

PRESS RELEASE

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URGENT NEED TO STEP UP EFFORTS TO SUPPORT PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS BACK INTO THE WORKPLACE SAYS MENTAL HEALTH CHARITY

“People with mental health conditions need improved support to access work” said Ronnie Wilson, MBE and First Step Trust (FST) Chief Executive, on the day that the DWP publishes the Perkins Review ‘Realising ambitions: Better employment support for people with a mental health condition.’

“Work plays a vital role in maintaining good mental health – we experience this every day at FST. However we are concerned that the lack of jobs in the current economic climate means that the people we work with, many of whom face multiple disadvantages of serious mental health conditions and long-term unemployment, will be pushed to the back of the queue.”

Ronnie Wilson believes that FST is well placed to address this issue by providing quick and easy access to work placements in the organisation’s own social enterprises. “We hope the report will recognise the important role that the voluntary sector can play in providing work-related health and vocational support services. People need to be able to choose the support that best suits their needs.”

In August, as part of the Perkins Review research and consultation process, Dr Paul Litchfield, Chief Medical Officer of BT Group plc. and a member of the Review panel, visited FST’s SMaRT project in Salford. SMaRT Garage Services is a commercial garage which operates as a not for profit business trading with the local community. At the same time the garage provides work placements and employment support to people who face barriers to work because of mental health conditions and other disadvantages.

Mark, who took up a work placement at SMaRT in June, said “My mental health has definitely improved since starting at FST. I am more confident, less paranoid, my thinking is clearer and my mood has improved. I’m learning new things practically every day. I think I am more employable and I look forward to the future with renewed hope.”

Carolyn, on placement at FST’s HQ in Woolwich, who has been out of work since 2001 and has bipolar disorder, said “Before I joined FST I didn’t think anyone would ever pay me to do a job because what could I offer? But coming here and being treated as a colleague and given responsibility to get the job done has totally turned my life around.

“I’m tougher now and feel more in control of my life. I’m applying for jobs but it’s very daunting to think you’re up against sometimes 500 other candidates. I got an interview for the first job I went for and although I didn’t get it that’s given me a tremendous boost.”

Ronnie Wilson agrees says that “employers should not underestimate the contribution that people with mental health issues can make to the workplace, “with the right support even

those furthest removed from the jobs market can learn to deal with the pressures, responsibilities and obligations of working life.”

For more information contact Ronnie Wilson, CEO, First Step Trust on 07971051037 or Ronnie.wilson@firststeptrust.org.uk or go to <http://www.firststeptrust.org.uk>

More information

First Step Trust (FST) believes that the dynamism of commercial enterprise acts as a catalyst to bring out people's potential. We set out to rekindle people's belief in themselves and their aspiration to realize their ambitions.

FST has over 15 years' experience delivering employment and training services, through social enterprise, for people with mental health conditions and other disadvantages.

The way FST works is that each of their projects operates as a small business providing a service for real customers. People with mental health conditions and other disadvantages join as workforce members and fully participate in the every aspect of running the business – they are critical to its success. Joining FST gives people the chance to become part of a team, build up their work experience, gain qualifications, get an employer's reference and get help in finding a job.

FST has 13 projects around the country, including a garage service repair centre, a restaurant, a coffee shop and three design studios. Its head office is in Woolwich, London.