

# Employing people with learning disabilities and/or autism: a feedback report from Engage to Change employers

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# Summary

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. The project used a Supported Employment approach to engage with over 1300 young people and 800 employers. This report examines the feedback from a sample of employers offering employment opportunities to people with learning disabilities and/or autism on the Engage to Change project between 2016-2023. These employers, received high quality input from a dedicated Job Coach trained in Supported Employment practice, which included support to the young person with a learning disability and/or autism, and support to the employer and business.

Employers' feedback was collected from the cohort of employers in Wales, with a short evaluation survey. Employers consented to take part in research.

The report aims to highlights the importance and benefits of employing individuals with learning disabilities and/or autism, and breaks down some of the stigma. It provides a series of recommendations on what works and discusses strategies for overcoming common challenges.





# Introduction

## A pool of undisclosed talents: what place in the labour market?

People with learning disabilities and/or autism experience challenges in accessing paid employment. There is only 4.8% of adults with a learning disability known to social services in England in employment (BASE, 2023). This represents the largest employment gap of any disabled population. The term learning disability identifies a group of people that experience a reduced intellectual ability and difficulty in everyday activities which affects them for their whole life (adapted by Mencap [What is a learning disability? | Mencap](#)). People with learning disabilities may need additional daily support or need more time to understand and learn new concepts, but they can, and want, to work.

According to the National Autistic Society, autism is a spectrum condition that affects people in different ways. It might affect how people communicate and interact with others ([What is autism](#)). Only 22% of people with autism are in employment (ONS, 2021). Many would like to work but are unable to do so due to a lack of understanding of their needs and lack of support.

The social model of disability states that disability is created by society. A person is disabled by societal barriers, social structure, discrimination and stigma. According to this model, society needs to break down these barriers, to make sure we create a more inclusive world to live and work.

If we consider the large number of people with learning disabilities and autism who are unemployed, we understand that the society is missing out on a plethora of untapped talents.



## How can we break down barriers to employment?

We are in a strong position to know what works. Supported Employment is an international model with strong model fidelity which works to support people with disabilities to achieve long term paid employment, and supports employers to break down barriers to enable them to employ good workers. The main ethos of Supported Employment is that anyone can be employed if they want to work and if the right support is provided ([About Supported Employment | British Association for Supported Employment](#)). Figure 1 shows the double route of support of the employer and the employee.

The 5 steps of Supported Employment are:

- **Engaging the jobseeker:** build local relationships and advertise the service in an accessible way.
- **Vocational profiling and action planning:** focus on what a person can do, their interests, likes and dislikes.
- **Employer engagement:** build relationships and explain the offer, understand the employers expectation, provide training.
- **Job matching and securing employment:** job matching and job analysis is fundamental. Many jobs are carved for that specific employee, but it is important that the standard of work reflect the employer's specification.
- **In-work support and career development:** Job Coach in the workplace.

The British Association for Supported Employment (BASE) has recently published a guide to support managers (Whitworth et al. 2024) providing useful tips on inclusive recruitment, ongoing support, workplace culture for employers.



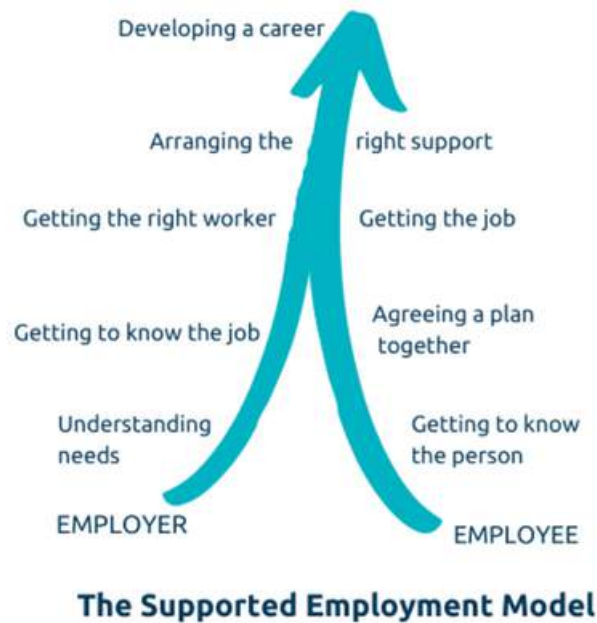


Figure 1: Supported employment (<https://www.pureinnovations.co.uk/supported-employment/>)

A review of the literature has also highlighted the business case for employing people with a learning disability and/or autism (Beyer and Beyer 2017) with key benefits to employers being the reliability of workers with learning disabilities in terms of punctuality, timekeeping and job retention (Needles and Schmitz 2006). When employed, people with learning disabilities and/or autism also help to develop increased levels of cooperation among co-workers in the workplace (Kregel and Tomiyasu 1994; Beyer and Beyer 2017).

