

Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb i ymgynghoriad y Pwyllgor Cydraddoldeb a Chyfiawnder Cymdeithasol ar Anabledd a Chyflogaeth

This response was submitted to the Equality and Social Justice Committee consultation on Disability and Employment

DE09

Ymateb gan: Cymdeithas Genedlaethol Awtistiaeth Cymru | Response from: National Autistic Society Cymru



About autism: Autism is a lifelong disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world. There are over 700,000 autistic adults and children in the UK. Without the right support or understanding, autistic people can miss out on an education, struggle to find work and become extremely isolated.

About us: The National Autistic Society is here to transform lives, change attitudes and create a society that works for autistic people. We transform lives by providing support, information and practical advice for the 700,000 autistic adults and children in the UK, as well as three million family members and carers. Since 1962, autistic people have turned to us at key moments or challenging times in their lives, be it getting a diagnosis, going to school or finding work. We change attitudes by improving public understanding of autism and the difficulties many autistic people face. We also work closely with businesses, local authorities and government to help them provide more autism-friendly spaces, deliver better services and improve laws. We have come a long way but it is not good enough www.autism.org.uk

The National Autistic Society welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Equality and Social Justice Committee's consultation on disability and employment. Unemployment, and under-employment is a big issue that autistic people face. The National Autistic Society's Moonshot vision envisages a society where all autistic people who can and want to work have a job and are happy in it¹, and we are responding to this consultation with that objective in mind.

The Buckland Review² on autism and employment highlighted the extent of the problem across the UK (and there is no evidence that the situation is significantly different in Wales). It highlighted that only 3 in 10 (30%) of autistic adults are in work. This is the lowest of any disability³. Furthermore, even when in employment, autistic people face further discrimination and disadvantage, with the pay gap between autistic people and non-autistic people the largest of any disabled group, with autistic people receiving on average a third less than non-disabled people⁴.

It is clear that unemployment and under-employment is a significant issue for autistic people, and carries significant costs to the economy in terms of lost incomes and increased expenditure on social security. It represents a barrier to growth. But more importantly than the economic case for tackling this gap is the well-being of autistic people who experience significant harm due to the discrimination and barriers they face in seeking employment.

¹ National Autistic Society, The Moonshot Vision – what a society that works for autism really looks like, 2023, available from <https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/who-we-are/the-moonshot-vision>

² The Buckland Review of Autism and Employment, 2024, available from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-buckland-review-of-autism-employment-report-and-recommendations/the-buckland-review-of-autism-employment-report-and-recommendations>

³ Department for Work & Pensions (2023) *Employment of disabled people 2023*, Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-employment-of-disabled-people-2023/employment-of-disabled-people-2023>

⁴ Buckland review 2024 - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-buckland-review-of-autism-employment-report-and-recommendations/the-buckland-review-of-autism-employment-report-and-recommendations>

Discrimination

The Buckland Review highlighted that the biggest barrier to accessing employment for autistic people is a lack of understanding and negative stereotypes. Its findings demonstrate there remains significant work to do to tackle prejudice amongst employers. Amongst its findings include:

- 50% of managers expressed discomfort with the idea of hiring autistic people.
- Only 35% of autistic employees were fully open about being autistic across their organisation.
- 34% of employers said that they thought an autistic person would be unlikely to fit into their team.

These findings demonstrate that discrimination persists. We are concerned about the attitude of those 34% of employers who felt that autistic people wouldn't "fit" within their team. When employers are using criteria such as "fit" to determine hiring decisions then unconscious biases (and conscious biases) are likely to be playing a role in such decisions.

At the recent Senedd Cross-Party Group on Autism meeting of 14th June, the frustrations of one of the speakers over this issue was evident. Her presentation highlighted some of the reasons employers had given her for rejecting her from entry level jobs, such as not being passive, living too far away (when it wasn't true) and ridiculously that she was not a smoker.

We support efforts to strengthen legislation against discrimination in the workplace, noting the current Westminster government's view that one of the two factors behind the 'decline' in the UK's economic performance was "*an inability to accept that a strong economy can only be built on the contribution of every community and every person*⁵". In other words, the unemployment and under-employment of autistic people is not just a problem for the individual autistic person facing discrimination, but an economic problem that harms growth. We hope that governments across the UK are willing to make the "tough decisions" required to tackle institutional discrimination and prejudice.

Career progression, and workplace environment

It is not only in employment decisions that discrimination exists. The Buckland Review's findings also demonstrate that under-employment is an issue, with the pay gap highlighting this. Autistic graduates experience the worst outcomes of all disability groups. They are the most likely to be overqualified for the role they have, the most likely to be on zero hours contracts, and the least likely to be in a permanent role. By definition, graduates have already demonstrated academic ability and have the capability to perform the required tasks in many graduate roles. Logically, lack of qualifications cannot therefore explain these outcomes.

