

Engage to Change briefing: Jobs for people with a learning disability or autism - The role of the NHS



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Background

The Engage to Change partnership has drawn attention to the challenge facing people with learning disabilities or autism in the labour market recession created by the coronavirus pandemic. The challenge will be to maintain the jobs that have already been found for people through initiatives such as Engage to Change, initiatives to raise awareness of people's abilities, and employability options to develop new job opportunities in a very tight labour market. We also know that there will be fierce competition for the jobs that do exist. Further, the impact of national and Welsh Government incentives to help employers take on new staff will be both an opportunity and a threat to people with a learning disability or autism. These initiatives can be a threat because they may divert jobs that might once have been available to people with learning disabilities or autism to other populations due to the action of the incentive (eg the Kickstart Scheme). These initiatives will be an opportunity if people with a learning disability or autism receive the support to successfully access them.

The Engage to Change partnership has made proposals to Welsh Government for a national offer that would assist in levelling the playing field for people with a learning disability or autism, and anticipates the need to support people's access to any employability initiatives that are available:

- The National Job Coaching Service to help people with a learning disability or autism to find, get, learn and keep a job through the supported employment model and to assist their access to other Welsh Government and UK employability schemes (eg Kickstart, Communities in Work Plus).
- A national Supported Internship offer that would provide up to 12 months on-the-job training with a large employer, or local networks of SMEs, and the prospect of a paid job at the end.
- A flexible Employer Development Grant that could support employees by subsidising wages or other employer costs over a 6-12 month period.
- An emphasis on indigenous provision in Wales, securing knowledge of local employer networks to match our expectation of a shift to local recruitment practices among employers.

We believe there is room for further public sector initiatives in terms of generating stronger pathways for people with a learning disability or autism into paid jobs.

Anchor institutions

There has been significant interest in the idea of “anchor institutions” within local economies that play a particular role in maintaining and generating jobs¹. These are employers who are unlikely to move during periods of recession, represent significant reservoirs of capital, are significant purchasers of services and employ a large number of local people. The NHS is often pointed to as an example of an anchor employer. Other examples include local authorities, universities, colleges, core transport providers and other public sector service providers. This can influence the local economy in a number of ways:

¹ Reed, S. (2018). *The NHS as an anchor*. The Health Foundation. <https://www.health.org.uk/newsletter-feature/the-nhs-as-an-anchor>

- In the way they **purchase** services, anchor institutions can promote jobs in local economies, they can drive up rates of pay towards the national living wage, and help to create opportunities for apprenticeships and other work preparation schemes.
- Through the way they use **capital assets** such as buildings, particularly underutilised buildings, they can generate work and provide opportunities for job development in the local area.
- As large employers, anchor institutions can underpin decent wage rates and demonstrate good practice in equal opportunity and diverse recruitment. They can also act as a catalyst for creating networks of employers to share information, resources and good practice to meet national and regional aspirations for employing people with significant disabilities.

Benefits of employing people with a learning disability or autism in the NHS

NHS England has developed a Learning Disability Employment Plan (LDEP), which encompasses people with autism, and is part of a government commitment to employ tens of thousands of people with a learning disability. This initiative has seen the development of a significant number of supported internships in NHS Trusts to provide a pathway into a range of NHS jobs. This is coordinated as part of the NHS commitment to develop greater equality and diversity in their workforce and has generated significant numbers of paid jobs.

Supported internships (including DFN Project SEARCH) play a central and effective role in NHS England's strategy to deliver a significant volume of jobs for people with a learning disability. Data from DFN Project SEARCH in England shows that they delivered their schemes in partnerships in 22 NHS hospital sites in 2018-19, serving 190 interns in that year. The employment rate at the end of people's internships was 60.8% of the cohort, with a job retention rate of 95%. On average, people were employed for 28 hours per week.

A study of the social, economic and environmental value created by supported internships in the NHS using a *Social Return on Investment (SROI)* methodology investigated DFN Project SEARCH in Wishaw General Hospital in North Lanarkshire over a 2-year period. It found that benefits extended beyond the 2 years studied and that the extra value created by DFN Project SEARCH over what it cost was £206,749 for that hospital scheme. In summary, the internship programme created £3.96 of social value for every pound of investment at 2013 prices.²

While the coronavirus pandemic has raised considerable challenges for the NHS, there are many examples of supported internships and other recruitment of people with a learning disability or autism continuing despite the constraints of successive lockdowns and pressure on NHS staff and management. NHS England has recently renewed their commitment to the LDEP and are looking to refresh their strategy for recruitment and placement of people with a learning disability.

There is no similar commitment by NHS Wales. The NHS is a significant anchor institution in many regions of Wales. It will continue to play a significant role as a commissioner of services and as an employer of people even throughout the labour market recession that we anticipate resulting from the coronavirus pandemic, and any implications of Brexit post-January 2021.

