

# The impact of Covid-19 pandemic on jobs for people with intellectual disabilities and/or autism in Wales

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# Abstract

## Background

The study reports the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, and containment strategies such as lockdown and remote working, on jobs for people with intellectual disabilities and/or autism. The study focuses on the impact of the first lockdown and “firebreak” lockdowns, and the actions taken to support young people with an intellectual disability and/or autism in employment.

## Method

Data was collected from the cohort of young people currently working in Wales and that received job coach support from the Engage to Change Project, on furlough arrangements, job retainment and job losses.

## Results

A review of the working situation during the pandemic was conducted for 184 jobs, evaluating the proportion of young people being furloughed or working remotely and compared with the general population in Wales. Innovative initiatives to support young people being furloughed, made redundant, or searching for employment are described.

## Conclusions

Engage to Change offered a multi-agency approach and successfully supported young people with an intellectual disability and/or autism during the first part of the Covid-19 pandemic. Rates of furlough were similar to the general population in Wales. Job coaching appeared to offer protection from job loss for this vulnerable group of workers.

# Introduction

Employment for people with intellectual disabilities and/or autism is a real challenge as the level of employment for them is low. Only 5.1% of adults with an intellectual disability known to social services in England (NHS Digital, 2022) and 22% of autistic adults in the UK are in some sort of paid employment (ONS, 2021).

However, with the right personalised support, individuals with an intellectual disability and/or autism can access the labour market and lead independent lives (Equality Act, 2010). The model adopted over the last 30 years is the supported employment model, also known as Place, Train and Maintain (Beyer et al., 2010). This model encompasses several stages, starting with vocational profiling, where the support provider gets to know the individual to determine their abilities and preferences. This stage is followed by job finding activity where the individual's abilities and aspirations are matched with a potential real job. The job is then analysed and tasks are broken down into steps by a job coach to make it easy to understand and more accessible for the individual. When the job has been fully analysed, the job coach trains the individual in the workplace to perform the task to the employer's specification, often using Applied Behaviour Analysis based systematic instruction to pursue errorless learning (Steere and Cavanagh 1997). The job coach fades their support progressively as the individual learns the task to leave them independent and confident in carrying out the tasks of the job (Wenzel, Fisher and Brodhead 2022).

The supported employment model has been found to be effective in delivering paid jobs in a more cost-efficient way (Cimera & Rusch, 1999) and better quality of life outcomes (Eggleton et al., 1999) than other models such as sheltered employment. A review of the literature has also highlighted the business case for employing a person with an intellectual disability and/or autism (Beyer & Beyer, 2017) with key benefits to employers being the reliability of workers with intellectual disability in terms of punctuality, timekeeping and job retention (Needles & Schmitz, 2006). When employed, people with intellectual disabilities and/or autism also help to develop increased levels of cooperation among co-workers in the workplace (Beyer & Beyer, 2017; Kregel & Tomiyasu, 1994).

The Engage to Change project applied the model of supported employment to assist young people with intellectual disabilities and/or autism aged 16-25 into paid employment to establish its effectiveness in a Welsh context.

## The Engage to Change Project

Supported employment is at the heart of the Engage to Change project, an all-Wales project supporting young people aged 16-25, Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET), to develop employment skills through unpaid and paid opportunities, with the aim of providing real paid jobs in the community. The project is delivered through a consortium of 5 organisations working in partnership, being funded by the National Lottery Community Fund and in partnership with Welsh Government. The project aims to support 1,000 young people in ordinary work places and works with 800 employers over 5 years (Beyer et al., 2020). The project was extended for another two years.

The consortium is led by Learning Disability Wales, the umbrella organisation for intellectual disability bodies in Wales, and also includes: two supported employment agencies, Elite Supported Employment Agency and Agoriad Cyf delivering job coach supported employment to young people and employers. In addition to the supported employment, the project offered Employer Development Grants for under 6 months, as well as four DFN Project SEARCH and three general internship schemes. Research on outcomes of the project was carried out by the National Centre for Mental Health (NCMH) at Cardiff University. NCMH is the independent evaluator of the project, ensuring the project is influencing policy makers and creates a legacy for the project.

## Covid-19 impact on employment and the Engage to Change project

The Engage to Change project was about to reach the end of its fourth year of operation when the Covid-19 crisis hit the community, and consequently the labour market. This led to lockdowns and “firebreaks” where movement and mixing of the general population was restricted; the closure of workplaces and public venues; the consequent laying-off of employees; and restrictions in taking up new jobs. In Wales, as elsewhere in the UK, “furlough” arrangements were put in place that re-imbursed employers for a proportion of staff wages paid while businesses were closed during government-imposed lockdowns. Employees with intellectual disabilities were eligible for these furlough arrangements as any other employee.

