# Public Services Committee

## Corrected oral evidence: The transition from education to employment for young disabled people

Wednesday 20 March 2024

3.05 pm

Watch the meeting

Members present: Baroness Morris of Yardley (The Chair); Lord Bach; Lord Blencathra; Lord Carter of Coles; Lord Laming; Lord Mott; Lord Prentis of Leeds; Lord Shipley; Lord Willis of Knaresborough.

Evidence Session No. 13 Heard in Public Questions 171 - 179

## Witnesses

I: Angela Matthews, Head of Policy and Research, Business Disability Forum; David Hale, Head of Policy Affairs, Federation of Small Businesses (FSB); Hector Minto, Director of Accessibility Evangelism, Microsoft.

## Examination of witnesses

Angela Matthews, David Hale and Hector Minto.

Q171 **The Chair:** Welcome to this hearing in our inquiry into the transition from education to employment for young disabled people. In this session, we will concentrate on employers and businesses. We have three witnesses. I will ask them to briefly introduce themselves in a minute and then we shall be on our way. Angela, you are on screen rather than in the room, so do you want to start?

***Angela Matthews:*** Apologies for no longer being able to be there in person, but thank you for accommodating me like this. I am head of policy and research at Business Disability Forum.

***Hector Minto:*** I am the lead accessibility evangelist for Microsoft. I look after our global field engagement programme on disability and accessibility.

***David Hale:*** I am from the Federation of Small Businesses. I am head of public affairs.

Q172 **The Chair:** You are very welcome. I want to start off by asking you to tell us ways in which your organisations have worked or engaged with young disabled people. Do not go into all the problems, advantages and disadvantages, because we will come on to that later. Just start by setting the scene for us.

***David Hale:*** The FSB as an organisation does a lot of work with small businesses to try to showcase what they can do and share good practice from one business to another. We also try to focus as much as possible on how to help people into self-employment and starting businesses, including how you can recruit more inclusively, how you can help staff with disabilities in a better way than you are currently doing and, if you are setting up a business, what information you need to know. That is both what we say and how we look at the services that we offer, because we offer services to small businesses in general.

***Hector Minto:*** We do so in a number of ways. Microsoft works in the education space, with schools and colleges all across the UK. It has put quite a large focus on the knowledge space around disability and accessibility, engaging with teachers and with pupils' transition from education into employment to make sure that they have the digital skills and the accessibility digital skills required to be successful in the workplace. Building energy among teachers, particularly those working with the transition into employment, is one angle.

Secondly, our partners employ many more people than Microsoft in the UK, so as part of our Disability Confident leader status we were always told to engage with our industry and drive confidence there around disability. Microsoft trains every single employee on disability and accessibility. That is mandated learning. We also offer that training out to our partner ecosystem and ask them to sign up to be Disability Confident. We have seen some amazing partners engage much more confidently in the conversation around the hiring of people with disabilities in the larger tech landscape.

Thirdly, disabled people's organisations are important to Microsoft. We work directly with specific disability charities and NGOs. We meet regularly with the global disability charities to make sure they are aware of the very latest that will be made available to support people with disabilities into work across all disability characteristics.

That is probably a taster, but in my specific role, and remembering that every company does technology, I am doing a lot of work with all employers across the UK to make sure that they are thinking about how they engage confidently by sharing some of our best practice in mandated learning, building confidence and understanding that, for some people with disabilities, it is just a tweak or a small adjustment that will make work successful for somebody. Essentially, we are trying to grow much greater confidence across everybody employing anybody, not just about the role of technology but with good practice, about the impact disability inclusion can have in their workplace.

***Angela Matthews:*** We do so in two key ways. First, we are a business-facing membership organisation. We work with many employers who are now in a multigenerational workforce. We do a lot of work on what disability inclusion looks like for the youngest people in our member organisations as well as the oldest.

The second part is through research. My most recent piece of research came about by accident. I started some research, which Hector was involved in, on the availability of assistive technology across the labour market. One of the key groups that was disadvantaged most was people moving from the education setting to the employment setting and those who were younger. My most recent piece of research has been on the role of adjustments for young people moving from university into employment. My insights, interest and work are in those two key places right now.

**The Chair:** I am sure that Tom has already asked you for the evidence of that research, because it is absolutely what our work is about.

As a follow-up question, you have all described what you do, and I imagine that this is one-to-one with your staff, online or through lots of different ways. Do you know which of your approaches in supporting your staff is most effective?

***Hector Minto:*** I can certainly jump in there. We view disability as talent we need. That can sound like a line, but essentially the representation of the full lived human experience allows us to build what we need to build. As a technology company we certainly have to remember that everybody will be using technology in some form. Therefore, it has to be inclusive through language, literacy and disability. This is core to what we are trying to do.

What I notice when we engage with the younger generation coming into the workplace is that they want to work for businesses that have values and are actively delivering. We are also seeing a growing confidence among the generation coming through, including the young disabled people. They are much happier to talk about their disability than they may have been beforehand. They are also going into the workplace with their own accommodations and they know how to use their own technology. More often than not they know how to make things work.

Some of the problems happen when they get into the systems of the workplace: the phone or the computer. They are quite good at driving their own access to that, but when they get in it is about whether they can take the training or read the payslip—it is some of the more structural things that will stop and people can then get frustrated. From the perspective of what is successful, it is a culture conversation first and an infrastructure conversation second. You need both.

