

From service to strategy: A National Job Coaching strategy for Wales to support people with learning disabilities and autism into employment.

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By **Dr. Elisa Vigna and Andrea Meek**, Engage to Change Evaluation Team, The National Centre for Mental Health, Cardiff University.

Angela Kenvyn, Influencing and Informing Engage to Change Project Manager, and **Gerraint Jones-Griffiths**, Influencing and Informing Engage to Change Lead Ambassador, Learning Disability Wales.



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Background:

[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).

The project is no longer accepting referrals.

Influencing and Informing Engage to Change is a partnership between Learning Disability Wales and NCMH at Cardiff University. We are taking forward the policy, research, and legacy work of the Engage to Change project. We are advocating for a Wales National Job Coach Strategy.



Building opportunity:

In 2020, we published a briefing which called for a National Job Coaching Service as an effective model to support people with a learning disability and/or autism to equally access the labour market in Wales. This briefing used evidence and learning from the evaluation of the first four years of the Engage to Change project and stated:

“Central to any redesign must be the provision of supported employment for people with a learning disability or ASD, including job coaching, of a significant intensity and quality to support those most distant from the labour market and who do not easily develop skills to work through pre-placement training or qualification. Any employment recovery plan, or replacement for the Job Support Wales scheme, should include ring fenced resources for a National Job Coaching Service to ensure people with autism and/or learning disabilities are not left behind in the competition for new jobs post-Covid-19.” (Beyer, Meek & Vigna 2020)

Supported employment including job coaching, was recognised as the key element to supporting the development of work-related skills and transition into paid employment through work-based learning.

In Wales, where unemployment is currently lower than the UK average, 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). Young people with learning disabilities and/or autism are also likely to be economically inactive due to lack of transition and employment support.

The latest data shows that only 4.8% of adults with a learning disability aged 18-64 and known to social services were in paid employment in England (BASE 2023) and 21.7% of autistic people were employed (Office for National Statistics 2022). In Wales we do not currently know the specific employment rate for people with learning disabilities and/ or autism because this data is not routinely collected or available.

Wales has many excellent employment support programmes, but many programmes are still not accessible to people with learning disabilities, who are more likely to require specialist, needs led and person-centred support (Miles and Rutter 2024).

Over a seven-year period, Engage to Change supported young people with learning disabilities and /or autism to gain employment. Since our previous briefing was published a series of further evaluation reports and data collection has provided additional evidence of what works and what is still needed.

Supporting equality of opportunity.

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

Within our previous call for a National Job Coaching Service, we focused on the importance of redesigning employment support to better include supported employment provision, delivered through job coaching, with a person-centred approach. We specified that any employment recovery plan, or replacement for the Job Support Wales scheme, should include ring fenced resources for a National Job Coaching Service to ensure people with autism and/or learning disabilities are not left behind in the labour market.

A recent report by Dr. Hefin David MS, written for the Welsh Parliament, welcomed the idea of a National Job Coaching Service for learners with Additional Learning Needs (ALN), but also acknowledged some barriers, mainly due to the divisions between devolved and reserved responsibilities (David, 2023). Recommendation 8 states that *“The Welsh Government should review support for job coaching for those transitional learners with Additional Learning Needs who request it. With reference to the good practice developed by Engage to Change and Learning Disability Wales, an ALN job coaching strategy should be prepared, expanding the provision of specialist coaches to support learners with ALN to gain paid employment.”* (David, 2023 p.24).

As a result of work done by the Engage to Change project, the Welsh Government Employability and Skills Plan, Stronger, Greener, Fairer Wales (2023) states that in future Welsh Government will be:

“Taking forward activity to improve access to, and outcomes on our employability programmes for people with significant learning disabilities by providing specialist intensive job-coach support.”