With the beginning of the pandemic, businesses faced many challenges, with direct consequences for young people, many seeing their placement or job suspended. Businesses were affected by closure or suffered the general effect of a decrease in demand for goods and services with consequent economic challenges, leading to staff redundancies or furloughing. In addition, some individuals had concerns about the risks of Covid-19 while being employed, leading them to leave their employment.

The Engage to Change consortium faced a number of challenges in delivering employment in a pandemic. It had to reinvent itself and find new ways to support young people. To date, there are no studies reporting how the employment experience of people with intellectual disabilities and/or autism were affected under pandemic rules. An analogous study of 818 families of people with intellectual disabilities found out that the majority of the participants reported a loss of some educational service and just half of the sample received some form of support remotely (Jeste et al., 2020).

This study compares the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the employment experience of people with intellectual disability and/or autism during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, including work lay-offs and their inclusion in furlough arrangements, redundancies, and return to employment after lockdown, and the role supported employment can play in this type of crisis.

## Method

Data on employment outcomes was collected on all participants referred onto the project between June 2016 and May 2020. Data were recorded and sent securely to the research team by job coaches using a bespoke application installed on iPads or Android tablets. Data included descriptions of the people referred: eligible disability diagnosis; comorbid disabilities and learning difficulties; educational background and special needs status at school; age; gender; and ethnicity. For those entering paid and unpaid work placements, supported internships and paid jobs, data included: job/placement title; employer name; type of work; pay (where relevant); and hours worked. The project monitored young people over time to see if they sustained their employment during the pandemic, through the Covid-19 lockdown and firebreak regulations, and in the following two years from the beginning of the pandemic.



# Results

## Effects on paid placements and jobs

The Engage to Change project received 875 referrals since its start in June 2016 and supported 685 (2019) employers around Wales. Until the beginning of the pandemic, the Engage to Change project had developed 382 unpaid placements (many still in progress), 351 paid placements of up to six months and found 184 paid jobs. This represented an employment rate of 24%, based on numbers of referrals (2019).

A total of 34 placements were suspended or postponed across Wales during the first lockdown from March to June 2020, and during the two week “firebreak” lockdown in October 2020 (Table 1).

Number people in jobs at beginning of Covid-19	184			
	No. people (% of people in jobs pre-Covid)	No. people returning to work (% of row)	No. people made redundant/no longer working (% of row)	No. people with unknown outcome (% of row)
People furloughed	46 (25%)	32 (70%)	14 (30%)	-
People working from home/ smart working <sup>1</sup>	9 (5%)	6 (67%)	1 (11%)	2 (22%)
Placement on hold or postponed	34	13 (38%)	21 (62%)	-
People electing to leave job	2 (1%)	-	2 (100%)	-
<b>Total people influenced by COVID-19</b>	<b>91 (53%)</b>	<b>51 (56%)</b>	<b>38 (42%)</b>	<b>2 (2%)</b>

[1] “Smart working” means working using digital innovation, from a place different from the office, providing the employee with more autonomy and flexibility. Smart working was supported by many businesses during the Covid-19 pandemic to continue with their activities.

[1] Engage to Change Delivery Partners are Elite and Agoriad C

P02F3: “My role is to help the clients prepare for work, so one of them might meet with the employment officer, I would then meet with them on a weekly basis to help them prepare their CV’s, portfolios, help them apply for work and once they’ve found that paid placement I would then visit them and help them settle in their work and withdraw support.”

## Table 1: Impact of Covid-19 on employment

A small number of participants who were in placements, and their families, questioned whether it was worth continuing a placement or if it was a more sensible decision to postpone the current opportunity for safer times. Furthermore, some participants were asked to shield due to a medical condition or needed to isolate as a result of the Covid-19 policy in place during lockdowns. Only one person reported leaving a paid job due to these conditions. Some young people had to leave a placement or a job as a direct consequence of businesses temporarily closing down or moving into smart, remote working. In addition, restrictions on public transport or their temporary closure hindered young people's chances of travelling to placements.

Before the first lockdown, Engage to Change secured paid jobs for 184 young people in paid employment and 136 (74%) of these people were still in those jobs three months after they started (called "sustained" by the project), a measure of success often utilised in employment rehabilitation schemes funded by Department of Work and Pensions.

