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New organisation to help businesses comply with disability laws

By Andrew Taylor, Employment Correspondent

A new independent body is to establish business-wide standards aimed at helping employers cope with disability discrimination laws.

Employers meeting the new standards could be eligible for lower insurance premiums, according to the UK Council for Access and Equality, which will be a non-profit making body.

Founder members of the scheme, which include the Association of British Insurers and the British Retail Consortium, represent more than 600,000 organisations.

Government this month announced measures designed to return 1m people, currently receiving incapacity benefit, to work.

Incapacity benefit, which is claimed by about 2.7m people and costs £12bn a year, will be replaced for new claimants by an employment and support allowance intended to encourage people to return to work.

Private sector companies and public sector bodies will also be expected to introduce more inclusive employment policies for disabled workers.

Peter Carr, a former chairman of Postwatch, the consumer watchdog, is chairman of the council. He said the council would offer training packages to employers as well as setting independently audited standards to certify that organisations were complying with the requirements of the Disability and Discrimination Act.

Mr Carr said: "Disabled people no longer have to put up with second-class service. If they can prove they have been discriminated against they can start civil proceedings and serve an injunction and from December this will apply if they can prove inclusion is not a policy.

"The Disability Rights Commission has stated it will rigorously pursue those 'dragging their feet' through the courts. However, litigation does not bring about inclusion, it simply allows for legal redress. Litigation does not help disabled people achieve their aspirations or gain access, nor does it help the community achieve these goals."

Mr Carr said the council was working with the independent UK Accreditation Service, the sole body appointed by government to assess organisations providing certification, testing and inspection services, for the new standards.

The council said that there were 10m adult disabled people in the UK with 6min employment, representing about 20 per cent of the workforce. The majority of these would have acquired their disability during their working life, posing a big potential problem for their employers, said Mr Carr.

He said 70 per cent of disabled people had reported difficulties in gaining access to goods and services while 25 per cent of high street businesses were rated "as having poor disability access".

The council planned to consult "businesses and all members of the community including individual disabled people" to establish suitable standards and methods for measuring progress. It expected UKAS-certified auditors to be in place by the end of next year to allow the scheme to start.

Other founder members include Co-operative Financial Services, Martineau Johnson, the law firm, the Forum for Private Businesses and the Professional Footballers' Association.