

ACORNS TO TREES



University of  
**Strathclyde**  
Glasgow

# Fraser of Allander Institute

Employment that works: employers'  
experiences of hiring people with  
learning disabilities

*March 2024*



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The Fraser of Allander Institute

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## Disclaimer

The analysis in this report has been conducted by the Fraser of Allander Institute (FAI) at the University of Strathclyde. The FAI is a leading academic research centre focused on the Scottish economy.

The analysis and writing-up of the results was undertaken independently by the FAI. The FAI is committed to providing the highest quality analytical advice and analysis. We are therefore happy to respond to requests for technical advice and analysis. Any technical errors or omissions are those of the FAI.

## Acknowledgements

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Thank you to members of The Assembly for acting as an advisory board for the contents of this research. The Assembly is a group of individuals with learning disabilities and/or autism who meet weekly to engage with Scottish policy and policy-relevant content.

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# Executive Summary

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This report features our findings from speaking to seven employers with experience hiring people with learning disabilities. We summarise what they told us about what works for each employer and reflect on common challenges that employers told us they face. The key findings are summarised below.

Some highlights from what works:

- The Theatre Royal told us that small changes can make a big difference, such as extended induction periods, accessible rotas and help with online training modules.
- At RSBi, they told us that courses in numeracy and literacy were enabling people with learning disabilities to transition from supported employment to mainstream employment.
- Employees' roles at the Usual Place highlighted positions of mentorship that are available to people with learning disabilities.
- Our contact at DFN Project SEARCH emphasised the need for equitable recruitment.
- Renfrewshire Council were creating a talent pipeline for people with learning disabilities so that they could become full-time permanent employees at the Council.
- Volvo Motherwell sang the praises of North Lanarkshire Council's supported employment scheme.
- The Assembly told us about their model where people with learning disabilities become paid advocates and leaders for other people with learning disabilities.

The key challenges we found include:

- Difficulties measuring the number of employees with learning disabilities. This is important for tracking workforce diversity, but some people with learning disabilities won't want to disclose or be labelled as such. A short-term solution to this may be to measure support provided instead.
- Challenges that arise when people with learning disabilities and autism are viewed as one group in policy and other areas. We heard contrasting views from employers about the types of work suited to people with learning disabilities and autism. Aggregating groups that aren't sufficiently similar could lead to one group's needs being overshadowed by the other.
- The importance of 'enablers' who champion inclusion and promote culture change. Culture change could be trickier for larger employers.
- Challenges with Access to Work. We heard that Access to Work is great once in place, but has long waiting times for support and applying can be a stressful process for both employers and employees.
- Barriers of expectation. We heard from some employers that both people with learning disabilities and their parents can find the transition into work difficult when they have been told that they may not work. Some employers are working to tackle this with school-age young people so that they and their families feel prepared for entering the workplace.

Our next piece of work will involve employers who haven't yet hired people with learning disabilities to better understand perceived barriers for employers.

# Introduction

In 2020, the Fraser of Allander embarked on a [programme of research](#) looking at the barriers and opportunities for people with a learning disability in Scotland's economy and wider society. Having a learning disability is different for everyone - it is not necessarily a diagnosis, but rather a term which describes a range of conditions. There isn't a set definition of a learning disability, but Box 1 provides the Keys to Life definition which was produced by people with learning disabilities.

In 2023 we announced a new programme of work which would take a deep dive into two issues: data availability for people with learning disabilities and improving employment outcomes. This report is the first output from our work on improving employment outcomes for people with learning disabilities in Scotland.

For this report, we have spoken to seven employers across Scotland with experience hiring individuals with learning disabilities. We interviewed them about their transitions to becoming an employer with employees with learning disabilities, their recruitment processes, the support they provide employees, and any challenges they have faced as well as how these were overcome. The seven employer case studies highlight good practice by employers and showcase the diverse types of work people with learning disabilities may be undertaking in Scotland, including leadership roles. In the section following the case studies, we have summarised the common challenges and barriers faced by employers.

In this report, we have only spoken to employers who have experience hiring people with learning disabilities. In our next piece of work, we will be speaking to employers who haven't yet hired people with learning disabilities, to better understand what the perceived barriers are for these employers and what concerns are holding them back from hiring people with learning disabilities.