During the pandemic, Engage to Change's supported employment delivery partners<sup>[1]</sup>, Elite and Agoriad Cyf, continued to provide their support using new approaches. They supported young people and employers with welfare benefit advice and advocacy, as young people went out of paid work or placement onto welfare benefits. This issue was addressed promptly by the partners, ensuring people were accessing the right benefits while out of work.

The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS), or furlough scheme, was introduced to Wales on 20 March 2020 and 320,000 jobs were supported through the CJRS up to 1 June 2020 (HMRC, 2020). During the first and subsequent firebreak lockdown, 46 young people from the Engage to Change Project were furloughed, 25% of those in paid work (Table 1). The proportion of employees

[1] Engage to Change Delivery Partners are Elite and Agoriad Cyf, well-established supported employment providers, supporting young people accessing the Engage to Change project, with highly skilled job coaching support.



claiming the CJRS in Wales at the end of June 2020 was 29% of the working age population (Welsh Government 2020) for the same period.

Nine people (5%) shifted their job to smart working, supported by employers and delivery partners. Fourteen people (30% of those furloughed) were made redundant or did not return to work following the lockdown and firebreak measures and have been supported since then by delivery partners.

When we look at comparisons, the Resolution Foundation (2021) estimated that 136,000 of all furloughed workers (12%) ended the JRS unemployed (3.4%) or became economically inactive (8.5%). The Labour Force Survey (2021) found that only 10% of all workers furloughed were no longer employed after JRS closure. The ONS (2021) estimated among disabled people in general furloughed, 12% were no longer working, 4% becoming unemployed (compared with 3% of non-disabled furloughed people) and 8% of disabled people furloughed became economically inactive (compared to 4% of non-disabled furloughed people).

After lockdown, 13 (38%) young people out of the 34 people who had placements postponed or put on hold returned to their placement (Table 1) as businesses re-opened and the majority of people returned to their activities. Despite the challenges, participants continued to return to placements during the summer and autumn quarters of 2020, with a total of 19 new paid placements offered during the period. During the same period, the project supported 34 young people entering new paid employment opportunities. Both return to work and new paid placement offers were fully supported by Engage to Change delivery partners through the use of personalised job coach support. Job coaches support delivered explanations and demonstrations of new Covid-19 rules, which were practised in the workplace to increase young people's confidence and their understanding of regulations. Many young people travelled independently using public transport and received support from the Engage to Change delivery partners to learn and follow safely new Covid-19 rules on public transport.

## Referrals, pre-employment support and way forward

Between June and November 2020, the project saw a decrease in referrals by 30% compared to the same period in the previous year. This is certainly a drop but considering the economic climate at the time, this drop could have been greater. Indeed, in April 2020 Universal Credit (UC) saw the greatest expansion ever in numbers of claimants. In Wales, figures climbed from a 4-5% monthly increase in UC claimants to 34% of new claimants during April 2020 (Figure 1). Despite the current difficult climate, young people continue to self-refer or be referred by others to the Engage to Change project and the support model seems to provide a way forward for young people into employment in uncertain times.

