

ACAS RESPONSE TO 'IMPROVING LIVES: THE WORK, HEALTH AND DISABILITY GREEN PAPER'

Acas' response to the Government Green Paper, 'Improving Lives', focuses on the following four areas relating to accessing and staying in work:

1. Getting disabled people into work
2. Helping disabled people stay in work
3. Responding in the right way when disabled people 'fall' out of work
4. Developing a strategic approach to managing the whole person as they embark on their individual journeys in and out of work.

Our response is based upon original research we have recently carried out, operational experience and customer interactions (drawing on the hundreds of training courses we run in this area), and our recognised expertise in promoting positive and productive relationships at work. We also recently hosted a workshop event in the East Midlands, attended by the DWP officials and group of 40 employers, trade unionists and stakeholders, to address the key questions. Some of the views expressed form part of our response and the Appendix contains a summary of the findings from the event.

We particularly wish to stress the importance of the Government addressing [mental](#) as well as physical well-being. In addition a new study undertaken by Acas has explored the question of [neurodiversity](#) and work.

1. Getting disabled people into work

The Green Paper rightly places a strong focus on the best ways to recruit disabled people, of building the business case for diversity and creating the workplace environments that celebrate difference and address stigma. Acas evidence suggests that achieving this aim is likely to need [fair and transparent recruitment processes](#). Our recent research on neurodiversity shows that enlightened employers often modify recruitment practices so that they accommodate the needs of neuro-diverse employees – for example, allowing applicants to fill in application forms online rather than by hand if they have problems with writing and spelling. However, our workshop on the Green Paper also demonstrated the complexity of this area – for example, one delegate reported that 50% of his disabled clients did not have access to the internet. Employers should consider mixed approaches to recruitment in order to ensure maximum accessibility.

Perhaps the issue that was most raised by employers in our workshop was the need to create the right workplace culture. Acas experience suggests that this is highly dependent on leadership that supports and champions diversity and inclusion and tackles [discrimination](#), as well as providing the right training and support for line managers. Another interesting point from our workshop was that basic issues such as physical access to buildings remains a concern, both for individuals and employers, some of whom feel unable to address the changes needed to improve accessibility as a result of costs.

Delegates were also keen to emphasise the need for joined-up thinking: access to transport is also being part of the access to work problem.

2. Helping disabled stay in work

The Green Paper highlights the importance of providing the right kind of ongoing support to help people stay in work, particularly those with mental health conditions. Our recent research suggests that the following factors are likely to contribute to sustainable work for people with disabilities:

- Maintaining **ongoing dialogue** between managers and employees, particularly in the face of organisational and external pressures. This goes beyond being able to handle '[difficult conversations](#)' and requires managers to develop an awareness of individual needs and any workplace adjustments that might help
- Investing in **shared learning experiences**. Our case study research on mental health found that engaging those with mental health problems in finding the right solutions can be beneficial, particularly if these are shared with other businesses in the community.
- Evidence of the impact of broader **wellbeing interventions** are patchy and employers can be confused about what works best. Acas evidence suggests that it might be worth revising the HSE workplace standards so that they cover the broader mental health spectrum and not just stress.

3. Responding in the right way when disabled people 'fall' out of work

The Green Paper helpfully identifies many of the gaps that can emerge between the different stages of a person's journey in and out of work. In order to minimise the negative impacts associated with poor attendance, employers should prioritise the following areas:

- Have clear and consistent policies for **addressing attendance management** and return to work. In the context of this Green Paper, this should include an agreement on appropriate 'keeping in touch' days and a clear understanding of the extent to which adjustments are available and are reasonable in the context of business needs.
- **Allowing employees to have a say** in how their health is managed in the context of the workplace. One of the case studies in our research on mental health, for example, showed how empowering employees to contribute actively to work and to the management of their mental health at work can help them feel more positive about their wellbeing. This is backed up by broader research on the importance of job autonomy in promoting a range of positive outcomes, such as job satisfaction and employee engagement

4. Developing a strategic approach to managing the whole person as they embark on their individual journeys in and out of work.

