

Response to The Equality and Social Justice Committee inquiry into the disability employment and payment gap.

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Evidence submitted on behalf of: Influencing and informing: Engage to Change (Learning Disability Wales and the National Centre for Mental Health at Cardiff University).

Confirmation of whether you would prefer that your name is not published alongside your evidence: We are happy to be named in conjunction with this evidence.

Confirmation of whether you would like the Committee to treat any or all of your written evidence as confidential: The information contained in this response is in the public domain and is not confidential.

All responses below are in relation to people with learning disabilities, For a definition please see: [About learning disability | Mencap Cymru ~ Wales](#))

Position statement on use of language from All Wales people First : [Position-Statement-on-language-December-2023.docx \(live.com\)](#)

People with learning disabilities remain the population most excluded from the labour market with only 4.8% in employment ([Employment Rates for People with Disabilities 2022-23 | British Association for Supported Employment \(base-uk.org\)](#)). This is a statistic based on the number of adults with a learning disability and autism known to adult social care in England. Wales does not currently record figures relating to the number of people with learning disabilities in employment. Although it is reasonable to assume a comparable figure to England, this represents a significant gap in our knowledge about the Welsh LD population and the challenges of employment within the Welsh economy and employment landscapes.

The “Locked Out” report did not go far enough in addressing the concerns affecting people with a learning disability in relation to employment. Recommendations failed to explore the importance of needs led and whole systems approaches, including the role of supported employment and job

coaching, for supporting people with learning disabilities to train for, gain and maintain employment.

Engage to Change was a seven-year, pan Wales project, funded through the National Lottery Community Fund and supported by the Welsh Government to help young people with a learning disability and/or autism to tackle employment barriers and transition into a paid job. Led by Learning Disability Wales, it brought together ELITE and Agoriad Cyf supported employment agencies to deliver job coaching, unpaid and paid placements and paid jobs in ordinary workplaces. The project was supported by self-advocates from All Wales People First and evaluated by the National Centre for Mental Health (NCMH) at Cardiff University.

The Engage to Change project successfully provided employment support through job coaching to 1075 young people and delivered 244 supported internships, gaining an overall paid employment rate of 41%. This is compared to an estimated employment rate of 4.8% for people with learning disabilities in England (BASE 2023). This project is no longer accepting referrals, however during its operation it provided an important pathway for addressing the transition and employment needs of young people with learning disabilities and reducing the employment gap.

In Wales there is a high proportion of working age people who are economically inactive (28.4%) because of long-term sickness and disabilities (Welsh Government, 2024), however young people with learning disabilities are also likely to be economically inactive due to the lack of transition and employment support. People are generally excluded from the labour market as they experience difficulties in getting, learning, and maintaining a job without the right support. We know Supported Employment frameworks, which adopt the social model of disability, are effective ways of supporting young people into real employment in the open labour market. However, the Supported Employment model is not widely available for everyone who may need it.

In addition, there are still common misconceptions from stakeholders that people with learning disabilities cannot work, do not want to work, or do not make good employees. These misconceptions need to be urgently addressed. This will require a whole systems approach between people with learning disabilities, education, parents/ carers, employers and policy makers to develop a clear and accessible strategy that promotes the fact that there are people with learning disabilities who can work, who want to work and who should be supported to work.

Wales has some excellent employment support programmes, but many programmes are still not accessible to people with learning disabilities, who require specialist, flexible and person-centred support.

It is also clear that there should be better cross-party working within Welsh Government to encourage discussions and improve knowledge around employment for people with learning disabilities and/or autism across Wales. Welsh Government divisions, directorates, and working groups, together with bodies funded by Welsh Government, should better communicate with each other to support people with learning disabilities and/or autism around employment. This includes: The National Neurodivergence Team/ ALN transformation programme/ Curriculum for Wales consortium/ Young Persons Guarantee Group/ Learning Disability Ministerial Advisory Group/ The Disabled People's Employment Working Group / Careers Wales/Working Wales/ Medr and others. Discussions should include, as mandatory, people with learning disabilities, parents and carers, employers and commissioners of services.

It is important to recognise the employment support and Supported Employment are not the same thing.

To enable equality of opportunity and support there is a call for transition support to be guided by the [Supported Employment National Occupation Standards \(NOS\)](#) which is an internationally agreed 5-stage model of Supported Employment. The 5 stages are: client engagement, vocational profiling, job finding, employer engagement, on and off job support. This is aimed at enabling support for people to find, access and stay in employment.

A National Job Coaching Strategy is needed to ensure equality of opportunity and support for young people by promoting job coaching as a trained and qualified role.

The network of Disability Employment Champions is a welcome addition to Wales, but it is still too new to make a statement on its impact on reducing barriers to employment and lessening the employment gap. However, it was disappointing to see the loss of a Disabled Peoples Employment Champion with lived experience of learning disability.

In relation to **Supported Internships** for people with Learning Disabilities:

The Supported Internship model has been extended to more sites in Wales under the Welsh Government funded post-16 Independent Living Curriculum, as Pathway 4. Delivered by FE colleges, in some sites the model has deviated from the DFN Project SEARCH model, introduced to Wales by Engage to Change and to some extent the Alternative Supported Internships model developed by the project. There is more flexibility on outcome, with paid employment not regarded as the singular goal of supported internships, with other routes of progression such as supported apprenticeships being valid.

