

# Welfare Reform; The Green Paper

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The long awaited Green Paper on the reform of Incapacity Benefit was published on January 24. According to the press, the main points are as follows:

- The benefit will be renamed Employment and Support Allowance.
- The aim is to get a million people off IB within ten years, also a further million people over 50 and 300,000 lone parents back to work in the same period.
- Employment advisors will be hired at certain GPs' surgeries as part of a trial scheme to get people back to work. Health staff who offer assistance to keep people in work when they are ill or help them to return to work will be rewarded.
- There will be a new unit set up to check on IB claimants and new medical evidence will be required.
- From 2008 all new claimants will be required to attend regular interviews, complete action plans and engage in work-related activity. Those who refuse will have their benefit cut.
- Existing claimants will remain on their current benefit levels but over the next few years they will be asked to attend work focussed interviews and take steps to return to work if possible. Those who do not do so might have their benefit cut.

My views are entirely personal and do not necessarily represent those of Depression Alliance.

Any steps that can help people to live more worthwhile lives and to reduce the number of those dependent on state benefits must be welcomed. Nevertheless the seemingly negative approach to this issue must be regretted. Much has been made of

the number of people claiming IB. However the BMA have suggested that it is unlikely that more than 10% of them are abusing the system. Perhaps therefore more should be done to help the disabled and less stress put solely on getting them off benefits – particularly in the field of mental health.

There is nothing in the Green Paper about where these million jobs will come from, nor is there anything in it to encourage employers to take on the sick and disabled. This must be especially true for those suffering from depression. Great strides have recently been made over the removal of discrimination in the workplace; however this is not always extended to those with emotional disorders. If a person has any kind of mental illness in their past they may be far less likely to find a job than those with a physical disability. If such reforms are to work there must be a radical change in society's attitude towards the mentally ill; if there is not then those with non-physical clinical conditions will be vulnerable.

Third, if these reforms are to benefit the depressed they must encourage people back to work, rather than force them into the workplace. MIND is already worried that mentally ill people may be forced into work too soon and without support. Coercion will not make people well; it is more likely to make them worse.

This is of course the start of a long process of consultation and changes will be made to the plans. The Government are right in saying that 'work is good for you' But while anything being done to reform IB is welcome, this latest attempt seems

to me not to be thought through properly; it has also been presented in an insensitive way. The starting point must be to improve the quality of life for the depressed and others who are unable to work – not to reduce costs and figures.

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