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

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Ymateb gan: Canolfan Polisi Cyhoeddus Cymru | Response from: Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP)

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Submission to the Equality and Social Justice Committee's Inquiry into the disability and employment gap

The Wales Centre for Public Policy

1. The Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) seeks to improve policy making and outcomes by enabling public bodies, the Welsh Government and other decision makers to access authoritative independent evidence to help them address the key economic, social and environmental challenges facing Wales.

2. WCPP is funded by the Welsh Government, the Economic and Social Research Council, and Cardiff University. It is a member of the What Works Network and is the Welsh partner in the International Public Policy Observatory.

3. This submission summarises research we have undertaken that bears on the topic of the Committee's inquiry. This research includes evidence reviews based on academic and 'grey' literature, as well as data collected through a roundtable held in April 2024 that brought together the Welsh Government, public services, and wider organisations to identify and share good practice relating to diversifying the workforce (Park et al., 2020, Taylor-Collins et al., 2020, Morgan et al., forthcoming).

Evidence

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.

4. A key recommendation from the 'Locked Out' report to ensure that disabled people apply for jobs, senior level promotions and advisory roles, is to take a proactive approach to reasonable adjustments whilst advertising such roles. The accessibility of interviews can be a significant barrier for disabled people, particularly when the responsibility for requesting adjustments falls on the candidate (Park et al., 2020). In a roundtable we held in April 2024 that brought together the Welsh Government with public services and organisations based in Wales, participants suggested sending out a video developed by existing staff alongside the candidate pack to encourage candidates to request reasonable adjustments. The video would provide practical examples that explain what reasonable adjustments are available. Another organisation shared their previous practice of leaving adjustment approvals to the hiring manager, but they were

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finding that there was an inconsistency as to which candidates received adjustments. In response, they have implemented a system where, if a hiring manager wants to refuse an adjustment request, it goes to a separate team within the organisation who review the application and request and can grant the adjustment. As a result of this and other inclusive recruitment policies, the organisation reported doubling the rate of disabled people who were successful at interview. These adjustments could be offered throughout the recruitment process by default. As candidates often sound apologetic when requesting adjustments, standardising adjustments, such as providing questions in advance, would help to remove barriers.

5. A systemic barrier to progress in reducing the employment and pay disability gap is an unwillingness or lack of confidence within organisations to discuss diversity and inclusion issues. The Holmes Review (2018) on opening up public appointments to disabled people found that low disability awareness amongst panel members was a barrier to increasing representation.

6. The way in which an interview is conducted may disadvantage some candidates and unfairly advantage others. Particularly for senior appointments, interviews are likely to focus on certain forms of work experience and presentational styles with which some individuals from underrepresented backgrounds may be unfamiliar. The Holmes Review (2018) into opening up public appointments for disabled people notes that this can take three forms – many disabled people have non-standard work histories and might not have experience in formal interviews; neurodiverse candidates, or those who communicate through British Sign Language, might find communication challenging; and a focus on sector knowledge and competence can exclude those who come from outside the sector, but who might nonetheless have the skillset needed.

7. A lack of evidence on 'what works' also poses a barrier to reducing the employment and pay disability gap. As Sealy et al. (2009) note, existing evidence on the effectiveness of interventions to increase the diversity of boards predominantly relates to gender. While some of this evidence may be transferrable to race, disability and other characteristics, there is a lack of evidence examining whether and under what circumstances this is the case. Whilst this evidence is now quite old, more recently, Disability Wales have highlighted that despite a recent government focus on supporting more disabled people into work, there is a lack of research on the disability employment gap (Disability Wales, 2022).

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).

8. Some research suggests that adopting the social model of disability could assist in reducing unconscious bias towards disabled applicants by changing the social conditions and removing barriers to the participation of disabled people in the workforce (Bunbury 2019). This approach 'recognises that people with impairments are disabled by barriers that commonly exist in society… that all prevent disabled people's inclusion and participation in all areas of life' (Welsh Government, 2022). As highlighted above, this places the onus on organisations to remove societal barriers rather than expecting disabled people to adapt to or accept being excluded by existing practices.

