



Autism Act 2009 Committee

Corrected oral evidence

Monday 19 May 2025

2.45 pm

Watch the meeting

Members present: Baroness Rock (The Chair); Lord Addington; Lord Crisp; Baroness Goudie; Baroness Hodgson of Abinger; Baroness Pitkeathley; Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick; Lord Wigley.

Evidence Session No. 14

Heard in Public

Questions 91 - 100

Witnesses

[I](#): Professor Kim Hoque, Professor of Human Resource Management, King's College London; Professor Anna Remington, Director of the Centre for Research in Autism and Education, University College London; Laura Davis, CEO, British Association of Supported Employment.

Examination of witnesses

Professor Kim Hoque, Professor Anna Remington and Laura Davis.

Q91 The Chair: Good afternoon and welcome to this public meeting of the House of Lords Autism Act 2009 Committee. In this evidence session we will hear from witnesses about key barriers to enabling autistic people to find and stay in work, and effective ways to overcome these barriers. We are absolutely delighted to be joined in person by Professor Kim Hoque, professor of human resource management at King's College London, Professor Anna Remington, director of the Centre for Research in Autism and Education at University College London, and Laura Davis, CEO of the British Association of Supported Employment. Thank you very much indeed for coming and you are all extremely welcome.

Our evidence sessions are on the record, which means that they are broadcast and a written transcript is taken for subsequent publication. The list of members' declared interests has been published on the committee's website.

What is the evidence on the numbers and characteristics of autistic people of working age, both diagnosed and undiagnosed, in England and their access to employment? Could you compare this to disabled people more broadly and to the general population?

Professor Anna Remington: The data we have most recently from the Office for National Statistics in 2022-23 suggests that autistic people in the UK have an employment rate of about 29%, which is the second lowest of all disability groups. The overall employment rate for all people with disabilities is 55% and for the general population it is 75%.

We also have data specifically on those graduating from higher education, and it is a similar pattern. The figures for 2021-22 suggest that autistic people are twice as likely to be unemployed as non-disabled graduates and least likely to be in full-time employment. Again, this is lower than for any other disability type, for those with either undergraduate or postgraduate degrees.

I am citing the official statistics, but I want to note that that is likely to be a huge underestimation, because we do not know about those who are undisclosed or undiagnosed. Other polls, for example the work done by Ann Memmott, have put the rates much higher, so it is likely to be a bit better than we think.

To add another caveat, we know employment is not right for all autistic people. I do not think that people should be valued just for their economic activity, but we know that there is a gap between those who want to work and are able to work and those who are able to access employment. We also know that many are malemployed or underemployed, so that is where autistic people's jobs do not match their skill level.

Q92 Baroness Pitkeathley: Thank you very much for those statistics and for

talking about the low employment rates. I would like to put a broader question to all of you. What are the main reasons for low employment rates among autistic people? To what extent are the reasons for low employment rates among autistic people common to other disabled groups? Could you tie up in your answer the consequences of failing to support autistic people to access employment?

Professor Kim Hoque: A lot of this comes down to the fact that employers are, unfortunately, not putting into place the sorts of policies and practices that we would ideally want to see. In terms of autism specifically, some of them are quite prosaic, such as making sure that you provide interview questions in advance of interviews, that there are adaptations for lighting and noise and that you provide quiet spaces for employees, noise-cancelling headphones and the like. Communication is very important. Employers should make sure that communication is absolutely clear, provide flexible working arrangements and so on.

All these things, we suspect, are going to be extremely important for autistic people in terms of getting into and remaining in employment, but we do not know how widely adopted these are. Not that much research has been done telling us the extent to which employers are actually doing this.

We do know the extent to which employers are implementing policies in relation to disability more broadly. A bit of research that my Disability@Work colleague Nick Bacon and I did a little while ago was to look at the Government's Workplace Employment Relations Survey data, which is nationally representative government data, and the sorts of disability equality policies and practices that employers have put into place. We looked at whether they monitor and review hiring and promotions by disability, whether they review pay by disability, whether they have put into place special recruitment procedures to reach out to disabled people in the hiring process, and whether they have conducted accessibility assessments.

We looked at seven practices in total. We focused in particular on large private sector employers with 250 or more employees. We found out that, on average, they have adopted just 1.1 out of those seven practices. This is despite the fact that about 84% of them have a formal disability equality policy statement. In their documentation on their websites and so on, they say, "We support disabled people. We look to hire disabled people. We are an equal opportunities employer by disability", but when you look under the lid of that policy statement, very often there is very little there. This is what we refer to as the empty shell. An awful lot of disability equality policies are not backed up by the sorts of substantive, robust employer practice that you would expect to see.

That is the picture for disability broadly. I would not be surprised if we had a very similar picture for autism more specifically. We could look at one potential autism-related practice—working from home. We know that, for a lot of autistic people, the opportunity to work from home is very important. We also know that there has been a big growth in

working from home in recent times. You might think, “This is going to be good for autistic people”, but, when you look at the number of jobs that are advertised on a working-from-home basis, that number is extremely low. We looked at the Government’s Find a Job website. When we looked at it back in May of last year, it was advertising over 133,000 jobs.

We found that 1.34% were offered on a fully remote basis. Just over 4% were offered on a hybrid remote basis. Even those figures are an overestimate, because a lot of those jobs are not really working from home. A lot of them are delivery drivers, taxi drivers, people providing care services in clients’ homes and so on. When you strip those out and look just at the jobs that are offered on the Government’s Find a Job website on a working-from-home basis, we calculated it as 0.35%. Employers are just not offering working from home to new entrants to the organisation. Given that that is important for autistic people, that is an important working practice that is not available to people who are looking to move into organisations for the first time.

Laura Davis: We have already heard from Anna about some of the statistics around the impact for people who are autistic. I always have to talk about the fact that, for people who are autistic and known to adult social care, that rate drops even lower to around 4.8% of people accessing paid employment, yet a piece of research by Mencap demonstrated that over 86% of people want to work. This is not a lack of ambition or aspiration. The pathways are simply not working for people.