The section titled 'What Works' provides a summary of the support that each of the seven employers provide to their employees with learning disabilities. The 'Common Themes and Challenges' section provides an analysis of the key themes that we have observed across the interviews, on what has worked well, and on what has been more challenging. The conclusion summarises our findings and our next steps for this programme of research.

## **Box 1:** The [Keys to Life](#) Definition of a Learning Disability

People with learning disabilities have a significant, lifelong, condition that started before adulthood, which affected their development and which means they need help to:

- understand information;
- learn skills; and
- cope independently.

*Source: The keys to life: improving quality of life for people with learning disabilities (2013)*

# What Works: What employers told us about their experiences

This section summarises the findings from each employer we interviewed, including their experiences recruiting and supporting people with learning disabilities in work. This information was gathered in seven interviews where we spoke to individuals in each organisation who had experience with recruitment, management and/or HR responsibilities as part of their role.

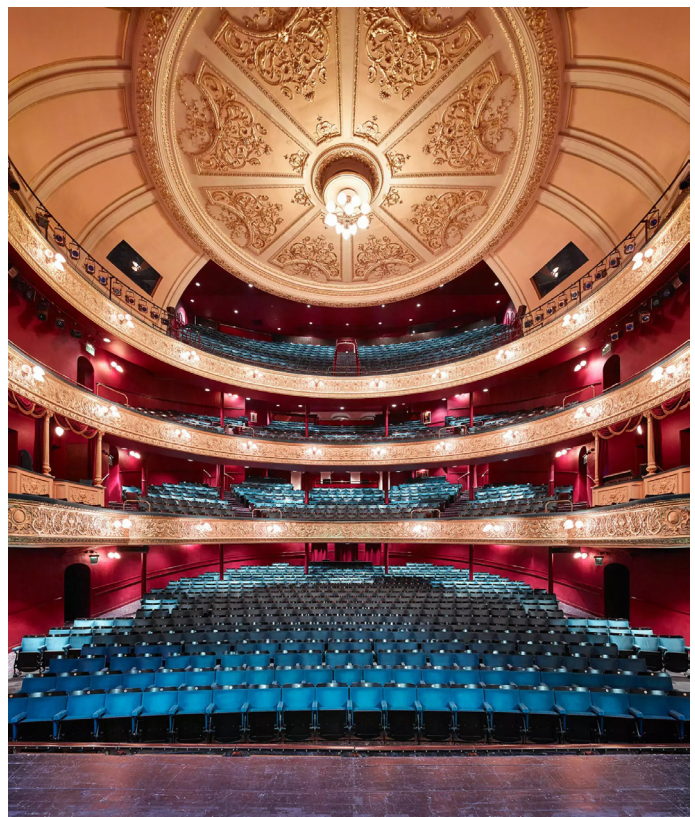
## 1. The Theatre Royal

The Theatre Royal is a popular venue for shows in Glasgow city centre. Customer experience is at the heart of their operations, with 150 employees in front-of-house and bar roles at the time of interview. Several people with learning disabilities work in customer experience roles in this venue. We spoke to Kat Moir, Deputy Manager of Customer Experience, to understand how she and her colleagues support people with learning disabilities working at the theatre.

People with learning disabilities usually join the team at the Theatre Royal after undertaking a work placement to see if the job is a good fit. The venue has worked with the Scottish Union for Supported Employment (SUSE), Glasgow City Council Employability Services and Hub International to provide placements for potential employees. They have also hired people with learning disabilities organically in the past through connections with Enable.

Supported employment services generally provide a job coach who helps an individual look for work that suits them and helps them to secure placements and ideally a permanent job. Kat discussed an upcoming initiative at the Theatre where one of their workers will have their job coach on shift with them at the beginning of their placement until they feel confident to work independently. This creates some challenges in terms of ensuring the job coach is trained to safely work within the Theatre without being treated as an employee by customers, but the presence of their coach is likely to be invaluable in the employee's journey to being confident in the workplace.

Kat's experience working with people with learning disabilities showed that small changes can make a big difference when it comes to accessible and supportive jobs. As a default, staff in customer experience work across both front-of-house (checking tickets, selling programmes, directing customers to seats) and bar work, with a 3-week training period covering both areas when they start at the venue. Colleagues with learning disabilities or other additional support needs train in front-of-house only, which allows them to use the full 3-week training period to learn one role instead of two.



