



## Autism Act 2009 Committee

### Corrected oral evidence

Monday 9 June 2025

3.55 pm

Watch the meeting

Members present: Baroness Browning (The Chair); Lord Elliott of Mickle Fell; Baroness Goudie; Lord Hope of Craighead; Baroness Pitkeathley; Baroness Rock; Lord Wigley.

In the absence of Baroness Rock, who was attending virtually, Baroness Browning was called to the Chair.

Evidence Session No. 18

Heard in Public

Questions 125 - 131

### Witnesses

[I](#): Rob Walters, Technical Director, PatronBase; Peter Stokes, Neurodiversity and Social Mobility Manager, Babcock; Mayur Gondhea, Founder, CubeLynx

## Examination of witnesses

Rob Walters, Peter Stokes and Mayur Gondhea.

**Q125 The Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to this public meeting of the House of Lords Committee on the Autism Act 2009. We are now commencing our second evidence session of the afternoon. In this session, we are speaking to three employers about key opportunities and barriers in relation to autistic people finding and staying in work. We are delighted to welcome Rob Walters, technical director of PatronBase UK, an events and entertainment company based in Bradford; Peter Stokes, neurodiversity and social mobility manager at Babcock, a large engineering and manufacturing company based in Plymouth; and Mayur Gondhea, founder of CubeLynx, a financial modelling consultancy company based in London. All three are appearing in person. You are all very welcome.

This is a public evidence session and a written transcript will be taken. I once again draw attention to the interests of the members of the committee, as published on the committee website.

I would like to ask the first question, and then other members of the committee will have other questions to ask our panellists. Could I ask you gentlemen to introduce yourselves and your organisations when you reply? Why is improving support for autistic people to find and stay in work important to you? In your experience, what are the main benefits of employing autistic people? Shall we start with Rob Walters?

**Rob Walters:** I head up PatronBase UK, which is a software company that specialises in arts and culture. I have been writing software since I was 15. I founded a business when I left uni at about 24, pretty much by accident more than having made a conscious decision that I wanted to go into business, and I have progressed on from there. But this is personal for me as well, because I was late diagnosed as being autistic; I was diagnosed at 35, so about six years ago now. I have autistic children as well. So from a personal perspective, of course, it is something really important to me and I would love to see things being a lot easier for my children than they were for me getting to this point. Secondly, to me, it is just good business. As a business, we all want to attract and retain the best possible people, and there is every possibility that the best possible people for our business are people who have autism, as well as people who do not. That is where I come from.

**Peter Stokes:** I work for Babcock International, an international company that delivers engineering support and defence in civil markets. I personally work in Devonport dockyard, which is the largest naval dockyard in western Europe. We have around 7,000 employees, and around 20% to 30% of them are neurodivergent. Over the last seven years, I have worked with some incredible people. I have seen some brilliantly talented people that challenge the stereotypes of autism—some of the most funny, most engaging, most talented people you can imagine. We have had engineers who have been able to resolve problems

that no other engineers could. We have had analysts who have been able to support major savings in contracts for our customers, and it was their autism that helped them to spot those changes and spot that data. I have also worked with a number of SEND schools as well, given my role, and it never fails to amaze me how talented these youngsters are, and they have all got something to give us. As long as it is a safe role, and as long as it suits and fits the individual, with all the technology that we have got nowadays and with all the different things that we could do, there is nothing that should be holding these youngsters back. It is really important to me to work with those youngsters as well.

What I think they bring to the table is a lot of honesty. An autistic person will tell you that a spade is a spade. They are very loyal individuals. If you have got them in a psychologically safe place, they will stay with you. They have got diverse thinking, they have got critical thinking, and they bring a different approach to your business as well. They bring a real asset to our companies.

**Mayur Gondhea:** I am the founder of a financial modelling consultancy company, which I founded following my son Jaimin's autism diagnosis five years ago. We support public and private sector clients on large-scale infrastructure projects: regulated utilities and a lot of renewable energy projects, and we work with funds, developers, government agencies, and charities as well. We also do a lot of awareness-raising now so, as well as directly employing autistic people, we pride ourselves on doing awareness in our industry. In terms of my main driver, I think it is the unemployment rates that are so dreadful, and providing an opportunity to tap into talent that is often overlooked, especially in my industry where financial analyst skills are in quite high demand. It is great to explore a different talent pool and have access to that and benefit from that. So there is a business sense as well as the unemployment side of things.

In terms of the benefits of someone who is autistic, with my field of work, obviously there is a lot of variation in particular attributes and traits, but certain autistic people are highly numerate with great attention to detail, reliable and hyper focused. Those types of qualities are really important for a financial analyst role. In terms of how it benefits the business, we are in a competitive environment where we work. To actually have someone who can approach things in a different and novel way is hugely valuable and also makes you, as an employer, think about your work practices and environment in a different way—which benefits all of our employees, not just the autistic ones. It is also important to set an example in the industry, and it is also quite fun working in this environment, which has its challenges. That is part of the benefit and interest of the work as well.