We see that there is a lack of ambition and aspiration within the education system itself, which is pushing people down one form of being able to demonstrate competencies, talents, skills and strengths. We need to see different ways for people to be able to evidence their huge strengths and talents. We also hear from young people, as they navigate their way through the education system, that it leads them to a position where they cannot even think about dreaming and hoping about what employment could look like.

We know that supported employment has a very clear evidence base to support people with all disabilities, including autistic people. We need to think about that full range of employment pathways that could be open to people. Supported internships are a great way of supporting much younger people through, but only certain groups of people are eligible. We look at the drop-out rate for young people who are going through into apprenticeships—not just young people but anybody going on to an apprenticeship—where you get to that end-point assessment and people are dropping out of it because, again, it has one style of demonstrating your competencies. We need to build different ways for people to be able to evidence their skills and talents.

There is a real lack of join-up across the system. I am the mother of three disabled and neurodivergent young women and I can tell you that we have been on a waiting list for about three and a half years. I am a very privileged human being who knows how to navigate my way around the system, but there are lots of families who do not have that privilege.

It is very difficult to think about employment if you still do not quite understand who you are or why you are experiencing some of the things that you are.

There is a lack of accountability for public bodies. The figure I gave you earlier of 4.8% came from something called the adult social care framework. The two mechanisms to look at employment no longer exist, so nobody is reporting this anymore. How do we know the impact if we are not looking at the data?

To build on Kim's point, we do lots of work with employers, helping them move from Disability Confident to what we call "Disability Confident in Action". They tell us the same things time and time again. They intellectually get this. They have an aspiration to do it, but they do not know how. They will have something such as an adjustments policy, but that does not build into practice. What do you actually do as a process?

Some of the work that we have been doing with employers to help them build a robust end-to-end entire life-cycle process is really starting to help them think about how they can do this differently, but it is a handful of employers doing this. We need to make this so that it is wide-scale and people can share if they wish to. Things need to be built into the system, rather than it being based on a position of having to constantly disclose information that you might not want to or feel ready or able to share.

Baroness Pitkeathley: We will come to see whether you have anything to add on this, Anna, but could you answer the point about consequences?

Professor Anna Remington: I agree totally with what you have both said, in that we need to be looking across the whole employment pipeline, and your comments about how to think about career planning, aspirations and, of course, recruitment, hiring and how that is biased. I want to add a couple of points based on the research that we have been doing. We can see that entry requirements are often a disproportionate barrier for autistic people, because many autistic people will struggle to gain qualifications, not because of lack of skills or ability but for other systemic reasons.

Also, once in a role, autistic people often struggle to access adjustments, as Laura was saying. We did some research which showed that almost a third of autistic employees felt unable to discuss what they might need as adjustments. Of those who requested them, a quarter were refused and 10% said that the adjustments they received were not properly implemented.

We know that a lot of this is related to stigma or stereotypes that employers hold. These seem to be really persistent. Many autistic people have to very carefully weigh up whether they are going to disclose their autistic identity at work. As noted in the Buckland review, only 35% of autistic employees said that they were fully open about being autistic in the workplace. Some of our research showed that 40% of those who had

disclosed it felt that there was a positive outcome. That is quite a low percentage.

On the consequences of failing to support autistic employment, we know that autistic people are twice as likely not to have the necessary income to meet their basic needs, but the impact of a lack of employment goes way beyond the financial. For autistic people, as for non-autistic people, employment is often a gateway to independence and to social and community participation. Research has shown that, for autistic people, employment significantly impacts on mental health and well-being.

Baroness Pitkeathley: Do you have anything to add on the consequences?

Laura Davis: Alongside the impact on people's mental health, we know that people live 15 years of happier, longer life. Why would we not want that, in terms of the impact it has on wider society, on health and on people accessing other services? Another consequence is what a huge untapped talent pool we have across the UK at the moment. Look at the number of vacancies that we have. There is a real mismatch in the fact that we have huge numbers of vacancies, so we need workforce, and of people who want to work. Quite often, it is the barriers around recruitment processes and onboarding that prevent people accessing them.

Professor Kim Hoque: I would second all the comments that have been made, particularly Laura's point about the fact that we have all these vacancies. I think that there are over 800,000 vacancies in the economy. Employers are constantly complaining about a lack of available skill, problems in labour supply and so on. Yet, not just for autistic people but for disabled people more broadly, if you are not doing everything that you can to cast your recruitment net as wide as possible as an employer, in many ways you have only yourself to blame for those shortages.

There is a huge amount of lost productive capacity. It stops firms being able to grow if they cannot get the staff that they need. Of course there is then the impact in terms of lower income tax revenue, because you have people who are on benefits and using the welfare system, rather than contributing economically, paying taxes, et cetera.

Q93 **Baroness Goudie:** My question is quite long but it has many parts, so answer the parts that you feel are applicable to you. What is the evidence on how access to employment for autistic people is changing over time compared to disabled people and, more broadly, to the general population? What has been the main reason for progress or setbacks in recent years? What influence, if any, have the Autism Act, the statutory guidance and successive government autism strategies had on access to employment for autistic people? Why have they been effective or not effective? You have covered a bit of that earlier, so cover what you feel is right.

Laura Davis: We have definitely seen an increase in awareness across society around autism. We hear it talked about a lot more, but there are quite a lot of stereotypes built into that narrative. One thing that we always warn employers about is this whole notion of superpowers and that you have to have a superpower to be worthy of having a job. All the autistic people I know and love are amazing human beings who have strengths and weaknesses exactly as I do. They are good at some stuff and not good at some other stuff.

We have to start building a space where all autistic people can enter into the labour market. We need to think about different ways of recruiting, making sure that it is not just those traditional recruitment processes that we are going to. We know that AI is screening people out. We have spoken to lots of people. AI has huge potential, so it is not all bad; it can do some great things, but, when you look at that recruitment process, it is quite often built by neurotypical people and is screening autistic people out at that very first stage.