The Supported Employment model was adopted by the Engage to Change project as best practice to assist young people with learning disabilities and/or autism, aged 16-25, into paid employment.

Before describing the project in more details, it is important to specify that supported employment and employment support are two different concepts. When we refer to supported employment we refer to a personalised model to support people with significant disabilities to look for a job, learn the job according to individual learning styles, and maintain a job in the long term as described above. Employment support is a general term to identify various services and resources aimed at helping people to find a job, secure and maintain employment.

## The Engage to Change Project

Supported Employment was the core element of Engage to Change project, an all-Wales transition to employment project that supported over 1300 young people aged 16-25, who were Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) or in danger of becoming NEET. The aim of this project was to develop employment skills through unpaid and paid opportunities, and offer significant work experiences and needs-led support with the aim of transitioning young people into real and equal paid jobs in the community. Young people could self-refer, or they could be referred by someone. The project was funded by the National Lottery Community Fund in partnership with Welsh Government and delivered through a Consortium of 5 organisations working in partnership. The project was led by Learning Disability Wales, delivered by two supported employment agencies, Elite Supported Employment Agency and Agoriad Cyf, and independently evaluated by the National Centre for Mental Health at Cardiff University in partnership with All Wales People first who represented the united voice of self-advocacy groups and people with learning disabilities in Wales. The project could not be delivered without the engagement of over 800 employers in Wales over the 7 year period. Their involvement contributed to a positive shift in inclusion and mindset, with more employers recognising the value of a diverse workforce.

## Method

The Engage to Change job coaches received training in data collection for the project evaluation including employers' experience of the project. Employers were asked to complete an evaluation form at the end of their employment experience for each young person they engaged with through Engage to Change if the work experience was of a significant length (over 3 months). We received feedback from 277 employers who consented to take part into research. Data collection was completed on a real time data collection device, an iPad or Android, using a bespoke application.

The Engage to Change project offered a variety of employment experiences (Table 1):

- **Paid placements:** lasting 6 months, offering a wage incentive to employers subsidised by the Engage to Change project. In the ideal situation the wage incentive was reduced over 6 months duration from 100% and tapered into employer payment of wages, transitioning to employing the employee with a regular contract. 91 employers completed a research evaluation form out of the 475 paid placements offered at the end of the project.

- **Unpaid placements:** generally lasting a week, but in certain circumstances lasting longer. Not all employers were asked to complete an evaluation form, but only those who engaged for at least 3 months, to give an opportunity to the employer to provide a meaningful evaluation of their experience. We received 39 unpaid placements evaluation forms. We are not including total numbers of unpaid employment offered, because it was generally not required by an employer to complete a feedback form as unpaid employment opportunities generally lasted one week only.
- **DFN Project SEARCH Supported Internships (four sites):** first introduced in Wales through the Engage to Change project, offered 3 internship rotations within large host employers, supported by a local college or education agency and a supported employment agency (Meek et al. 2024). Employers completed an evaluation form for 58 interns out of the 125 who completed an internship programme. Some employers might have supported more than one intern.
- **Alternative Supported Internships (three sites):** with an adapted approach based on local needs. Fifteen employers out of 65 completed a survey. Some employers might have supported more than one intern.
- **Paid Employment:** into the open labour market. Forty-nine evaluation form were completed by employers out of 379 jobs secured.

Employment experience offered	Number of responses	Number of experiences offered in total	Employers response rate
Paid Placement	91	475	19%
Unpaid Placement	39	n/a	n/a
DFN Project SEARCH supported internship	58	125	46%
Alternative Supported Internship	15	65	23%
Paid Employment	49	379	13%
Not specified	25	n/a	n/a

*Table 1: Engage to Change employers completing an evaluation form by type of employment experience*

The response rate varied depending on the employment experience offered, with DFN Project SEARCH employers being the more proactive in giving feedback. Some young people moved from a paid placement to a paid job, so a single employer evaluation form was often completed by an employer. Some types of employment offers have not been specified as described.



