

Written evidence from The Twist Partnership (DEG0054)

Executive Summary

1. Nearly all the signatories of this letter have been Work Programme clients receiving Employment and Support Allowance. We are among more than a thousand who have had a very positive experience of the *Better Way* programme developed by the Twist Partnership, a small Third Sector subcontractor. As well as inspiring and stimulating us, the methodology seems also to have improved job entry and dramatically increased sustained employment rates.
2. The *Better Way* programme evolved as a client led initiative focussing on self-help and empowerment and getting participants involved in enterprise activities that stimulate their self-belief and help to develop their expertise and networking capability.
3. It is innovative. Many professionals across the sectors find its assumptions counter-intuitive. Its significant impact suggests that part of the Disability Employment Gap can be explained by the prevailing low expectations regarding disabled and chronically ill people. It also suggests that the way people are treated while participating in Employment Support can be more important than what they are given to do and that this is especially significant for people on ESA.
4. We fully support the robust implantation of Equal Opportunities legislation. We also support educating and informing employers about disability and chronic illness as in the "Disability Confident" campaign. However, we distance ourselves from initiatives that put us in the position of victims or dependents on other people's benevolence.
5. The proposed reduction of benefits of people on ESA is highly counterproductive. Removing the WRAG status ignores both the special potential and the special incentives that help people with illnesses and disabilities get back into work. In addition the reputational damage to Government policy that will result from cutting benefits to the most vulnerable would put the prospect of helpful and necessary Welfare Reform at risk.
6. In spite of the hardship and distress that many people have suffered since the Work Programme began, it would be disastrous if the innovation and progress that has also been made were to be ignored or discarded.

Who we are

All of the undersigned are or were on Employment and Support Allowance (ESA). We were referred to the *Better Way* programme developed by the Twist Partnership, a voluntary sector subcontractor to Prime Providers for the DWP. Most of us were referred via the Work Programme although some of us were referred directly by our local Jobcentre Plus.

All of us therefore have some form of illness or disability that qualifies us to receive this benefit. Other than that we are not a "group". We agree with the contents of this letter as individuals. The points on which we differ are stated below.

Our reason for writing is that we found participation in the *Better Way* to be an enormously positive experience towards getting our lives back on track. It may not be suitable for everyone. Some unemployed people just want to get on with looking for a job without delay. Others, including most of us, really needed a change of mindset and self-image before we could become employable. The trouble is that most of what we had to undergo in order to prevent our benefits being jeopardised tended to make us worse rather than better.

Because the *Better Way* programme has generally been part of our overall employment support programme it is difficult at present to provide objective evidence of its beneficial effects. However the programme has been tried out by a number of Prime Contractors to the DWP, especially Seetec a private company delivering the Work Programme in three areas, including in East London. That company found that engagement with people on ESA

dramatically improved where the *Better Way* programme was introduced. In addition that company's performance in the Government's league tables for "new ESA" clients steadily went up. In addition, the enthusiasm of everyone involved in the programme was infectious and it improved morale and optimism among Prime Contractor staff and clients. It also added reputational value. One of the founder members of the group won the award for "significant achievement" at the Employment Related Services Association's National Employment Awards in June 2015 and now the whole *Better Way* team has been nominated as finalists in the Disability and Health Employment category to be awarded in July 2016.

The Development of the *Better Way* programme

The scheme was developed and facilitated by people like ourselves for the Twist Partnership. As the programme has extended, some of us have become employed by Twist and others have continued to support and facilitate it, in some cases even after they finished the Work Programme when their Jobcentre Plus advisers have recognised the benefits their clients gain from continuing involvement. We found that people responded better to the atmosphere of self-help and mutual support and the fact that there were no teachers or trainers unless commissioned by members of the group. However, it required sensitivity and experience to maintain the positive spirit and flexibility to manage the different needs of participants including those who did not work well in groups. Developing these management skills was part of our progress towards employability.

What works?

The reasons for the programme's success are still being evaluated but we can speak personally concerning its transformational and uplifting effect on people assessed as being in the Work Related Activity Group (WRAG). It may indicate that people on ESA are not necessarily "furthest from employment" as is usually assumed. The majority of people in the WRAG have a lifetime of experience to draw on but have become disempowered and demoralised by what has happened to them, perhaps as the result of a late-in-life event. Even those with life-long conditions may have been continually dogged by low expectations. When other people who really understand our situation just want only to harness our capacity for enterprise it can come like a liberation. "You are the first people to treat me with respect," is what people often say.

"When you're in a group of people like yourself looking for ways to stay active and useful, the Twist approach can become hard to resist," says Alta, who has MS. "You get treated as adults not as helpless invalids. Our starting position is that you probably have more to offer the world than most people. Even negative experiences can be valuable. Just like everybody else, you've got to find work-arounds for what you can't fix."

