

Disability and Employment

Engagement findings

Monday, 25 November 2024

Background

1. As part of the Equality and Social Justice Committee's inquiry into 'Disability and Employment', the Citizen Engagement Team proposed a qualitative approach to engagement, comprising a series of focus groups and interviews with disabled people across Wales.
2. This paper is based upon contributions made during nine focus groups, two one-to-one interviews, two follow-up discussions with focus group contributors and three written contributions.
3. The programme of engagement involved 65 contributors across all five Senedd regions and took place between 31 July - 30 October 2024.
4. An interim summary paper, comprising views gathered during the initial phase of engagement (31 July - 20 August), was provided to the Committee to inform its first evidence session on 30 September.
5. This paper builds upon the evidence gathered during the initial phase of engagement.

Contributors

6. Whilst the majority of contributors were disabled, a small number contributed in a professional capacity as staff working with disabled people, with many being disabled themselves. They helped support participants with their contributions.



7. Contributor composition varied and included people with learning difficulties, learning disabilities, mental health conditions, sensory impairments, physical impairments and neurodiverse conditions.

8. The employment status of contributors also varied and included: -

- Contributors working in the public, private and third sectors.
- Contributors with different employment contracts including full-time, part-time and zero-hours contracts.
- Contributors who were self-employed.
- Contributors who were unemployed.
- Contributors who were in receipt of benefits.
- Contributors undertaking voluntary work.
- Contributors to which a combination of the above was applicable.

9. Contributors were sourced through several organisations including Conwy Connect, Disability Wales, RNIB Cymru, Scope and Stand North Wales.

Format

10. The engagement comprised the following: -

- Four face-to-face focus groups.
- Five online focus groups (via Zoom and Microsoft Teams).
- One face-to-face interview.
- One online interview (via Google Meets).
- Two follow-up discussions (via Microsoft Teams).
- Three written contributions (received via e-mail).

11. The format of engagement was largely comparable between sessions but varied slightly to meet the distinct needs of contributors.

12. Notes of each session are available to Members upon request. The following themes emerged from the discussions.

1. Looking for employment

13. Contributors agreed that barriers to paid employment for disabled people exist at the outset of the job-seeking process. Each stage of the job search, from reading a job description to participating in an interview, gives rise to several accessibility issues.

14. The barriers cited by contributors were numerous and varied. As such, the following is not intended to be an exhaustive list of the challenges disabled people may encounter when looking for work. Rather, it provides a snapshot of the barriers most often discussed by contributors during the programme of engagement.

Website accessibility

15. Some of the more salient examples of website inaccessibility were shared by contributors with sensory impairments, neurodiverse conditions, learning disabilities and/or learning difficulties. The solutions to some of these barriers were considered somewhat elementary, which caused contributors to query whether employers had disabled applicants in mind when recruiting. For example, many online job descriptions are in PDF format only, which is incompatible with screen readers, thus disadvantaging those with sight loss.

“The Welsh Government needs to lead by example, but if you go on the Welsh Government’s website, if you go on their job portal, you’re presuming that we have to have the technology to apply for these jobs. You haven’t got ‘recite me’ on the bar for people to navigate pages, you’ve hidden your accessibility button, if there’s even an accessibility button . . .so what you’re saying is, we have to be technical to apply for these jobs. But you’re not willing at the level of the Welsh Government to put those sites in place. That’s where it should be starting. It should be starting on these sites that we can access that reflects back to us our values.”

Focus group contributor, Neath Port Talbot.

“I’m neurodivergent. Websites are a disaster for me. There’s too much information. We need full choice of whether we look at things ...easy read, braille, whatever we’re using. Hardcopies.”

Focus group contributor, Gwynedd.

“Before you even look at the job advert, it’s the accessibility of an actual website. Some are better than others. So you’ve got the website, but when you tap on to ‘job specification’ and it goes to a PDF then that’s not accessible. Even before you look at a job advert, you have those barriers. . . it’s so exhausting . . . you use so much mental energy to even read part of a job description . . .”

Focus group contributor, Caerphilly.

Job descriptions

16. Some contributors said they felt that employers rarely make a concerted effort to recruit disabled people. The language used in job descriptions, whilst appearing to be inclusive, often merely paid lip service to equality of opportunity.

“Once they put out a job description, there’s a lot of companies that have the generic “We look forward to hearing from everybody regardless of disability, sex, gender, race, religion”, but actually when you look at the hours, they aren’t disability friendly for somebody within my remit of energy-limitation or living with a fluctuating condition . . . So those jobs are still inaccessible to me. A lot of jobs are still saying, come into the office. There’s not enough remote jobs. . .The language isn’t inclusive. . . Does it matter what time of day I get that done as long as I get it done by a certain time? It’s about the flexibility.”

Focus group contributor, Caerphilly.

“In Mid Wales especially, on loads of job adverts – driving a car is essential. You would think it would rule out a load of jobs but it doesn’t because you can apply to ‘Access to Work’ for a driver and have one through that. But it’s the language that job adverts use that’s putting people on the back foot immediately.”

Focus group contributor, Powys.

