

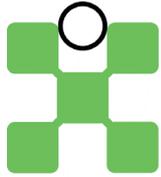
Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb i ymgynghoriad y Pwyllgor Cydraddoldeb a Chyfiawnder Cymdeithasol ar Anabledd a Chyflogaeth

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

DE15

Ymateb gan: Cymdeithas Syndrom Down | Response from: Down's Syndrome Association





Down's Syndrome Association

A Registered Charity No. 1061474

Disability and Employment Consultation – Wales

Response from the Down's Syndrome Association

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National Office

Langdon Down Centre,
2a Langdon Park, Teddington,
Middlesex, TW11 9PS
Reg Company No. 3310024 (England & Wales)

Down's Syndrome Association

t. 0333 1212 300
f. 020 8614 5127
e. info@downs-syndrome.org.uk
w. www.downs-syndrome.org.uk



About the Down's Syndrome Association

The Down's Syndrome Association is a national charity focusing on all aspects of living successfully with Down's syndrome. Established in 1970, we have over 20,000 members throughout England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, comprising of primarily family-carers of children and adults with Down's syndrome, with a growing membership of adults who have Down's syndrome aged 18+. We are the lead provider of information, advocacy, support, and training to anyone with an interest in Down's syndrome.

About Down's syndrome

Down's syndrome is a genetic condition, caused by the presence of an extra chromosome 21 in the body's cells. The number of people in England and Wales with the condition was estimated at just over 37,000.

Everyone with the condition will have some degree of learning disability. In addition, there are other associated medical conditions which affect some, but not all, people who have Down's syndrome, meaning the services that they access from the NHS (and social care settings) are of paramount importance to their wellbeing.

About the DSA's WorkFit Programme

WorkFit¹ is the Down's Syndrome Association's highly successful employment programme, which engages with a range of employers to support candidates who have Down's syndrome into a variety of suitable jobs. The WorkFit programme supports anyone who has Down's syndrome and who wants to work, to fulfil their career ambitions and potential. The WorkFit programme has an impressive track record in supporting people who have Down's syndrome gain meaningful employment. Since 2021:

- 92% of people in paid work developed by WorkFit have retained their jobs
- 87% of our candidates go into paid work from the start from the range of formats that we offer
- 79% of our candidates go into jobs in private sector organisations (12% public sector, 9% third sector)

This success is based on a person-centred approach for our candidates, and bespoke advice, resources and training for each employer. We use a workplace buddy system which removes the expense of a job coach, ensuring a more typical workplace experience for all, with reasonable adjustments being implemented with WorkFit support.

¹ [Workfit - Downs Syndrome Association \(downs-syndrome.org.uk\)](https://www.downs-syndrome.org.uk/workfit)

Response to Consultation Questions

1. What progress has been made to deliver the recommendations set out in the 'Locked Out' report and to reduce and remove barriers faced by disabled people who want to access Wales's labour market. Why progress to reduce the employment and pay disability gap has been so difficult to achieve.

The impact of COVID has exacerbated many of the existing challenges that face people with learning disabilities when trying to enter the workforce. For many issues there is no 'quick fix,' and the legacy of COVID will take some time, alongside dedicated resources and capacity, to remedy. We have found the following are all issues currently being faced by our candidates:

- Many families have become more reliant upon their own community and less keen to travel for support and services. Shielding has been a key factor.
- Aspirations will inevitably have been lowered for some individuals. Schools/colleges were closed at a crucial point for many in their academic career, and where, crucially, the next step was a transition to the workplace.
- There is a systematic lack of understanding about Learning Disability in the employment field – from both employers and services which aim to support people with disabilities find work. Without the understanding of how to best support people with Learning Disabilities, employment opportunities can often be unsuitable or will not be sustainable due to the lack of appropriate support.
- We know that better outcomes are experienced when actions to support people with disabilities find employment start early in the secondary education timeframe. We recommend that schools and colleges start talking to students about working towards career options as early as possible, and certainly no later than 14 years of age. They should also be expected to source high quality and well supported work experience placements and taster sessions ideally including, and where possible, beyond the traditional sectors of retail, catering and hospitality. Schools and colleges should be liaising with local employers to develop these placements and taster sessions in a variety of locations and settings incorporating a range of roles, with relevant and qualified support from job coaches and/or workplace buddies
- The impact on the Careers service meant that not everyone was able to benefit from accessible guidance. The use of technology for meetings and sharing information became more common in many systems, but for many people with learning disabilities this may have proved frustrating and a challenge to access effectively.
- Some young adults who have Down's syndrome went from being in education to being classed as 'out of work' and claiming Employment Support Allowance (ESA)/Universal Credit (UC) in a matter of a few weeks due to COVID.