As it stands, the whole benefits-to-employment system appears fundamentally confrontational. In the competition to find jobs, people with illnesses and disabilities feel that they are at the back of the queue, which make repetitive job search a dispiritingly pointless exercise. In their battle with job advisers, they often feel compelled to prove how ill they are. In return job advisers feel compelled to put them on some job search activity that matches the low expectations of their prospects.

Although we are not all agreed on this, some of us regard the emphasis placed on our "special needs" and our "barriers to employment" as almost equally counter-productive. This well-meaning attitude often encourages people with disabilities and illnesses to default to a different type of dependence. We are fully aware that everybody is different and there ought to be a diversity of provision to match the diversity of the people. But if everyone had the chance of engaging in a programme like the *Better Way* a good proportion of them would find their own way to progress to independence and save an enormous amount of lost time and money.

How to fund the project (and incentivise providers)

The Payment By Results (PBR) System has worked surprisingly well in developing the *Better Way* programme. It has focussed our minds on working within the financial limits and has shown us that in many cases "less is more". It has been easier for Twist to gain commissions when the "black box" principle applies than from many grant funding bodies which required assurances about the processes as well as outcomes. For example, the *Better Way* programme does not start with an extensive individual "needs assessment" except in purely practical terms for managing risks. The assessments we have already undergone to qualify for ESA tend to make us wary about admitting what we can do in case it acts to our disadvantage. But when we are among people who know what it's

like to be incapacitated, it is easier to focus on what each of us still has to offer, and we can develop our skills very often in a more productive and worthwhile way than before.

However, there is a real problems with PBR in the Work Programme. “Results” here largely means Job Outcomes, and therefore ignores the progress made by people who have not got jobs within the time frame, even though that progress will get them to employment eventually. The value added by the *Better Way* programme is currently demonstrated by the improved the percentage of outcomes overall. It would be preferable if some additional measures of progress could be introduced, although we are aware of the difficulties of designing such system in a way that is objective and related to some actual savings in health or welfare expenditure.

The Disability Confident campaign

We are totally in favour of robust implantation of Equal Opportunities legislation. We are very much support the better Informing and supporting employers about working with people with disabilities and illnesses. It would be especially useful in the case of people who are prevented from working at some times and not others, or whose working is occasionally disrupted by illness such as epilepsy.

We are also aware that some of us have to re-think our future as regards finding a more creative and flexible way of working. Many of us have good reason to feel frustrated and victimised by insensitive employment practices and the prejudice we have endured from co-workers; but these feelings are highly disempowering. For this reason we do not make it a priority to blame employers and inaccessibility for our problems, even though such criticism may sometimes be justified.

But we are very keen to encourage employer organisations to explore the value of diversity to their business success. In fact many of us are well placed to provide consultancy services on ways to manage these issues. However, we avoid appealing to people’s philanthropy (as opposed to their business sense) because it is likely to be impractical and unsustainable in the long run. The best run Corporate Responsibility programmes can be usefully employed in a variety of ways to reduce the Disability Employment Gap, for example to help new small businesses to take off into profitability. The *Better Way* programme has stimulated a large number of business and social enterprise ideas ranging from food and retail businesses to health initiatives for example for diabetes and sickle cell. These need not so much money as advice and guidance from people with business experience and a commitment to social improvement and job creation.

Squeezing the vulnerable

It is difficult to exaggerate the sense of outrage among people who have been driven into dependence to be further punished with increased stress and deprivation. Being assessed as coming within the Work Related Activity Group category has been controversial and we are not all agreed about its whether it has been a good thing. However, we all agree that additional pressure put on people currently in this group will move them further away from work rather than closer to it. Putting them on the defensive is going to exacerbate both their illness and their disengagement. It is equally short-sighted to remove those concessions to people on ESA – such as permitted work and special Working Tax Credit terms for people with disabilities - to encourage first steps to towards work and self-employment. These changes would not even prove to be cost-cutting in the end, precisely since they would increase the Disability Employment Gap.

Nevertheless, most of us were mandated to attend the *Better Way* programme. Some of us recognise that we have now got a degree of control back over our lives and that this might never have happened without it, or at any rate it would have taken longer. Others say if there were really useful things to do on the Work Programme you wouldn’t have to mandate people. Either way, there is an intelligent debate still to be had on these issues. Without such a debate “Welfare Reform” to reduce dependency will simply turn into “Welfare Cuts” to balance the books.

We strongly the support the work of the Committee in investigating the issues. Attitudes to welfare have become increasingly polarised, with the two sides being seen as representing the “hard” or “soft” approach. The *Better Way* group doesn’t fully identify with either party but has found it difficult to make its voice heard, especially in view of the DWP’s reluctance to allow us to encourage media organisations to look at what we are doing. Other people are surely experimenting with similar ideas; if our various methods were replicated it could make a real

difference to closing the Disability Employment Gap as well as in improving the lives of people who currently fail to thrive in the welfare to work regime. We are hoping that your initiative might encourage a period of constructive discussion and experimentation.

Signed by 20 members of the Advocacy Group of the Twist *Better Way* programme

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