⁵ The Labour Party, Kickstart economic growth, available from <https://labour.org.uk/change/kickstart-economic-growth/>

The reasons are complex and can include the attitudes highlighted. But they also include the ways in which employers make decisions both on recruitment and career progression. It is often highlighted that there is a “hidden” job market in which a person’s ability to network and make social connections is important in accessing this hidden job market. This is especially the case in more senior roles where people who are seen at conferences and events are more likely to be remembered when such roles come up.

Autistic people can face difficulties with social interaction, or may adopt the strategy of “masking” during social events to fit in. Masking can cause physical and mental burnout, and an autistic person may struggle to maintain “masking” during a long networking event such as a conference. This can make it difficult or impossible for some people to find their way into this “hidden” job market.

Similarly, in a workplace that involves lots of social interaction and where an autistic person does not feel comfortable being themselves, the difficulties they may face because of masking or being misunderstood could lead to managers misinterpreting autistic burnout as “not fitting in” or “becoming withdrawn”. This in turn could lead to a downward spiral of the autistic person finding the workplace more stressful, making mistakes as a result, becoming more anxious around colleagues and managers, and receiving negative feedback that reinforces this negative cycle.

Furthermore, autistic people can find change and uncertainty more stressful than non-autistic people. During times of change, such as restructures, autistic employees may experience significant anxiety because of this, which can make it harder to engage fully and positively in the process.

These are just some of the issues that autistic people may face in both securing and obtaining employment. As the Buckland Review notes, “autistic people are coming to the recruitment process without confidence that they can secure and keep employment”. This is why the National Autistic Society wants a fundamental change to recruitment practices, so that these processes are fairer, do not exclude autistic people, and ultimately result in better recruitment decisions for all.

The National Autistic Society has been working with many employers for a number of years, and has launched (with Auto-trader) the creation of the Greater Manchester Neuro-diversity and Learning Disability employer network. It has around 140 businesses and organisations who are members of the network, a mix of support organisations and employers. It meets twice a year and has a sub-group which tries to encourage the creation of neuro-diversity staff networks and standards that come from that group. It is hoping that these standards will form part of the refresh of the Greater Manchester good employment charter.

Further examples of good recruitment and retention practices are highlighted in the appendix to this consultation response.

Support services

The Committee is also asking for views on the existing support services for disabled people to support them into work.

At the recent Cross-Party Group on Autism meeting of 14th June the issue of employment was discussed, with two autistic people presenting their own experiences. One of the speakers highlighted that she did not need help with her CV when the reasons given for constant rejection were irrelevant to the roles. However, many support services place the onus on finding employment to the individual with activities such as CV workshops.

Many of these services are not autistic-friendly, and do not have staff that are appropriately trained to understand autism. One of the other speakers at this Cross-Party Group noted how that the focus of such services was often on mental health not on the possibility their clients could be autistic, and it was only once she received specialist support (that considered autism as a possibility) that she was able to secure employment. This highlights the need for autistic people to have access to specialist job coaches (not available from generic scheme providers), as has been recommended by Hefin David MS in his report for the Welsh Government 'Transitions to Employment'.⁶

The National Autistic Society believes that existing services are clearly not supporting enough autistic people into work, and changes are required to them to offer autism-friendly services. Services that recognise that autistic people face additional barriers in accessing employment that cannot be simply resolved via upgrading a CV. We would like a fundamental shift to be made to the ethos of such services – where too often the onus is placed on the autistic person to be pro-active in finding a job (often accompanied by a threat of sanctions by the DWP for “non-compliance” even if the requirements demanded are unsuitable for an autistic person). Instead, we need to move to services that work with local employers to remove the barriers autistic (and other disabled) people face in accessing the jobs that are available.

The Buckland Review highlights here that such services, even where they exist, are not known about. The report highlights findings from the National Autistic Society that 60% of employers said that they did not know where to go for support or advice about employing an autistic person, and 60% of employers would worry about getting support for autistic people wrong⁷.

The Buckland Report also highlights that that training on autism run by employers and training providers is often poor, arguing that, *“Oversimplification, reliance on the medical model and a one-size-fits-all approach are not only outdated but are now doing more harm than good, reinforcing stereotypes and low expectations for autistic people.”*

⁶ Dr Hefin David MS, Transitions to employment, a report for the Welsh Government, 2023, available from <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2023-06/230622-transitions-to-employment.pdf>

⁷ The National Autistic Society, The autism employment gap, 2016, available from <https://s3.chorus-mk.thirdlight.com/file/1573224908/63516243370/width=-1/height=-1/format=-1/fit=scale/t=444848/e=never/k=59f99727/TMI%20Employment%20Report%2024pp%20WEB.pdf>

Buckland also notes that there is also too often an absence of detailed training on how to provide the right support for autistic staff, such as what constitutes a workplace adjustment, how these can help, and how they can be implemented. This training is either unavailable or very basic, making inappropriate assumptions about what autistic people may need and failing to take account of individual differences.

