

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

DE19

Ymateb gan: Cwmnïau Cymdeithasol Cymru | Response from: Social Firms Wales



Introduction to Social Firms Wales

Social Firms Wales (www.socialfirmswales.co.uk) exists to support the development of Social Firms, a form of social enterprise that prioritises the creation of employment, volunteering and training opportunities for disabled and other disadvantaged groups.

A model recognised globally, Social Firms offer a vital opportunity for people who face multiple and deeply entrenched barriers to employment within the open labour market.

Social Firms make a significant contribution to the spectrum of employment opportunities that exist for disabled people, and the variety and richness of the sector continues to blossom, particularly with the demise of the more traditional Day Centre model of occupation, as people want greater choice about how they want to spend their recreational and working life.

From Social Firms Wales perspective, it's important above all, that disabled people are able to have choices open to them in terms of their employment options. From more inclusive recruitment practices within mainstream employment, to Supported Employment options and Social Firms, it is all about people having the additional support they need to achieve a more equal playing field.

What are Social Firms and how do they fit into the spectrum of employment opportunities for disabled people?

Social Firms offer an alternative to mainstream employment, with a wide spectrum and diversity of models in existence. In fact, there is no one 'standard' Social Firm model, and it has become a term loosely used for any Social Enterprise that is primarily concerned with Social Inclusion.

The Social Firm movement began in the 1980s in Europe. Social Firms Wales is proud to be the only Social Firms Organisation in the UK flying the flag for this business model and helping to promote and grow the Social Firm ethos in Wales. Having been established in 2005, we've developed a strong reputation for working across Wales to champion social firm development, working with numerous local authorities to 'externalise' their day services into Social Firms, and have also helped many other independent social firms to take root and become established and sustainable social businesses.

With strong connections we work in partnership with Cwmpas, the DTA and Unltd to support the growth of socially inclusive social businesses. We now have 110 members within Social Firms Wales who are committed to socially inclusive employment practice and collectively which provide hundreds of employment, training and volunteering opportunities to disabled people.

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.

Progress has been hampered by Covid 19 and the Cost-of-Living Crisis. The loss of EU funding and its replacement with Shared Prosperity has offered sporadic opportunities for services to be delivered in support of disability employment but it is noticeably inconsistent across Wales. As services turned to crisis management, progress in terms of campaigning for disability employment rights has taken a back seat over the last few years.

Disability Rights are key to underpinning recommendations and ensuring continued funding of Disability Wales, and Self-Advocacy Groups like All Wales People First (and the hugely active local 'People First' groups) is vital to ensure that people's views and needs continue to have a forum and voice. The sector has been instrumental in ensuring user voices continue to be heard and that people are supported to advocate for themselves.

The recognition of remote working as a good option for disabled people has been won, and at Social Firms Wales we are pleased to have been funded (ending March 25) to pilot self-employment support to neurodivergent and other disabled people to develop this area, for the increasing numbers of disabled people looking at freelance and self-employment options.

Covid 19 had a disproportionately negative effect on disabled people's lives in Wales. Fragile and inconsistently funded support systems quickly became shut down and, in many cases, never returned. Many day services have closed and not been replaced, and we have heard anecdotally, stories of people losing hard fought for, and scarce jobs as a result of the pandemic. As an example, one member we recently spoke to at Caerphilly People First, said that they were let go from their supermarket job when the Pandemic started and were never asked to go back.

Disabled people were also disproportionately affected by job loss during the pandemic, being more highly represented within lower paid, insecure job roles.

Swiftly following the pandemic, came the Cost-of-Living Crisis, which once again has had a hugely disproportionate impact on the income of disabled people.

The Bevan Foundation's 'Winter Snapshot' on poverty in Wales (Feb 2024), found that Disabled people or people with a long-term health condition who state that their condition limits them "a lot" are among the people who are most likely to be in severe financial hardship. A staggering 36 per cent of disabled people whose condition limits

them a lot of report that they sometimes, often or always struggle to afford the essentials. That's nearly three times higher than the national average (13 per cent).

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).

Existing barriers remain stubbornly in place when it comes to people with learning disabilities. In recent consultations with Beacons Creative (Brecon), Caerphilly People First and Rhondda Cynon Taf People First, conversations with employees, volunteers and staff, revealed a shortage of paid employment opportunities, and lack of job coach support to help people access work in mainstream support.

Other more general barriers continue to be felt, including the messages that disabled people are given from childhood about what they can and can't do, with many people we speak to having not been given the chance to ever really 'test' their capabilities. This plays out in volunteering placements where our consultations found that people with learning disabilities volunteering in charity shops, were often not allowed to go on the tills (due to being short staffed and not having anyone to train them). However, this is the same culture that prevents people from really discovering what their capabilities are and helps to hold people back from developing key work skills.

Parents that worry for their adult offspring, and who have sometimes come to rely on carers benefits (especially in areas of deep poverty) often are reluctant to help their adult child pursue employment for different reasons. There is an argument to be made for early intervention and education for disabled people around their rights and to counter more negative assumptions they may have experienced.