This positive recognition, supported by updated Engage to Change research findings, leads us to summarise where we are now regarding what works in getting young people with learning disabilities and/ or autism into employment:

- **Experience matters:** Previous work experience (prior to participation in Engage to Change) had a positive influence on future employment for young people. This included work experience when in education, volunteering and paid employment. Having previous work experience does improve young people’s job chances, particularly if they have had more than one opportunity. This underlines the need for high quality work experience with support while young people are at school or college. Our research suggests that this alone will lead to better than normal rates of employment for young people with learning disabilities and/or autism, if experiences are organised and resourced properly.
- **Specialist job coaching support is a key factor:** Job coaching was central in getting young people into employment, learning a job in the workplace, developing social skills and facing the challenges imposed by the Covid Pandemic (Vigna,2024). A Job Coach is a qualified, specialist and wide-ranging role; it begins with getting to know the individual to understand skills and aspirations, matching features of a job to the interests, talents, and abilities of the person with a learning disability and/or autism, and tailoring support to the needs of the person and employer (Meek et al. 2023).
- **Needs led approach:** The Engage to Change project supported individuals with a wide range of support needs, and therefore the employment trajectory of individuals varies. Some young people may need more support than others to acquire new employment skills, others might need more input from job coaching to navigate the social aspects of employment and some will need targeted help around job maintenance (Vigna, 2024). Job coaching should not be a *“one size fits all”* approach in regard to the amount of time allocated to individuals within the *“place, train and maintain”* model of supported employment.
- **Significant employment experience** such as **paid placements and supported internships**, gave the highest rates of transition into paid employment. In this project the placements were individually matched to young people, in real workplaces, doing real work, with job coach support provided as needed including in the workplace.

- **Engaging employers:** This is best done directly on an employer-by-employer basis, particularly where they have a relationship with the supporting organisation. Offering supported employment and job coach services are crucial to gaining employment for people with learning disabilities in a tight labour market.
- **Recognising the wider outcomes of employment:** Being in employment has an impact on confidence, independence and improved mental health. Having a strategy that can help young people transition smoothly from education into employment can provide a contribution to both the Welsh Government’s Health and Social Care and well-being agendas.

Since 2016, supported employment and transition support has evolved across Wales. This included the introduction of supported internships by Engage to Change. The project ended in May 2023 but aimed to leave a legacy. Work in partnership with Welsh Government and other organisations has resulted in: around 20 Supported Internship programmes; Supported/Supported Shared Apprenticeships schemes both in North and South Wales; Supported Traineeships models (Jobs Growth Wales+); 2 Local Supported Employment programmes funded by the DWP covering 4 areas in Wales; the North Wales Learning Disability Employment Strategy covering the 6 local authority areas in North Wales; the new National Lottery Community Fund Sustainable Steps – Green Careers programme call to include supported employment and job coaching in projects.

Moving forward, as part of the Influencing and Informing Engage to Change phase, the Engage to Change evaluation team at the NCMH, Cardiff University, in partnership with Learning Disability Wales intend to map the supported employment provision in Wales, to understand what it is currently available in different areas. We need to build on these approaches in Wales and make sure young people, their families, education settings, health and social care, employers, providers and Welsh Government are aware of what it is available. We need to make sure information and communication around transition, support and employment is accessible and closer to home in line with the Welsh Government’s and the Wales TUC “Better Jobs, Closer to Home” strategy for localising the availability of jobs and individualised packages of support.

Funding

Funding is a key element in this discussion. We support the idea that every employment and skills programme should have ring fenced funding dedicated to job coaching support for those individuals who would not be able to achieve employment without it.

What are the options?

1. **Access to Work** is a DWP scheme that provides flexible funding for disabled people entering work. Access to Work payments for continuing job coaching provided a significant resource for Engage to Change, helping the project to support more people than through its main grant funding alone. Access to Work funding has also enabled additional job coaches to be employed within its supported internship programmes in Wales. In our previous briefing we discussed how developing a Relationship Team within DWP has been crucial to our success with this funding. We still recommend that this arrangement be taken forward for any future Welsh Government national programmes of job coaching or supported internship. However, the lengthy delays in decision making for Access to Work funding and in making payments experienced by Engage to Change continue to be issues that need to be addressed, for this to work and be sustainable. We need additional liaison by Welsh Government with DWP and Access to Work on internship programmes to ensure flexibility in payments for personal support and equality with English schemes.
2. **Pathway 4 funding** for supported internships has been extended to many more sites in Wales under the Welsh Government's post-16 Independent Living Skills Curriculum. However, there are no dedicated sources of funding to provide one-to-one support through job coaching for interns who may require preparation support, such as travel training, for intern's pre-internship or for those post-internship who are still looking for employment or may need ad-hoc support in employment. Further work is needed with the UK Department for Work and Pensions so that Access to Work funding can be more easily utilised in Wales, including to extend job coach support hours around supported internship provision.
3. Support through the **Universal Support** programme by DWP should be based on delivering services that conform to a recognised model of supported employment that has been shown to work. Any delivery of a National Job Coaching Strategy by the Welsh Government should have synergy with this funding and lead to the joint provision of an effective service across Wales.
4. The North Wales Learning Disability Employment programme is led by Health and Social Care and is funded by the **Regional Integration Fund (RIF) granted by the Regional Partnership Board**. This programme delivers a supported employment model for people of all ages who have a learning disability that could be replicated in other regions in Wales.

