

Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb hwn i'r [Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg](#) ar [Llwybrau at addysg a hyfforddiant ôl-16](#)

This response was submitted to the [Children, Young People and Education Committee](#) on the [Routes into post-16 education and training](#)

RET 46

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**Dr Elisa Vigna & Andrea Meek:** The National Centre for Mental Health, Cardiff University based on their independent evaluation of the Engage to Change (E2C) project and legacy work.

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## **1. What worked well for us: sharing our best practice experience.**

### **Engage to Change**

The Engage to Change project was set up to look at the problem of employment for young people with learning disabilities and/or autism across Wales, aged 16-25, NEET. It was a transition to employment project, achieving 41% employment rate despite operating during the pandemic. The Engage to Change project demonstrated the potential of Supported Employment and job coaching as a successful pathway for young people with learning disabilities and autism to transition to sustainable paid employment. The dual support, offered to the person and the employer, showcased the importance of the Supported Employment model in fostering an inclusive workforce. The project supported over 1300 young people and supported about 800 employers. The project offered a wide range of employment experiences, such as paid placements, unpaid placements, DFN Project SEARCH supported internships, Alternative Internships, with the ultimate goal of paid employment.

The Engage to Change research, undertaken by Dr. Elisa Vigna, Andrea Meek and Gerraint Jones Griffiths from The National Centre for Mental Health, Cardiff University, highlights the **importance of work experience** in improving the employment prospects of young people with learning disabilities and/or autism. People with learning disabilities and/or autism with multiple work experiences from school/college were better prepared to transition into paid employment, highlighting the need for early, supported, consistent, and good quality job placements. However, **what really made a difference, was experiencing employment with the support of a supported**

**employment agency and a job coach.** Within the Engage to Change Project, the most effective pathway to employment was paid placements, followed by DFN Project SEARCH supported internship programmes. Both pathways had considerable involvement of the young person who engaged with the employers for at least 6 months and up to one academic year. This length of work experience, together with the job coach support, proved to be an important factor to transition young people into paid employment. Employer engagement for the provision of experiences needs to be better promoted and supported in policy and practice.

The **importance of job coaches** is evident throughout the Engage to Change project, with employers consistently reporting high levels of satisfaction with the support received. Employers were satisfied with the work ethic, punctuality, and productivity of the young people on the project, with many expressing an interest in hiring future employees with similar disabilities.

In the Engage to Change legacy work, we had the opportunity to connect with Ysgol y Deri school which caters for a wide and diverse range of differently able pupils with learning disabilities, physical needs and autism. Ysgol Y Deri embraces a lot of the good practices linked with what supported transition and career guidance should look like. With Ysgol y Deri, we set up a **Transition GAP group** to talk about how we can mitigate the gap and improve transition practice in Wales.

### **Ysgol Y Deri**

Within Ysgol y Deri, we offer lots of vocational opportunities and work placements to our pupils with the intention of preparing them for the next steps post school. Careers and work-related experiences, as part of the new curriculum for Wales, is being embedded throughout the curriculum from 3-19. We understand that not all of our pupils will go on to work, but **they should all be given the opportunity to explore the world of work in a way that meets their individual needs and capabilities.**

For those that are capable of employment, we offer both internal and external work placement opportunities. Internal opportunities available to all year groups include the school cafe and kitchen, reception, admin, mail delivery, IT and assistive tech support. We have a coffee van that pupils work on off site, delivering and serving at other school sites. For those in key stage 5 and ready to access external placements, we work with local employers and source opportunities that meet the young person's aspirations. Current links and placements include Ikea, Cardiff Museum, Lana's Cafe, Red Cross Charity shop, Reptiles Cymru, Barry War Museum, Wales Millenium Centre. We continuously work hard to form new relationships with local employers.

We have numerous enterprise opportunities in school, including t-shirt and mug printing, car washing, external catering and most recently the development of a vinted style store. We are in the process of moving our store into Penarth town centre, giving us a high street presence, whilst integrating our pupils into the local community and opening up further work placement opportunities. We have a good record of transition

out post school as **we start working with pupils from a young age to identify dreams and aspirations.**

Our most successful transitions have been those who have gone through **supported employment via Project Search**. Project Search enabled pupils to stay on school role and access supported internship opportunities in year 13. This enabled them to have the safety net of school, should the placement not be successful, and alleviated risk. Via this programme we saw huge growth in pupils' independence, confidence and work-related capabilities, and 2 out of 4 went into paid employment, and remain there. We as a Vale School no longer have access to Project Search, due to funding cuts. This is a huge loss for our pupils.

