Work and learning disability research
Final report

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

In March 2022 Mencap commissioned National Development Team for Inclusion (NDTi) to undertake some research to better understand what people with a learning disability want when it comes to work, why so few people with a learning disability are able to access or maintain paid work, and what more can be done to help address the barriers to work for people with a learning disability in the UK.

The purpose of the research is:

1) *to inform Mencap's work-related strategy*
2) *to inform Mencap's and others' future delivery of employment support services and related programmes*
3) *to inform influencing, campaigning, advice and research activities.*

Background

There is evidence of a considerable 'employment gap' for people with a learning disability (e.g. Mencap, 2019). Data sources vary, but the number of people with a learning disability in paid employment in the UK appears to be very low compared to their non-disabled peers. For example, government data suggests that only 5.1% of people with learning disabilities accessing long-term social care support in England (NHS Digital, 2021) had a paid job. A survey of people with learning disabilities and autism who attend day centres found that 8% of people were in paid work and 25% wanted a paid job (Giri et al., 2021). Mencap's Big Learning Disability survey 2022 found that 27% were in paid work and 37% of those who are not in paid work would like a paid job (Mencap, 2022). Where people are in work, this is often low paid and insecure work (Learning Disability England, 2022).

People with a learning disability have the right to work if they want to, on an equal basis with others (Article 27 of the UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities). This includes rights to equal pay, opportunities for career progression and reasonable accommodation of support needs at work. The Equality Act (2010) provides a legal mandate to protect against discrimination in the workplace on the basis of disability status, at all stages of employment. The right to paid employment remains a priority area for learning disability self-advocacy groups, for example within Learning Disability England's Good Lives Framework (Learning Disability England, 2022).

There are currently record numbers of vacancies in the UK labour market, with nearly 1.25 million unfilled positions as of September 2022 (Office for National Statistics, 2022). This is in part due to disruption to the labour market following the COVID-19 pandemic. Data suggest that around one-third of businesses with 10 or more employees are experiencing a shortage of workers as of November 2021 (Office for National Statistics, 2021). Therefore, it appears that employers can no longer afford to overlook the employment potential of people with learning disabilities.

Previous research has highlighted many barriers that make it difficult for people with a learning disability to find and retain employment. Structural barriers include the benefits system placing limits on how much someone can work (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2017 as cited in Mencap 2019) and negative attitudes towards disabled people, which can lead to discrimination at work (McGinley & McKeown, 2019). At an environmental level, lack of accessible transport and inaccessibility of job sites exclude many people from work (Mencap, 2019). Inequalities in the education system can contribute to low aspirations of people with a learning disability (Learning Disability England, 2022) in turn affecting people's confidence and access to opportunities like work experience.

Whilst there is a breadth of existing research examining the barriers to employment for people with a learning disability, less is known about what is important to people with a learning disability themselves when it comes to work. The present research was carried out to explore what could influence a long-term national change in employing people with a learning disability, with the aim of informing Mencap's strategy, delivery of employment support services and campaigning activities with regards to employment. It sought to understand what people with a learning disability want from work and what barriers they experience in the workplace. It also sought to explore the perspective of employers by better understanding what would motivate more employers to employ people with a learning disability, and how the known barriers faced by people could be addressed. The present research also updates the evidence base given the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the job market.

Research questions

The research questions, initially designed by Mencap, working with a group of Mencap colleagues with a learning disability, were reviewed in the early stages of the research and refined as follows:

Part A – People with a learning disability

1) *What do people with a learning disability want when it comes to work?*

2) *What impacts the aspirations and barriers experienced by people with a learning disability when it comes to work?*

Part B - Employers

3) *What would motivate employers to employ more people with a learning disability?*
4) *What else can be done to help address the known barriers to people with a learning disability gaining and maintaining work?*

Part C - Overarching question

5) *What could influence a long-term UK wide change to employing people with a learning disability?*

Research Working Group

A group of people with lived experience of learning disabilities was formed to inform, guide and advise on various aspects of the research. This was called the Research Working Group (RWG). The RWG was made up of four members of Mencap's paid staff members and one Mencap trustee who were involved in working on the specification of the research, and four independent members recruited by NDTi. All those involved did so as part of their paid Mencap roles or were paid for their time. Two of the independent members of the RWG also worked as paid co-researchers undertaking the interviews with employers.

The RWG met six times in total and the focus of the meetings and their involvement was as follows:

1. **Getting to know each other**
2. **Focus groups** – *informing and testing the creative methods used in the focus groups.*
3. **Employer interviews** – *agreeing questions to ask employers and thinking about what co-researchers might need during the interviews.*
4. **Survey design** – *designing questions for the online survey and testing it to ensure accessibility.*
5. **Outputs** – *thinking of creative and accessible ways to share the research findings.*
6. **Findings** – *reflections on some of the findings and providing recommendations for employers and employment support providers.*

The RWG members valued the opportunity to contribute ideas that may help more people with a learning disability to attain employment in the future. Feedback from RWG members suggested that they found it valuable to learn more about research, with one group member saying:

"I think it's good for people with learning disabilities to get involved and find out about different types of research, and inclusion as well." (RWG member)

Structure of this report

The report is structured around the five research questions, with Part A drawing on the focus groups, interviews and survey with people with a learning disability and addressing research questions 1 and 2, and Part B drawing on the interviews with employers and addressing research questions 3 and 4. For the flow of the report research question 4 (which includes identifying barriers) is addressed before research question 3. Part C considers the overarching research question 5 and includes recommendations and suggestions for addressing the barriers identified through the report.

Methods

A mixed methods design was adopted for the research, including focus groups, interviews and an online survey with people with a learning disability, and interviews with employers. The emphasis in the research was on qualitative methods to allow for depth and unanticipated findings. The online survey enabled us to hear from a larger number of people with a learning disability and to validate the findings emerging through the focus groups.

Focus Groups and Interviews

Recruitment

People with learning disabilities were invited to attend focus groups to discuss their views and experiences of work. Information was distributed through NDTi and Mencap networks and self-advocacy groups, in the form of an easy-read information sheet and video. On advice from the RWG members most of the focus groups were online.

Purposive sampling was used to make sure that people with a range of perspectives were included in the focus groups. Specific focus groups were carried out with people living in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, encompassing a range of ages and employment status. For people living in England, there were designated focus groups for young people aged 18-25, people aged over 25 who were in work, and two groups with people aged over 25 who were not in paid work or on an employment programme.

Six online focus groups and one in-person focus group were carried out in total. Four one-to-one interviews were also conducted; these were with people who could not, or preferred not to, attend the focus groups.

Method

Participants provided informed consent to take part in the group, either by completing a consent form via email or providing verbal consent at the start of the group.

The format of the focus groups was designed in conjunction with the RWG. Creative approaches were used to ensure that the groups were accessible, comfortable and inclusive. The focus groups were conducted in two sections:

- *A discussion about 'What is your perfect job and why?'*

- A 'snakes and ladders' group exercise ran in breakout groups. This involved discussion of 'ladders' (the things that help people to get or do the job they want) and 'snakes' (the things that get in the way of having or keeping the job they want).

A more detailed outline of the topics covered in the groups is set out in [Appendix](#)).

The one-to-one interviews followed the same format. Groups and interviews were recorded with permission from the participants.

Who took part?

Table 1 shows the number of people who attended each focus group.

Table 1. Number of people who took part in each focus group.

Focus group	Number of participants
Wales	10
Scotland	7
Northern Ireland	8
Group A: England (young people aged under 25)	6
Group B: England (people aged 25+ not in paid work)	3
Group C: England (people aged 25+ not in paid work; in-person)	8
Group D: England (people aged 25+ in paid work)	6
One-to-one interviews	4
TOTAL	52[1]

Graph 1. shows the age range of people who took part in the focus groups. Over half (58%) of focus group participants were aged under 35 years old.

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[1] One individual took part in a focus group and chose to leave early and took up the offer of an interview, therefore the number of individuals we spoke to was 51

Graph 1. Age range of focus group participants

Age range of focus group participants
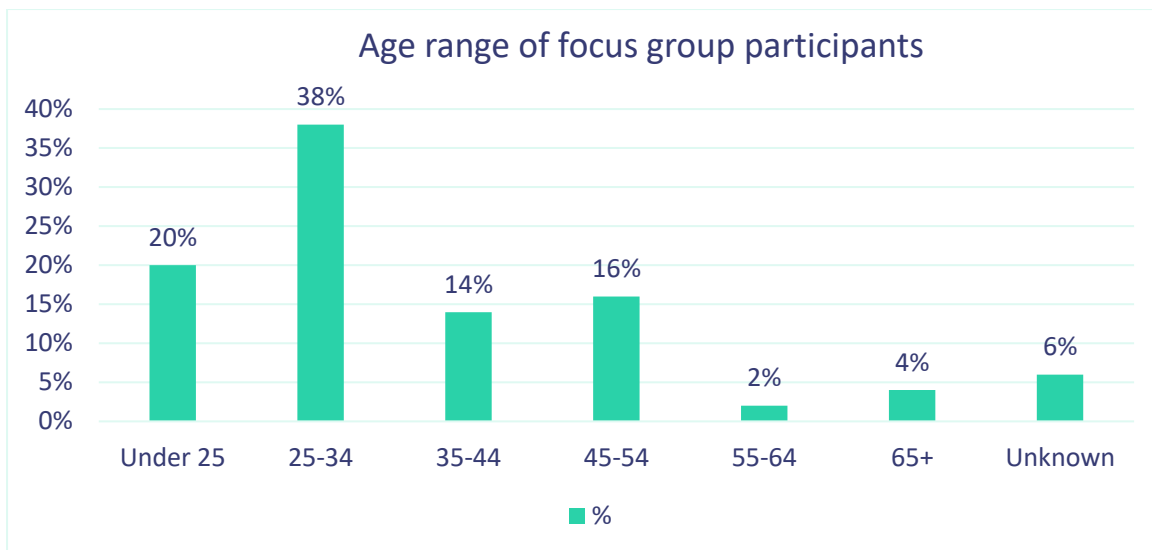
Just over half (54%) of focus group participants were male, 40% were female and 6% were unknown.

Graph 2. shows the ethnicity of people who took part in the focus groups. Most of the focus group participants identified as White British (84%); only a small number of participants were Asian/Asian British or Black/Black British.

Graph 2. Ethnicity of focus group participants

Ethnicity of focus group participants

■ White British ■ White Other ■ Asian / Asian British ■ Black / Black British ■ Other ■ Unknown
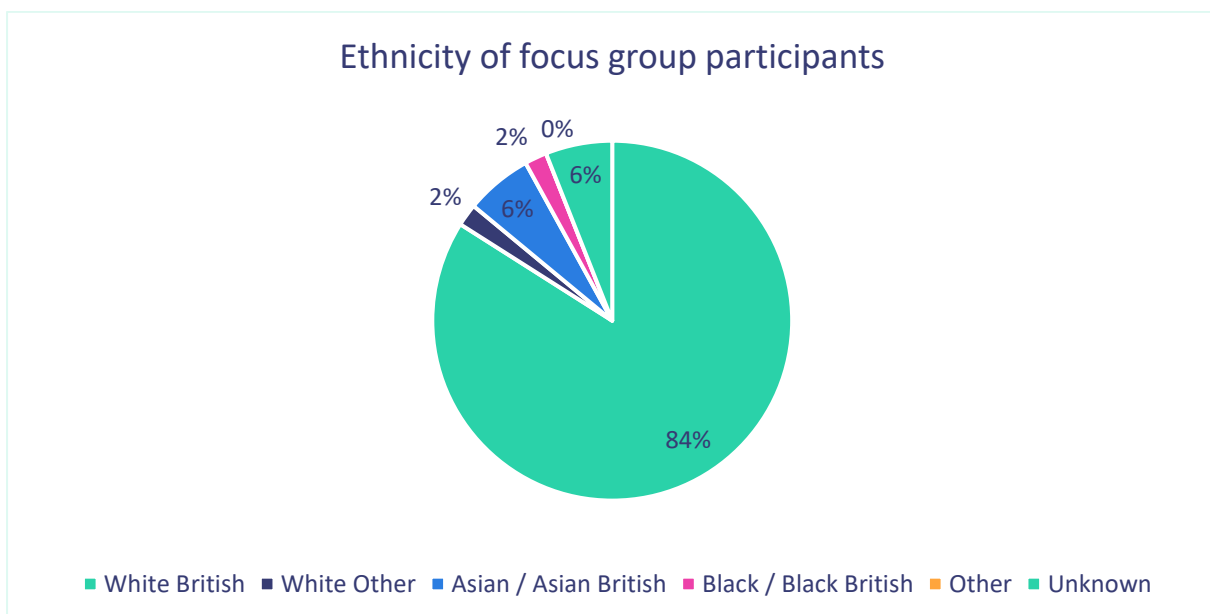
In terms of employment status, of people who took part in the focus groups:

- 40% were in paid work
- 14% were in unpaid work
- 40% were not working
- 6% were not known.

Survey

Distribution

An online survey was carried out to explore people with learning disabilities' experiences of work. The aim was to have a wider reach than was possible through the focus groups. Due to resource limitations, the survey was available online only. The survey was distributed via social media and email to NDTi and Mencap contacts including learning disability organisations, self-advocacy groups and supported employment providers.

Method

The survey questions were designed in partnership with the RWG. It was written in easy-read and the information sheet was available in video format to improve accessibility.

The survey followed different 'routes' depending on people's employment status, so that they were only asked questions relevant to their situation. There was a maximum of 14 questions, depending on which 'route' people took through the survey. See [Appendix](#) for a list of the survey questions.

Who took part?

The survey was open for just over a month and 188 people responded to the survey.

Demographic information was provided by 142 participants. The vast majority of participants lived in England, with only 5 people living in Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales.

Of those that completed the survey, 61% of people were under 35 years old, which means that, similar to the focus groups, the survey is over-representative of younger people.

Graph 3. Age range of survey participants

How old are you?