17. One contributor highlighted the intersection between employment and social care, explaining that employers lack the “*cultural competence and understanding*” to address the associated challenges.

“We know a lot of disabled people and people with long-term health conditions can work, but actually part of the reason they may be held back from working is because a care agency can’t get to them until 10:00 am or certain times to actually get people out of bed. I’ve had to take the decision to employ my husband through direct payments because it enables me to say, “Yes, I can travel to wherever I need to go to”. So actually there are further barriers that people don’t automatically see.”

One-to-one interviewee, Vale of Glamorgan.

Interviews

18. The inaccessibility of interviews was also highlighted as an issue. Whilst the increase in online communication tools was considered effective in mitigating barriers to employment by some, others were keen to give nuance to the context in which those tools are used. An example was given by a contributor who shared the experience of an individual with sight loss who was unable to attend a focus group.

“They were completely silent when he was talking. They must have been nodding their heads and smiling...or not. But the whole interview went by and apart from the questions, there were no audible cues. So he said that at the end of the interview, he was asked how he thought it went and he said not very well because he wasn’t sure if he answered the questions. They said they didn’t give him the role because he clearly lacked confidence in his own ability...but the interview was completely inaccessible to him.”

Focus group contributor, Cardiff

19. Some contributors shared anecdotal accounts of information revealed by their prospective employers during interviews or the job-seeking process, which left them disheartened.

"I have applied to a number of public sector bodies in Wales . . . and I've not had a great experience with that, to the point that with the Welsh Government, they had a major high profile recruitment campaign about 4 years ago for a load of deputy directors in the Welsh civil service. . . It was a marathon during lockdown. So we had a 'Meet the staff engagement' interview, a panel interview, psychometric tests and a psychologist interview. You were put through the absolute mill, all in a virtual environment. . . I was told during the psychologist interview, where I discussed my dyslexia, not to raise that at panel and I was really quite shocked about that. . . As it was out of over 600 applicants - I made it through to the final 100 for 20 positions. I still feel quite bitter about that even today. Of all organisations, I expected the Welsh Government's bar to be much higher. Ironically the title of the candidate presentation was - 'Welsh Government Civil Service is facing its biggest challenge in peacetime, what approach would you take to leadership and delivery if you were appointed to one of those Deputy Director posts?' - I would proffer the opinion that the skill sets brought by having neurodivergent leaders at all levels in the Welsh Government is especially critical particularly with respect to the current and future delivery imperative."

Focus group contributor, Flintshire

"I have been repeatedly warned that I should not declare that I am disabled in any way. I've been warned this by quite a few different people who are in senior positions and who themselves have faced ablest attitudes so it's very discouraging at the minute with academia."

Written contribution, Bridgend

"I've had interviews I've felt have gone well and I've not got the job so I've asked for feedback. They've said, well, I can give you some unofficial feedback, but the unofficial feedback is because of the reasonable adjustments that would be needed. A lot of these jobs involved IT and they were worried that I would be quite a financial drain on the company. I never took that any further because they've been kind enough to give me some off-the-record, unofficial advice. I didn't want to get somebody into trouble for telling it how I thought it

was anyway, but again it's quite chilling to hear it really is as discriminatory as you think it is."

Focus group contributor, Swansea

Disability Confident

20. Views shared on the UK Government's Disability Confident employer scheme were exclusively negative, with many contributors explaining that it was not something they consider when looking for employment. Criticism largely centred on two aspects. The first is whether employers are sincere in their attempts to recruit a diverse workforce.

"You don't know whether they're inviting you for interview because you have all the required experiences and qualifications, or they're just calling you based on this scheme."

Focus group contributor, Swansea

21. The second aspect focused on the efficacy of the scheme and whether attaining certain levels, particularly levels 1 and 2, was in any way meaningful.

"... I don't think it's worth the paper it's written on. If you look at Level 1, it's just that you're going to look into an EDI strategy... Level 2, I think you have to have a percentage of your workforce that's disabled and you have to have done X, Y and Z training. Now does that mean that you'll employ people to be tokenistic so you can get that badge? Level 3, yes it's a bit more extensive and you need an external assessor. But Level 1 and 2 are completely internal, so you could technically forge it. Nobody's going to look... there are many flaws with it I think... I don't personally look for that if I'm looking for jobs because I know you don't need to be in-depth with it."

Focus group contributor, Caerphilly.

"Nowhere in the Disability Confident scheme does it focus on the Welsh language, so actually if the Welsh Language Commissioner was going to look at that standard, it would fail because there is no Welsh marks to see whether people are aware of different cultural needs."

One-to-one interviewee, Vale of Glamorgan.

Positive experiences

22. Whilst much of the discussion focused on the challenges of navigating the job-seeking process by disabled people, some were keen to share positive experiences and areas of good practice.

"I just wanted to give you a positive experience through the University of South Wales. . . I applied for a post there, I'd been working some ad hoc as an hourly paid lecturer and the support through that interview process and subsequently, has been really good, including adjustments with a large screen which I have to use . . . but I'm also aware of a lot of people with negative experiences, although I've not experienced that at all at the University of South Wales."