*Photo by Andrew Lee*



Other supports in place for any employee who requires them include accessible rotas (these provide an individual's shifts separately rather than a large spreadsheet containing all shifts), in-person help with computer-based training modules such as health and safety courses, and a buddy system.

The Theatre Royal are looking to improve accessibility when it comes to applying for jobs. They currently offer guaranteed interviews and tailored assessment days, but they are conscious of their application forms being a potential barrier for people with learning disabilities. Kat noted that current employees with learning disabilities had been supported by their job coaches to overcome this barrier, but she is aiming for applications being accessible to everyone in the near future.

## 2. Royal Strathclyde Blindcraft Industries (RSBi)



RSBi is one of the largest supported manufacturing businesses in Europe, owned by Glasgow City Council and The Wheatley Group. They employ over 200 people, more than 50% of whom have a disability. RSBi manufactures furniture for various uses, including fully furnished homeless persons' accommodation.

It might be surprising to learn that some form of RSBi has been in existence since 1804. The business originally provided jobs for the blind (hence the name Blindcraft), then extended their workforce to those who are deaf, before including all disabilities in their

workforce from 1980 onwards. We spoke to Steven McGurk, Development and Support Manager at RSBi, as part of our research.

RSBi use several streams of recruitment for the business. They actively recruit through the local jobcentre which connects disabled jobseekers with the company. They also run a Scottish Vocational Qualification (SVQ) programme for 25 school pupils with additional support needs (ASN) each year. Pupils gain an SVQ in furniture assembly over the course of an academic year, and the programme allows RSBi to find more potential employees. This programme used to be run for ASN schools, but the business moved to a more general model since mainstream schools now often have ASN units and they were missing these pupils.

RSBi is somewhat unique as an employer for people with learning disabilities: since their core workforce is disabled, support and accessibility need to be built in from the ground up rather than adaptations being made for a few individuals.

*"As part of the recruitment stage we will establish any support which a potential employee may require, we will go through any reasonable adjustments that they think they need, and we'll get them in place either as a business or through Access to Work to ensure we meet their needs from day one. A lot of the adjustments are already in place because of the nature of the business, but we are aware that two people with a similar condition don't necessarily need the same adjustments – it has to be an individual approach. We would never wait until someone is in post and struggling before considering adjustments. We are also clear with employees that we understand their needs can change and have a very open dialogue should they ever need further adjustments. RSBi is also*

*considered an adapted workplace, although some of these adaptations are subtle, an example is if you were to walk through the factory you will notice the handrails throughout, which assist our visually impaired employees to navigate the factory independently.*" – Steven McGurk, RSBi

Another area where RSBi often provides support is literacy and numeracy. The trade union at RSBi receive funding to put on courses for employees every week in literacy and numeracy, and every employee is entitled to attend the course for an hour and a quarter per week. This is particularly useful in expanding the skills of employees who want to move into a new role in the business.

Literacy and numeracy training also has an impact on employee's long-term outcomes. City Building (of which RSBi is a part) provide apprenticeships in mainstream employment, but literacy and numeracy are often a hurdle to being eligible for the apprenticeships. Steven discussed some individuals with learning disabilities and other ASNs who had completed their numeracy and literacy course, applied for and completed a City Building apprenticeship and had transitioned out of supported employment entirely.

Overall, RSBi's approach to employing people is to focus on their abilities rather than their disabilities. Their model shows that with the right support, people with learning disabilities can have long, successful and satisfying careers.

### 3. The Usual Place

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The Usual Place is a community café, event space and shop in Dumfries which operates as a social enterprise, providing training and work experience opportunities to young people with additional support needs. 70% of their workforce has a disability. At the time of interview, eight individuals with learning disabilities were in paid employment at the Usual Place, and more young people with learning disabilities were in training positions. We spoke to CEO Heather Hall, COO Craig McEwen and Autism Awareness Officer Alison Ball.

Those with learning disabilities who are employed at the Usual Place act as mentors for young people who are completing their training placements. Most work in the actual café in various hospitality-based roles, where young people can learn from them on the job. Some individuals are employed as lived experience trainers who attend events and deliver training to external organisations such as other businesses. Craig described this as 'micro-awareness raising': they have found that the public seeing disabled people attending events such as job fairs and delivering training provides a powerful message in itself. The café has also had an awareness-raising effect in the local community. Disabled young people are visible and working as equal team members.

