



Mencap NI Briefing Paper **No.4**

Employ me: Supporting people with a learning disability towards and into employment

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mencap NI

In Northern Ireland there are approximately:¹

- **42,000** people with a learning disability
- **25,000** working age adults with a learning disability

A **learning disability** is a reduced intellectual ability and difficulty with everyday activities. Learning disabilities are diverse in nature, ranging from mild to moderate, to more severe and profound. With the right support, most people can lead fulfilled lives.

Introduction

Mencap's vision is a future in which the UK is the best place in the world for people with a learning disability to lead happy and healthy lives, and for many, being employed will play an important role in achieving this. We believe people with a learning disability should receive the right support to access and stay in work; have real jobs in the open labour market, with regular hours; and be paid at the same rate as everyone else. Being employed is also about more than earning money. It is about feeling valued, independent and fulfilled.

Unfortunately, people with a learning disability are at greater risk of experiencing a range of economic, social and health inequalities. They are especially likely to be disadvantaged in terms of employment rate, type of work and level of unemployment (Equality Commission, 2018). This is a particular concern in Northern Ireland which continuously has the highest employment gap between disabled and non-disabled people across all the UK regions since 2014 (NISRA, 2021), and where policy development and implementation is generally slow.

These existing challenges are further compounded by the disproportionate impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on disabled people, and the cost-of-living crisis which may be even harder for people with a learning disability who tend to be on lower incomes and have additional costs associated with their disability. Furthermore, there is an ongoing lack of clarity in Northern Ireland around future funding for disability employment support services.

¹ These estimates have been calculated using learning disability prevalence rates from Public Health England (2016) and population data from the Office for National Statistics (2021).

About this paper

This paper provides an overview of why employment is important for people with a learning disability. It also outlines what Mencap is doing to improve outcomes for people with a learning disability in Northern Ireland through our employment and personal development services. In doing so it highlights barriers to employment, and what works well in the provision of employment support. The paper also discusses challenges to the future provision of disability employment services, and makes recommendations for wider policy and practice.

Article 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) recognises the right of persons with disabilities to work on an equal basis with others; including the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities.

Policy Context

Understanding about the learning disability population in Northern Ireland is limited, which creates challenges for government in providing an effective policy and practice response. This includes a lack of disaggregated data in relation to employment, with no official figures available on the numbers of people with a learning disability who are in work. Mencap's 'Big Learning Disability Survey'² (2019) suggested that up to 23% of working age adults with a learning disability, including those with lower support needs, have a paid job in the UK, compared with 53% of working age adults with any disability, and 76% of the general population.³ However, government statistics suggest only 5.1% of adults with a learning disability known to their local authority in England are in paid work (NHS Digital, 2021).