## Results

### Supported Employment and job coaching: is this model effective?

We asked employers if they thought they received effective support to the business from Elite Supported Employment or Agoriad Cyf job coaches. 271 employers (98%) described the support to the business to be effective.

Job Coach support was also provided to young people, therefore we asked employers if they thought the young people received enough support. 267 employers (96%) said that the young person with learning disabilities and/or autism they employed received effective support by the supported employment agencies. Out of the 10 employers reporting a negative opinion, 3 commented that difficulties were related to the pandemic and 2 described the support as inconsistent. The remaining 5 employers did not provide an explanation. Overall, the opinion on support for both the business and the young person employed was positive.

### What makes a good employee?

We asked employers to identify their satisfactions against several parameters. Employers were generally very satisfied or satisfied with young peoples' working skills, as well as the ability to follow instructions (Figure 2).

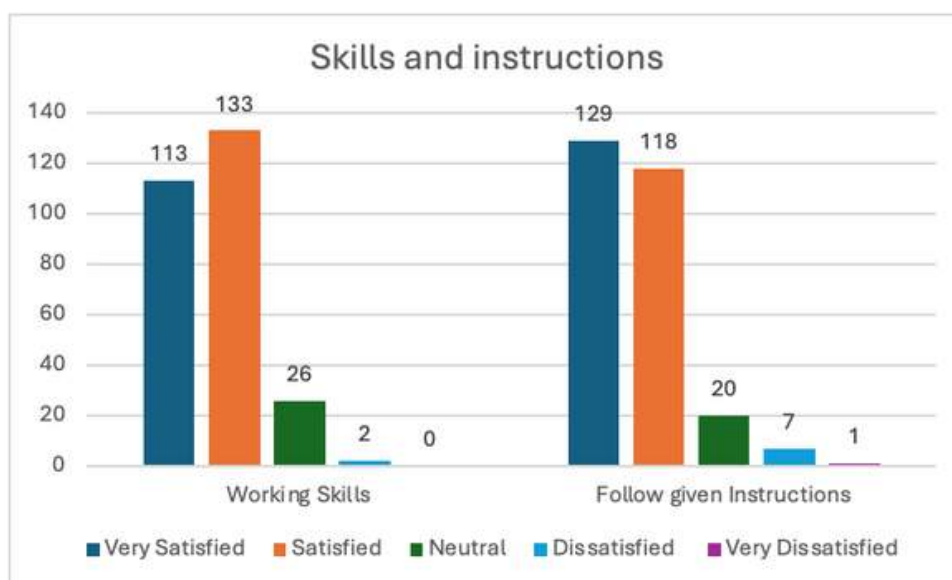


Figure 2: Skills and instruction – employers' satisfaction

In the Engage to Change project, employers were overall satisfied or very satisfied with safety rules adherence, attendance, punctuality and taking breaks according to workplace rules (Figure 3).