People with learning disabilities usually become employed at the Usual Place through open recruitment or through programmes such as the Kickstart scheme (a 6-month placement scheme created by the DWP for young people at risk of long-term unemployment due to the Coronavirus pandemic). Mentors



are recruited for their sector-specific expertise (e.g., cooking, front of house, cleaning) and trained up to be able to pass on their skills to the young people on placements. The Usual Place enables candidates to access appropriate external support to apply for roles in the business as soon as they get in touch about an opening, whether that's preparing their CV or practising for an interview.

The goal of the Usual Place is to get more disabled young people into jobs, and their mentors play a big part in that. If a young person who has completed training at the Usual Place is offered a job in another business, their mentor can attend the new job with them and help them to learn the job until the young person is comfortable performing independently. Mentors can also provide support to employers and the young person's new colleagues, whilst they enable the young person to settle into their new job. Support is then offered via phone call as long as it's needed and more direct support, for example enabling a young person to complete additional training for their job, can be negotiated. Paid employees with learning disabilities also get help with transitioning to new jobs if they move on, if they would like it. The Usual Place find that this is beneficial not only for the staff member but also for their new employers.

While the young people undertaking training are not paid, they gain invaluable experience and since The Usual Place is partnered with local colleges, they also gain an SVQ qualification. The training scheme has high levels of success in terms of outcomes for young people, with many going into further employment, self-employment or returning to education.

## 4. DFN Project SEARCH

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DFN Project SEARCH is a model that supports people with learning disabilities and autism to move into paid employment. The programme is classed as a full-time supported internship based at a host business and a focused employability curriculum delivered from the workplace. On average, 60% of Project Search graduates transition into full-time permanent roles after

the programme and 70% transition into some kind of paid work.

DFN Project SEARCH also employs people with learning disabilities as part of their team of 30 employees. We spoke to Carmel McKeogh, Director of Operations to hear about their experience.

Employees with learning disabilities at DFN Project SEARCH have a variety of responsibilities, from leading groups of young people and alumni, attending and speaking at events, creating media such as videos, looking after the project's portal and other administrative tasks. Some of the employees have job coaches, and others can get access to a job coach if they require one (for example, if their role evolves). Some of their employees also draw on support from when they were a student as they still have good links to those who supported them before they were working full-time.

DFN Project SEARCH's recruitment policy was developed by Carmel with the CEO. Carmel was aware of the difficulties faced by disabled people as she is a HR professional by background and has witnessed complicated application and interview processes that create barriers for people with learning disabilities and autism. The policy emphasises fairness and openness, and prioritising equity over 'sameness' and equal treatment – to Carmel, this means making it easy for people with disabilities to apply for roles if they are the right fit or if lived experience is beneficial to the post. They also encourage other employers to try different techniques such as working interviews where



candidates try the job with supervision and are assessed on their ability to do the job rather than just talk about it as they would in an interview. Carmel has found that when it comes to accommodating people with learning disabilities and autism in recruitment, flexibility of approach is key as it allows individuals to showcase their skills and experience in different ways that are comfortable for them.

Due to the wealth of experience Carmel and her team have interacting with employers hiring people with learning disabilities for the first time, we asked her opinion on the barriers employers perceive in relation to hiring people with learning disabilities.

**Box 2:** Quote from DFN Project Search

*“So I think the biggest thing that we find is that people, because there's so few people with learning disabilities or autism or both in work, are not exposed to them as colleagues. So for the most part it's a lack of confidence and lack of knowledge about how to support people with learning disabilities in a work setting that makes it difficult for people. I've rarely met people who are mean about it. People do not say “I feel like we just don't want to work with them, they're not for us”. I've rarely met anybody that is like that. I've met a lot of people that are a bit scared and unsure and they say things like “we've never employed anyone with a learning disability, we don't know what that's going to be like. What happens if they have a meltdown? What happens if a customer doesn't like dealing with them? What happens if...?” We see that most of all that what stops employers from engaging is fear - because they've not seen people with learning disabilities in their workplace and they don't know what they look like, how they will behave and what they are capable of.*