**The Chair:** I will add one little question to Angela and David. David, although you are the Federation of Small Businesses, the businesses will differ in size in terms of the numbers of employees. As well as asking

about your awareness of the most effective means, do you notice a difference in the effectiveness of what you do between businesses of different sizes?

***Angela Matthews:*** The majority of our members are large organisations, but we have an SME network, people who are self-employed, and entrepreneurs and micros.

As to what works, one of the key things is equipping the disabled individuals to, first, know that they are not out of place in the workplace. By workplace, I mean the labour market more widely. Secondly, when I spoke to employees who were five years into their first job out of university and asked them, 'What would you tell people who are just leaving university now?', the key thing they said was, 'I wish I was more assertive. I wish my university or my education prepared me to have confidence to say, "This is what I need and that will enable me to do this"'. It was the number one thing that came up consistently. I thought it might be more kit, more money or whatever, but they said, 'If I'd had the communication skills, as well as my university equipping me with a degree, I would have been able to get everything I needed and work life would have been easier to be in now and to enter into'. Someone else even said, 'I would have had more choices because I would have had the confidence to know what would suit me and what would not'.

The second thing is about what works for non-disabled staff around the disabled employee. It is not about, 'Disabled folk, you're the different ones'. We are all different; everyone in our workforce is different. Then it becomes a conversation about what each individual is finding difficult and how we remove that difficulty for each individual. Then it becomes a less 'othering' narrative, which younger people in particular said they are picking up on: even if the disabled/non-disabled narrative is not said in an organisation, they feel where othering narratives are. The younger folk are calling it out as well. From employers, we are seeing this different confidence among the younger generation about saying when something is wrong. Their expectations of a narrative of equality and equity at a very human, non-jargon level is really high.

On what works from the larger global organisations to the very smallest, in some of our larger organisations there is just such a broad range of diversity of comfort to have these conversations. It might be, 'I don't know what authority I have to sign off this adjustment', or, 'I don't know where to buy this', whereas particularly at the small and micro level we find that there is less preparation for those conversations but they can be effective.

I work with a couple of small businesses that are coffee shops. They do not have a computer and are not working in an office-based role. The way they prepare for a conversation is that they take a quick 10 minutes at a coffee table in their coffee shop around the public and have a conversation about, 'How are you today? Do you need to be here? Can you go home? What can I do tomorrow to help? Let me know. Drop me a WhatsApp later'—bang, back behind the coffee counter. Similar

conversations with a similar output are required, but they take place in a very different situation. We find that they are less recorded in small and micro businesses, by the very nature of not having a typing-based occupation, but they are no less effective.

***David Hale:*** On what works well, there is a huge variety of things. What works well is not the same for every individual or every business, and it is not the same for every disability or health condition either. It can be quite different.

On the size question, to pick up on what Angela said, we know on outcomes that, in the private sector, small businesses are the most likely employers to employ somebody with a disability, large businesses next and then medium-sized businesses. There are a couple of things from that. One goes to what Angela said. Small businesses tend to be agile. If they need to make a decision quickly, they do not need the board, the HR department, the hiring manager, the line manager and potentially the head of department. They do not need that many people to say, 'Yes, you can make this a part-time job', or, 'You can add some flexibility that was not there before'. They do not need to do that; they can turn a lot quicker. That is probably the major factor behind why you see that relative success in small businesses: it is easier to make changes and adjustments.

You see relative success in large businesses because they have a wider set of resources. There can be expertise to draw on. It can be the fact that the business has put a lot of effort into specific things that can help and they have a bigger set of resources to draw on.

You might worry that medium-sized businesses fall between the two: they have processes, an HR department, a board and that stuff, but they do not necessarily have the resource. That is probably where I would address that.

Self-employment does the best of all in terms of outcomes—people working for themselves. It does a bit better. If you are working for yourself you can make your own changes to how you do business and you might know best what to do.

On the first part of the question about variety, it really does depend. The big factors, from the employment rather than the self-employment perspective, that change whether somebody is hired and how well that hiring goes are, first, the line manager or hiring manager and colleagues second. There can be a temptation on this topic to talk about whole organisation culture. That may well be important, but certainly all the evidence that we have seen and that we have strongly emphasises the particular importance of the line manager and feedback. When people tell us about a negative experience it tends to be a poor-quality relationship either with the line manager or with colleagues. Getting those two things right is probably the most important for what works.

As Hector says, it is often small process changes: 'How is this done? How could it be done differently?' Sometimes it is what sound like bigger changes but are very easy to make, such as, 'Are we advertising these jobs at a level where the essential qualifications are higher than they need to be?' We have a lot of disabled people who are not getting through education with the same level of qualifications. It is those changes, but they are probably easier to make in a smaller business than a larger business, where you might have to get more sign-off.

Q173 **Lord Laming:** I have a very quick question and I expect quick answers. Your organisations are each employers in their own right. Could you give us an idea about how many disabled people each of your organisations employs and what adjustments had to be made to make that a success?

***Hector Minto:*** At the moment, we publish our American number in our *Global Diversity & Inclusion Report*, and we are at about 8%. That varies division to division across the whole of Microsoft and we do not share that number. Showing our progress is the best way that we can do it, because every business will have a different profile. Sainsbury's will be different from Lloyds Bank and Lloyds Bank will be different from Microsoft, because of the different dynamic.