**The Chair:** It is incredibly encouraging to hear how all three of you have replied to that question. Could I just put something to you? We have heard in previous evidence that people think that employers may be anxious or even fearful of employing people with autism because they themselves are concerned that they might get it wrong—they might not

be able to cope with all sorts of things that autistic people might present as challenges. What is your view of that? I was just particularly thinking, Peter: did you say 20% to 30% of your workforce is neurodivergent?

**Peter Stokes:** Yes.

**The Chair:** If only all companies were like that, I do not think that we would be sitting here having this inquiry. How have you achieved that?

**Peter Stokes:** We naturally attract neurodivergent individuals just because of the nature of what we do. We have neurodivergent managers as well. As we know, the interview process can be a major stumbling block. We see a lot of fear in managers; we are lucky enough to have a neurodiversity team and neurodiversity networks, which has changed our culture, in a way, because managers who are fearful come and speak to us now. They come and have a conversation and ask, if they are interviewing somebody, how they get it right. That tends to be more of a question than how not to, or about the many barriers being put in the way.

There is still a lot of fear, but it is how you drive the culture of your business to try to make it more inclusive of individuals and raise awareness of the strengths that these individuals bring. It is also about reassuring people that it is about making small and reasonable adjustments. The majority of the time that is what you need; it just needs to be small and simple. People see it as having to put in place large things, which will take a lot of their time, when it is really not the case. It is just about reassuring people that it can be simple.

**The Chair:** Rob and Mayur, do you feel that there is any sense of anxiety about employing autistic people?

**Rob Walters:** I am probably the wrong person to ask, being one myself. But on the sort of things that autistic people need in employment, they are things that would be good practice across employment law generally. If someone who is autistic says that they need flexible time to work, why would you not offer that to other people you employ? If that is what the best people for the job need for them to do their best work, why would you not offer that? It is just about having that openness to look across the board and say, "What do the best people for my role need to be as effective as they possibly can?" When you view it in that way, it is not something to be fearful of at all. It is just good business and good human resources.

**The Chair:** We are talking about the best people, and these best people are autistic people. How have you managed to achieve what you have achieved in your business when we are looking at very high unemployment rates? Do you have any solutions to that?

**Mayur Gondhea:** In terms of the myths and preconceptions, there is a big education and awareness piece. That is why, as well as consulting work, we are really passionate about that. It is about getting more people

out there and setting some kind of best practice exemplar initiatives, whether they are led by government or supported by charities. It is about trying to get more awareness, more processes and more manuals out there.

I was in a similar position: when my son was diagnosed, the school got in touch with me and we had regular parents' evenings where it was indicated that there might be something autism related. I went home and googled it and put myself through a course. It is sometimes not complete ignorance—it is just that people are just not used to it. Therefore, there is a real need to promote the education side, and this is where the Government can do a bit more in facilitating that.

I mentioned before that all my organisations and people do a lot of awareness raising. That takes us away from the consultancy work, so having some kind of compensation or incentive to do more is important. On that specific side, we are a private limited company and reliant on our consultancy mandate, so we would be in favour of a more proactive stance on things such as grants or different initiatives. With R&D, tax credits are provided. For companies such as ours, which are SMEs, which cannot over-recruit, those kinds of schemes and initiatives would greatly help us.

**Q126 Baroness Pitkeathley:** You have addressed some of my question in answer to the Lord Chair's question about fear. In your experience—and it is marvellous to have such richness of experience with us before the committee—how effectively do employers in general support autistic people to find and stay in work? I suspect that you have views about that. What is it that determines whether an employer offers the right support or not? How do we tease that out?

**Mayur Gondhea:** On whether or not the employer offers the right support, it is just a cultural or mindset thing. These adjustments are reasonable; they are not out of the ordinary or difficult to implement or expensive. It is just about trying to be an open-minded and considerate employer. Ultimately, you will get the benefits of being like that as an employer. Your staff retention will improve. If you are able to create working environments that are conducive to people being happy and working well, it will benefit your projects, mandates and solutions. I think that there are a lot of benefits from the employer perspective.

**Peter Stokes:** Traditionally, a lot of companies do as we have always done it. If you look at interview techniques, how we do interviews is really archaic. You send somebody into a room, which might not be the best environment. We use alien language and put multiple questions into a question and expect people to take out key buzzwords. It is a really old-fashioned way in which to approach things.

There is still fear there. The difference is in people being aware of neurodiversity. If someone has a human connection—maybe a child, a member of the family or a friend—and they start to learn a bit more about it, you start to see that culture change. Good looks like where we

have leaders leading from the top and being neuroinclusive, raising the subject and raising it from top down.

