

History of Disability in the Post Office

Employment

By 1932 the Post Office had rules relating to the long term employment of disabled people on preferential duties. These rules were drawn up after the First World War when the Post Office employed many ex-servicemen who had been disabled in action. However, records in the Royal Mail Archive reflect the employment of disabled people prior to this with our earliest records relating to disability dating back to the late 19th century.

From 1880-1884 Henry Fawcett, who was blind, was the Postmaster General. Henry Fawcett is well known for his efforts to improve conditions in the Post Office. During this time the Post Office began experiments in the employment of 'deaf mutes' (POST 30/821). Much effort appears to have been taken to find suitable employment, despite the negative attitude of many of the departments approached. Reasons cited for the reluctance to employ these individuals related to lack of productivity, difficulties in training them and concerns over their safety. Despite these concerns the trials were continued until 1907. While there was a desire at the higher levels of the Post Office to find suitable employment for these individuals it was a rather benevolent desire. Similar attitudes can also be seen in files from the 20th century and were not confined to staff directly employed by the Post Office. POST 30/4207a, dating from 1919, relates to tenders for supplies to the Post Office and the possibility of using institutions for the blind to provide supplies and offer profitable employment to the individuals concerned. Again we see a charitable concern for those 'who so much need our sympathy and support' (POST 30/4207a). Concerns raised regarding productivity and quality of work are similar to those relating to the employment of 'deaf mutes'.

In the period after the First World War the issue of disability became more prominent within the Post

Office. Along with the rest of the Civil Service the Post Office needed to consider how to make provision for those disabled in the war. This included employees of various grades who had enlisted and been injured in action, and 'outsiders' (i.e. new recruits to the service). The aim appears to have been to ensure maximum efficiency while allowing for the greatest possible employment of ex servicemen. An interim report by the Lords Commissioners of His Majesty's Treasury on 'Civil Service-Recruitment After the War' issued in February 1918 stated that 'It is of importance that the State should show the utmost consideration for men disabled in the War both on the grounds of public policy and as setting an example to private employers, and we consider that the ordinary physical standard for certification should be relaxed in favour of such men, subject in each case to a reasonable probability of efficient service' (POST 30/3384b). Instructions issued for Medical Officers in 1918 indicated that consideration should be given to the likelihood of the candidate being able to perform the duties required for a sufficient period of time, without further deterioration in their health. The joint considerations of efficiency and future prognosis determined the attitude to different disabilities. Conditions which were not regarded as preventing employment at an established grade included the loss of a limb, sensory impairments, typhoid or dysentery (if not a carrier), rheumatism (if movements are free), and bronchitis (if no remaining symptoms). Conditions which raised more concern included a history of tuberculosis and various mental health issues. In both these cases there was concern over the possibility of recurrence and generally candidates were only recommended for unestablished posts-which did not entitle them to full pension benefits or sick pay.

Similar issues regarding the employment of disabled people also arose after the Second World War. Again the attitude of the Post Office must be viewed against the wider background. In 1944 the Disabled

Persons (Employment) Act was passed. This set out a requirement that certain industries should employ at least a 3% quota of registered disabled people. The Act also set up a system for registering disabled people for the first time. This led to a report in 1946 on the employment of disabled persons in the departmental grades of the General Post Office, detailing the main provisions of the Disabled Persons (Employment) Act 1944 (POST 57/30). The terms of reference for this report were 'to consider what provision can be made for disabled persons in the departmental grades of the Post Office in accordance with the requirements of the Disabled Persons (Employment) Act 1944 and other matters relevant to the employment of disabled persons in these grades.'. The 1944 Act defined a disabled person as 'a person who, on account of injury, disease, or congenital deformity is substantially handicapped in obtaining or keeping employment, or in undertaking work on his own account of a kind that apart from that injury, disease or deformity would be suited to his age, experience and qualifications' (POST 57/30). This was broader than past Post Office policy towards disability which solely concerned itself with the position of ex servicemen in receipt of a war disablement pension. The 1946 report examined the existing employment of disabled persons and set out recommendations for the future. It found that many ex servicemen had been employed on specially arranged duties which were often monotonous and had little prospect of promotion. The report recommended that disabled persons should be encouraged to undertake as wide a range of duties as possible. Concerns remained about the efficiency of disabled persons with recommendations against the recruitment of people with disabilities which were likely to cause frequent or excessive sick leave. Special arrangements continued to apply for ex-servicemen. The report covers physical, mental and sensory disabilities with consideration given to the type of work which might be suitable in each instance.

A further report was produced in 1972 by a Joint Study Group on disabled persons. The terms of reference for the Study Group were 'to examine the whole question of recruitment, rehabilitation and employment of disabled persons' (POST 62/21).

The final report sets out various categories of disabled persons in the Post Office, these were:

- 1) registered disabled persons recruited to normal (i.e. not preferential) duties
- 2) staff eligible to be registered but not
- 3) staff disabled while employed by the Post Office these were split into:
 - i) those who return to work before fully fit but will be able to resume full duties eventually
 - ii) those who return to work but will never be able to manage their old job
- 4) staff in 'designated employment' i.e. positions only open to registered disabled for example car park attendants and electric lift operators

Many of the conclusions of this report upheld those established in the 1946 report with a few additions. These included arrangements to keep under review the well being of all disabled employees including new entrants, and encouraging those eligible to register to do so.