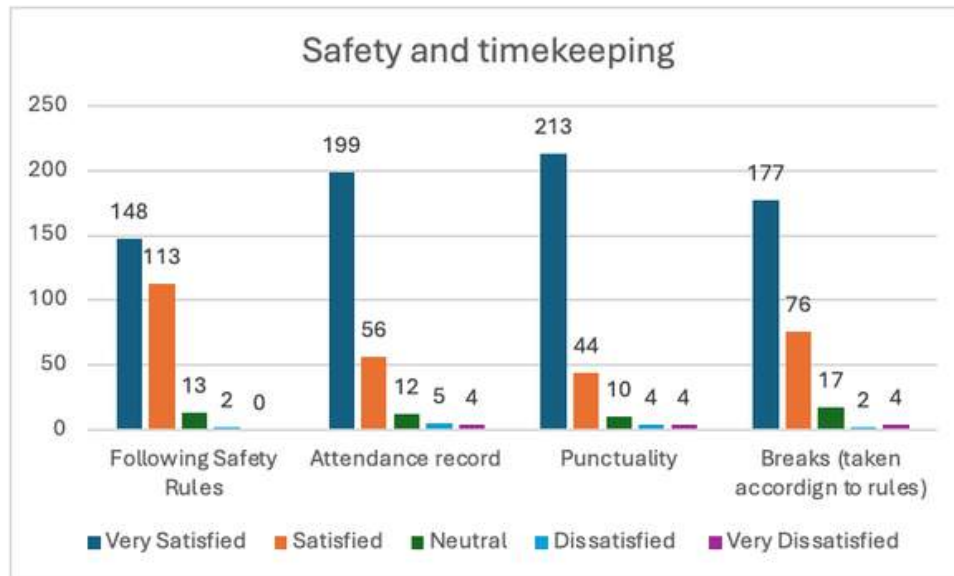


Figure 3: Work ethics – employers’ satisfaction

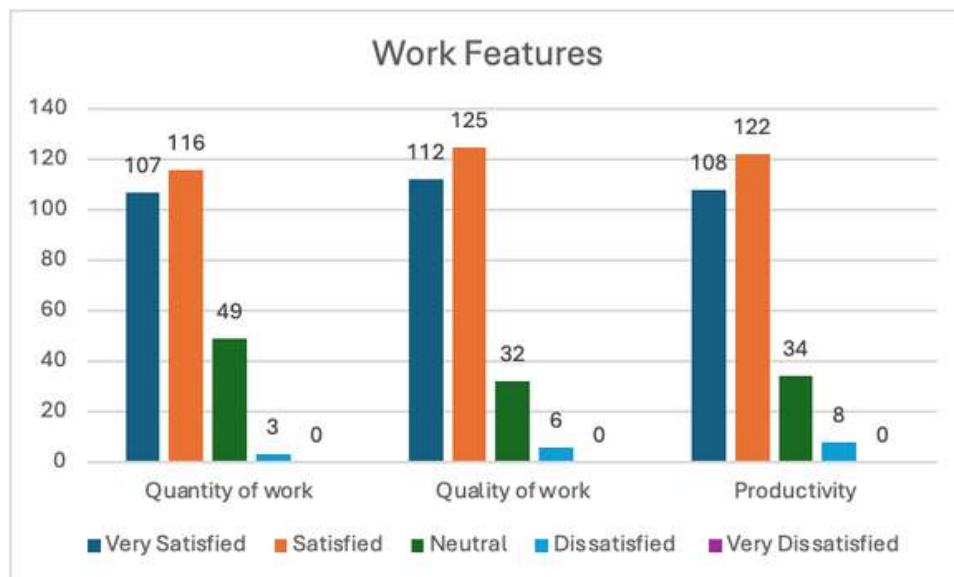


Figure 4: Work features - employers' satisfaction

Employees’ interest on the tasks was judged positively. Initiative was overall reported as positive, but 27% of the employers (3 over 10) had a neutral opinion (Figure 5).

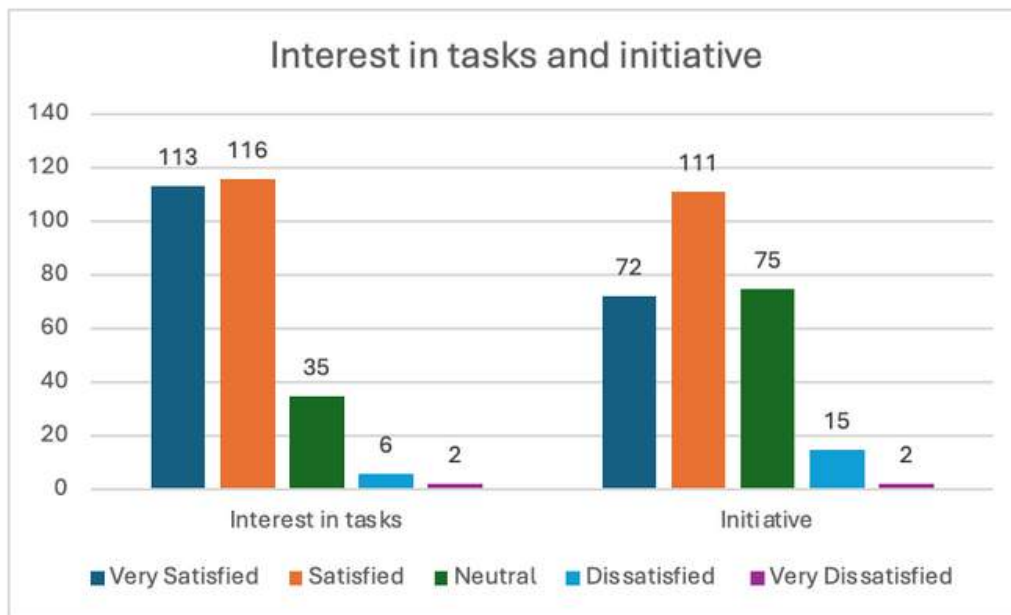


Figure 5: Interest in tasks and Initiative - employers' satisfaction

Part of employment is also about developing interpersonal skills that are useful to personal development and can be used in real world situations. Unfortunately, due to the layout of the survey on some devices, a small proportion of data is not available for this set of questions. However, for the data that was available, overall the relationship with colleagues, supervisor and personal appearance were judged to be positive.