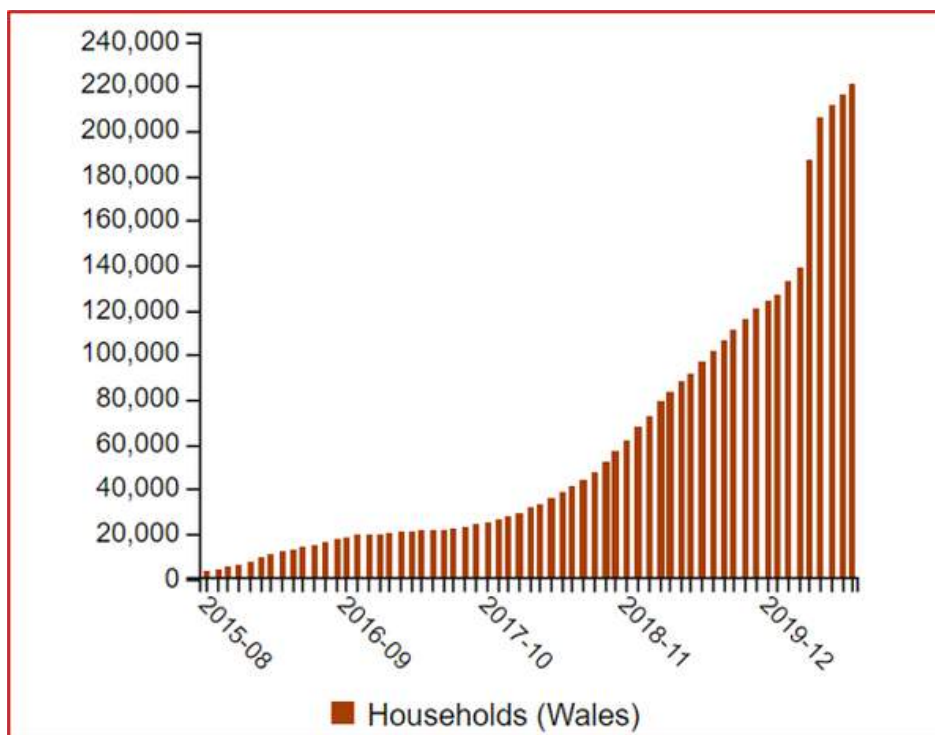


Figure 1: Number of households claiming Universal Credit, Aug 15 to Aug 19 (DWP, 2020)

## Discussion

Disabled people were twice more likely to become economically inactive, and a little more likely not to be working at all, than non-disabled people after furlough ended. Our data suggests that people with intellectual disabilities and/or autism within Engage to Change were a little less likely to be furloughed than the general population. They returned to work in significant numbers but were less likely to be working after furlough than other disabled workers or workers in general. This suggests to us that supported employment can provide a level of insulation from job fall out in this type of crisis for those with the highest support needs. The availability of job coaching to help workers and employers apply for furloughing for vulnerable workers, to help manage transition into and out of any additional welfare benefits, and to retrain these workers in new working arrangements post-Covid emergency, appear to be crucial to this outcome.

Both delivery partners offered vocational accreditation courses in support of people's move into paid placements or paid jobs. The accreditation courses were transferred online, allowing young people to achieve more employability skills, supporting their personal development and work-readiness. In response to the pandemic, Elite Supported Employment designed an accredited certificate unit in "Promoting Safe Practices During Covid-19 and Other Infectious Diseases". This focused on helping young people with an intellectual disability and/or autism to better understand the virus, use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), Covid-19 appropriate personal hygiene, safe travel and managing social distancing. These courses are now delivered across the Engage to Change project and are facilitating placements or jobs.

The project supported young people and their families to help with reducing anxiety and encouraging them to undertake employment opportunities safely. Moreover, young people were supported to continue using their skills and learning new ones while supported in job finding activities.

Engage to Change partners offer ongoing support to young people entering the project through job clubs (promoted by Elite Supported Employment) and induction sessions (promoted by Agoriad Cyf). Job club/Induction sessions are Engage to Change initiatives to support young people recently referred to the project while waiting to receive job coach support. These initiatives operate face-to-face, usually organised in small groups of young people engaged in tailored activities to: improve their skills; develop their confidence; CV preparation and editing; and support with job searching activities while waiting for a placement.

During the pandemic, these initiatives were transferred onto a digital platform. Some changes in the design of activities were required for online sessions to ensure young people with a range of intellectual disabilities and/or autism were able to participate, and to accommodate individual needs. Job clubs and induction sessions were also a real asset in sustaining social support for a group of young people who often have small social groups and need help to stay connected. In order to support social engagement, the Engage to Change Lead Ambassador set up a weekly appointment open to anyone enrolled on the Engage to Change project with the aim of keeping young people socially connected. These initiatives have the aim of reducing anxiety, social exclusion and mental health issues of young people while waiting to return to work.

## Conclusions

Unemployment increased as a result of the pandemic and there is continuing concern for how this will impact on the jobs market in the medium term, especially around potential reduction in the availability of jobs in tourism, hospitality, leisure, arts, retail, and transport. This is due to businesses closing, more agile working and reduced recruitment during this period of economic uncertainty. We are expecting an increase in competition for existing jobs that is likely to affect the employability of young people with an intellectual disability and/or autism. Government initiatives to reduce this impact included the Kickstart Scheme that aimed to provide new job placements for young people aged 16-24 receiving Universal Credit, fully paid for by the Government. Any size employers from any sector could apply and this scheme aimed to support financially the employment of young people, providing experience in any sector. This initiative represented an opportunity for young people with intellectual disability and/or autism but also a threat because it was likely to divert jobs that once might have been available to people with intellectual disabilities and/or autism to other populations. Furthermore, these initiatives are only an opportunity if people with an intellectual disability and/or autism receive the support to successfully access them. Availability of job coaching support is crucial in this respect.

The Engage to Change project will continue to support young people with intellectual disabilities and/or autism providing long term paid employment opportunities. The priority will be to use the learning from the pandemic in terms of new ways to train and support young people, helping them to take full advantage of new homeworking opportunities, and to work within any new patterns of work.

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