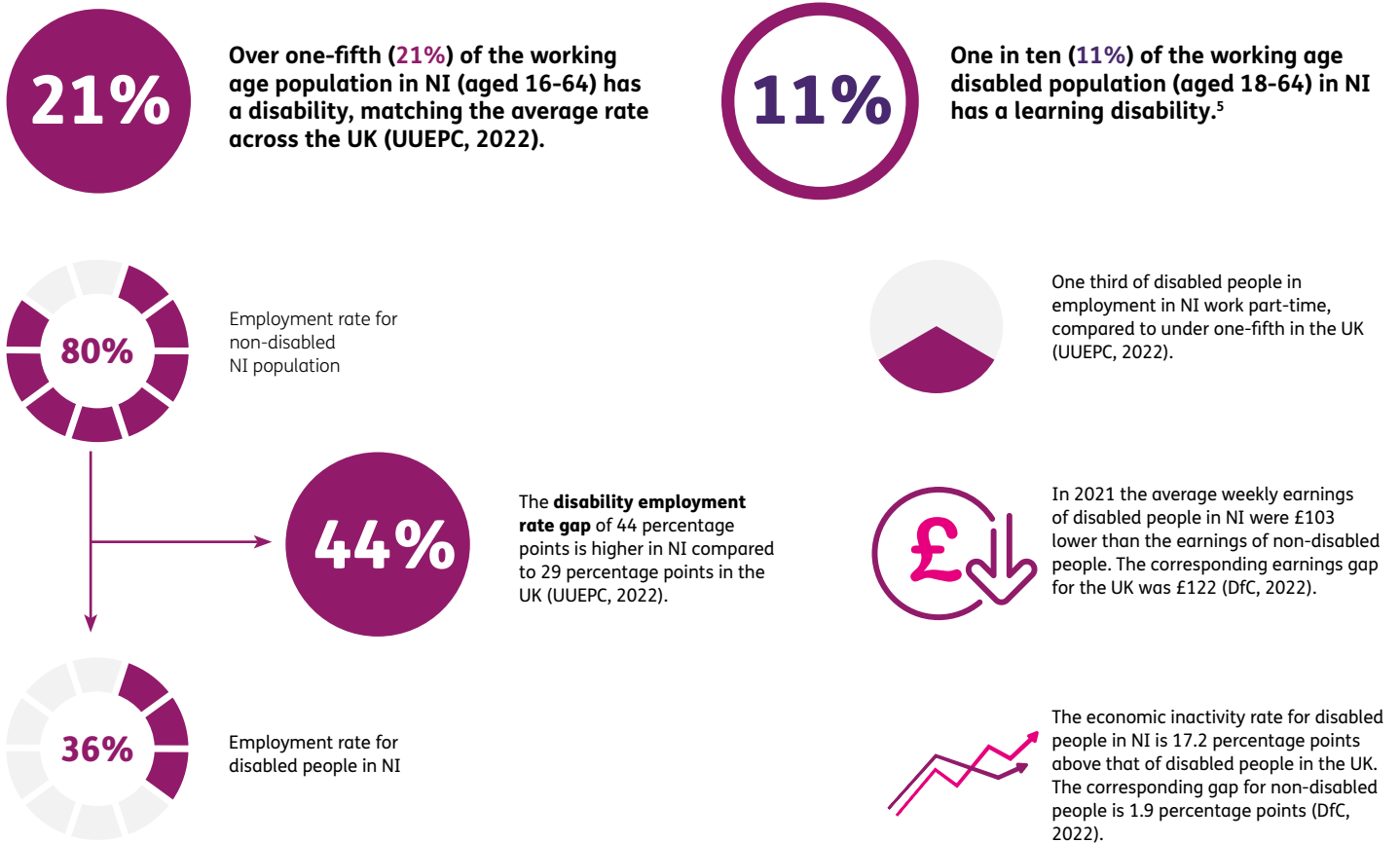
The Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC, 2022) report on labour outcomes for disabled people in Northern Ireland⁴ indicates that just over one in three disabled people is in work here, compared to over half of disabled people in the UK. It further shows that amongst UK regions, NI not only has the lowest disability employment rate, but it also has the largest employment gap between disabled and non-disabled people. The statistics presented overleaf highlight the employment inequalities facing disabled people as a whole in Northern Ireland, and the further disparities between NI and the UK.



2. Mencap ran a UK-wide survey in 2019 with 1625 adults (aged 18+) with a learning disability.
3. From: ONS (2019) A08: Labour market status of disabled people. Dataset. Aug 2019.
4. Based on the most recent Labour Force Survey data.

Key Statistics

People with a disability in Northern Ireland



Policy discussion in terms of disability employment provision in Northern Ireland is underpinned by **two** priority issues.

1) An absence of disability employment policy / strategy

There is no Disability Employment Strategy in place, the previous one having ended in 2020⁶ without any reported evaluation of its impact and lessons learned. A new Disability Employment Strategy is currently being developed by the Department for Communities. It will

align with the NI Executive's Disability Strategy, which is due for publication in 2022. Unique to Northern Ireland, periods without a functioning government delays the implementation of strategies aimed at tackling the everyday inequalities that disabled people experience.

4. Ibid, note 1.
5. Ibid, note 1.
6. Department for Employment and Learning (2016) 'Supporting equality through inclusive employment'. An employment strategy for people with disabilities.

2) The future funding of disability employment services is unclear

For many years, the European Social Fund (ESF) has been the primary and consistent source of funding for projects which collectively promote social inclusion and provide skills development, training and employment opportunities for disabled people. Match funders include government departments, Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCTs), local Councils, and Further Education (FE) colleges.