*For a lot of people their exposure to people with a learning disability or autism is on the tv and so what they've seen is more stereotypical. People will say things to me such as, oh, we've seen the guy with Downs Syndrome on Coronation Street in the café and so they think that is what all people with downs syndrome want to do. They have seen people with autism who wear ear defenders and so they think everyone with autism can only get a job in a quiet workplace. Because there are so few people with a learning disability or autism in workplaces people naturally have a limited frame of reference. And even sometimes when employers know people personally, they often don't see them from an employment angle. So they can't imagine their niece or their nephew or their son or their daughter in work because they don't know anybody like them that is in work to form a reference point for them.” Yet the DFN Project SEARCH data shows that young autistic people and young people with a learning disability move into a vast array of jobs across a range of employers, from engineer to pharmacy assistant, from porter to warehouse associate, just like everyone else they have a wide range of ambitions, drive, capability and talent’*

– Carmel McKeogh, Director of operations at DFN Project SEARCH

## 5. Renfrewshire Council

Within Renfrewshire Council's Economic Development team, there are a range of inward-facing employability programmes. These include a traineeship programme, an internship programme, and a modern apprenticeship programme. Renfrewshire Council also works with DFN Project Search to provide up to 12 unpaid placements for people with learning disabilities and autism each year. We spoke to a staff member in the council who facilitates these programmes to understand how people with learning disabilities move into paid work in the council.



As mentioned above, the goal of DFN project search is to achieve long-term sustainable employment for people with learning disabilities and autism. Renfrewshire Council's success rate in achieving this for their Project Search candidates averages 60%. The roles people move into are diverse and depend on their personal preferences and constraints. Past Project Search candidates have moved into roles such as full-time cleaners or admin assistants. Some individuals have gone on to take up a 26-week paid traineeship in e.g., an admin role. This allows the Council to assess whether a 12-month modern apprenticeship would be suitable for those candidates by introducing them to a Business Administration SCQF qualification. Five or six individuals who came out of DFN Project Search in the council have graduated to traineeship, then completed a modern apprenticeship with Business Administration SCQF Level 6, allowing them to secure full-time permanent roles in the Council.

Regardless of which role project search graduates aim for, they are supported in their application and with mock interviews by the council. Graduates who do not manage to get a job straight out of Project Search receive 12 months' support from their job coach, but our contact at Renfrewshire Council told us that in reality this continues for as long as the person needs it. One graduate, for example, had been in a positive place in external employment for about a year after the end of their time at Renfrewshire Council until they had a change in personal circumstances which negatively impacted their work. Both the graduate and the employer got in touch for advice and the job coaches worked with them and various areas of the council to ensure they could continue their work.

Our contact at Renfrewshire Council also discussed their experience providing reasonable adjustments for colleagues with learning disabilities. One employee who started on the modern apprenticeship required reduced hours, but they weren't sure exactly how many were best. The Council started them off on 16 hours per week and gradually increased this until they found that the employee was most comfortable working 20-25 hours per week. These kinds of adjustments promote long-term sustainability for employees with disabilities – the employee mentioned is still working at the Council five years later.



## 6. Volvo CE



Volvo is a multinational company famous for manufacturing and selling vehicles. Volvo Motherwell is part of Volvo Construction Equipment: this particular location designs, develops and manufactures two types of trucks used in the construction industry. They have a workforce of 400 and have been running since 1950. We spoke to the HSE and Sustainability Manager about their experience employing people with learning disabilities.

Volvo Motherwell works with North Lanarkshire Council Supported Employment to provide jobs for people

with learning disabilities and other additional support needs. They have done so for the last six years. Some employees have come through the adult supported employment scheme, while others have come through the No Limits programme which is aimed at school leavers with ASN. All employees coming through a supported employment route have had access to a job coach until they feel ready to work independently. One employee's apprentice training has been modified as they struggle with reading and writing – this support has allowed them to thrive in their role at Volvo Motherwell.

The site also employs young people with additional support needs through their canteen. When the canteen closed during COVID, the HSE and Sustainability Manager reached out to North Lanarkshire Council to ask if it could be used as a training kitchen. This is based on a model North Lanarkshire Council were already running in one of the local schools. The café is run by a job coach from North Lanarkshire Council and offers two 12-month, full-time positions as well as taster sessions for school pupils with ASN.

Overall, our contact at Volvo Motherwell has had an incredibly positive experience working with North Lanarkshire Council's supported employment team. They were pleasantly surprised at how smoothly their transition into employing people with learning disabilities was (see quote below). North Lanarkshire Council have clearly played a large part in ensuring the success of the employees supported. The Council have now even set up a network where employers involved in the supported employment scheme can meet and discuss their involvement.