## **2. What support and opportunities are available - could this be improved and how?**

### **Ysgol Y Deri:**

There are very few viable opportunities for our pupil's post school. Due to the needs of our pupils, few of them follow the traditional GCSE curriculum. The majority of pupils will transition onto college, however due to the entry requirements set by colleges for mainstream courses, and the lack of insight in accepting qualifications with GCSE equivalence, the majority of our pupils are shoehorned through generic life and employability type courses.

For some, this is the right route, but many of our pupils, by the time they transition out at 19, are in a place where they could successfully access mainstreams courses, and many have excellent vocational skills. For those pupils that go through college, the transition routes out are very poor and with a lack of support, as a result the majority of our past pupils now access very little.

There is now the option of OnSite supported internships via Cardiff and the Vale College. These programmes seem to be offering more in the way of transition and employment opportunities, however, there are still a distinct lack of paid opportunities at the end.

Many of our past pupils, whilst very able, go into long term volunteering opportunities. This could be improved with the local colleges offering more in the way of recognised mainstream courses and qualifications for our pupils, without such stringent entry requirements. A wider offer of supported internships should be developed with local companies, with a built-in incentive to offer employment at the end. Apprenticeships should be assessed, again entry requirements are often too high for many of our pupils, but they can offer the required level of vocational and work-related skills.

### **Engage to Change:**

In 2024 we wrote a report and recommendations for a Job Coaching strategy for Wales (see below). We acknowledge that there are now several different programmes in Wales which include job coach support through Jobs Growth Wales+, Supported Internships, and Supported Shared Apprenticeships and we are grateful to Welsh

Government. These programmes 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. 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.

**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. For instance, a teaching assistant could be trained as a job coach, to help preparing ALN students to their transition to employment. Job coaching training is inexpensive but can make a great difference in the way students transition to adulthood. 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).

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.

To complete on what it is available in Wales, there are some Local Supported Employment programmes being delivered in some areas of Wales, led by local authorities, health boards or third sector providers. Their standards are good; however, they are geographically restricted and internally monitored for quality and outcomes. We believe all Welsh Government-funded programmes should be fully inclusive, accessible and suitable for people with learning disabilities and/or autism. This is why we asked Welsh Government to consider a Job Coaching strategy for Wales.

### **3. Knowledge and skills base of Careers Wales FE/HE and other organisations - could this be improved?**

#### **Engage to Change:**

Despite pockets of good practice being highlighted across Wales by young people, parents, education providers and employers these were seen as sporadic and regional and there was still a sense of “where do we go” for good information and support around post-16 options. People valued work experience in supporting informed choices around post-16 options for education and training, but the support and opportunity for these was inconsistent and limited as a real opportunity.

Tying in with communication and accessibility many parents and people with learning disabilities/ autism had not heard of national schemes such as The Young Persons Guarantee, Working Wales, Jobs Growth Wales+ and Access to Work. Careers Wales was more commonly known, however they were often highlighted as talking to the young person in school but not supporting further, or as offering “resources”, such as personality/ job profiling, with no practical value for transition or supporting choice in the real world.

#### **Ysgol Y Deri:**

Ysgol y Deri work closely with Careers Wales around transition out of school, predominantly where funding applications for WG are required. This process will change with funding going back to local authorities and Careers Wales will have less involvement. Pupils are offered careers meetings with an advisor, this can take the form of observations, dependant on the needs of the young person. School transition staff have a good knowledge around future provisions and so are not reliant on the guidance of Careers Wales. Advice and guidance for our pupils tends to lean towards the College route, rather than employment or schemes such as Jobs Growth Wales. It seems to be the responsibility of the young person to seek advice and guidance from Careers Wales post school, as opposed to it being freely available.

### **4. Transition process from stat education to FE/HE**

#### **Ysgol Y Deri:**

We have a strong post 16 transition process in Ysgol y Deri, with the process formerly starting in year 9 annual reviews/IDP meetings, we link with the young person, their families and any other professionals involved. We know our young people individually and are able to identify the best pathway for them. This is however often a pathway restricted by unrealistic entry requirements for FE and a lack of employment opportunities in the community. With CWRE embedded into the curriculum, we are doing what we can to get our young people work ready, this however needs to be

supported once they leave school with further opportunities, like supported employment and job coaches.