Age range	Percentage
18 to 24 years old	38%
25 to 34 years old	23%
35 to 44 years old	13%
45 to 54 years old	12%
55 to 64 years old	8%
65 years and over	1%
Don't know	0%
I don't want to say	5%
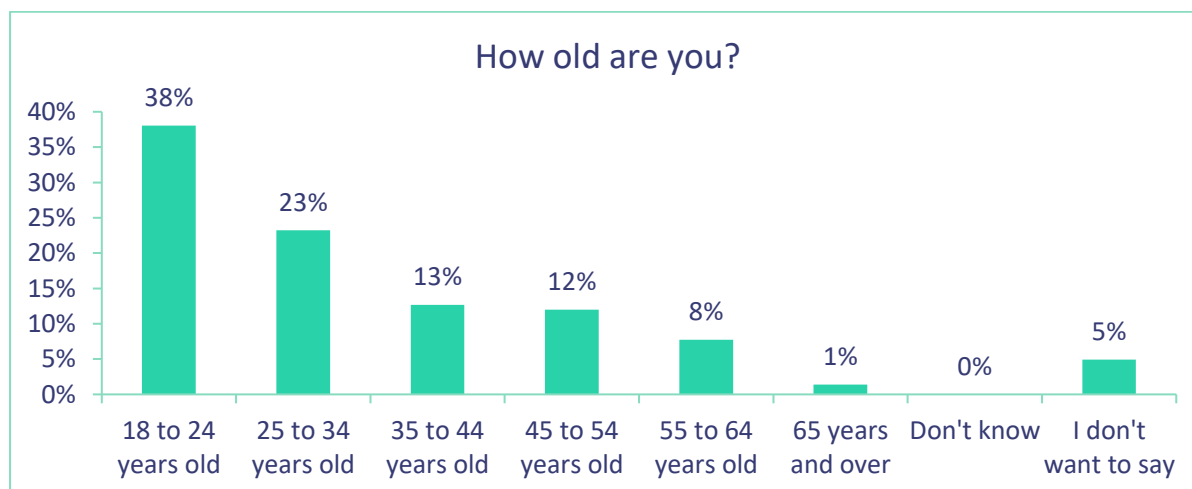
As with the focus groups, more males (59%) than females (37%) responded to the survey.

Just over 80% of people who completed the survey identified as White British,

Irish or Other, 7% of respondents were Asian or Asian British and 5% were Black or Black British, suggesting a more ethnically diverse sample than the focus groups.

Graph 4. Ethnicity of survey participants

What is your ethnic group?

1% — 1% 1% 4%
5%
7%
81%

- White (British, Irish or Other)
- Asian or Asian British
- Black or Black British
- Mixed or multiple ethnic group
- Other ethnic group
- Don't know
- I don't want to say
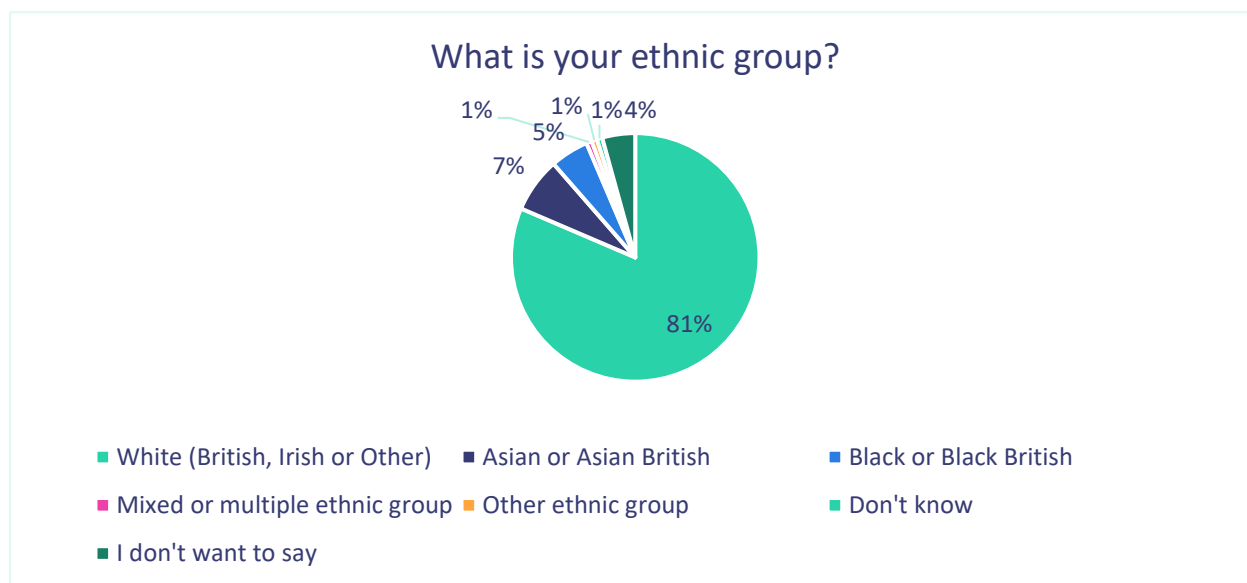
As shown in Table 2. 42% of survey respondents were in paid work and 54% were not in work. This is higher than other sources have found (see page 6).

Table 2. Employment status of survey participants

Employment status	Number of respondents	%
In work (paid)	75	42%
In work (unpaid)	6	3%
Not in work	96	54%
Total people who answered this question	177	

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Employer Interviews

To explore employers' attitudes towards employing people with learning disabilities, interviews were conducted with representatives from organisations that do, and do not, currently employ people with learning disabilities.

Recruitment

Potential participants were identified using Mencap and NDTi's links with employers and supported employment organisations. An initial list was drawn up with the aim of including a spread by geography, sector and size of organisation. They were invited by email and sent an information sheet about the research.

In practice it was difficult to find employers who were willing to take part. It proved easiest to secure an interview where one of the researchers already had a relationship with a key person in the business. In some cases, employers agreed verbally to participate or agreed with an intermediary, but they did not come back with a date for the interview. The difficulty in securing interviews may reflect the context that many businesses are under enormous pressure at the present time. In the end, it was larger employers who tended to take part, possibly because freeing up time in a small or medium enterprise was more challenging.

Method

Interviews were carried out by a pair of researchers, made up of a researcher with experience working in employment support and a researcher with lived experience of learning disabilities (called a 'co-researcher). A co-researcher was present in 14 interviews, but not all, due to scheduling conflicts.

The interview questions were designed in partnership with the RWG. See [Appendix](#) *for an outline of the interview topics covered.*

Who took part?

In total, interviews were carried out with representatives from 18 organisations. Eleven of these organisations did employ someone with a learning disability at the time of the interview, and seven did not. Some of the employers who did not currently employ someone with a learning disability were in the process of setting up programmes or placements such as traineeships or internships or were in contact with employment support organisations.

Table 3. shows the organisations represented in the interviews according to geographic region and industry sector. Eleven were public sector organisations and 7 were private sector organisations.

Table 3. Employing organisations who took part in the interviews, by region and sector

Region	Number	Sectors
South West England	5	NHS (2), Catering (1), Council (1), Utilities (1)
South East England	3	Education (1), Retail (1), NHS (1)
London	3	NHS (1), Media (1), Council (1)
East of England	1	NHS
West Midlands	1	Council
Northern Ireland	1	Council
Ireland and UK	1	Manufacturing
National or International	3	Finance (1), Logistics (1), Government agency (1)
TOTAL	18	

Table 4. shows the size of organisations represented in the interviews, based on EU classification[2]. The number of employees at each organisation ranged from under 10 to 22,000 employees.

Table 4. Size of organisations represented in the interviews

Size of enterprise	Number
Micro-enterprise	1
Small	1
Medium	0
Large	16

Ethics

The research was approved by NDTi's internal ethics process.

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[2]*Under 10 employees is a micro-enterprise, under 50 employers is a small enterprise, under 250 employees is a medium enterprise and over 250 employees is a large enterprise*

Limitations

There are some limitations in this research as a result of the methods used and participants recruited which it is important to acknowledge when interpreting findings, particularly with regard to how representative the samples are.

As most of the focus groups and the survey were online it is likely that the people who took part were those who were more confident using technology and who could access the required technology, such as a laptop, tablet or smartphone. This may explain the younger age of participants in both the focus groups and survey. Partly as a result of being online, it is likely that the focus group and survey respondents were more representative of people with mild and moderate learning disabilities rather than people with severe and profound learning disabilities. We tried to mitigate this in a number of ways in the focus groups, by allowing people to have a support person present with them, providing the questions in advance to give people a chance to prepare their answers and offering the option of one-to-one interviews as an alternative. However, we were unsuccessful in including people who do not use words to communicate, and their experience of employment warrants further research.

The proportion of focus group participants and survey respondents in paid work was higher than other data sources about employment rates among people with a learning disability have found. While we approached a large number of organisations to assist us with recruitment for the focus groups and distribution of the survey, the organisations who were most responsive were self-advocacy groups (many of whom pay their self-advocates) and employment support organisations. This may explain the higher rate of paid employment among participants.

Despite attempts to share via local organisations in the devolved nations, the survey had a very low response rate from people based outside of England.

As a result of the challenges described above in finding organisations to take part in the employer interviews, many of the interviewees were recruited via their involvement with employment support services organisations. This means that interviews with the representatives of organisations that do not currently employ people with a learning disability are more likely to be representative of organisations with an interest or commitment to improving their diversity and inclusion.

Part A: People with a learning disability

What do people with a learning disability want when it comes to work?

This research question was addressed in both the online survey and in the focus groups, with the focus groups allowing for more in-depth exploration around what people with a learning disability want from work.

Type of job

In both the survey and the focus groups participants were asked what their perfect job would be. We did not restrict this to paid jobs only as we wanted to hear what people's aspirations are, paid or unpaid. In the focus groups we encouraged people to be aspirational. There was a wide and varied response, with relatively few jobs being mentioned more than once. Forty-eight people in the focus groups, three people who were interviewed and 125 people in the survey described their perfect jobs. The diagrams illustrate the huge range of jobs that people aspire to.

Perfect jobs according to focus group and interview participants

Fiction writer · Work in IT · Training people in using IT · Pub manager · Teaching · Actor · Cleaning · Spa therapist · Campaigner · Work with animals · Farming · Researcher · Animal care · Football coach · Receptionist · Post-production film editor · Work at a pet shop · Work with older people · Work in the arts · Politics · Genealogist · Setting up own photography business · Teaching people to use computers · Work at a self-advocacy organisation · Trustee at self-advocacy organisation · First aider · Childcare · Work in retail · Office work · Speaker in the Senedd · Quality Assessor · Work in a hotel · Cook · Administration · Ice cream taster · Visiting lecturer · Game developer · Car mechanic · Tennis player · Barista · Work in science / medicine · Chairman of self-advocacy group · I don't know · Work in a library · Work at a garden centre · Youth worker

Perfect jobs according to survey participants who have a job currently

Work in a bridal shop
Work for the council
Paramedic or nurse
DJ
Helping people
Work for the railway
Tour guide
IT
Work at sports centre
Work in an office
Work in a restaurant
Volunteer
Improving services for people with learning disabilities
Work in a café
Barista
Actor
Work in a warehouse
Supporting people with learning disabilities
Vicar
Education and training
Engineer
Self-employed
Artist
Social worker
Work in the travel sector
Work on a farm
Managing director
Work in a clothes shop

Perfect jobs according to survey participants who do not have a job currently

Work in a warehouse
Director
Work with children
Expert by Experience
Set up own charity
Entrepreneur
Construction
Sports
Cabin crew
Delivery driver
Travel agent
IT
Fashion retail
DJ
Work in a café
Firefighter
Illustrator of children's books
Healthcare assistant
Paramedic
Chef
Cleaning
Work in a restaurant
Dog grooming
Work for a charity
Personal trainer
Advocate
Work in a nursery
Waitress
Work in a shop
Mechanic
Hospital porter
Administration
Work in a supermarket
Receptionist
Work with older people
Work in an office
IT technician
Working with people with mental health problems
Work in a library
Work with animals
Photographer

In terms of current employment, the survey asked those people in paid work what type of job they do. The highest responses were:
- Work in an office (17%)
- Work in health or social care (17%)
- Work in a bar, restaurant, café or hotel (11%)
- Work in a shop (11%)

Importantly, 24% selected 'other' which highlights that the categories included in the survey did not fully capture the range of roles people are employed in (n=54, see Graph 5.).

