



Barriers To and Opportunities For Employment for Those with Learning Disabilities

Final Report

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Executive Summary

In Northern Ireland, those with disabilities are twice as likely to be unemployed compared to those without a disability. The 'depression, anxiety, severe or specific learning problems or nervous disorders' disability category reports the highest levels of unemployment. It is pertinent to disentangle this category due to the range of supportive interventions this category could encompass. The aim of this project is to identify barriers to and opportunities for employment for those with learning disabilities living in Northern Ireland. This project has been commissioned by the Department for the Economy as part of the 10X Economy programme.

Stage One of this project was dedicated to co-producing and gaining preliminary data from focus group/interview schedules for service users (e.g. adults with learning disabilities in sheltered employment) and service providers (e.g. those operating sheltered employment schemes). Feedback was sought, obtained and implemented from a range of stakeholders and participants to inform Stage Two data collection.

Preliminary data collection in Stage One was comprised of eight service users and three service providers. The second round of data collection analysed multiple interviews and focus groups, which comprised fourteen service users and five service providers.

A range of barriers and opportunities were identified for service users. Employment provided social benefits for service users and allowed them to develop new skills,

which they subsequently enjoyed using to support and help others. However, service users struggled to access crucial guidance such as knowledge of regional services, financial information and more. Service users could also have negative workplace experiences such as a lack of support, completing menial tasks, and poor experiences with the general public. Service users also feared that transitioning to external employment would lead to the loss of friendships as community groups for those with learning disabilities typically run during working hours.

Service providers could effectively support users by providing a range of training, accessible tools and training, and providing clear instructions in the workplace. However, service providers experienced their own barriers to offering this support such as time-limited and conditional funding. Service providers reported that it has become more difficult in recent economic times to build relationships with external employers due to their own challenges and workloads.

Future recommendations were made from the data collection in supporting adults with learning disabilities to enter the workforce. These include: improvements in knowledge exchange; improved provider-employer relationships; incentivised buddy systems in the workplace; centralised funding support for service providers; and improved social opportunities for those with learning disabilities.

Introduction

The Disability within the Northern Ireland Labour Market Report (Department for Communities, 2023) has provided insight into employment outcomes for those with disabilities living in Northern Ireland (NI). The report found that NI had the second highest rate of disability across the United Kingdom (UK), and that those with disabilities in NI were over twice as likely to be unemployed compared to those without a disability. Unemployment rates varied across disability, with the 'depression, anxiety, severe or specific learning problems or nervous disorders' category reporting the highest levels of unemployment in NI.

It is pertinent to disentangle this category of 'depression, anxiety, severe or specific learning problems or nervous disorders' as each subcategory can encompass a range of employment capabilities and supportive interventions. For example, while interventions such as flexible and hybrid working can be beneficial to those with anxiety disorders (Bishop, 2022), those with learning disabilities may need more direct interventions such as employment support services and sheltered employment. Sheltered employment schemes provide non-competitive workplace experience to those with disabilities. Employees gain hands-on experience of the workplace and learn transferrable skills.

Following or during sheltered employment, employment support services can help these employees transition to external employment.

Following or during sheltered employment, employment support services can help these employees transition to external employment. Testimonials from service users describe how transitioning to external employment made them "really happy", how they "love [their] job", and how they are "proud of all [they] have achieved and happy with where [they are at in their] life right now" (Mencap, 2022). While testimonials emphasise the impact that employment support services can have on the lives of service users, the relatively high rates of unemployment in this population indicates challenges in reaching service users and transitioning them to employment.

To identify evidence-based solutions for overcoming these challenges, we have undertaken a multi-stage research project to understand the barriers to and opportunities for employment for those with learning disabilities in NI. This final report details the co-production of appropriate data collection tools, presents comprehensive findings from service users and service providers, and provides final recommendations based on the expanded data collection in Stage Two. Stage Two focused on refining and expanding recommendations, introducing new sub-themes, and strengthening existing ones to ensure a more comprehensive and actionable framework for improving employment outcomes for individuals with learning disabilities. This project has been commissioned by the Department for the Economy.

| Methods

Defining Terminology

The aim of this project is to identify barriers to and opportunities for employment for adults with learning disabilities. This will be achieved through gaining a variety of insights and perspectives from both service users and service providers. The following definitions of 'service users', 'service providers', 'barriers' and 'opportunities' have been used in this project to guide data collection:

Service users refers to those who wish to, have previously, or currently avail of services designed to support adults with learning disabilities to gain employment. This criteria can include participants such as: adults with learning disabilities wishing to enter an employment scheme; adults with learning disabilities who have entered paid employment following an employment support service; adults with learning disabilities currently in sheltered employment and more.

Service providers refers to employees and volunteers of organisations who provide employment and training support. While the focus will remain on organisations specifically providing employment and training support to adults with learning disabilities, we also welcome insight from mainstream employment services wishing to support those with learning disabilities.

Barriers to employment refers to the challenges faced by adults with learning disabilities in entering/retaining employment and the challenges faced by service providers in providing training and employment services for adults with learning disabilities.

Opportunities for employment refers to the benefits experienced by adults with learning disabilities who are currently or have previously been in training and employment services, alongside insight from service providers on how they have successfully supported service users and the benefits observed both to users and the wider community.

Methodology

The overall project is qualitative report collecting verbal data. Qualitative data are gathered via focus groups and semi-structured interviews of both service users and service providers. For service users, the focus group/interview schedule aims to gather information such as their experiences of employment, the benefits that employment brings/brought to them, any challenges they have experienced gaining employment and more. For service providers, the schedule aims to identify information such as the type of support offered by their organisation, whether there are barriers to offering this service, the benefits they have observed from this service and more.

This project has been divided into a Stage One and Stage Two research phase. The purpose of the Stage One phase was to co-produce and test focus group/interview schedules for both service users and service providers that are concise, easy-to-understand and capture the most relevant data from each population. Feedback on these schedules will be sought from a range of stakeholders, and participants will be actively encouraged to critique questions and suggest their own additions and changes to the schedules.

Details of the data collection tool design phase, the testing phase, and initial data captured from the tools are included in the final report. The final report will analyse all data captured during the project. The final report i will be completed on February 28th 2025.

Procedure

A Data Protection Impact Assessment for this project was conducted to ensure all data would be captured and held in a GDPR-compliant manner. This assessment was successfully completed on February 20th 2024 (Reference No. DfE/GDPR/2023-066).

Preliminary focus group/interview schedules were created for use with service users and service providers separately. Questions were designed to capture appropriate data on barriers to and opportunities for employment from the perspectives of both service users and service providers. As part of the co-production process, these schedules were circulated to both the project Steering Group and to a Clinical Health Psychologist for feedback prior to data collection.

Service providers were contacted for interviews/focus groups via email. In accordance with the Data Protection Impact Assessment, no names or contact details of adults with learning disabilities have been sought or obtained from the research team. Instead, access to adults with learning disabilities was facilitated directly through service providers who would organise a time and location to speak with adults with learning disabilities.

A Privacy Notice was sent to all service providers prior to the commencement of the focus groups/interviews. Participants were asked the questions detailed in the focus group/interview schedule. As part of data collection for the final report, data collection ended by asking participants for feedback on the questions they had just been asked. This feedback includes whether they felt any important questions had been missed and if they were happy with the phrasing of questions.

Interviews and focus groups were recorded either using a Dictaphone or through Microsoft Teams' built-in recording feature (for service providers only). Anonymous transcriptions were created using the recordings and were deleted upon the completion of the transcripts.

Data Analysis Strategy

Qualitative data was collected during the stage one and two report phases due to the focus on assessing the quality of the focus group/interview schedules. Qualitative data were analysed using Thematic Analysis. Thematic Analysis involves collating interview/focus group transcripts to identify common themes and patterns that emerge from a variety of experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Anonymised transcripts were collated into two categories: transcripts from service users and transcripts from service providers. Thematic Analysis was conducted on each collation separately to identify emerging themes from discussions. Following an initial identification of themes, these identified themes and their corresponding quotes were reviewed with an emphasis on categorising themes as 'barriers' or 'opportunities' to employment. After this second review phase, a final review phase was implemented where themes were categorised into main themes and subthemes under the umbrella themes of 'barriers' and 'opportunities' to employment.

This analysis approach has resulted in four categories of findings: opportunities described by service users; barriers described by service users; opportunities described by service providers; and barriers described by service providers in relation to employment.

Results: Participant Overview

Data were collected from a total of eight service users and three service providers in Stage One. Seven service users were aged between 18-25, while one service user was in later adulthood. Six service users were in sheltered employment as part of a social enterprise, while one service user was in paid employment at this social enterprise. During Stage Two data collection, an additional fourteen service users and five service providers were interviewed. The service providers in stage two represented individuals from organisations with the education, charities who support and raise awareness for individuals with learning disabilities and those whose support employment opportunities for individuals with learning disabilities.

The remaining 'service user' was a parent of a young person with learning disabilities approaching adulthood. Data gathered from the first focus group with service users encouraged the research team to interview family members of those who would meet the definition of 'service user' from the Methods section. The implications of this decision on Stage Two data collection will be reviewed in the Discussion section.

All service providers spoken to worked at social enterprises supporting young adults with learning disabilities. Their roles at these social enterprises included managing adults with learning disabilities in the workplace, providing and delivering training, applying for funding to deliver and extend programmes and more.

Using Thematic Analysis, opportunities for and barriers to employment were identified for both service users and service providers. These findings are presented in their respective categories.

Schedule Development and Testing

The research team developed an initial focus group/interview schedule for service users and service providers separately. Feedback was sought from these initial schedules from a Clinical Health Psychologist. Recommendations were made to these schedules such as asking the average educational attainment level service providers feel that service users achieve, asking service users about the quality of their workplace training and more. These recommended changes were incorporated to the initial schedules.

These adapted schedules were circulated to the project's Steering Group for a wider range of feedback. Recommendations from the Steering Group included asking questions related to additional training service users feel they would benefit from, how service providers initially identify and engage with service users and more. These recommended changes were also incorporated to the schedules that would be used for Stage One data collection.