### **Engage to Change:**

Early intervention is critical element in the transition process. Support that is “whole system” including the young person, parents/ carers, education providers/ Careers Wales etc. needs to happen sooner and more diligently. There needs to be different levels of experience, including practical experiences, targeted through the curriculum. Experiences MUST include options for FE/ HE AND employment so that the young person has informed choice. The traditional pathway of school – college- university is not the only pathway.

Advocacy and self-advocacy must also play a part here.

Building stronger partnerships between schools, colleges, universities and employers can ensure that young people with learning disabilities and autism are exposed to options and experiences before transitioning post-16. Changes to the curriculum in Wales should offer flexibility to be more needs-led in building links with local FE/HE/ Employers. Welsh Government should support regional initiatives to get post-16 providers talking and working together.

## **5. Workplace inclusion and business engagement with schools**

### **Engage to Change:**

Workplace inclusion is promoted by working with employers. Currently this is not being supported in Wales and a lack of work based learning opportunities pre and post-16 is limiting inclusion.

In the Engage to Change Project the majority of employers reported positive experiences working with young people with learning disabilities because they had the chance to experience it (Vigna & Meek, 2025).

The overwhelming majority (98%) of employers found the business support provided by the supported employment agency and the job coach effective, and 96% agreed that the young people they employed received the necessary support in the workplace. This reinforces the idea that with the right support structures in place, young people with learning disabilities and autism can become valuable and productive members of the workforce. Therefore this needs to become a stronger pathway for post 16 training and opportunity.

Within the Engage to Change project despite a low number of employers (30%) signing up for the Disability Confident scheme, 264 out of 277 (95%) of employers said they would consider hiring another person with similar disabilities following their

involvement with Engage to Change. 228 out of 277 (82%) employers would employ the person in the future if support remained available.

We need employers to commit to offering new opportunities, to challenge misconceptions and stigma surrounding the employment of individuals with learning disabilities and autism.

It is crucial to offer more post-16 training and awareness-raising programs for employers to work with young people with learning disabilities to challenge stereotypes and educate them on the benefits of a diverse workforce. Such programs should be delivered by people with learning disabilities working with employers, in conjunction with education providers. The training should focus on what people **can** do in work, rather than what people cannot do.

### **Ysgol Y Deri:**

Business engagement is growing within YYD, but this is down to us knocking on the door of local companies and asking for support. It tends to be token gestures of a class talk, a tour, or possibly work placements. What we need to develop is long-term working relationships, where companies get to know our young people and their capabilities, with the goal of employment opportunities post school

## **6. Personalised transition plans**

### **Ysgol Y Deri:**

As part of Year 13 person-centred IDP reviews, students work with teachers to complete a 'My Plan, My Future' document which outlines student aspirations, the support needed and actions that will support reaching this end goal. These are highly personalised and include external agency support if required. This is attached to the IDP to support a positive transition. However, where students aspire to follow a vocational route or apprenticeship for example, they are often excluded from these opportunities due to the academic expectations and qualification pre-requisites of such courses.

## **7. The Voice of the young person and parents/carers**

### **Ysgol Y Deri:**

Students who take part in work-related experiences, such as enterprise, and work placements in school report improvements of self-confidence and self-worth. They are able to take risks, knowing that they are supported by school staff. Job coaches would further support in this area.

Parental feedback at PCP IDP reviews shows huge pride in student achievement when they are taking part in experiences that they never thought possible such as work placements. Some parents then support students into supported internships such as

Clwb Coffi at Bridgend College. However, there are challenges in raising aspirations of some parents/carers for their young people, as they often do not see employment as a realistic option.

## **7. Supported Internships and Supported Apprenticeships**

### **Engage to Change:**

**Supported internships** were introduced to Wales under the Engage to Change project in 2016. Prior to this there were no significant opportunities for young people with learning disabilities and/or autism to have experiences of this type or duration. To date there are now over 20 sites which offer supported internships in Wales. These offer a work-based learning transition route that feedback from interns enrolled in both Engage to Change Project SEARCH and Alternative Supported Internship models showed had many benefits.