As Rob put it, universal design makes a big difference. What scares me is what is happening in America with diversity and inclusion projects, and you are seeing that come across with some of the American companies in the UK. If we utilise universal design, it is about getting the best individuals. For example, we have Grammarly and those kinds of things for individuals who struggle with grammar and spelling; we have dictation software, which could help someone who has a newborn baby and is tired, for example. By approaching it that way and being transparent about universal design and the things that we put in place for individuals with conditions such as autism, so that it is available to individuals when they need it, it stops that fear—it stops that barrier and stops the othering of autistic individuals as well.

It is about being transparent and working together. We have found that with civic agreements, working locally with our council and education providers as well as with the Department for Work and Pensions in a collaborative group to look at the needs of our location and the specific needs of our areas. In the south-west there is a lot of tourism and marine technology, so we need to look at how that translates across. Things such as civil agreements and encouraging partnerships across multi-organisations make a massive difference.

**Rob Walters:** On the whole, probably employers are fairly bad at it. In many cases, that will be lack of awareness, but there is still a fair bit of stigma out there. In talking to some of my team prior to coming to this session, it was raised as a concern. They said that there was still stigma out there. When do you put yourself as autistic? When do you put your head above the parapet and say, "Yes, I'm autistic, I need some help because of this, that and the other"?

The other thing that is worth bearing in mind is that getting diagnosed as autistic as an adult in the UK right now is pretty much impossible. In Bradford, for example, it is four years before they will even talk to you about it. Who helps you in that four years? There is a significant number of people who are diagnosed late or self-diagnosed, and a significant number who may have private diagnoses rather than NHS diagnoses. We need to think not just how we help the people who turn up with a sheet of paper and say, "I'm autistic, I can prove it", but the people who do not have piece of paper because they cannot get it, because the support is not there to get it.

One of my daughters had a private diagnosis because, again, she did not meet the threshold where the NHS regarded it as being enough of an issue to take the situation on. There is a gap between the people who can come to you and say, "Look, I've been through a diagnostic pathway. Here are the needs for support", and the people who know that they struggle from time to time but could not tell you what you could do to make that better. There is that gap in knowing how you can help.

I have to commend the work that Autistica has been doing on the Neurodiversity Employers Index. It is really good work around how we can measure how neurodiverse-friendly an employer is. In going through that process, as we did—we came out with a silver award for that—there is a whole list of questions that they ask you. It opens your eyes to saying, “Actually, that’s something we are not doing but could do”. It is about having those sorts of schemes to help employers look at what possible needs there are, because the people who come to you as prospective employees or actual employees may not know what those needs are. I certainly did not and, at 41, I am still trying to find the supports that might work for me.

So I would say that things are not great, but there are structural reasons for why that is the case—as well as awareness, education and those sorts of things.

**Baroness Pitkeathley:** That is most helpful; thank you very much.

Q127 **Baroness Goudie:** Good afternoon. I have found all that you have told us so far very interesting—in particular, the diversity question, which we must be aware of on all counts. It is important that that was raised with us today.

My main question is this: what are the main barriers to employers supporting young autistic people with the move from education to work? What should the Government, employers and others do to overcome these barriers?

**Peter Stokes:** As was stated in the previous evidence, I think, we end school and that is it. You then go straight into employment. We could be employing mentors by getting them in from businesses early to work in education and prep these children for what is next. Give them more work experience. Give them more hands-on experience of what happens, and maybe do pre-employment courses as well. We see not just autistic individuals but individuals who have been out of work for a long time not even knowing to phone the manager if they are off sick. They do not know what is expected. The things that we take for granted are not always known to individuals, so pre-employment courses help.

Do mentorships. Go into schools and do really good pieces around the positive support of autism. Train all future managers in the subject. Get those tea-table conversations going, with youngsters coming home and telling their parents about what they learned today. Getting into the schools early and exposing these children to what life is like before they leave is a really big factor.

**Mayur Gondhea:** Those are all valid points from Peter there. There is also the consideration of distance. If you secure a job in, say, central London but you live outside it, that can present itself as a real barrier in terms of the distance and the change. There are ways to overcome that, such as regional hubs, but, going back to what Peter said, it is about

mentoring and careers advice. There is an important role there for some kind of job coaching or careers advice to bridge that gap.

Supported internships are fantastic as well. Those are funded so you do not need to pay for them. They allow students to get experience, which improves their confidence. As they go through the education system, they are allowed to get exposure to organisations and different types of industries; that will greatly benefit their job prospects at the end of the education system.