When conducting interviews and focus groups in Stage One, participants were asked at the conclusion of the session how they found answering the questions and whether they felt any important questions had not been asked. From this additional question stage, we identified the importance of asking service users about their experience of transition meetings and their work experience during their school years. These recommendations were added to the finalised schedules.

Results: Service Users

Opportunities for Employment

Focus groups and interviews identified the following themes and subthemes related to opportunities for employment for service users:

Main Theme	Subtheme
Community Engagement	Socialising and Engagement Family and Community Support Sense of Purpose and Belonging
Skills and Competencies	Developing Skills The Joy of Skill Development
Community Networks and Support	Teaching Staff Advocacy Groups Success Stories

Opportunities for Employment Theme 1: Community Engagement

Subtheme 1: Socialising and Engagement

Speaking with service users and providers gave insight into why users wished to join sheltered employment. A service provider described how a previous sheltered employment scheme was so successful that the users could not stop talking about it, particularly about speaking with and serving customers:



All they were chatting about was their next shift in [redacted]...we didn't expect to hear such good things.

“I remember sitting in the morning having my coffee, and all they were chatting about was their next shift in [redacted] and how many customers they served and how many [products] they made...we didn't expect to hear such good things.” – Service provider

“Our job is to listen [to the young adults], that's really important” – Service provider

“

I wanted to work because I saw my friends working there too.

This encouraged the service provider to expand to more sheltered employment schemes, allowing more young adults to socialise with others and engage with the community. Service users enjoy the ability to see their friends at work and to work alongside others:

“I wanted to work because I saw my friends working there too.” – Service user

“All my friends work there too.” – Service user

Service providers will work alongside users in these employment schemes to supervise and provide support. This added an additional layer of enjoyment to their employment as they had great relationships with the service providers supporting them:

“

"[Service provider] supported you and made you feel really comfortable?"
"Yeah."

“So [service provider] was really good to you, is that right? They supported you and made you feel really comfortable?” - Service provider

“Yeah.” – Service user

“Do the staff support you and help you?” – Service provider

“They’re great!” - Service user

“

"The work they do is amazing [...] just the stories and it is focused on more their, that social aspect and they do."

Service providers who focused on the social benefits and aspects of service users' needs were highlighted. The service users enjoy the ability to be able to socialise with their friends:

"The social aspect of work is also there. But I can understand, and that was coming through on that social aspect, that people do be fearful. Will I? But then, we'd all like to be with our friends every day. I know." - Service user

Subtheme 2: Family and Community Support

“

You'll find a lot of family members come out and visit [the business].

We identified that when service users are in employment, their family members can make an effort to visit the business to greet them and to support the business:

“[Family member] comes in to see you most Saturdays or Fridays too as well.” – Service provider

“He tortures me the whole time! [laughter]” – Service user

“You'll find a lot of family members come out and visit.” – Service provider

Along with family supporting the business, wider community members that the service user knows will make an effort to visit the business. Examples provided to the research team include the service user's past teachers and principals:

“Oh and teachers as well, they come on [in] as well.” – Service provider

We found that when providing support to service users, it is important to talk with the families to find the best support for each individual. It is also essential to be able to talk to the child, if possible, to fully encapsulate all their care needs.

“

"it's listening to families. Where will their child be best supported? They know their child. You're the expert in your child."

“I totally believe in inclusion, and bringing children in wherever they should be and having those experiences..” – Service provider

“Whenever an employer actually employs a young adult with a learning disability, more people would like come into the shop and things like that. Because it's that community spirit.” – Service provider

Subtheme 3: Sense of Purpose and Belonging



"They love coming here and you know, all of that, you know, so there is that."

We found that employment opportunities provided service users with more than just a job, they created a sense of purpose and belonging. Feeling included in the workplace, being part of a team, and knowing their contributions were valued helped service users build confidence and motivation.

"We have people that are usually two years plus that have all these relationships kind of set up already. And the engagement continues to always be there." – Service provider

"It's really, really positive from our end when we're trying to roll out our learning disability and, I suppose, positive action on our own remit." – Service provider

Along with providing service users with a sense of purpose and belonging, it can also give businesses one. Allowing them to feel more connected to the community:

"Employers now are recognising that they need to be part of their communities, and if you employ from your community and be representative for them, people, and they are becoming much more diverse than ever." – Service provider

Opportunities for Employment Theme 2: Skills and Competencies

Subtheme 1: Developing Skills

Service users spoke of being responsible for a range of different tasks at their job, including both customer service roles and maintenance rolls. Service users would serve customers at the till and support them in picking out items. Users would manage stock, price items and organise their location in the shop. Service users would also maintain the cleanliness and appearance of the shop:



We sort out items, put the items in their categories, we serve customers, we price items, we tag items, we hang items up...

"So [to summarise], we sort out items, put the item in their categories, we serve customers, we price items, we tag items, we hang items up." – Service provider

These tasks in tandem indicate that sheltered employment can help develop skills such as money handling, customer service skills, organisational skills and more. The users expressed a sense of pride in their workplace and enjoyed having routine elements of their day such as the daily routine when opening in the morning:

“What’s the first thing you do when you come in?” - Service provider

“Put things out in the front of the shop.” – Service user

The service providers also highlighted the importance of having these programmes that provide the opportunity to build skills with service users:

“We provide employability skills training within that programme in a partnership with them.” – Service user

Subtheme 2: The Joys of Skill Development

“

You have a job and you get to learn new things.

During focus groups, service users were asked questions about whether they enjoyed their employment and why. All service users in employment spoke positively about their employment, enjoying the ability to “learn new things” and “help[ing] customers”:

“What do you like about working in [redacted]?”

“You have a job and you get to learn new things.” – Service user

“The support’s good and I like helping customers.” - Service user

Using their skills to help customers was a common sentiment expressed during focus groups. Users loved the ability to help others with their needs and were proud of their customer service skills:

“

She wanted me to get her a dress and I always give her good customer service.

“I say to the customers “Come again soon, have a nice day!”” – Service user

“You try to give them a good smile.” - Service user

“She wanted me to get her a dress and I always give her good customer service.” – Service

“

We've got to meet loads of new people.

The desire to help others with good customer service skills helped to benefit the service users themselves. Users enjoy the ability to “[meet loads of new people](#)” as part of their job and have formed good relationships with “[all the regulars](#)”:

“Do you like getting to talk to new people?”

“Yeah!” – Service user

“You know [all the regulars](#), don't you?” – Service provider

“Yeah.” - Service user

“We've got to meet loads of new people.” – Service user

The ability to meet new people, help them with their needs and learn new things led to service users sharing that their job “[makes \[them\] happy](#)” and makes them feel “[amazing](#)”:

“

[My job] makes me happy.

“How does your job make you feel?”

“Amazing!” - Service user

“It makes me happy.” - Service user

During the interviews, the service providers highlighted the importance of people with learning disabilities participating in programmes, education and skills-building classes even if they don't complete the courses. The skills they can learn from even taking part for a shorter time can still benefit them in the longer term.

“They may have participated in education and skills training, but just not, you know, completed the certificate or achieved the certificate. But they've got lots and lots of relevant experience and they've got lots and lots to offer.” - Service provider

Opportunities for Employment Theme 3: Community Networks and Support

While the previous themes have identified the benefits that employment opportunities can bring to adults with learning disabilities, this theme details sources of support identified during data collection that can support service users with entering employment.

Subtheme 1: Teaching Staff

Service users described how teaching staff at their previous schools were supportive in organising external work placements that would allow them to gain work experience directly within workplaces:

“So you worked at [redacted] and you said you worked earlier at [redacted] in the town. How?” –

Service provider

“The school.” – Service user

“

[Service user]'s teacher contacted me just for a volunteer placement for him over the summer...and now works 20 hours a week.

One of the service users involved in Stage One data collection is currently in paid part-time employment. A service provider detailed how a school teacher was ultimately responsible for this arrangement. The teacher contacted local organisations aiming to secure a volunteer placement for the service user over the summer holidays. This summer

placement led to the service user applying for a paid role at the service and was successful:

“[Service user]'s teacher contacted me just for a volunteer placement for him over the summer... he was able to apply for our job search scheme and now works 20 hours a week.” – Service provider

Subtheme 2: Advocacy Groups

One of the users included in the 'service user' cohort was the parent of a young person with learning disabilities approaching adulthood. During their interview, they spoke of the value of regional advocacy groups which included a range of users, ranging from those with learning disabilities themselves to service providers:

"[The group contains those] diagnosed with learning disabilities. Some are waiting to be diagnosed. Then there are parents of children and adults with learning disabilities...but then there are people from a social work background, people from the private sector, you know." – Service user

The user shared how advocacy groups could be used to share information with other users and provide feedback on upcoming programmes and interventions designed to support adults with learning disabilities. Advocacy groups could be a valuable opportunity not only for service users to connect with for their own information and benefit, but for service providers to seek feedback and support from:

"A group of users and carers who provide feedback...it would be appropriate, constructive and respectful." – Service user

“

A group of users and carers who provide feedback...it would be appropriate, constructive and respectful.

“

"For example, there's... [redacted], which is a real advocacy organisation, has recently taken over a farm, and looking at developing social enterprise."

A parent shared how advocacy groups can make a real impact in the community in relation to building the skills of service users. This organisation focuses on creating a social enterprise which can benefit those with learning disabilities. Advocacy groups are crucial for not only promoting the need for social enterprises but providing feedback and support to everyone involved.

"And actually one of one of the people on the panel got in touch with me going, could you do any more advocacy work, please?" – Parent

Subtheme 3: Success Stories

These highlight the positive impact that employment programmes and support services can have on individuals with learning disabilities. These stories provide examples of how structured interventions, advocacy efforts, and workplace inclusivity contribute to meaningful employment and educational opportunities.

“The [Fund] come out there and there's three main disability organisers. And they are all, over and above the amount of people and better at getting people into jobs. And have been very successful in doing that. People have got jobs, they've got a variety of jobs, a mix of jobs.” –

Service provider

“

[Service User] has 5 A-Levels. And with the Queens and has a first class combined bachelor master's in computer programming.

A parent shared their child's experience within a university setting and showed the ability of her child. However, it was highlighted that more support could have been provided within this setting.

