

Disability and employment

Interim summary of engagement

Monday, 30 September 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 interim summary paper is based upon contributions made during four focus groups and a one-to-one interview involving a total of 32 contributors across all five Senedd regions, as of Tuesday, 20 August 2024.
3. Additional focus groups are being arranged. A paper summarising the key themes which emerged across the full programme of engagement will be available to the Committee ahead of its Ministerial evidence session.

Contributors

4. Whilst the majority of contributors were disabled, a small number participated in a professional capacity as staff working with disabled people, although many also had disabilities themselves. They helped facilitate the discussion and supported participants with their contributions.
5. Contributor composition varied and included people with learning difficulties, learning disabilities, mental health conditions, sensory impairments, physical impairments and neurodiverse conditions.



6. The employment status of contributors also varied with 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, unemployed, on benefits and with more than one voluntary role.

7. Participants were sourced through a number of community groups and organisations including RNIB Cymru, Conwy Connect and Scope.

Format

8. Four face-to-face focus groups and one face-to-face interview were held.

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

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

Looking for employment

11. Most contributors agreed that barriers to paid work for disabled people exist at the outset of the job seeking process. Whilst those barriers were numerous and varied, some of the starkest examples were shared by contributors with sight loss and learning disabilities and/or learning difficulties.

“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

“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

12. Each step of the job application process poses challenges, with the inaccessibility of interviews also highlighted as problematic by some contributors. 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.

13. One example was given by a contributor who shared the experience of an individual with sight loss who was unable to attend the 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

14. Some contributors referenced the UK Government's 'Two ticks' scheme, since replaced by the Disability Confident employer scheme, who queried whether some employers were sincere in their attempts to recruit a diverse workforce.

"I was told at one interview I went for, that they'd only interviewed me because they had to tick the box. There's also the financial implications because I had to get a cab there and back. I was down £20. If I had known I was a token interviewee I wouldn't have gone for it.

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

- 15.** Concerns were raised by some contributors about the built work environment and 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

Solutions

- 16.** Several solutions were offered to some of the issues raised, which 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.
- 17.** Ensuring that job descriptions, application forms and job seeking websites are fully accessible (to include easy-read, for example) for those with a range of disabilities is crucial.

"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

18. For those who require support with navigating the job seeking process, a number of contributors explained that job coaches, with an understanding of disability, would be helpful.

“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

Disability awareness

19. There were deeply held views that whilst there was a lack of disability awareness amongst employers, with particular reference being made to those in the private sector, this was also the case amongst institutions responsible for supporting people to find work.

“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. . . I know other people who are younger than me, 18 plus, trying to find work. Employers don’t understand disability or

mental health. It's getting a job that's suitable to fit in with our health conditions as well."

Focus group contributor, Anglesey

20. 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 exclusively negative with some explaining that some Jobcentre advisers seem to lack the training required to appropriately and sensitively advise disabled jobseekers.

"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

"The Jobcentre sometimes don't bother to check where they send you. They chuck you in the charity shop and it might be unsuitable."

Focus group contributor, Conwy

"It's the thoughtlessness and lack of care in what they do. This came out for me when I was told by a member of the Jobcentre staff, you've got to go for a mandatory interview. You're going to lose your money if you don't go for this interview. I asked, 'What's the job for?'. They said driving for Stage Coach. I was sat there with a guide dog."

Focus group contributor, Cardiff

Solutions

21. 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

Work and benefits

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

“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 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

23. 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

Paid v. unpaid work

24. A significant number of contributors had current or previous experience of volunteering. These roles varied and included retail roles in charity shops, volunteering at a local radio station and with organisations such as Scouts and the Girls Friendly Society.

25. Most contributors with experience of volunteering spoke positively about those roles, explaining that it allowed them to learn new skills, gain confidence and supported 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

26. However, many contributors were frustrated at the lack of opportunities for paid work. For those in paid work, some felt limited by the basic nature of the tasks they were assigned and the lack of opportunities to progress.

Solutions

27. Some contributors were keen to emphasise that whilst supporting disabled people into paid employment is important, it is also necessary to support them to progress within those roles.

"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

Reasonable adjustments

28. Experiences of employers making reasonable adjustments varied. Some contributors were keen to share positive experiences of their employer implementing reasonable adjustments, whilst others had starkly contrasting experiences.

“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. They sent me to an occupational health doctor as well, to get a report. 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

“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 Speak¹ 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

“I apply for jobs but sometimes the equipment is not there and I need support and training so I’ve looked at self-employment.”

Focus group contributor, Cardiff

29. 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 to which they were able to apply, for fear that their 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.”

¹ Dragon is speech recognition software that works by listening to you speak and using artificial intelligence to transcribe the words on your behalf.

Focus group contributor, Powys

Solutions

30. Some contributors were keen to emphasise that reasonable adjustments can vary depending on the nature of an individual's disability. As such, employers should not view these adjustments as a permanent 'fix', but rather a process which requires monitoring and where appropriate, adjustment.

"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

Transport

31. Contributors across all focus groups shared a range of issues relating to transport and the associated barriers to paid and voluntary work. Whilst issues, such as the cost and reliability of public transport were not necessarily unique to disabled people, they posed different challenges.

"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

32. Whilst some contributors recognised that some circumventions are available to support disabled people with issues relating to the accessibility of the transportation infrastructure, they are not always fit for purpose.

“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

Access to Work

33. There was strong criticism amongst contributors about the effectiveness of the 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

34. The criticism predominantly focused on three aspects. Firstly, the time it takes to navigate the scheme is too long and onerous. Secondly, the onus placed upon the applicant to explain what adaptations they require, despite the fact that an applicant may be unaware of what is available/or suitable for them.

“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 JAWS² 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

35. Finally, some were critical of the lack of consistency with the support provided, with some advisers more effective than others.

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

Focus group contributor, Powys

Solutions

36. Aside from the need to ensure the support provided was consistent and less cumbersome for the applicant, a number of contributors agreed that more guidance and greater awareness of the scheme is required.

"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."

² JAWS is a screen reader developed for computer users whose vision loss prevents them from seeing screen content or navigating with a mouse.

Focus group contributor, Powys

The future

37. In addition to the cultural shift needed to ensure that disabled people are at the heart of decision-making, some contributors involved in a focus group arranged by RNIB Cymru were keen to look further ahead.

“We talk a lot about getting blind and partially sighted people to meet with decision makers. We need to make a shift to them being the decision makers. That’s the next step. If we’re all in the third sector, we’re not moving into the public and private sectors. Those jobs don’t seem to be there, that progression doesn’t seem to be there. How do we get people with lived experience to be up there in the decision making process? If you can’t see it, how can you be it? My worry is, the third sector is always propping things up.”

“Another thing to mention is about the future of Wales and future skill sets. By 2050 we’re going to see a significant increase in people with visual impairments. There’s also going to be a significant change in the type of jobs that Wales has. There’ll be more green jobs. What is the Welsh Government doing to prepare for those changes? Older generations will need to retrain. What support is there for that? If these new jobs are created, they need to be designed at the start with disabled people in mind.”

Focus group contributor, Caerphilly