Focus group contributor, Ceredigion

Solutions suggested by contributors

23. Several solutions were offered to some of the issues raised. These predominantly focused on the need for employers to have a greater understanding of an individual's needs and the reasonable adjustments they may require to fulfil their role, from the outset.

"If there was more integration with Access to Work at the application stage there could be a way of employers working with Access to Work at that stage rather than the onus being on us all the time to ask for the adjustments. If there could be a better integrated system whereby the employer could have already, at least floated the idea of Access to Work, that would be great."

Focus group contributor, Powys

24. Ensuring that job descriptions, application forms and job-seeking websites are fully accessible (to include easy read for example) is crucial. Some contributors with neurodiverse conditions, learning difficulties and/or learning disabilities, felt strongly that interview questions should be shared prior to the interview and that double-barrelled questions should be avoided.

25. For those who require support with navigating the job-seeking process, several contributors explained that job coaches with an acute understanding of disability would be helpful. Some contributors were unsure about the type of roles that would be suitable for them and called for greater guidance to support them in identifying careers that would meet their needs.

“Job coaches specifically tailored for disabilities, with an understanding of learning disabilities and especially neurodivergence, as there’s a lot of people getting diagnosed. With a lot of the schemes – the employment support schemes like Engage to Change, it supports people up to the age of 25. What about 25 plus? We can still work until pension age. That’s a long time. . . I live on my own. If I didn’t work, I wouldn’t really be mixing with people, seeing people, getting out and about. People don’t realise that when you’re in work it helps with your mental health as well. You are giving something back to society.”

Focus group contributor, Anglesey

“I had a job coach who was amazing . . . We did all sorts - confidence skills, interview skills, CVs, application forms. She helped me find volunteering work in 2016.”

Focus group contributor, Conwy

26. Whilst solutions focused on the efficacy of the Disability Confident employer scheme were discussed by fewer contributors, some called for increased efforts to ensure the scheme is meaningful and robust.

“I feel strongly about Disability Confident . . . because it says that it’s something that is voluntary. It should be mandatory with a quota and not a voluntary tick box.”

Focus group contributor, Cardiff

2. Support

27. Much of the discussion focused on the job-seeking process involved discussing the support, or lack thereof, available to disabled people. General

awareness of support initiatives varied, whilst those who had experience accessing support were critical of its usefulness. In particular, several contributors expressed concern at the lack of disability awareness amongst organisations tasked with supporting disabled people to secure employment.

Jobcentres

28. A number of contributors had sought support from the Jobcentre in the past, although they were largely critical of the support offered and/or received. The experiences shared were negative with some explaining that some Jobcentre advisers seem to lack the training required to appropriately and sensitively advise disabled jobseekers.

“When you’re looking for careers advice . . . especially if they’re government funded or the Jobcentres, they don’t understand the majority of conditions that people are living with. The problem then is, if they don’t understand you and they don’t understand your symptoms, they can either give you the wrong advice, give you no advice or give you bad advice. So people go to a work capability assessment and then they may be pushed to an interview where they can’t actually access that job or that job’s not good for them. Then they’re caught in that cycle of almost being too sick to be well but too well to be sick. If people who are giving that advice don’t understand that condition, I don’t understand how anyone can move forward. People then either get frustrated with the system, or they lose trust in the system. It can have a massive effect if people lose trust in the people that are trying to help them.”

Focus group contributor, Caerphilly.

“I went in and they didn’t really know what to do with me, so they sat me down on a chair and my partner sat next to me. They started asking me these questions but he wasn’t talking to me, he was talking to my partner. So I already felt ‘othered’. It was due to a lack of awareness. They started talking to my partner - “he does realise he needs to apply for 30 hours a week. He should apply for ESA (Employment and Support Allowance) instead because that means he doesn’t have to be actively looking for work.” But I’m a job seeker and I want a job.”

Focus group contributor, Bridgend.

"I have been with the Jobcentre because I get Universal Credit and I claim the non-work capability element of it as well, but to me, there's not really the help there. They still get me to go to the Jobcentre every 2 - 3 months. I don't know why because they don't really help me with anything. I'm pretty independent. I can fill in forms. But for people who are less capable than me, there's not the support, especially around Anglesey."

Focus group contributor, Anglesey.

29. Several contributors relied on specialist third sector organisations for support and signposting. The effectiveness of this support was discussed in largely positive terms, with marked praise for *Equal Power, Equal Voice*¹ in particular. However, some contributors discussed the burden which often befalls the third sector to fill gaps in support, which was considered particularly challenging in the current economic climate.

"I got great support from Equal Power, Equal Voice, which was really excellent and to be honest, without it, I don't think I'd have the confidence to be speaking at this Committee. It really opened up my public speaking skills and it's given me the confidence to start my role as a policy lead at [voluntary organisation] and explore and help people in the community and become a community leader. It's schemes like this that have really helped. I felt lost really. I didn't know where to go. I didn't feel ready for employment but I needed some scheme that would help me get there."

Focus group contributor, Cardiff.