"I was [Service user]'s support worker at uni" – Parent

A service provider highlight how employment for people with learning disabilities has changed over the years. While there could still be more opportunities and awareness, there has been a positive increase in this area:

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"People just working everywhere, too. So the, beforehand you would have maybe never, and when I first started, you would very rarely see people with disabilities in workplaces but now.."

Barriers to Employment

Focus groups and interviews identified the following themes and subthemes related to barriers to employment for service users:

Main Theme	Subtheme
Transition to Employment	Complicated Transition Process Lack of Information Signposting to Employment
Lack of Knowledge and Experience	Knowledge of Local Resources Understanding of Financial Situation Workplace Inexperience
Negative Experiences	Poor Experiences in the Workplace Poor Placement Experiences More Training for Employers
The Role of Disabilities	Comorbid Disabilities Negative Expectations Loss of Social Networks

Barriers to Employment Theme 1: Transition to Employment

During the data collection process, the decision was made to interview a parent of a young person with learning disabilities approaching adulthood. This decision was made to gain a better understanding of the transition process from the perspective of those closest to young people in supporting their transition to adulthood. We have conceptualised parents of young people with learning disabilities also as ‘service users’ due to their role in liaising with and utilising support from service providers on behalf of their child.

Subtheme 1: Complicated Transition Process

Speaking with the parent of a transition-age young person with learning disabilities highlighted how the transition process to adulthood and adult services could be complicated and challenging. The transition to adult-oriented services was conceptualised as “a huge task” due to how much of a service user’s life it encompassed:

“It’s a huge task because it’s [a] holistic transition.” – Service user

“Young people that are in that very supported environment of a special school where they do have the smaller classes... for a young person that’s leaving mainstream education, it can be much harder to navigate.” - Service user

Part of the transition process involves supporting young people with learning disabilities and their families to plan for the future. This transition process begins at age 14, yet the parent of a young person approaching 17 years old describes their transition as “it has [started] but it's not”:

“

The transition process is supposed to start from 14. It has done [for our child] but it's not.

“In special schools, the adult services seem to be aware of the children from the age of 14 because those services have to plan for the future...they need to know what demand there will be in the future.” – Service user

“Our [child] is going to be 17, but the transition process is supposed to start from 14. It has done but it's not.” – Service user

“Transitions are always huge issues. That's when the ball gets dropped..” – Service provider

“My son is about to turn 17 and I have no transition plan, have no guidance and no idea where he's going to go..” – Service User

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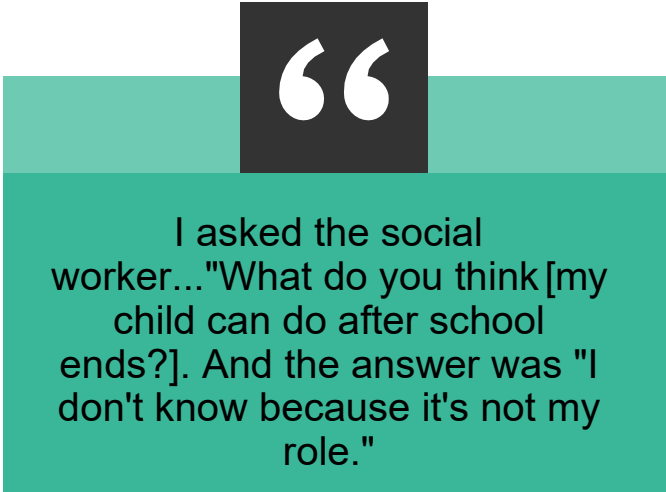
A lot of parents don't know what might be developing, they need to know more in advance.

When the parent sought more information, they were told that more adult-oriented services do not become more actively involved in the young person's transition until they reach the age of 17. This was recognised as “another gap in the service” as parents may not feel that this is adequate time to help plan for what their child will do in the future:

“They told me they know our [child] is on the list between other children and that they will become involved more actively only when [they are] 17...they will meet me before [they] will be 18, but management recognised that this is perhaps another gap in the service because a lot of parents don't know what might be developing, they need to know more in advance.” – Service user

“So post 19 there's a massive cliff edge for young people with disabilities and there's very little provision, I would say. Now charities do their best to fill the gap, but if your child doesn't fit in that box, then often it can break down and then you're left with nothing.” – Service user

The parent spoke with their child's current social worker to gain an informed perspective on the pathways available to their child once school ends. The social worker was unable to provide this information as it was “not [their] role”:



I asked the social worker...“What do you think [my child can do after school ends?]. And the answer was “I don't know because it's not my role.”

“I asked the social worker “What do you think? You know our [child] and you have the records, I know you can't tell me for certain but what do you think [my child can do after school ends?]”. And the answer was “I don't know because it's not my role”. – Service user

This was a source of frustration and a “limitation” to the parent as they wished for a point of contact to speak to about what their child could transition to following school. Ideally, they would like to speak with their child's current social worker as they would be the person most familiar with the young person at that stage:

“With that kind of approach, “This is not my role”...you could make one more step to say something. That was [a] limitation.” – Service user

“I'm a big advocate for the concept of named workers...my child has a social worker allocated in children's learning disability service. So that should be, in my opinion, the person who should be able to tell me about [transitions]”. – Service user

“Parents are constantly...they don't know where to go. They don't know the learning disability teams. I don't have a social worker for my son anymore because I'm now unallocated..” – Service user

“

The children's learning disability social worker has no formalised means of looking into the adult pathway...and the adult social worker will not contact me until our [child] is an adult.

The parent feels that during the transition process, there is a lack of clear communication or information pathways between the current social worker and the upcoming adult learning disability social worker. This is a challenge as this could result in approximately 75% of the transition process having no visible input from more adult-oriented services:

“There seems to be some overlap between the adult learning disability social worker and [the] children's one. But it's not really happening timely and whatever is happening is hidden...it's really happening only in one part of the service. So it looks like the children's learning disability social worker has no formalised means of looking into the adult pathway and telling me what they see there. And the adult social worker will not contact me until our [child] is an adult.” –

Service user

“What happens is the young person finishes mainstream or special school education, there's a bit of a cliff edge that they hit and then they and their parents have to navigate the next steps.” – Service user

However, the parent was sympathetic towards the problems experienced by social workers, particularly regarding high caseloads:

“The social workers change a lot, there seems to be a burnout to the big case loads...too [few] numbers of staff, you know.” – Service user

Subtheme 2: Lack of Information

Interviewing a parent of a young person with learning disabilities approaching adulthood identified the challenges of a lack of and even contradictory information regarding their transition to training and employment programmes. A positive avenue identified by the parent was a transition event held by their child's school which also allowed parents to attend and understand which avenues were available to them:

"The school organised a transition [event] and invited different organisations and groups to present to both pupils and parents [about] what will be available after school [finishes]." – Service user

The parent praised the school for helping parents to "know in advance what options are out there". However, they also acknowledged the role that schools may find themselves having to play to deliver information about their child's future as "you basically have to go back to school who may give you more information than anybody else":

“

People want to know in advance what options are out there...you basically have to go back to [the] school who may give you more information than anybody else.

"People want to know in advance what options are out there...what your child is eligible to get and where they might not be eligible." – Service user

"Although it starts at 14, there is very little information in reality and it's kind of heavily left on the school staff themselves...although there are nominated persons, they don't really provide the answers. You basically have to go back to school who may give you more information than anybody else." – Service user

"When you leave school, there's nothing in place to help you know where to go next. It's like falling into a black hole." – Service user

"People just don't know where to go" – Service provider

“

When I go to speak with [an organisation's] representative...they gave me [contradictory] information to the one which I've got from [a disability service].

At this transition event, the parent received “[contradictory] information” about the eligibility of their child for certain training and services:

“When I got to speak with [an organisation's] representative, even they sort of confused me because they gave me [contradictory] information to the one which I've got from [a disability service.]” –

Service user

This culminated in the parent ultimately receiving contradictory information from three separate parties, including disability service workers, service providers and parents. This information has still not been clarified for the parent:

“The service told me there are no definitive criterion to exclude your [child]...whereas when I spoke with the person from the [organisation], they asked “What education level is your [child] at? Are they are Level 3?”...but when I spoke with another parent, they told me “This does not sound right, that sounds like exclusion.” – Service user

The parent expressed frustration that there was no dedicated person available to discuss “what's available to [your child]”. This frustration was further exacerbated by the knowledge that some services and programmes require referral from a social worker, creating an additional barrier:

“

So there was that barrier...some services we depend on the social worker in making referrals...the criteria is not really clear.

“So that was the barrier...ideally you should meet someone who...should tailor that offer of what's available to [your child]. For some services we depend on the social worker in making referrals, you cannot self-refer. As I say, that criteria is not really clear.” – Service user

“The transition plan - it should be: this happens, this happens, this happens. But it's left to parents. You were searching for the charities in the area, you were looking for the provision. It's not done for you.” – Service user

“There's no signposts. So when I started to look at this, I thought I'll do an article. And then I started hearing loads of messages from parents who are sending me things and I just thought, oh, I'm going to have to do something here.” – Service user

“

Maybe I need to look at my pension plan...[they] really should have full time equivalent of training, work activities, programmes...

The lack of clear information and information pathways had a negative impact on the parent. Despite feeling that their child “really should have full time equivalent of training, work activities, programmes”, the situation was causing them to look at their “pension plan or [their] work plan” regarding their child’s future:

“Maybe I need to look at my pension plan or my work plan, but [I just felt that they] really should have full time equivalent of training, work activities, programmes...I’m hoping that will be what it will be, but I guess I’ll see it when I come to that point.” – Service user

Subtheme 3: Signposting to Employment

Service providers were spoken to about the transition review process and their experiences of young adults being signposted to their employment services. They described the review process as “a statutory obligation” that young people with learning disabilities entering adulthood must experience:

“So the transition review is a statutory obligation, it means that everyone before they left [school] would have had a meeting to discuss what they wanted to do after they left school.” – Service provider

“

Service providers expressed that “employment was never really pushed” as an option for young people with learning disabilities leaving school:

Employment wouldn't have been a big option at that stage...employment was never really pushed.

“People have got jobs, they've got a variety of jobs, a mix of jobs. But they don't know how to get them unless someone tells them where to look” - Service provider

“They would talk through the different options, but employment wouldn’t have been a big option at that stage...employment was never really pushed.” – Service provider

“

There would have been guidance from the teacher that it wouldn't have been a realistic option at that stage...there's probably less than 10% that would move on to employment.