I spoke to a number of people over the last couple of weeks who said, "I have applied for over 300 jobs and I simply cannot get through anywhere near to interview stage". You look at some of the questions that are built into this and there is an expectation that you understand and can predict what somebody else might be thinking, rather than there being a logical rule that follows through. We think that that is having an impact.

I will let Professor Hoque talk in more detail about the Disability Confident scheme. We do quite a bit of work across Europe and they are quite envious of the fact that we have a Disability Confident scheme. However, the evidence shows that organisations that are Disability Confident are no more likely to hire autistic people than organisations that are not.

I also worry about some of the companies that come through to us that have asked for us to validate their Disability Confident level 3, for example. When you unpick it, what they are evidencing as a global organisation is that they are doing one good thing in one particular part of the organisation. We need to see a space where, if you are going to be signed up as a leader, you are doing a lot more. It has to be embedded across the whole organisation and the entire life cycle of your employees.

There is a big one, which we have touched on. Adjustments are absolutely key to this, and not just thinking about adjustments once somebody has got the job. We have to start baking in adjustments right the way through that recruitment process, thinking about how we advertise in a different way and offer different ways for people to be able to come and evidence their competency. Does it all have to be done via an interview where you are having to articulate your competencies, or could it be done through working interviews and work trials, which we know are a really successful way of supporting people into the workplace?

Baroness Goudie: Coming back to AI, some of those programmes are set by companies themselves. Maybe we should be asking them to look

at how the programmes are set, as when, although it has nothing to do with this, you go for a mortgage—whether it is a woman or a man and all of that. We might look at that for these programmes and they should be looking at that too. That is for another bit of evidence, but it is quite important.

Laura Davis: Absolutely, yes.

Professor Kim Hoque: The first part of your question was to do with the evidence of change over time. Anna pointed out that the figure today is around a 29% employment rate for autistic people. That has barely changed in recent times. If you go back to the 1950s, which is an awfully long way to go back, the rates were single digits, but that was largely because of diagnosis rates as well. You would have a situation where you would get a diagnosis only if you were on the most serious end of the scale, so obviously employment rates would be commensurably lower as well. There was an estimate from the ONS in 2021 that was as low as a 22% employment rate, but I think 29% is the one that is most widely established.

On your second question about the reasons for progress or setbacks, I should focus on the setbacks, given that we have not really seen any progress, if I am honest. Laura mentioned the Disability Confident scheme, so I will pick up on that. This is something that the *Buckland Review of Autism Employment* suggested that we need to push more heavily. I think that it also features in the autism strategy for 2021 to 2026.

The problem with this is that the research evidence on Disability Confident is not good. This is research that has been done by me and Nick Bacon, my Disability@Work colleague. It is very large-scale data that we use; there are 128,000 individuals in our analysis, from the WorkL employee experience database. We merge into this database evidence from the DWP, so we can tell whether these people are in Disability Confident level 1, 2 or 3 or non-Disability Confident organisations. That means that we can then work out what percentage of the workforce is disabled in each. It barely varies. There is hardly any evidence at all to suggest that Disability Confident organisations actually employ disabled people in greater numbers than non-Disability Confident organisations.

On top of this, we look at people's experience of work—things such as your job satisfaction, your sense of contentment and your sense of well-being in the workplace. Again, there is no evidence to suggest that, if you are a disabled person, you are better off in a Disability Confident than a non-Disability Confident organisation for those outcomes. This is obviously not a particularly positive assessment of the scheme. At the same time, we have also seen a massive growth in Disability Confident. About 19,000 organisations are Disability Confident now. I think the DWP estimates that about a third of the working population of the UK is now in a Disability Confident organisation.

That is nothing more than a false impression of progress. Worse still, you could argue that, over the years, Disability Confident has deflected government attention away from policy solutions that would likely have been much more effective. Instead of simply focusing on growing Disability Confident, they could have been looking at other things in that time that would have been much more impactful.

What do we do with Disability Confident? Should we scrap it or reform it? In many ways, it is too big to scrap now, so it needs to be reformed. The key reform that we would argue for is to move away from the assessment criteria being based on processes and policies that you claim to have in place, because it is all purely self-assessment. Nobody is inspected as to whether they actually do these things.

We need to move towards the assessment regime being based on outcomes. In other words, you would be assessed, particularly at levels 2 and 3, so the higher levels, based on whether you meet a certain threshold, for example, in terms of the percentage of your workforce who are disabled. Only if we do that will accreditation become meaningful and send a signal to disabled people and autistic people about the organisations that are most likely to hire and retain them. Sorry, it was a long question, so that is a long answer.

Baroness Goudie: No, it is all right. We have to probe you.

Professor Kim Hoque: Can I move on to talking about the autism strategy and some of the statutory instruments? One problem with the autism strategy is that it does not necessarily back the right things, like Disability Confident. Also, some other things that it has backed as schemes have themselves run into difficulty.

The obvious one is Access to Work. We have all seen the extent to which there are backlogs and delays in the Access to Work system now, where people are waiting six months for their assessment to come through. People are having job offers withdrawn as a result of that. Of course, beyond that, there have also been quite a few rumours in recent times about proposed changes to Access to Work, such as stripping back the range of equipment that will be funded, putting a strict cap on the hourly rate for support workers and so on. We would argue that the Government should be very cautious about going down this line.

The idea that, if you withdraw Access to Work support, employers will step in and provide that support instead is wishful thinking. It is for the birds. It is more likely that people will find themselves forced out of work. If they are then forced out of work, what recourse will they have? It will probably be the employment tribunal system, which itself is not in a good place right now. Employment tribunal backlogs have increased by 28% just in the last 12 months. This is going to be a cost to the employer. It will be a cost to the disabled employee. It is going to be a cost to the taxpayer because, again, you will have somebody who is not productively employed and you are going to have to fund the employment tribunal system and so on.

The key message for Access to Work is that it needs to be viewed as an investment and not simply money out. It is enabling people to stay in employment, in productive capacity and so on, who otherwise would just not be able to contribute in that sort of way.