"I could potentially be out of work in the next six months. I wouldn't know where to go. . . Disability Wales would probably be the first port of call. I wouldn't know where to go in terms of the DWP or I remember Jobcentres . . . where are they now? I did have a disability adviser. I haven't heard from them for probably around 3 years or more."

¹ 'Equal Power, Equal Voice' was a cross equalities partnership mentoring programme, which aimed to increase diversity of representation in public and political life in Wales. The scheme ran from September 2024 - May 2024.

Focus group contributor, Ceredigion.

“When it comes to who supports me to look for a job, I’ve found nothing. I’m not accessing anything, I’m not aware of anything. There’s no “you can go here if you’re disabled and looking for a job with no pressure on you”, out there that I’ve found.”

Focus group contributor, Swansea.

30. Whilst views shared by contributors often focused on identifying gaps in support, some positive examples were shared.

“I felt I’ve had great support from Cardiff Uni, through their careers service. I actually interned as a policy research intern at Disability Wales a couple of years ago and that was really good. I had a lot of support there.”

Focus group contributor, Cardiff.

3. Reasonable adjustments

31. Experiences of employers making reasonable adjustments varied. Some shared positive experiences of their employer responding to, and implementing reasonable adjustments, whilst others had starkly contrasting experiences.

“I suffer with migraines and severe light sensitivity. They’re excellent if I need to take an afternoon off and work an extra hour elsewhere to make up for it. In 2020 I was actually redeployed because the job I was in at the time wasn’t really suitable for me anymore. It was a decision they let me make. They gave me options. I was working in a school at the time and it, for me, was very challenging to start losing my sight around primary school children. I said to my manager one day, I don’t know how to cope with this anymore. They put me in touch with somebody who had gone through redeployment in the past which was really helpful to me. . . I was supported the entire way through the process.”

Focus group contributor, Newport.

“When I worked with DWP, they were brilliant. You could have a guide dog, we had equipment on time. They went overboard with equipment really. I had a special keyboard, large monitor, zoom text, Dragon Speak² into the system and was well-trained and I had a mentor for a while. . . At [anonymised organisation], we weren’t really trained. The keyboard came late. In the end, my manager said I wasn’t performing at the speed of my peers. The DWP took a lot off me because of my disability, but [anonymised organisation] expected me to be able to perform my job to the same degree as my peers.”

Focus group contributor, Cardiff.

“Anything I wanted they would do. They moved me so I could hear everyone, they adjusted my hours to suit me, so I was doing alternate days. I went down from full-time to 3 days a week. I did Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and had a day off in between to manage the fatigue. . . I previously worked as a manager in a supermarket, and I don’t think I would have had the same there.”

Focus group contributor, Newport.

32. There was a view amongst some contributors that certain sectors are more receptive to requests for reasonable adjustments. As such, some felt limited by the nature of the roles they were able to pursue, for fear that a prospective employer may not be amenable to the adjustments they require.

“The third sector is good at this stuff, whereas the private sector, for profit, isn’t as good. People with sight loss will tend to gravitate towards organisations that represent them. It’s a shame that’s the case, but it’s because they understand you more. . . The third sector picks up so much and fills so many gaps.”

Focus group contributor, Powys.

² Dragon is speech recognition software that works by listening to you speak and using artificial intelligence to transcribe the words on your behalf.

Solutions suggested by contributors

33. In addition to enforcing workplace policies informed by those with lived experience, several contributors felt strongly that staff in senior positions should lead from the front when creating a workplace inclusive of all.

34. Flexibility in working patterns was considered key to achieving an inclusive workplace. Sustainability and staff retention are important in employment and as such, if encouraging more disabled people into employment is to be achieved, employers need to understand the needs of their workforce.

“...we have an inclusion staff network made up of staff with disabilities, impairments and long-term health conditions. . . we no longer have three periods of sickness and then sanctions. It's three periods of sickness and then support. So you won't be pulled in for disciplinary. It'll be a look at what support's needed. That helps support members of staff who don't identify as disabled, protects disabled staff whilst protecting other staff too by identifying where people need support. . . as much as you can implement policies, procedures and guidance to help people, it's also down to the managers and the people responsible to make sure that they're following that guidance.”

Focus group contributor, Newport.

“I've got a line manager who's absolutely platinum . . . but that's not across the board. There's a lack of consistency across the board in terms of line management which is frustrating because they are the key. If you get a first-class line manager, you give more, you commit more. If you've got people like that who are leading you then they get it, you get, and it's like there's more discretionary effort because you've got people like that supporting you.”

Focus group contributor, Ceredigion.

35. Some contributors were keen to emphasise that reasonable adjustments vary depending on the nature of the disability. As such, employers should not view these adjustments through the lens of permanency, but rather a process which requires monitoring and where appropriate, adaptation.

“Reasonable adjustments are a constantly evolving thing. At different times of the year, I require different adjustments. Before COVID, my reasonable adjustment would be that if I was in the office, I would leave at 3:30 pm or 3:15 pm to be home before it’s dark because my sight is worse at night.”

Focus group contributor, Caerphilly.