Additionally, we are aware of issues around people within supported living schemes not getting access to information about employment support services- i.e. the information is distributed to supported living providers but quite often doesn't filter through to individuals. GDPR also means that services are unable to contact people individually and so are reliant on third party distribution of information.

It is also an ongoing issue that employers are reluctant (and both lack understanding) of how to be more inclusive in their recruitment practices. Equally, disabled people and those who are neurodivergent find it hard to make successful applications to gain an interview, requiring support to build strong applications that are competitive, especially when they may have dyslexia or find it difficult to express themselves in the written word.

One issue we have become aware of over time, is the need for closer connections between Social Firms and Job Coach schemes that can help those who want to, to transition into mainstream employment. Whilst some Social Firms create a vital

opportunity for some disabled people to have meaningful occupation such as training and volunteering (rather than paid employment), it must be acknowledged that open, mainstream employment is a preferred option for some. Having these different options and choice available is critical.

Neurodiversity is becoming far more understood and acknowledged within our communities, and we have seen increasing numbers of neurodivergent entrepreneurs setting up social businesses that provide a wide range of services.

Self-Employment for disabled people is an opportunity perhaps under-recognised in more generic business support, as it has the capacity to work well around people's conditions and needs.

We are also currently working with prisoners in (and about to leave) Berwyn Prison in Wrexham, many of whom are neurodivergent, with currently three clients who we will be continuing to provide business coaching to, on their release. Neurodiversity for prisoners is one of the most under-recognised issues facing the sector. It is estimated that up to half of the adult prison population in the UK could be considered neurodivergent, covering a range of conditions and disorders such as learning disabilities and acquired brain injuries. Since April 2021, the Prison Service has identified at least 25,000 prisoners enrolled in education who have learning difficulties and disabilities. (UK Government Statistics).

Self-employment offers an attractive route for many prisoners, circumnavigating some of the difficulties of entering employment on release.

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.

Welsh Government supports Social Firms Wales as a specialist in the development of alternative employment and volunteering opportunities for disabled and other socially disadvantaged people in Wales and has had an ongoing relationship for over a decade.

The support of our small but 'niche' organisation has meant that we've been able to continue promoting, strengthening and supporting the growth of the social firm sector in Wales, with over 110 (and growing) numbers of Social Firms members all with inclusive employment at their heart. There is no other organisation that has the sole focus of socially inclusive social enterprise support, and we have also grown our support to encompass self-employment support for neurodiverse people and prison leavers.

In this time, we have honed our skills in inclusive business support practice, using adaptations and tailored, person-centred, flexible support that is in contrast to much of the time limited and restricted methods of support currently available. Having the option of finding employment or volunteering within the more specialised support environment of a Social Firm, is an important provision for people who are not always ready or comfortable in pursuing a job in the open labour market. With trained and professional staff that work intensively at times, alongside disabled workers, Social Firms offer a genuine workplace environment within a mixed setting, allowing people the time and space to develop their skills and abilities within a supportive and disability friendly environment.

Welsh Government funding has enabled us to practice a much more flexible and inclusive method of support which we have become known for and is highly prized by our social firm members and clients. We are very much about quality of support, over quantity and have no problem with spending many hours of support with one client where we feel we can really make a stepped change in their business life or Social Firm (which also translates to their personal health and wellbeing in many instances).

Welsh Government has supported a range of other initiatives aimed at tackling the deep rooted barriers to employment for disabled people including the development of Disability Champions and Supported Apprenticeships (delivered by ELITE and AGORIED CYF) and these have also been found to be very successful, along with the Internship model with local colleges, supporting people with learning disabilities into internships with local businesses. Other support services for people with learning disabilities vary from area to area, with projects such as the Vale of Glamorgan Supported Employment Project and Working on Wellbeing programme by Legacy in the Community, and Cardiff's Local Supported Employment project which all offer support to help people gain work placements and prepare for interviews. However, the projects are generally based on short term funding, and not all areas have these services available.

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

Supported Employment Apprenticeships delivered by Elite and Agoriad Cyf are offered to people with learning disabilities however we are unaware of how successful these are and suspect that provision of this service is inconsistent across Wales.

Anecdotally we have heard of the options for Jobs Growth Wales, but it is not something that we have seen happening much within the Social Firm sector (other than for non-disabled people). In many cases the barrier is around benefits and the risk of a job ending after 6 months or 1 years and the disruption and fear that elicits.

Wider promotion of apprenticeships being open to people with disabilities is needed, along with Job coaching support initially, as it would be an ideal way of helping people

move on from volunteering and training placements across Social Firms- so often people get stuck within a volunteering role for many years due to a lack of impetus and opportunity to go into mainstream employment (for the many reasons we have already mentioned). Provision of supported employment apprenticeships should be available across Wales, in all areas to make it equitable.

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.