The other thing that we monitor is our supply chain. We work with our supply chain to drive awareness that we want disability talent also to be brought to us through our supply chain and our supported employment programmes. Those are two measures that we actively work on.

I will say a little on the processes that you asked about. Years ago, Microsoft talked about the individual decision made by an individual manager. That is 100% correct. The confidence of an individual to make the right choice is something we often talk about. From a structural perspective, if that comes with extra costs then people will start making different decisions. We now have a global, centralised accommodation budget to support the employment of people with disabilities so that neither the individual employee nor the individual manager has even to think about the extra costs that may be required. We then balance that out across the whole organisation. There is a culture play there but there is also a process play to make sure that you do not allow the wrong decision to be made sometimes.

***David Hale:*** We are small enough that I would be wary about overly disclosing about us as a particular business. The businesses that we represent tend to employ quite small numbers. The average small business in the UK employs around eight or nine people. Over half of them employ somebody with a disability. I would not necessarily be able to put a number on it and it obviously depends on the size, but the smaller you get the more careful you have to be about disclosure and what you are saying about your employees.

***Angela Matthews:*** We think that representation is important, but more important than that is the quality of the experience that those people have. Nevertheless, we do measure. BDF has about 50 people, so we are

small/medium. Almost 70% of us have a disability or long-term condition. As Hector said, though, it is about the profile of the organisation: we are a disability organisation.

As for adjustments, we are very broad. I have a genetic liver condition, I have had two strokes, I am autistic and I have Parkinsonism—just a little list. We also have a lot of autism, ADHD, mobility issues, cancers—we have a very broad range so adjustments really do differ. We work flexible hours across BDF. Some of us are remote all the time and some of us, like me, are in the office all the time. We use the Microsoft Office suite and we are quite on it to make sure our staff know the stuff that is already available within the Office suite. We are medium-sized; we cannot afford everything else.

I am a senior leader. Each new person has an induction with me, where I talk about being disabled myself and say, 'If anything is difficult at all here let me know, let any of us know, and we will sort it out'. As has already been said, the culture is important. We start from, 'Yes, we can make that adjustment', and we work back to, 'Is there any reason why we would not be able to?' For us, everyone is different. We do not have a disabled/non-disabled vibe going on here.

Q174 **Lord Willis of Knaresborough:** First of all, I have found all your contributions interesting this afternoon. We could do with a lot more time to explore them.

One of the things that Angela said earlier on was this business about being more assertive. I think that we would all accept that; it is a problem that MPs do not have. The one thing I am really interested in is the accessibility of assistive technology. We have heard throughout this inquiry, right across the disability spectrum, that if you have the right technologies to be able to access learning in all its forms, from early childhood through into employment, you will have a real chance of being successful. Our employer is the Government, which looks after 60 million-plus people. What we would like from you is how we can make sure that assistive technology is available. What should the Government do to make sure that assistive technology is available to employers and students of all abilities so that they can do what you want them to do? Frankly, you can talk until you are blue in the face about what the problems are, but unless we have some clear action we will just continue and we will do exactly the same things in 10 years' time. Hector, you are in charge of one of the largest—sorry, you are not in charge of—

***Hector Minto:*** Not yet.

**Lord Willis of Knaresborough:** I see; he has given you the word, has he? All right. I do not mean this disrespectfully, but you are in charge of one of the most interesting and vibrant organisations coming out of the US. Throughout, this remarkable research has been going on. We have some incredible people across the globe. What do we say to our Government: 'Please do this and you will make a fundamental difference to the lives and aspirations of young people'?

***Hector Minto:*** I 100% agree. Just so that you know, before I joined Microsoft I worked with the most specialist of technologies for people with complex disabilities: eye-controlled computers, sip/puff-driven wheelchairs, the whole lot. That is amazing assistive technology and it needs to continue to be invested in. Some of the best technologies ever have come from the disability world. Mainstream technology is now delivering assistive technology at scale; the challenge is awareness. We are working with some of the largest organisations in the world to make accessibility training part of what they deliver so that the person who is not talking about their hearing loss finds the captions on their computer. They do not need an adjustment; they just need to know how to click that button. That is the awareness part.

We are also looking at who the new stakeholders in society are who will help with this. Throughout my career, you were lucky if you found a specialist who would then take you to your assistive technology. We have just trained 26,000 work coaches at the DWP. They now know how to turn the captions on.

**Lord Willis of Knaresborough:** What can we ask the Government to do?

***Hector Minto:*** We need to ask the Government to make sure that people engaging with people with disabilities in society have 101-level assistive technology awareness: do you know how to magnify? Do you know how to dictate into a computer? Do you know how to support somebody who cannot read to get the information from their computer? It really is as simple as that.

**Lord Willis of Knaresborough:** We could do with that list.

**The Chair:** Let us go on to David now; I am conscious that we will be missing out the later questions.

***David Hale:*** I do not have too much to add to what Hector said on the assistive technologies that are out there. I would stress that assistive technologies are only part of the answer; I think Hector would agree.

***Hector Minto:*** Absolutely.

***David Hale:*** Remember that when you transition from education to employment you will generally get managers who are less experienced. You will generally get line managers who themselves might be only a few years distant from education, so you might get a general lack of awareness. I agree with Hector that we should not have people leaving education—especially people who we know are at risk of poor employment outcomes, such as people with disabilities—who have not been given the skills they need to do basic workplace actions. That is incredibly important. I would not tell the Government that this is a technology fix only; it is a management fix as much as a technology fix.

