

## **Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People; UNISON's response to the consultation issued by the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit.**

UNISON as the largest union in the UK with 1.3 million members, 73% of whom are women, is particularly well placed to provide evidence. We represent public sector workers in public and private organisations across many services, including local government, healthcare, higher and further education, the utilities, transport, police support staff and the voluntary services. These workers comprise all occupations from manual to management, administrative to technical.

Our response to this Consultation reflects twenty-five years of organising and representing Disabled members. It encompasses policies we've agreed and issues that have been raised by our Disabled members including Black, Lesbian and Gay, Women members and Deaf (native) British Sign Language users.

We welcome many of the proposals in the consultation. We endorse the views submitted by the British Council of Disabled People and Trade Union Disability Alliance regarding personal assistance and independent living. We also endorse the submission from the Royal National Institute of Blind People's contributions on Hate Crimes, accessible facilities for public transport users, expansion of concessionary fare schemes and the support needed to give younger people equal access to society.

Our response focuses on employment matters, in particular the Access to Work Scheme and the Two-Tick Scheme.

### **Access to Work**

We welcome the proposal to restructure the Access to Work Scheme so that by 2010 it can provide a new personalised system of in-work support which is effective and targets support at the right time. The consultation rightly acknowledges that delays in providing AtW support can impact greatly on a Disabled workers right to remain economically active. We would add that the provision of inappropriate support such as aids or equipment can also exacerbate poor employment options of Disabled workers.

We are very concerned with the proposal to remove AtW from public sector employers so that small and medium sized employers can access greater resources as a result of savings. We are aware of a number of public sector employers who have taken their responsibility to provide reasonable adjustment very seriously and made provision without any application for government support. At the same time we know of public sector employers who have made fullest use of AtW in their attempts to retain Disabled workers. It is vital that AtW continues to be available to Disabled workers in the public sector as this may be the only way Disabled workers and their trade union representatives can gain access to appropriate resources swiftly to support them at work.

In particular we are aware of the important role that AtW has played in improving health and safety standards for Disabled workers. Our activists have been involved in supporting Disabled members at work where devious employers have used safety concerns to attempt to justify less favourable treatment towards Disabled workers and public service users. We hope government will recognise the importance of maintaining the Disabled worker in a health and safe environment and review this proposal.

The role of the public sector in promoting barrier free work should be viewed as the role model for all employers. Trade union organisation has resulted in proper pay structures, fairness in recruitment and selection procedures as well as training and career prospects too scarcely found in the private sector. The Office of National Statistics has published the latest trends in the employment of disabled people in the public sector in Great Britain. The rate of public sector employment growth for disabled people was four times the growth rate for their non-disabled counterparts. The bulk of the job gains were in education and health, and the growth in employment of disabled people in both areas outstripped that of non-disabled people.

We would also comment that the new public authority duty to promote disability equality should have a significant effect on the lives of Disabled people, especially their employment prospects. We understand there may be no additional funding available to assist with the additional costs associated with disability equality actions. To propose that AtW funding is removed from the public sector at the same time as introducing new responsibilities would, in our opinion amount to negligence.

#### Two Ticks Scheme

We welcome the Consultation report's open and transparent criticism of the Two-Tick Scheme. Our experience also confirms that it fails to inspire Disabled job seekers to have any confidence that employers take seriously the commitments they should make in order to maintain their awards. We are aware of a number of employers who openly flout their responsibilities: failure to shortlist all appropriate Disabled job applicants, neglect in the provision of facilities at interview and inaction regarding the accessible training and personal development opportunities feature regularly as complaints to our trade union representatives.

We welcome the suggestion that the Investors in People standard is revised to include a disability component. We hope that UNISON will be specifically invited to be involved in discussions on this matter and that our Disabled members will be recognised as having specific expertise to offer government.

Finally, the proposed campaign to improve employer awareness on the business benefits of employing Disabled people sets out a number of trusted key stakeholders. These include the Confederation of British Industry, the Federation

of Small Businesses, the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service and the Disability Rights Commission for its expertise on legal obligations and reasonable adjustments. It is hoped that these organisations could provide evidence in the form of case studies to be used to illustrate examples of good practice. We suggest further consideration be given to extending the partnership to include trade unions as they should be able to offer expert advice on negotiating on behalf of, and representing Disabled workers.