I have a voice (IHAV) response to DWP's 'Shaping future support: the health and disability green paper'

1. IHAV is a social enterprise that supports young people into employment in the public policy and political sphere and supports a number of youth-led advocacy campaigns, one of which is to close the employment and attainment gap for young people with disabilities. We're particularly focused on the 16-25 age group, as that the age group we're in, but more importantly because this is the age at which the attainment and employment gap and therefore interventions at this age would have lifelong benefit.

2. On a personal level, we are concerned that if we are not able to access employment at the start of our working lives this will have a negative impact on our earning potential and financial security over our lifetime. We are also concerned this would also have a negative impact on our mental health – for us, meaningful employment is something we are either actively seeking now or looking forward to once we finish studying.

3. Our key recommendations are:
    i. Proactive efforts are needed across government to promote the Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) when students are considering whether go on to Higher Education, rather than waiting until they've already made the decision, given it is crucial in influencing disabled individual's decisions to apply to higher education.
    ii. Add the Disability Confident Scheme to the list of considerations for new businesses listed here https://www.gov.uk/employing-staff, thereby making new employers engage with the Scheme from their inception.
    iii. Leverage Disability Confident Leaders to promote the Disability Confident Scheme regionally and across their sector. This could be facilitated by linking with trade associations and professional bodies.
    iv. Upskill professional carers to help people with disabilities to overcome digital exclusion.

4. We have only answered those questions where our experiences and research can add value to policy discussions.

Q. What more information, advice or signposting is needed and how should this be provided?

5. University is a critical part of any young adult's life, providing a space to develop useful skills and knowledge which will help guide their career choices, as well as helping to build self-confidence and independence. Those who attend university, on average, are more likely to be employed than non-graduates and, once employed, earn an average of £9,500 more per annum. Increasingly, individuals with disabilities are choosing to attend university, with 17.3% of all individuals in higher education in 2019/20 experiencing some form of disability. This is a significant increase of 47% compared to 2014/15 which has been driven in part due to rising levels of individuals who are reporting to have mental health difficulties.

6. Yet, compared to their non-disabled counterparts, disabled individuals are more likely to drop out, achieve a lower degree classification, and are less likely to enter full time employment. Ensuring that young people have the confidence and support required to remain in higher education is vital. Disabled individuals with a degree are 15% more likely to enter work than a disabled individual with an A-level as their highest qualification and 55% more likely to enter work than a disabled individual with no qualifications at all.

7. The DSA is one key avenue of support for disabled students. [A 2019 report by the Department of Education](#) found that students in receipt of the DSA reported that it had a positive impact on their experiences of their higher education courses and were more likely to recommend their course to other students with disability. However, the same report highlights that only 40% of disabled students knew about the DSA before starting their studies despite knowledge of the DSA being crucial in influencing disabled individual's decisions to apply to higher education. Additionally, there is some confusion among students as to whether they are eligible for the DSA and about what the DSA is for, especially among those with mental health difficulties and long-term health conditions.

8. From the findings of this report, it is clear that the Student Loan Company (SLC), who is responsible for the DSA, is not doing enough to clearly promote the scheme to people who may need it, despite its importance to those with disabilities. Therefore, we recommend that the Government takes steps to improve signposting and information available to make sure that all individuals are aware of the DSA and whether or not they are eligible, in order to make sure that anyone who may need the DSA is aware of it and knows how to access it. Crucially this should take place when students are considering whether go on to Higher Education or not, rather than waiting until they've already made the decision, given it is crucial in influencing disabled individual's decisions to apply to higher education.

9. We contacted the Department of Education about our concerns regarding the lack of awareness of the DSA. We are concerned that their response suggests the consider enough is being done, despite its own findings. The DfE said - the SLC "works closely with partners in Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) to ensure that students are aware of DSA prior to them commencing their HE course". Can the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) play a greater role in helping to increase the exposure of the DSA, through its role in "[encouraging disabled people and those with ill health to work and be independent](#)"?

10. This could include providing more information about the DSA on the DWP website, alongside information about the Personal Independence Payment and the Disability Living Allowance. It could also include ensuring that evaluation of the SLC includes its performance in promoting awareness of the DSA for those who remain in education. Additionally, DWP should ensure that its staff who regularly engage with individuals with disabilities, such as those who carry out assessments, are aware of what the DSA is and who is eligible so that they can also better signpost individuals to the relevant resources they need about the DSA.

Q. What more could we do to further support employers to improve work opportunities for disabled people through Access to Work and Disability Confident?