- Some support providers were unable to continue delivering support for individuals and families of disabled people due to their workers being furloughed. Providers had to adapt to accommodate operations across a vastly different operational landscape. Working from home became the norm for many practitioners, which was not always ideal for people with disabilities who found it challenging to engage in this online world.
- Much of Wales is rural and apart from the short stretch of motorway (M4) people rely on A and B roads. In addition, public transport is extremely limited. Both of these issues impact people who have disabilities more than typical residents of Wales. WorkFit candidates can get support from the DWP's Access to Work (A2W) scheme for the costs of travelling to and from work by taxi, some people with a disability are not eligible. It may then be difficult to find a reliable local taxi operator who is willing to enter into a regular agreement.
- Since Covid many more people work from home and can support a family member with a disability more readily alleviating some of the responsibilities of social services to provide support and day services. This can lead to more isolation for all members of the family.
- As mentioned above the rural nature of much of Wales means that the larger employers are not building their production locations, logistics hubs and other business infrastructure in areas outside the largest of the seven cities in the country, Cardiff and Swansea. Local authority/public sector is often the main employer in rural Wales and this small group of public sector employers has been subject to significant cuts in funding and subsequent provision of supported employment and opportunities.
- Summary of barriers that are often encountered by people who have disabilities:
 - Transport and mobility needs
 - Difficulties with spoken language and communication
 - Difficulties with short-term auditory memory making it harder to take in information through hearing
 - Lack of meaningful travel training
 - Confidence of employers in how best to recruit and support people with Down's syndrome in their workplace
 - Lack of understanding from some employers of inclusion and diversity along with making reasonable adjustments in the workplace

2. How the social model of disability is being used to underpin employment and recruitment practices, and what barriers continue to exist throughout society that impact on access to work (i.e. transport, attitudes).

The social model of disability is a way of viewing the world, developed by disabled people - the model says that people are disabled by barriers in society, not by their impairment or difference. Barriers can be physical, like buildings not having

accessible toilets. Or they can be caused by people's attitudes to difference, like assuming disabled people cannot do certain things. The social model helps us recognise barriers that make life harder for disabled people. Removing these barriers creates equality and offers disabled people more independence, choice and control. Not everyone uses the social model - how individuals choose to talk about their impairment is up to them.

Barriers outlined in section 1 around transport, rurality, lack of investment are all relevant in impacting an individual's ability to access work opportunities. At WorkFit we have found that attitudes can and are being changed and that employers are better able to understand that a diverse workforce is a strong workforce. Our focus on DEIB – diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging – is being amplified by every success story that we share.

Often recruitment is delivered via a technology driven format that can be challenging to navigate. Employers are looking for efficient and effective ways to secure talent for their organisation and that can mean that a person-centred approach is often left behind, however unintentionally.

In practical terms, we encourage employers to engage with supported employment programmes like WorkFit to access the free support, resources and training on offer. This means that we can support them to review and amend their traditional recruitment practices and implement the following:

- Remove the requirement for completing a lengthy online application.
- Avoid holding assessment workshops, as large groups of people in a competitive atmosphere as this is not a format that would be suitable for the majority of people who have learning disabilities.
- Support requests for the candidate to be accompanied to any interview or meeting and keep any meetings informal and ensure that reasonable adjustments are offered and implemented before the candidate attends.
- Be open to engaging with the candidate's support network if the candidate gives permission but ensuring that the candidate is involved in all discussions using the 'nothing about us without us' approach.
- Review the format of any discussions and written materials (ideally using Easy Read format if possible), considering language used and environmental factors that may not be helpful for the candidate.
- Allow video CVs and other materials to be used in support of an application.

Flexibility and a person-centred approach are two vital approaches to ensure success. At the DSA we work with employers who have a genuine appetite for a diverse and inclusive workforce, rather than those who wish to access a financial incentive. It is vital that government and organisations work together to explode the myths and misconceptions around reasonable adjustments being costly and difficult to implement, along with raising awareness of support available through Access to Work and other support mechanisms and programmes.

3. How effective Welsh Government actions (e.g. the network of Disability Employment Champions and apprenticeships) have been in reducing barriers to employment and reducing the employment gap between disabled and non-disabled people, including the extent to which Welsh Government policies complement/ duplicate/ undermine those set by the UK Government.

As a specialist, supported employment provider, WorkFit is not subject to Welsh or UK government policies, other than those statutory pieces of legislation that relate to employment law (Equality Act 2010 etc.), the benefits system and provision of support such as Access to Work. This makes WorkFit a highly effective, scalable and sustainable model operating with employers and jobseekers to bring them together in a suitable job-matching arrangement. The support is person-centred and highly individual, considering the career ambitions and personal support needs of the candidate and ensuring that the employer is willing and able to meet those needs with the help of our free advice, resources and training.

Access to Work is a valuable support mechanism that could be even more effective if the time needed for processing applications could be significantly reduced. Recent reforms have seen some improvements in this area, including an online portal, which are very welcome for those people who have access to technology and support to use it. An extension to Access to Work would also be beneficial as people who have Down's syndrome may not immediately be able to work for 16 hours or more per week, but this can be achieved for some with support over time. This extension would also be useful particularly in rural areas where transport is not easily accessible.