“When I wake up, I have to base my day with the first step I take. If my leg feels like it’s about to buckle, it’s a wheelchair day.”

Focus group contributor, Cardiff.

36. Ensuring there is consistency and buy-in at senior level within organisations is important. Some contributors explained that employers need to harness the expertise of specialist organisations and involve those with lived experience when forming policy and training.

“In terms of line managers, they are the role models to how you should lead people. . . I think values, attitudes and behaviour is the key that unlocks the door and then getting those people as role models for other leaders to follow.”

Focus group contributor, Ceredigion.

“If you want to understand neurodiversity, then you need to go to an organisation that specialises in neurodiversity, not just ask employees to do a standard e-learning course. It’s important to invest time in training and lead from the front.”

Focus group contributor, Caerphilly.

“One of my recommendations about how to get more people to take up reasonable adjustments is actually, let’s see somewhere like Business Wales running an advert on ITV like they do for general businesses and actually say, “If you’re in business or employment do you realise you can have reasonable adjustments?”. Reasonable adjustments don’t always have to be big corporate assistive technology pieces. It could be about getting a disabled car parking space outside a building because it’s the one closest to the door.”

One-to-one interviewee, Vale of Glamorgan.

4. Access to Work

37. There was strong criticism amongst contributors about the effectiveness of the UK Government's Access to Work scheme, with the experiences shared exclusively negative.

"For the few employers that I've come across that do already know it exists, I've had employers say they've had such a bad experience with Access to Work they don't want to know that system."

Focus group contributor, Powys.

38. Criticism of the scheme predominantly focused on three aspects, which are dealt with in turn.

- The scheme was considered cumbersome and time-consuming to navigate. In particular, the time taken to process invoices was referenced by several contributors.

"I made an application back in December and I think it took about 4 months to come through. But I've had to pause it because I'm currently off work. But it wasn't the easiest to navigate in terms of where you are in the queue and then you'll suddenly get a call out of the blue for an assessment when you don't know how to navigate it. You don't know what to ask for."

Focus group contributor, Flintshire.

". . . you might employ your husband as your PA and your husband has to put an invoice in to actually claim his money back. They'll take up near enough a month to pay that invoice because they have such a backlog. When you ring them to ask why is this invoice taking so long to pay, the attitude you get off them is 'oh you should be grateful that you're getting anything' when actually it's not a benefit because it's paying someone to enable me to be a taxpayer."

One-to-one interviewee, Vale of Glamorgan.

“Yes, I have accessed ‘Access to Work’ and sometimes it doesn’t really provide access if I have to chase them up looking for money because I’m in a position where I need that money. . . I don’t get money on time to meet my need.”

Focus group contributor, Cardiff.

- The onus placed upon the applicant to explain what they require, despite the fact that an applicant may be unaware of what is available and/or suitable for them. This was a particular issue for those who had become disabled during the course of their employment.

“I used Access to Work in January and when I applied, I didn’t know anything about it really. . . I didn’t know what adaptations I needed because I’d never really done it before so I didn’t know what was out there. . . Then I had a lady from DWP phone me and she asked what I wanted. I said I don’t really know. She said it’s quicker if you tell me what you want. I said I don’t know, maybe a screen reader? Would I need training to use JAWS³ because I’ve never used it before? She was jotting all these things down but I didn’t know if it was going to help me or not. I’m now looking back and thinking I could do with this or that, but I don’t want to go through that whole process again because it takes so long.”

Focus group contributor, Bridgend.

- The lack of consistency with the support provided.

“I’m currently going through a re-assessment at the moment and it’s chalk and cheese from my first assessment three years ago. . . The first caseworker I had, he was brilliant. He actively asked me about my visual impairment, he wanted to learn as much as he could. He was really inquisitive and proactive. My current caseworker doesn’t want to communicate on the phone. It’s not his preference, so we’re just doing it by e-mail and so much is getting lost in translation. . . He said he can’t phone me because he can’t set up a time to call because he couldn’t guarantee he’d be available because of how much work he’s

³ JAWS is a screen reader developed for computer users whose vision loss prevents them from seeing screen content or navigating with a mouse.

got. Trying to manage that, with a full-time job is stressful. I call it 'disability admin!'

Focus group contributor, Powys.

39. Whilst general awareness of the scheme amongst contributors was high, some shared concerns regarding their employer's awareness and/or perception of the scheme and its purpose.

"(My employer) has to contribute some money to Access to Work, therefore they're actually expecting me to do more work because they're contributing some money to Access to Work. So there is some kind of misunderstanding there . . ."

Focus group contributor, Swansea.

"There are a lot of employers who see reasonable adjustments as extra expenses and in a climate like we are in today I suspect it's going to be even harder for people to have those accommodations made because of this perception. It's why I believe we should highlight the cost of not being inclusive - the loss of some very good knowledge and resources from disabled people who now cannot work in certain fields and jobs."

Written contribution, Bridgend.

Solutions suggested by contributors

40. Several contributors felt strongly that Access to Work assessors should be cognisant of the nuances that may be relevant to applicants in Wales, such as Welsh language considerations. As a result, some called for the Welsh Government to have greater influence and oversight.