Graph 5. Type of job held by survey participants who have a paid job

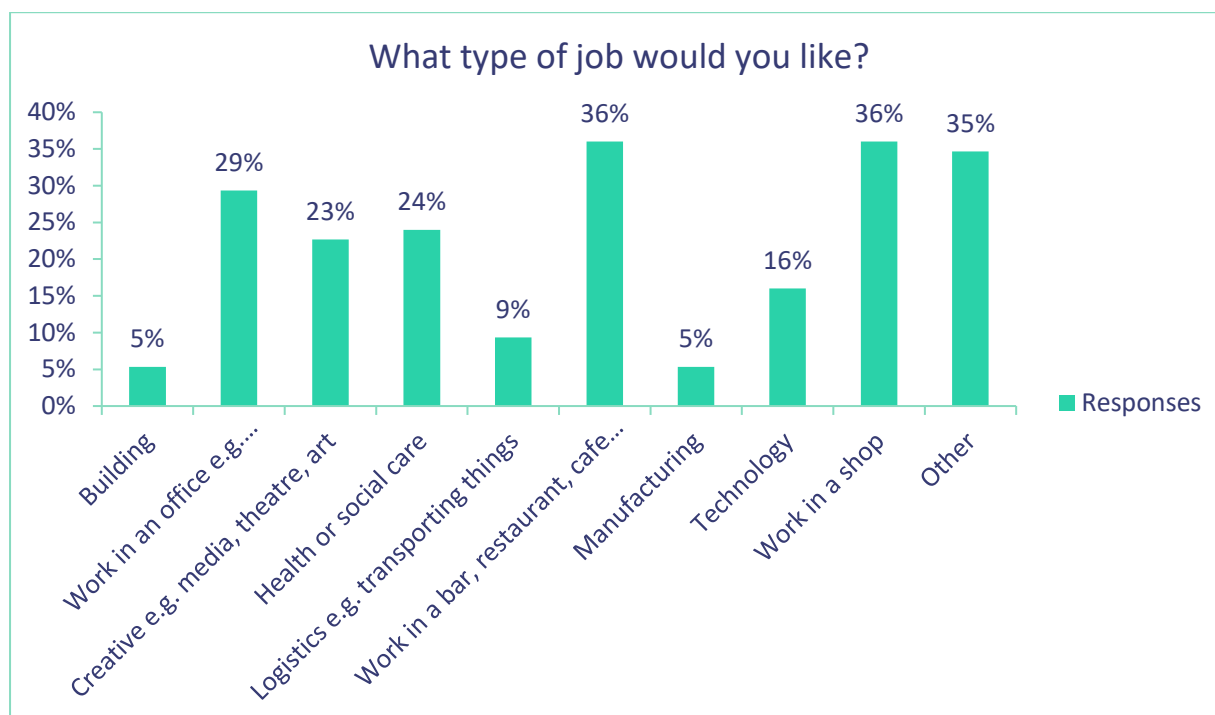**What type of job do you do?**
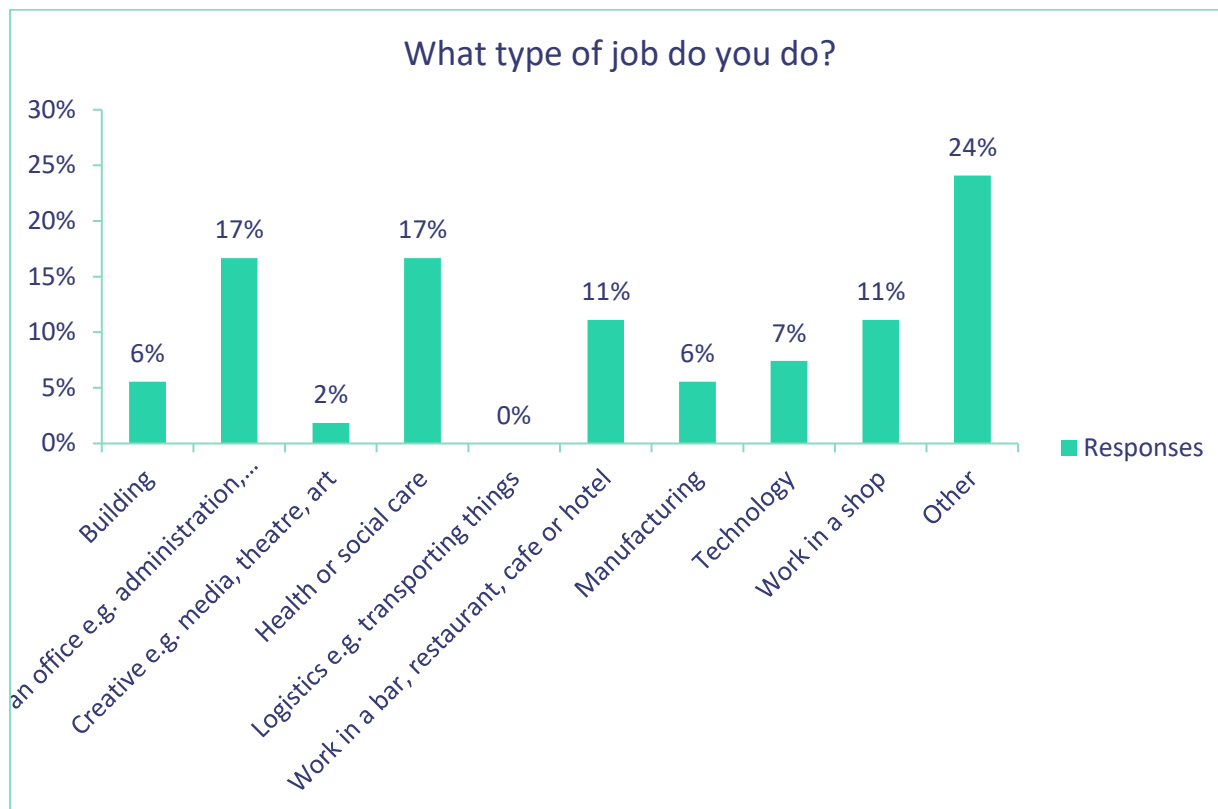
The survey asked those who were not in paid work, but would like to be, what paid job they would like. The highest responses were:

- Work in a bar, restaurant, café or hotel (36%)
- Work in a shop (36%)
- Work in an office (29%)

Over a third (35%) selected 'other' again emphasising that the list in the survey did not capture the full range of jobs people are interested in (n=75, see Graph 6). This corresponds with the findings around people's perfect job which also highlighted the very broad range of jobs people would like.

Graph 6. Aspirational job sector of survey participants who do not have a job currently

What type of job would you like?

Bar chart values:
- Building: 5%
- Work in an office e.g...: 29%
- Creative e.g. media, theatre, art: 23%
- Health or social care: 24%
- Logistics e.g. transporting things: 9%
- Work in a bar, restaurant, cafe...: 36%
- Manufacturing: 5%
- Technology: 16%
- Work in a shop: 36%
- Other: 35%

■ Responses

Paid or unpaid

From the outset of the research, we wanted to be open about what people considered to be work, and we did not want to limit this to paid employment only. As outlined above, 42% of survey respondents were in paid work. In the focus groups 40% of people were in paid work. In the survey we asked those who do not have a paid job whether they would like a paid job and in the focus groups we explored in more depth how people feel about getting paid, how important it is to them and the reasons for this.

Importance of getting paid

For many people, getting paid was important. In the survey, of the respondents who did not have a job, 86% said they would like to have a paid job (n=94, see Appendix, Graph 11.). The survey asked people in paid work what the three best things about their job are. The highest response was 'getting paid' with 49% of people selecting this response (n=55, see Graph 7,).

In the focus groups, people identified a range of reasons that getting paid was important to them; sometimes for the money itself and sometimes for what it represented. Getting paid can enable people to pay their bills and live independently:

> *"It means I can contribute at home and not depend on my family for money." (Focus group participant, Scotland)*

"I've lived independently in recent years so I've had to pay bills and other expenses." (Interviewee, England)

For some people, it is important in enabling them to support their families:

"I stack shelves which is really hard work and I really like to get paid.... I've been saving up, I quite like to save up for the future and doing different things with my daughter...." (Focus group participant, England, Group D)

"I have a 4-year old son, and by doing paid work I can financially support his up-bringing." (Focus group participant, Scotland)

Getting paid can enable people to save money or spend it on the things they choose, whether that is holidays, going out or buying things:

"I like getting paid... I put it in the bank... for meals and holidays." (Focus group participant, England, Group D)

'it would make a huge difference...my sister's big birthday is coming up and I'd be able to afford to buy her a nice present. I'd be able to do other things, I'd love to be able to go on holiday." (Focus group participant, Scotland)

"getting paid is great because it allows me to save up money where I'm able to spend money on goods and I'm able to have a good life ... go to places, go to friends, socialising" (Focus group participant, Northern Ireland)

It can also have a positive impact on how people feel about themselves, with people describing how it makes them feel valued, respected and rewarded:

"It was good... People showed me respect for once." (Focus group participant, Northern Ireland)

"Having a paid job makes us feel a lot more valued." (Focus group participant, Wales)

"That's how I like to get paid, it's to do work and to feel happy inside of me, like I've earnt it." (Focus group participant, England, Group D)

Ambivalence about paid or unpaid work

The survey found that just 14% of people who do not have job said that they would not like a paid job (n=94, see [Appendix](#), Graph 11.). In the focus groups a minority of people were ambivalent about whether they got paid or not for their work and did not feel strongly either way:

"It's good [to be paid] a wee bit, but it's not the end of the world if I don't get a paid job." (Focus group participant, Northern Ireland)

One person who had been doing voluntary work for 15 years enjoyed what she did and did not feel strongly about moving to paid work, despite engaging with an employment support organisation. Others talked about how doing something they are interested in is more important to them than being paid:

> *"I don't really mind, I'm not bothered about it... It's more doing something I'm interested in"* (Focus group participant, England, Group B)

Some people, particularly those working for learning disability organisations or charities, felt that making a difference in the job that they were doing was more important than whether it was paid or not:

> *"Getting paid is the icing on the cake...it is more important to me to make a difference."* (Focus group participant, Scotland)

In one focus group where three people were working as self-advocates, doing both paid and unpaid work, there was consensus that doing something they felt strongly about was more important than whether they got paid.

What is important to people

The focus groups and the survey explored what is important to people when it comes to work. The survey asked people in paid work to identify the best thing about their job by selecting up to three things from a list (see Graph 7.).

Graph 7. The three best things about their job, as rated by survey participants with a paid job

What are the best things about your job? Pick up to 3 things (n=55)

Earning money	49%
Helping other people	38%
Learning new skills	36%
Having something to do	31%
Feeling good about yourself	29%
Doing interesting work	25%
Meeting new people	20%
Spending time with the people you work with	15%
Getting to travel	11%
Something Else	9%

In the focus groups, this was explored using people's perfect jobs to open up conversation about what they want from work. Some clear themes emerged from the groups, most of which align with the survey findings.

Making a difference

In the survey, 38% of people selected 'helping other people' as one of the best three things about their job, the second highest response after 'getting paid' (n=55, Graph 7.). People across the different focus groups talked about wanting to make a difference, help people or contribute.

Some people talked about helping particular groups of people through their work, including homeless people, children, young people, older people and LGBT people.

> *"I do the church and help with the homeless, that's unpaid work... I enjoy giving, looking out for other people" (Focus group participant, England, Group D)*

> *"Helping people, like old people... getting out and going out" (Focus group participant, England, Group C)*

Some talked about wanting to help other people with a learning disability to have their voice heard or advocated for:

> *"Making sure people are looked after properly and cared for" (Focus group participant, England, Group D; in reference to her work as a Quality Checker)*

> *"Hopefully I can be a spokesperson for [organisation] ... cos unfortunately they don't do really anything for people with learning disabilities, they don't really involve people with learning disabilities." (Focus group participant, Northern Ireland)*

> *"We love doing it because we are passionate, we are talking on behalf of our members... Some of them can't stick up for themselves and that's what we love to do" (Focus group participant, England, Group D)*

Or to be a role model for people with a learning disability:

> *"I have got a bit of a dream of what I want to do, I'm a freelance photographer, I want to have my own business... and help people with learning disabilities to become photographers themselves... I want to help other people live their dream" (Focus group participant, Wales)*

One young person who has a physical disability talked about having a job where she was a role model for others with physical disabilities and another young person talked about wanting to be a youth worker to be a role model for other young people.

Social aspects of work

In the survey, 20% of people in paid work identified 'meeting new people' and 15% of people identified 'spending time with the people you work with' as one of the three best things about their job (n=55, see, Graph 7.).

People in the focus groups talked about the importance of the social aspects that work brings. They talked about the importance of being with colleagues or feeling part of a team:

> *"X and X are the best people I like working with, we have a laugh".*
> *(Focus group participant, England, Group D)*

> *"I just loved the team environment and the atmosphere" (Interviewee, England)*

Others talked about enjoying getting to meet new people, staff or customers, either in the job they do or in terms of what they hope for from a job:

> *"I'm a people person, I love working with people." (Focus group participant, Scotland)*

One person who works in a pub described:

> *I like being with people, around them, talking to them (Focus group participant, England, Group C)*

Several people highlighted how difficult working remotely during COVID lockdowns had been. One person described going to the office for meetings before COVID, now joining meetings from home via Zoom or Teams:

> *"It's good to have all this technology but it's not really the same." (Focus group participant, Northern Ireland)*

For one person the lack of social contact during lockdowns had a particularly detrimental impact:

> *"When we had lockdown it was very hard for me because it was always on Zoom... it was very hard. It stressed me out because we couldn't go into the office.. I did have a breakdown. Now we're in for the work I'm happier." (Focus group participant, England, Group D)*

Some people in the focus groups described the role work plays in getting them out and about or giving them a structure to their days. The survey found that 31% of people in paid work identified 'having something to do' and 11% of people identified 'getting to travel' as one of the three best things about their job (n=55, see Graph 7.).

Following an interest or passion

In the survey, 25% of people in paid work identified 'doing interesting work' as one of the three best things about their job (n=55, Graph 7.). People in the focus groups talked about wanting to work in an area where they have an existing interest, hobby or passion.

> "My perfect job is working at a pet shop because I'm an animal lover and I have pets at home" (Focus group participant, England Group B)

Many talked about wanting to develop a current hobby into a job, particularly in the area of creative arts and sports. Acting, work in the film industry, being a swimming instructor, playing tennis, coaching football, being a game developer, gardening, cooking and photography were all mentioned.

One paid self-advocate who worked for a learning disability organisation described the overlap between his interest and paid work:

> "I love research, it's something I do in my spare time anyway and I'm into my politics so that's the campaigning side... It's a hobby slash work. I love it.... I love my hobbies, but I also love doing them at work." (Focus group participant, England, Group D)

How people feel about themselves

In the survey 29% of people in paid work identified 'feeling good about yourself' as one of the best three things about their job (n=55, see Graph 7.). It was also clear in the focus groups that work is important to people in terms of how it makes them feel about themselves. Some talked about how work or work experience has given them self-confidence:

> "It made me feel great about myself cos it made me open up, come out of my shell" (Focus group participant, England, Group B)

> "[it's important] to feel confident and to know that you can achieve something paid or unpaid." (Focus group participant, Scotland)

Others talked about how important work was in giving them a sense of purpose or achievement:

> "One of the things that [job] has done is motivated me... it motivates me where I'm doing something, I have a purpose in life." (Focus group participant, Northern Ireland)

> "I make the farm welcome and stuff, I can go back and say I've had a good day" (Focus group participant, England, Group B)

Two people talked about how it was particularly important to them to look smart in their work describing how it would make them feel good about themselves.

Skills development

It is important to some people that work gives them the opportunity to develop new skills. The survey found that 36% of people in paid work identified 'learning new skills' as one of the best things about their job, the third highest response after 'getting paid' and 'helping other people' (n=55, Graph 7.).

In the focus groups people said:

> *"I love learning new things, having a challenge, and keeping the customers happy."* *(Scotland)*

> *"Since I've been there I've been growing and growing, I didn't know anything about people with learning disabilities at first."* *(England 25+ in paid work)*

Others talked about wanting a job that uses their existing skills, for example computer or people skills. Some of the people working for learning disability organisations recognised the importance of using their lived experience in their jobs. A small number of people talked about wanting an opportunity to gain qualifications through work, or opportunities for progression.

Summary

Hearing from over 200 people with a learning disability about their career wishes and aspirations, it was clear from the range of answers given that people's goals and dreams are as varied and unique as they are. People's aspirations for work are informed by their individual interests, passions, past experiences and personalities. Therefore, there were no particular sectors or roles that people with a learning disability want to work in.

Different people that we spoke to placed emphasis on different aspects of work. Some people are motivated by meeting and being with people, others want to follow their interests or hobbies in a work environment; some want to help other people, others are seeking a sense of identity or self-respect.

For some people with a learning disability, doing what they enjoy or feel strongly about is more important than the financial reward. For many however, getting paid is important both in terms of life choices, what it enables them to buy or do, and for what it represents in terms of independence or feeling respected and valued.

People with a learning disability have individual hopes, goals and aspirations when it comes to work. It is clear from the evidence collected that any kind of

support to help people with a learning disability gain or retain work needs to explore people's hopes and dreams as well as their prior experiences and perceived limitations.

What impacts the aspirations and barriers experienced by people with a learning disability when it comes to work?