*"I think we probably did a disservice to the wider workforce, I think we anticipated more problems than we actually faced. It's very male dominated, it's very masculine, it's a heavy industry, we expected it to be a difficult transition, when actually we were blown away with the level of support that they got from day one. People were so willing to help them and to talk to them and to show them what they do and get them involved and just stop them and have a conversation with them. So yes there was ... it was a lot smoother than we anticipated it being, so we probably did not do our own workforce justice at that point and, yes, there's not really been that many challenges."* – HSE and Sustainability Manager, Volvo Motherwell

## 7. The Assembly

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The Assembly is a small organisation which is part of Values into Action Scotland (VIAS). The Assembly was created to bring together people with learning disabilities and/or autism to engage with Scottish policy and policy-relevant content. We spoke to Sonya Bewsher who leads the Assembly.

People with learning disabilities work (and have worked) in a range of roles in the Assembly. Four paid roles as 'leads' have been created, one to represent each region in Scotland (though not all of these had been filled at the time of interview). Some of these positions are filled by people with learning disabilities, with the aim of all posts being filled by people with learning disabilities and/or autism in the near future. COVID created a lot of issues for the Assembly's recruitment, including a sudden pivot to remote working which doesn't suit all people with learning disabilities.

The responsibilities for regional leads include representing their region at events and making contact with as many people with learning disabilities in their region as possible. Leads attend local community events for people with learning disabilities and autism to reach out to those who are not connected into online communities. Leads are supported by regional facilitators who act as mentors and provide support where needed. Other posts held by people with learning disabilities include roles such as creating accessible information and temporary admin work. Most employees with learning disabilities work around 16 hours per week as they are limited in hours by their benefits and/or health.

Since Sonya has worked in the field of accessible politics for many years, she is very conscious of ensuring people with learning disabilities are helping to run the Assembly. There wasn't really a transition period into hiring people with learning disabilities for the Assembly since this was built in from the beginning. Sonya also reflected on some of the challenges they have faced as an employer with significant experience supporting those with learning disabilities, some of which are discussed in the following section.





# Common Themes and Challenges

The previous section highlighted the support provided by employers to people with learning disabilities at work. We also saw examples of good practice in various industries. However, employers did also speak to us about challenges which both they and their employees with learning disabilities face. Many of the issues discussed were shared across multiple employers – for this reason, we have combined and analysed the common themes across all interviews.

## Measuring the number of employees with learning disabilities

Due to the issues with defining a learning disability and privacy issues, it can be difficult for employers to get an accurate count of how many individuals with learning disabilities they employ. There is an argument that employers do not need to know this, as long as they are able to provide the right support, but it can be useful for monitoring the diversity of the workforce which is an important objective in its own right.

The smaller businesses we spoke to tended to know if employees had a learning disability from personal disclosure and sometimes incidentally due to information provided by the person on their benefit situation, or via the involvement of a supported employment organisation. In larger businesses it seemed to be more difficult for those we spoke with to provide a figure. This issue is further complicated by the aggregation of people with learning disabilities and autism into the same category in Scottish Government policy (for example with the upcoming [Learning Disabilities, Autism and Neurodivergence Bill](#)) and in other arenas. While there are some similarities in support required across both groups, there can also be stark differences (this is discussed in the following section). When both groups are discussed as one, this can cause confusion both for people with learning disabilities and for employers looking to best support their workers.

People with learning disabilities sometimes do not want to be labelled as such, and/or may not wish to disclose for a number of reasons including fear of stigma. In an ideal world, all people with learning disabilities would feel safe disclosing their disability to employers and would be able to describe their learning disability in the language that they feel comfortable with, rather than having a definition imposed on them. This requires more systematic change in the way society views a learning disability.

## Grouping learning disabilities and autism together

We heard contrasting opinions about the needs of employees with learning disabilities versus those with autism. One employer drew on their experience with both disabilities to explain that in their experience, different roles were more likely to suit each group. This employer found that remote working suited their autistic employees well, since they preferred using chat functions and emails to face-to-face work. This employer found it difficult to transition some of their autistic employees into non-remote roles after COVID. On the other hand, their employees with learning disabilities preferred in-person work and ‘picking up the phone’ since this meant they didn’t need to rely on using computers and weren’t impacted by any difficulties with literacy. In contrast, another employer felt that autistic employees were very adaptable and could handle busy, noisy environments with lots of people given the right support and enough experience.