We asked service providers why they felt that employment had not been readily shared as a transition option. They believed that this was through “guidance from the teacher that it wouldn’t have been a realistic option at that stage”. Three main transition avenues were detailed for young people with learning disabilities which included day centres, technical colleges/further education, and support from community sector organisations. In their experience, “less than 10% would move on to employment”:

“There would have been guidance from the teacher that it wouldn’t have been a realistic option at that stage. I suppose there’s three [main] avenues for those with learning disabilities. There will be the day centres, then for those with higher ability, you would look at the technical college and education, then there would be the community sector that would have things to do...I would be linked in with the schools, there’s probably less than 10% that would move on to employment.” – Service provider

One service provider noted that even following transition to technical college or further education, adults with learning disabilities can still find themselves utilising sheltered employment services:

“We have a few people go to [technical college], but what happens is they find themselves coming into services like us after [technical college].” – Service provider

“

We have a few people go to [technical college]...they find themselves coming into services like us after.

One service provider highlighted "And we also have contracts with the health and social care trusts within Northern Ireland, where we support a number of individuals known to the adult learning disability teams into either voluntary work, paid employment or further education training." However it is important that the signposts to this type of opportunity are made accessible for everyone.

Barriers to Employment Theme 2: Lack of Knowledge and Experience

Subtheme 1: Knowledge of Local Resources



I asked them..."Are you new here?" and they'd say "No, we've been here over 25 years"...how come I've never heard of you?

The parents interviewed during the data capturing interviews described how they would attend events focused on those with learning disabilities. At these events, they would come across organisations that had been embedded in their community for over two decades, but they had never been signposted to or encouraged to contact them:

"I asked them "How long have you been in Northern Ireland? Are you new here?" and they'd say "No, we've been here over 25 years". I just thought 'How come I've never heard of you?'" – Service user

During these events, the parent would speak to services not local to their area in an attempt to find out more about what could be availed of in their area. These organisations would willingly share information about services that they knew of that were more local to the parent. While helpful, the parent felt a sense of frustration that they were once again hearing about something "in [their] area" that they had not previously heard of:

"Some people told me that [organisation] is in the local [Trust] area. So I said "Look, if you don't mind, is there an equivalent of you in the [redacted] Trust? It may well be your competition, but would you tell me?" and they told me. And again, they told me something that I've never heard about before despite the fact that's in my area, you know." – Service user

Service providers also acknowledged that many employment support programmes and services that exist but are not widely known: "There are organisations in Northern Ireland too that are specifically focused on learning disability, such as [redacted], but not everyone is told about them."

"Each team of careers advisors would have various different contacts who they would have met with previously and know of the programmes that are available." - Service Provider

Subtheme 2: Understanding of Financial Situation

A service provider spoke about an opportunity within their service to transition from sheltered employment to paid employment. However, only one person in this sheltered employment scheme applied for the position:

“

37 of our young adults got a letter to apply if they're interested in a job...only one applied.

“With our job search scheme, 37 of our young adults got a letter to apply if they're interested in a job at [service]. Only one applied, the other 36 didn't.” – Service provider

This “says a lot” to the service provider as while the service users evidently enjoy working at the service, there were barriers in place that limited how “realistic” it was for them to transition to paid employment:

“And I think that says a lot. They like working at [service] and they like doing it, but it might not be realistic for them to get a job.” – Service provider

“

But when you do that benefit calculation, the family are saying no...we don't know everybody's individual circumstances.

One of the barriers identified by the service provider was how the service user transitioning to paid employment could impact their family unit. For example, the paid number of hours they could be transitioning to could limit the financial capabilities of the household through the loss of Personal Independence Payments. However, the service provider was

sympathetic to this experience during a Cost of Living Crisis, commenting that “we don't know everybody's individual circumstances”:

“So if you do four hours a day three days a week, that's twelve hours. But when you do that benefit calculation, the family are saying no, this is going to affect their PIP (Personal Independence Payments), you know? So families don't want to rock the boat...we don't know everybody's individual circumstances.” – Service provider

“

People get to 19 and suddenly they have no idea what benefits they're entitled to. Nobody sits them down and explains it.

Another barrier that was identified was in relation to a lack of understanding around financial implications including benefits, income and potential funding options, "Parent's are constantly - they don't know where to go".

One parent identified the difficult financial decisions they have had to make in order to be able to care for their child with learning disabilities, highlighting that not everyone may be able to make this sacrifice which acts as an additional barrier.

"I could have easily said put him under care and went on with my life. But I gave up my career and now I'm still caring. I'm 60, and this is a lifetime of caring." - Service user

Furthermore another discussed how the system is set up to fail those with learning disabilities. "I want, I would love a career, but I haven't been able to have one. And that's OK. I love my son. I wouldn't do anything different. But don't assume that the system is set out to help us. It's set to fail at the minute." - Service user

Subtheme 3: Workplace Inexperience

When speaking with service users about their previous placement experience, several users spoke about how their work placements were carried out in the school they attended. This typically involved helping school staff such as caretakers and kitchen staff:

"Where did you do your work experience?"

"In [school name], I was a caretaker." – Service user

"I helped the canteen lady." – Service user

Service providers echoed this feedback and expressed how in their experience, “a lot of the work placements were in the school”, leading to limited experience of being in the workplace. When gaining feedback on the focus group/interview schedule, service providers recommended that we ask service users questions about this to gauge their level of workplace (in)experience:

“

I worked at [service] for 11 years as their employment service manager. What I found was that a lot of the work placements were in the school.

“I worked at [service] for 11 years as their employment service manager. What I found was that a lot of the work placements were in the school.” – Service provider

“You find out a lot that a lot of young people will end up getting their work experience within the school. So you need to ask them ‘Did you ever do work experience when you were in school? Do you know where you went?’.” – Service provider

“

“Young people are then left to sit at home.”

Many of those we interviewed highlighted the lack of opportunity to build skills and experience of working in job settings due to a lack of exposure to the 'real-world' jobs. Not having this previous experience makes it difficult to succeed in a job.

“Sometimes, you can see it—the fear. They have never been in a work environment before. They don’t know the expectations.” – Service provider

“They don’t know what to do when they first start. If you’ve never had a job before, and you don’t have the right support, it’s overwhelming.” – Service provider

A service provider highlighted the importance of job coaching and workplace support to help bridge this gap, talking about one service user: “So she actually went in and she learnt, this is one of the unique aspects within supported employment as well, is that you can become a job coach within it. And as part of that role is that you go in and you learn the tasks.”

Barriers to Employment Theme 3: Negative Experiences

Subtheme 1: Poor Experiences in the Workplace

In a sheltered employment scheme, it was noted that service users wear special lanyards that read 'volunteer':

"Why do we have lanyards that say 'volunteer'?" – Service provider

"So people know we are all volunteers." – Service user

“

People don't know [they are volunteers]...how customers were treating the young people weren't as positive.

It was revealed that while service users wear the same uniform and badges as service providers, the 'volunteer' lanyard was implemented to maximise patience and understanding from the general public. This additional measure was brought in as the service users were not being treated as staff members and could even be treated negatively by customers:

"Yes, people don't know. You have a uniform, you have a badge, but we had to get them for a particular reason as well. So customers could differentiate between staff and our volunteers, [because] how customers were treating the young people weren't as positive."

– Service provider

The service provider felt that the addition of a volunteer lanyard during sheltered employment was a necessary adjustment to mitigate negative experiences during their shift:

"We need to take any adjustments we can to show the support that they require." – Service provider

“

"Would you know something? Everybody's had real good experiences and we've also had bad experiences... It's about developing that relationship with the employer."

It was revealed that many people can have both good and bad experiences in the workplace and sometimes the determining factor can be the relationship with the employer.

Subtheme 2: Poor Placement Experiences

A previous subtheme identified how common it can be for a young person with learning disabilities to have their work placement take place within a school. However, service providers alluded to how service users could have negative experiences in external work placements:

“

We were able to talk about the good experiences that she's had here...but not everybody gets that.

“We were able to talk about the good experiences that she's had here...but not everybody gets that.” – Service provider

“

They said that the [young person] has been here for two [school] terms and they just hide behind that fridge...

Additional information was provided based on both the past experience of current service users and from their previous experience as a service provider. Service providers described how the young adults currently using their service “were always made to clean” when they secured an external work placement. From their own history as service

providers, they shared testimonials of how a young person had secured a work placement for two school terms yet were spending their shifts hiding from others and receiving no support from the employer:

“They were always made to clean.” – Service provider

“So work placement is really difficult to get...I had a particular experience in [redacted]...when I went out there to speak to the employer, they said that [the young person] has been here for two [school] terms and they just hide behind that fridge.” – Service provider

Furthermore, when there is a lack of accommodations, it can lead to a difficult work environment:

“[Service user] did struggle a little bit about the coffees, cause you can imagine now it's not ‘can I have a coffee or a tea?’ It's like an Americano, a flat white, all the different syrups, all the different types of milk. So it does get more complicated.” - Service user

Subtheme 3: More Training for Employers



“People don’t understand what it’s like to try and get a job when you have a learning disability. They assume it’s the same as everyone else.”

From the second stage of data collection it was highlighted that there should be more training and awareness for employers when hiring people with learning disabilities. Having more training generally may help employers and businesses feel more confident hiring those with learning disabilities as well:

“Employers are nervous, maybe haven’t employed somebody before with a disability. And particularly in and around learning disability as well, they’re apprehensive about how to deal with it.” - Service provider

One service provider shared how training is needed to help employers with training individuals with learning disabilities and these services can be provided:

“We also have a learning disability awareness training. And that really is a wrap-around service that we offer when we’re working with both employers and the people we work with.”

Furthermore, a need was highlighted by one service provider that many employers and companies are reluctant to invest in accessible work environments which acts as another barriers to employment for those with learning disabilities.