While there is existing research and literature around barriers to work for people with a learning disability, as part of this research we wanted to explore these in-depth and ensure that our understanding of barriers is current. To address this research question, the barriers and enablers to work were explored both in the survey and through the focus groups. The survey asked people who are in work what the best and worst things about their jobs are, and asked people who are not in work whether they want a paid job and what is stopping them. As part of the focus groups, we used the imagery of a snakes and ladders board game. We discussed the ladders (things that support and enable work) and snakes (things that challenge and get in the way of work). People in the focus groups identified a range of ladders and snakes both when trying to get work and when in work.

Snakes

The 'snakes' that people talked about in the focus groups can be broadly summarised into the following main areas.

"The benefits trap"

As described above, 86% of people responding to the survey who do not have a job said they would like a paid job. Of these people 45% identified 'worried about my benefits' as something that is stopping them from getting a job. This was the most common reason people identified (n=74, see Appendix, Graph 12.). The survey also found that 20% of people in paid work identified 'problems with benefits' as one of the three worst things about their job (n=55, see Appendix, Graph 9.).

A discussion about benefits took place in five of the seven focus groups. In some this was initiated by the participants; in others it was in response to probing of the focus group facilitator and met with a strong reaction. It was clear that people have a firm belief that the hours of paid work that they can do are restricted by the benefits that they are on.

In some cases, this was based on their own experience:

> *"A lot of people say, why don't you get a proper job? I think, how could I get a proper job? ... I had a proper job and because of me and my wife's claim it really mucked everything up."* (Focus group participant, England, Group D)

However, for others it was unclear whether this was based on an understanding of the rules relating to their own benefits, or a general and widespread belief that people with learning disabilities cannot work more than 16 hours:

> *"People with learning disabilities you can only do 16 hours of paid work, if you do any higher than that you lose your benefits."* (Focus group participant, Wales)

> *"It's the benefit trap, you can't do more than 16 [hours] and that's it, it's gone."* (Focus group participant, England, Group D)

One person who was not working, said she was on Personal Independence Payment (PIP) but was not sure what other benefits she received. She was engaged with an employment support organisation but had not received any advice around how paid work would affect her benefits:

> *"My main concern when I finally get a job is will my benefits stop or carry on."* (Focus group participant, England, Group B)

Two people in the young people focus group talked about being worried about their benefits stopping if they got a paid job. Given their age, these people are likely to be on Universal Credit which is intended to encourage people into work and ensure that people are better off working.

Concerns about the impact of paid work on benefits entitlement is deterring people doing more hours as well as from getting a paid job at all:

> *"That's why I do 10 till 12 at the moment because of my benefits"* (Focus group participant, England, Group C)

Among the survey respondents in paid work 54% did under 16 hours a week (n=54, see Appendix Graph 8.) and 18% identified 'not enough hours' as one of the worst three things about their job (n=55, see Appendix, Graph 9.). While we do not know the reason for people working under 16 hours or the reason that people are not working as many hours as they want, alongside the evidence from the focus groups this suggests that people may be deterred from doing additional hours of work because of the benefit system.

One person reported being sanctioned by Jobcentre Plus as they had not understood the requirements of the benefit, further adding to a general fear and apprehension around the system.

The welfare benefits system is complex; people with a learning disability can be on a range of benefits including Universal Credit, Employment Support Allowance, Incapacity Benefit, Disability Living Allowance (DLA), PIP, Carers Allowance, and get differing support towards rent, mortgage and council tax. The rules related to work, hours and pay vary depending on the benefit received and the 16-hour rule does not apply to everyone or every benefit. Even where the benefit is not related to income or capital, such as DLA or PIP, being in work can be taken by the DWP as evidence that the person is not eligible for these benefits (SCIE, 2021). It is clear from both the survey and the focus groups that fear and uncertainty about the impact of paid work on benefits is a significant barrier to people working or working the hours that they want.

Experiences of discrimination and poor treatment

We found that experiences of discrimination or poor treatment were common and came up in six of the seven focus groups. People talked about feeling discriminated against on the basis of their learning disability when trying to get a job:

> *"It was like, this is how we feel about you, because of the disability that you have we don't think we can go any further. And it was like, but you haven't seen what I can do, you're just going off my disability which I don't think is fair... it's like they stereotype before they get to know me which is unfair... As soon as they hear the words disability, they don't wanna know you"* (Focus group participant, Wales)

Others talked about discrimination in the job. One person looked back at a job he'd had a long time ago recalling that he had been paid less than a colleague who had been doing less work:

> *"One of those members of staff that I worked with he was getting £4.40 and I was getting £2.40. I was getting less than him and I was doing more. It was just so hard."* (Focus group participant, England, Group D)

Some people talked about being bullied or treated badly at work:

> *"There used to be a bit of bullying going on... I was scared. I tried my best to be brave."* (Focus group participant, Wales)

They talked about being asked to do things other people would not have been asked to do, such as more hours or menial tasks:

> *"I was there for 10 years and then I found out I was being used as a lackey; they were using me in the end... I was hoovering, that's not me, I was hoovering, getting the milk, making teas and coffee, that wasn't me, I was just wasted"* (Focus group participant, Wales)

Some experiences of being treated badly were from colleagues:

"And some of the staff there - a lot are racist or rude, overruling me..." (Focus group participant, England, Group D)

Other times it was poor treatment by managers:

"It was like they were seeing how much they can pile on you before you cracked. I remember most days I'd be coming home from work and I'd be like... what an absolute rubbish day. They were piling loads more work on to me than anybody else" (Focus group participant, Wales)

Another person talked about being treated rudely by customers in a supermarket.

Several people described discrimination on the basis of other factors as well as learning disability, which compounded their experience of feeling discriminated against and excluded. Among the focus groups people described discrimination on the basis of being a wheelchair user, epilepsy, vision impairment, dyslexia and autism.

Racial discrimination was an issue for some people of colour in the focus groups. One person described *"questions, so many questions"* about his right to work in the UK to the extent that he lost out on a job offer because of the time it took. Another felt that he was losing out on opportunities because of his age as internships and apprenticeships are usually for young people.

"Apprenticeships should be open to all ages not just 16-25yrs" (Focus group participant, Scotland)

Most people responded to discrimination and poor treatment by walking out of their jobs rather than feeling able to challenge or address discrimination or bullying:

"I've had a bad experience working in a clothes shop. I told them I've got a learning disability. They asked me to put numbers on tags and I asked for help. They went nuts on me. I've walked out." (Focus group participant, Wales)

"I had it at work experience where two people were talking behind my back and I just walked out..." (Focus group participant, England, Group C)

"Before I got a paid job I used to work in a charity shop, they did that about me as well, talked behind my back, so I just walked out as well." (Focus group participant, England, Group C)

It is clear that discrimination and poor treatment of people with a learning disability in the workplace is rife and the findings from the focus groups suggest that the most common way that people deal with it is to leave the job, rather than address or challenge it.

Limited professional support

The survey found that 35% of the people who do not have a job and would like a paid job, said that 'not enough support to look for a job' was stopping them from getting a job. This was the second most common reason people identified (n=74, see [Appendix](#), Graph 12.).

Some people in the focus groups reported the impact of having no support to look for jobs:

> *"For me it's about knowing where to start and how to find a job. It's really difficult to know where to begin with job search and stuff." (Focus group participant, England, Group B)*

Many of the people participating in the focus groups had received some form of formal employment support, much of it good (see 'ladders' section of the report). However, some people reported employment support workers or job coaches who had not worked well with them:

> *"She wasn't very good, she didn't get what I really wanted..." (Focus group participant, England, Group D)*

> *"My [organisation] worker, she's not very helpful... I used to hate her, me and her did not get on, telling me what you can and can't do she was – telling, not suggesting." (Focus group participant, England, Group C)*

Others reported the lack of support of Jobcentre Plus staff when they want support to look for work:

> *"Jobcentre Plus is a waste of time... All that they care about is getting people off of benefits, not about getting people jobs." (Focus group participant, Scotland)*

> *"If I look for a job it's hard for me, if I go to the Jobcentre they will ask me different questions... ask me questions I cannot know." (Interviewee, England)*

In some cases, even where people did not identify a lack of employment support or poor support as a 'snake' themselves, it was clear to facilitators of the focus groups that high quality support would be beneficial in their situation.

In terms of in-work support, the survey found that 20% of respondents say they received no support to do their jobs (n=54, see [Appendix](#), Chart 10.) and 9% of people in paid work identified 'not enough support at work' as one of the three worst things about their job (n=55, see [Appendix](#), Graph 9.).

One person, who lived in supported living and is doing ad-hoc paid work described how they were limited in what work they could take up because it had to fit with their support hours. The survey found that 7% of people in paid

work got support from a personal assistant to do their job, suggesting that ability to work for some of these people is likely to be influenced by the number and time of support hours received.

Locality and transport

The survey found that 15% of the people who do not have a job but would like a paid job identified 'no jobs in my area' as something that is stopping them from getting a job (n=74, see Appendix, Graph 12.). Some people in the focus groups talked about the limited jobs in their area limiting their prospects for finding work:

> "I live a long way away so it makes it really hard for me to get a job... there are no buses for me either. There are no pubs, or shops, there ain't nothing" (Focus group participant, England, Group C)

Limited public transport can make independent travel impossible with people having to rely on family members to get to work:

> "I live up in the countryside – very rural. Mum and Dad have to take me to work, it would be nice if I didn't have to rely on them." (Focus group participant, Northern Ireland)

Organisational structures and support

There are structures and processes in place in many organisations that get in the way of people with a learning disability getting or maintaining a job.

The application processes that organisations use can act as significant barrier to people applying for jobs:

> "Application forms that I have to fill in, that's hard for me to understand" (Focus group participant, England, Group B)

> 'The hoops you have to go through' (Focus group participant, Scotland)

> "I cannot read it.... I see office title, I think its admin but it might not be (Interviewee, England)

The survey found that 23% of the people who do not have a job who would like a paid job identified 'application forms aren't accessible' as one of the things stopping them from getting a job and 14% identified 'job adverts aren't accessible' (n=74, see Appendix, Graph 12.). People in the focus groups identified application processes that are online only as a challenge. Given that most of the focus groups were online, this could be even more of a factor for others with a learning disability.

Within organisations there are barriers as a result of internal organisational processes, for example complex IT systems:

"The portal [to book days off] has been a big struggle, I've never seen a portal like it before… there are holidays I can't get off and I have to work them, it has been a bit of a struggle…There were holidays I booked up with my daughter and my mum, then all of a sudden I can't get them off" (Focus group participant, England, Group D)

People also talked about inaccessible communication within organisations (for example not having things in easy read, or not communicating in a way that suits the person's needs) and physical inaccessibility for wheelchair users.

Linked to the barrier around the benefit trap, several people highlighted the challenge around organisations offering insecure or zero-hour contracts which are particularly challenging when combining them with benefit income.

As well as the processes and structures within organisations that create barriers for people with a learning disability, people in the focus groups also talked about the lack of understanding about learning disabilities in organisations they had worked in. This was particularly from managers:

"The management didn't understand me, they don't make things in easy read communication, they didn't understand me." (Focus group participant, England, Group D)

"My boss was giving me all these jobs and she was like, why is [she] stressing out, she just didn't realise that she needed to slow down a little bit to give me time to do one job at a time." (Focus group participant, Northern Ireland)

Other people talked about managers not being available or not listening. Several people talked about the negative impact a change in manager can have on their experience at work, from one who has a good understanding of learning disabilities to one who does not.

The survey found that 9% of people in paid work identified 'the managers' as one of the three worst things about their job and 5% identified 'the people you work with' (n=55, see [Appendix](#), Graph 9.).

Qualifications, skills and experience

Focus groups participants talked about a lack of the right qualifications getting in the way of getting the job they want:

"Every job, even customer services, you need a Level 2 Customer Services qualification…for Apprenticeships you need at least a C grade in English and Maths… There are a wide variety of jobs in [the area], but you can't even apply for them due to the qualifications…" (Focus group participant, England, Group A)

The survey found that 22% of the people who do not have a job who would like a paid job identified 'don't have the right qualifications' as something that is stopping them from getting a job (n=74, see [Appendix](#), Graph 12.).

There was a particular frustration where individuals felt they had the skills needed for the job, but experienced a lack of flexibility in considering transferable skills over qualification requirements:

> *"They don't seem to recognise transferable skills... their rigidness is really annoying, often I can't even apply for jobs even though I know I have the skills." (Focus group participant, England, Group A)*

One person talked about wanting to get into care work and feeling frustrated that his experience of caring for his grandparents was not considered as relevant experience:

> *"If I can't get the job I can't get experience." (Focus group participant, Scotland)*

Although volunteering and work experience helped some people to get paid work (see 'ladders' section), it should also be noted that some people who had been volunteering for some time in the hope of securing a paid role had not yet been successful in doing this. Someone in the young person's focus group who wanted a paid job had done work experience, internships and voluntary work for several years. While she has had interviews, she has not managed to get a job, and she is told this is due to a lack of experience.

The survey found that 30% of the people who do not have a job who would like a paid job identified 'don't have the right experience' as something that is stopping them from getting a job. This was the third most common reason people identified (n=74, see [Appendix](#), Graph 12.).

Attitudes of self and others

A small number of people talked about the attitudes, aspirations or expectations of other getting in the way of getting a job. One person talked about his parents telling him he wouldn't be able to work:

> *"I did ask my mum if I could work and mum and dad said no because no-one don't want to employ me" (Focus group participant, England, Group C)*

One person in his late 40s had completely given up the idea of work as a result of being repeatedly told throughout his life, including by Jobcentre Plus that he cannot work as he can't read and write. A young person in her early 20s who had never worked firmly believed that she could not work due to her dyscalculia, and it was clear that this was something she had been told repeatedly.

The survey found that 22% of the people who do not have a job who would like a paid job identified 'other people don't think I should get a job' as what is stopping them from getting a job (n=74, see [Appendix](#), Graph 12.).

People are also held back by their own lack of confidence or self-belief:

> *"You can be a barrier for yourself, put yourself down, think you're not worth it, you can't get a job" (Focus group participant, England, Group A)*

> *"I suppose for me it's a lack of confidence in a certain skill that prevents me from taking things further." (Interviewee, England)*

In particular, people talked about feeling like they had lost hope after repeated knock backs from job applications:

> *"The hard thing for me is when I apply for jobs and I get an email saying your job application was unsuccessful. I find it very hard to search for other jobs." (Focus group participant, England, Group B)*

One person talks about how it feels when employers don't respond to job applications:

> *"I feel like I'm being ignored and disregarded." (Focus group participant, England, Group A)*

Other reasons

Although this did not come up specifically in any of the focus groups, a small number of people (n=5) identified physical or mental health as a reason for not wanting or not being able to do paid work in open text questions in the survey. Another person identified caring responsibilities. While these are small numbers, it emphasises that the barriers to work faced by people because of their learning disability may be compounded by barriers they experience for other reasons.