Finally, there is one other thing I would like to raise in relation to Jobcentre Plus. The autism strategy raises that we need to be looking at Jobcentre Plus premises and staff, and making sure that they are better trained to meet the needs of autistic people.

Baroness Goudie: Assessor training is key.

Professor Kim Hoque: Yes. Laura and Anna may have more to say on this than I do. If you were to talk to the National Autistic Society, autistic people themselves or anybody else in the autism space, I would be amazed if any of them said that the Jobcentre Plus environment has become a more suitable, welcoming, appropriate, less threatening place for autistic people.

Baroness Goudie: Or for the general public as a whole.

Professor Kim Hoque: Yes, exactly. That is an absolutely fair assessment. If it had worked, we would have seen an improvement in the autism employment rates, and we have not.

Professor Anna Remington: I do not have much to add beyond those comprehensive answers. I absolutely agree. One positive aspect of the Act and the other strategies is the raising of awareness. We are now measuring autistic employment. Autism was added as a category in the Labour Force Survey, which is really important, so we are able to track changes over time. There was a slight narrowing of the gap between disabled and non-disabled employment, but that stopped at Covid. It massively widened and has not been shrinking again.

Baroness Goudie: Thank you, all of you, for very straightforward and frank answers.

Q94 **Lord Addington:** We are talking constantly about this perception about disability generally but autism particularly in this case. Do you think that any of those employers you are talking about has an accurate idea of what the—I do not know how you put this on the record—normal autistic looks like, or even the range you are covering? From my own work outside this, I am aware that virtually all disabilities have a stereotype. I think that autism's is the scariest.

Professor Anna Remington: You are right. There is a big issue with employers' views on what an autistic person does within the workplace. We are seeing a slight drop in that stigma. I should start with the positive. There was a YouGov poll that surveyed a lot of employers and asked them, "Would an autistic person be a likely fit in your team?"; 27% thought that an autistic person would be unlikely to fit in their team, down from 34% a few years earlier. So it is a slow drop, but it is a decline.

In our research we have seen that, in a lot of cases, unless an employer has a personal connection with autism and knows someone who is autistic, they hold a lot of those enduring stereotypes and negative stigma, and think that an autistic person would require a lot of costly adaptations, would not be able to perform and would not meet the role expectations. We know that that is not the case, so we have been looking at what we could do to change that.

The research suggests that all these initiatives to increase knowledge about autism help with explicit biases and build autism-related knowledge, but they are not addressing the implicit bias and are not working for everyone. Sometimes you see shifts among groups of people who take the training, but, if you look on an individual level, the results are much more spiky. This is an area where we need a lot more research to understand how we start to push back against that. I do not think that these one-size-fits-all trainings on autism knowledge are what make a difference.

Lord Addington: Does anybody disagree with that?

Laura Davis: No, not at all. When you talk to employers about their understanding, quite often their perception is around a particular group of autistic people, and it never reflects my daughter. I never hear them talking and think, "Hey, you're describing my girl when you're having those conversations". I completely agree with Anna that we need to be careful that we do not have organisations that put in their Disability Confident that "We are doing training for everybody". We actually need to look at the content of that training and do some research around what the impact of that training is.

Who is being trained within an organisation is incredibly important. We have seen lots of cases where the senior leadership team have had all of this training, and that is absolutely wonderful, but they are not the people who are going to be line managing individuals on a day-to-day basis. That tends to be where things break down, so we need to make sure that everybody in the organisation has access to good-quality training and, I would suggest, be trained by the real experts, and that is not me. They should be trained by people who are autistic and who can come in and empower organisations to know how they can do things differently.

Professor Kim Hoque: I get completely the point that you are making. It is complex. You cannot just say, "Autistic people need these adjustments and non-autistic people don't", because even within that category it manifests and impacts differently for different people.

Your question reminded me of a conversation that I had recently with an organisation called SEDSConnective that is run by Jane Green. It highlights that there is much greater need for understanding of the interplay between physiological and neurological conditions. Talking to organisations such as that, you realise just how complex that is and how those two things interact with each other. We need to have greater

awareness of some of the nuances around autism, the way it presents differently for different people and the sorts of support that people with co-occurring physiological and neurological conditions need.

There is the suggestion that it is just straightforward in terms of what you do to address this issue as an employer—that you have a checklist of things that you do and then you are going to be fine—but it is way more complex than that. There are organisations out there, such as SEDSConnective, that have that specialist knowledge and can add that nuance into the debate.

Lord Addington: Do you think that there is a general fear from the employer as well? You have just said that it is difficult. The employer, maybe at the top or somewhere, knows that it is difficult. Is that one of the barriers that means they think, “Well, we’ll do without them”?

Professor Kim Hoque: It quite likely is, but there are places where you can go to find these sorts of things out. For an individual employer to seek out that information is difficult. Hence, there is a role for government and for exactly the sort of thing that you are doing right now, from the point of view of looking at the nuances around that and how you can help these different groups of people who need that help. That is something that you can develop expertise on. Then there is a role for government in disseminating that expertise as widely as they can.

Q95 **Lord Wigley:** Perhaps we can pick up on the “quite likely” bit at the end there. What is the evidence on effective ways to support autistic people, and disabled people in general, to find work? To what extent do autistic people have access to the support they need for work? What are the main barriers to improving support with finding work? What are the best ways of overcoming those barriers that are evidence based?

Professor Kim Hoque: There is a lot there to unpick. There are some things that we can do for autistic people that are very good for getting disabled people into work as well. Targeted internships, for example, can be very effective. The premier supported internship model, for example, is the DFN Project SEARCH model, which has proved to be very effective, particularly for people with learning difficulties. It has a success rate of about 60% to 65%, from what I understand. When you look at the average employment rate for people with learning disabilities generally, it is something like 5.1%, so what it achieves is actually quite astonishing.

There are things that could be done, not necessarily evidenced, around passporting the disabled students’ allowance into Access to Work, for example. A lot more people get disabled students’ allowance than get Access to Work. There are people who are getting the one and that is not transferring to the other.

