

Inclusive employment of people with learning disabilities and/or autism (October 2025)

This is a briefing that sets out SeeAbility's calls on improving the employment prospects of people with learning disabilities and/or autism.

It reflects on the work of our Ready Willing and Able programme¹, which seeks out supported employment opportunities and provides coaching and skills development for anyone with a learning disability and/or autism (some of whom also experience sight loss). SeeAbility is also a Disability Confident employer.

At the time of writing, Ready, Willing and Able has worked with **over 200 people since March 2021** supporting them to move along their employment journey by increasing their employability skills, supporting **62 paid employment opportunities** in a range of sectors such as retail, hospitality, leisure, sport and charities.

This position statement is focussed on actions needed for inclusive employment, however separately SeeAbility is also campaigning to ensure benefits reforms reflects the needs of people with learning disabilities, autism and sight loss. Many benefits are used by disabled people to stay in work, and for those that cannot work, they should remain as an essential safety net.

Scott Watkin BEM is SeeAbility's Head of Engagement, striving for everyone to see the potential that people with learning disabilities have.

Scott says:

"When I was younger, I was told that my future would be never having a job, never living independently. I refused to accept that I would be going to a day centre for the rest of my life. It took one person to see my potential. From then on, I moved into jobs that have taken me all the way to the heart of government to helping lift up the voices of other people with disabilities in my current job with SeeAbility. I'm really proud of what I've achieved and determined to help others get the opportunity of paid work."

¹ More on SeeAbility's Ready Willing and Able programme at www.seeability.org/supported-employment/meet-ready-willing-and-able

Setting the scene

Many people with learning disabilities and/or autism have an ambition to secure meaningful paid employment, but employment rates continue to be low, meaning society is not recognising the potential of hundreds of thousands of possible employees (there is an estimated 1 million adults with a learning disability in England and 700,000 autistic people.²).

Labour Force data puts the employment rate of people with specific or severe 'learning difficulties', and people with autism at around 30%.³ For those with learning disabilities who are known to local authorities, the figure in paid employment is historically much lower at 6%.⁴ This latter figure has remained static despite being a national 'outcome' for local authorities to improve upon for many years.

For some people with disabilities, such as those with more profound and multiple learning disabilities and high support needs, the prospect of repeatedly justifying their need for benefits support, or being assessed for their capability to work and facing sanction is a cause of huge anxiety and not grounded in the reality of their lives. Benefits provide a fundamental safety net of support for disabled people who on average have additional disability related costs of £1010 a month, according to the charity Scope.⁵

In a recent report, 86% of people with learning disabilities surveyed said they want a paid job, but they find there are multiple barriers to this.⁶ Sometimes challenging assumptions is the main barrier. For example, people with a learning disability can learn complicated tasks and working processes, but they can do this most effectively if they are taught on the job and tasks are broken down or allocated in a different way – known as 'job carving'.

Once in employment, there is a host of evidence that people with learning disabilities stay in their roles for a longer time than their non-disabled co-workers and are less likely to be absent. Some 'business cases' exist, based on

² Public Health England 2023. [Learning disability - applying All Our Health - GOV.UK](#) and HM Government 2021. [National strategy for autistic children, young people and adults: 2021 to 2026 - GOV.UK](#)

³ Department of Work and Pensions Official Statistics (2024). [The employment of disabled people 2024 - GOV.UK](#)

⁴ DHSC (2025). [Adult social care activity report 2024 to 2025: commentary - GOV.UK](#)

⁵ Scope (2024). [Disability Price Tag 2024 | Disability charity Scope UK](#)

⁶ NDTI and Mencap (2023). [Resources from Research about work and learning disability - NDTi](#)

research and existing programmes that demonstrate how hardworking and diligent employees with learning disabilities are.⁷

More work is being done on the benefits of a neurodiverse workforce and the aptitudes that autistic people have.⁸ This is particularly true in the changing job market and 'post Covid' world where hybrid or home-based roles have increased, which in turn can benefit people with disabilities and conditions for many different reasons.

Existing and future government support programmes

Numerous initiatives, developed through government, the third sector and academia, are providing support to people with learning disabilities and autism to gain employment. Supported employment is the most popular approach and is provided under a set of national occupational standards.⁹

Various white papers and government action plans have aimed to support disabled people into work and within work in recent years. In 2025 the government issued a green paper 'Pathways to Work' which sets out a plan for future job support programmes. A brief summary of existing support and proposed support follows.¹⁰

Current disability employment support provision is mainly funded by the DWP through Jobcentre Plus. Initiatives include the Work and Health Programme, Connect to Work and WorkWell and either bring in specialist providers help people find a job and provide in work support, or a more intensive programme of one-to-one support for those with more complex support needs. Within each Jobcentre Plus there will be support from disability employment advisors.