In my opinion, there is also scope, potentially, for having a central log or list of young people who are looking for jobs and roles. Again, there is a lot of good practice out there—lots of organisations are doing this—but, if the Government could pull it all together and centralise it, that would make things much easier.

**Rob Walters:** I am a massive fan of some of the vocational programmes that are out there because there is a real steep learning curve in my area, which is software development. There is such a diversity in terms of software development that you cannot expect anyone to come out of school or uni and have the skills. You have to train them from day one. So I am a huge fan of the vocational schemes that are out there.

Degree apprenticeships are one example. We have had a number of people on degree apprenticeships, which have been brilliant. They work with us 80% of the time and study 20% of the time over a period of three years, and they get a bachelor's degree at the end of it.

We do T-level placements as well. I know that T-levels are not necessarily that fashionable with the Government at the moment, but T-level placements are really good. Students study computing intensively for two years and then do a nine-week placement; I have two students who are on nine-week placements at the moment. They offer a real opportunity for autistic students to spend some time in a workplace while they are still in that education environment and still have the wraparound support of tutors and the education system.

Although these schemes were not necessarily designed with autistic people in mind, they are really good for autistic people going into work and allow us to have a bit more of a supportive environment. There is a lower threshold of expectations from day one because that combination of the education aspects and the work aspects really allows you to look at this as much more of a process over nine weeks or three years, depending on the type of programme. I would really commend them to you as something to look at as a definite support.

**The Chair:** Does anyone have anything else to say? No? Then I shall turn to the usual chair of our committee, Baroness Rock; she is joining us on the screen, as you will see. Unfortunately, I am having to sit in the chair, but we did not want to let her miss out on a question.

Q128 **Baroness Rock:** Thank you, Baroness Browning, for the day. I am very



grateful to you for your wonderful chairing. I am also grateful to be joining remotely; I apologise to the panel for being unable to join in person.

We have covered a bit of this but I want to come back to the clear main barriers to employers recruiting autistic people that we have been hearing about. One of them is something that we have touched on—fear—but I wonder: what should the Government and employers do to overcome those barriers?

I am also particularly interested in some of the things that the panel has touched on around best practice. How do your organisations attract and recruit autistic people? How are vacancies advertised? I am particularly interested in the point about having a central log or a hub. What sort of adjustments do you think should be made during the recruitment and interview processes? Again, we have heard that those are some challenging areas. If I may, I would like to start with Rob.

**Rob Walters:** Absolutely. We are relatively fortunate in that we have a fairly stable team over the past few years, so we have not done a huge amount of recruiting recently. However, one thing that I would really encourage employers to think about is this: “What do I need in the recruitment process that is intrinsic to the job, and what is just the way we have always done things?”

For example, one of the things that I had not thought of before we went through the Autistica NDEI scheme was whether an interview needs to be face to face. Could it take place over text messaging? Could it take place over a platform such as Slack, where you exchange messages back and forth? To be fair, I spend the majority of my work time using Slack to communicate with colleagues, rather than necessarily having lots of face-to-face meetings or phone calls, so is there actually a reason why we cannot interview someone in an exchange of written messages? Does it have to be them talking to me? It is about things of that nature.

We come back to the same question: yes, you can put at the bottom of your job adverts that you are positive about recruiting people with autism, but, as an autistic person, do I know whether you mean that or whether you are just putting it at the bottom of your job ad because that is the done thing? It is not just about what we put in the job ad; it is what we communicate as the things that we have available. If at the interview stage we communicate what we can make available in terms of demonstrating skills—if we can communicate the different ways that we can take that information from people—then we do not need to say we are positive about autism, because that is obvious from what we are telling people. Again, this comes down to the idea of mainstreaming: do I need you to be autistic in order for me to provide you with a written interview? Well, no. If you tell me that is the best way for you to communicate, then fine, let us do it that way.

Look at the things that are essential to the job role versus common practices based on the way that we have already done things. If they are

not essential then you should show that you have flexibility in the recruitment process through the information you provide, and then make that available to everyone, regardless of whether or not they tell you they are autistic. They may have a diagnosis that they are afraid to tell you about, or they may have suspicions but not actually a formal diagnosis, and so on.

**Baroness Rock:** Thank you, that is helpful. Peter, you have mentioned already that that you recruit between 20% and 30% neurodiverse individuals. I would be interested to hear your personal experience of how your organisation attracts and recruits autistic people. How do you advertise and interview?

**Peter Stokes:** We still have lots to do and a way to go, as do all organisations, but we have recently put some things in place. We have a list of reasonable adjustments available. We have found that when we ask somebody, "What reasonable adjustments would you like?", they are not sure, so now we give them a list of the different reasonable adjustments at the point of them asking for it.

We do a lot to try and encourage people to disclose. When I turn up at job fairs, the major question I get asked is, "Should I disclose?" It is normally the parent who comes and asks the question. We normally say yes, it is important that you disclose because then we can set you up to succeed in your interview.