There may be some tension in the aims set out in the Green Paper between the principles of 'personalised, integrated and targeted' support for disabled people and the desire to create a 'one stop shop' for all workplace help and interventions. It may be worth considering the need for:

- **‘Workplace passports’** that help aid the conversation between the Job Centre coaches, who have such a pivotal role in government plans, and individuals. These passports could also provide written information for other outside agencies on the nature of a job, the work culture, relationships and the kind of demands made on individuals. These could mirror the mental health passports used successfully in some organisations (notably BT), and could highlight possible stressors or environmental challenges a disabled person might face on returning to work. Such passports, supported by the right conversations, would also help match individuals with the right jobs and the right support.

- **Promoting wellbeing initiatives** – and making the business case for interventions – arguably comes under the broader umbrella of corporate governance and responsibility. The Green Paper wants the public sector to lead the way in bridging the disability employment gap. Acas supports the aim of employers monitoring and reviewing absence and wellbeing in their organisations. Perhaps some form of corporate level guidance on reporting on recruitment and retention figures for those with disabilities could be introduced?

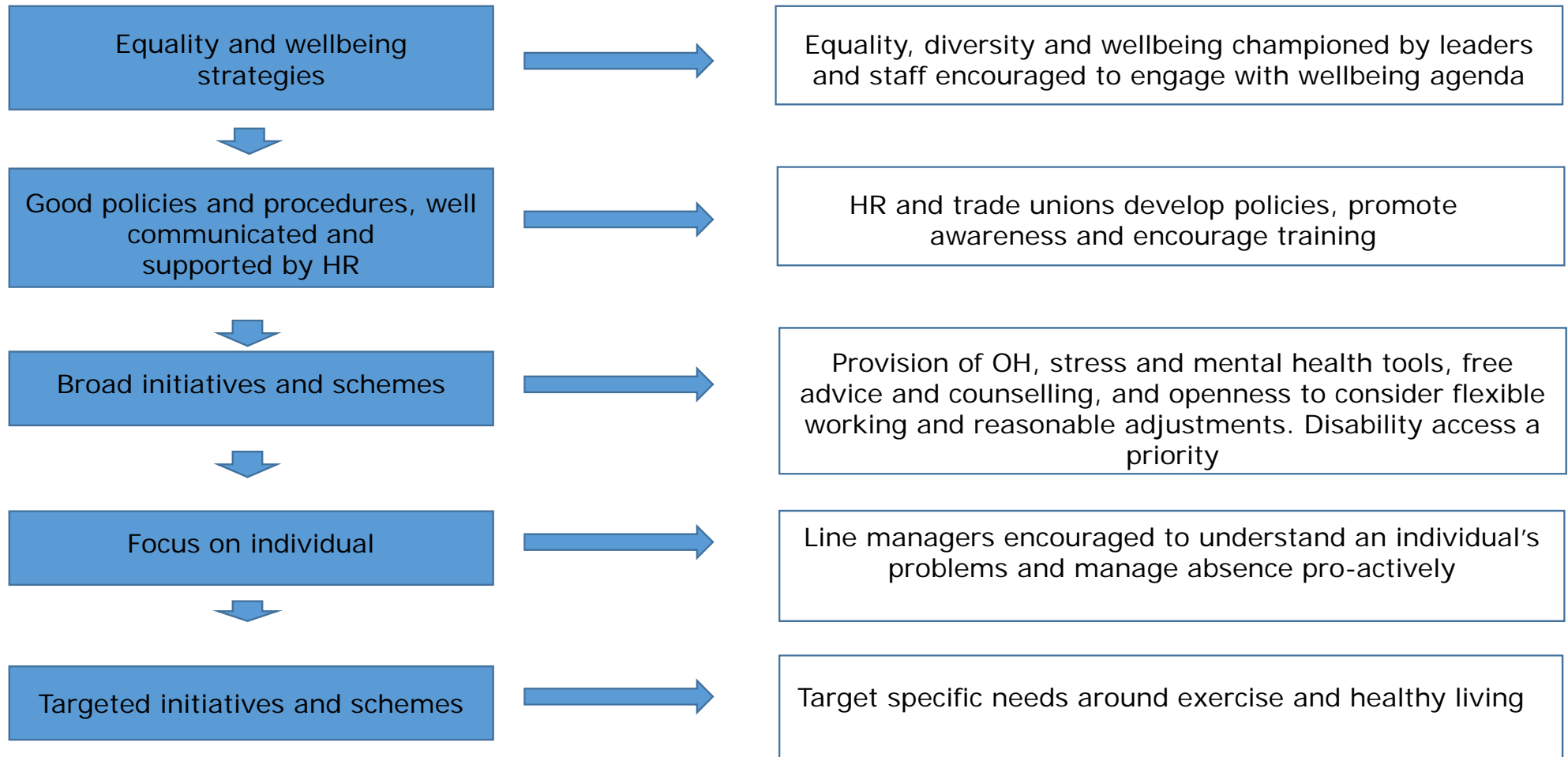
- **Further research is needed.** We agree with the green paper that more evidence is needed on which interventions work best so that good practice can be shared and replicated.

