

# Help Available From the Jobcentre

## Work Choice Programme

Work Choice replaced the Work Step programme in 2012 and provides help for people who have been out of the job market for a long time and who may have a disability or long-term health problem which is presenting an obstacle to getting into work. The Work Choice programme can provide help with learning basic human skills such as confidence and communications skills and with developing skills in human interaction.



The Work Choice Programme can help with confidence building and communications skills  
(Photo: Pressmaster on Shutterstock)

These sorts of skills are often areas that people with schizophrenia struggle with. In addition to all of its other disadvantages, schizophrenia is a ruthless destroyer of self-esteem. If you have spent the last ten years under daily assault from persecutory voices and delusions you may have very little insight into your own qualities and abilities and very little awareness of your own self-worth. In addition people with schizophrenia often find that whilst they have been poorly they have lost some of the social skills that people often rely on in their daily communications with the people they work or live with and which other people would take for granted.

As well as help with basic social skills and confidence-building, later on the programme can help with specific training tailored to the job that you want to get, such as first aid, manual handling or IT skills and help with jobsearching skills such as how to write a decent CV and how to present yourself well at interview. (You may also like to take a look at our Information Sheets on CV Writing and Interview Skills which also cover these areas.)

So for many the first step in engaging with the job market again is to learn about your own skills and qualities. Our information sheet *What Kind of Work Can I Do?* gives some guidance on how to assess the qualities that you have when thinking about jobsearching again.

The Work Choice Programme can also provide help with arranging a work placement. This is a short period of unpaid employment, part-time or full-time, with a real employer which will give you the opportunity to try out a specific job and find out if it is suited to you. Working on the placement won't affect your benefits and you may be entitled to some additional financial help such as help with travel costs and some other work-related expenses.



Short work placements can also be arranged through the Work Choice Programme (Photo: Dmitry Kalinovsky on Shutterstock)

Work placements are a really useful way of testing the job market and assessing your own strengths and weaknesses before you make the almighty leap into full time employment. They also give you an opportunity to get yourself known by a local employer and gives you access to that all important job reference. Here's what one person with schizophrenia who worked on a placement said about it:

*I did a three month placement with a local building firm as part of a Jobcentre programme . It started off as part-time for two days a week and then over the three month period built up to full-time. During this time I had the support of a mentor who monitored my progress on the scheme and was helped with my travel costs and protective clothing costs. It was just so good to be working again and I learnt a lot about how to do well in a job and how the industry had changed since I was last in work. At the end of the placement I got a good reference from the site manager. Then six months later they called me and offered me a full time job with them. I was over the moon. Ryan.*

The Work Choice programme is due to be replaced next year by the new Work and Health Programme.

### **Work Coach**

Schizophrenia often involves being out of work for a long period and perhaps in some cases, because schizophrenia often starts in early life, never having held down a job. So starting jobsearching can be a real unknown. It is important to start by getting as much information as possible. A lot of information is available on the internet now but there is no substitute for face-to-face advice from people that know what they are talking about so If you are thinking of starting jobsearching then the first step is to make an appointment to see a Work Coach at the Jobcentre.

The Work Coach will discuss your plans with you and carry out an employment assessment which will take into account all of your skills and qualifications as well as how your abilities are impacted by your schizophrenia. The coach will then help you to prepare a back-to-work plan and may be able to refer you on to specialist back-to-work organisations such as People Plus (formerly known as A4E) who can help with jobsearching skills or a specialist employment psychologist who can help identify any mental health obstacles to getting into work such as residual psychotic symptoms.



The Work Coach at your Jobcentre will be able to arrange an assessment by a specialist employment psychologist (Photo: Photographee.eu on Shutterstock)

Speaking to a work coach before you start your jobsearching is also essential because they will be able to highlight any impacts that going into work will have on your benefits and so enable you to choose the career path that will be of the greatest financial advantage to you. The benefits system in the UK is extremely complex and it is important not to do anything that would risk leaving you worse off.

### **Access to Work**

The Access to Work Programme provides financial support to help people overcome obstacles to employment that they may face as a result of a disability or long-term health condition. For people with physical disabilities this could include adaptations to their workplace or special equipment over and above the reasonable adaptations that employers are required to make as part of their obligations under disability legislation.

For people with mental health conditions the support could include provision of a support worker or help with travel to work, for instance travelling by taxi if they find it too stressful to travel by public transport or if using public transport exacerbates their psychotic symptoms.

In this programme most employers tend to come from local government or the voluntary sector, the types of organisations that are more receptive to employing people with long-term health conditions and only a minority of private sector employers are currently taking part..

### **New Enterprise Allowance**

If you are unemployed you may be able to get help from the Jobcentre with setting up your own business. Setting up your own business may sound like a daunting option for someone who has schizophrenia but in fact it may be a useful way into employment if you have found that your condition has presented obstacles to finding a suitable directly-employed job. Most small businesses in the UK are “one-man-bands” and only employ the owner often with minimal help from others.

Self-employment could suit you if you enjoy being your own boss and are well organised. It may also have definite advantages for some people with schizophrenia for instance those who cannot stick to prescribed working hours because their body clock is disrupted and need very flexible working or those who have a criminal record who may find it difficult to get through the application process with a large employer.



Self employment often suits people with schizophrenia who need to work flexibly (Photo: Kritchanut on Shutterstock)

If you have a business idea and think that self-employment might be a good option for you then the Jobcentre runs a scheme called the New Enterprise Allowance which provides real support in setting up on your own. You will be eligible if you are aged over 18, currently unemployed and claiming certain benefits such as Jobseekers Allowance, Employment Support Allowance or Income Support. You may also qualify if you are claiming Universal Credit but you won't be eligible if you are in the Work Programme as support for self-employment is provided as part of that system.

Each year several thousand people in the UK set up their own businesses with the help of the New Enterprise Allowance. The list of different occupations that they choose is endless but here are a few examples taken from reports on the web today:

- Car valeting
- Window cleaning
- Proofreading
- Dog walking
- Gardening
- Counselling
- IT support services
- On line retailing
- Personal trainer
- Stone walling

You can see a video interview with a young woman from London who set up her own counselling service [here](#).

The New Enterprise Allowance provides a volunteer mentor who will help you to develop your business idea and write a good business plan followed by training in business skills such as book-keeping and marketing. You then get a weekly allowance totalling £1,274 over six months while you are getting your business off the ground and access to a loan of up to £1,000 to help with your start-up costs. The loan is on a low rate of interest and can be paid back over five years.

While you are building up your business and are on a low income you may also be entitled to Working Tax Credit and may still get your Housing Benefit and Personal Independence Payment (or Disability Living Allowance).

The help is provided by external providers not your normal Jobcentre advisors and the business mentor is

usually a volunteer whose day job often involves providing business advice to very large organisations. If your business idea doesn't work out you may be able to claim to go back onto your previous benefits.

Most people with schizophrenia will start to think about getting into work at some time during their recovery. An important first step is to discuss your plans with your local Jobcentre who can give important help and advice which will enable you to plan your jobsearching better and improve your prospects of success greatly.

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