We offer quite a few reasonable adjustments that we make available to everyone. We find that having questions up on a screen is a fantastic way of getting the best interview out of an individual; it does not matter whether or not you are neurotypical or neurodivergent. So we offer that in the first place.

We are starting to look at a route called Alternative Routes, where we work with our local council and local support companies to look at identifying youngsters who maybe have not had the same opportunity to come in, and then try and match them to the right role. It is not just about getting someone in; it is about getting someone who is going to be interested in that area and show their skill, and then working with them for pre-employment courses, giving them an internship and giving them a chance to come in and prove by doing, rather than an interview. We are looking at how we can move that out to our supply chain as well, so it could be that the role will not be with us but will be with our sub-tier supply chain. We are looking at those kinds of environments of coming in by different routes in different ways.

**Baroness Rock:** Would you be able to send us the list of reasonable adjustments that you make available? Apologies, I am sure it is on your website, but I would be grateful as I think the committee would be interested in that. Perhaps you could also give us an example of how you put your interview questions on screen.

You mentioned that you are based in the south-west. Is this something

that you as an organisation are trying to scale out on a national level? Your organisation works on a national level. Is this something that is easy to scale up and out internally into an organisation? I would be interested in your views. Is it something that the committee could look at to see how it could be scaled out into other organisations, not just in your sector but in a much wider sector-wide capacity?

**Peter Stokes:** When working in a multinational company, as you know, sometimes it is really hard to scale things up, but we try to showcase and highlight best practice. Recently the company has looked at having senior advocates for all our networks, and we are lucky to have Sir Nick Hine as our lead and sponsor for neurodiversity. He is passionate about the subject, and he is looking at what we are doing from the top down for the best examples across our networks.

We communicate quite a lot across our networks as well. We have regular meetings with our members in Rosyth and Bristol—all across the UK—to share and showcase best practice. We look to work with partnerships in local areas: we work closely with Plymouth City Council, Plymouth University and so on to share and learn best practice. It is generally about how we communicate and showcase our best practice, and we hope that people listen.

**Baroness Rock:** Leading by best practice is a fantastic way of demonstrating how change can happen. Mayur, perhaps I can come on to you and ask you the same question about attraction, recruitment, vacancies and whether there is more that the Government and employers should do to overcome some of the barriers that we have discussed.

**Mayur Gondhea:** I will answer that question first and then follow on from Peter's answer. It is important that employers showcase best practice, and there is a real role for the Government to pull that together and lead it. It is not about employers being competitive; they need to be sharing as much information as possible. With the Government taking a role, there would be the concept of standardisation. There are lots of organisations, charities and initiatives that are doing great work, but bringing it all together is an important role that the Government could play.

At CubeLynx, we start with our job specification. Particularly in the infrastructure industry, there are a lot of acronyms and abbreviations, so we try to make sure that the job spec is jargon free and quite succinct. Often we target people who are young, and someone who is more neurotypical might look at a job spec with 15 or 20 requirements and think they can probably do two of the things and then wing the rest, whereas someone autistic might look at every single item and unless they can nail them all and do them very well then they will not apply. That is an important consideration. We have a Disability Confident logo on our job spec, which signals to the wider audience out there that we are an open-minded employer. Admittedly a lot of companies can just stick in a logo, but we feel that it adds something different.

In the job itself, a lot of our work is quite technical and uses Microsoft Excel. We focus on whether the person can do the job as opposed to what in my view is a big barrier, which is softer skills that prohibit a lot of people going into employment. Before they get to an interview stage, we set them a generic Excel case-study exercise, which we mark using our scoring regime. Once we have got the score back we have a good idea of whether they can do the job, so the interview is actually a bit of a tick-box exercise.

When it comes to the interview, we send questions in advance. Again, that is not a very traditional thing to do, and some people might deem it to be cheating, but when it comes to our consultancy projects we are given two to four months to work on our projects and there is back and forth, so we have taken the same approach in an interview. Why not allow all candidates, not just the autistic and neurodiverse ones, to prepare and plan their answers as well as possible? We ask if people have any reasonable adjustments that they want us to make. Again, that is trying to put the person at ease and make sure that their interview process is smooth. Interviews are daunting for everyone and I think people who are autistic might struggle a bit more than people who are neurotypical. Those are the types of things that we do.

**Baroness Rock:** That is really helpful. To all three of you: if you have any good examples of an autistic person who you have interviewed, taken through and gone through that progression piece, the committee would be very grateful. Any real examples would be helpful to bring it alive. I thank each and every one of your organisations for that open-mindedness, innovation and flexibility. You are the leaders and the powerhouses, and it is powerful for us as a committee to show organisations that are leading the way, and I thank you.