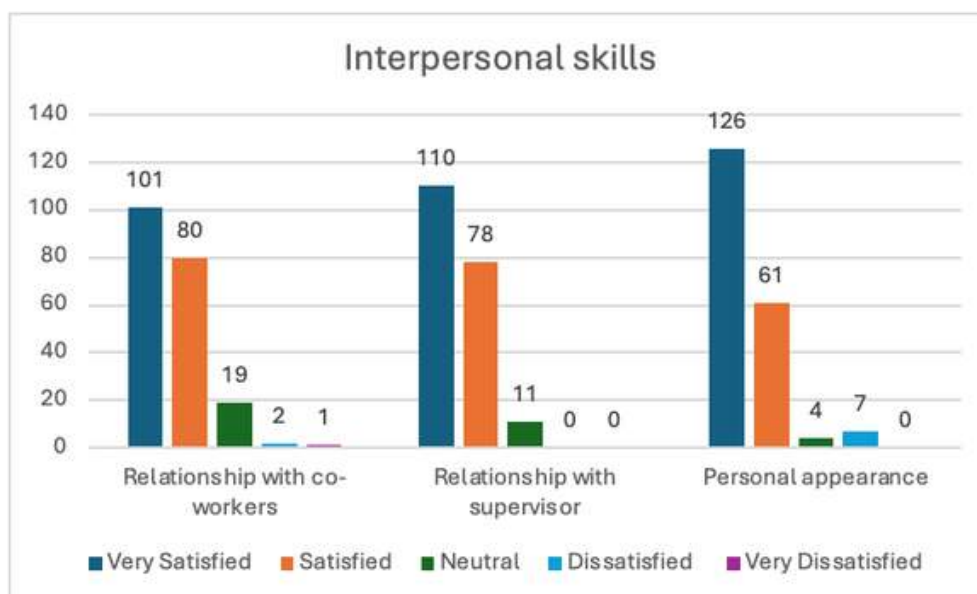


Figure 6: Interpersonal skills - employers' satisfaction

## The Disability Confident Scheme

The Disability Confident scheme ([Disability Confident employer scheme - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/disability-confident-employer-scheme)) is a UK government initiative designed by the Department of Work and Pensions to encourage employers to recruit and retain disabled people. It provides free guidance and advice to employers to help them create more inclusive workplaces.

In order to track the impact of Engage to Change with employers, we asked if they were aware of, or had signed up to, the Disability Confident Scheme. Fifty-nine out of 195 (30%) of employers responded that they signed up. Out of the 136 employers who had not signed up, 103 said they were not aware of this initiative, 13 were aware but did not have enough information to sign up. Eleven employers said they had no time to sign up and 6 employers thought their businesses would not benefit from it. Two employers were in the process of signing up for the initiative and 1 employer belonged to a larger organisation which was not taking this initiative on board (Table 2).

Employer reasons for not signing up to the Disability Confident Scheme	Number of Employers
I am not aware of these initiatives	103
I do not have time	11
I do not think will benefit my business	6
I know about the initiatives, but do not have enough information about it	13
I am doing it, in the process	2
Large employers not taking these initiatives on board	1
TOTAL	136

*Table 2: Why employers decided not to sign up to the Disability Confident Scheme?*

Despite a low number of employers 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.



# Discussion

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 access sustainable employment. The dual support, offered to the person and the employer, showcased the importance of the Supported Employment model in fostering an inclusive workforce.

Feedback from 277 employers over the seven year operation of the Engage to Change project highlighted a positive impact on employers and businesses. 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, people with learning disabilities and autism can become valuable and productive members of the workforce.

Vigna et al. (2023) highlights the importance of work experience in improving the employment prospects of individuals with learning disabilities and autism. People with learning disabilities and autism with multiple work experiences were better prepared to transition into paid employment, highlighting the need for early, supported, consistent, and good quality job placements. 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. Within the Supported Employment model, job coaches pay significant attention to matching the young person to job and employer.** Often some job carving is needed, where the job role and tasks are “carved” to match the skills of the young person, to make sure the match works for both the employees and the employer. The young people performed at the employers’ expected standards, and developed the social skills needed in the workplace. Employers received job coach support that was needed, and this is certainly a contributing factor to their satisfaction with working skills, commitment and the ability of working to the employers’ specification.