“You’re always going to get your employer that we’ve seen them all, you don’t have to basically don’t have time for you. But if employers do want to see the benefits, employers are more aware of their inclusion and diversity.” - Service provider

Barriers to Employment Theme 4: The Role of Disabilities

Subtheme 1: Comorbid Disabilities

When speaking with service users, it was identified that some lacked confidence in their ability to transition from sheltered employment to paid employment. For some users, comorbid disabilities such as vision difficulties were identified as the key barrier rather than their learning disability:

“

Some people get jobs but that's because they have good eyesight, which I don't.

“You’ve been working at [service] for four years, right? Do you think maybe you could get a job?” –

Service provider

“Probably not.” – Service user

“And why’s that?” – Service provider

“It’s like you said, some people do get jobs but that’s because they have good eyesight, which I don’t.”

– Service user

Another participant spoke about the complexity of managing multiple disabilities and the additional challenges it presents when in employment, if people are not trained well enough to be able to accommodate additional needs.

“[Service user] can read really well. You put him up in front of a crowd, he can read a piece of paper, but he can’t hold two-way conversation easily. He has extreme anxiety, ADHD, selective mutism.” - Service user

“Employers aren’t expected to know everything. But they need support, they need someone to navigate that for them, to help them understand how disabilities interact.” -Service Provider

The sheltered employment scheme had adapted the environment to suit the needs of the service user. For example, the till at the shop used large icons that the service user could easily press. The service user did not feel confident that external employers would make such adaptations for them:

“So is that one of the main barriers, where probably people’s disabilities stop them from getting jobs elsewhere because they might not get the right support? Like with a till?” – Service provider

“Yeah.” – Service user

Subtheme 2: Negative Expectations

Service users were asked about the prospect of moving beyond sheltered employment to paid employment. Some service users did not feel that they would be able to transition to paid employment:

“Here’s a question, does anybody in here think they’ll ever get a job?” – Service provider

“No.” – Service user

“

"Why do you think it's really hard
[to get a job]?"
"My disabilities."

When asked why service users felt this way, the most common response was the impact of their learning disability:

“Why do you think it’s really hard [to get a job]?” – Service provider

“Because [of] your disabilities.” – Service user

“My disabilities.” – Service user

A service provider helped the users to elaborate on why they felt this transition would not be possible. One aspect of this transition that the users felt would be too stressful was the lack of support available to them in external employment:

“So if you got a job in [redacted] tomorrow and you don’t have a staff member there to support you, would you find it really challenging?” – Service provider

“Oh yeah.” – Service user

“I’d be very stressed.” – Service user

The role of support during shifts was reiterated by a service user sharing insight from one of their family members on why they did not have a job. However, the user felt that these factors did not matter when they working at sheltered employment:

“

"Because you get the right support
here, does [your disability]
matter?"
"No."

“My [family member] tells me that [you don’t have a job] because of your disability and because you’re bad at counting.” – Service user

“But because you get the right support here, does that matter in [service]?” – Service provider

“No.” – Service user

“

“People just don’t know where to go... and because of that, they assume we just stay at home and do nothing. That’s not the case, but that’s the assumption.”

In stage two of the data collection parents of service users highlighted some more negative expectations that were placed upon their children which acts as a barrier to employment for them.

A participant shared how low expectations often limit opportunities for individuals with learning disabilities:

“He was to go into care for life, they said. But I didn’t accept that. He went to mainstream school, got 5 A-levels, a first-class degree in computer programming. But that wasn’t expected of him.” - Service user

Furthermore, it was highlighted that a lack of knowledge from people and professional can influence opinions and contribute to negative expectations for those individuals with learning difficulties:

“Then it was difficult in that there was no knowledge of autism, OK, none whatsoever, because you said autistic and they thought you meant artistic.” - Service user

Subtheme 3: Loss of Social Networks

A notable barrier to service users entering employment was the impact that paid employment would have on their social lives and the ability to spend time with their community. Services that service users attended were their main avenues for social connections as they did not have many friends outside of these services:

“Do you have any friends where you live?” – Service provider

“Not really.” – Service user

“Where do you see your friends?” – Service provider

“At [service] and [service] and [service].” – Service user

“That’s where your community is.” – Service provider

“

Sometimes the risk of getting a job means they lose all social aspects and their community. That's the harsh thing.

Service providers identified this as a limitation for young adults seeking employment as they would feel disconnected from their community:

“For young people [with learning disabilities], sometimes the risk of getting a job means they lose all social aspects and their community. That’s the harsh thing.” – Service provider

This limitation is further evidenced by the example of only one young adult applying for paid employment out of 37 potential candidates. While the service provider felt that family financial circumstances played a role in these applications, they also acknowledge the impact of the young person not utilising any other services that they provide. If they were to transition to paid employment, they would have had to leave these services:

“

And the one that applied [for the job] doesn’t attend day service...they can’t be paid to come here by the Trust to then be getting a paid job as well, so they have to give that up.

“So if we have 37 young people who all volunteer at [service] and only one of them applied for a job, it’s very poor. And the one that applied doesn’t attend day service...they can’t be paid to come here by the Trust to then be getting a paid job as well, so they have to give that up.” – Service provider

“

[I would stay in a service] because I wouldn't be losing all my friends.

When the scenario of leaving support services to take up paid employment was put to the service users, they felt that they “couldn't do that” as they “want[ed] to see [their] friends” and felt they would be “losing all [their] friends”:

“If you got a job in [redacted] tomorrow but it meant that you couldn't come to [service] anymore, what would you choose?” – Service provider

“I want to see my friends.” – Service user

“If you get a job, you might lose the chance to see your friends, which is a harsh reality.” - Service provider

“I couldn't, I couldn't do that.” – Service user

“You couldn't do that? Why?” – Service provider

“If I did get a job then I wouldn't be able to go to [service] anymore or to [service].” – Service user

“So you would choose to stay in [service] instead of getting the job?” – Service provider

“Yep.” – Service user

“Why?” – Service provider

“Because I wouldn't be losing all my friends.” - Service user

A service provider shared a story of another young adult with learning disabilities who had transitioned to paid employment as part of their team. They directly told the service provider that they had selected this role so “they still get to see their friends” and wouldn't lose access to their “social connections”:

“

They told me the only reason they came for the job was so [they] still get to see [their] friends.

“Someone on my team, [they're] a young person who works here...they told me the only reason they came for the job was so [they] still get to see [their] friends. If they went elsewhere, [they] wouldn't have those social connections anymore.” – Service provider

Results: Service Providers

Opportunities for Employment

Focus groups and interviews identified the following themes and subthemes related to opportunities for employment for service providers:

Main Theme	Subtheme
Training and Guidance	Range of Training Offered Clear Instructions
Adapted Training and Workplaces	Adapted Training Adapted Work Tools Adapted Approaches to Employment

Opportunities for Employment Theme 1: Training and Guidance

Subtheme 1: Range of Training Offered

Service providers spoke eagerly about providing a range of training support and options to service users in sheltered employment. This ranged from workplace guidance such as cash handling to manual lifting training, which service users had just completed the day before the focus group:

“They’ve done training like cash handling.” – Service provider

“What training did you do yesterday?” – Service provider

“Manual lifting, how to lift heavy boxes.” – Service user

“So you don’t hurt yourself, and that’s important.” – Service provider

Emphasis was placed on providing a range of training services that considered the health and safety needs of the service users. The service provider placed such emphasis on health and safety needs that it was a source of comedy to service users:

“So we make sure you know a wee bit about health and safety-” – Service provider

“Oh here we go!” – Service user

“To make sure you’re not doing things you shouldn’t, like climbing high up the ladder!” – Service provider

“

“We have our main skill set programme which is a funded programme and for those people that would be closer to the labour market. There’s a bit of a shorter turnaround in terms of movement towards paid jobs, generally takes 6 to 9 months.”

From the second stage of data collection, service providers identified the variety of training opportunities available, which are tailored to different abilities and employment needs. Some individuals required short-term, intensive training, while others benefitted more from longer-term programmes. Both are designed to support them through each stage of employment readiness:

“We also have contracts with the health and social care trusts where we support individuals into either voluntary work, paid employment or further education and training. That would normally be a longer journey, over a two to three-year period.” - Service provider

One service provider highlighted how training programmes are adapted to individual employment goals:

“There are other outcomes for that programme in terms of further education, job searching, CV building, social and community groups.”

While another emphasised the importance of post-employment training to support those with learning disabilities and increase job sustainability:

“So it's not just about getting the job, it's about maintaining that job and sustaining that job as well, and progressing.”

Furthermore, service providers highlighted that more awareness should be made around the available opportunities:

[School] are very good at reaching out to schools and saying, if you're thinking about young people attending, here are the dates they need to attend.” - Service provider

“We also support people into self-employment as well.” - Service provider

Subtheme 2: Clear Instructions

Conversations with service providers highlighted the negative impact that unclear or misinterpreted instructions could have on work placements. For example, a service user would have one of each lunch item available in a canteen as “they thought being a good employee meant eating each item”:

“Someone happened to say to them on their first day that you can have one of everything for lunch. So they took that literally...we were getting phone calls saying they are having 20 lunches because they're eating every item. When we explained you could have one item it was okay. They thought being a good employee meant eating each item.” – Service provider

Another example provided involved break time instructions that could be misinterpreted. A common thread in these incidents was how “easy enough to explain” the resolution was, yet service providers were being called by placement providers to resolve these simple misunderstandings:



One organisation said you could take your break from 1 to 3...[the service user] is sitting in the canteen from 1 to 3. But that's easy enough to explain.

“One organisation said you could take your break from 1 to 3...when I went to do the visit, they said that [the service user] is sitting in the canteen from 1 to 3. But that's easy enough to explain.” – Service provider

In response, service providers saw this as an opportunity to provide clear, concise, easy-to-follow instructions for service users during their sheltered employment. When describing what they did at the service, service users would refer to simple flowcharts of instructions such as 'if this, do that':

“If it's clean, I keep it. If it's dirty, I recycle it.” – Service user

“

[It's easier because] I know what I'm doing, what people expect from me.

The clarity that service providers offered helped users to feel that this was an “easier” placement than they have previously attended, attributing this to “knowing what [they're] doing” and “what people expect from [them]”:

“Which work placement is best, [service] or [previous work placement]?” – Service provider

“[Service] is better. It's easier.” – Service user

“Why is it easier?” – Service provider

“I know what I'm doing, what people expect from me.” - Service user

When talking to the service providers they all highlighted the importance of giving clear instructions to the service users and how structured training plans can make a huge difference when trying to ensure workplace success.