"Let's stop seeing Access to Work as a benefit. Access to Work should be seen as an enabler to employment. We should make Access to Work come under Welsh jurisdiction because I think the difference in Wales sometimes is, we spend more time explaining to an English Access to Work assessor why you may need certain things. I think there needs to be Access to Work assessors based in Wales for Wales."

One-to-one interviewee, Vale of Glamorgan.

“... in terms of a solution, whilst the DWP's not a devolved matter... maybe they could give them some oversight powers to do it on behalf of the DWP in Wales because I don't think they could do a worse job. And then there's people who obviously want it in the Welsh language.”

Focus group contributor, Flintshire.

“I think Welsh Government should be creating Access to Work coordinators so we have this hierarchy of people that are really trained in understanding Access to Work... so you'd have an Access to Work coordinator depending on the size of the business, so for example, one coordinator for every 20 people trained to a certain level.”

Focus group contributor, Neath Port Talbot.

41. Contributors called for the scheme to be streamlined to create greater efficiencies, achieve consistency in the support provided and reduce the burden on the applicant. Increased guidance and greater awareness of the scheme and its operation, particularly amongst employers, were considered imperative.

“There's very little guidance for people applying to the Access to Work Scheme, apart from eligibility criteria. It's really difficult to find out things like how to fill in a form, how to manage somebody, what happens if you take somebody on as your PA and they're not right for the job and how you go about firing somebody.”

Focus group contributor, Powys.

5. Societal barriers

42. Much of the discussion on barriers to employment involved a wider discussion on societal barriers that exist and play a significant role in impeding access to employment for disabled people. Whilst these barriers are often multifaceted, those most frequently raised can be summarised into three categories.

Attitudes towards disability

43. Many contributors explained that a cultural shift in society is needed to address the way people perceive disability, particularly at its intersection with employment. According to some contributors, societal perception of disability has also influenced their view of their own disability and what they believe they can achieve at work.

“The difficulty I had is reflected in the way society judges people with disability . . . The organisation I worked for was very much rooted, or should have been, in the community, it was there to provide opportunities for everyone . . . I employed deaf people, there were blind people, people with mental health illness. However, I had trustees say to me, why are we employing these people? I think that’s societal. It’s this ableism we get all the time, rather than seeing that people can contribute and that they bring something very different to the table. You’re either a hero for winning a gold medal or you are a villain for not working.”

Focus group contributor, Swansea.

“I was in denial and almost internally ableist. There were things I couldn’t do the same anymore but in my brain, I couldn’t accept that, or I couldn’t think about the adjustments quite yet. I think there’s a lack of support in helping people who maybe don’t identify with being disabled. So there’s a lot of people who would qualify for the support or have long-term health conditions and impairments but to them, they hear ‘disability’ and sometimes there’s that societal element, especially for those who maybe haven’t lived with it for a long time, that can make it a hard thing to accept.”

Focus group contributor, Newport.

44. Whilst there was muted agreement during some focus groups that attitudes towards disability are improving, some contributors shared stark examples of how little they felt things have changed.

“I’ll give you an example of 1997/1998 when I had to leave the operational police environment as an operational police officer and move into a desk job within a training department. My view of the

training department was a department that was supportive of people. My arrival there, and this quote will live with me for the rest of my days, from a first-line supervisor was, "Look, we know you enjoy training, but what are people going to think out in the operational field when they see that the training department is a dumping ground for people with disabilities."

So that was the culture then. I don't think the culture has changed that much and here's my evidence. I only spoke to a former colleague yesterday, albeit in another police service to the one I worked in, who has recently been moved from happily being an operational cop and has now had to move into a training department. The comment from his first-line supervisor was "Well look if you're going to tell them you've got [a disability], then you're out of a job mate". So the lived experience for me was back in 1997 and I thought we'd moved on, but have we really moved on in terms of the attitude and behaviour of people?"

Focus group contributor, Ceredigion.

Transport

45. Contributors shared a range of issues relating to transport and the associated barriers to employment. Whilst issues, such as the cost and reliability of public transport are not necessarily unique to disabled people, those issues manifest in a way that often pose challenges for disabled people in different ways.

"I had to surrender my driving licence due to the surgery. The public transport infrastructure was horrific for me to try and get a bus from Malpas to Newport town centre . . . It was the hardest thing for me to try and get there on time so I ended up cycling. It was probably dangerous but there was no other way to get there on time so it was probably the biggest barrier for me other than the employer himself."

Focus group contributor, Newport.

46. Some contributors recognised that circumventions are available to support disabled people overcome issues relating to the accessibility of public transport, although they are not always fit for purpose.

“Buses don’t have loop systems in them so they have announcements but no loop systems so you’re straight away penalising deaf people or hard of hearing people or deaf blind people. So when we’re talking about a route to work, the most basic aspect of that route to work is erased straight away. . . but the transport aspect of it is extremely scary because we know they want 1 million disabled people back at work, with a percentage of that in Wales . . .but the question is, how can you expect people to look for work when the basic stepping stones to get to work are not in place?”

Focus group contributor, Neath Port Talbot.