Research has shown that having experiences similar to their mainstream peers is a significant factor in developing greater independence for young people with learning disabilities and/or autism ultimately enabling young people to make more informed choices (Beyer et al. 2014). Opportunities in real work environments increased the self-confidence, self-esteem, and the employability of the interns. Interns recognised that the move from education into work-based learning was a shift to adulthood with growing independence and confidence. Interns appreciated the support given for this and that they felt involved and treated as equals. Trained (to National Occupational Standards) job coach support, specialising in working with people with learning disabilities and adopting a needs-led approach to focus on strengths and skills growth is key here.

Internships help to improve the vocational skills and personal performance of interns in work and life. Engage to Change supported internships have demonstrated the effectiveness of job coach support and educational input within the workplace in developing skills and establishing jobs. This form of intensive internship has received positive feedback from young people. Job coaching is key to the success of this form of internship.

Proposed extensions of Access to Work funding for job coaching prior to supported internships to allow for preparation work, and after supported internships for follow on support in gaining and maintaining employment should be more highly considered.

**Supported Apprenticeships** have great potential and provide an inclusive framework to allow people with a learning disability and/or autism to get a qualification and enter the labour market. Within the E2C project, we wrote a report focusing on the provision in South Wales by ELITE Supported Employment Agency and it is not inclusive of supported apprenticeship provision delivered across North Wales (Vigna and Meek 2024).

In this brief report, the wide variety of apprenticeship types was praised, supporting the development of different career pathways to suit individual aspirations. More employers should be incentivised to offer supported apprenticeships, which will support this successful scheme and contribute to a culture change, where people with

disabilities are actively included in the labour market, with equitable opportunity. The adjustment of apprenticeship entry criteria by Welsh Government, was welcomed, and facilitated inclusivity.

In this brief report, the role of prior experience was key, with people having had previous work experience, employment or volunteering more likely to achieve paid employment with Job Coach support, with 60% of young people having previous work experience. For most this had come through the Engage to Change project, Supported Internship programmes, JobSense, RESTART and Job Growth Wales+. This suggests some benefits are given by strong pre-apprenticeship supported work experiences, such as supported employment and supported internships. This is important because the supported apprenticeship pathway, is not for everyone.

Since the Engage to Change project ended, there is no bespoke supported employment provision in many areas of Wales. People who are not suitable to start a supported apprenticeship, cannot access support and will stay economically inactive. Once again, there is a need for Welsh Government to have a National Job Coaching Strategy for Wales, where job coach support is provided to anyone who needs it, available in various stages of employment. Job coach support should be embedded in every employment programme, to ensure equity of opportunity.

## **9. How we can reduce disparities across Wales**

### **Engage to Change:**

At present there is not equality of opportunity across Wales for young people with learning disabilities of additional learning needs who require needs led support and advocacy for making an informed choice around post –16 options.


Post –16 options are limited by their inaccessibility in a number of ways:

- Communication of options to young people
- Communication of options to families/carers
- Accessible information (easy read/ plain language/standardised across Wales)
- Lack of substantial support (Careers Wales/ resources)
- Lack of informed choice/ no work experiences
- Lack of joint working between stakeholders

### **Further evidence:**

All reports and video are available on the project website in English, Welsh, English easy read and Welsh easy read: [Research and Evaluation - Engage to Change](#)

### **Videos and presentations**

The voice of people with learning disabilities and neurodivergent people in employment: What works?  [What Works CTM talk NCMH 2025 Andrea Meek - final - PDF.pdf](#)

Gerraint's mum and aunt talks about their experience:

<https://youtu.be/gXmwQx8RdO8>

Young people talk about "what works" : <https://youtu.be/DESTkqmQoqc>

E2C Parent report: [Engage to Change Parent report](#)

Welsh Government report on Transitions: [Transitions to employment \(gov.wales\)](#)  
Easy read version: [Moving from education to employment. A report for the Welsh Government](#)

Pathways to employment video that features young people from the project: [Engage to Change Pathways to employment](#)

Knowing Me, Knowing You event videos (E2C YouTube): [Engage to Change on YouTube](#)

### **Engage to Change Academic articles and reports:**

Beyer, S., Vigna, E. and Meek, A. (2020) *Jobs for people with a Learning Disability and Autism- The role of the NHS*. Cardiff: Learning Disability Wales. [Engage-to-Change-The-role-of-the-NHS-Jan21\\_final\\_eng2.pdf \(engagetochange.org.uk\)](#)