In the future, a new funding programme starting in 2026 is planned under the banner of Pathways to Work but will maintain a diversity of supported employment providers and expand numbers of employment advisors. There will be a new 'right to try' work which will enable a person to regain their benefits if the role does not work out. There may also be changes to the benefits regime,

⁷ For example, Beyer et al (for Mencap) (2017). [Fact sheet 2: The benefits of hiring someone with a learning disability in your workplace | Mencap](#).

⁸ Department of Work and Pensions (2014). [The Buckland Review of Autism Employment: report and recommendations - GOV.UK](#).

⁹ The standards are hosted by the British Association for Supported Employment (BASE). [What is Supported Employment?](#)

¹⁰ Parliament research briefing (2024) [Disabled people in employment - House of Commons Library](#) and new government green paper (2025) [Pathways to Work: Reforming Benefits and Support to Get Britain Working Green Paper - GOV.UK](#).

which could make it harder for disabled people to access benefits, including those which are paid whether in work or not.

For younger disabled people, supported internships for young people with special educational needs and disabilities with an Education, Health and Care Plan remain current government policy, as is increasing the proportion of young disabled people accessing apprenticeships.

DWP support also comes from the Access to Work programme, which can offer support through e.g. a grant to people with a disability or health condition to get into or stay in work. According to the latest DWP data 6,720 people with a learning disability had some form of Access to Work provision.¹¹ The new government is also proposing to reform Access to Work. DWP also promotes the 'Disability Confident' scheme for employers to voluntarily show commitment to employing disabled people.

Legislation

It is also important to state that disability discrimination is covered by the Equality Act 2010, meaning that employers should not be treating disabled people less favourably in their employment and recruitment practices either directly due to their disability or indirectly, because a policy or practice puts the disabled person at a disadvantage. There are circumstances that can allow employers to lawfully preclude a person with a disability in the recruitment process or type of role, but this must be proportionate and justifiable.

Under the Act all employers are obliged to make reasonable adjustments that could overcome barriers experienced by a disabled person. In our experience adjustments can be more low cost and creative than employers might realise.

As part of our Ready Willing and Able programme, we have helped make 'reasonable adjustment' suggestions such as: changing the time, location or format of interviews; setting projects rather than competency questions or scenarios at interviews; providing interview questions in advance of the interview; having an employment coach present to help with communication and understanding; and more accessible written information.

Transition into employment for some of the people we support has been helped by extending induction periods to maximise learning and retention and having a job coach that can slowly taper off support once that person is confident in their role.

¹¹ DWP (2024). [Access to Work statistics: April 2007 to March 2024 - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/access-to-work-statistics)

Tim is one of the people we have supported under our Ready, Willing and Able programme. He'd always been steered to voluntary roles but really wanted a paid job to boost his income. Working with Tim, we helped him create his first CV, learn about interview questions and attend local job fairs, which resulted in his first paid job in retail.

Tim says:

"I feel very excited to have a paid job and I am very grateful to my job coach for helping me with my CV and interview preparation. Looking for work is a challenge but don't give up."

Recommendations for improvement

The following is a summary of the key issues as we see them around inclusive employment. The gap in employment for people with learning disabilities and autism is vast and in the case of people with learning disabilities with higher support needs, it is only widening, meaning a concerted and specialist package of action is needed.

We think that the government should produce an action plan with targets that are dedicated to improving the lives of people with learning disabilities. This would include raising employment rates to that of the best performing councils.

In 2001, a strategy called Valuing People, and then in 2009, Valuing People Now, took a holistic, cross government approach to improve outcomes for people with learning disabilities. 16 years on, there is no current government plan that provides a national strategic focus on the lives of people with learning disabilities, although a strategy on autism has a chapter on employment.

There is a strong association of being in poverty and having a learning disability¹² and experiencing much poorer health. A fresh strategy could drive improvements in job outcomes and improve people's life chances, given evidence of an association between paid work (particularly supported employment) and better physical and mental health amongst people with learning disabilities.¹³

¹² Institute of Health Equity 2018. [A Fair Supportive Society: Summary Report, Learning Disabilities, Social Determinants of Health, Health Equity, Poor Housing, Bullying, NHS England, Poverty, life expectancy - IHE](#)

¹³ Public Health England (2018). Webinar by Professor Chris Hatton and Neil Wood on Learning Disability Inclusive Employment. This can be accessed at the following link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e8yh9tD9HRk>

As part of a new strategy, actions should include:

1. Building employer and advisor understanding

There is work to do in building understanding and positive attitudes from employers on the benefits of employing people with learning disabilities and/or autism and the talent there is available to them and a need for employers to join forces in advocating for the benefits of inclusive employment. Having more definitive studies and evidence from employers, and employer champions would help show this is not just “virtue signalling” but brings business opportunities and benefits. This bank of evidence could help demonstrate to other employers that the initial costs and investment are not as great as they might think.