**Q129 Lord Hope of Craighead:** This is another question about barriers, but we are moving a step further forward in the process. What are the main barriers to employers supporting autistic people to stay and progress in work? What should the Government, employers and others do to overcome these barriers? In particular, how does your organisation—a workforce—support autistic employees to enable them to stay and progress in work?

**Peter Stokes:** For me, the barrier to keeping people is having good, legitimate leaders, and having good pastoral care. Something that the Government could do is sell the benefits. Look at good pastoral care and looking after your staff. It might be an outdated figure but I think it costs about £30,000 to replace a member of staff if somebody leaves. So when you start putting into the business, it sells itself. Fundamentally, you are safer if you look after your neurodivergent staff as well. Individuals with a lower level of literacy are more likely to have an industrial accident than those with higher levels. So talking to your employers and saying that small, reasonable adjustments could save you a health and safety incident is a real eye-opener for staff. Supporting your staff improves your output and reduces your sickness levels. So good, legitimate leadership with leaders who actually listen to the individuals, treat people

as individuals, play to their strengths and support them makes a huge difference. Selling that in a business way transcends that barrier between, "Should I do it because it is the right thing to do, or because it is a good business thing to do as well?" I always feel that I am selling my soul at that point because I am from the "right thing to do" side.

Also, for me, it is looking at what we do positively. What we have learnt is to have neurodiverse advocates in your business. We are really lucky. We started with the Neurodiversity Network. We got lots of people who were passionate on the subject, with links at home, and who then sort of went on a journey and were able to sell up, manage up through the business and raise awareness. I know that I am really lucky. I have a neurodiversity team and a team that looks after our staff, but that is because I work in a large organisation with a huge turnover of individuals needing support for neurodiversity. But not every business can do that. So for me, it is about having champions in businesses and education for people to do that and being a champion in a business. It goes a long way because the managers come and ask for advice, and it is just a question of that reassurance. For the individuals, it is somebody they know, trust and can build a relationship with. As we know, with autistic individuals, having that trust and relationship is vital. So having champions in your business and encouraging businesses to have champions makes a huge difference.

**Lord Hope of Craighead:** Do you find, because of what you have just been describing to us, that these people remain with you?

**Peter Stokes:** Absolutely, they do. They are psychologically safe. So money is not always the reason why people are in a job but because they are happy and feel safe in their role. Especially with neurodivergent individuals, the safer they feel, the more likely they are to stay in your organisation.

**Mayur Gondhea:** There are barriers to bringing people in and making sure they are kept in employment because—I go back to the statistics, which are quite grave—unemployment rates for autistic people are some 70%. There are barriers out there, clearly. There are also issues to contend with in business fluctuations—if a company is, for example, going through cost-cutting measures and some of my autistic colleagues do not work for five days a week. Therefore, if you are judging whether someone is going and who is staying, that can be a difficult situation for certain people on different paths. The other consideration is that some autistic people like operating within their niche and do not necessarily get involved in other, wider parts of the business. Traditionally, people's careers are defined by stepping stones, progressing and doing different things such as client-facing roles or whatever. But there are certain expectations. It is a bit of a mindset shift to make sure that we value people who are doing good work and allow them to flourish in their own way, rather than judge everyone's career on the traditional basis.

There is also the concept of change. We are seeing it with, for example, hot-desking and hybrid working, whereby change is an issue. Someone

who is autistic is likely to want to have the same desk each time they come in to the office, et cetera. So there are genuine barriers around this. But in terms of what organisations can do, I would ask employers to be committed to the cause and really commit to it in the long term. As I said, there are incentives there that employers who are particularly going above and beyond should be entitled to access. There is a big awareness programme, as well, that will help the case. It is just a question of getting HR and different departments to buy into it all.

In my specific industry, we work on a lot of public sector projects with local authorities, government agencies or regulators. When we are bidding for projects, marks are often awarded for social value. So the bid is judged on how good they are at certain things like environment, mobility, et cetera. The marks awarded are sometimes between 5% and 10%. I would encourage that marking scheme to be high and specifically target something more directly about neurodiversity and autism, because it will allow organisations such as CubeLynx to partner on some fantastic schemes and projects, win more work and therefore employ more autistic people. That is my own plug there for something that will directly benefit a business like ours.

In terms of how CubeLynx supports colleagues, we have job coaches, who are often funded by Access to Work. There are some issues with that government DWP scheme as well. We have been successful in applying for it but it takes a long time and is quite hard work. There needs to be some streamlining of that. Also, we provide small things like written instructions to our employees. It benefits everyone. We make sure that people's workload is managed. We let people be themselves and feel comfortable in their working environment. We get that back in terms of quality of work, output and enjoying working on our projects and servicing some interesting clients.