Welsh Government is expending significant investment of time and resources to develop a recovery plan to fight the economic impact of the pandemic. We argue that additional measures are required to maintain a place for people with a learning disability or autism in the labour market in the future. Our research has shown that the Engage to Change project was successful before the pandemic in generating supported internships within “anchor institutions” such as Princess of Wales Hospital Bridgend, Ysbyty Gwynedd Bangor, Cardiff University and Rhondda Cynon Taf local

² Social Value Lab (2013) SROI Evaluation Project Search. <http://www.socialvaluelab.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/SROI-Report-Project-Search-Final.pdf>

authority. Young people have been found paid jobs in public sector institutions.³ In addition, individual jobs have been found in wider NHS services and in other public services. However, the majority of Engage to Change's jobs have been found in the private sector - jobs and supported internships have generally been hard to find in the public sector.

A public sector Learning Disability and Autism Employment Strategy for Wales

At this time of maximum pressure on the labour market it is important that public sector employers are encouraged to play their role as anchors within their local communities and regions, not least in relation to the employment of people with a learning disability or autism. We see significant opportunity to systematically promote the employment of people in these target groups by large public sector employers as a part of Welsh Government's recovery plan. This would represent a strategy similar to NHS England's Learning Disability Employment Plan and be fully supportive of the commitment to equality and diversity within the NHS, the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act, the current Learning Disability: Improving Lives programme, and the updated ASD Delivery Plan and draft Code of Practice. Further, a recent review of the literature supports the view that the well-established association between employment and better health is similar for adults with and without intellectual disabilities.⁴ By strengthening the employment of people with a learning disability, either within the NHS or by acting as a catalyst for employment by other key agencies, the NHS will be promoting its core public health improvement agenda. Any

³ Meek, A., Vigna, E., Beyer, S. Meighan, J. (2019) Engage to Change: DFN Project SEARCH Report on an internship programme for young people with Learning Disabilities and/or Autism: The first three years. Cardiff: National Centre for Mental Health, Cardiff University.

⁴ Robertson, J., Beyer, S., Emerson, E., Baines, S. and Hatton, C. (2019) The association between employment and the health of people with intellectual disabilities: A systematic review. *J Appl Res Intellect Disabil.*, 3, 2:1335-1348

such strategy would have synergy with our existing proposals for a National Job Coaching Service and a national Supported Internship offer.

This would be a long-term strategy and we would expect significant results over a 5-year period. Engaging the NHS in Wales in such a strategy should not be seen as any form of additional burden. Evidence from NHS England's LDEP suggests there has been significant benefits to hospitals and other services from supported internships and the employment of people with a learning disability or autism.⁵

The benefits of employing people with a learning disability within the NHS have been summarised by English Trusts^{6,7} with experience as:

- A greater local talent pool for hard to fill and high turnover posts.
- Creation of a new support worker role.
- Employing people from diverse backgrounds to fulfil the NHS's Workforce Disability Equality Standard.
- Access to a recruitment talent pool that also served community Health Centres, medical clinics, care homes and outpatient services.
- High internal hospital team satisfaction.

Further, such a strategy would enable the development of local or regional partnerships to develop good practice and further employment opportunities across the public sector. This would balance Welsh Government equality employment strategies targeted primarily at the private sector (eg Disability Employment Champions, Inclusive Apprenticeships). There is a positive example of this regional partnership approach in the NHS *West London Alliance*⁸ that develops supported internships for people with a learning disability or autism. Here there has been an

⁵ NHS Employers (2020) *Flexible role development: Royal United Bath NHS Foundation Trust*.

⁶ NHS Employers (2020a) *Building a community talent pool Northern Devon Healthcare NHS Trust – Barnstaple*.

⁷ NHS Employers (2020b) *Long term sustainable support: Barts Health NHS Trust*.

⁸ <https://wla.london>

attempt to develop a comprehensive pathway for people with a learning disability to enter paid work with the significant support of the public sector. The Alliance involves 3 NHS hospitals, the West London NHS Trust, and primary health care, social care and education providers. The partnership provides the following interventions on an area-wide basis to systematically promote paid employment opportunities for these groups:

- Family-forming and aspiration-raising around employment in maternity and paediatric clinics.
- An introduction to health and social care careers across years 7 to 12 in schools, with family engagement.
- Supported work experience in school years 12 to 13.
- Pre-employment skills and acquisition programmes offered through short courses and colleges along with a “preparation for internship programme”.
- Multiple supported internship programmes based on large public sector employers, and also with a network of smaller employers.
- Access to supported apprenticeships and traineeships with the employees along with paid jobs with supported employment job coach support.

In the next stage, the Alliance plans to develop their own area job coaching service to assure the availability of skilled job coaching to support the employment opportunities being provided. This further demonstrates the need for a supply of good job coaching to underpin key strategies for people with a learning disability or autism.

The role of the NHS as a central anchor institution within the West London Alliance is clear. The opportunity for a similar network approach in Wales is also clear. As part of the ongoing efforts to develop a coherent recovery plan for jobs in Wales, and securing equality of access for people with a learning disability or autism, we propose that:

- **Welsh Government develops a learning disability and autism employment plan for the NHS.**
 - **This plan is part of a strategy to utilise the leading role of the NHS in employment in Wales to promote area and regional collaboration with other public sector institutions helping prepare this group of consumers for the world of work, and to provide them with pathways to paid employment.**
 - **These collaborations promote good practice in recruitment and training by public sector and private sector employers in these areas and regions.**
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