

Submission: Call for Evidence - The Benefits System in Wales (Welsh Affairs Committee)

Deadline 10. August 2021

Response on behalf of the Engage to Change Project

Funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, Engage to Change sets out to find employment for young people with a learning disability, autistic spectrum conditions, or specific learning difficulties aged 16-25 in Wales. It uses a supported employment methodology and job coaching. Our vision is of a world in which people with a learning disability and/or autism are able to experience improved wellbeing outcomes through the increased independence, financial status, social capital and fulfilment that paid work offers.

Project partners are:

Learning Disability Wales, a national charity representing the learning disability sector in Wales. Learning Disability Wales works with people with a learning disability and their families, Welsh Government, local authorities, disabled people's organisations and the voluntary sector to create a better Wales for all people with a learning disability. Learning Disability Wales is the lead partner for the Engage to Change project.

Other project partners are: two supported employment agencies, **Agoriad Cyf** and **Elite Supported Employment**; and the **National Centre for Mental Health (NCMH)** at Cardiff University, our evaluation partners.

More information on Engage to Change can be found on our website:
<http://www.engagetochange.org.uk/>

Contact: Grace Krause (Policy Officer, Learning Disability Wales)

Email: Grace.krause@ldw.org.uk

Telephone: 029 20681165

What are the key challenges for the benefits system in Wales and how do they differ from the other nations and regions of the UK?

The benefits system in Wales is the same as in England as this process is not yet devolved. However, there are challenges, in part due to areas that are devolved such as the education system where there are differences between the nations of the UK. For example, children/young people with Special Education Needs (SEN) in England who require additional specialist support will usually have an Education & Healthcare Plan that follows them to age 25. For these learners further education and can be used to draw down Access to Work funding. In Wales, historically, children/young people qualifying for extra specialist support had a Statement of Special Educational Needs (SSEN) while at school. However, the term used is now Additional Learning Needs (ALN) and over the last few years, Local Authorities in Wales have moved away from the 'statementing' system due to ALN Reform. Therefore, many children/young people requiring additional specialist support do not have a SSEN or equivalent. From September 2021 Local Authorities in Wales will be required to produce 'Individual Development Plans' for children and young people with ALN. Roll out of this new system will not take place in further education until September 2022. This has caused huge issues with claiming Access to Work funding for job coach support, especially for young people in further education undertaking a supported internship. However, after much work with DWP and Welsh Government, there has recently been progress on accepting that SSENs are not viable evidence for eligibility in Wales. Instead, assessment interviews started to be conducted by several different agencies on behalf of DWP, and a backlog of applications is being worked through.

Rural areas in Wales and poor transport infrastructure pose challenges for claimants to travel to and attend meetings at JCP venues. This is exacerbated by the closure of some JCP offices and difficulties disabled people often have accessing public transport or public transport not being reliable or available.

We also urge the committee to pay special attention to the submission from Disability Wales which includes original evidence submitted by disabled people in Wales and which reports significant issues with access to benefits, long waits for assessments and other benefits coming through, unsuitable support and unnecessary assessments which cause "constant anxiety".

Pre-pandemic, how effectively did the UK benefits system tackle poverty and socio-economic inequalities in Wales as compared to England and Scotland?

Wales has areas of deprivation and pockets of people trapped in poverty due to the lack of decently paying jobs. The benefits system does not always offer appropriate support in areas where unemployment is high and where there are limited job opportunities. The benefits system fails to support those

individuals who are unable to travel to areas where there are opportunities or are unable to afford travel. The geography of Wales makes it difficult to access opportunities due to these barriers. Where opportunities are concentrated in more urban areas the opportunities are thus unevenly distributed and significant parts of the Welsh population are excluded. The benefits system would be much improved in Wales by recognising this to support individuals in rural areas to access job opportunities.

During the pandemic, there has been an additional top up to the UC payment which will end in November. This will have negative effects on people as many will struggle to make ends meet without this additional income.

The reliance on call centres does at times disadvantage people with a learning disability who have limited access to assistance. Prior to Covid, the differences for people living in an area being rolled over into UC, and those living in non-UC areas did lead to reluctance of people with a learning disability and their families in the latter areas to enter paid employment because of the potential loss of any premium payments. This undermined the goals of both the Engage to Change project and the goals of the government to help more people from benefit into employment.

One of the contributions of supported employment agencies within the Engage to Change project in Wales has been to provide direct assistance to those entering employment to manage the UC process of transition to employment. This can mean dealing with additional communications issues and is not always available from other DWP sources.

How has the COVID-19 pandemic changed the type and amount of support needed by people in Wales?

The majority of the job centres closed, and staff worked remotely. Some of our unemployed participants became more isolated as their DWP Work Coach was one of the very few social contacts which they now lost. They may have felt that employment was not possible during this time due to the lack of contact. Due to the huge spike in people claiming UC, there was a big recruitment drive to manage the increased demand, resulting in many inexperienced staff to support individuals. By their own recognition, there is a huge training need in the JCP's. One result of having less experienced caseworkers is that they have not had the appropriate knowledge for referral and signposting to supporting organisations and specialist providers.