**Lord Hope of Craighead:** Do you have cases where they are no longer able to remain with you? If there are, do you ask yourself, "Why did that happen? Could I have done the matter a little differently and kept that person?"

**Mayur Gondhea:** Yes, it is a good point. Initially, I was disappointed when the first autistic person left our company, but he went on to a larger accountancy company and I thought that was success in itself. He had been long-term unemployed, Oxbridge-educated and could not get a foothold in the jobs market, so there was a success story in allowing him to have a platform. He has gone on to qualify as an accountant in the last short period. We are really proud. Sometimes, we also take on people who might not cut it in the consultancy role. But, as I said, there is a long line of people wanting roles with us. It is a really difficult position to be in when we are assessing these candidates who have challenges and needs, and we really want to give them roles, but we cannot. Sometimes we take them on with a view to giving them experience, training them on certain tasks that might not be aligned to our normal course of business—more business process-orientated tasks such as looking after

our invoicing, et cetera—then supporting them until they have a new role. That has been successful and we are really proud that they sometimes get in touch and thank us for providing a platform. Again, it is a bit unusual for a consultancy company to be thinking about the positives of people moving on but we are a unique organisation in some ways.

**Lord Hope of Craighead:** Rob, what about your experience?

**Rob Walters:** We are very firmly at the small business end of the overall business sector, and that has some definite advantages. We can be flexible a lot more easily, perhaps, than some of our larger-organisation counterparts. At the end of the day, we can make decisions quite quickly because the decision-maker is here. We make the decision—job done. However, that does mean that we are a lot more cost sensitive, being a small organisation. It means that we have to be mindful that, because we are a small team, if we were to support people with a condition that meant they could not work Mondays and we recruited 10 people who could not work Mondays, for example, we would have a problem when our customers expected people to work on Mondays. The numbers game is not in our favour in the same way that perhaps it would be in a larger organisation. That is the constraint we are under. There are advantages and disadvantages.

On the sorts of things that we can do, one thing I found very challenging was around the balance between being reactive to things going on in the organisation and getting my head down and concentrating on stuff in the old autistic hyper-focus sphere. We put in office hours, which was something I pinched from universities. It is the idea that, between 9 and 10, you can hit me with questions, but from 10 onwards I have my head down and am concentrating on stuff. I found that really helpful and other colleagues did as well, in the sense that other colleagues have similar approaches and therefore found that useful for managing their workload and the difference between proactive and reactive work. So that worked really well.

We have quite a traditional building, and we have some offices that are quieter and some that are louder, so people gravitate to the office that fits both their job role and their mindset. We have people who will be sat there working with headphones on most of the time. We use Slack quite a lot, in preference to phone calls, meetings and things of that nature. So we can do a variety of things.

I am fortunate in that, when I took over PatronBase, it was already doing a lot of things that were really good—by accident more than anything else—in the sense that the organisation was mostly distributed and we were working from home long before it became fashionable when Covid came around. About half of our team works from home, up and down the country, and about half of our team works from the office or close to the office up in Bradford. So all these sorts of things are really helpful.

On government, I think Mayur has been a bit diplomatic about Access to Work. Given the waiting times at the moment, it might as well not be there. Although we have had people who got in there quite early with Access to Work and said, "Yes, I'd benefit from some help" and got some real high-quality help, the more recent experience has been that you go in there and say, "Yes, I need some help from Access to Work", but six months later you have still not heard anything. So it might as well not exist at this point, with the wait times as they are—and that is even with the nice little check box on the DWP website that says, "I'm at risk of losing a job". Even if you tick that, you could still be waiting months. So Access to Work is not fit for purpose.

I am long enough in the tooth to have been through the Kickstart scheme recently, as well as the previous incarnation of that—the Future Jobs Fund scheme—around 2010. The Kickstart scheme was a Covid reaction and the Future Jobs Fund was much older than that, but both gave somebody who had been long-term unemployed a six-month funded placement with a company. We went through that scheme both times. In the case of the original incarnation, the Future Jobs Fund, I was running a charity as well, and that charity did that too. We found that it was really useful for people who did not know what they wanted to do and therefore had a funded placement for six months that allowed them to find what they wanted to do. Some carried on with us and others said, "No—I found something" and went off to employment, perhaps even before their six months ended.

So the Government really can do those sorts of things, but they are not at the moment. That is where we really need that support from government. Small and medium enterprises can be very flexible and can respond to people's needs, but they need help from government to do that. That is where things such as Access to Work, funded placements and so on come in, although right now they are not there, as I say.

**Lord Hope of Craighead:** Can you tell us how small you are? Can you give us some numbers so that we have a scale? There was a question last week about SMEs, and it was suggested to us that it was more difficult for SMEs to take on autistic people for understandable reasons—there is a question of scale. But, in your case, you are making a great success of it. What is your size?