Recommendations

The National Autistic Society believes that the employment and wage gap between non-autistic people and autistic people must be addressed in the interests of both social justice and boosting the economy. The existing approach of placing the onus on disabled people to secure employment with just a carrot of generic support services and an anxiety inducing stick of benefit withdrawal has not worked. It has also not worked in either tackling discriminatory attitudes amongst employers or offering suitable support to those employers who do value a diverse work.

We have submitted examples of good practice in making recruitment practices more accessible in the appendix, and we encourage the committee to consider how such practices should be more widespread. We also make the following recommendations to governments in both London and Cardiff:

- The creation of a taskforce to carry out the recommendations in the Buckland report and challenge poor employer behaviour.
- Work with autistic people and the National Autistic Society to create a national campaign aimed at employers. The campaign would build understanding of the needs of autistic people.
- Work with autism charities to produce “autism design guides” for a range of industries.
- Continue to develop Disability Confident employer scheme, increasing the rigour of developmental work needed to achieve higher Disability Confident levels.
- Promote the Autism Inclusive Employer Award⁸
- Ensure that commissioning practices for any Welsh style support for employment service, particularly in the event of administrative devolution of social security, specify that all service providers are autism aware and cognisant of the possibility of undiagnosed autism in the people they work with. Specialist job coaches for disabled people should also be part of this service.
- Employment protections for autistic people should also be better communicated to and understood by employers to ensure autistic people are protected against unfair dismissal, discrimination in recruitment processes, and failures to adjust workplaces to ensure they are autism-friendly.

We hope that governments across the UK will make the right decisions to tackle discrimination and poor employment practices, decisions that are necessary steps in

⁸ National Autistic Society, autism inclusive employer award, see <https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/autism-training-and-best-practice/autism-accreditation/autism-inclusive-employer-award>

accepting that a strong economy can only be built on the contribution of every community and every person.

We are happy to discuss any of these issues further.



Appendix – examples of good practices in making adjustments to recruitment and retention practices

1. John Lewis providing interview questions in advance⁹:

“The National Autistic Society recommends that employers provide questions a few days in advance for autistic people who can have more difficulty processing information quickly.

The charity says it means applicants have a chance of constructing more meaningful responses. Joey Nettleton Burrows, the charity's policy and public affairs manager, said it was a "brilliant" decision by the retailer.

He said: "Providing questions in advance is one important adjustment that employers can do to the interview process to make employment more accessible to all, particularly autistic people who can face huge barriers in finding and staying in work. Autistic people have a huge amount to offer employers, and more and more businesses are recognising the benefits of having a diverse workforce full of people who offer a variety of skills and different ways of thinking. It is vital that employers are open to reasonable adjustments."

2. AutoTrader – creating a welcoming environment for Autistic people¹⁰

Auto-trader have specific policies to make their workplaces inclusive and welcoming for autistic people, that includes use of regular staff networks to provide feedback on issues such as signage (eg: signs for toilets) , reception spaces and using scripts to help receptionists create a welcoming environment.

The company also adjusts some office policies such as ensuring 'hot-desking' systems ensure that people can return to the same desk if that is a cause of stress, offering private workspaces within open plan offices, and having plants, sound absorbing materials, and open spaces to make offices more calming.

3. EY (Ernst and Young) creating and operating Neuro-diverse centres of excellence¹¹

EY operates 23 Neurodiverse Centers of Excellence (NCoE) across the world, designed to support workers with autism, dyslexia, ADHD and other cognitive differences. These neurodiverse employees – who do high-level work across AI, blockchain, data analytics and more – perform their roles in an accommodating environment with tailored professional development.

In developing these centres of excellence, EY paid close attention to gender parity and the fact that women are under-diagnosed with neuro-divergence. They ensured recruitment adverts were using gender inclusive language, and within the company there is a commitment to prove to its employees every day that they are valued. Their retention rate is 92%.

⁹ Waitrose and John Lewis publish questions they ask job applicants, available from https://uk.news.yahoo.com/waitrose-john-lewis-publish-questions-152715502.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLnNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAALWSh-d-GdKZUEjqlHq3ihGXMYcFfMXub9nzHOM7XapYSs57yBYK7plwq4PGKwWNkV_Xe1ciAEY8L2BsDSUpIGu5XczuhBiUL5DH5wqcrZUDINsfZBKJ8DteEXRDMaXUWLhZIMVE581Jzs04alvapk81QanWJ9PjJKiz18eDnOnr

¹⁰ Presentation From GM Neuro-diversity and Learning disability employment network presentation to the network

¹¹ How EY is focusing on neurodiverse talent – and why it benefits everyone, available from <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20240320-ey-karyn-twaronite-neurodiversity-bbc-executive-interview>