

Summary

This response to the Green Paper 'Empowering People to Work' on Incapacity Benefit reform is based on the personal experience of members of my family and a close reading of recent official research and literature on the subject. It challenges the main tenets of its proposals as follows:

1. that reform is urgent because the present system is unaffordable and numbers claiming incapacity benefits are spiralling out of control.

- Official statistics show that compared to most industrialised countries our numbers are normal and our benefit levels below average. Numbers are static if not falling and in the words of one official report, 'there is no crisis'.

2. the proposed reform will save the country money by getting 1 million people off incapacity benefits over 10 years.

- Some savings will come from making future access to benefits more difficult and by shaving the benefit in ways indicated in the Green Paper. **Pathways to Work**, the chosen mechanism, cannot fail to be expensive in human and financial resources. A number of official sources recognise that the personalised service promised by Pathways is incompatible with overall savings for the country.

3. the overwhelming proportion of claimants whose conditions are not declared exempt are potentially capable of work, and work would be their best therapy. In future, if people are caught at an early enough stage they may

never need to go onto incapacity benefits.

- This estimate is not supported by any clinical or other evidence. Its main justification is comparison with 1979, since when there have been many changes in the economy, the benefits system, and patterns of illness. No evidence is given of jobs being available or employers willing to take on people from benefits.

The assumption is that all illness/disability is mostly in the mind and so controllable by 'condition management' (loosely based on cognitive behavioural therapy) plus a carrot-and-stick approach of inducements to work and threat of benefit cuts. This belies the reality of long-term, serious conditions of those needing the support of incapacity benefits.

4. Pathways to Work is regarded as proven and is to be extended nationwide by 2008.

- Pathways pilots only began in October 2003 and when research on them was published in 2005 it was premature to judge their success or likely effectiveness if applied nationwide. The research was based on tiny samples, and statistics of those leaving benefits for work were admitted to be unreliable.

5. the Green Paper's proposed reform is soundly based on research and theory.

- The body of research and theory has been commissioned by the DWP and other official bodies and is demonstrably framed within a particular policy agenda. The report that most explains the Green Paper's philosophy was carried out in a research unit sponsored by Unum Provident, a large American disability insurance company with an interest in limiting disability claims.

Where, in this and other reports, caveats and disclaimers were given, they have been ignored by the Green Paper.

6. the reform is necessary for redefining the Welfare State for the 21st century. It will admit those previously unfairly excluded by the present incapacity benefits system to full contractual citizenship.

- With an unknown number of exceptions, claimants' problems are due in the first place to definable conditions and calamities, to prove which they are already subjected to rigorous and repeated tests. They will not be helped by denial of these conditions and what would, in effect, be a transfer of their cost from the state to individuals and their families. This is not moving forward to an updated Welfare State but turning the clock back to an era before National Insurance was recognised as essential to an enlightened modern society.

Alison Ravetz; March 2006