1. Dimensions is a specialist provider of services for people with learning disabilities and people with autism. A not-for-profit organisation, we are a leader in our sector, supporting around 3,500 people and their families throughout England and Wales. We provide support that is tailored to meet each person’s needs. By listening to the people and families we support, we shape a service that is as individual as they are.

2. Our purpose is to enable people to be part of the community and make their own choices and decisions about their life. We provide support for people living in their own homes or in shared housing, transition support for young people leaving school or college, and opportunities for learning, employment and participating in the community. Our team of support advisors help individuals and their families with a personal budget.

3. The quality of our service is based on a commitment to person-centred support, underpinned by our well-trained and dedicated staff. What makes Dimensions a leader in the sector is a combination of 30 years’ experience, real expertise and a commitment to continuous improvement and innovation.

The Supported Employment Team

4. Having a job is about more than earning money. Having a job helps people to feel more independent, valued and can give them goals and aspirations. Some people need extra help to find a job: help to find what’s out there, how to apply, or support on the job to learn how to do it.

5. Our supported employment team helps people find and secure employment. We have seven experienced job coaches in the team, which has been running for three years.

6. The team is funded through Local Authorities and the Department for Work and Pensions Grants and Contracts. We also have a plan in place that will allow people who have Personal Independence Payments to purchase our services and are currently looking at other funding options e.g. Big Lottery funding. People are referred to us in various ways, including through their Social Worker, Care Services, Self-referral, Dimensions and word of mouth.

7. The supported employment team members use person-centred tools to help people find and secure employment. We get to know the person looking for work; their likes and dislikes; aspirations and potential and the relationships they have. By talking to employers and businesses about their needs, we can use this information to make matches that ensure the best possible chance of employment being successful.
8. We provide training, workshops and meaningful volunteer placements to help people prepare for employment. We are able to support people to write a CV, fill out application forms and learn interview techniques. We use taster sessions to help both the employer and the employee decide if the match works for them. The team also works with employers and businesses to train them about employing someone with a learning disability.

9. By working with people to understand what is expected of them, we are able to maintain employment.

10. We have supported 52 people into paid employment, both within Dimensions and with external companies. At the moment our service is limited in location; we cover Somerset and Barnet in London. We are building partnerships nationally and it is the intention for this service to be rolled out to all areas where Dimensions provides services.

Tamara’s story

Tamara is a young lady with Asperger’s who loves working with children. College hadn’t gone well for her, and she was left doubting that she could ever get her dream job. When a Dimensions Job Coach first met with Tamara, her family were sceptical, but they soon saw that our person-centred, holistic and on-going approach could be just what Tamara needed.

We spent time with Tamara and people close to her, ‘discovering’ all aspects of her life; her routines, skills and dislikes. Her confidence had been knocked so we set up a reading session at her local library with a pre-school group, which proved to us and to her that she had what it takes. Gradually, we compiled a photo-portfolio of Tamara, something we then used to show to potential employers.

Part of our support to Tamara was to help her identify the best training and employment route, taking into consideration her finances and the way she learns. We agreed on an apprenticeship where she could spend one day supported one-to-one in her local college, with extra help from the Specialist Asperger Team, and three days in a nursery, where she used to volunteer. We supported Tamara to apply for Working Tax Credits and a Back to Work grant, so that with her Apprenticeship wage, she wouldn’t miss her benefits.
Our experience of Access to Work

11. We have supported three people to secure Access to Work funding and we believe having access to this fund has benefitted them hugely. We plan to support more people to apply for Access to Work funding in the future.

12. We found the process was fairly straightforward for our job coaches to negotiate. It took no more than four weeks overall and the people we have supported to receive Access to Work funding have remained in employment, with little or no problems regarding the fund.

13. We do feel, however, that there are areas for improvement; particularly where people with a learning disability are concerned.

Our Recommendations

Awareness

14. Knowledge and awareness of the Access to Work fund amongst eligible people is low and even lower amongst employers. It is clear that many people are unaware of the fund before we discuss it with them.

15. Our job coaches are aware of Access to Work due to their close links with jobcentres and the Department for Work and Pensions. For people with a learning disability and their families, who have little experience in this area, awareness of the fund is low.

16. We believe that the jobcentre need to increase the advertisement of the Access to Work Scheme within their services, through leaflets, posters and staff talking to people about it more. For this to be successful, staff within jobcentres need to have more knowledge Access to Work than they currently do. The scheme needs to be publicised much better and far wider than it is currently, including potential employers.

17. There must be more guidance and information available for Access to Work, in various formats, including easy-read. It is not easy to find for those who are unfamiliar with the system, and particularly for those with a learning disability.

Application Process

18. The application process requires high literacy skills. Straight away this means that many people with a learning disability will be excluded from applying without support. The people we support have access to experienced job coaches who inform them of Access to Work to begin with, and then support them to apply.

19. We recommend:
   - More information being available in an accessible format, such as easy-read.
• Staff in jobcentres should be trained in how to support people with a learning disability to apply for the Access to Work fund.
• If trained staff are unavailable, information should be given to direct people where they can go to get support.

**Funding**

20. Our Job Coaches are able to support people while they get used to employment, helping them to learn the job and gain confidence. In some cases Access to Work funds this support, and we see this increasing in the future. This support is only available, however, once paid employment has been offered.

21. People with a learning disability who are looking to work rarely have previous work experience, and if they do, it is limited. To discover what work will suit them, and the employer, we organise work taster sessions/trials, working interviews or volunteer placements. This leads to a higher success rate in long-term, sustained employment.

22. We recommend that Access to Work be available to people at this point and not just when paid employment is offered. We believe this would be extremely useful to people with a learning disability, would encourage more people to start the employment process and could mean the difference between someone having paid employment or remaining in receipt of benefits.

23. Some employers require a potential employee to complete training before offering paid employment, for example a basic food hygiene certificate or gain a CSCS card before they can start. In the majority of cases, people don’t have the means to pay themselves.

24. We recommend that funding from Access to Work should be available to support training that is linked to paid employment.

25. Transport is often a major barrier for people with a learning disability to gaining paid employment. People can be put off volunteering, work experience or taster sessions, due to the high costs associated with transport.

26. We recommend that Access to Work funding for transport to work experience and volunteering placements should be considered, not just when paid employment is offered.
Conclusion

27. There are major barriers for people with a learning disability or autism to gaining paid employment. We believe that the Access to Work fund is a great resource for people in overcoming these barriers and being successful in fulfilling sustained employment.

28. Access to Work is not without its own issues however,
   - It is not accessible to people with a learning disability or their families, unless employment support is already in place.
   - There is a lack of awareness of the scheme and lack of knowledge of how it works amongst staff, people with a learning disability and employers and businesses.
   - The fund itself can be too narrow and needs to include unpaid employment, and the lead up to paid employment.

29. We believe that the Access to Work scheme can over simplify the position of people with a disability in employment. No disability is the same and supporting a person with a learning disability into employment is very different to supporting someone with a different disability. Their needs and requirements are very different, and this is something that needs to be considered in the funding that is offered.

30. We feel Access to Work should ensure that the needs of each individual are met in order for them to be able to work and not concentrate on meeting specific criteria. The application process needs to be flexible and each case judged on its own merits.

31. Supporting someone with a learning disability into employment and having ‘access to work’ is a long process, and begins with an individual deciding they want to work. The Access to Work fund needs to reflect this and not just support someone once they have achieved much more by getting to paid employment.

18 June 2014