These differing experiences from employers highlight the need for government, and others trying to close the learning disability employment gap to be careful about grouping those with learning disabilities and autism and other conditions into the same category.

## The Importance of ‘Enablers’ and Culture Change

Across all the employers we’ve spoken to so far, there has always been someone in their organisation pushing for greater inclusion of people with disabilities in the workplace. These individuals are creating culture changes in their place of work which have long-term positive impacts for current and future employees with learning disabilities. One of the employers we spoke to referred to those colleagues, particularly those in HR spaces, as ‘enablers’. Through our interviews with employers, we have seen that these people can also be managers or organisational leaders. They can indeed even be people with learning disabilities themselves, as discussed in the Usual Place’s example of micro-awareness raising through individuals with lived experience of disability delivering training.

Being a larger employer may make culture change more difficult to implement. Some of the people we spoke to are part of very large organisations, but they only have control over the culture at their own site or in their own department. One employer highlighted the importance of training for managers in larger organisations so that they understand how to support employees with learning disabilities – ideally before they have an employee with a learning disability to support. In smaller businesses with only a few managers, this can be easier to implement. On the other hand, small businesses tend not to have HR support which they could see as a barrier to employing people with learning disabilities.

## Challenges with Access to Work

Five of the seven employers spoken to have experience applying for Access to Work on behalf of their employees. Most employees reported that once the support was in place, it was a great help for their employees and was very well received. But the process of applying for Access to Work, and waiting for support to start, was very stressful for some employers and their employees with disabilities.

Access to Work is a fund which employees can apply to in order to have reasonable adjustments at work paid for by the government. The support available can include anything from transport, to screen readers, to support workers and much more. However, the wait for this support to arrive can be months long, meaning the employee is left unable to complete all or part of their responsibilities. The following interview excerpt from mid-October 2023 shows the varied waiting times one employer dealt with when multiple supports were required:

*“So, we applied [for one employee] first, because [they were] starting to have to use a wheelchair quite often and that was more around taxis, but [they’re] also dyslexic. So, with the assessment, we’ve got [them] an office chair, I think, [they’ve] been assessed for Dragon, Glean and a smart tablet for taking notes like bullet points and bits and training to go around that. But again, like we made that application in May [2023] probably. The taxis came through in July [2023] to set up the contract taxi. The chair that [they were] assessed as needing was delivered last week and we’re still waiting – I think Dragon has been – so that comes this week, and [they’ll] do training next week for Dragon, but we still don’t have the smart tablet or Glean.” – Employer, October 2023*

All five employers we spoke to about Access to Work had waited months for support to arrive for some or all of their employees. Some employers reflected that once they had experience of Access to Work and the time it could take to come through, they pivoted to starting a claim as soon as they know they will have someone in post rather than waiting until issues come up. While this doesn’t completely solve the problem, it does reduce waiting times.

We also heard from some employers that applying to Access to Work was a difficult and upsetting experience for themselves and their workers. The default process for Access to Work is that the employee applies for it themselves, but employees are able to give permission for their employer to speak on their behalf. Although, sometimes this isn’t possible which creates further issues.

*“In one case somebody had an appointee. Therefore, that young person couldn’t get me permission.*



*The appointee had to get the permission to that office. That appointee has lots of other things to do in their life and it was a nightmare to get through to the office. I once spent two days constantly pressing redial, redial, redial. It was constantly engaged. It turned out they were off work. There was nobody there to answer that. But nothing to tell me that.*

*Now, if you've got any kind of mental health issue, any kind of anxiety, any kind of executive function issue, how hard would that be? I was sitting typing away, hitting redial. By the end of the day, I was so frustrated. Access to Work has been set up that it's the person with a disability that has to do it all. There is no way that would have happened because it took me being quite dogged at times to get through the process. So, how do we expect people who don't have our kind of workplace, who can't put my time towards it? So, technically they funded me trying to do that work, which isn't part of what we should be doing. But there is no way we wouldn't have.” – Employer*

The stress created by the Access to Work process, even when it was largely managed by this employer, still filtered down to disabled employees.