Ladders

In general people found it more difficult to recognise and talk about 'ladders' than 'snakes' and unsurprisingly many of the areas that people did talk about mirrored the 'snakes'.

Professional support

People talked about support they had received from different professionals at various points in their lives. This started at school with a small number of people talking about the good employment support or advice they had received at school. One of the people in the young people's focus group described the help he had received through a post-16 employment advisor and

another described the *"amazing"* experiences and opportunities she had received through school:

> *"They helped me believe that although I am a wheelchair user I can still get a job."* (Focus group participant, England, Group A)

Many more people talked about the help they had received through employment support organisations – job coaches or employment support officers, advisers or practitioners. The survey showed that 33% of people in paid work get support from a job coach to do their job (n=54, see Appendix, Graph 10.).

> *"I got help from [job coach] to get the jobs. [She] has been amazing"* (Focus group participant, England, Group D)

People were supported by a wide range of different organisations, describing several different job preparation activities including:

- *Help with CV* – writing, formatting, editing and printing.
- *Help with job searching* – help with searching, understanding job adverts and what the job entails, the application process, completing forms and producing cover letters.
- *Interview support* - including interview advice and tips, interview skills course, mock/practice interviews, support travelling to the interview and support in the interview itself.

People also talked about the help of the in-work support they received – either paid jobs or supported internships:

> *"I ask lots of question and it helps me to learn from other people...having someone there with me showing me what to do was really helpful. Even if I made mistakes they could help me."* (Focus group participant, England, Group A)

Another person described how during work experience, his employer did not initially understand how to support him. His Employment Officer helped him to improve his employer's understanding around learning disabilities:

> *"Once he saw me working with the team he thought I really fit in."* (Focus group participant, Northern Ireland)

One individual talked about the role their Employment Officer had in helping to increase awareness of employers and colleagues about learning disabilities through training:

> *"My Employment Officer signed them up for a training programme, these people who ran it had a learning disability as well, and it really*

helped them understand people with learning disabilities and how to work along with them and explain things." (Focus group participant, Northern Ireland)

Organisational support

In terms of applying for jobs, one person talked about how they had benefited from an organisation's policy of guaranteed interviews for people with a disability:

> *"[organisation] has a guaranteed interview scheme for people with disabilities. So if I matched the skills that they're looking for then they can invite me for interview."* (Interviewee, England)

The survey showed that 46% of people got support from someone at work to do their job (n=54, see Appendix, Graph 10.). People in work or who had been in work, talked about the different ways that the employer or organisation supported them to work. They reflected on the importance of a supportive manager, team and organisation that treats them well:

> *"Its gotta be a good organisation and gotta be a good team that understands you"* (Focus group participant, Wales)

> *"The people I work for are very good to me"* (Focus group participant, Northern Ireland)

They talked about some specific things the organisation had put in place to support them that had worked well, including providing a work buddy, providing opportunities to observe or shadow others, being flexible and allowing extra time:

> *"If it's your first day, if the employer is telling you what to do they need to show you what to do and how to do it, instead of just telling you."* (Focus group participant, Northern Ireland)

15% of survey respondents in paid work said that they had been provided equipment to do the job and 13% said they were given extra time to do the job (n=54, see Appendix, Graph 10.).

Communication was particularly important for people. Things people found helpful were getting emails before meetings, so they know what is going to happen, having expectations made clear, receiving clear instructions, having regular meetings with their boss and the being able to talk to someone if there are any problems:

> *"Ease them into the organisation and just go a wee bit slower to explain things and make them feel welcome. Just help them along and be open if they're not sure what's going on so they feel enough to go back to you*

and ask a question and build up a relationship, so they understand you and you understand them." (Focus group participant, Northern Ireland)

Attitudes of self and others

Just as a lack of support from family members could be a 'snake', encouragement and support from family members could be a 'ladder':

> *"My family is really supportive which helps me so much"* (Focus group participant, England, Group A)

The survey showed that 20% of people in paid work had support from their family to do their job (n=54, see [Appendix](#), Graph 10.). Family members provided practical support such as help with writing CVs and one person described how her family were planning to move from a rural area to a city to support her to pursue the career and opportunities she wants.

In one focus group there was a discussion about the importance of people's own self-belief in getting where they want. People mentioned confidence to put themselves forwards, motivation to achieve their goal and taking initiative.

> *"Confidence...you obviously want the confidence to go up that ladder and reach your goal in life and have your dream job... You need to put yourself forwards"* (Focus group participant, Wales)

Qualifications, skills and experience

Several people felt that work experience, either arranged through their school or college, or with the help of an employment support organisation, had helped them by giving them confidence, inspiring them with job ideas, or gaining experience to help with applying for jobs. Similarly, there was a discussion in the young people's focus group where two of the people talked about having done several supported internships and placements which had given them confidence and the chance to try out jobs.

Although, as described above, some people choose to do unpaid voluntary work over paid work, others have found it helps them to secure paid work:

> *"Having had experience as a volunteer with charities helped me get my foot in the door...its all about your experience."* (Focus group participant, Scotland)

Others are hoping that their voluntary work will lead on to, or help them get, paid work.

> *"I think they're just starting me off as voluntary and then once I've gained up my experience they will start to pay me."* (Focus group participant, Northern Ireland)

One person talked about using her own lived experience of having been in a secure unit to help her with a job doing care and treatment reviews and as a quality checker for learning disability services.

Several people emphasised the importance of having qualifications to put on their CV, or training in specific skills related to the job they want – such as cooking and food hygiene.

Locality and transport

Some people mentioned the importance of their jobs being local - within walking distance or being able to get public transport - to sustaining their jobs. Two people talked about the travel training they had received being helpful in preparing them for work and one talked about a travel buddy. The survey showed that 15% of people in paid work get help to travel to work (n=54, see [Appendix](#), Graph 10.).

Summary

The research question seeks to understand what affects people's aspirations around work and the barriers and enablers that people with a learning disability experience when it comes to employment. These can be summarised as operating in the following levels:

- *Cultural – entrenched attitudes such as stigma and prejudice towards people with a learning disability, and layers of disadvantage that people with a learning disability may also experience including race, physical disabilities, long-term conditions, poverty.*
- *National and UK-wide – The welfare benefit system and Jobcentre Plus processes operating across the UK.*
- *Local – Location can determine the availability and quality of employment support, opportunities for supported internships and inclusive apprenticeships, the kind of job opportunities available and whether they are accessible in terms of transport.*
- *Organisations – The structures and processes that individual organisations have in place including application processes, qualification requirements and IT systems, and the support that they provide people with a learning disability.*
- *Employment support services – Availability and quality of employment support provision.*
- *Individual – individuals' own aspirations, support systems and prior experiences of employment, either positive or negative.*

It is clear that action to increase the levels of employment among people with a learning disability will need to address the barriers at all levels.

Part B: Employers

What else can be done to help address the known barriers to people with a learning disability gaining and maintaining work?

This section draws on the 18 interviews with employers, 11 of whom currently employ someone with a learning disability and 7 of whom do not, to address the research question. It starts by outlining the barriers identified by the employers that we interviewed. Employers who currently employ someone with a learning disability reflected on both the barriers that they experienced when they started to employ people and the barriers to employing more people with a learning disability in their organisation. To consider what can be done to address these issues, this section then goes on to explore some of the things that employers told us worked well in terms of recruiting and supporting employees with a learning disability. The challenges experienced in recruiting employers and resulting limitations as outlined in the methods section should be acknowledged when reflecting on the findings described here. Due to the different nature and size of the organisations, the participants interviewed have a range of roles and responsibilities within their organisations, for simplicity and to maintain anonymity, in this section we refer to them all as 'employers'.

Barriers

Employers from both groups talked about the barriers to employing people with a learning disability, both from within their organisations and external factors.

Inaccessible recruitment processes

Firstly, employers reflected on how their recruitment processes create a barrier to people with a learning disability when applying for jobs in their organisation. One employer who does not employ people with a learning disability reflected on how their current practices such as using a recruitment firm, requiring a lot of reading and having online application forms only could all be barriers:

> "We only work with certain recruitment firms and they may not represent anyone with learning disabilities. The first stage of the application process requires them to read a lot.... All our adverts are

online" *(Private sector employer, does not employ people with a learning disability)*

Another barrier that was identified by more employers, several of whom were clearly frustrated by it, was the qualification or experience requirements for job roles which excluded many people a learning disability from applying:

> *"I just want to know that I have someone that can do my job role, and not what qualifications and experience they have." (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)*

One of the employers highlighted that the biggest barrier in his organisation was the banding of jobs which are very rigid around specific qualifications and experience meaning that people with other types of skills and experiences including lived experience, cannot apply. Another employer gave an example of the challenges that fixed qualifications requirements caused in offering an intern (in this case with a physical long-term condition) a paid job:

> *"The hard bit was after [individual's] internship ended. We wanted to keep [him] because he is an asset and [he] wanted to stay - he loves the team. The [organisation's] apprenticeships are really complicated; lots of requirements and you have to have four GCSE at grade 5 and [he] doesn't have that." (Public sector employer, does not employ people with a learning disability)*

Inaccessible organisations

Employers acknowledged a range of barriers within their organisations in terms of the systems and processes that they use or the structures in place that create challenges for people with a learning disability. One employer who does not employ people with a learning disability mentioned the challenge around physical accessibility due to their offices being in a listed building and another identified inaccessible IT systems:

> *"Infrastructure is an issue - not all of our IT systems are set-up to be fully accessible for people with disabilities... So that for us is still a challenge, very much a challenge for us at the moment." (Public sector employer, does not employ people with a learning disability)*

Others talked about rigid processes in general and the lack of flexibility getting in the way of making the organisation accessible for people with a learning disability:

> *"It's infuriating because it's within our gift to do something about that - it's our organisation. There's a lot of rigidity around some of our processes... the rigidity in our policies... we inhibit ourselves by not being*

flexible when we could be." (Public sector employer, does not employ people with a learning disability)

An example of this was given by another employer who felt that their current set shift patterns (which included working four nights in a row) could be difficult for some people with a learning disability.

While some employers recognised these more physical and tangible barriers, others voiced their views that there was something more inherently inaccessible within their organisation. For example, two organisations highlighted a perceived lack of suitable roles for people with a learning disability within their organisation:

> *"We are a relatively small organisation. Relatively few of our jobs are entry level ones."* (Private sector employer, does not employ people with a learning disability)

> *"Job type is the first and foremost [challenge] for us.... So, for us it's to identify roles that would be supportive to somebody."* (Public sector employer, does not employ people with a learning disability)

Several employers talked about the concerns over risk and safety. An employer who does not currently employ people with a learning disability identified safety concerns as the biggest challenge:

> *"We have safety critical roles in our organisation, that would not lend themselves to be opened up to any demographic from a talent perspective. So you know a [example job role], for example... we would need to make sure that whoever was in that role was able to carry that role out to the required standard from a safety perspective."* (Public sector employer, does not employ people with a learning disability)

Another concern among some employers who do not employ people with a learning disability was the fast-paced nature of their organisation or sector:

> *"[in this organisation], it's a very, very busy environment, very reactive and sometimes it's more difficult to deliver the EDI programme in [this type of organisation] because the priorities are very different."* (Public sector employer, does not employ people with a learning disability)

> *"We are a relatively small organisation and work is quite fast with lots of information to process. We would have to think differently about how we do things."* (Private sector employer, does not employ people with a learning disability)

While some of the systems and processes could be relatively easily addressed, the bigger challenge is the belief held by some that their organisations are fundamentally not suited to people with a learning disability because of the

nature of the roles, concerns about safety and risk or the pace of the organisation.

Not getting the right support

While many employers had had positive experiences of working with an employment support organisation (see [What Works? Section](#)) it became clear through the interviews that some had received limited or poor support. One employer talked about the difficulties she had experienced with a job coach who she felt supported the individual but did not support them as an employer This was resolved with a change of supported employment organisation:

> *"My first experience was hard, and I think other employers could be put off by this." (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)*

In other interviews, the lead researchers, both of whom have extensive knowledge and experience in employment support, identified examples where employment support organisations were engaged but had not provided a high quality of support. This resulted in missed opportunities or slow progression for organisations. This was picked up in several interviews involving different employment support organisations. This is something that is difficult for employers themselves to identify as they do not know what good support can look like, as acknowledged by one employer:

> *"I know there are a couple of different places I could go to get some advice. Whether or not it would be the right advice, I suppose that would be difficult for me to say." (Public sector employer, does not employ people with a learning disability)*

It was clear from other employers that there was also a lack of knowledge about where to go to find the right support. Not getting the right support at the time they need it could deter employers from employing people with a learning disability.

Knowledge, awareness and attitudes among employers

Employers acknowledged their own, or their colleagues', lack of knowledge and awareness about learning disabilities as a barrier to employing people with a learning disability:

> *"We do have roles in the organisation at entry level, but we just don't know how to do it... We need that awareness, knowledge, training and support to get it right." (Private sector employer, does not employ people with a learning disability)*

Although some of the individuals interviewed had received some training about learning disabilities, none of the employers' organisations routinely offered training around learning disability awareness.

Linked to this limited knowledge and awareness about learning disabilities, it was evident that some employers had a real fear of not doing or saying the right thing to people with a learning disability:

> *"There is a little bit of a fear factor. We've had some workshops and discussions with people in the organisation of what could they do to encourage more people with disabilities into [the organisation].... somebody was very open and honest and said 'I would worry that I wasn't doing the right thing to help this person... I'm worried I would get it wrong'."* (Public sector employer, does not employ people with a learning disability)

> *"We need more knowledge as we want to set someone up for success. We are fearful of getting it wrong."* (Private sector employer, does not employ people with a learning disability)

Some of the employers who do employ people with a learning disability observed a similar apprehension among other people within their organisation:

> *"People are worried that they may say something that will offend - that is still a problem"* (Private sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

> *"Nine out of ten people are nervous and over-compensate for someone's difficulties"* (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

Two employers whose organisations who are seeking to, but do not currently, employ people with a learning disability, described their frustration at the reluctance of others elsewhere in the organisation to come on board:

> *"We had a meeting with all the usual people you would expect including HR and our AD [Assistant Director] and it just didn't get progressed. I went on leave and nothing happened, which is really disappointing. There's a long way to go for us."* (Public sector employer, does not employ people with a learning disability)

> *"I mean for me, it was a no brainer. We've got some students here who would love to come and work for [us]. Absolutely. Come, come, come. But well, I will be totally honest and say at the beginning it was a struggle to try and advise departments how easy it would be to recruit... why did it take that long for departments to sign up?"* (Public sector employer, does not employ people with a learning disability)

One employer whose organisation does employ people with a learning disability described a similar reluctance in other departments in his organisation. They felt that it was prejudice and stereotype that was getting in the way of recruiting more people into a supported internship in the organisation:

> *"We still have a pocketful of managers who are prejudiced and have a stereotypical view and even though we have been doing this for nine years, they are still unwilling to dip their toe in the water and take a student."* (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

Some other employers gave examples of overt prejudice they had encountered within their organisations. For example, one person told us about a colleague who holds the view that people with learning disabilities should not work in the organisation at all. Another employer shared a story where someone with a learning disability was discriminated against by a colleague and it was overlooked in a way that the interviewee felt it would not have been had the person had a different protected characteristic.