Obtaining authorisation for Supported Permitted Work continued to be a lengthy process made more difficult due to the COVID pandemic. Although partners have strong relationships with their local Job Centres, working patterns of staff at them changed with them predominantly home working, so the lines

of communication were not as efficient. This had a knock-on effect on the Access to Work applications, as the majority were closed until a decision on Permitted Work was made.

Further challenges were experienced with the Access to Work claims and participants who had been furloughed. This continued for many participants, and partners found that the initial application was no longer live and that the process had to be started again and a new one submitted.

We have needed to extend Engage to Change's offer to provide advice and guidance on furlough, all benefits, redundancy and provide support for work capability assessments.

The JCP's are concentrating on the youth unemployment market at present meaning that many people with disabilities and the over 25's are being overlooked. It should be noted that the Kickstart scheme is only available to claimants of UC and therefore excludes many young people with disabilities.

How effectively has the UK benefits system responded to these needs, and what else should the UK Government do to deliver the right support in Wales?

We understand the DWP is currently reforming Access to Work and suggest different and devolved systems in Wales need to be considered.

Only 5.6% of people with a learning disability in Wales are in paid employment but we know that many more people would like to work. There are a few pilot schemes being undertaken or planned in Wales to support disabled people to gain and maintain work. In terms of the employment of disabled people, we have gained some important successes in supported employment. The Engage to Change project has demonstrated that supported employment methodology is the best way to achieve good support for people with learning disabilities.

We need more supported employment and job coaching resources in Wales to assist people with these more complex disabilities to fulfil their potential to become employed, and to create a "level playing field" for them in the more competitive labour market, post-Covid. The roll-out by the DWP of funding for a greater number of "Local Supported Employment" schemes into Wales would assist in this. Deepening co-ordination between DWP and Welsh Government in their funded schemes to ensure that adequate levels of this form of provision is available will help both WG and DWP fulfil their shared objectives of helping more people with disabilities into employment.

We understand the DWP is undertaking a 'trailblazer' local supported employment (LSE) offer for local authorities in the Autumn that was delayed due to the pandemic. We strongly suggest a minimum of one LSE should be ringfenced for Wales.

There are resources available that discuss what Engage to Change partners have learned about how to best support disabled people into work, and make recommendations:

Dr Steve Beyer, 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? Available online: http://www.engagetochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/National-Job-Coach-Briefing-6July20-V6_final.pdf

Dr Steve Beyer, 2021: Engage to Change briefing: Jobs for people with a learning disability or autism - The role of the NHS. Available online: http://www.engagetochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Engage-to-Change-The-role-of-the-NHS-Jan21_final_eng2.pdf

Further policy information from the Engage to Change project and Learning Disability Wales can be found on our policy page: <https://www.ldw.org.uk/project/policy/>

It is however important to point out that people deserve to live dignified lives out of poverty when they are not in paid employment too. We urge you to study closely the research and recommendations by the Bevan Foundation on the Welsh benefits system.

Steffan Evans, 2021: The case for a Welsh Benefits System. Bevan Foundation. Available online: <https://www.bevanfoundation.org/views/case-for-welsh-benefits-system/>

How effectively do the Welsh Government's allowances and grants meet the particular needs of people in Wales?

The Welsh Government have the discretionary assistance fund, meaning there is a flexibility to support people in the context of the coronavirus pandemic, emergency assistance payment and free school meals available. There are a few discretionary payments available these however are without specialist support would be accessible to anyone with disabilities.

We have seen an increased number of participants having to utilise food banks. Individuals often do not have the extra funds to travel and attend appointments with organisations that can support them to access employment opportunities and enable them to leave the poverty trap.

What reforms are needed to the benefits system and should there be further devolution of powers?

In line with the above, there are certain geographical and economic factors that mean the landscape in Wales is different and therefore needs a more bespoke approach as one size does not fit all. During COVID, lockdowns and restrictions have not always been synchronised with England so therefore decisions made by central government are not timely for Welsh claimants. We have recently fed into potential future provisions for undertaking assessments for sickness and disability benefits PIP and UC (Work Capability Assessment) to ensure they are more user friendly. Access to Work is a point of contention due to differences in statementing processes and educational needs which are not uniform across the UK. This has led to numerous issues in claiming this funding.

How effectively do the UK and Welsh Governments work together in the delivery of benefits in Wales?

We do not feel there is much joined-up communication which causes problems. One such problem was the Access to Work payments for supported internships where there was no regard for the difference in educational statementing.

Again we would like to draw attention to the need for more supported employment and job coaching resources in Wales to assist people with these more complex disabilities to fulfil their potential to become employed, and to create a "level playing field" for them in the more competitive labour market, post-Covid (see page 4).

What are the implications of the Universal Basic Income pilot in Wales?

At present, there is little data from other countries that have trialled similar models to suggest it will lead to increased employment opportunities. However, a non means-tested benefit payment for all to alleviate poverty would always be welcomed. This could be particularly beneficial for individuals transitioning from care or full-time further education and would act as a safety net. More detail would be welcome around the intended outcomes of this pilot.