*“It was, right, we now need this information, and we need it within the next three days. The part time member of staff is maybe not in for another four days. If you don't send it in, we will cancel your claim and you'll have to start the whole process from the beginning again. There was, yeah, constantly pushing people and for somebody with a learning disability, for an autistic person, traumatic. One person I spoke to said, “I considered leaving the job. I considered it was too difficult, it was too much, it was too overwhelming,” whilst you're already starting a new job at the same time as well. So, huge, huge issues with it.” - Employer*

These issues are problematic not only for employers with experience hiring people with learning disabilities: they could also act as a significant barrier for employers who haven't dealt with Access to Work before. Many employers will likely be unaware that they are able to support their employees in their applications, and from the quotes above, this could be crucial for employees with learning disabilities. Even if employers are aware and willing to help, the time-consuming and stressful current processes add significant work to employers' busy schedules.

## **Barriers of expectation**

Something that came up repeatedly when speaking to employers was this idea of employability interventions coming too late for young people with learning disabilities. Individuals and their parents had low expectations surrounding work due to what they had been told about additional support needs in school. This then led to anxiety for both people with learning disabilities and their parents when the person with a learning disability wanted to work. These issues can also be tied up in financial worry, since a young person with a learning disability getting a job while still living at home changes the home's financial situation and therefore eligibility for support such as Carer Support Payment (formally Carer's Allowance). One employer described this learning process to us and the solutions they were working towards.

*“So, not only has that young person got to make a transition, so have the family, and that needs to start much, much earlier. We've started with occupational therapy to work with children as young as 11 and their families to start looking at enablement and start looking at having a different future and thinking differently, that your child might, although they might not be within the school system, they're not going to go on and maybe set the world on fire and go to uni in that respect, but it doesn't mean you can't set the world on fire and do something totally different. So, we've started to address that at 11, but it needs to start, as [name] said, it's a huge issue for us.” – Employer*

Other employers echoed these findings in terms of the difficulty for young people when transitioning from school to further education or work. Young people taking part in DFN Project SEARCH are eligible for a means-tested bursary since it counts as full-time education, but our contact at Renfrewshire

Council noted that some young people he had worked with had already gone through college and claimed their bursary before finding out about DFN Project SEARCH, meaning they were no longer eligible for financial support. Our contact was looking into ways to improve communications about the programme so that school-age young people in their area would be able to make informed decisions about their future without potential financial difficulty.

Once people with learning disabilities are in work, parents often still feel anxiety and a responsibility to make sure things go well. One employer noted that parents often acted as ‘taxi’ for their adult children, and shared with us an example where a parent had come to work with their adult child.

*“It was the [employee]’s parent that not only took them to the stalls or the conference, they helped on the stall because they were worried that [the employee] wouldn’t cope by themselves, even though we had made sure that there were two people from additional stalls that they had long-term relationships with that would just keep an eye out.” – Employer*

Early intervention seems to be key in this area to ensure that young people with learning disabilities and their parents understand far in advance that job opportunities and support are available if the young person wants to work.

# Conclusion

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The employees we have spoken to as part of this research paint a promising picture for people with learning disabilities' employment in Scotland. If more employers are able to implement the good practice shown here, employment prospects for people with learning disabilities should improve. We have also seen vast differences in job roles across our seven employers, with individuals working in a range of customer-facing roles and back-end manufacturing and administrative roles. Furthermore, this research highlights that people with learning disabilities in Scotland can and do work in positions of real leadership, where they are often advocates for their community.

However, we can't rely on good practice alone to close the employment gap for people with learning disabilities. We have highlighted some key challenges employers face when navigating this employment landscape. Keeping track of workforce diversity is important but difficult when not all employees will be comfortable disclosing their disability or being labelled as disabled. We heard contrasting views from employers about employment needs for people with learning disabilities and those with autism which made us reflect on these groups being treated as one in policy and advocacy. Wider culture change is key, and this could be a challenge for larger employers, while smaller employers may struggle with a lack of HR support.

We also heard that Access to Work was causing difficulties for both employers and employees due to long waiting times and stressful application processes – though the support was excellent once in place. Finally, we heard that early intervention for families of people with learning disabilities may be needed to prepare individuals and their parents/carers for the possibility of future employment.

With an estimated employment rate of just [4-8% in Scotland](#), there is still much to understand when it comes to improving employment outcomes for people with learning disabilities. The employers highlighted here are already doing much of what is required. In our next report (to be published in the second half of 2024), we will delve into the experiences of employers who have not yet hired people with learning disabilities.



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