It is important to highlight that within the Engage to Change project all job coaches were trained by the Supported Employed agency to national occupational standards (National Occupational Standards | British Association for Supported Employment) and received training in systematic instruction, which is significant in the job coaching role to break down complex tasks into easy steps that are manageable for the employee.

There were also high levels of satisfaction in the employees' interest on the tasks, which is a positive factor, meaning job coaches worked well to job match the job to the characteristics of the employees. Initiative in the workplaces was reported as overall positive, but 3 employers out of every 10 had a neutral opinion here. One reason might be that it is difficult to assess initiative at the early stage of the employment experience, when the person is still settling in the job. Initiative naturally develops with confidence in the work tasks and within the Engage to Change project it might have been too early to assess, particularly when the person was still working with job coach support. Further evaluation would have been an important step in this research.

**Despite these successes, challenges persist. Stigma and discrimination against individuals with learning disabilities and autism continue to be barriers in the workplace. This is determined by the lack of knowledge and fear of risks associated with employing someone with a learning disability and/or autism. There is still work to be done to overcome misconceptions, particularly around concerns about reliability and work performance.** The Engage to Change project's efforts in raising awareness about the value of a diverse workforce and encouraging employers to give people with learning disabilities a chance represent a significant step forward, but more can be done to ensure long-term, widespread change.

A recent review of the literature by Beyer & Beyer (2017), highlights that people with learning disabilities provided a financial net saving to employers because they were committed workers, had better health and safety adherence and they remained in the job for long periods, showing high loyalty to the business. Several guidelines are now available for employers, presenting case studies (Foundation for people with learning disabilities 2019) and offering tips (Whitworth et al. 2024).

Many employers still focus more on what individuals "cannot do" rather than recognizing their capabilities. In this study, we tried to measure the impact of Engage to Change support on the employer. While 3 out of 10 employers signed up for the Disability Confident scheme, a large proportion, 7 out of 10, were either unaware of it or did not have enough information to join or did not think the business would benefit from it. Further research would be beneficial here in determining employers' views of the relevance of the Disability Confidence scheme.

Once again, experience matters. **The majority of Engage to Change employers said they would employ someone else with a similar disability and would continue employing the person if support was available to them. Employers committing to Supported Employment and job coaching support, as well as experiencing the benefit of employing a person with learning disability and/or autism, are the ones in a better position to evaluate the benefits.** Engage to Change employers have the knowledge and possibly the skills to consider the opportunity to diversify their workforce, simply because they experienced it.

Another important element was that both of the Supported Employment agencies working with Engage to Change had significant connections in their areas with local businesses, including large and small employers. Agencies worked hard to overcome challenges to deal with the geographic nature in some areas of Wales, like travel barriers or lack of job opportunities in rural areas (Vigna et al 2024).

Overall, while the Engage to Change project engaged over 800 employers, this represents a fraction of the total number of businesses in Wales, therefore more work should be done. One of the limitations of this project was that the evaluation period did not fully capture the long-term success of participants after they transitioned into paid employment. While many employers expressed interest in hiring again, a longer follow-up period would have allowed for more comprehensive data on longitudinal job retention, career progression, and overall satisfaction with the program. This is especially important to understand if the initial success can be sustained over the long term.



# Conclusion

The Engage to Change project has provided valuable insights into how Supported Employment can serve as an effective strategy for supporting employers to integrate young people with learning disabilities and autism into the workforce. The Engage to Change project left a legacy of supported employment programmes, regional programmes, supported internships and a commitment from Members of the Senedd and Ministers in improving transition and supported employment practices in Wales (David 2023).

The Connect to Work programme, introduced by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP [Connect to Work - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/programmes/connect-to-work)), is a high-fidelity Supported Employment initiative designed to assist individuals facing significant barriers to employment, including those with learning disabilities, health conditions, and other complex challenges. The programme aims to connect work, health, and skills support across England and Wales, providing tailored assistance through job coaching to help participants secure and sustain employment. One element of this programme is the Supported Employment model (SEQF), which has high fidelity for supporting people with learning disabilities. It will provide a bespoke, whole system support. Experiencing the benefit of the Supported Employment model, will increase the likelihood of employers hiring people with learning disabilities based on the positive element they can bring to the business.