***Hector Minto:*** I agree.

***Angela Matthews:*** I will not reiterate what David and Hector said. I agree with it all. I will cover those for whom tech is the answer.

What is needed is for tech to be in the hands of people—sorry, that is quite an ableist term—for people to have the tech they need as soon as they need it. By tech, I mean even as basic as owning a computer or a laptop. A lot of disabled young people do not have that. That means that all the tools that Hector is talking about are not available to them unless they have a smartphone, which, again, a lot of young disabled people, depending on their condition, do not have.

What the Government need to do—this is an ask from young disabled people themselves, as well as parents of disabled children—is invest in a programme that these people have broadly called 'tech for life'. It is the tech equivalent of the Motability scheme for disabled people. At the moment, people generally have access to tech if they are in education or employment. A lot of young disabled folk told me that when they leave education, they leave their computer behind. How do they look for a job?

There are tech gaps when a policy area changes. When moving from education to employment, young disabled folk said that if there was the Motability-type scheme for tech, it would mean they would be able to have a fit-for-purpose assessment, which would say, 'You're at school right now; you need this stuff. When you go to, perhaps, an apprenticeship, you might need different tech for a different environment. Then you can trade it in and that will change'. It would be a lifelong technology provision that changes and flexes with the life that a young disabled person chooses and how that changes throughout their life.

Q175 **Lord Bach:** Good afternoon. The question I was going to ask—it is a very exciting question—has been answered: the impact of employing disabled people, including young disabled people, on businesses that you, in your different ways, have all worked with. I will leave that; I think you have dealt with the impact point. I will ask you a perhaps less sexy question but it is almost as important: how can we measure different impacts on things such as retention, productivity and staff morale rather than just through anecdote? How can we do it without telling stories about individual people? That measurement is something that has worried us a bit as to how you can actually say this and that on measurement.

***Hector Minto:*** Disability is not the same as other protected characteristics, in that much of disability is hidden. It is not a binary thing of do you employ disabled people or not? It is also: are they happy to share that they are a person with a disability to their employer? Many people with disabilities report to us that that has had negative consequences in the past, therefore they are not likely to share that they have a disability. So, when measuring the data, many people with disabilities are missing from it. This long-term cultural investment that we all need to make—I acknowledge that it is easier for larger organisations to say things like this—is where we are starting to see more people being confident to share that. From there, through our employee resource groups and our communities, we are able, essentially, to work

on the satisfaction of working in the workplace across a number of metrics.

That is more of the qualitative stuff. There is a quantitative thing here, though, which is: is the workplace accessible? Is a website accessible? Is a training resource accessible? That is all measurable. If you want to listen to me being roasted on Radio 4, I can share the link with you. I was speaking to somebody who was blind, employed in the police, had managed to do all the hard stuff and get the job, but when they got in none of the systems were accessible. The accessibility of the infrastructure of an organisation is measurable. Are your buildings accessible? We measure that. Is your internal technology accessible? We measure that. How many people are using the products that we want them to? We measure all this. There are measurables and data points, but I acknowledge—this is why it is great I have David sat next to me—that these are somewhat easier for larger organisations to go after.

***Angela Matthews:*** I agree with everything Hector said so, again, I will not repeat that. What Hector has highlighted is the difference between disabled people being in the workplace—so representation, targets, quotas, for example—and whether they feel they belong in the workplace, so the difference between being there and feeling like they are valued there.

To Hector's point about disabled people feeling that they can say, 'I have a disability', what we often miss also about people saying, or not saying, 'I have a disability' as a measure of how good an employer is, is that across a lot of religions, cultures and the combination of religion and ethnicity there will be reasons why someone must not tell their employer about their disability. We often miss that and look just at how many people have been employed by this organisation who have a disability, and say, 'Oh, that is a really good or a really bad organisation'.

On measurements, again, I will not repeat everything Hector said but one of my favourites from one of our members is that they measure inclusion by their exit data. At the point someone resigns, that is when they have their exit interview—not when they leave, but at the point of resignation. That has enabled them to identify any type—not just disability-related—of unfairness, harassment, discrimination, stuff not working, inaccessibility and other barriers, to the point where some of our members have even turned around those resignations and retained people who would otherwise have left if that exit interview had been on the day they left. A couple of organisations that have been doing that have managed to stop disabled employees leaving, among this silent quitting resignation trend that we are seeing more widely in the labour force, particularly among young disabled people—the 'quit-tok' trend, for example.

**Lord Bach:** How does the Federation of Small Businesses measure success, or otherwise?

***David Hale:*** You can measure success nationally. I would point to employment outcomes: are disabled people in the workforce or are they

not? That sounds like a big headline figure but I would not get distracted away from it. That is the big question and the answer is: not as many people as there should be. You can tell general trends. We talked about whether they are working in small businesses or are self-employed. You can see some general trends about what is generally working. It is quite hard for an organisation, especially a small organisation, to measure the impact on staff morale compared with a counterfactual that they will not have access to. You can draw conclusions from general data but organisations themselves will struggle. I am not sure that disclosure is a good proxy for how good organisations are.