9. The social model of disability needs to be supplemented with a firm recognition of difference rather than attempting to assimilate disabled people into the workforce (Bunbury, 2019). The Welsh Government adopted the model in 2002 as the basis for its work on disability and reaffirmed its commitment to embedding the model within its employment policies in 2022 (Welsh Government, 2022).

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

10. Whilst we are unable to provide supporting evidence to answer the question of whether disabled people are accessing apprenticeships in Wales, we would like to highlight an example of good practice from elsewhere that was discussed in a recent roundtable. To encourage a more diverse range of applicants, Deutsche Bank have set up an Autism Internship. Applicants joining the programme are rigorously tested, with appropriate changes made to the assessment style to ensure they are comfortable. Timed responses and group assessment centres are replaced with a series of questions where graduates have one week to respond and these then form the basis of one-to-one discussions. Every successful applicant is then assigned a mentor and their line managers and colleagues receive specific training in how to work effectively with them (Morgan et al., forthcoming).

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?

11. Participants in WCPP's roundtable discussed how ensuring that applications are accessible is key to increasing employment rates. Simple, effective changes to support candidates to complete applications included providing candidates with an option to complete and submit their application as a Word document instead of using the less accessible online system; or submitting their answers in a video (Morgan et al., forthcoming).

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12. More thorough attempts to anonymise applications include Applied, a product from the UK's Behavioural Insights Team. Applied promotes job-specific skills-based questions for job applications rather than traditional CVs. This allows for initial assessment based on skills for the specific role rather than experience. Personal information such as name, race, gender and education can be removed so that recruiters assess the candidate on the quality of the skills-based questions. Self-published research suggests that using Applied resulted in a more diverse group of candidates passing through initial sifts, although the sample size was too small to disaggregate for ethnic minority and disabled applicants (Glazebrook, 2016). While software of this sort might be useful, adoption for public appointments will depend on the balance that the Welsh Government wishes to strike between job skills and prior experience in the area.

13. Schemes such as the Disability Confident employer scheme have also been highlighted as positive for attracting a more diverse pool of applicants (Morgan et al, forthcoming). The Disability Confident Scheme is a voluntary UK government scheme that helps organisations to attract, recruit and retain disabled staff. All employers join the scheme at level one and there are three levels associated with different commitments. It includes guaranteed interviews for disabled candidates who meet the essential criteria for an advertised job. Several participants in our roundtable noted that their organisations use the Guaranteed Interview Scheme (GIS) for disabled candidates (Morgan et al., forthcoming). The interview panel members are not notified that a candidate has an impairment, they are only given their answers to the specific criteria set out in the person specification for the role. There are, however, mixed opinions about its effectiveness. While some candidates are supportive of the scheme, others view it as a form of box-ticking and tokenism or even believe that it might harm their chances of attaining an interview (Holmes, 2018).

14. Positive action, which refers to lawful measures employers can take to improve diversity and achieve equal outcomes for any underrepresented group, also provides a basis for policy measures to increase participation rates. It is important to note that 'positive discrimination' does not form part of positive action, with the exception that the Equality Act 2010 allows more favourable treatment of disabled people in order to remove the barriers they experience. We summarise our evidence on the perception and use of positive action below.

15. Amongst roundtable participants there was a hesitation to use positive action tools as incorrect use of positive action can result in legal action being taken. The biggest challenge is understanding what positive action means in practice as it can often be misinterpreted as positive discrimination, which is unlawful in the UK.

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16. BBC runs a positive action employment programme for people who are deaf, disabled, or neurodivergent. The programme, BBC Extend, ringfences roles that only people defined as disabled by the Equality Act (2010) can apply for. These roles vary in type, length and seniority. We are aware that some public service organisations have considered ringfencing roles for disabled people but have decided against it due to legal concerns, despite the implementation of the BBC Extend programme (Morgan et al., forthcoming).

17. It is important for employers to be well informed about how to apply positive action tools and further guidance, research and information sharing on how to apply these tools is needed (Morgan et al., forthcoming).

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