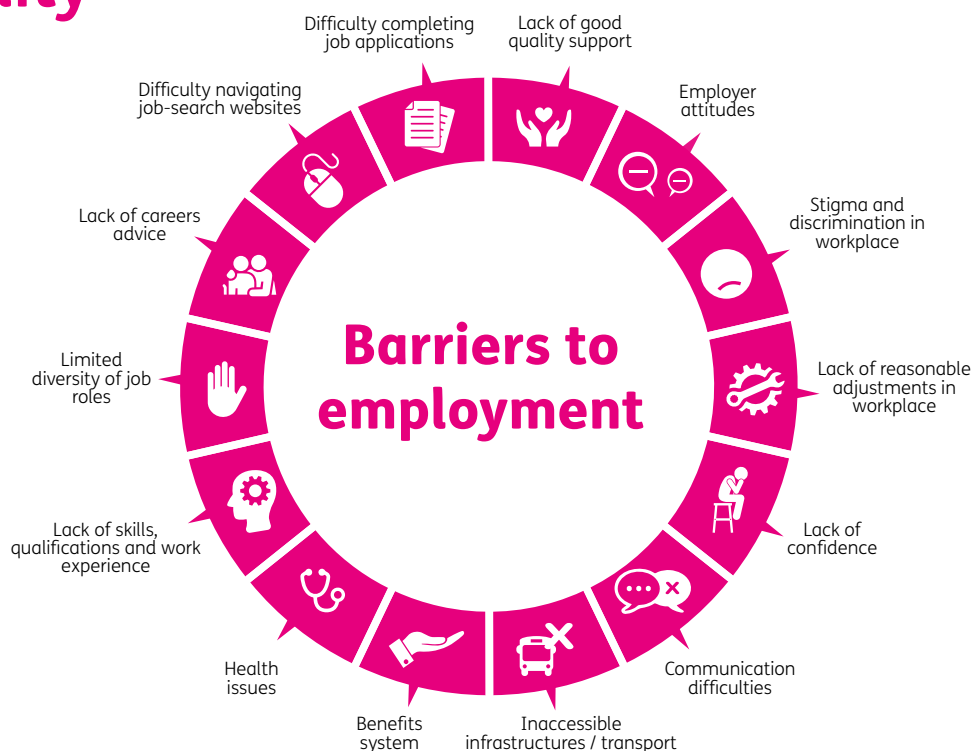
- There is an absence of any plan from government to ensure continuous funding for ESF projects after March 2023, leaving organisations facing a ‘cliff edge’ when current support ends.
- Although some more information is starting to emerge, the role of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) as a replacement for ESF is still far from

clear. Initial indications are that this fund will fall significantly short in terms of scope, timeframe, and levels of funding.

- There are concerns that responsibility for strategic oversight and spending power for the UKSPF will not be delegated to Northern Ireland; and that government departments and key stakeholders here do not have a clear role in the Fund’s design and implementation to ensure it meets local strategic priorities.
- The potential loss of ESF employability and day opportunity services which are currently match funded by HSCTs is of particular concern. These services are an integral part of health and social care policy aimed at ensuring disabled people are treated equally and achieve positive outcomes, including improved health and well-being.

Barriers to employment facing people with a learning disability

Northern Ireland has the largest **well-being gaps** between disabled people and non-disabled people in the UK, and non-employed disabled people here are 2.5 times more likely to be in **poverty** than employed disabled people (UUEPC, 2022). Although there are current challenges due to the cost of living crisis, for most people having a job still remains one of the best routes out of poverty. Being in paid work also has a positive impact on physical and emotional well-being (Emerson et al, 2018); and self-esteem, sense of identity, and social inclusion (Lindstrom, Hirano and Thomas, 2018). However, as illustrated on the right, people with a learning disability can face specific barriers when trying to access employment.⁷



Almost one in four disabled people in NI who are currently economically inactive would like a job. This is double the proportion of non-disabled economically inactive people, where one in ten want a job (UUEPC, 2022).

7. For more information on employment barriers for people with a disability/learning disability, see, for example, DfC, 2022; UUEPC, 2022; and <https://www.mencap.org.uk/about-us/what-we-think/employment-what-we-think>

Inclusion

Social integration, inclusion and acceptance into the workplace are a fundamental aspect of sustainable employment. However, research shows that people with a learning disability frequently experience **stigma** and struggle with **non-inclusive workplace cultures** and **employers' attitudes** (Barrows et al., 2016; Ellenkamp et al., 2016; Vornholt et al., 2013). Employers often lack understanding that, with the right support, and if placed in a suitable role, people with a learning disability can perform exceptionally well. They may see more potential problems and barriers in employing people with a learning disability compared to those with physical disabilities (Kocman, Fischer and Weber, 2018).