Specifically regarding autism, there is a range of things. We touched on some of these earlier, such as providing interview questions in advance, being very clear about instructions, considering alternative assessment formats—Laura touched on that—and making sure that the interview

environment is appropriate. There is advice from the National Autistic Society that you should not have chairs facing each other in an interview room and that you should sit at right angles because of the issue with eye contact. There are things that can be done.

What there is less of, exactly to the point that you raise, is evidence. Where is the evidence that these things actually work? We assume that they work and you would expect them to work. Anna, correct me if I am wrong, but I do not think that there is really that much in terms of evidence—

Professor Anna Remington: I can talk about the evidence.

Professor Kim Hoque: Excellent, you will come on to that. I am a member of the DWP neurodiversity expert panel. We are in the process of pulling together some evidence on that, looking at diversity more broadly, as well as autism more specifically. I would hope that the outcome from that panel will be quite helpful for this committee to inform the work that you are doing.

Lord Wigley: When will that be available?

Professor Kim Hoque: That is a good question. It will be available in the summer at some point. That could mean quite a wide range of time.

You also asked to what extent people have access to the support they need. That goes back to the point that I was making earlier about a lot of employer policies being, effectively, empty shells. A lot of employers are not doing what we would want them to be doing.

I think you asked about how to overcome the barriers to finding and supporting work. The biggest barrier, to my mind, is the fact that employers need to do more. They need to step up. How do we get them to do this? I would propose a three-step process. We start off with a greater understanding of what works. As I said earlier, there is a limited evidence base—although Anna is going to tell me that I am wrong and that there is lots of evidence. We need more research to identify exactly what works.

Once you have done that, you can then look at ways to effectively disseminate it. It is similar to the point that I made to Lord Addington. There is a big role for government in that dissemination process. But is just telling employers what works enough, or do you have to go further and make sure that employers actually do it? There is a big role for government there, not just in advising and encouraging but in incentivising and, if necessary, requiring employers to step up.

There is evidence that the Government are doing this. There is the Equality (Race and Disability) Bill. The Cabinet Office is currently consulting on mandatory employment and pay gap reporting, which we would absolutely encourage. We think that that is absolutely a positive step forward. The Employment Rights Bill is introducing a range of measures, such as statutory sick pay from day one and the removal of

the lower earnings limit, which will be very important. Flexible working as the default from day one. The other thing that often does not get talked about is statutory rights to time off for trade union equality reps. That is something else that the Bill proposes introducing, which I have been calling for since 2009, so I was over the moon to see that included in the Employment Rights Bill.

There is still more the Government could do. That brings me on to the Disability Employment Charter. I do not know whether you have heard of the charter or know anything about it, but this was something set up by my organisation, Disability@Work, along with Disability Rights UK, Leonard Cheshire, Scope, the DFN Charitable Foundation, the Shaw Trust, UNISON and the University of Warwick, to outline the policies that we think that government should implement to improve the disability employment gap. I suspect that, if these are implemented, they will also impact autistic people positively.

We launched this in 2021. We now have 250 signatories, including BASE, Laura's organisation, which is one of our fantastic supporters. All the country's big charities—Mind, Sense, the RNIB, the RNID and so on—have signed up. As well as calling for some of the things that the Government are already doing in terms of mandatory reporting, flexible working and so on in the Employment Rights Bill, it calls for a range of other things, such as investing more heavily in supported internships and employment programmes—which is very close to the work that Laura is involved in—reforming and improving rather than stripping down Access to Work, reforming Disability Confident and leveraging government procurement. The Government spend over £400 billion a year in terms of procurement expenditure, and that is expenditure that can be leveraged to improve disabled people's and autistic people's employment outcomes.

One final thing is that it proposes a two-week time limit within which employers need to provide a substantive response on reasonable adjustment requests. That is something that UNISON was really keen went into the disability employment charter. The reason for that, it said, is that so often people's requests for reasonable adjustments simply disappear into the ether. They make that request and never hear back. It said that we need a situation where employers are required to come back within two weeks of a reasonable adjustment request being made.

Sir Stephen Timms announced at the disability charter's annual reception a couple of weeks ago that the Cabinet Office is looking at that. Deirdre Costigan MP is bringing a 10-minute rule Bill on it tomorrow and is hoping for the Minister's and the department's support. If that passes, that will be the end of the era of reasonable adjustments disappearing into the ether, so that will be a major positive step forward.

Lord Wigley: I am glad to hear optimism.

Professor Kim Hoque: I have to be optimistic.

Laura Davis: I am also going to share a bit of optimism. How about that? There is an international evidence base around supported employment being a really effective model to support autistic people into employment, particularly those who have multiple barriers into work. For those who do not know what supported employment is, it is a model based on getting people a job as soon as possible, rather than making people jump through endless hoops to prove their worthiness of being near an employer.

You go through a process called vocational profiling, which is a really rich way of getting to know somebody. You then go out and proactively work with employers. This fits really nicely with the work that Kim is doing. You cannot lift and shift. You cannot just look, vacancy chase and then make people apply for endless numbers of jobs where they are not going to be successful because they will not make it through the recruitment process.

Once you have gone out and engaged with employers, and supported them to think about how they can do things very differently, you match the two together. You take the talents, strengths and aspirations of an individual to an employer that is looking to recruit and support both as an equal partner. It is not just about what the autistic individual needs. It is about what that employer needs to build a workplace that is—

Q96 **Lord Wigley:** Do you know to what extent the good practice is being disseminated from one employer to another? Do employers look to each other? Is there any system for making that happen?

Laura Davis: That is a really good question. It is very ad hoc at the moment. We would like to see a mechanism that the Government could support which is providing that peer-to-peer challenge but also, more importantly, practical examples where they are managing to do it really well. We are working with Amazon, which is building its first ever supported employment programme. That is using that five-stage model that I described, with the values that underpin it.

It is about matching talent from within communities and bringing in the expert support from supported employment that will wrap around the individual and the employer. It addresses that line management challenge that we have all described where you get an organisation that signs up to something and then the line manager goes, "I don't know how to deliver this". Through qualified job coaches, they will work alongside that line manager.