Beyer, S., Meek, A. and Vigna, E., (2020) *Engage to Change briefing: What policy changes are required to provide people with a learning disability or ASD equal access to the labour market in Wales?* Cardiff: Learning Disability Wales. [National-Job-Coach-Briefing-6July20-V6\\_final.pdf \(engagetochange.org.uk\)](#)

Beyer, S. Vigna, E. Meek, A. & Meighan, J. (2019) Research outcomes for the Engage to Change study – Lottery report [Engage-to-Change-research-outcomes-June-2019- final.pdf \(engagetochange.org.uk\)](#)

Beyer, S., Vigna, E. and Meek, A. (2019) Employment Outcomes from different patterns of job coach inputs – the experience of Engage to Change (<https://doi-org.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/10.1111/jir.12663>)

Meek, A., Vigna, E., & Beyer, S. (2024) Supported Internships: Evaluating the outcomes of a nationwide project using different internship models to support young people with Intellectual Disabilities and Autistic young people into employment.

<https://www.engagetochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/supported-internships-report-English-compressed-2.pdf>

Meek, A., Vigna, E., & Beyer, S. (2023) The Role and Experience of the Job Coach: The experience of a nation-wide Supported Employment project.

<https://www.engagetochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/english-compressed.pdf>

Vigna & Meek (2025) Employing people with learning disabilities and/or autism: a feedback report from Engage to Change employers <https://t.co/IYhkTNPd75>

Vigna & Meek (2024) Influencing and Informing Engage to Change Supported Shared Apprenticeships in South Wales [SSA-report-English-final-compressed.pdf-compressed.pdf](#)

Vigna, Meek, Kenvyn, Jones-Griffiths (2024) From service to strategy: A National Job Coaching strategy for Wales to support people with learning disabilities and autism into employment : [E2C A National Job Coaching Strategy for Wales](#) Easy Read version: [Easy Read E2C A National Job Coaching strategy for Wales](#)

Vigna, Meek and Beyer (2024) Supported employment, quality of jobs and employment typicalness: the experience of the Engage to Change project. *Journal Applied Research Intellectual Disability*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jar.13226>

Vigna, E., Meek, A. and Beyer, S. (2024). The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on jobs for people with intellectual disabilities and autism in Wales. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jar.13194>

Vigna, Beyer and Meek (2023). A demographic and qualitative analysis of the determinants of success in a National Supported Employment project. *Journal Applied Research Intellectual Disability*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jar.13094>

Vigna, Beyer, Meek, Meighan (2022) Engage to Change - The first four years – Lottery report [Engage to Change - The first four years](#)

Vigna, E., Beyer, S. and Meek, A. (2019) Employment Outcomes of the Engage to Change project in Wales over its first three years (<https://doi.org.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/10.1111/jir.12663>)

Vigna, E., Beyer, S. and Meek, A. (2018) Outcomes of the engage to change project-supported employment for young people with a learning disability or ASD (<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/jar.12484>)

**Real opportunities Transition reports:**

Beyer, S., Kaehne, A., Meek, A., Davies, A., & Vigna, E. (2014). Regional SEN Transition to Employment Initiative (Real Opportunities): Impact of the Real Opportunities Project. Cardiff: Welsh Centre for Learning Disabilities, Cardiff University.

Beyer, S., Kaehne, A., Meek, A., Pimm, C., & Davies, A. (2014). Regional SEN Transition to Employment Initiative (Real Opportunities): Family Follow-up Study. Cardiff: Welsh Centre for Learning Disabilities, Cardiff University.

Beyer, S., Kaehne, A., Meek, A., & Davies, A. (2014). Regional SEN Transition to Employment Initiative (Real Opportunities): An Evaluation of Peer Mentoring initiatives within the project. Cardiff: Welsh Centre for Learning Disabilities, Cardiff University.

Beyer, S., Meek, A., & Davies, A. (2014). Regional SEN Transition to Employment Initiative (Real Opportunities): Staff views of its effectiveness & outcomes, second round survey. Cardiff: Welsh Centre for Learning Disabilities, Cardiff University.

Davies, A., Meek, A., & Beyer, S. (2014). Regional SEN Transition to Employment Initiative (Real Opportunities): The influence of Hub teams on the quality of person centred planning. Cardiff: Welsh Centre for Learning Disabilities, Cardiff University.