“

“We would have tasks. We call this a job analysis, seeing what's expected each day and then writing a plan for the person with prompts so they know exactly what to do.”

Furthermore, one service provider stressed the importance of step-by-step instructions when training, which ensures accessibility for individuals with learning disabilities:

“So she actually went in and she learnt. This is one of the unique aspects within supported employment as well, you can become a job coach within it. And as part of that role, you go in and you learn the tasks and then break them down.”

Training methods can also be changed to suit each service user depending on how they work and learn best, this can help ensure efficiency and encourage understanding:

“She did it through pictorial, so he didn't have to rely on reading. For every coffee type, she broke down how to make them—step by step, with pictures.”

Opportunities for Employment Theme 2: Adapted Training and Workplaces

Subtheme 1: Adapted Training

Along with providing service users with a range of different training, the service providers that we spoke to were eager to deliver training in a manner that was clear to the service users. A helpful training method used by service providers was the ability to roleplay and practice activities that the service users would be completing. This would involve roleplaying events such as interacting with customers, managing the till, giving correct change and more:

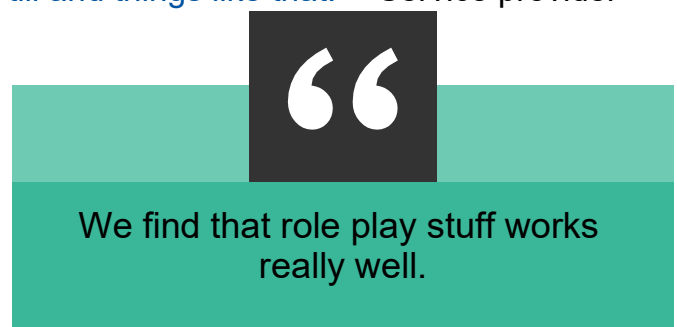
“What other type of training did you do?” – Service provider

"We pretend to be one of the customers." - Service user

"That's right, role play scenarios of working the till and things like that." - Service provider

Service providers felt that roleplaying was an effective tool to get service users accustomed to their job role, reporting that it “works really well”:

“We find that role play stuff works really well.” – Service provider



Many service providers discussed the importance of customised training programmes to accommodate diverse learning needs. This approach ensures that training is tailored to an individual's learning style, whether through practical demonstrations, visual supports, or gradual skill-building programmes:

“We also have a learning disability awareness training, and that really is a wrap-around service we offer when working with both employers and the people we support.” – Service provider

Moreover, service providers discussed the importance of also supporting the employers and helping them understand the different types of learning they would need to provide to support those with learning disabilities:

“The support organizations go in and meet with the employer, the individual, and talk through what's been working and what hasn't. The training isn't just for the individual, it's also about making sure the employer understands what they need to do to help.”

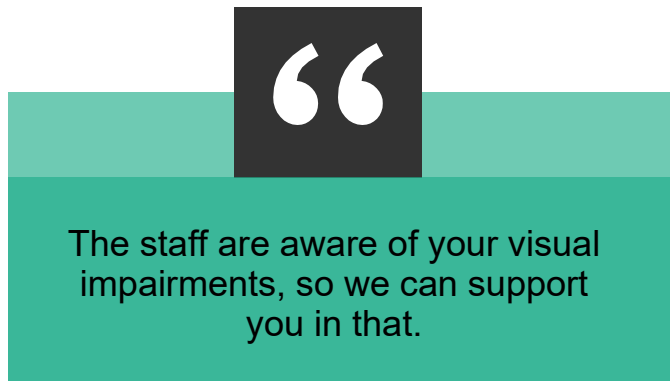
Subtheme 2: Adapted Work Tools

When speaking with service providers, a core philosophy of their sheltered employment schemes was keeping instructions and training as clear as possible. This philosophy was extended to the tools used to complete work activities. For example, the service incorporated “a visual type of software” to their till that allowed service users to select images corresponding to products to streamline item purchases:

“What’s different about the till at [service]?” – Service provider

“There’s pictures of the items.” – Service user

“That’s right, it visually matches the products. So the software that we use is a visual type of software.” – Service provider



The staff are aware of your visual impairments, so we can support you in that.

In a previous subtheme, it was identified that some service users did not feel confident about achieving external employment due to comorbid disabilities such as vision impairment. This software allowed the provider to adapt to the needs of the service user by providing large icons that they could press on the till:

“The staff are aware of your visual impairments, so we can support you in that.” – Service provider

Providers stressed the importance of adapting work environments and tools to help individuals with learning disabilities succeed. These adjustments, from assistive technologies to modified job roles, make the workplace more accessible and ensure long-term success.

“Now, more assistive technology is being used. QR codes, for example, can be put on chemical cleaning products so that someone can scan it and see exactly which cloth to use and how to clean.” – Service provider

“There was a young woman struggling to complete her tasks in a hotel because of the time pressures of cleaning rooms. Instead, they job carved, she focused on preparing room packs instead of doing the full cleaning process. This small adaptation made it possible for her to stay employed.” - Service provider

Subtheme 3: Adapted Approaches to Employment



“It's not just about getting the job, it's about maintaining that job and sustaining that job as well, and progressing.”

A new subtheme identified from additional interviews found the importance of taking a more holistic approach to employment support and considering every individual's needs. Many employment programmes go beyond job placements and focus on long-term career development, independent living skills, and social inclusion.

Service providers emphasised that successful employment programmes must go beyond essential job placements and instead adopt a flexible and individualised approach. This includes ongoing mentoring, career development, and adjustments based on each individual's abilities and strengths. Rather than a one-size-fits-all model, providers focus on progressive pathways supporting individuals at different employment readiness stages.

“A lot of what [redacted] tries to do is ensure we have a holistic approach... so that when they transition, they are moving towards paid employment and gaining real-world experience.” - Service provider

To ensure the employment support is tailored to the individual, providers conducted detailed assessments to understand better each person's strengths and preferences, adding to support for the holistic and person-centred approach:

“We do a big piece beforehand as well where we get, it's called a My Profile, and we look at all the areas and we take into account what that person feels that they're best at as well as their person that's maybe most closest to them.” - Service provider

“So we'd really try and get a real rounded understanding of the individual to ensure that we're as person-centred as possible.... And then because of that, you know, we have people that within their first year are moving straight into paid employment” -Service provider

“Somebody who would be significantly put off by a panel interview... we were able to negotiate with the employer to do a working interview instead.” - Service provider

Barriers to Employment

Focus groups and interviews identified the following themes and subthemes related to barriers to employment for service providers:

Main Theme	Subtheme
Reliance on External Funding	Time-Conditioned Funding Limiting Cooperation Bureaucratic and Administrative Challenges
Complex Transition Process	Specialist Support in Schools Gauging Service User Ability
Challenges for Employment Providers	Cost of Living Crisis Employee Support Overcoming Limited Experience

Barriers to Employment Theme 1: Reliance on External Funding

Subtheme 1: Time-Conditioned Funding

When offering training and employment services to service users, service providers spoke of their reliance on external funding to provide such services. However, this funding is often time-conditioned. For example, the funding to run the sheltered employment scheme described in this report ends in 2024:

“We spoke to [funder] and had written an application to receive some money to run [service]...it ends this year.” – Service provider

Service providers felt that the best allocation of funding to support young adults entering the workplace was towards those who “actually work with young adults” and “can give the right support” to help them to enter the workplace:

“I sometimes think that the best way for some of these programmes to actually work is to provide [funding] to organisations who actually work with young adults, know the young adults and can give the right support.” – Service provider

Funding constraints often create uncertainty for service providers, making it difficult to sustain programmes and provide long-term employment support for individuals, which in previous sub-themes has found how important this can be for individuals with learning disabilities. This issue is evident when funding streams suddenly end or change, forcing organisations to restructure or cut services.

“The [fund], which replaced [fund], was supposed to provide the same amount of money, but that’s not what happened. Things have changed, and we’ve had to adjust.” - Service provider

“The biggest challenge is that funding doesn’t last. You’re planning for a programme, and then you realise, ‘Oh, this funding ends in a year, what do we do next?’” - Service provider

Subtheme 2: Limiting Cooperation

While reliance on external funding can lead to challenges such as its time-conditional nature, interviews with service providers identified additional challenges that this can bring. The importance of connecting with other organisations was emphasised as successful external placements often resulted from having good connections and knowing certain contacts:

“We got a couple of good [work placements] and it was mostly in organisations we knew or we knew the personnel there. But we can struggle to get good quality work placements that would support our young adults.” – Service provider

“There’s other organisations out there and I think that has to be the next step for us now, linking in with the likes of [service] and [service] and [service], these other groups.” – Service provider

However, it was identified that the terms and conditions of some funding programmes limited the ability to either create joint funding applications with other organisations or to collaborate entirely with them. This was recognised as a barrier to successful external work placements for service providers as, as identified above, collaboration with other organisations is seen as “the next step” in high-quality work placements:

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A lot of those organisations are funded under that [funding scheme] and then there’s all the restrictions of that and how you can’t work with one organisation if you’re registered with another.

“We currently have a funded programme with [funder] to provide external work placements...we’re already funded, so we can’t get dual funding you know?” – Service provider

“A lot of those organisations are funded under that [funding scheme] and then there’s all the restrictions of that and how you can’t work with one organisation if you’re registered with another.” – Service provider

Subtheme 3: Bureaucratic and Administrative Challenges

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“There was a report done back in 2011 to 16 mandate and which was submitted to the assembly with everything I’m asking for that sat on the shelf for years and nothing’s been done.”

The second data collection stage identified an additional sub-theme relating to bureaucratic and administrative issues. Many service providers and advocacy groups expressed frustration with government policies and funding structures that make it challenging to provide sustainable employment support for individuals with learning difficulties. One of the key concerns raised was the lack of legislative frameworks to support employment and transition planning:

“In Northern Ireland, we have no act, no plan, nothing. So when a statement of educational needs ends, there's nothing available after that. Often our children, like my son, who have complex needs, are invisible.” – Service provider

The service providers emphasised the reliance on government-backed initiatives to sustain employment services, but these programmes often lack financial continuity, leading to disruption in services and uncertainty for both providers and service users. Beyond funding limitations, the administrative burden placed on service providers is another significant challenge.