“There’s certain train stations in Cardiff that currently don’t have accessible platforms at all. What you can do is phone a number and Transport for Wales will arrange for you to have a taxi to a station with an accessible platform. However, how many taxis are there for people who can’t transfer and need to drive into the boot in the wheelchair? There aren’t many. So they’re giving you this option which actually isn’t fit for purpose. It’s false hope. If you can transfer great, but what if you can’t transfer?”

Focus group contributor, Monmouthshire.

Built environment

47. The barriers associated with transport were interlinked with discussion on the challenges often posed by the built environment.

“When I lived in Greater London, I could go into central London. . . Now, it was hard, sometimes I got locked on the train because people didn’t come to get me off for example, but it was achievable generally. I cannot get to the end of my road here in a wheelchair without having to go on the road, partly because pavements are blocked. I can’t get to the pharmacy to pick up my medication because I have to go about 4 miles further than everybody else, which now isn’t so bad because I do use an electric wheelchair for that reason, because I was self-propelling before. I get quite annoyed with the fact that the people who need access are often the people who have to literally go further because the pavements, the roads, everything is not accessible.”

Focus group contributor, Vale of Glamorgan.

48. Concerns were raised about the impact navigating a space, unsuitable for those with disabilities, can have on an individual's decision whether to apply for a role.

"When I look for volunteer or part-time work, I look at what the job entails. I need to know what type of building it is. Most of the time, it's not wheelchair accessible. Even if they wanted me, I can't take the job. That's why I stopped looking. The only way forward for my situation is setting up a business by myself. Between 2019 and 2021, all I did was ask for help. I need some support. I can't go from benefits to a job, because the likelihood is, I'm going to lose that job because of my disability. I panic about these things. I got to a point where my mental health was getting worse, I was in a wheelchair. No one was there for me."

Focus group contributor, Cardiff.

"The voluntary work I did, they were kind, really lovely, but my wheelchair didn't fit in the space so I could only sit at a desk. . . I have osteoarthritis, so there were some things I couldn't do. I never felt like I could contribute. Everybody was very kind but sometimes, for me, I just want to be independent. . . So there's a lack of knowledge and there's a lack of understanding of what's needed, certainly for wheelchair users."

Focus group contributor, Vale of Glamorgan.

Remote working

49. Some contributors discussed the transition towards remote working during the pandemic, which they said afforded greater flexibility and increased accessibility for disabled people. However, some felt that progress in this regard has rolled back and opportunities to recruit a diverse workforce are being missed.

"There is generally such a lack of knowledge around remote working. Businesses are saying you can't be productive, everyone has to return to the office. For many people like me, we can only do the amount of

hours we do because we're not travelling so we can be more productive at home. With an energy-limitation and living with debilitating fatigue like ME, we have to pace all parts of our lives in order to live a form of life, for those of us who can work. That includes the morning routine - getting up in the morning, making a cup of tea, having a shower, brushing your teeth, comes naturally to a lot of people. We still have to pace that time. We have to pace our time at work, we have to pace our time after work . . . Travelling to work limits my energy for the day so then I have to work less if I have to go in because I have to accommodate time for travel to and from work and being cognitively active around a noisy office. So for a lot of people who have an energy limitation, working from home is extremely productive.

During the pandemic, a lot of these doors opened for millions of people who couldn't access anything because they are housebound but can still be productive . . . there was a sense of inclusion and accessibility. As things started to open up, the door shut again. I completely understand that people still need to go out now but we shut the door on so many potential opportunities and businesses are missing a massive trick."

Focus group contributor, Caerphilly.

Solutions suggested by contributors

50. According to contributors, there is a need to embed a deep-rooted change in attitudes and workplace culture. Changing attitudes and increasing disability awareness are challenging. Any changes need to be meaningful, with contributors explaining that this is a process, which requires perseverance.

"How do you go about changing culture? We need training on attitudes. It's not just about accessibility. It's about what language is and isn't acceptable. How do we speak to people about their disability? Ask them. We need to consider what that person might have had to go through to get to this stage. It's not just about accessibility but attitudes too."

Focus group contributor, Monmouthshire.

“Maybe some level of disability awareness should be incorporated into everyone’s job interview so when they’re employed they’re aware they need to treat everyone the same. I can’t remember anyone doing anything specific about people they’re working with or those with a disability. That aspect needs to be incorporated more.”

Focus group contributor, Newport.

“It’s how we value people and that means we’ve got to be really honest about when we make mistakes. We need to collectively learn from where we make mistakes rather than bury them. We need to record where we do things wrong. We learn more from things you do wrong in life than things you do right all the time, and I think we’re very poor at capturing where we do things wrong in an honest and open way. So if we’re going to tackle this really complex issue we have to start from that point of openness, honesty and say look, hands up we do make mistakes, but we want people to achieve what they want to achieve in life rather than be focused on let’s just push people into a job. If we’re going to do things differently then we need to start from that footing to give confidence to everyone to play a part and be valued.”

Focus group contributor, Swansea.

