

SOUTH CAMBS USERS FORUM

The voice for users and ex-users of mental health services in South Cambridgeshire

October 3rd 2006

Dear MP,

We represent mental health service users in Cambridge City and South Cambs and we are writing to you regarding the government plans to change the Incapacity Benefit system by introducing Employment and Support Allowance (ESA). The Welfare Reform Bill has already had its second reading in Parliament and we understand that it will now be looked at by MPs in the Committees.

Although we welcome measures that will help to empower people to remain in or return to work, we have grave concerns over the Bill's proposal to make compulsory the attendance of work-focused health assessments, work-focused interviews and the undertaking of work-related activity for those in receipt of the 'Employment' component of ESA by withdrawing benefits from those who do not comply.

Our concern is for the following reasons:

1. Someone who is too unwell to attend an assessment or interview may be too anxious to pick up the phone to explain why.
2. Making 'help' compulsory by threatening to withdraw benefit unnecessarily increases fear and anxiety for people who are trying the best they can to manage their lives whilst dealing with a mental health problem.

The Government justifies including a compulsory element by saying that many people will not 'volunteer' for interviews and thus will not know what help is on offer. Our response to this is, does letting people know their options really require a 'series' of work-focused interviews at the outset? Surely people can be informed about their options by much less formal means, leaving people to access work-focused support when they are well enough to make good use of it.

3. Compulsory attendance of assessments, interviews and activities could push people back into work too early, being set up to fail at a time when their confidence can least afford it, risking them becoming even more unwell.
4. The compulsion element will limit the effectiveness of the advisor/claimant relationship. The advisor will experience conflict between trying to build a trusting working relationship with a vulnerable individual and the knowing that they have to meet targets and withdraw benefit for failed participation. The claimant will treat his/her advisor's efforts with suspicion, not knowing whether they are a result of the genuine consideration of his/hers best interests or government targets, thus hampering enthusiasm for this kind of 'help'.

If you wish to support the welfare of those who use mental health services we urge you not to vote for the part of the Bill that makes powers to cut people's benefits for non-compliance and we urge you to ensure that all advisors working with claimants who have mental health problems are fully trained and experienced in the field.

Yours Sincerely,

Amanda Price and Giles Chesterman
On behalf of South Cambs Users Forum