We can tell some things from our general data. We know that a disabled employer is more likely either to have or to have recently employed somebody with a disability—or at least to know they have—than another employer. The most important thing to measure is outcomes, and you have to look at that nationally.

Q176 **Lord Carter of Coles:** Good afternoon. We have probably covered this, but could we dive a little bit deeper into what happens when people have made the transition into work? To be concise about this, we will have to make recommendations to the Government, and we would like your guidance on a summary of what they should be. I know that the Chair will come to this at the end, but it would be a sense of what we should be saying the key things are, particularly on how to influence people in medium-sized businesses. I think you have made the case to us that small businesses and large businesses do it well. Are there learnings? What are the key recommendations you think that we should make to raise awareness to deal with the access points?

***Angela Matthews:*** My main, favourite, number one thing goes back to what David mentioned before. It can be quite easy in large organisations and in small organisations and a bit harder for medium-sized organisations. On what the Government can do, which size of organisation is most disadvantaged by Access to Work and that first £1,000? It is medium-sized organisations. Among our members, it is the medium-sized organisations that can use Access to Work the least, because of the first £1,000 that needs to be paid. It is just that little bit too much for medium-sized organisations. As a result, we have medium-sized organisations that do not use Access to Work anymore. Therefore, what is reasonable for them to do for an employee becomes much less, meaning the employee either leaves the business, is redeployed or cannot do their job as intended. A revision of Access to Work for a medium-sized employer would be my number one ask.

***David Hale:*** My number one ask probably relates to when transition fails, so when somebody has left education and they have not been in work for, say, a two-year period. That is the area where government can do most, because it is difficult for businesses to access those people. They will have the hardest time getting into work. We still have plenty of people who had poor transitions in the financial crisis and are still not, in general, working because of how damaging that initial failure of transition was.

The gold standard on it—and this is expensive, so consider it—would be that in the pandemic we had the Kickstart scheme for young people. We never designed and had it on the basis that youth unemployment was going to be as bad as disabled unemployment and inactivity. We could have a version of Kickstart, if we did it in different ways that are perhaps a little bit less expensive, that was particularly focused on people who had never succeeded in that transition and gave those people a block of work experience. We tend to find that is the thing people find hardest: when transition has not worked, someone has no experience in the workplace and has become quite distant from what they might need to know to succeed in the workplace. I would probably focus on having a short block of employment for those people.

I have two much quicker things. Perhaps we will get on to this, but if you were to talk just about what government should do, the Treasury has outcome metrics by department. Disability employment is a DWP outcome metric; it is not a DfE outcome metric, as far as I am aware, or a Department of Health metric to the same extent. Making it a cross-government outcome metric in advance of a spending review in, presumably, the near if not immediate future would help to focus minds on all the different parts of government that need to look at this and probably need to be judged on it.

**Lord Carter of Coles:** That is a wider question. What I am after is the specific aim to employers. This is really just directed at what we would say for employers.

***David Hale:*** If transition fails you need to redress that problem at the point of recruitment for the people who have not had a successful transition. I would point to the Kickstart scheme for people.

**Lord Carter of Coles:** Hector, in your comments on the awareness and accessibility issue in medium-sized businesses, how do you get—

***Hector Minto:*** If you think about industry approaches rather than company approaches, you can go for it. If you think that the future of digital jobs will be in AI, for example, we have to make sure that coursework is deliberately inclusive and accessible. We have to make sure that we are proactively reaching out and making sure that candidates with disabilities are entering skilling programmes. Those skilling programmes are delivered by small to medium-sized businesses. Most of the partner network organisations of a company the size of Microsoft are 30 to 40 people strong. The same resources and the same demands are things that we can start to put on a skills vertical and think of it like that.

If we think of, say, the future of construction hiring, we have to start saying, 'Is the course material accessible? Do you have to speak English? Do you need a certain level of literacy, or should you have support in taking those courses to get into that job?' For each industry there is a skills journey, particularly as people do not work one job for their whole career nowadays and will be reskilling. Those reskilling courses need to

get the same attention in terms of the accessibility of the materials structurally and the support that students get to be able to take the coursework as if they were at university.

**Lord Carter of Coles:** What happens when they get into the employer? You have experience as Microsoft. You have a supply chain and you reach down into that supply chain. Where you are reaching into one of those businesses with 30 or 40 employees, how do you get the employees in there to be disability aware?

***Hector Minto:*** Our industry has a skills shortage; we need more people. We need people from different backgrounds to join our industry. We are proactively reaching out and saying, 'How do we support people from different backgrounds to follow that skills path into the tech sector and into employment?' It is a very deliberate strategy on our part to reach them, for example, through our autism hiring programme. If people are working in retail when they should be working in tech with the skill set they have, we need them and we need to find a way to get to them. The skills programmes need to be deliberately asking for disability talent to come into them.

**Lord Carter of Coles:** Do you make the employer aware of that in the middle ranks of this?

***Hector Minto:*** Yes, we do. We put demands on learning on all partners. Disability awareness is not currently mandated for our partner ecosystem, but we did manage to get 300 partners signed up to Disability Confident. Part of that was that they took our accessibility training. One was to sign up to the Government's initiative, but what Microsoft asks of you is that you take your accessibility training and make sure that it is offered to all staff. There are things that we can do through our partner programmes.