Some of the main barriers reported by employers when hiring a disabled person include the cost of making adjustments to the workplace (69%); practicalities of making workplace adjustments (67%); and accessibility of the application process (44%) (Leonard Cheshire, 2021). The area of recruitment is a common barrier for people with a learning disability, for example, 22% of respondents to Mencap's 'Big Listen Survey' (2019) said they experienced difficulties filling in job application forms.



Skills, qualifications and opportunities

Educational attainment can be a key determinant in accessing further education and employment for the working age population. The highest qualification level of disabled people in Northern Ireland is substantially lower than that of the non-disabled population (UUEPC, 2022). This is further compounded for people with a learning disability who will likely experience cognitive difficulties that affect communication, reading, writing and numeracy skills, and time spent learning new tasks, therefore placing them at an immediate disadvantage. A lack of skills and recognised qualifications means they are more likely to work part-time, be in lower skilled jobs and earn less money. They may also make the decision to work part-time due to health issues (Meltzer et al., 2016).⁸

Most respondents to Mencap's 'Big Learning Disability Survey' (2019) who have a paid job said they work part-time, with 62% of those working 16 hours a week or less.

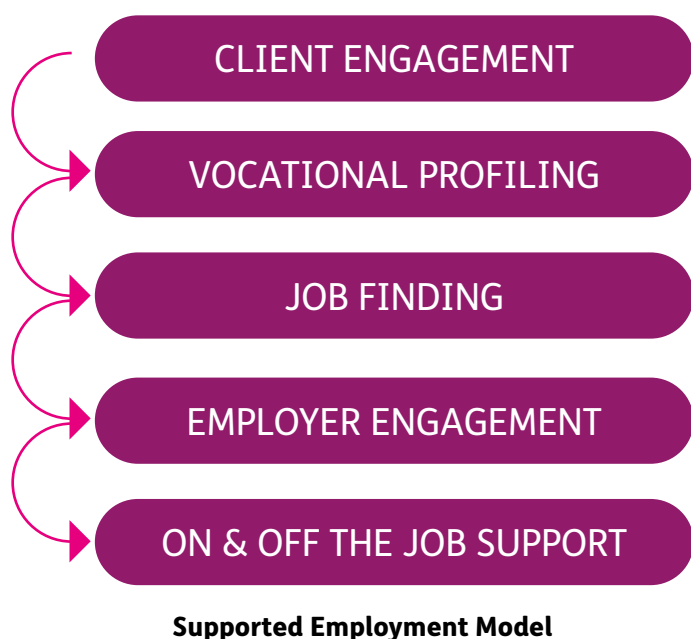
Disabled people in NI are generally under-represented in professional, associate professional and technical occupations - they tend to be employed within caring, leisure, retail, customer and other services (DfC, 2022; UUEPC, 2022). They also report lower satisfaction scores across a range of work quality metrics including career progression, involvement in decision making, job satisfaction and meaningful work (DfC, 2022).

Moving forward, it is important to consider the rapid development of technology and artificial intelligence, and the ongoing automation of manual and repetitive tasks. These growing trends may make it even harder for people with learning disabilities to gain employment, and further widen the employment gap (Kocman, Fischer and Weber, 2018).

8. People with a learning disability are more likely to experience health inequalities in comparison to the working age population. For more information, see Webb, M. A. & Cole, F (2019) Treat me well: Equal access to healthcare for people with a learning disability. Mencap NI.

The **Ulster University Economic Policy Centre** (UUEPC, 2022) report on labour market outcomes for people with disabilities in Northern Ireland states:

- Failure to address the barriers to work that disabled people face is a failure to recognise the contribution that disabled people make and represents a huge opportunity cost to Northern Ireland's economy and society.
- The majority of economically inactive disabled people who say they intend to work again at some point in the short or long-term could move into employment with only a short-time lag, if suitable opportunities were available and any labour market barriers could be overcome.
- The types of jobs disabled people are employed in are more likely to be associated with lower pay and lower growth prospects - empowering disabled people to enter a more diverse range of occupations is therefore an important challenge for government.
- Increasing NI's disability employment rate from 36% in 2021 to 53% by 2031 to match today's UK disability employment rate would represent an ambitious, transformative and achievable target.



