

Government launches National Disability Strategy

August 18, 2021

The government launched its National Disability Strategy in July, setting out 100 practical commitments supported by £1.6 billion in funding. It also released its response to the "Health is Everyone's Business" consultation and a Green Paper seeking views on how to help the disabled thrive in the workplace and live a more independent life.

The launch of the government's National Disability Strategy (the **Strategy**) builds upon the Disability Discrimination Act (since replaced by the Equality Act 2010), which enshrined protections for disabled people, with funding and practical commitments. Plans include the launch of an online advice hub for employers and disabled employees, and development of an online work passport to help disabled students move seamlessly from education to work. The government also recently released its response to the "Health is Everyone's Business" consultation (the **Response**) which was set up to collate views on different ways in which the government and employers can take action to reduce ill health-related job loss, which disproportionately affects disabled workers.

The Strategy focuses on a number of key issues including, but not limited to, improving inclusion in the workplace and tackling the disability employment gap. The Strategy sets out practical commitments and ambitious ideas for future reform. These include:

- **Disability workforce reporting.** The government is considering the introduction of mandatory reporting for businesses with 250 or more staff on the number of disabled people within their workforce. This follows in the footsteps of the gender pay reporting requirements, and is designed to improve inclusivity across the UK's biggest employers. There is already a voluntary scheme in place, encouraging larger businesses to report on disability, mental health and wellbeing in their workforce. However, the voluntary scheme is not generating enough data to make meaningful assessments and steps toward inclusivity. The government will launch a consultation later this year which will consider options around both voluntary and mandatory reporting. At the same time, the government intends to continue to highlight the importance of large businesses engaging with the voluntary reporting framework.
- **An online disability advice hub.** The new online advice hub was jointly launched by the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (Acas) and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy in July 2021. The hub, which is available via the Acas website, provides employers and disabled workers with accessible information and advice on employment rights. This includes guidance around employment issues such as disability discrimination in the workforce, flexible working and reasonable adjustments. The hub seeks to be a one-stop shop, the remit for which extends to mental health and COVID-19 considerations.
- **Access to Work Adjustments Passport.** This strategy is led by the Department for Work and Pensions. Its aim is to support disabled workers when they begin employment and/or transition to new roles or companies. The Adjustments Passport, scheduled to pilot this year, plans to capture information about the support available from Access to Work and encourage better understanding around the type of adjustments that might be needed in the workplace. The aim is to create a more open working environment and encourage constructive discussion between

workers and employers about any reasonable adjustments that might be required from the outset of the working relationship. The availability of the passport is also intended to reduce the need for repeat assessments which can often create difficulties of their own. The pilot will be key in determining what form the passport will take (presumably electronic) and how the more practical issues will be overcome (for example, the level of medical information required and methods of providing consent before an employer can have access to the passport).

The government's response to the "Health is Everyone's Business" consultation sets out proposals that aim to support proactive, early steps by employers to help their employees with long-term health conditions. One of the main takeaways from the Response is the inherent link between work and the health of employees. Unsurprisingly, the Response revealed that employers who invested in the health and wellbeing of their workforce benefited from a reduced sickness absence rate, increased productivity and improved workplace retention. The Response crucially highlighted the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and how important it is for health professionals to have an active role in a company's work and health agenda. Occupational Health professionals have increasingly played a critical role in supporting employers' responses to COVID-19 and the Response reiterated the importance of engaging with Occupational Health when issues of ill health arise in the workplace, whether related to COVID-19 or otherwise.

As part of a wider package of support for disabled people, the government has also released a Green Paper, "Shaping Future Support: the Health and Disability Green Paper". With this Green Paper, the government is seeking different perspectives on how it might better help disabled people live more independently, succeed in work and improve their experience with the benefits system.

The Strategy, coupled with the newly released Green Paper and the Response, represents a fresh focus on disability and the workplace. It also demonstrates an intention to adopt a collaborative approach across government departments in order to set out a wide-ranging portfolio of practical changes to help disabled people in every aspect of life. While the government has coined its national disability strategy as "the most far-reaching endeavour in the area for a generation", it is seeking a more inclusive and accessible experience for disabled workers. Hopefully this should help close the gap in the employment rate of disabled people compared with that of non-disabled people. By doing so, not only will companies have the potential to attract and retain talent from all walks of life but also, more importantly, they have the potential to considerably improve the everyday lives of all disabled people.

While many of the proposals are still in their infancy, or only at consultation stage, the announcement of this disability strategy is an opportunity for companies to review their working practices afresh and consider whether positive changes can be implemented now. This could be as simple as reviewing relevant policies and procedures, committing to engaging with the voluntary disability workforce reporting, or perhaps consulting with the workforce to obtain real-time views on what changes disabled workers would like to see in the workplace. If you would like assistance with any of these aspects, or would benefit from further advice on any of the points raised in this article, please do reach out to the People, Reward and Mobility team at Dentons.

Your Key Contacts



Helena Rozman

Associate, Milton Keynes

D +44 20 7320 5482

M +44 74 7195 3372

helena.rozman@dentons.com