Q177 **Lord Shipley:** Could I ask you all a generic question? I will direct it to David first for an FSB position. How effective are the government programmes and resources designed to support employers to develop inclusive workplaces and employ disabled people, and how could they be improved? Maybe we will just limit that. We could talk about any aspect of government support, but I am particularly interested in Disability Confident and Access to Work. I understand that the FSB has called for a specific tier in Disability Confident aimed at small businesses producing good outcomes, arguing that the current scheme disadvantages small businesses by being too focused on procedures and not outcomes. What more can you tell us about that?

***David Hale:*** You put it very succinctly. An issue that you will hear a lot about Disability Confident is that an organisation can be a Disability Confident employer without employing any disabled people. There are three tiers in Disability Confident as it exists now, and the further you go up the more you get good things about sharing good practice throughout supply chains and that sort of thing but, for want of a better word, there is more paperwork in getting to the top tier. I do not think that we

particularly want to ask small businesses to do more paperwork that does not necessarily lead to better results for those businesses. The idea of having an outstanding small business performer section of Disability Confident would help to recognise good outcomes rather than necessarily size of process.

I will limit this to small employers and SMEs on Disability Confident. I am always nervous when government focuses too much on a kitemarking scheme such as Disability Confident. There are around 11,000 employers involved. That is quite good for a government kitemarking scheme, but it is nowhere near the general population of small employers and I do not think that it is particularly representative of whether small businesses are confident to employ people with disabilities. I do not want that to sound like a moan about the scheme; it is not. It has negative consequences in the delivery of public services. For instance, if a jobcentre has a disabled jobseeker, they are more likely to go to a Disability Confident employer. There is no reason for them to. They would probably be better off trying to place that person with a small business that is looking to employ someone and give them a chance. That is what they should look at. Unfortunately, they tend to look at Disability Confident employers as a metric or a proxy, and it is not necessarily a good one.

The DfE has done this on trainee schemes. I will not go into detail, but I remember that it had a website that said, 'You can become a trainee'. This was when there were quite a lot of opportunities available coming out of the pandemic. You could tick a box that said, 'Tick this to see Disability Confident employers'. I did that for where I am from. I ticked the box, because it seemed like a relevant box to tick for some of the work we do. I saw two employers. I unticked it and I saw 158. Of the two employers that had gone through Disability Confident, one was a well-known national employer and the other was a small business that I suspect worked with the public sector. It is fine that they are on the Disability Confident scheme, but that is not a good way to direct people. I would not want people to have the impression that they should be looking only at Disability Confident employers. Sorry, that was quite a long answer.

On Access to Work, an important thing is that it works quickly. If you look at somebody coming into the workplace or any new job, the first three months, then six months, then a year make up the most important part of the employment to go well and for it to succeed in the long term. If you arrive without the equipment that you need, it is harder. We are not talking about not getting a laptop on the first day, you cannot log on and it is difficult to know what meetings you have to go to; we are talking about very long periods where people do not have access to the equipment they need and it disrupts the start of their work. Not that many self-employed people are aware that they can get help with Access to Work.

Sorry, I will make this the last thing. The mental health Access to Work scheme is a good scheme. It addresses some of the specific mental

health challenges. It does not require disclosure to an employer. You can access it regardless of disclosure. That is probably underused and undersold.

To sum up, Disability Confident especially is not quite the right area that the Government need to look at. It is probably the things that we talked about with Kickstart, addressing things such as line management and a broader set of things on self-employment that would help.

**Lord Shipley:** Can I switch to Microsoft and Hector? I think that Microsoft has been a Disability Confident leader for the last five years or so, and it is expected to support other organisations to join the Disability Confident scheme and to put disability-inclusive practices in place. I wondered how it was going.

***Hector Minto:*** As I described earlier, it is exactly that. We picked up that requirement within the leader status: influence your industry, take it to your networks, take it to your supply chain. This is something that we actively do. We are trying to recruit more of our partner network into Disability Confident and make sure they have the learning. We actively engage with our supply chain to make sure that it has the knowledge and awareness to build confidence.

On engaging with Disability Confident in the leaders group, not every company is really going after it. That is a fair criticism. I also think that the programme was very well managed from a marketing perspective in the very early days but we have lost momentum. Like anything, if you launch and leave, you do not necessarily continue to see the impact.

To give you a little bit of a global perspective on this, my goal as the lead for accessibility in Microsoft is to work out what the local offer is in all our markets. Having something like Disability Confident is an incredible starting point. That is all I would say: to really get going with businesses around their confidence and the conversation they are having. I agree that the kitemark does not solve anything on its own but at least somebody has signed up to it, so let us now make this structural: what do you want to do?

When we talk to other countries about Disability Confident, we speak pretty positively about it because it is seen as good that the Government are at least engaged in recognising the role employers will play. However, it is a fair criticism to say that it is not as impactful in all industries as it might be.

**Lord Shipley:** Can I ask Angela to comment on anything that she has heard about those two schemes and to add anything else she would like to about government support and what she would change?

***Angela Matthews:*** Following on from what David said about Disability Confident, you could go further and say that a Disability Confident level 3 leader does not have to do anything before they get validated. All that the level 3 requires is that another organisation validates you. When I do

a validation, I write my recommendations on the template and that is all. They do not have to do my recommendations; they just say, 'Yes, we got this overview from another organisation. I am ready for my level 3, please.'