With only 3% of people with a learning disability in work, there is a huge mountain to be climbed, and therefore the more opportunities and interventions, combined with greater collaboration and a National Strategy would greatly help to make much needed progress around disability employment. Having a National Strategy which focused on creating a range of choices for how people want to work and volunteer their time, would enable a greater understanding and collaboration of the different options and opportunities available and promote a more joined up approach between providers, to make the end user's journey smoother and more easily to access.

Lack of central promotion and awareness of support services means that many disabled people are unaware of options open to them and are often reliant on the knowledge and motivation of their individual support worker to access such services.

This is particularly true of more rural areas where Supported Employment schemes are less prevalent and supported employment providers struggle to gain coverage due to lack of resource combined with rural barriers more generally.

Social Firms Wales also supports Learning Disability Wales call for a **'National Job Coaching Strategy for Wales'** which aims to build on the success of the 'Engage to Change' 7 year lottery and Welsh Government funded project, which delivered job coaching to 2047 people and delivered 244 Supported Internships with a 41% sustained employment success rate. For anyone who has worked within the Learning Disability employment field, this demonstrates the power of the model and the effectiveness of a partnership approach to tackling the problem.

The Strategy would help to address inconsistencies of Supported Employment provision and build on developing a robust Supported Employment offer across Wales.

We believe however that although Supported Employment continues to be an important choice for disabled people, that Social Firms offering inclusive employment, training and volunteering opportunities, must continue to be a key provision, particularly with the closure of day centres across Wales which once provided 'meaningful occupation', that over time have been replaced by Social Firms in many cases. The opportunity for people to develop their soft skills, employment

skills and confidence is a primary role of Social Firms, enabling people in many cases to 'transition' into mainstream employment where they are able and willing. For others, Social Firms offer a safe and supportive environment for them to participate in working life on an ongoing basis, whether as a paid worker, volunteer or trainee. Once again, it is about choice and diversity of opportunity.

There needs to be a change in attitudes and assumptions, so that it is assumed that all disabled **people can and will work, with the right kind of support.**

A change in perception at all levels from early years to adulthood and across the spectrum of support providers would help to build a future society that seeks to recognise the value and strengths that everyone has, and which has the patience and democratic values to find alternative approaches, support methods, adaptations and inclusive practices that values people's differences. **This includes being prepared to resource the additional support that is needed to level the huge inequity that disabled people face.**

Social Firms Wales supports the concept of a joined-up disability employment strategy for Wales, which incorporates physical disability, learning disability, autism and neurodiversity, ensuring that opportunities and support services are working in a co-ordinated way across Wales. Having a central point of promotion of opportunities including paid employment, volunteering, supported employment, mainstream employment support, and social firm opportunities.

Social Enterprises (and Social Firms) prioritise people, planet and purpose, over purely profit, and collectively, the sector in Wales aims to promote the model as widely as possible- indeed, the Community Interest Company model of business operation is becoming a fast growing option for entrepreneurs that want to blend their social mission with their commercial vision, with 874 active CICs operating in Wales, with an average 8% growth margin each year.

The Social Enterprise strategy for Wales '*Transforming Wales through Social Enterprise*' is a key mechanism underpinning the growth of the Social Enterprise sector, helping to bring about more inclusive workplaces. On the 18th of September 2024, the Social Enterprise Stakeholder Group will hold a Senedd event which will discuss the progress made so far by the sector with its 10-year Vision and Action Plan for Social Enterprise.

Social Firms Wales believes a firm commitment to the continuation of support of Social Enterprise growth is fundamentally important, as no other sector is so committed to providing opportunities for disabled people (and other disadvantaged groups) as part of their central ethos.

The main point is that there are many ingrained cultural, social and economic barriers to disabled people participating in employment, but there is also ample opportunity to start to change that culture with education, more joined up thinking, greater promotion of opportunity, and consistent support for Social Firms and Supported Employment/job coaching schemes, and to offer self-employment support for disabled and neurodivergent entrepreneurs, for whom the model can work so well around managing their condition.

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

Social Firms are a vital option for people who are unable to work in mainstream employment, providing a nurturing and supportive environment where people can experience working life, develop their skills and reap the benefits to health and wellbeing of participating in work. Helping Social Firms to sustain themselves, to grow and flourish will certainly help to meet the need for more volunteering opportunities within the sector, however that is countered by also requiring financial support to pay for additional staff within Social Firms to meet the high support needs of some of the complex individuals that come to volunteer. In many cases our Social Firms spend huge amounts of resource on supporting vulnerable workers to access work, without compensation or recognition of financial cost that this support entails.

The danger is that statutory bodies view Social Firms as a free Social Care provision, and the reality is that due to the high support needs that some individuals have, the cost of inclusion is hugely prohibitive to Social Firms that are often struggling to sustain themselves.

Recognition of the cost of staff support within Social Firms needs to be understood, as governments move away from statutory provision. We need to make sure we are reaching available opportunities for funding and directing funds into the sector, as well as supporting the business and acumen of the social firm sector.

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