What works

An independent evaluation (DfE, 2020) showed that disability employment projects in Northern Ireland demonstrate excellent value for money - key strengths include flexibility of approach; investment in relationship building; and the provision of tailored, demand driven supports. Other evidence shows successful outcomes in terms of work-readiness, personal and social skills, and increased levels of confidence and self-esteem (Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), 2018).

Supported employment

Many of the disability employment services in NI, including Mencap, use the Supported Employment approach to provide high quality, personalised support services for people to overcome barriers to employment. It is recognised at a local level, and also internationally, as the preferred intervention to assist disabled people into paid employment. The model is characterised by five key components.

- **Engagement:** Underpinned by the core values of accessibility to ensure informed choices are made
- **Vocational Profiling:** ensuring empowerment to the individual through the process
- **Job Finding:** self-determination and informed choice are central
- **Employer Engagement:** accessibility, flexibility and confidentiality are key values to be nurtured through this process
- **Ongoing Job Support:** particularly when the individual is in paid employment and supported by an Employment Support Worker / Job Coach

Mencap NI Employment and Personal Development Services

Mencap has been delivering employability services for people with a learning disability in Northern Ireland since 1991. Over that period, we have developed considerable expertise in assisting people to move closer to, prepare for, find and sustain work. A ‘person-centred’ approach is at the heart of everything we do, underpinned by an emphasis on good relationships and high levels of communication and partnership working with employers and other stakeholders. Employers regularly tell us how much their organisations value the trainees / employees as productive members of staff who create a positive impact in the workplace, including increasing the wider staff teams’ understanding about learning disability.

98% of employers said they felt more confident about employing someone with a learning disability as a result of working with Mencap NI.⁹

Mencap NI’s current employment model comprises two NI-wide interdependent training and employment services ‘**EmployAbility3**’ (developing employability) and ‘**Workable NI**’ (supporting people in paid employment), and we also work with partner organisations to influence systems change. Notably, our employment services are integrated into the wider range of Mencap programmes so a continuum of support can be offered.

Mencap NI Employment & Personal Development Services

Supporting people with a learning disability to progress towards and into employment

PROGRAMME / ACTIVITIES	OUTCOMES
<p>‘EmployAbility3’</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Job profiling and matching - Work placements - Vocational advice and guidance - Job clubs - Interview / work skills training - Personal development - Learning disability awareness training for employers 	<p>Participants will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Be prepared for working life - Have improved motivation and ability to find work - Feel more confident when applying for jobs and attending interviews - Feel more included in their local community
<p>‘Workable NI’</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 10 hours or more paid work per week - Support to retain and develop in chosen jobs - Support to employers e.g., information on reasonable adjustments 	<p>Participants will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Secure and retain unsupported employment, or require lower levels of support - Gain skills, confidence and self-esteem in the workplace
<p>Influencing policy and practice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identifying policy and legislative barriers to accessing support - Working collaboratively with partners in the disability employment sector to campaign for change - Research and evaluation 	<p>Anticipated change:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Employment policy and legislation recognises and supports people with a learning disability - People with a learning disability are heard by decision-makers - Disability employment services will be evidence-informed/high quality

8. 9. Based on 46 employers responding to a Mencap feedback survey in 2021.

EmployAbility

Mencap NI's 'EmployAbility' project is currently funded by ESF and the Department for the Economy, with match funding from Department for Communities, all five Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCTs), North West Regional College (NWRC) and South Eastern Regional College (SERC). Through the project we aim to promote social inclusion, reduce economic inactivity, combat discrimination and reduce inequalities. When a participant joins the project, they work with a dedicated staff team to develop their own personal agreement and action plan. Participants are supported to move towards and into a range of destinations including further education; vocational training; work experience; volunteering and paid employment.

Through our partnerships with NWRC (Transition Course) and SERC (Foundation Learning), Mencap NI Employment Officers undertake a range of tailored interventions and support to develop an individual, work focused training plan with each student. Mencap ensure work placements match individual student goals and needs, and that these can translate into achievable and meaningful opportunities for each student.