That said, a scheme like this is only as good as how an employer uses it. I think that the employer has a responsibility here, yet it is true that, if you look at it purely, there is no requirement to actually do everything or employ a disabled person under the scheme. Part of me says that is up to the employer. If you want to be that tick-box employer that is up to you, or you can use it strategically, as Hector outlined; I will not go over that. There is a responsibility for employers that are serious about this stuff.

The other thing is that Disability Confident is not very focused. Compared with its predecessor, the Positive About Disabled People scheme, the Disability Confident scheme has a range of things that you could do. In the Positive About Disabled People scheme, there were five things that you needed to do to qualify as a two ticks Positive About Disabled People employer and everyone knew what they were. There were no ins or outs; you had to do those five things. Now we have a whole framework: a bit of reporting, there is even a bit of customers in there, a bit of recruiting, training and retention, and well-being and mental health. All that stuff is great, but young disabled people tell me, 'Okay, an employer has that Disability Confident badge. We don't know what they're doing or not doing'. With the Positive About Disabled People scheme, we knew they were offering what was then the two tick guaranteed interview scheme. We knew they were providing training, for example. That is a comment on the focus of the Disability Confident scheme.

Access to Work needs to be higher on the Treasury's list. It needs to be a strategic priority for the Government to invest in. When it works it is amazing, but our members say that at the moment it takes a year from when one of their employees applies to when they get the report. That is just not effective. As a result, young disabled people are having their interviews withdrawn because the Access to Work applications are not going through quickly enough for when employers need to recruit. They are then declining interviews for applicants who cannot get adjustments done from Access to Work in time.

We also need to think about getting Access to Work to people earlier in their economic activity journey. It should be available to anyone who is looking for a job, not just when they have secured an interview or when they are in work. It should be available to them when they leave a job or when they are looking to start up their own business.

We recently surveyed young disabled people who were looking for a graduate scheme to join. The most common and popular scheme that young disabled people were going to apply for was the Civil Service graduate scheme. There was an expectation that they would be able to apply for Access to Work to keep the adjustments they currently have in their disabled student's allowance. Of course, the Civil Service is no

longer allowed to use Access to Work, so we are already setting up young disabled people unfairly there. I will stop there.

**The Chair:** Let me tag another bit on to the question that Lord Mott will ask next. It would be great if you could include whether there is anything in the stick bit for employers, rather than the carrot bit that you might recommend.

Q178 **Lord Mott:** I am conscious of time. We have heard that there is poor awareness of the rights of disabled people in the workplace and that rights are often not respected. What impact would more stringent or proactive enforcement mechanisms have on employer behaviour? What kinds of enforcement would work?

***Angela Matthews:*** Our research shows that young disabled people in particular do not know their rights. When I asked employers—by employers I mean line managers, so these are not even people who are in a management position in their organisation but they manage someone—they did not know the ins and outs of the law. There is a question as to whether we expect them to. At one level, we must recognise that rights are the bare minimum standard of how employers should be behaving. This should be about being a good human being and basic kindness in the workplace: you are finding something difficult; let us make it easier.

Rights are about equipping young disabled people. It is not necessarily about knowing when the law has been breached, but it goes back to assertiveness: am I uncomfortable with how I am feeling; do I feel that I am not being treated well? For me as a disabled person, but also as a manager and as a human being, that is where I want the future for disabled people to be: do I feel I am not being valued here? For me, that is about rights as well.

I do not think that we can expect every single line manager and every single non-lawyer or non-HR person to have an in-depth working knowledge of the law. I do not think that is needed or reasonable. However, on enforcement, where there is a repeated pattern of unfairness, poor treatment or harassment, there is a mandate within the Equality and Human Rights Commission to look into it. Whether it has the resources and the time to do so is a different issue, but the mandate is there, particularly where there is a repeated pattern of behaviour or feeling within an organisation, industry or sector, for example.

My one want for the future of disabled people is: let us not make them settle for the bare minimum of what is lawful. Let us make sure that they get into places where they feel valued and, therefore, that they belong there.

***Hector Minto:*** Maybe I can offer a global perspective, because we have different laws in different countries around rights and hiring. They roughly boil down to two types: employee rights and quota systems. That is probably the easiest way to describe it. We do not really see positive

outcomes of quota systems because it is a forcing function of employing people with disabilities. We see some difficult practices in different countries, where a company has been forced to take this group on without the requisite skills, and without the ambition for people with disabilities to be successful in the workplace.

It is a hard one because if you force it, it does not lead to the outcomes that you want, which is career progression and having successful disabled employees in the workplace to create more disabled people in the workplace because of successful experiences. I feel your pain in thinking this one through and I certainly would not want to overly influence you one way or the other, but all I can say is that I would definitely do your research globally to see whether it is leading to the outcomes that you hope that it leads to.

Our approach is mandated learning. In Microsoft, you cannot say that you do not understand disability. You understand what it is, what tools and accommodations people need, and how to build an accessible experience. If, at that point, you are still not in a position where you understand that we want to employ people with disabilities then we have a problem, but equally, our requirement as a business is to train our HR recruiters to run specific programmes and have specific landing points. If you are a person with a disability looking for a job at Microsoft, there is a specific inclusive hiring portal where you will have inclusive hiring support through the process into the business. There are certain things that you can do tactically. Enforcing that on businesses of all sizes is hard.