“

“Every time there’s a new funding tranche, we have to start over, convincing partners, submitting new bids, and waiting for approval. This slows everything down.”

Many organisations find themselves spending more time on paperwork, compliance, and reporting than on actually delivering frontline employment support services. The complex application processes and bureaucratic red tape create unnecessary obstacles, further reducing efficiency and service impact:

“We spend more time applying for funding and writing reports than actually supporting people. It’s a never-ending cycle.” - Service provider

Barriers to Employment Theme 2: Complex Transition Process

Subtheme 1: Specialist Support in Schools

The complicated nature of the transition to adult services was identified as a barrier to employment for service users. However, service providers also identified challenges from this process that resulted in their own service limitations. One service provider felt that transition meetings were too much like “a tick box [exercise]” and were not sufficiently “meeting the needs” of service users and their futures:

“They would have had a visit from a Careers Officer as part of the transition from [age] 14 onwards, and other agencies involved would come in and chat to the young people. To me it’s like a tick box [exercise]. They’re talking about work placements and employment, but they’re not really meeting the needs of that client group.” – Service provider

“

That's why I like school-
employer
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within schools.

To overcome this barrier, service providers felt that “school-employer connections” could be utilised to their fullest. To achieve this, there would ideally need to be “a very specialist role within schools”. The value of such a role has been demonstrated previously in this report, such as schools often being seen as the hub of information for parents and a service user successfully securing paid employment from their teacher’s initiative:

“That’s why I like school-employer connections. I know there’s a lot of paperwork, but there’s organisations who just don’t know the young person. I think it has to be a very specialist role within schools.” – Service provider

Many of the service providers we spoke to in the second stage of data collection noted that school-based transition support is inconsistent. Some schools offer strong employment preparation, while others lack adequate resources.

“Special schools are a lifeline for parents, but when the time comes to transition out, it’s terrifying because there’s no clear path forward.” - Service provider

“There’s no signposts. Parents are left searching for the right services, and there’s no central system to guide them.” - Service provider

Subtheme 2: Gauging Service User Ability

Service providers expressed that during the transition process and throughout these meetings, it can be challenging to gauge the abilities of service users. The example was given of the focus group that had previously taken place with service users. While “[some users \[were\] much quieter](#)” and could “[struggle to articulate](#)”, they did not need any additional support:

“Some users are much quieter and would struggle to articulate their day-to-day workings, but they get the same support as everyone else.” – Service provider

Their shy and timid nature during these meetings also did not correlate with their capabilities as “[they all know their jobs inside out...they just couldn't tell you](#)”:

“For some [service users] it's hard when they're put on the spot, but they all know their jobs inside out...they just couldn't tell you.” – Service provider

“

It's hard when they're put on the spot, but they all know their jobs inside out...they just couldn't tell you.

Barriers to Employment Theme 3: Challenges for Employment Providers

Subtheme 1: Cost of Living Crisis

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Employers will say "Look, I can't do this, business is tough enough here."

Service providers reported struggling to organise external work placements for their service users. One of the main barriers to these placements was the ongoing Cost of Living Crisis as employers were telling service providers that “[business is tough enough here](#)”:

“[When organising work placements], employers will say “Look, I can't do this, business is tough enough here.” – Service provider

Struggles with cost of living could inadvertently impact the quality of external work placements due to the lack of “willingness of staff within organisations”. As service users could need extra support and guidance during these placements, this was perceived as “another additional task for someone who’s probably already overworked because companies are struggling”:

“I would say the main barriers are probably support levels and the willingness of staff within organisations. But then again that is another additional task for someone who’s probably already overworked because companies are struggling.” – Service provider

“

[Supporting a service user] is another additional task for someone who's probably already overworked because companies are struggling.

The rising cost of living has significantly impacted employment providers, service users, and families. Service providers noted that economic pressures force organisations to stretch resources thin, making it difficult to provide consistent, high-quality employment support.

“Funding cuts and the cost of living mean organisations have to stretch resources thin, making it harder to provide quality support.” - Service provider

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“Salaries are so poor now that families need both parents working full-time just to survive. That means there’s less flexibility to support young people with additional needs.”

At the same time, many families struggle financially, reducing their ability to support young people in gaining work-related experience, volunteering or attending additional training programmes.

Moreover, in addition to affecting families and service providers, the economic downturn has impacted the willingness of employers to take on employees with learning disabilities, making the employment landscape even more competitive and challenging.

Subtheme 2: Employee Support

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If you went to work at [company], there might be tonnes of employees for one person to support.

The previous subtheme identified that service users may need the help and guidance of their coworkers during external work placements. The willingness of employees to support service users during work placements was recognised by service providers as its own individual barrier to employment. While service

users were accustomed to a relatively high service user to service provider ratio during sheltered employment, this would not be the case in external workplaces:

“Sometimes the customer asks you a question and you don’t know how to answer it. What do you do?”

– Service provider

“I ask a member of staff.” – Service user

“Whereas if you went to work at [company name], there might be tonnes of employees for one person to support.” – Service provider

Service providers reported that in external work placements, service users would commonly ‘buddy up’ with another employee to receive help and support from. More often than not, this buddy system could lead to tension as the employee “might struggle to get [their] own job done” and the service user may feel unsupported. This can lead to such “knock-on effects” as parents boycotting the workplace and to a scenario where all parties involved have a “bad experience”:

“If they’re thrown into [workplace] or [workplace], you’re talking about buddying up with someone. But if you’re buddied up with [a service user], you might struggle to get your own job done. I get that it can be a bad experience for the employer, but it becomes a bad experience for the [service user] as well. And you know, I’ve had parents who refuse to use [workplace] anymore because of how [the service user] was treated, so there’s lots of knock-on effects there.” – Service provider

“

If you're buddied up with [a service user], you might struggle to get your own job done...I've had parents who refuse to use [workplace] anymore because of how [the service user] was treated.

Employers often want to be more inclusive but struggle with a lack of knowledge, resources and workplace accommodations. The service providers highlighted that some employers fear making mistakes or facing legal consequences if they do not provide adequate support.

“Employers want to help, but they don’t always know how. They’re worried about making mistakes or not having the right resources.”

Subtheme 3: Overcoming Limited Experience

We have previously identified how service users can lack workplace experience due to completing placements within their school. Service providers felt that this unfamiliarity with the workplace and limited experience of being within a formal workplace acted as a barrier for service users. One way in which this barrier could manifest was a lack of trust with the service user’s family as they could have “no connection” or point of contact with the service user’s employer:

“We need to build trust with [the families] as well, which is really important...we have had [service users] go into massive companies for their parents to drop them off at someone different every day, which is understandable. That’s how companies operate. There was no connection.” – Service provider

“Employers still have this idea that they need someone with ‘experience’, but how are people supposed to gain experience if no one will hire them?” - Service provider

“People learn best on the job, but if you don’t have the experience, it’s really hard to even get a chance.” - Service provider

“

The staff are trained, they're familiar with the [service users] and their needs. But I think a lot of work needs to happen for those external placements to happen properly.

The benefits of sheltered employment schemes to overcome this limited experience were highlighted due to the amount of training staff receive and how they build trust and familiarity with the service users they are helping to provide workplace experience to:

“I think what works for us is that it’s in-house. The staff are trained, they’re familiar with the [service users] and their needs. But I think a lot of work needs to happen for those external placements to happen properly.” – Service provider

| Discussion

This project aimed to gain qualitative data on the barriers to and opportunities for employment for those with learning disabilities, while also obtaining feedback on focus group/interview schedules designed for data collection. Feedback was obtained from Clinical Health Psychologists and members of the project Steering Group prior to data collection. These adapted schedules were then used to gain data and schedule feedback from fifteen service users and seven service providers.

Multiple benefits and opportunities for service users were identified during this initial data collection. Through sheltered and external employment, service users could socialise with others and engage with community members. This would create a reciprocal relationship for the business as family and community members would support the workplace due to supporting the service user. Service users could develop a range of skills through employment such as money handling skills, customer service skills, organisational skills and more. Service users would take pride in their work and appreciated the ability to learn new things and to help others, leading to their job making them feel “amazing” and “happy”. We found that opportunities for employment could be facilitated by teaching staff organising summer placements for young people, while advocacy groups could be used to signpost service users to relevant services.

A number of limitations and barriers to employment experienced by service users were also identified from data collection. For those with learning disabilities, the transition to adult services is posited to begin at 14 years of age to allow sufficient time for handover. However, this could be a source of confusion and a perceived diffusion of responsibility as service users did not know who to speak to for employment help, particularly as more adult-oriented support had not yet been assigned to a service user approaching 17 years of age. Service users reported both a lack of and inconsistent information regarding the post-school transition, such as a parent receiving three contradictory pieces of information regarding access to educational services. During statutory transition meetings to discuss the future of the service user, it was felt that “less than 10%” would transition to employment, with the majority transitioning instead to day centres or technical college.

Lack of knowledge of support remained as a persistent barrier for service users. Service users could struggle not only with knowing what support was available within their area, but whether a service would need the referral of a social worker to access. An example was provided of a service user only recently finding out about a service provider who had operated in their area for over 20 years. Service users could be hesitant about applying for paid workplace opportunities due to lack of understanding of how this

could impact their household's finances through payments such as PIP, choosing instead not to "rock the boat".

The combination of a lack of experience and negative experiences also acted as a barrier for service users. Most service users in the focus group had completed their previous work placements within the school they attended, limiting their understanding of and experience within the workplace. For those who did have external work placements, this could lead to negative experiences such as only being given menial tasks such as cleaning. However, the general public could also lead to negative placement experiences: it became necessary for service users to wear lanyards recognising them as 'volunteers' to reduce instances of poor treatment.

The role that disabilities played in the young adult's life could also act as a perceived and tangible barrier to employment. Most service users during data collection did not feel that they could transition from sheltered employment to external employment. The users felt that external employers would not be as accommodating to their needs, including comorbid needs such as visual impairments. It was also identified that community and activity groups for adults with learning disabilities often take place during typical working hours. Service users felt that if they transitioned to external employment, they would be "losing all [their] friends" as they could not attend these activity groups.