The Chair: It is not only peer-to-peer business understanding. For the autistic community and the young people looking for work, where are they going in order to find those businesses that are learning from each other? Where are the connecting dots?

Laura Davis: It is through supported employment providers. We have providers across the UK that are all delivering the model that I described. The Government have just rolled out the Connect to Work programme,

which I am incredibly positive about because it is using the five-stage model that I described.

The bit we could do better is articulating this. We have the most phenomenal opportunity. We are tipping on its head how the DWP has commissioned employment support previously and moving to an international evidence-based model. We need to get better at describing that, not only to communities and to autistic people and their families to think about this as a different way of doing it, but also to employers that they will get a level of wraparound support that they have never had before.

We also know that we need to start better articulating how supported employment providers will do that wraparound piece, such as through supporting people to think about their welfare benefits. This is a voluntary programme. It is not about mandating people. I cannot make you want to work, but I can inspire you to. I can help you think about what is possible.

Q97 **Baroness Hodgson of Abinger:** If a young autistic person was trying to get their first job, how would they know where to go to get this support?

Laura Davis: Careers services are not there in the way that they used to be and that is a significant gap, particularly specialist career support that can support an individual to think about all the different pathways. Professor Kim Hoque has already talked about supported internships. They are supported employment but are designed for young people who are still in education to transition into employment.

We need to do better at making sure that there is really good-quality careers guidance for individuals. I know that we are looking at bringing the National Careers Service into Jobcentre Plus. I guess this is the warning that I would give: how many people feel comfortable going into Jobcentre Plus as it is? Will that be the space they go to in order to access support and guidance around careers?

We need to think about how we better bring this into community organisations that are already working with individuals, rather than thinking about a different mechanism for delivering good careers support.

Baroness Hodgson of Abinger: I guess that it is more difficult for those who have not been diagnosed, is it not?

Laura Davis: Absolutely, yes. We need to move away from a position of having to have a diagnosis. I come from a position of privilege that I have been able to navigate this system with my children. Not everybody has the time, capacity or knowledge to be able to do that.

I also think that we need to move away from a position of disclosure and move to one that is about sharing. If employers have the right things in place, nobody ever has to disclose anything. It will just be there. We are starting to see some good practice with employers that are building this into having things as a given, where you almost have to say "I don't need

that” rather than constantly having to disclose and say “Please can I have an adjustment?” We are starting to see little bits of that, but it is just pockets of very good practice.

Professor Anna Remington: I think that my role here is maybe to bring some evidence. I totally agree with you, Kim, that the evidence base is very patchy on what works in employment. We have been doing some research on autistic people, non-autistic neurodivergent people and neurotypical people, aiming to work out what some of these very specific barriers might be for the autistic population. All this work is done collaboratively with autistic collaborators, so I hope that those results are particularly meaningful.

One key barrier seems to be recruitment, as you have both mentioned. Autistic applicants are rated less favourably than non-autistic applicants, but simple adaptations really change that. We urge employers to have these more inclusive recruitment or training practices, along with standardised reasonable adjustments in hiring processes. As you mentioned, the use of AI and psychometric testing within recruitment can be very biased against autistic candidates. The issue with the DWP and support there absolutely needs to be addressed.

Most of the barriers we have been talking about throughout this session are the employers and not the autistic people. It is the employers’ concerns about how much it would cost them or how much time or effort it would take to employ an autistic staff member. Often it is their concern about their own lack of knowledge. They are willing and want to be able to support people but they do not know how. They often would like to offer placements but feel that they do not have the resources.

The emphasis needs to shift away from the autistic person having to be more like a non-autistic person to putting the onus back on to employers. One specific way, if we are going to get practical about this, is to extend something like the apprenticeship levy, so that you are explicitly welcoming businesses to spend on initiatives that would support a neurodivergent or autistic workforce.

This would be particularly beneficial for two reasons. First, it is a proactive approach; you are not waiting for someone to struggle or hit a crisis situation, so it is more cost effective in terms of spending. Secondly—this is super important—it avoids autistic people feeling like they are a burden to the organisation that they are trying to join. Unfortunately, many autistic people will have had a huge amount of negative work experience. Even though they are arriving with a lot of skill and ability, they have very low self-esteem. We want to make sure that any support that we are suggesting is put in place avoids exacerbating this.

I want to mention one area of good practice because, Lord Wigley, your point about sharing these areas of good practice was very important. We worked with Deutsche Bank to set up its first internship for autistic graduates. We worked to showcase the experiences of the graduates

themselves and the managers and team members who worked with them. Once that was all done, it was hugely successful. There was not a total absence of challenges, but it was hugely successful. Once that report was out, Deutsche Bank shared it widely through the sector. It was really interesting to see how lots of other firms started to engage with this information and realise that they too could do it with the right support in place. That was a very positive move.

Lord Wigley: I am glad that you got that in.

The Chair: Congratulations on that. Another idea was that employers would not pay national insurance for autistic people as they came into work for the first two or three years of their work. You are extending the apprenticeship levy. There are those sorts of carrots for employers.

Baroness Goudie: Can we make a note about psychometric testing, not to talk about it today, but as something we need to consider? It is difficult enough for us. Somebody who is very bright would be all right, but you know what I am trying to say.

The Chair: Thank you, Baroness Goudie. Apologies, I am going to ask for slightly shorter answers because some members are going on to a visit to a project supporting employment for autistic people and I would not want to delay that visit. There is so much here, and I apologise for asking you to do this, but maybe you could give slightly curtailed answers.

Q98 **Lord Crisp:** A lot of my question has been covered. You have just been talking about practical methods of support. I want to link it with the visit we are about to make. What are the most effective ways to support people to stay and progress in a job? This is not about getting it, but the reality. Laura, right at the beginning you talked about a lot of people dropping out. To what extent do autistic people have access to that support? What are the main barriers to improving support?