Perceived resource implications

Employers held varying views about the perceived financial costs of employing someone with a learning disability. One employer who does not employ anyone with a learning disability felt that costs would need to be considered. He compared it to a situation where an existing employee had developed a health condition where they needed a separate office to be built at considerable cost:

> *"If we are to put reasonable judgments in place for an individual, it is about the reasonableness test of cost.... Was that a reasonable thing for us to do, to spend £50,000 of taxpayers' money building a new office for an individual to sit in for three days of the week?... So that didn't happen. So that decision making process would need to be very, very robust and very structured."* (Public sector employer, does not employ people with a learning disability)

Research suggests that the typical costs of reasonable adjustments for people with a learning disability are as low £75 (Mencap, 2017).

Another employer whose organisation does not employ anyone with a learning disability felt that in the context of uncertain financial landscape and an emphasis on profitability, the biggest barrier in their organisation would be cost. However, other organisations who do not employ people with a learning disability felt that there would not be costs incurred or that the costs would not be an issue.

Of those employers who do employ people with a learning disability, none of them identified costs as having been a barrier. One employer (of a small organisation who employs one person with a learning disability) thought that employing this person probably had incurred costs but he felt this needed to be balanced out with the higher costs he would have had if there had been high turnover of staff in the position. Two employers said that they had incurred the costs of working with an employment support organisation but did not think there were any other costs. None of the other employers that have employed people with a learning disability reported significant additional financial costs.

Some emphasised the cost savings as a result of better retention, reduced turnover and lower recruitment costs (see [Motivations section](#)), one employer felt there could be a cost saving through job carving and one reported that job carving[3] had led to efficiency in the service and a reduction in staff costs.

It was however, felt by some employers that there was a resource implication in terms of additional time taken (which could ultimately have a financial cost) either for the person to do the job or for the time taken to support the person do the job:

> *"The biggest challenge I would say is time and what I mean by that is that sometimes we find that people with learning disabilities take a little longer to get the hang of things - a bit more time and patience needs to be invested in helping them." (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)*

> *"One of the biggest concerns that employers have is 'will I be able to cope? Will I be able to give someone with SEND the time they deserve?'... people are worried about whether they can devote enough staff time." (Private sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)*

External factors

Finally, there were several factors external to the organisations which people identified as barriers. Some employers felt challenged by ensuring they were complying with equalities legislation. One employer talked about grappling with the need to treat everyone equally in a competitive interview with the need to provide reasonable adjustments. Another employer told us about their plan to recruit through one learning disability organisation which had been discouraged by the Equality Commission on the grounds that it could be unlawful to only recruit from a pool of people with a learning disability.

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[3] *Job carving refers to analysing tasks in a job role and swapping an element of the job duties to make the most of individual skills*

Two employers mentioned difficulties with Access to Work, finding it bureaucratic or restrictive:

> *"I find Access to Work is difficult... I thought Access to Work might be able to pay for that [employing their own job coach] but I have heard that they don't pay on time and it takes ages to process the applications." (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)*

A small number of employers reflected on how progress that had been started or they hoped to make had been paused or slowed down as a result of COVID.

> *"It would have been great had we employed people back in 2020, I would have been able to give you more of an experience from my point of view. But unfortunately, I've got to that stage and then we were all working from home so we weren't able to employ then." (Public sector employer, does not employ people with a learning disability)*

What works?

In order to understand what can overcome the barriers to employing people with a learning disability, we asked employers whose organisations do employ people, what has worked in their organisation. Employers told us about a range of actions and approaches that have worked, many of which directly relate to both the barriers identified by employers and the 'snakes' identified by people with a learning disability.

Supporting people with recruitment

Across the employers there were several ways that employers had made the application process more accessible to people with a learning disability. People talked about having produced application forms and packs in alternative formats and reviewing job specifications and descriptions:

> *"We're adjusting our recruitment process to make it less administrative, less process driven and being a bit more flexible." (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)*

One person had made a case to have lived experience acknowledged as being equal to qualifications for certain jobs in his organisation.

Some employers also talked about offering alternatives to standard interviews. Three organisations had offered working interviews and one offered job trials:

"People come in and trial and see what it's like, see whether they like it and whether they think they could do it with some support." (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

Supporting people in the organisation

Employers talked about the different ways that they supported people with a learning disability within their organisation and what they had learned. One of the most important aspects identified was good communication – asking and listening to what the person needs:

"It's very important to check that communication is right at the very beginning and to understand what they need…. it's just about finding ways to make things work." (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

"It's just about putting info into smaller sections so they can digest it, understand the content and then coming back and recapping so they have time to process it." (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

Some talked about practical ways they had helped people communicate:

"We have had one student who did not verbalise at all… we gave him cards. It worked really well and he has been employed." (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

Another employer talked about using one-page profiles of their employees with learning disability which are shared with other employees to support them to understand how to communicate with people with a learning disability.

Other practical ways of supporting people within the organisation included:

"We can provide flexible working hours, later starts or more hours over less days or vice versa." (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

"Prompt cards to help people remember certain things about their jobs." (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

"Think about reasonable adjustments like pictorial job lists, getting the right equipment, environment and hours." (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

"Little whiteboards that they can carry around with them, that they have their next task written on. And then when they've completed it, they can wipe it off and someone writes the next task." (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

> *"We can transfer people if the environment is not right for them."* (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

Two employers provided training or support around travel to ensure people can get to work and back home.

Some employers highlighted the importance of providing training and support for the people who supervise employees with a learning disability:

> *"You have to invest a lot of time in supporting the supervisors as well"* (Private sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

> *"Getting the right supervisors on board has been really important. They have to be open minded and supportive and up for it and understand what the impact of this can be on people's lives."* (Private sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

Two of the organisations had employed job coaches internally and reported positive outcomes.

Working with employment support organisations

Several employers talked about how working with employment support organisations supported their companies to find the right people:

> *"They give us the people who are matched to our vacancies, and this works well."* (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

> *"[supported employment organisation] has helped to ensure that people are matched to jobs based on their skills, and are treated like anyone else."* (Private sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

Employers particularly stressed the valuable role of job coaches:

> *"The job coach is so important in ensuring they get the support they need."* (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

> *"It's having that time to invest in a colleague who needs a bit of extra support and that's where job coaching is really helpful - where you've got external support coming in. That is really helpful in terms of helping the person settle in and getting them up to speed in terms of their job and integrating into the workplace."* (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

Employers also made it clear that in order to retain people in their organisation, the support needed to be ongoing. As well as supporting people to get the job, it was about supporting people in the role and supporting people to develop and progress.

Employers also emphasised the role of employment support organisations in supporting the employing organisation as well as the individuals with a learning disability. One employer said that the job coaches were a really important source of support for the department as well as the individual. Another emphasised their own learning:

> "Through working with [supported employment organisation], as well as being helpful in terms of supported employment, it's also been quite good in terms of being educational for me." (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

One employer described how the employment support organisation they had commissioned provided training for the organisation:

> "The training will cover things like how to work best with a young person with special educational needs, how to break down tasks, how to communicate." (Private sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

Trainee/internship schemes

Several of the employers had trainee schemes, supported internships or apprenticeships in their organisations and recognised some real benefits of this, particularly as an entry route into the organisation. One employer who has been working for 15 years to bring people with a learning disability into the organisation explained how they focus on apprenticeships and internships as entry routes as they are "risk free and work well for the service".

Employers reported varying rates of progression from supported internship to paid employment:

> "I think we started with [supported internship organisation] in 2009 and by 2018, 39 different departments had hosted 101 different interns. 64% of them graduated and very few departments have not employed someone. I think we have 44 people currently employed, it may be more." (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

> "We have one person in digital marketing, three people in IT, one in admin, three in operations... One, whose passion is horticulture is... working with the garden team... At [organisation] there's nobody who

has not got employment from a supported internship." (Private sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

"What I do know, as a result of those two programmes [10 week traineeships] is that there were 14 individuals who went through the programme and that three of them still have jobs today and they are incredibly happy in their roles and the employers are incredibly happy with them too." (Private sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

One organisation that is in the process of starting supported internships was very clear about the intention that this will lead on to paid employment:

"So when we were seeking the placements, we made it very clear that this is the idea behind it. So, it's not a work experience, it's an internship that should end up with a full-time employment or part-time employment if they choose to, but employment at the end of it. So all of the departments are aware of that and hopefully we'll get employment as a result of the internship." (Public sector employer, does not employ people with a learning disability)

Right person for the right job

It was clear from the employers, whether they recruited through an employment support organisation, supported internships or another route, that the key to making it work is getting the right person for the right job.

Employers emphasised the importance of working to people's strengths:

"It is a question of understanding people's gifts and talents" (Private sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

They have got so many abilities and it's getting employers to focus on those abilities and not the disabilities. (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

Then identifying suitable roles:

"[It's about finding] a job that we need doing. So not just inventing a job - because it's tokenism to employ someone with a disability - but because there is actually a job there that needs to be done and someone with a learning disability can do the job just as well as someone without one, with a bit of help." (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

It is then important to match the person's strengths and abilities to the roles. Some employers referred to 'job carving' or 'job shaping' to match the role to the person and the benefits of this:

"So we tend to start out with the standard job description and then based on the individual's need, do some job carving and adapt it to what would be suitable for them." (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

"Some of my staff are terrible at certain things, and I think [job carving] is a good thing to get everyone working to their strengths." (Private sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

Having additional resources

A small number of organisations referred to financial resources that supported their organisation to employ people with a learning disability. One explained that their (large) organisation had set aside money to fund the supported employment and another had found that Access to Work had supported what they were doing:

"We have applied for access to work grants for additional kit and job coaching... really practical things like if transport is difficult, get an Access to Work grant for a taxi to and from work." (Private sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

Summary

Employers have identified some significant and persistent barriers to employing people with a learning disability within their organisations, operating at the following levels:

- *Cultural - A widespread lack of knowledge and awareness about learning disabilities with various consequences, ranging from inaction out of fear of doing the wrong thing, to examples of prejudice and discrimination.*
- *National or UK-wide - Mechanisms that are supposed to help, such as equality legislation and schemes such as Access to Work, do not always provide the support that employers need.*
- *Local - When employers want support it is not always available, or they do not know how to find it.*
- *Organisations – Organisational recruitment procedures, structures, processes and systems are inaccessible.*
- *Employment support services - When they seek support from employment support organisations, they are not always getting the help or the quality of support that their organisation needs.*

The perceived financial costs of employing someone with a learning disability is a concern for some employers; however, employers who do employ people

with a learning disability tend to report minimal costs or costs being offset by savings through good retention.

Despite these barriers, we heard some really positive accounts from employers, whose organisations do employ people with a learning disability, describing what has worked well in their organisations. They talked about various actions taken during the recruitment process and within their organisations to support people with a learning disability.

Most of these organisations have benefitted from working with employment support organisations. This works well when both the employer and the individual with a learning disability receive support and the support is ongoing. Supported internships, traineeships and inclusive apprenticeships have also worked very well to provide an entry route into organisations, with many people going on to paid employment.

Whether or not people enter the organisation through these routes, employers emphasised the importance of matching the individuals' skills with the job role and ensuring that they find the right job for them.

What would motivate employers to employ more people with a learning disability?

This section draws on responses to questions about what would motivate or encourage employers to employ more people with a learning disability. For those employers who are not currently employing people with a learning disability, we explore what would motivate or encourage them to do so. For those employers whose organisations do employ someone with a learning disability we look at what did motivate them to do so, what has encouraged them to keep employing people with a learning disability and what would encourage them to employ more people.

Increased knowledge and awareness of learning disabilities

Employers identified a range of ways that they felt that increased knowledge and awareness of learning disabilities would work to encourage their organisations to employ more people with a learning disability. Some felt that general awareness-raising about learning disabilities was needed to address the general fear and apprehension that was described above:

> *"People with learning disabilities are not scary people and we need to get others to understand what they can do."* (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

> *"I think awareness raising that people with a learning disability are not hard work. You know, there's this perception, I think out there that it's a lot of effort from an employment point of view. Because you have to adapt things and change things and provide more support and it could cost a lot of money - and all of those things are really, once you work with someone with a learning disability, you get to understand that it's not that difficult."* (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

In terms of how to do this, two employers mentioned awareness training had been, or would be, helpful in their organisation. One employer felt that employers need opportunities to meet people with a learning disability and two felt a national campaign would help:

> *"I would like to see more national campaigns around this. There are pockets of good practice here and there but... We need more national*

work on these issues." *(Public sector employer, does not employ people with a learning disability)*

Some employers recognised the specific support that they need from expert organisations to employ people with a learning disability:

"I think the support I would like is from experts to help us get it right and push us to do something different. Maybe because, we aren't the experts, we're under no illusion that we'll be able to do this on our own. We absolutely would like some support from a professional organisation that will help us achieve this goal." (Public sector employer, does not employ people with a learning disability)

Seeing positive examples

Employers talked about the importance of others being able to see that it works and to see positive examples:

"I think if more people could just see it and what is possible, how easily it can be done, it would encourage more people to try. It should just be our normal practice and seeing it would give others confidence than we could all do more." (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

"I think it's just about being able to share success stories really making sure that those penetrate to the right people." (Private sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

Two employers who are not yet employing people with a learning disability, but have done planning and preparation to do so, felt that their success would send an important message to others within their organisations and outside of them:

"I think we need this pilot project to prove to our other departments how easy it is." (Public sector employer, does not employ people with a learning disability)

"I think if other organisations see that we do this, if we're promoting it, if we're successful in doing it, that can only send out good, positive messages to other organisations. Visitors coming in, seeing us employing people a lot of people with disabilities can only be good. " (Public sector employer, does not employ people with a learning disability)

In terms of how to share success stories, one employer had prepared a paper for other departments, another had produced a guide for other employers and a third had shared stories in both internal and external newsletters and produced a video.