Case Study: Karen

Karen was supported by Mencap NI on the 'EmployAbility project' to complete a few different work placements in various workplaces. This approach aimed to develop her skills, confidence and experience before she secured her current paid job, in a local café. Karen started working one day per week at the cafe, then after six months increased this to two days per week. Her regular duties include washing the dishes, clearing the tables and taking orders. Karen has also regularly attended Job Club and Home Learning sessions with Mencap; and taken part in accredited, as well as non-accredited training sessions, that we organised in partnership with local training providers.

Karen said: ***"I really enjoy working in the Café as the staff are lovely and friendly and good fun. I love meeting all the customers. My job is to keep the café nice and clean and serve the food orders."***

Karen's manager Aidan told us: ***"Karen is a great addition to the team and settled in very quickly and gets on with everybody. Karen is a hard worker, and we were delighted to be able to increase her hours recently to two days a week."***

A recent review by the **Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI, 2022)** to assess the quality of provision in Mencap NI's 'EmployAbility2' ESF project reported that:

- The programme is suitably tailored to the participants' specific needs, and supports them effectively to develop relevant employability skills which enables progression to and productive participation in the workplace.
- Participants' progress is well captured through regular check-ins and reviews, thereby ensuring that the work placement matches their interests, ability and aspirations.
- Staff provide a high-level of individualised one-to-one support to participants; and foster a positive, inclusive learning environment.
- Participants are encouraged to contribute to their local community over and beyond their work placement.
- A comprehensive and appropriately specialist learning disability awareness training programme is offered on a regular basis to all employers.

The **Covid-19 pandemic** and subsequent lockdowns / restrictions led to staff having to find creative and innovative ways of working in order to deliver the core elements of the programme. Staff mobilised quickly to adapt programmes for online delivery; and developed a 'hybrid' model of virtual and face-to-face (when permitted) work. The prolonged period of the pandemic was further compounded by the higher risks posed to people with a learning disability (British Medical Journal, 2021) and the additional monitoring this required. Despite these difficulties, the ETI reported:

"All of the outcomes on the project are positive; in spite of the impact of the pandemic on a vulnerable group of participants with complex needs, the enrolment target has almost been achieved. Almost all of the participants have been successfully retained on the project. Progression to further education and training has exceeded overall targets, while progression into employment is high" (ETI, 2022).

Outcomes for 152 Mencap NI survey participants: ¹⁰

90%

felt more motivated to look for a job

"My Employment Officer has given me confidence and motivation to do volunteering and look for work in the future."

86%

reported improved confidence in looking for a job

"From being in work I feel more confident and valued, people are friendly and have time for me."

"It has been really beneficial when giving me confidence to complete online application forms."

80%

said they felt more included in their local community

"In my volunteer job I feel like I'm servicing my local community."

¹⁰ Mencap NI Employment Trainee Survey 2021.



Case Study: **Conor**

Conor was initially supported by Mencap NI on the 'EmployAbility' project and then progressed onto the 'Workable NI' programme. We supported him to secure paid employment with Primark in his local hometown where he has been working now for several years. Conor is very happy in his role as a Sales Assistant in Primark, saying:

"I got support by Mencap helping me to get in here and by telling me what is required from me. They support me as much as they possibly can, they tell me what I need to do – and if I don't do it, they tell me how to correct it, so next time I'll do it from the moment I walk in, to the moment I leave."

Conor's Manager, Lorna, is delighted with his progress:

"I would say to any employer, you have absolutely nothing to lose from trying this and you have so much to gain. We have gained an employee who has such an excellent idea of customer service - he makes both the employees' and the customers' day and experience really enjoyable in Primark."

The role of the Mencap NI Employment Officer (EO) is fundamental to developing each individual's skills and career interests, and helping them to secure work placements and job opportunities.

The EO proactively engages with a broad range of employers through the provision of on-going support, information and advice, and to help resolve any issues that may arise.

EO's are knowledgeable about employment rights, working practices and work collaboratively with stakeholders to find services and opportunities for the people they support.

They are particularly skilled in supporting individuals with a learning disability to develop important 'soft skills.' These typically include self-confidence, motivation, teamwork, communication and personal safety.

EO's provide employers with the opportunity to undertake Mencap's Learning Disability Awareness training, which is delivered by Mencap colleagues who have a learning disability.

Clara is an Employment Officer



"I have been an Employment Officer with Mencap NI for over 8 years and I can honestly say I enjoy my job."