I wonder whether you could slightly continue a bit of the conversation we have been having. I think that a lot of us have been thinking in the same sort of way that this is not just about the Government doing stuff. When you get a policy implementation barrier, the Government do not know what to implement. The ideas come up from below, do they not? Could you extend it a bit more into what employers, together or individually, can do, what voluntary organisations can do and whether some of this should be giving them more support to do that, rather than thinking purely about legislation and the role of government? That was a long question, but we are asking for a short answer.

Professor Anna Remington: There are two very interesting parts to that question: staying in work and progressing. I am really glad that that is part of the question, because too often the research has been looking at just numbers and how we get people into a job, and then it is the end of the story. We know that it is not the end of the story and that we should be looking at career progression and fulfilment, and, ultimately, retirement or other job-related transitions that we know are likely to be

more challenging for autistic employees compared to non-autistic employees.

In a recent priority-setting exercise that we did, autistic people identified a need for more research across the entire employment journey, rather than just looking at finding a job. When we asked people whether they were satisfied with their employment status, less than half of the autistic people we spoke to said that they were, compared to more than half of non-autistic neurodivergent participants. The vast majority of neurotypical participants were happy with their current employment status.

With respect to progression, our review of the work in the area suggests that there are a few things getting in the way: underemployment and poor job matching, which we touched on earlier, stigma and discrimination, a lack of institutional support and bias within the internal promotion procedures, and gaps in education and employment history. We have talked a lot about work experience and the need for it. Differences in social communication could mean that people struggle to build up that social capital that is necessary for progression within employment.

Looking at what helps people stay and progress, as I said before, the key is ongoing support for the employee and the employer. To answer your sub-question of how others can help as well as government, it is job coaching and mentoring, informal peer mentoring within an organisation and, crucially, ongoing mental health support. Mental health is often a barrier to people staying in work. Workplace adjustments are crucial. We found that those who received adjustments were over three times more likely to be in a job that matched their skill level.

Autistic people do not currently have the support they need to stay and progress in roles. Only 28% of people in our studies thought that they got the necessary support to progress and this was often due to what they perceived to be barriers in the capability of their line managers. It is clear that there is some work to be done with training up people. As I said, the best way to overcome this is to have some sort of centralised fund, for example the apprenticeship levy, which could fund the training at every level for people who are trying to support their autistic or neurodivergent workforce.

I am mindful that there is even a modification of this apprenticeship levy in terms of removing some of the higher-level qualifications. I recently benefited from doing a level 7 apprenticeship, which was hugely beneficial to the way that I managed and led within my role at work. It is slightly concerning that there is a sense that we need to stop upskilling the higher levels. As we know, it is those upper levels within an organisation that are setting the tone and agenda for the teams further down.

We need to put the onus on to the employers to make sure there are standard routes for adjustments. We rely too much on the autistic person

to figure out even in the first place what might be useful. That in itself is a difficult task. We need that to be in place.

If we had funding, it could pay for organisations to opt into a neuroinclusive framework. We have heard about Disability Confident. I want to mention one other, with a disclaimer: I am proud to be a trustee of the research charity Autistica. It has developed the Neurodiversity Employers Index, which has an element of assessment; it is not all self-reported. This is a really nice step towards having more of an objective measure of how neuroinclusive an organisation is.

Lastly, we do not know how to remove some of the implicit stigma. I would really urge that more research be done in this area to try to work out what might make a practical difference on the ground.

Laura Davis: Within the supported employment model, the job coach is absolutely integral to the success for both the individual and the employer. Their role is not only about getting somebody into a job. I am always clear that this is not about binging people into any old job; it is about matching somebody to the right job where not only they but their line manager will flourish.

The role of a job coach is about taking a job, stripping it down, layering it back in and making sure that that employer understands how to build adjustments into it. It is about practice, not just theory, and saying "This is how you do it". It is about working with them to think about their training and the barriers that would prevent somebody progressing within the world of work. It is about giving people an opportunity. They do not have to stay with the same employer. I have not worked for the same employer for the whole of my career. It is about making sure that people have choice and control about where they might want to work.

It is wonderful that there is investment in the Connect to Work programme that is using this model, but there is so much to learn from how job coaches work. It is really important that they are trained job coaches and we do not just suddenly tell somebody, "By the way, you're a learning support assistant today, and now you're a job coach". There is a real skill to how you do this.

We have talked a bit about the role of line managers. There is something really interesting about matching people up. It is about building a community of practice where people are doing these things really well, so it is not always senior leaders who are talking to each other, but we get people on the ground who are delivering really good support to connect and share best practice with each other.

Access to Work is not just about getting people into work. It should then be about how we help people to flourish. People's needs change. Things adapt and progress over time. Somebody might need a different adjustment. We need to make sure that people can tap back into that additional support as and when they need it. I am very aware of time—I could talk about this for hours.

Professor Kim Hoque: I will try to be brief and pick up on the points that you made about ideas coming up from below and the role that employers can play in working together on this.

I completely get the point that you are making about whether employers or government should lead on this. The current Government are taking more the view that there is a role for government to shine a spotlight on the demand side with employers. This is exactly what was in the Charlie Mayfield review, for example.

Lord Crisp: The answer is probably both, is it not?

Professor Kim Hoque: It is, yes. We have seen not enough of the government side for a long time. We need more of that. There is this idea that employers should be looking at this and saying, "Look, this is not just about compliance. It is not just a moral argument or a social argument. There are business reasons as to why you would do this". That argument has been around for over 30 years. It goes back to Kandola and Fullerton in 1994, who first mooted the idea of a business case for equality.

This notion of voluntarism and exhorting employers to do better—"If we just let them know what the business case is or let them know about our best practices, they will up their game"—has been going on for too long now and it has not worked, which is exactly why the disability employment gap has remained static in recent times. The new Government's shift of focus through the Charlie Mayfield review, et cetera, is a really welcome change of direction.

Baroness Hodgson of Abinger: On the Deutsche Bank example, did you monitor promotion? Was the promotion of the people going in equal to the promotion of the other employees?

Professor Anna Remington: It was an internship for entry level, so there was not a promotion aspect yet, but a number of the interns have jobs within Deutsche Bank still. It is possible we could come back years later and see whether there has been that progression.