Fulfilling a business need

Some of the motivation from employers comes from a direct response to a business need, particularly in regard to filling positions. Several employers referred to employing people with a learning disability as a way to address the current shortage of workers, particularly in health, hospitality and manufacturing:

> *"We have a massive skill shortage and I think that we need to open up our eyes to a wider range of avenues to recruit from." (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)*

> *"The workforce is changing dramatically. With the whole pandemic, there's a lot of people who have disappeared from the workforce and it's very difficult to get people, you know and here where I live, there's an aging population, you know, so the workforce is aging." ((Public sector employer, does not employ people with a learning disability)*

People talked particularly about accessing a wider talent pool or considering their 'talent pipeline':

> *"A wider talent pool, especially at the moment where there seems to be a recruitment crisis across the whole of the UK... the labour market is changing ... It does widen your talent pool, from which you can recruit and that can only be a good thing." ((Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)*

> *"[Our motivation] was to make sure that we supported any colleague or supported talent coming into the business and not limiting ourselves... opening up our ability to attract as many people as we can in the organisation" (Public sector employer, does not employ people with a learning disability)*

A number of employers who do employ people with a learning disability commented on the benefits to their business through retention and reduced turnover, as a result of employing people with a learning disability. One employer, reflecting on the transient workers in his sector currently felt that he wanted to invest in someone who would be likely to stay working for his company. Other employers who do employ people with a learning disability talked about the good retention and loyalty they had experienced from their employees with a learning disability:

> *"We haven't lost anybody we took on and they are very loyal and hard-working people... We take a lot of agency people at certain times of year and maybe I am being unkind, but some don't care too much, they are not so reliable and they are more expensive." (Private sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)*

"They want the job and are committed - their attendance is very good." (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

"People with learning disabilities tend to stay in job roles for a long time because they like the consistency and continuity." (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

"We've also found that people with learning disabilities in particular are very committed and very loyal as employees, and that has really helped us to maintain consistency of staffing" (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

Experiencing the benefits of retention and reduced turnover has worked to encourage these employers to continue to recruit and employ people with a learning disability.

Experiencing wider benefits

As well as recruitment and retention, there were a number of other direct benefits to the organisation that employers talked about which have motivated them to continue employing people with a learning disability. Some employers referred to the benefits that having a colleague with a learning disability has brought to their teams:

"Some of our teams were awful and then they had a student and it changed the whole dynamic of the team." (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

"It creates positivity and it helps other people with their outlook on life." (Private sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

There are also benefits to the organisations in terms of being more representative of people who use their services:

"It is really important to me that we have someone in the service who has lived experience. I don't have that. It is important that we have people who can tell us how we can make the service better." (Public sector employer, does not employ people with a learning disability)

"It kind of reflects our [user] population... So it's about inclusivity really and giving everybody an opportunity." (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

In one case, the work the organisation was doing to involve young people and people with disabilities was a way of giving back to the community to improve relationships in an area where they are undertaking a significant building project:

"... as you can imagine, if this big... company comes along... and says right, we're gonna build [X]... here, you're going to face resentment and

a lot of barriers, really, but to show that you're really, you're giving back, I think is so, so important." (Private sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

Moral or ethical reasons

Although there are some clear business benefits to employing people with a learning disability, many of the employers were keen to stress that their motivation was primarily about it being the right thing to do:

"Just morally and ethically, we have an obligation to help them on their life journey." (Private sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

"Because it was the right thing to do and it was important that people with a learning disability had a seat at the table." (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

"It was just the right thing to do; what you have to do if you want to make a change. If you want to make a difference, you just have to do what's right. Doesn't matter if it's difficult or not. If you have funding or if you don't have funding, you just have to try and do the right thing." (Public sector employer, does not employ people with a learning disability; in reference to starting internships)

Others felt particularly strongly about the importance of employing people with a learning disability as part of a diverse workforce:

"I think it shows diversity and inclusion and I think if you have a learning disability or you are a parent who has just given birth to a baby with a learning disability, then to see somebody with a learning disability working and integrated into society, surely that must be giving them some hope." (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

"I would say that when organisations are looking at diversity and inclusivity, so many are very limited in terms of what they are looking at. They tend to think about race, religion, sexual orientation but they don't always think about disability and I would say they are missing out." (Public sector employer, does not employ people with a learning disability)

"For our customers, we want to be seen as inclusive as that is part of who we are." (Private sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)

Funding and financial incentives

There were mixed views about whether funding or financial incentives would encourage or motivate organisations to employ people with a learning disability. One employer felt that additional funding in general would help:

> *"We would be encouraged to get more people with learning disability by having resources, I think." (Public sector employer, does not employ people with a learning disability)*

There was not a consensus around financial incentives to employ people with a learning disability. One employer described how they had employed 30 young people through the Kickstart Scheme, 13 of whom have gone on to permanent employment. While none of these people had a learning disability the employer gave this as an example of how government financial incentives can work to encourage organisations to employ particular groups of people. An owner of a small business felt that financial incentives could be helpful for small businesses like his. However, others felt uncomfortable about the idea, either feeling they were not needed or feeling concerned around potential exploitation. One employer, stressing that she did not think financial incentives would be helpful said "we do it because we care."

Support from senior levels

Interestingly, five of the employers who do employ people with a learning disability spoke particularly strongly about the importance of having support from senior levels within the organisation:

> *"It was the CEO, she pulled together a meeting... They did a presentation and she said we need to support this and you will take students and back it. She was very forthright, and managers did support it and since then we have gone from strength to strength." (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)*

> *"It was X our CEO at the time. He wanted to do things differently and to give back to the community. He wanted to be approachable and would often have his lunch with the [intern] group." (Public sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)*

This is important to note as it could influence where efforts to make significant changes are directed.

External factors

Finally, a number of employers suggested that the real push for them has been, or would be, driven by requirements or expectations from forces outside

of the organisation. One employer referred to their duty, as a public sector organisation, to be inclusive and diverse:

> *"We have commitments under that as a government organisation, we have a commitment under the PSD [public sector equalities duty] that states we need to make sure that we create inclusive and diverse environments within our organisation... It is one of our commitments for our public sector equality duty. It's one of my performance objectives for this year." (Public sector employer, does not employ people with a learning disability)*

For a private sector organisation, a commitment to diversity and inclusion was a requirement of getting approval granted for their work:

> *"The project has a big commitment in terms of its legacy, it's the reason why it was signed off... [organisation} had to commit to certain things such as investing in the local community, particularly in skills development with young people, but also a commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion." (Private sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)*

One employer thought that quotas for employing people with a learning disability would help and another felt that government policy was needed:

> *"Government policy – we need a mandate." (Private sector employer, does not employ people with a learning disability)*

Some of the private organisations were also motivated by their investors, clients or customers. One employer emphasised the strong influence of their investors:

> *"Our investors are very important to us and if they asked for it, we would change immediately." (Private sector employer, does not employ people with a learning disability)*

Being inclusive is also important for some of the organisations' customers:

> *Our customers - many make decisions on price or our sustainability strategy as much as anything, but equally, it will touch some people and they will do business with [organisation] because of their values; being an inclusive and diverse organisation is an extremely positive outcome of employing people with disabilities. (Private sector employer, does employ people with a learning disability)*

Summary

Employers identified a number of factors that they believed would encourage either their own or other organisations to employ people with a learning disability:

- *Improving awareness and understanding of learning disabilities.*
- *Being able to see that it can work from organisations that have already done it.*
- *Demonstrating the benefits to the business, such as access to a wider talent pool and therefore fewer vacancies, better retention, improved staff morale and improved perception of the organisation by the public.*
- *External factors such as government policy directives or expectations from customers or investors.*

Employers identified the additional following factors that had helped motivate or encourage them to employ people with a learning disability:

- *Senior level commitment*
- *Equality legislation, policy or contractual requirements*
- *A sense that it is morally the right thing to do.*

PART C: Overarching question

What could influence a long-term UK wide change to employing people with a learning disability?

In this section we reflect on the findings from Part A and Part B to consider what could influence a change across the UK to employing people with a learning disability.

This research has heard the perspectives of people with a learning disability and employers about what stops people with a learning disability getting and keeping paid employment when it is what they want. Table 5. summarises the barriers identified by both groups of people.

Table 5: Summary of barriers

Level	Barriers identified by people with a learning disability	Barriers identified by employers
Cultural	• Discrimination and prejudice – learning disability • Discrimination and prejudice – other characteristics • Knowledge, awareness and attitudes of others about learning disabilities	• Discrimination and prejudice • Knowledge, awareness and attitudes about learning disabilities
National or UK-wide	• The welfare benefits system • Limited or poor support from Jobcentre Plus	• Equalities legislation • Limits of government provision such as Access to Work • Lack of a policy mandate

Level	Barriers identified by people with a learning disability	Barriers identified by employers
Local	• Inconsistent availability of employment support • Inconsistent availability of supported internships and inclusive apprenticeships • Local job availability • Local transport	• Inconsistent availability and quality of employment support • Inconsistent availability of supported internships and inclusive apprenticeships
Organisations	• Inaccessible recruitment processes • Inflexible qualification/experience requirements • Inaccessible organisational structures and processes • Limited support within organisation	• Inaccessible recruitment processes • Inflexible qualification/experience requirements • Inaccessible organisational structures and processes • Perceived cost
Employment support provision	• Limited or poor employment support	• Limited or poor employment support
Individual	• Lack of qualifications • Lack of experience • Self-confidence and self-belief	

The findings show some common barriers identified by both groups including inaccessible recruitment processes, inaccessible organisational structures and processes, inflexible qualification or experience requirements and limited or poor employment support. The groups also identified different barriers such as the 'benefits trap' highlighted by people with a learning disability and the perceived costs identified by some employers. While discrimination was identified as a barrier by some employers, the message was far stronger from people with a learning disability.

It is clear that there are many barriers operating at different levels, and as such there is not one solution to making a long-term UK wide change to employing people with a learning disability. Making organisations more accessible will help, but this will have a limited impact without acknowledging and addressing the very real fear people with a learning disability have about the effect of work on their benefits. Likewise, improvements to the quality and availability of employment support, supported internships and inclusive apprenticeships need

to be accompanied by efforts to tackle the discrimination experienced by many people with a learning disability in the workplace.

Through gathering information about 'ladders', 'what works' and what would motivate or encourage employers, this research has generated rich insight on possibilities for addressing the barriers at the different levels. An organisation the size of Mencap with the breadth of services, support, advice, research and policy work it delivers has the opportunity to generate change at all levels.

Reflecting on the findings, drawing on the perspectives of those with lived experience of learning disability through the RWG and expertise within the research team, we suggest a range of actions that Mencap could consider taking at each level.

Cultural

- *Promote and extend learning disability awareness training provision, delivered with people with lived experience of learning disability, to organisations – both those working with Mencap employment services and those that are not.*
- *Promote positive attitudes by sharing good news stories with employers. Mencap could consider joining some of the employer forums such as www.businessdisabilityforum.org.uk*
- *Provide information about what discrimination at work is and how to deal with it, as part of preparing for work in delivery of employment support services.*
- *Awareness raising about discrimination at work and how to deal with it through all Mencap advice and support services.*

National or UK-wide

- *Take up opportunities to use the findings from this research to feed into relevant policy consultations about disability, work and the benefit system.*
- *Consider a direct campaign around the impact of the perceived 'benefit trap' both for those on Universal Credit and legacy benefits.*
- *Ensure that accurate information about the impact of work on welfare benefits is included as part of preparing for work in the delivery of employment support services, which could be done by Mencap staff when compiling vocational profiles.*
- *Ensure that all people supported by Mencap advice and support services have access to up to date and correct information about benefits and the impact of work, particularly around Universal Credit. This needs to be done by signposting people to good welfare rights advice so that 'better off' calculations can be carried out.*
- *Mencap could consider work with government officials to advocate bringing back the linking rules that allow people to try out work so that*

they could go back on their original benefits if necessary, without loss of income.

Local

- *Work with local authorities and other partners to create opportunities to fill gaps in the provision of employment support across the UK.*
- *Look at opportunities to extend the provision of supported internships and inclusive apprenticeships to more areas across the UK, including working closely with the Department for Education funded Internships Work programme[4].*
- *Work at a local level through involvement with local area Employment Forums as part of the Internships Work programme.*

Organisations

- *Ensure that organisations understand the business case for employing people with a learning disability. Mencap's own business case for employing people with a learning disability is a useful document and could be used in conjunction with evidence from this research.*
- *Look for opportunities to share positive stories about employing people with a learning disability with organisations not engaged with Mencap or other employment support services, including through the use of a range of social media channels.*

Employment support provision

- *Continue to work with employers to recognise and challenge wider structural and process barriers within their organisations by offering positive solutions and support to implement them.*
- *Consider the needs of the employer and how those needs can be met through the wide variety of provision available through Mencap.*
- *Ensure that employment support provided by Mencap adheres to the values underpinning the supported employment National Occupational standards[5], including:*
  - *ensuring that support is individualised, and all options assume successful employment*
  - *recognising the importance of the employer as a customer of supported employment in their own right with requirements that need to be satisfied.*
- *Consider the development of traineeships for people with a learning disability over the age of 25.*
- *Require Mencap supported employment staff to undergo training in supported employment techniques including Training in Systematic Instruction through the Internships Work programme.*

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[4] See www.ndti.org.uk/projects/internships-work

[5] See www.base-uk.org/nos

Individual

- *Promote and support work aspirations and ambitions among individuals and their circles of support across all Mencap advice, services and support.*

In making these suggestions, we acknowledge our relatively limited knowledge and understanding of the full range of services, support and activity that Mencap currently provides. We have also reflected on our very positive, but limited (due to time and resource), discussion about the findings with the RWG group. In the two-hour meeting where we reflected on the findings, the benefits of having the perspectives of those with lived experience and members of the Mencap Lifestyles and Work team was very evident.

We recommend that Mencap forms a working group to focus on how the recommendations from the research can be implemented and to identify actions at each level. We suggest that this would benefit from including people with a wide range of experience, expertise and perspectives and could include:

- *People with a learning disability who have used Mencap employment services*
- *People with a learning disability who have used other Mencap advice or support services*
- *People from a wide range of Mencap teams and provision, including those involved in the direct delivery of employment and other services*
- *Employers working with Mencap*

Overall summary

This research sought to better understand what is important to people with a learning disability when it comes to work, and what can be done to help address the barriers to people with a learning disability finding and retaining work in the UK. It was conducted in collaboration with people with lived experience of learning disability, through the contributions of the Research Working Group and co-researchers with a learning disability.

What do people with a learning disability want when it comes to work?

People's wishes and aspirations for work are as unique as they are, and are informed by their interests, passions and experiences. Different aspects of work are important to different people; some common themes include following a passion, meeting people and helping others.