We were very pleased to see the appointment in recent years of a Welsh employment champion who has Down's syndrome – Sara Pickard². We would like to see further employment champions who have Down's syndrome identified and appointed, and we would welcome the opportunity to assist the Welsh Government in doing this.

4. Whether disabled people are accessing apprenticeships and if any further support is needed to ensure schemes are inclusive.

A small number of WorkFit candidates enter apprenticeship programmes with our support, however we find that they are often unsuitable for someone who has Down's syndrome for the following reasons:

- The requirement to work a fixed number of hours/days a week. Often working over 25 hours per week is not something that a person who has Down's syndrome is able to achieve due to several factors, such as general health challenges, stamina and fatigue issues, wishing to be able

² [Sara Pickard at the Women of the Year Awards - Downs Syndrome Association \(downs-syndrome.org.uk\)](https://www.downs-syndrome.org.uk/news/2019/04/sara-pickard-at-the-women-of-the-year-awards/)

to maintain social activities to support their sense of wellbeing and good mental health etc.

- The requirement for attaining specific levels of Maths and English has recently been relaxed to some extent however there is still a requirement to be able to meet a standard that some may find difficult to achieve.
- Exam formats are often unhelpful for people who have learning disabilities, where the formal exam setting with time constraints and a lack of reasonable adjustments can be overwhelming and lead to the person becoming very anxious and finding the experience negative, regardless of any positive outcomes. This can lead to a long-term aversion to future vocational learning opportunities.

5. What further policy measures are needed to support disabled people, young disabled people and employers to increase participation rates and what can be learned from elsewhere.

- Working closely with specialist providers such as WorkFit (from the Down's Syndrome Association) will ensure that specific needs of people who have Down's syndrome can be met, ensuring a much greater chance of success in the workplace and the creation of meaning full and sustainable roles. Our model was developed without significant external funding, and is a sustainable and long-term approach which supports both the practice of the employer and employee, and which does not require the involvement of external job coaches.
- Reviewing the application criteria for Access to Work (AtW) and allowing candidates to forego a full re-application after 3 years would be extremely helpful. Down's syndrome is a life-long condition that will not change and so adapting the AtW process so that the person is able to re-apply for job coach or travel support without the need for competing the full application and going through additional Work Capability Assessments would reduce the associated anxiety experienced by candidates and their families, many of whom may not feel proficient with online systems.
- A greater provision of meaningful vocational work opportunities in college would allow young people to gain a greater understanding of the variety of job roles and opportunities in the workplace. Currently work experience focuses on retail, catering or hospitality sectors and, while these are valuable, they do not provide a broader understanding of the wider jobs market.
- We strongly advocate for a presumption of employment to be part of all planning for people who have Down's syndrome, encompassing education, health and social care interactions.
- Independent Development Plans (IDPs) for students with ALN should include work opportunities and travel training for all and skills and abilities

in these areas should then be considered and developed as appropriate to support the individual to be as independent as possible. A specific and detailed offer of effective and practical travel training should be included in all IDPs as part of an early approach to Preparing for Adulthood for all children with disabilities.

- Often employers do not fully understand the rights of all employees in the workplace. Education and support with this could be supported by the Disability Confident Scheme and promoted by unitary authorities. Further good practice would include the points raised above and ensuring that information such as company policies is available in Easy Read format.

6. What actions would support those who are currently unable to work to access voluntary opportunities (which could lead to future work opportunities).

- Unitary authorities could provide incentives to local organisations to offer voluntary work placements. They could also offer a volunteering programme themselves as part of their service provision via a CIC or other non-for-profit initiative.
- Unitary authorities could also support local organisations to offer volunteering opportunities and also paid, permanent jobs as part of a social value element for companies tendering for council contracts.
- Welsh government to identify and promote effective practice across a range of disability employment issues – travel, working with employers, identifying suitable jobs, long term support in the workplace etc.
- The Welsh Learning Disability Ministerial Advisory Group currently does not have a representative with knowledge and a focus on disability employment. We could help identify such a post, whose expertise would help inform this influential network.
- Welsh government to provide a funding commitment from 2025 to support organisations focusing on sustainable disability employment and individuals looking for employment.
- The Welsh government could undertake a formal review/inquiry into disability employment – looking at sustainable and cost-effective models of practice, and key systematic issues which need to be addressed. A series of key recommendations could set out a road map to greater outcomes in the long term.
- Models of employment for people who have learning disabilities should be focussed on being sustainable and meaningful for the employee and the employers.
- Early engagement is essential to successfully prepare people who have Down's syndrome for the requirements of the workplace. It is important to be able to share good practice and accessible case studies of other

people from their peer group making a successful transition and for them to feel that their needs will be met in terms of support to help them to achieve their career ambitions – we have many case studies and films promoting our sustainable model of employment support.