The above shows a gradual shift from charitable and narrow views of disability to a wider definition aiming for employment on an equal footing. However it is interesting to note the persistence of certain criteria used when employing disabled people. One such criterion is the requirement for 75% efficiency compared to non-disabled staff. This can be seen in the 1946 report of the employment of disabled persons and is implied in the employment of deaf mutes at the end of the 19th century. The same criterion continued to be used in the early 1980s. During the 1980s Girobank received national recognition for its policies in the employment of disabled people, receiving the Manpower Services Commission's 'Fit for Work' award in 1982 and 1985. The 1980s and 1990s also saw various guidelines on the recruitment and employment of disabled people and equal opportunities policies (covering race, colour, nationality, ethnic or national origins, religion or creed, sex, sexuality, marital status as well as disability). These shifts in attitude towards disability reflect wider changes in society and continue today.

Services

As a public service organisation the Post Office is also involved in the provision of services to disabled people. In some cases this has resulted in services catering specifically for the needs of disabled people. One such service is 'Articles for the Blind' which was introduced on 1 September 1906. This service was introduced because Braille and large print literature was heavier than counterparts in standard print and prior to the introduction of this service was more expensive to send. The service was initially known as 'Blind Literature' and reduced inland postage rates for papers, periodicals and books impressed in Braille or other special type for use by blind people. In 1933 the service was extended to cover overseas post. In June 1936 the service was renamed 'Articles for the Blind' and the material included in the service was expanded. In 1965 the reduced rate of postage was abolished and all packets containing Braille material or audio books for blind or partially sighted people were conveyed free. This free service continues to be offered by the Post Office today (2008).

Free wireless licences were also issued by the Post Office to visually impaired customers. Wireless receiving licenses were first introduced in 1922 and were required to 'install and use a station for receiving wireless signals'. Free licenses for blind people were introduced in 1926 after the passing of the Wireless Telegraphy (Blind Persons Facilities) Act. Individuals wishing to claim a free licence could not be resident in a public or charitable institution or in a school. They also had to produce a certificate from their County Council, or County Borough Council confirming that they were a registered blind person. Television licences were introduced in June 1946 and an agreement was reached in principle to issue television licences at a reduced rate to registered blind people in 1955. Today 'blind and severely sight impaired' people continue to be eligible for a 50% discount on their television licence, although broadcasting is no longer the responsibility of the Post Office.

Another area where the Post Office had to consider its policies relating to disabled customers was in the area of mental illness. This arose particularly with regard to funds in the Post Office Savings Bank and

attempts to withdraw these funds by people other than the named account holder. In 1881 the question arose as to whether the spouse of a person who was a patient in an asylum could withdraw money from the individuals saving account to pay for their maintenance. Post Office Regulation 22 issued in August 1861 stated 'that if any depositor shall become insane or otherwise incapacitated to act and the same shall be proved to the satisfaction of the Postmaster General and if the Postmaster General shall be satisfied of the urgency of the case he may authorize payment from time to time out of the funds of such a depositor to any person whom he shall judge proper and the receipt of such a person shall be a good discharge for the same.' (POST 30/420a). However, in 1882 concerns were raised regarding the right of the Postmaster General to 'dispose of the property of Lunatics, without the sanction of the Lord Chancellor, to whom the charge of their persons and property is entrusted by law' (POST 30/420a). After much legal discussion it was agreed that the Postmaster General could allow payments for the maintenance of a mentally ill depositor. In order to make such payments the claimant needed to provide a medical certificate indicating the condition of the depositor, and details of a third party to testify the facts of the case before a Justice of the Peace. Additionally if there was any prospect of recovery for the depositor only a portion of the sum in the account should be used to pay their maintenance. Similar arrangements were implemented by the Money Order Office in the 1920s to deal with claims for war savings certificates purchased by individuals who later became mentally ill. A further file (POST 33/3986) deals with the issue of redirection of mail addressed to mental ill people. In this case the position of the Post Office appears to have been to only allow redirection of mail when requested by a receiver appointed by the 'Masters of Lunacy'. This differs from the situation regarding savings bank deposits and war certificates where claimants were only required to apply to be appointed receiver if there were other assets beyond those lodged in the Post Office held in the name of the patient.

More recently efforts have been made by the Post Office to make the counter side of their operations more accessible. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw a widespread maintenance and refurbishment

programme in Post Offices which had accessibility for disabled people as a high priority. By 1992, 770 of High Street Post Offices had ramps, or level access. Also in 1992 the Postbus for Sittingbourne, Kent became the first to incorporate a hoist for wheelchair users.

The passing of the 2005 Disability Discrimination Act has increased the legal requirements on businesses to make reasonable adjustments for the employment of disabled people and for serving disabled customers. However the files in the archive reflect the efforts of the Post Office to address these issues for a long time prior to the passing of the Act.

N.B. Please note that the language used to refer to various disabilities has changed over the centuries. The documents in the archive include the terms used at the time they were written, some of which may be regarded as offensive today. These should be viewed in their historical context.

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