Q99 **Lord Addington:** What are the most effective ways of preparing young autistic people and young disabled people generally for employment? To what extent do young autistic people have access to the support that they need to prepare for employment? What are the main barriers to that support? Could you also cover passporting? Disabled students' allowance and Access to Work are classic cases. If you could mention something about how possible that is when you do not have a formal diagnosis, that would also help the committee.

Professor Anna Remington: I will answer with respect to autism specifically because I am sure that the other two can answer a bit more broadly than I can. This is work that Professor Laura Crane, your specialist adviser, and I have done together looking at preparation for employment for young autistic people. That very much suggests that we

need a more tailored programme of careers guidance. It needs to be effective for those in mainstream and special schools.

I am just going to jump, for a moment, back to the end of the employment journey. Those who talked about being unhappy with their own career progression highlighted the fact that one of the barriers was around setting appropriate goals and aspirations at the start. Helping with this early on could be really helpful. We need specific career planning tools that are tailored for autistic people.

We have heard a lot about the really valuable role of work experience. I am not going to go into that any further, other than to say that I absolutely agree. Our research shows that there are lots of barriers to providing that work experience for autistic young people. We really need that to be rolled out more widely and more centrally so that all autistic people have access to that.

It is clear that young autistic people do not have access to the support that they need. There is very much a cliff edge in terms of support after school age. My and Laura's work on transition to adulthood showed that parents felt like the Children and Families Act reforms had pushed the cliff edge slightly up to 25, but it was still very much there.

The key recommendations would be to roll out those internships more broadly and to develop a new autism-specific programme of careers guidance for mainstream and special schools.

The Chair: Laura and Kim, if could you keep your answers, if at all possible, on support for autistic people as opposed to wider disabilities, that would be incredibly helpful for the committee.

Laura Davis: I completely agree with everything that Anna has just said. Aspirations are way too low for young people within education. The focus is purely around how academically successful you are. We have to start building different mechanisms for evidencing people's competencies. I see and speak to far too many young people who leave the education system feeling like a failure already. How do you then dream, hope and have a career ahead of you, if you are already starting from that position? We have to start to embed that.

There is a really important point around bringing in specialists. There is a community of specialist providers and community partners who could come and work within schools to help them deliver this, if schools do not feel equipped to do it themselves, alongside building really robust careers planning for young people.

There needs to be much greater choice and control. At the moment there are particular pathways that you can access, depending on where you go to school or what your local authority commissions. I am a huge advocate of supported internships, but they are not right for everybody. We need to start looking at every pathway to make sure that a young person can have access to an apprenticeship, if they want to. We need to think about

the entire life cycle of that apprenticeship and remove the barriers that prevent young people not only from accessing them but from completing them and feeling successful as a result of them. We need to look at the entire pathway across all of them.

The other thing that we have not really touched on much today is the welfare benefits system. Some families feel very trapped in terms of being able to support their young people to dream, have aspirations, try something and give it a go. I am sure this is true for everybody around this room. That is what I did—I gave some things a go, failed at them and then tried something else. It can be really difficult for families to even consider that when they feel tied into a welfare benefits system that does not always support that aspiration.

Professor Kim Hoque: I completely endorse what has been said about apprenticeships, about the need for careers advice to improve substantially and about the rollout of internships. I mentioned the DFN Project SEARCH scheme earlier. That is a great scheme, but there are probably many parts of the country where you would struggle to get on to the DFN programme simply because it is not available in your area.

I will just finish with a point about Disability Confident again. I was talking about this earlier. As a young disabled person or young autistic person coming into the workforce for the first time, you are going to want to know which employers are most likely to be empathetic towards you and provide the sort of support that you are likely to need.

Disability Confident is a DWP scheme. If you are an autistic person talking to somebody in Jobcentre Plus, I would wager they will point you towards Disability Confident organisations. You are already off on the wrong foot if somebody is giving you that advice, because that is not necessarily going to be helpful to you. Once you go down the route of chasing jobs through Disability Confident and not getting anywhere, you are going to be so discouraged. You will think: "If the absolutely best employers are not opening their doors to me, how do I stand a chance going anywhere else?"

Q100 **The Chair:** I have the last question. I am afraid I am going to limit you to two ideas now, which is a real challenge, but if you have any further ideas, please do write to the committee. We have had a really good, robust and interesting conversation about how we can help young autistic people find and stay in work. In light of the theme of today's session, the committee has to look at making recommendations. What two recommendations would you make to government about young autistic people finding and staying in work?

Professor Kim Hoque: I am going to limit myself to one, which is to implement the Disability Employment Charter in full. Of course, that covers nine different areas, each of which has about four different things. I have just given you 45 recommendations.

The Chair: You have.

Laura Davis: I am going to use my two. The first is around actually utilising the job coaching support that is embedded within supported employment and thinking about how you can use those principles to underpin some of the work for all young autistic people. There is a really key role in helping employers utilise and train up their own job coaches. Organisations such as DPD have put their staff through job coaching training. It is not just about how you bring people into the organisation but how they can flourish once they are there.

My second is about research. We need more research to understand the entire life cycle, from what it looks like for young people from a very early age, even just dreaming and thinking about employment, right the way through to how we make sure that people progress.

Professor Anna Remington: I am also going to use my two. The first key one is to have this funding model that comes from the employer, rather than the employee, whether that is broadening the apprenticeship levy or having a similar approach, so that you have really proactive spending rather than more reactive crisis spending.

The second thing is to involve autistic people in all the decision-making, recommendations and priorities that emerge from the committee and in subsequent strategies. It is all too easy for non-autistic people to impose neurotypical norms, meaning that any support that is implemented will be ineffective. Collaboration with autistic advisers is crucial here.

The Chair: Huge thanks to all three of you. We have covered a lot of ground, with a lot of recommendations and thoughts. I am incredibly grateful to you. We will send you a transcript for accuracy. The committee is going to meet again after the Recess on Monday 2 June and then on 9 June to hear evidence from autistic people about their experiences in relation to employment, and from employers about their approach. I now draw today's evidence session to a close. Thank you.