A Supported Internship Quality Assurance Framework (SIQAF) has recently been introduced in the UK (BASE 2023b) and is primarily available to be used by all supported internship providers and their delivery partners as part of the Internships Work programme in England. The aim is to ensure supported

internship models operate to the strengths of the individual site whilst also offering high quality and robust experiences to interns (NDTi 2023). In Wales, Quality Standards and Guidance for delivery of supported internships was published in 2023 by Colleges Wales, a member led organisation that acts as the voice of further education in Wales. These are independent and different from the English SIQAF.

It will be important to see how these standards impact on quality in supported internship delivery. In particular, whether these standards continue to evolve to ensure high quality outcomes for young people, including higher numbers of interns progressing into paid employment.

There remains a gap in provision to both prepare learners for the start of their internship and for ongoing support needed by interns not able to find jobs following their internships, who still require support to get employment. Pathway 4 funding, can only be used for the intern during the academic year while they are a learner on the supported internship course at the college. It pays for tutors and job coaching either provided by college staff or a supported employment agency. This is often supplemented by Access to Work being claimed as an hourly rate for support provided to the intern while on placement in the host business. Access to Work cannot be claimed for internship/work preparation but can be claimed for follow on employment support in paid work. However, ongoing delays in decision making and payment of claims continues to be a huge issue for supported employment agencies that may not be able to take the financial risk. Permitting Access to Work funding for permanent salaried job coach staff within large host employers should be considered.

As a result of Engage to Change, job coach support is available for young people with learning disabilities and /or autism participating in **Jobs Growth Wales+**. However, this programme is aimed at 16–19-year-olds and is not aligned to the age range of the Young Persons Guarantee. Many young people with learning disabilities and/or autism remain in school until they are 19 meaning they do not access this programme. There is a need for this programme to be promoted as a pathway to employment for these young people, their parents/carers and others who support them. We would also like to see any training and employability programmes aimed at young people to have an age range that is at minimum in line with the Young Person Guarantee and preferably for those up to 30 years of age.

We worked with Welsh Government to ensure apprenticeships were more inclusive. People with learning disabilities can get job coach support to undertake a **supported or supported shared apprenticeship** but must be able to achieve a Level 2. This, together with the other programmes mentioned, is not suitable for everyone with a learning disability.

There are gaps that need to be filled in order to provide equity of opportunity.

Recommendations

Moving forward, we know what works, but we need better data to fully understand the employment situation of people with learning disabilities in Wales. We need a clear idea of the number of people with learning disabilities, whether unemployed or in employment, what types of support are provided and where the support is available.

Previously we have called for a National Job Coach Service to be developed and funded across Wales. We recognise that in the current climate this has not been possible to achieve. However, we remain committed to ensuring that Welsh Government and stakeholders in Wales are engaged in the employment of people with a learning disability and/ or autism. If we are to provide effective support in Wales for people with a learning disability, we need to be clear about the model fidelity and the resources needed to deliver an effective service. We are now calling for a National Job Coaching Strategy that would be fully consistent with this.

Job coach support should not be limited to people with a learning disability, autism diagnosis or ALN status. Some people might self-diagnose and still need support. Job coach support should be given to any person, of any age, who would be unable to gain and or/ maintain paid employment without it.

In addition, experience matters. Having previous work experience does improve young people's job chances, particularly if they have had more than one opportunity. Welsh Government should consider the role of job coaching in schools in conjunction with Careers Wales for the children and young people who require additional support or reasonable adjustments for work experience.

The Welsh Government should also consider a policy of developing standardised *good practise* examples of Easy Read employment forms. Including examples for advertising job roles, CV's, job application forms and reasonable adjustment forms for employers.

Employment is everyone's business. There are direct links between employment and wider life, for example, wellbeing, independence, health and social care provision, caring roles and the economy. Sadly, people with a learning disability and/or autism are not regarded generally as a priority for employment support. This needs to change.

Reports from Engage to Change:

[Engage to Change: From service to strategy A national job coaching strategy for Wales.pdf](#)

[The impact of Covid-19 pandemic on jobs for people with LD in Wales: Vigna](#)

[Job equality and inclusion in Supported Employment for people with LD in Wales](#)

[Supported Employment for neurodivergent young people](#)

[Supported Internships: Evaluating the outcomes of a nationwide project](#)

[Supported Internships: Evaluation EASY READ](#)

[Parent views on Supported Employment for young people with LD](#)

[A demographic and qualitative analysis of success in a national SE project](#)

[Engage to Change briefing: Jobs for people with LD The role of the NHS](#)

References:

Vigna, E., Beyer, S., & Meek, A. (2023). A demographic and qualitative analysis of the determinants of success in a National Supported Employment project. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 36(4), 787–795. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jar.13094>

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[Beyer, Stephen; Meek, Andrea; Davies, Amy](#) (2016). Supported work experience and its impact on young people with intellectual disabilities, their families and employers. *Advances in mental health and intellectual disabilities*, Vol. 10, Issue 3, pages 207 - 220