SHEFFIELD LMC

JOB CENTRE PLUS
Overview for Sheffield GPs

At the March 2018 LMC meeting members received a presentation from Karen Church, Employer & Partnership Manager & Karen Goulty, Disability Employment Advisor Manager, Department for Work & Pensions (DWP). There followed a Q&A session. In view of the clarification received and GPs' continued frustrations and concerns with some elements of the medical evidence process relating to Job Centre Plus and the DWP, we subsequently liaised with Karen Goulty, who has agreed to the following summary being published:

- The DWP is keen to have a closer working relationship with GPs to facilitate the customer* journey (many of whom have health conditions) when claiming benefits, eg Employment Support Allowance (ESA), Universal Credit or Jobseekers Allowance, amongst others and in helping them find work.

- Recently significant changes have been made nationally to the benefit system, with the gradual introduction of the Universal Credit full service.

- Universal Credit full service:
  o Encompasses all existing benefits (such as income support, housing and tax credits).
  o Results in customers that did not previously need to attend a Job Centre having to do so, eg self-employed customers.
  o Is based on earnings rather than the existing job seekers allowance, which is based on number of hours worked.
  o Has not yet been rolled out in Sheffield (unlike Barnsley and Doncaster). It is expected that it will be implemented by the end of 2018. In the meantime GPs should expect to continue to receive requests to complete forms for other types of benefits. It is likely that the roll out will result in some delays initially as customers move from fortnightly to monthly payments. Customers will be able to request an advance payment to bridge gaps that would cause financial hardship.

- A Disability Employment Advisor (DEA) can visit a GP practice to provide clarification on services or address staff queries. This may be particularly useful for frontline staff such as receptionists.

- The ultimate aim of Jobcentre Plus is to move people into work. If there are barriers to that, eg if a customer is unable to find work or believes themselves to be unfit for work, Jobcentre Plus will help that person by 'moving' them closer to a working situation by setting a series of smaller, achievable steps or goals. This forms the 'contract' (usually referred to as the commitment) between the job centre and the customer. Terms are mutually agreed and signed up to on a rolling basis depending on progress made.

- Allowances can be are made for customers with conditions like fibromyalgia, whereby the commitment is temporarily 'switched off' to allow for periods where the functionality of that person is severely limited.

- The information provided on a Fit Note by a GP helps the DWP gauge what support a customer needs, what form the commitment will take, if any reasonable adjustments are required based on health needs and how best to keep in contact, ie face to face, telephone, email etc.

- GPs can help by noting specific aspects restricting a customer's return to work, eg 'can't sit for long periods' or 'not socially comfortable in large groups'.

- The customer will be assigned a named work coach who can help with CVs, interview techniques, job searches etc, aided by a DEA to support the customer into work. It is the role of the DEA to address any issues relevant to mental or physical disability or a health condition which are a barrier to work. They are also the first point of contact for a GP with any query relating to a customer's claim.

- An interpreting service is available for non-English speaking customers.

- Community partners work with the DWP to upskill work coaches (whose expertise is usually employment based rather than health) around more specific health needs, for example around mental health, drugs and alcohol. Community partners advise what additional support is available, adjustments employers would need to make and to which external organisations customers can be directed if it is felt to be beneficial (for support either during the back to work process or once the customer is in work).

- Community partners with an expertise in disability have been seconded into the DWP nationwide and, currently, Disability Sheffield and a young person's lead are working locally to improve the skills and techniques of work coaches. In addition, each work coach in South Yorkshire will receive 2 days' training on mental health.

- A health led trial with Sheffield City Region, Working Win, delivered by South Yorkshire Housing Association began recently. GPs are able to refer patients on to the trial and job centres will be able to signpost customers - http://www.workingwinreferrals.co.uk/.

- It was acknowledged that customers sometimes exaggerated a health condition and, although the DWP had no simple resolution to this, the following were thought to help reduce instances:
  o The work capability assessment carried out prior to granting ESA.
  o The commitment between the customer and the work coach can promote loyalty and some incentive.
  o The work coach's ability to 'test' the customer and to change the mind-set that they are unable to work.
  o A psychologist is available if necessary.

- A complex needs plan can be set up for vulnerable customers to address more specific needs.

- A customer disagreeing with a decision by the DWP is able to appeal. The process varies for each benefit, but the timescale is usually several months. A GP will be expected to continue to issue Fit Notes during this time.

- Customers receiving Disability Living Allowance (DLA), which is being replaced by Personal Independence Payments (PIP), can choose to use it to pay (or part pay) for a vehicle (car, scooter or powered wheelchair) under the Motability Scheme. The agreement is usually for 3 years and the customer only pays for petrol. A customer no longer qualifying for the enhanced rate Motability component will have to return the vehicle as soon as that decision is made, even if the customer appeals the decision.

*the person claiming benefit