The project legacy of Engage to Change and the positive employer feedback, together with the overall employment rate achieved of 41% compared to 4.8% nationally (BASE 2023), is a strong foundation for continued work in this area. The research suggests that there is a need for more tailored support for younger individuals, particularly those in the early stages of their career development, from education to employment, but with a recognition that the best practice should be available to all ages. In a recent document, we highlight the need of a Job Coaching Strategy for Wales, and the need of a job coach input in schools to shape aspiration (Vigna et al. 2023). For this to be successful, the continued support of employers is needed.

Ultimately, the Engage to Change project has highlighted the potential of Supported Employment to work with employers to create more inclusive, diverse, and resilient workforces across Wales. Continuing to build on this success, alongside tackling the remaining barriers to inclusion, will be essential to achieving lasting social and economic change for young people with learning disabilities and autism.



# Recommendations

## 1. Enhance Employer Knowledge and Training

We all fear what we do not know. The majority of employers reported positive experiences because they had the chance to experience it. 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 training and awareness-raising programs for employers to challenge stereotypes and educate them on the benefits of a diverse workforce. Such programs should be delivered by people with learning disabilities and/or employers with experience of employing someone with a learning disability and autism. The training should focus on what people can do in work, rather than what people cannot do.

## 2. Expand Job Coach Support

The role of the job coach is a key element for the success of the program. Several programmes are currently operative in Wales ([map link](#)), however there are discrepancies between “Supported Employment” with job coaches qualified to the national occupational standards and general “employment support”. The new DWP Connect to Work will be implemented in Wales in late 2025 and 2026. This will represent an opportunity to people to access employment with Supported Employment support. The challenge is to make sure that people with learning disability and autism are included in these programmes and that paid employment is the key outcome. To further enhance the transition into paid employment, there should be an expansion of available job coach support, especially for those with more complex needs.

## 3. Increase Collaboration with Schools and Educational Institutions

Early intervention is critical. Building stronger partnerships with schools, colleges, and universities can ensure that young people with learning disabilities and autism are exposed to work experience opportunities before transitioning into the job market. Schools understanding of supported employment practices and job coaching is key if we want to move towards a more inclusive workforce. Teaching assistants or other staff at the school could be trained as job coaches (to the national occupational standard), to support students with workplace readiness programs, work experience and develop positive attitudes and awareness towards employment. This would support greater employer engagement and an enhanced link between education and employment.

#### **4. Paid Placement Opportunities**

Data suggests that paid placements were the most effective pathway to employment. There is a need for further expansion of paid placement opportunities with employers, which can serve as a stepping stone to paid employment. More employers, particularly those in industries with high job turnover or seasonal work, should be encouraged to offer paid placements, with a clear pathway to full-time roles. Additionally, employers should be incentivized to transition subsidized placements into permanent employment after the initial placement period, as modelled in the Engage to Change project.

#### **5. Address Rural and Remote Areas**

Supported Employment practice is delivered in some areas of Wales, but not in others. There is currently a postcode lottery which results in a lack of equality of opportunity. Travel challenges in rural areas were highlighted as obstacles for job coaches in delivering support to both young people and employers (Vigna et al. 2023). To ensure that young people in all parts of Wales can access the same level of support, additional resources should be allocated to overcome these geographical challenges. This might include offering digital job coaching support, using mobile technology for monitoring.

#### **6. Strengthen Policy Advocacy and Public Awareness**

The legacy of Engage to Change includes interest from Welsh policymakers in adopting Supported Employment practices. Continued advocacy and collaboration with policymakers, employers and people with learning disabilities, should be a priority, aiming to create policies that encourage inclusive hiring practices. A typical hiring process have proved to be effective (Vigna et al. 2024). Public campaigns should focus on the positive impact of hiring individuals with learning disabilities and autism, showcasing success stories and building awareness of the potential benefits for employers.

#### **7. Job Sustainability and Career Development**

Supported Employment focusses on a “place/train/ maintain” model. We must have better policy and practice to support employers with the “maintain” element. Employers should be supported to provide career development programs, professional development workshops, and pathways to advancement as part of their continued support for participants. Helping individuals progress in their careers, transition from one job to another, and ensuring that they remain engaged in the workforce will be key to the success of future employment models.

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