For some people, doing something they enjoy is more important than the financial reward. However, getting paid is important to many as it increases opportunities and enables them to support themselves and their families financially. Being paid also shows people that their contribution is respected and valued.

The survey found that 86% of people who do not have a job would like to have a paid job. This suggests that there is still a considerable 'employment gap' faced by people with a learning disability who would like to work.

What impacts the aspirations and barriers experienced by people with a learning disability when it comes to work?

Whilst people's aspirations and goals when it comes to work are varied, there are some common barriers that people with a learning disability encounter in the workplace or when looking for work.

These range from inaccessible processes in the workplace to national and cultural factors that continue to exclude people with a learning disability from employment, such as discrimination and complexities surrounding the welfare benefits system. There is also considerable variation in the employment support and opportunities available to people in different areas.

What else can be done to help address the known barriers to people with a learning disability gaining and maintaining work?

The research confirmed some significant and persistent barriers to employing people with a learning disability as identified by employers, both those operating within organisations, as well as wider local, national and cultural factors.

Employers who currently employ people with a learning disability reported what has worked well in their organisations to address the barriers identified including actions taken during the recruitment process and within organisations to support people with a learning disability. Most of these organisations benefited from working with employment support organisations. This works well when both the employer and the individual with a learning disability receive support and the support is ongoing. Supported internships, traineeships and inclusive apprenticeships have also worked very well to overcome barriers and provide an entry route into organisations.

What would motivate employers to employ more people with a learning disability?

Employers felt that more awareness and understanding of learning disabilities would encourage their own or other organisations to employ more people with a learning disability, as would seeing examples of success stories from organisations that already employ someone with a learning disability. Some felt that demonstrating the business case for employing people with a learning disability – such as access to a wider talent pool and reduced turnover - would be beneficial. Other employers felt that external requirements or expectations from the government, customers or investors would encourage them to employ more people with a learning disability.

Many employers felt that employing people with a learning disability was the right thing to do and did not need any further encouragement, although they may require some support to do so.

What could influence a long-term UK wide change to employing people with a learning disability?

The barriers excluding people with a learning disability from gaining and maintaining work are compounding across a number of levels, from individual to organisational, local to national and cultural. Any initiatives that seek to address these will need to operate at multiple levels.

We recommend that a working group with input from people with a learning disability, Mencap teams and employers is formed to consider how the findings and recommendations presented in this report may best be put into action.

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Appendix

Focus group topics

- *Introduction, ground-rules and ice-breaker*
- *What is your perfect job and why?*
- *What is important to you when it comes to work?*
- *A 'snakes and ladders' group exercise ran in breakout groups. This involved discussion of 'ladders' (the things that help people to get or do the job they want) and 'snakes' (the things that get in the way of having or keeping the job they want).*
- *If there was one thing you could say to employers about employing people with a learning disability what would it be?*
- *Demographic questions and collecting contact details.*

Online survey questions

Questions for everyone

- *Do you have a job?*
- *If yes, do you get paid for your job?*
- *Where do you live?*
- *How old are you?*
- *What is your gender?*
- *What is your ethnic group?*
- *Did you have any help to fill out this survey?*

Questions for people with a paid job

- *How many hours of paid work do you do in a week?*
- *What type of job do you do?*
- *What are the best things about your job?*
- *What are the worst things about your job?*
- *What support do you get to do your job?*
- *Thinking about the future, would you like to stay in this job or get a different job?*
- *Please tell us what your perfect job would be.*

Questions for people with an unpaid job

- *What type of unpaid job do you do?*
- *How many hours do you work in a week?*
- *Would you like to get a paid job?*
- *If no, why don't you want a paid job?*
- *If yes, what is stopping you from getting a paid job?*
- *Please tell us what your perfect job would be.*

Questions for people without a job

- *Would you like to get a paid job?*
- *If no, why don't you want a paid job?*
- *If yes, what is stopping you from getting a paid job?*
- *What type of job would you like?*
- *Please tell us what your perfect job would be.*

Employer interview topics

Interviews with employers who <u>do</u> currently employ people with a learning disability

- *Information about the organisation and roles available*
- *Experience of learning disability and any training received*
- *Experience of employing someone with a learning disability (including what motivated them, what made it possible and any expert advice received)*
- *What has worked well in terms of employing people with a learning disability in their organisation (including benefits to the company and any useful learning)*
- *Main challenges or barriers to employing people with a learning disability in their experience*
- *What would encourage employers to employ more people with a learning disability*

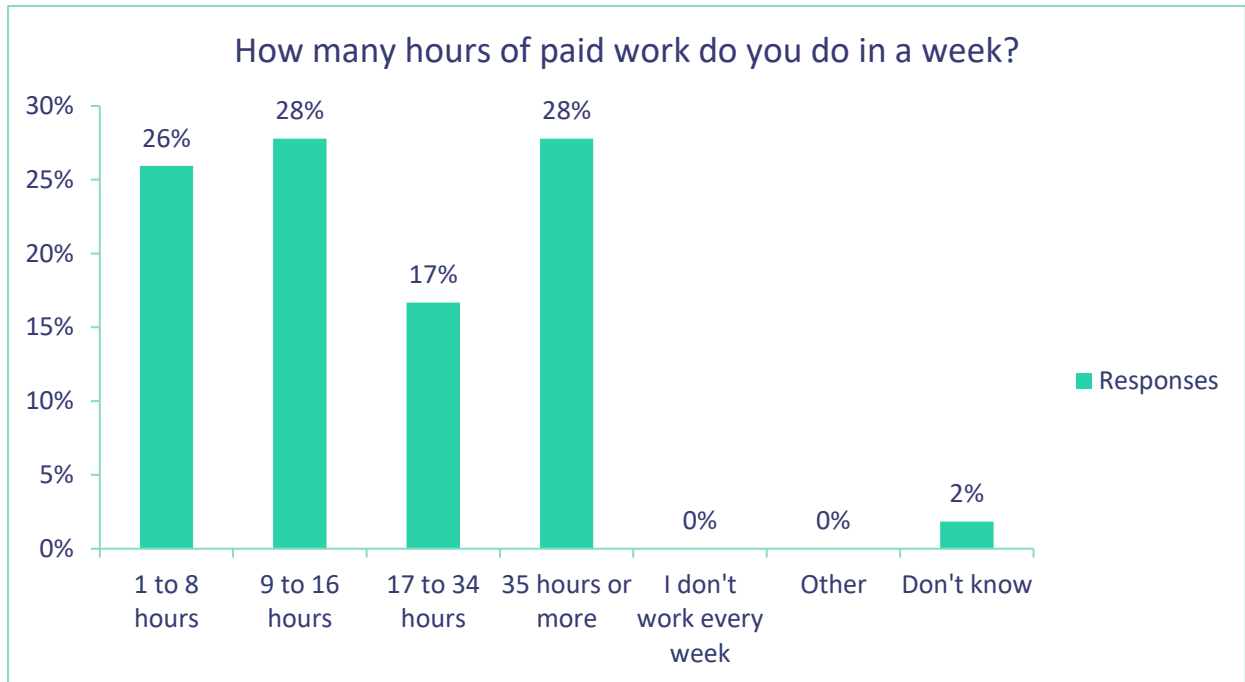### Interviews with employers who <u>do not</u> currently employ people with a learning disability

- *Information about the organisation and roles available*
- *Experience of learning disability and any training received*
- *Main challenges or barriers to employing people with a learning disability in their experience (including recruitment process and any perceived concerns)*

- *What would encourage the employer to employ more people with a learning disability.*

Graphs

Graph 8. Typical working hours per week according to survey participants with a paid job

How many hours of paid work do you do in a week?

Category	Responses
1 to 8 hours	26%
9 to 16 hours	28%
17 to 34 hours	17%
35 hours or more	28%
I don't work every week	0%
Other	0%
Don't know	2%

Graph 9. The three worst things about their job, as rated by survey participants with a paid job

What are the worst things about your job? Pick 3 things from the list (n=55)

Something Else	47%
Not paid enough	27%
Problems with benefits	20%
Not enough hours	18%
The work is difficult	16%
The work is boring	9%
The managers	9%
Not enough support at work	9%
Too many hours	7%
The people you work with	5%
No chance to learn new things	5%
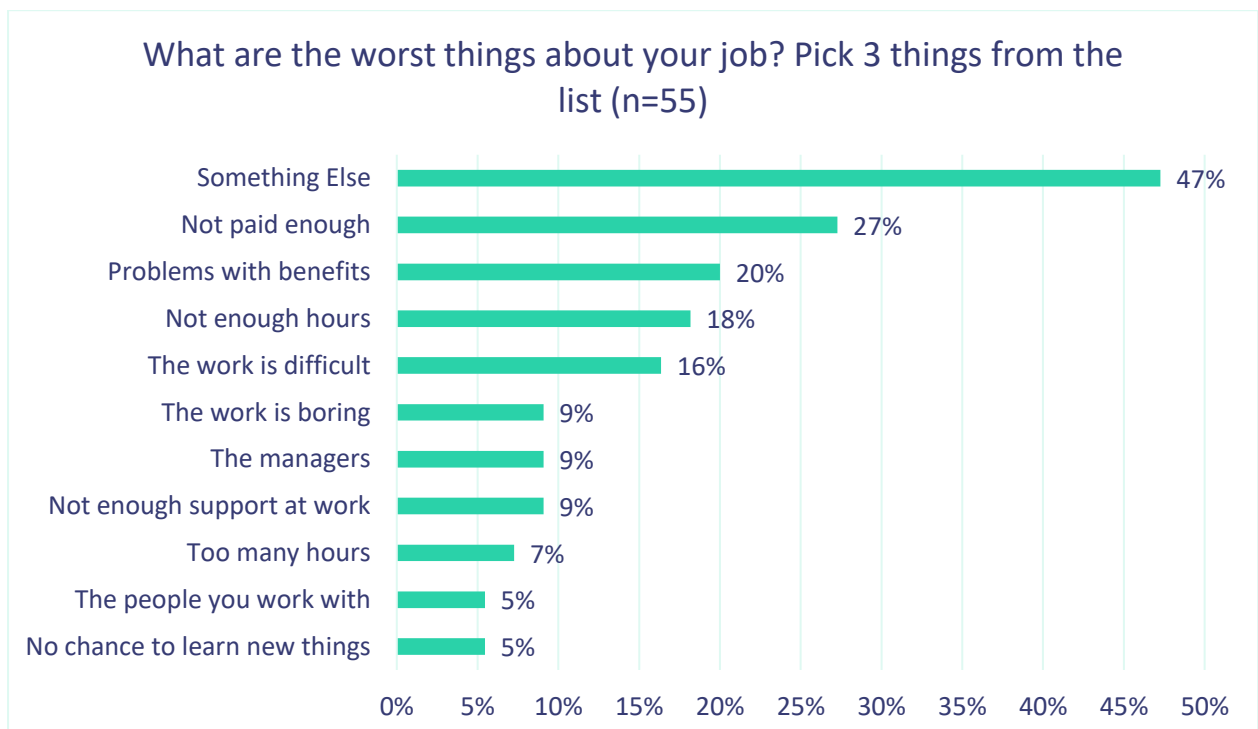
Graph 10. Support received at work, according to survey participants with a paid job

What support do you get to do your job? (n=55)

Support type	Percentage
Support from someone at work	46%
Support from a job coach	33%
No support	20%
Support from family	20%
Help to travel to work	15%
Equipment that helps with the job	15%
Extra time to do the job	13%
Something else	11%
Support from someone else	9%
Support from a personal assistant	7%
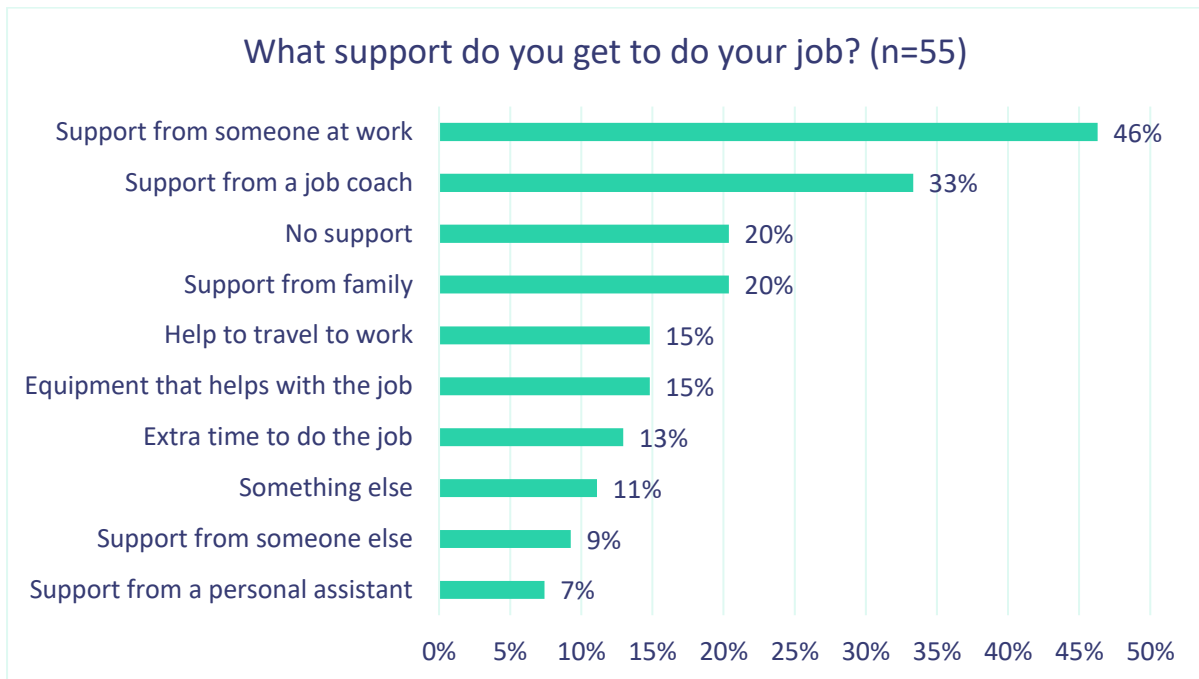
Graph 11. Aspirations for paid work, according to survey participants who do not have a job currently

Would you like to get a paid job?

Response	Percentage
Yes	86%
No	14%

Graph 12. Barriers to getting a paid job, according to survey participants who do not have a paid job currently

What is stopping you from getting a paid job?

Barrier	Percentage
Worried about my benefits	45%
Not enough support to look for a job	35%
Don't have the right experience	30%
Health problems	26%
Something else	24%
Application forms aren't accessible	23%
Other people don't think I should get a job	22%
Don't have the right qualifications	22%
No jobs in my area	15%
Job adverts aren't accessible	14%
Too busy	5%