11. The government already has a great, but under-used initiative to promote more disability friendly workplaces – [the Disability Confident Scheme](#). Only 20,000 employers are signed up to the Scheme. Yet in 2019 there were approximately [5.9 million private sector businesses](#) in the UK, of which 24% are employers – so 1.4 million. Even discounting the vast number of employers in the public sector, who account for many of the employers signed up to the Scheme, this means only 1.4% of employers are signed up to the Scheme, and are therefore disability confident employers. This is despite great efforts from the DWP to promote the campaign. We believe that this could be improved with a simple change to gov.uk that would alert businesses employing staff for the first time to the Scheme. By adding the Scheme to the list of considerations for new businesses here https://www.gov.uk/employing-staff the government could make new employers engage with the Scheme from their inception.

Q. How can we make the most of the knowledge and expertise of local organisations to support disabled people and people with health conditions into employment?

12. Again, we refer to the Disability Confident Scheme. When an employer joins the scheme, they join at Level 1 of the scheme, which shows that they are committed to the principles of being a Disability Confident employer. Level 2 means that the Employer has become Disability Confident, and Level 3 is a Disability Confident Leader. Currently, there are only 349 employers at this level.

13. Being a Leader shows that an organisation is a champion in promoting a disability friendly workplace and that it has the highest standards of access and provision for disabled employees and employees with health conditions, whether they are hidden or visible. These workplaces have clearly ensured that all these employees are made to feel welcome in their organisations and there are provisions in place to mean they are not disadvantaged when completing work tasks. Organisations at this level have the ability to actively employ a greater range of people.

14. Regular consultation with these organisations and observing the measures they have in place is a great way to make the most out of their knowledge and expertise. Seeing how these organisations operate and support their disabled employees and employees with health conditions on a day-to-day basis is a fantastic starting point for the DWP as it gives an understanding of what works for these employees. These employees could be key to providing insight to other employers in their region, or perhaps even more effectively in their sector. Trade associations and professional bodies are well-placed to help the DWP and these Leaders to reach an entire sector.

15. Promoting the Disability Confident Scheme even further, gives more opportunities for disabled people and people with health conditions and supports them into work. Promoting the most effective measures that have been put in place by Disability Confident Leaders to employers across the country means that disabled people and people with health conditions are given a much bigger array of jobs and sectors of work they can go into, thus supporting them into attractive and meaningful employment opportunities.

Q. What should we consider when developing a digital support offer for disabled people and people with health conditions? We want to consider how employment support could be offered as part of a mixed offer combining digital and face-to-face options.

16. It is important to recognise that [a majority of people who are non-internet users are disabled](#). This highlights that a significant number of disabled people feel uncomfortable with digital systems in the first place. For example, when universal credit was moved online [462,000 people](#) required help from friends, family, the Job Centre, or a charity to apply. Digital exclusion can clearly be damaging as more systems move online and it is therefore crucial that digitalisation is accompanied with clear advice and in-person support for some time to show people how to independently navigate digital support.

17. It would also be beneficial to build carers' digital confidence. Professional carers (as opposed to family members who provide informal care) will likely come into contact with a number of people with disabilities meaning that training carers may be more efficient that supporting individuals. Clearly this is only relevant where the employment opportunity does not require the individual to be digitally literate, but it would be an efficient means of removing this barrier for those roles that do not require digital literacy. Carers should be recognised for upskilling and the valuable contribution they're making to supporting people to get online.

18. It is also important to recognise that there will not be a one-size-fits-all solution when judging digital systems, for example different approaches will be needed for sensory issues compared with learning difficulties. A review paper from 2018, 'Digital technologies for social inclusion of individuals with disabilities' highlights that many technologies are often aimed at solving only one single issue. In general, technology designed for people with a vision or hearing impairment may not be suitable for deafblind people because of the reliance on the other sense to compensate. Furthermore, there is a lack of discussion on how these technologies are integrated into someone's existing living or working environment, or whether they are compatible with other existing technologies that might already be in use. It is important to recognise that digital support systems need to be tailored to different individuals.

19. Finally, COVID-19 has led to more people working from home. This shift has been immensely helpful for some disabled people, who may have been struggling with commuting because of the compounding lack of accessibility on transport and in workplaces. The option to combine face-to-face and digital working must continue where the tasks can still be completed to the required standard. Employers should be pushed to openly communicate with their disabled employees about digital and physical tools to allow them to comfortably and effectively work from home. This should include measures that facilitate working with others remotely. It is important to prevent any exclusion and ensure that they still feel a part of the workplace.

This response was written by Dhanya Bhat (age 17), Farah Khan (age 17) and Michael Hill (age 21) with support from I have a voice. If you would like to discuss this further, please contact rebecca@ihaveavoice.org.uk.