Speaking with service providers identified several opportunities to support service users in entering employment. Service providers spoke of effective strategies that they used for job training such as roleplay training. Not only was this format clear and easy to follow, but service users enjoyed the opportunity to practice roles within their work experience. Service providers also stressed the role of providing service users with clear workplace instructions that were free of misinterpretation. These clear instructions were welcomed by service users as it allows them to "know what [they're] doing" and "what people expect". Service providers could also adapt tools in the workplace to suit user needs, such as using large, clear images on the till to input purchases.

Service providers also provided insight into the barriers that are experienced when supporting service users to enter the workplace. Service providers working directly with service users were often reliant on external, time-conditioned funding to offer training and services; the funding for a sheltered employment scheme interviewed in Phase One is due to run out this year. Not only does this hinder the ability to consistently run services, but reliance on funding can limit cooperation between service providers due to clauses within these funding agreements.

Service providers echoed the sentiment expressed by service users that the transition process to adult-oriented services can be quite complex. From the

perspective of service providers, they would appreciate the ability to connect with more specialist transition services while the user is still in school. Providers also note the challenges of gauging a service user's suitability for the workplace from a lone transition meeting or event.

The service providers spoken with primarily deliver training and sheltered employment schemes to service users. These providers noted the challenges associated with transitioning users from sheltered employment to external employment. One of the most notable barriers was the current Cost of Living Crisis as employers will not accept placements from service users due to "business [being] tough enough". Providers also noted the often flawed system of 'buddying' a service user with an established employee while not being mindful of their current workload or support capacity, leading to a negative experience for all parties involved.

Despite the preliminary nature of Stage One data collection, participants provided valuable insights into the barriers to and opportunities for employment for young adults with learning disabilities. These findings enabled the research team to develop initial recommendations aimed at improving employment access and support. Stage Two expanded on these recommendations by refining key themes, introducing new sub-themes, and strengthening proposed strategies based on further engagement with service users and providers. This final report presents the comprehensive findings and actionable recommendations developed through this process.

Expanded Definitions

During this project, the research team will sought input from a wider range of service users and service providers in order to explore the future recommendations further. We would like to expand our definitions of 'service user' and 'service provider' to the following definitions:

Service user: Based on the findings, we would like to expand our definition of 'service user' to that of a more holistic view of those who are 'using' services. For example, we would consider the parent of a young person with a learning disability to be a service user if they are contacting services seeking out work placements for their child.

Service provider: In an attempt to find out more about offering services to those with learning disabilities, we are expanding our view of service providers to include professionals such as teachers and social workers. For example, we would now consider a teacher within a school to be a service provider due to our new insight into teachers successfully organising employment for young adults with learning disabilities. This will also allow the research team to gain greater insight into the transition process and how best to provide service users with accurate information about the services they can avail of.

Future Recommendations

Following our data collection for this project, our future recommendations for supporting young adults with learning disabilities to enter the workplace include:

Improvements in Knowledge Exchange

From the perspectives of both service users and service providers, we identified multiple instances where participants could not access accurate, relevant information from a designated source of help. These instances include:

- Accurate information on the post-school transition, including what services a service user can realistically avail of.
- Information on how paid employment can influence household finances such as Personal Independence Payments.
- Information on services local to a user, including what can be self-referred and what requires referral from a social worker.
- Inconsistent information and poor signposting, including people not being given any information on how to get help with no effort made to them to the correct resources.

We also identified instances where participants were told that someone did not have the information they need, but the person did not attempt to recommend or put them in touch with another party. This frustration and lack of accountability led to a desire for a “named person” that participants could seek information from.

Both service users and service providers referenced using school staff as their “named person” for placement and employment related queries, with service providers recommending for more specialised employment support to be available within schools. Using the revised definition of ‘service providers’. The introduction of dedicated transition coordinators within schools and disability support services would ensure that service users have a reliable and consistent point of contact for employment-related queries. Each school and community-based disability service should have a staff member trained in employment guidance who is responsible for helping young people and families navigate post-school options.

Interviews with service users identified the benefits of advocacy groups for those with learning disabilities, bringing together service users and service providers to share information and provide support. However, it was noted that the quality and organisation of advocacy groups can widely vary by region. The value of advocacy groups should be considered as an avenue for fruitful knowledge exchange related to learning disabilities. This can include standardising the operation of advocacy groups to ensure that service users can avail of the same quality of knowledge exchange irrespective of where they live.

Improved Provider-Employer Relationships

Stage One of data collection identified mixed success for service users and work placements. The majority of service users spoken with completed their work placement within the school they attended, limiting their ability to gain experience within a workplace. However, a service user was able to obtain paid employment due to the initiative of their teacher who organised a summer placement for them. By improving relationships and connections between service providers and prospective employers, service users are not only able to gain more authentic workplace experience, but can lead to a greater number of users transitioning to paid employment.

Expanding Employer Awareness

Many employers are open to hiring individuals with learning disabilities but lack confidence in making necessary workplace adjustments. Stage Two findings highlight concerns about training needs, legal responsibilities, and uncertainty around providing adequate support. Service providers must take a proactive role in addressing these gaps through structured employer training, dedicated liaison officers, and practical workplace guidance. Networking events, employer forums, and recognition initiatives can encourage inclusive hiring by showcasing best practices and success stories. Practical tools such as adapted training models, assistive technology, and job coaching during onboarding would help employers integrate service users effectively.

Furthermore, employers often hold misconceptions about the capabilities of individuals with learning disabilities, leading to hesitancy in hiring and limited job offers. Stage Two findings reveal that many businesses lack exposure to inclusive hiring practices and may assume that employing individuals with learning disabilities requires excessive accommodations. Expanding employer-led case studies, workplace success stories, and awareness campaigns could shift perceptions and encourage more businesses to engage in inclusive hiring. Expanding employer awareness through targeted support and engagement will increase job placements and promote more inclusive workplaces.

Enhancing Workplace Accessibility and Adapted Training

Stage Two findings emphasise the importance of workplace adaptations in enabling individuals with learning disabilities to succeed in employment. Many service users struggle with traditional job expectations, and without reasonable adjustments, their employment opportunities remain limited. Examples include QR-coded instructional guides, simplified role-specific tasks, and personalised training models that allow service users to gain practical experience in a structured, supportive way. Expanding the use of assistive technology, customised training, and flexible job structuring could significantly improve long-term employment retention.

Incentivised Buddy Systems in the Workplace

While improved relationships between service providers and employers can be of great benefit to service users, the limitations of building these relationships are acknowledged. For example, employers can feel apprehensive about supporting service users during the ongoing Cost of Living Crisis, citing financial difficulties and busy staff. The latter is noteworthy as service providers reported how common it can be for a service user to be 'buddied up' with an unwilling and overburdened employee, leading to a frustrating experience for all parties involved.

Rather than buddying a service user up with an unwilling employee, employers could consider identifying employees who are enthusiastic about supporting adults with learning disabilities. This could be further incentivised by the employee receiving training and certification to support those with learning disabilities. This training could consist of learning from the data collection findings such as the value of training methods such as roleplay and the importance of clear instructions. The findings highlighted the benefits service users find from learning while doing and receiving clear instructions, this would only be benefitted by buddy systems in the workplace having someone to guide and rely on for support.

Centralised Funding Support for Service Providers

Service providers can find themselves relying on time-conditional funding to deliver employment and training support to service users. Not only does the time-conditional nature of this funding make it challenging to plan support provisions for the future, but service providers have reported being limited in their ability to cooperate with other organisations due to clauses in their funding agreement. Having access to a more secure and centralised pot of funding to operate these services will not only allow their delivery to be more secure, but can ensure cooperation between organisations to help service users to enter employment.

Stage Two findings highlight that bureaucratic funding restrictions prevent collaboration between organisations, making it difficult to share resources or develop structured work placements. Many providers also report that excessive administrative burdens slow service delivery, as more time is spent securing funding than supporting service users. A centralised, multi-year funding model would provide stability, allowing providers to plan strategically and form lasting employer partnerships. Simplifying funding processes and reducing bureaucratic barriers would enable organisations to focus on frontline services rather than administrative tasks. Ensuring that funding agreements encourage, rather than restrict, collaboration between service providers would strengthen employment pathways and improve work placement quality for service users.

Expanding Career Pathways and Addressing Entry-Level Barriers

Many individuals with learning disabilities have strong practical skills but struggle with rigid job entry requirements that prioritise qualifications over experience. This often leads to missed employment opportunities despite their capabilities. Stage Two findings highlight working interviews as a more inclusive alternative to traditional hiring. Instead of formal panel interviews, service users complete practical tasks in the workplace, allowing employers to assess their abilities in a real-world setting. Employers should adopt skills-based hiring models that emphasise practical trials, job shadowing, and apprenticeships over formal qualifications. Expanding on-the-job training and alternative hiring pathways would provide more equitable access to employment. Recognising experience and workplace performance rather than academic credentials ensures that individuals with learning disabilities have greater opportunities for career progression.

Improved Social Opportunities for Those with Learning Disabilities

Speaking with service users identified how transitioning to employment could have an unintended consequence to their lives. Social groups and activities for those with learning disabilities primarily take place during traditional working hours (e.g. 9am to 5pm). Sheltered employment schemes allowed service users to learn skills and be part of a workplace while also remaining as part of their social groups. If users were to transition to external employment, they would lose access to these social groups, leading to users feeling that employment would lead to them “losing all [their] friends”. This barrier was evidenced by a testimonial from a service provider. When a paid placement opportunity was offered to 37 service users, the only user who applied was the only user who was not also part of the social club.

It is imperative that service users do not feel that they are “losing all [their] friends” as a result of transitioning to employment. One method of overcoming this could be to dedicate resources to evening clubs, activities and events for those with learning disabilities. This could ensure that they remain embedded within their community while also enjoying the benefits to employment highlighted above. Another way to address this barrier there is a need for more flexible social opportunities that allow individuals with learning disabilities to remain engaged with their communities while participating in employment. Developing evening and weekend social groups would help service users maintain friendships and social connections, reducing the sense of loss associated with transitioning to work. Expanding community-based activities beyond traditional working hours would ensure that employment does not come at the cost of social well-being.

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Thank you

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