Appendix 1: Summary of Acas/DWP workshop on 'Improving Lives'

Output from the Acas stakeholder workshop addressing the consultation document: 'Improving Lives: The Work, Health and Disability Green Paper'

**Event held in East Midlands
January 2017**

1. How do you promote wellbeing across your organisation?



2. What are the barriers to wellbeing?

1. Attitudes (culture)



- Lack of support from leaders
- Lack of understanding and confidence on the part of line managers

2. Resources



- Money – due to budget cuts and organisational priorities
- Resources – for equipment/training etc

3. Organisational pressures



- Cuts to services
- Organisational change and intensification of work

4. Disclosure



- Fear of disclosure due to fear and stigma
- Lack of trust in management and org response

5. Recruitment issues



- Unconscious bias during recruitment and inappropriate job specs
- Difficulty with progression for disabled staff

6. Accessibility problems



- Getting to work
- Old buildings not suited to adjustments

3. What would help you overcome the barriers to wellbeing?

1. Change attitudes and culture



- Greater awareness through promotion and education and provision of better information and support
- Greater focus on corporate social responsibility within organisations
- Government to set standards for good practice through procurement and promotion of disability confident scheme

2. More partnership working



- Start disability education in schools
- More work placements for disabled young people
- More use of mentoring between organisations and sectors to promote good practice

3. Fairer more accessible recruitment practices



- Review application processes – shouldn't all be online – to reflect needs of disabled
- Better advice and guidance on applying for a job etc

4. Change the law



- Remove employment tribunal fees
- Encourage positive discrimination to incentivise recruitment of disabled

4. How can you improve the recruitment of disabled people?

1. Greater understanding and insight

- Good empathetic line management
- Regular supervision

2. Better access to resources

- Information on what is available for employers and employees (eg Access to Work)
- Accessible resources and policies and procedures

3. Fairer application policies and practices

- Greater focus on the needs of disabled people
- More consultation with disabled people

4. Fight stigma and encourage disclosure

- Encourage disclosure for people with physical and mental disabilities
- Challenge negative attitudes

5. How can help disabled people get back to work?

Attendance management policies



- **Resources:**
 - access to OH, counselling etc
- **Process:**
 - line management training
 - clear absence triggers
 - return to work interviews
 - keeping in touch policy (negotiated with employee)
- **Principles:**
 - early intervention
 - prevention not cure
 - effective communication
- **Focus on:**
 - the need of carers of disabled employees
 - work transitions (especially schools to work)