From Service to Strategy

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.

Our previous briefing paper 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 we need to be clear about the model fidelity and the resources needed to deliver an effective service.

A National Job Coaching Strategy would be fully consistent with this.

We developed the following **key recommendations** for a National Job Coaching Strategy based on the Engage to Change evaluation and research: We need to ensure that ANY employment programmes developed by Welsh Government have ring fenced funding allocated to job coaching.

- We recommend a needs-led approach of significant length for job coaching with the aim of offering a flexible package of supported employment for people with a learning disability and/or autism.
- Best practice is for job coach support to be provided by a Supported Employment Agency. A Supported Employment Agency can provide well trained job coaches, together with an extensive network of employers and local labour market knowledge, which is fundamental when looking for the best job match for the person within their community.
- All organisations and individuals providing job coach support should work to the National Occupational Standards for Supported Employment and should have completed supported employment and job coach training along with Training in Systematic Instruction (TSI). [NOS BASE 2017](#)
- Welsh Government should consider supporting a national job coach training and qualification programme in line with BASE recommendations. ([Level 3 Certificate for Supported Employment Practitioners BASE](#))
- Supported Internships, Jobs Growth Wales+, Supported Apprenticeships and Supported Shared Apprenticeships are excellent ways to get young people into paid employment. However, if employment is not achieved within the timeframe, we risk these initiatives being unsuccessful in transitioning young people. Follow on support from employability programmes that provide job coach support for people who need it should be available.

- Supported Internships, Jobs Growth Wales+, Supported Apprenticeships and Supported Shared Apprenticeships are not appropriate pathways to employment for some young people with a learning disability and/or autism. Also, many of these young people remain in school until they are 19, meaning they are not eligible for the Jobs Growth Wales+ programme. All employability and skills programmes should have job coach support built into them to ensure equality of opportunity.
- 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 who would be unable to gain and or/ maintain paid employment without it.
- 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 eligible age criteria for employability and skills programmes specifically for young people (such as Jobs Growth Wales+), should at minimum be in line with the Young Person's Guarantee (16-24 years), but ideally should be for 16–30-year-olds in line with NLCF Sustainable Steps - green careers programme.
- Job coach support should not be limited to young people (16 to 25). It should be available for any person of working age.
- There needs to be a stronger expectation that the provision of job coaching will lead to employment for individuals receiving support.
- Information should be provided to employers across Wales regarding Supported Employment and the role of the job coach.



In addition to the above recommendations, we would also highlight the following as good practice:

- We need to raise the aspirations and confidence of young people with learning disabilities around employment by working with them and the schools, colleges, families and others who support them, including Careers Wales. Peer mentoring should be considered for this.
- There needs to be better and more accessible communication about the pathways to employment for young people with learning disabilities.
- We need to raise the expectations of parents/ carers, education providers and employers that young people with learning disabilities can work with the right support and the right job match.
- There needs to be better and more accessible communication for parents and carers about the support available for young people with learning disabilities.
- Work experience needs to be more nuanced. In first instance (age 14+) it should be around “what work is” and the role of employment, then at later age (16 to 18+) it should be more focused on skills, types of jobs/ sectors and practical experiences so that young people can make informed choices around employment options.
- “Youth Friendly Employer” scheme should be developed and promoted across Wales to engage and support employers to provide work experience placements for young people with learning disabilities and/or autism.
- To achieve the above, Careers Wales advisors should be supported to connect with supported employment agencies to explore possibilities
- 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.
- Employers should be encouraged to adopt inclusive and accessible practices, including recruitment processes, reasonable adjustments from interview to retirement, job tasters, job carving, and training in systematic instruction.
- The Welsh Government should consider developing standardised examples of Easy Read employment forms. Including examples for advertising job roles, CV’s, job application forms and reasonable adjustment forms,

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Corresponding author:

Dr. Elisa Vigna vignae@cardiff.ac.uk

Project manager:

Angela Kenvyn angela.kenvyn@ldw.org.uk



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