“I think there’s a big responsibility on workplaces to identify them and to offer the support even if people are not coming forward and saying “I’m disabled” . . . I know it’s a challenge and it’s almost that question that you can’t solve, but there’s a lot of reading between the lines that needs to happen to support everyone even if they don’t recognise it themselves that they need the support.”

Focus group contributor, Newport.

51. Some pragmatic solutions were offered to the issues relating to the transportation infrastructure in Wales and the need to increasingly recognise the benefits of remote working.

“Having lived in London I was able to use the Taxicard scheme⁴ and I’m sure that’s incredibly expensive, but I do think it’s worthwhile because it stops people being trapped. Sometimes I feel trapped because I have to rely on somebody else all the time.”

Focus group contributor, Vale of Glamorgan.

“I’d really like to see radical and genuine support for working from home. I really felt that COVID was an opportunity to do things differently and actually it was a terrible time and really difficult, but it was an opportunity to move forward in a different way and we’re not doing it. I think it gave a lot of people, including disabled people, more options but they seem to be disappearing.”

Focus group contributor, Vale of Glamorgan.

6. Work and benefits

52. There were varying degrees of understanding amongst contributors regarding benefit entitlement and how paid work may impact upon that entitlement.

“... through Universal Credit, before I got the sickness capability side, I was still having to deal with some of their requirements for the job searching and again I wasn't the stereotypical person who would be signed up for Universal Credit in their eyes. So lots of the things that were suggested were not suitable for me in their eyes or were jobs which I couldn't do such as retail and things primarily being on your feet all day.”

Written contribution, Bridgend.

“My biggest barrier to work is the benefit system. Because I’m on an old, old form of employment and support allowance and I’m in the support group so I’m left alone. And I also get PIP. Going through both of those benefits and different processes. Both were very stressful. I don’t see any reason why my benefits should stop because I’m visually

⁴ Taxicard is a subsidised service in London providing black taxis and private hire vehicles to those who might find it difficult or impossible to access other modes of transport.

impaired. That's not going to change. I know I wouldn't be allowed to go on to UC because I've got a small share in a relative's house. That's treated as a second asset. So obviously I can't sell the house. I'm very reluctant to put my head above the parapet and take any risk. I know there's a permitted work scheme with ESA. But it's very restricted. It's £85 a week, which is insulting. I'm just so worried that if I were to go down a permitted work route and find a job that I could do, the knock-on effect - from the benefit people, will be to say, 'Well you can work'. We're going to reduce your level of PIP which would be catastrophic for me financially. And we're going to stop your ESA. And even if I appealed I would never be able to go back to where I am now because that benefit doesn't exist for new claimants so it's just not worth the risk. I would love to work but It's not worth the risk. I don't have another person with another income to rely on."

Focus group contributor, Swansea.

53. Some contributors shared their anxiety around losing their benefit entitlement in its entirety if they were to secure any form of paid work. In particular, contributors with learning disabilities and/or learning difficulties were often reliant on family members to support them with financial decision-making. For the disabled person, family members were also often the source of benefit advice and information, but that did not always mean the advice and information were correct.

"I would like to get a job. What's making it hard? The benefits I'm on. If I get a job I'll lose my benefits."

Focus group contributor, Conwy.

7. Volunteering

54. Many contributors had current or previous experience of volunteering. The nature of these roles varied and included retail roles in charity shops, trustee roles for charities, volunteering at a local radio station and roles with organisations such as Scouts and the Girls Friendly Society.

55. Experiences of volunteering were largely discussed in positive terms, with contributors explaining that it allowed them to develop new skills, gain

confidence and a sense of purpose, and improved their mental health and wellbeing.

“Because there aren’t paid jobs, people are either finding voluntary work or finding other things to do to find fulfilment.”

Focus group contributor, Conwy.

“I really enjoy voluntary work. Before I got my job at Conwy Connect I hadn’t been working for 5 years. I feel, especially working for Conwy Connect the last year, I’ve met new friends, I’ve gained more confidence. I feel like I’m contributing to society. I am giving something back and I am helping to educate people around the health checks and how to deal with people with learning disabilities, as that’s a big issue still.”

Focus group contributor, Anglesey.

56. However, several contributors expressed frustration at the difficulty in transitioning into paid work. Contributors with learning disabilities and/or learning difficulties who had secured paid work sometimes felt limited by the rudimentary nature of the tasks to which they were assigned.

Solutions suggested by contributors

57. In addition to providing clearly delineated and accessible pathways for disabled people into paid employment, contributors were keen to ensure that support extends to opportunities for progression once in employment.

“I know we’ve spoken a lot about accessing employment and getting paid employment. Our research has shown that when people secure employment, they don’t feel like employers see the potential in them to progress. Even if the reasonable adjustments are in place, it’s about supporting people to get more senior roles. When one of our campaigners recently moved departments, through a part-time secondment, they had support to lead on projects.”

Focus group contributor, Cardiff.

“They wanted an admin. . . I was there 12 years. Near the end, I found there wasn’t much there for me. I just felt like I was being used to go

out to the shops for them. I felt like I had the experience to do more than that.”

Focus group contributor, Conwy.