"My role requires me to support individuals to gain paid employment, voluntary work, or to move on to further education/training, whilst increasing their personal development."

"I love watching the people we support progress and achieve their goals, as well as seeing their self-confidence grow. Every person's journey is different which brings new challenges, and I am constantly learning new things."

"The support from Employment Officer has been great. Always happy to answer any questions or queries we might have and assist in any way we might need."
(Employer)

Workable NI

'Workable NI' offers a flexible range of long-term support to help disabled people who have barriers to employment to find and keep work. When someone with a disability has been offered paid employment of at least ten hours per week, they can be supported on the 'Workable NI' programme, which is currently funded by the Department for Communities.

The Programme is delivered across Northern Ireland through the Supported Employment Solutions (SES) partnership, in which Mencap NI is one of the seven specialist partner organisations. Frontline staff are employed to work with clients on the programme to assist them to overcome barriers in the workplace and retain their paid employment. Staff also offer support, guidance and any required awareness training to employers.

Case Study: Derek

Derek secured his first paid job as a casual cleaner for the local council in 2019, and kept up his hours there after he secured his first permanent, part-time job for a housing association. Derek enjoyed his work so much that when a permanent vacancy came up for a cleaner in the council, he jumped at the chance to apply. Mencap NI supported Derek with lots of interview preparation, and due to his hard work and determination, he was successful on his second attempt.

Derek is looking forward to a long career with ABC council, telling us, ***"When I got the letter to say I got the job I was really happy, I love my job and enjoy working for the council, I am meeting new people every day and I hope to get more hours in the future."***

Now that Derek is working 15 hours consistently, he is supported by Mencap on the 'Workable NI' programme, and we will provide him with further in-work support



Case Study: Thomas

Thomas was supported by Mencap NI to set goals to find a job, learn new skills and to learn to drive. He was delighted when he secured paid employment in Grounds Maintenance, with IDverde. Thomas said:

"I was really down and having a hard time. My Employment Officer helped me to think about what I was going to do, to make things better. I am proud of all I have achieved and happy with where I am at in my life right now."

Thomas is well on his way to achieving his goals and much more, having completed his Construction Skills Register training and driving theory test. He is now making plans to complete his practical driving test, and continues to grow in confidence.

Thomas is progressing well in his job role, with day to day activities including leaf blowing, strimming, litter picking and a variety of other grounds maintenance duties. Mencap continue to support Thomas via the 'Workable NI' programme with a view to progressing him into sustained employment in the near future.

Between April 2018 – March 2022, Mencap NI Employment and Personal Development services achieved the following:

680 people with a learning disability supported

582 people
(EmployAbility) ▶ **58%** of leavers entered paid employment (**21%**) or FE/training (**37%**)

98 people
(Workable NI) ▶ **42%** progressed into unsupported employment

400+ employers worked with

"It's been lovely to see that, given the right support, a voluntary member of staff has been able to become a permanent member of staff. You can prejudge people and think that they wouldn't have the ability that they definitely do have." (Employer)

Recommendations

1. Produce a new disability employment strategy and action plan with a clear timeframe and measurable outcomes, including measures to reduce the disability employment gap for people with a learning disability. In doing so, the Strategy should:

- Investigate and understand the root causes of low employment for people with a learning disability; and identify the best interventions to help overcome those barriers.
- Support the creation of more jobs and training opportunities for people with a learning disability, including the availability of more on-the-job support.
- Identify and respond to changes in the labour market that will further inhibit employment options for people with a learning disability.
- Promote the development of more accessible and user friendly recruitment processes and job search websites / resources.
- Promote positive employer attitudes towards people with a learning disability in employment; and provide support to employers to increase their recruitment levels.

2. Clarify post-ESF funding for disability employment projects, including the role of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) and / or alternative funding provision.

- Set out a cross-departmental plan for the future provision of core services currently funded under ESF, in partnership with the disability employment sector.
- Consider implementing a 2–3-year transition programme until a successor programme for ESF is determined.
- Provide assurances that there will be no reduction in current funding levels, or any gap between existing and new funding streams for specialist disability provision.
- Ensure that powers to allocate funding through the UKSPF are transferred across nations to maintain NI's devolved status and responsibility for economic development. In the absence of this, the NI government must have a significant role in the preparation, implementation, and management of UKSPF funds, including determining local funding priorities.

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