There are many ways recruitment and employment practices can be made more inclusive, particularly interview processes and the way in which job roles are advertised, using less jargon/more inclusive language. Buddying schemes, awareness training and having a disability related forum for employees can also help embed greater understanding of people’s needs.

In addition, there are many ‘gatekeepers’ in terms of supporting disabled people to find and apply for roles, including disability employment advisors and staff at Job Centre Plus. We see a need for raised awareness and education amongst these professionals, not just in tackling assumptions or gaining greater understanding of learning disability, autism, or sight loss, but also in terms of assistive technology and software developments, which move at pace but can really transform access to job opportunities.

Wayne was born with sight loss. In his current role, supporting recruitment at SeeAbility, he uses a range of assistive technology and software to help him in his job. Wayne says:

“Throughout my career I’ve found different ways of working but in recent years technology has absolutely transformed things for people with sight loss. Before I came to SeeAbility I was unemployed for a period of time. I used to know more about what technology was available than my disability employment advisor at the job centre – in the end I was advising them!”

2. Preparing people for work with clearer information and standards of support and funding

The government should look to establish a ‘one stop shop’ of more straightforward, easily understandable information on the different pathways there are into work, and the support that is available, such as Access to Work.

In our experience, younger people transitioning from college are not always being provided with this support or information and finding this information can be overwhelming, particularly with so much now having to be done online. Apprenticeships, internships, work experience and training opportunities may not be easy to find in one place.

In addition, apprenticeships and supported internships are age restricted to the 16-25 age group, and some people with learning disabilities would benefit if this age restriction could be removed.

More broadly greater investment in specialist support programmes is needed, alongside development of a universal support offer. There is such variation in practice and funding available, a case for making schemes less of a postcode lottery backed by national standards and funding would be extremely welcome.

3. Addressing equality and tackling discrimination.

Sadly, we do still hear of issues for people who say the process of applying and interviewing was not inclusive, and they experienced a rejection they felt was more related to their disability than their aptitude. There does need to be more education and awareness available to employers on the Equality Act 2010 and action where appropriate.

Also crucial is that the terms and conditions for workers with learning disabilities and/or autism should be the same as for everyone else. These include being paid at the regular rate and having equal employee benefits, safe working conditions and opportunities for career development.

4. Reform of the Disability Confident scheme

There have been instances where people we support have met the minimum criteria for an interview but have not been offered one at Disability Confident employers. We share the concerns about the scheme allowing employers to pledge but not necessarily employ people with disabilities and lack of measures on tangible impact – for example it is not known how many disabled people the scheme has helped to get into work.

We think that employers who are advertising as 'Disability Confident', particularly those at Level 1 and 2, should be more accountable and independently assessed to understand if the scheme is driving meaningful change. We would like to see the new government progress with a review which had been promised in 2023.

5. Reform of Access to Work

The support from Access to Work is sometimes called the government's best kept secret, as employers and potential employees are often unaware of its existence, or the type of support it can fund (for example, funding for a job coach for people with learning disabilities).

However, reform is needed to its administration and governance, which can be variable and even arbitrary (for example in rates paid for job coaching). The application process can be complex, and there are long waits for decisions to be made and a backlog of applications. In that time, the job opportunity may be missed. In the past we have expressed our concern with other charities and have called for action¹⁴ including digitising the process to help speed it up. It would be helpful for Access to Work data to also report on the numbers of autistic people accessing the scheme (currently this demographic fall under 'other').

Reforms should concentrate on these areas rather than the principles of the scheme. It is very concerning that Access to Work is being described under the Pathways to Work green paper as 'financially unsustainable' and under new plans could be reformed and made more time limited and grants based, or devolved to local areas, risking a 'postcode lottery' around access. It is a hugely beneficial scheme and many people who use this to have a personal assistant or BSL interpreter on an ongoing basis in their roles would be affected by proposals.

¹⁴ SeeAbility was a signatory with RNIB to a letter in 2023 [Urgent action needed to tackle Access to Work delays, RNIB tells Minister in joint letter | RNIB](#)