***David Hale:*** We know that a negative experience of the workplace is a problem and we can tell that quite clearly through our self-employment data. We know that 17% of all people who become self-employed do so because they have had a negative experience in the workplace. For disabled people who are self-employed that is 26%. That at least is something that we can directly tell is part of the reason why self-employed people report that they have gone into self-employment.

On making progress, it is important to be clear about what the mechanisms to get there look like. They tend to be creativity. To be a bit more specific, they tend to be management creativity. A lot of disabled employment is through word of mouth. There is a little bit of a reason to be concerned about the move to more online recruitment, but that is another story. The mechanism that works tends to be: this is a person I can give a chance to. That involves changing things. It could be similar to what I was talking about earlier, with lowering qualifications, or that it is a part-time job and not a full-time job, or two part-time jobs instead of one full-time job. Those all require creativity in the moment. Some of them require risk. If you have two candidates and one of them has lower qualifications, probably as a result of their disability through the education system, it might seem like a risk to give them the job. You need people to take that risk if they see potential, and you need to build on that.

As Angela said, the important people in this are the people going to work, the people trying to get into work, and the line managers. I think that a vanishingly small number of employers are not very aware about what rights disabled people have in the workplace. Nearly every employer will have a decent level of awareness of what those rights mean. When it comes to hiring managers, we have tried as much as possible not to make this all about legal risk. That is the danger: if you make things look like they are a legal risk then you drive risk-averse behaviour, which is perfectly natural. You also drive people towards legal advice. We have a lot of lawyers in the membership, but legal advice tends to be risk averse. You do not want risk-averse behaviour or risk-averse advice when what you need is a bit of risk-taking at management level to see people with potential and bring them into the workplace. That is the main thing.

Q179 **Lord Blencathra:** I want to pick up on a couple of points that Angela made. First, I like the idea of this tech Motability scheme. We are not talking about 20,000-quid cars here; we are talking about a computer of about £300 or £400, not a £2,000 MacBook Pro, which at the moment is fighting with Microsoft because it does not want to play with Word and Office.

The other main question I have is that you said at the beginning that young disabled people wished they had been more assertive. That seems to tie in with evidence we heard—I exaggerate only slightly—from parents who said, 'Oh my God, my child is disabled. They have no future. There's nothing they can do. I'll have to mollycoddle you. You'll stay at home. You can never get a job' and schools with a similar attitude: 'Oh my God, you're disabled. Lower your expectations because you're not going to do anything proper in life'. What can we do to cut through that? Have you come across that and what do we do to cut through it?

***Angela Matthews:*** I think that those low expectations come from early in the education system, from the education system not being equipped with the resources to teach inclusively but also not having the knowledge and the back-up to do so. A lot of parents of disabled people who wanted that Motability-type scheme for tech said they had children who had to go to school legally for all primary school but had never taken part. They were now in secondary school and, because they were blind or disabled but never had access to tech, they had not yet started their learning journey. They are 11, 12, 14 years old.

A lot of those parents also told me that the learning support teams in schools did not know what tech was available or how to get it. The local authority did not know. The SEN teams in the local authority did not know. Who knows this stuff enough to know, at an early enough intervention, that this is what you need and this is how we can get it to you?

**The Chair:** That is very helpful. Briefly, Hector or David, do you wish to add to that?

***Hector Minto:*** Could I build on that? There is an interesting point here that the people with disabilities who have historically had access to technology have been people going into office administration jobs. We are doing some interesting work right now looking at people going into front-line jobs—catering and cleaning jobs—and using technology in exactly the same way to support their literacy, their understanding and their language needs. One of our showcase colleges is doing some interesting work with people with complex learning disabilities going into everyday roles with their phone, with some applications on it that will help with their literacy, their hearing, their understanding, whatever it might be. The concept of work coaches in supported employment programmes having core digital skills is certainly something I would be looking to.

To give that global perspective again, in my career there has always been the medical model of assessment of people with disabilities: what do you need to get you to access this thing? We have to start saying that this is a digital skill we should all have. We should come to a meeting like this and be thinking about captions or magnification. These are modern technologies that are pervasive. Work needs to be done to make sure that people are more routinely aware—a whole new group of stakeholders.

**The Chair:** David, do you want the last word in our hearing this afternoon?

***David Hale:*** It absolutely should be the case that young people with disabilities go from the start of education through to the end and beyond, where they believe rightly that they can access the employment opportunities that they should be able to. That should include being self-employed, becoming an employer, and going on to employ people, particularly including people with disabilities. That should be where we get to. I hope that the Government can listen to the Committee and get there.

**The Chair:** It has been an excellent session. You might know that part of the reason we have rushed today is that we are about to vote, and the minute the Division Bell goes we go for 20 minutes. We are not allowed to continue beyond a Division Bell. Apologies, I feel that we have rushed through so many important areas but, together with the conversations you have had with Tom, I know we have a wealth of evidence. We are very grateful. I hope that I can ask whether it is all right if we come back to you to clarify any of our information. Some of the phrases you have used have been very good, so you might see them appear in our report because they are well worth repeating. You have opened up a new vision for us. We are very grateful to you for appearing before our Committee and for the work you do in this important area.

I remind you that you will be sent a copy of the transcript so you will have the opportunity to make sure it says what you intended it to say. Other than that, I will close the session with our thanks.