**Rob Walters:** There are a dozen of us, so we are very much at the smaller end. The majority of our management team is autistic, and that guides that from there. We have to be quite good at it because otherwise I am out of a job.

**Q130 The Chair:** Rob, you mentioned quite clearly the problem with Access to Work. Can I ask the other members of the panel what your interface is with the public sector and Jobcentre Plus? Do you get many suitable referrals from them? Do they actually refer autistic people to you? Some of the local authorities, of course, have employment schemes or pre-employment schemes for people who are neurodiverse. So do people come to you through that route? What is your experience, as companies,



of dealing with the public sector?

**Peter Stokes:** From a Babcock point of view, it is quite strong. We are one of the largest employers in our city, so it is very attractive for them to approach us. We have really good working relationships with the Department for Work and Pensions and Plymouth City Council. I do not know whether that is the case for all smaller businesses, but we have a lot of dialogue with them and they are really keen to work with us.

**Mayur Gondhea:** We have had successful applications with Access to Work. On our arrangements with public sector bodies, we want to do more with that group. We have had them with universities and schools—we are taking on someone from a special needs school in a month or two. So, again, there is a limited amount of time for us to explore all these avenues. Each local authority has its own programme and point of contact, and it would make our lives easier if we had a central way of accessing and forming partnerships with these organisations. Our business is London-based—our offices are in central London, with registered offices in Hillingdon in north-west London—but we work right across the country on our projects. We would love to explore more partnerships and arrangements with different local authorities, particularly around training. It might not be permanent employment but rather employment with a view to permanent employment, or internships. So there is a lot more co-ordination that we could have on that side as well.

Q131 **Lord Elliott of Mickle Fell:** Thank you for all your evidence. This is the final question, where we get your insights and help on our final conclusions for the inquiry. The committee plans to make recommendations to the Government on how to improve support for autistic people to find and stay in work. In your view, what should the Government prioritise?

**Mayur Gondhea:** Rob mentioned the government Kickstart scheme during Covid. That was a huge success for us, and we still have people in the team who went on that scheme originally and are part of the team now. That was for three and a half days a week, and their wages were subsidised for six months. This allowed us that extra confidence to take people on because, without it, we would not have taken a chance on lots of people. That goes for small businesses such as ours that are operating in that space, and it is not just small businesses; all businesses need to be commercial.

On taking people off benefits, we hear a lot in the news about benefits and the welfare system being cut, but there need to be some kind of alternative means. We are taking people who are unproductive economically and putting them into highly skilled jobs. People who train with us can, in five, six, seven or eight years, earn close to six-figure sums—a substantial amount. Therefore, we are doing so much work, but we are fending for ourselves in terms of making that work commercially, which is difficult. As I said, there is a line of people wanting roles with us. That is one thing.

The other thing would be to have some teeth to any measures that you might recommend, whether that is in legislation or something else, as opposed to something that is not strong enough. Those would be my two suggestions, if I had to point to them.<sup>1</sup>

**Peter Stokes:** One of the ones that I am quite passionate about at the moment is that we are seeing a huge development in AI, and we are seeing a lot of applications being screened through AI—people looking for key buzzwords, and they are looking at how they can reduce the time it takes to select candidates. My fear is that we will see neurodivergent people excluded by the use of AI, so if the Government could look at how we protect individuals and how those programmes are developed so that neurodivergent individuals are taken into consideration with the development of AI when it comes to application screening, that could make a major difference for our future generations.

We need to look at parental support as well. That is a key factor. We see that a lot in the business. I think there was a frightening statistic that 40% of SEND parents give up their job. Predominantly, it is the mum. We are losing really talented individuals. What can the Government do? What can businesses do to support our SEND parents?

We need to do a lot of work around female diagnosis as well. Girls mask far better than boys. We see a huge underdiagnosis rate for youngsters. At the moment, waiting times for all are really long but, especially with young girls, sometimes they do not meet the threshold and then they go through life without a diagnosis, without any support and without any understanding.

We can promote universal design as well. What is the benefit for everyone if we are supporting? What is the hook for the business as well as the individuals? We could promote senior civic agreements and civic

---

<sup>1</sup> Note from witness: As a parent of a son who has a Educational Health Care Plans (EHCP) I understand the Government might decide to scrap or change EHCPs during reforms in the autumn for children in mainstream schools.

A EHCP is key for children to access services within a school setting to meet their needs. Removing that provision and the mechanism by which that provision is provided with the likely consequence of reducing the support children/ young people need, is hugely concerning and with likely devastating consequences for children and young people.

There are not enough special schools with suitable provision to meet the needs of children with SEN. Children also have a right to be taught in mainstream school—the removal or reduction of EHCP is likely have significant consequences on children accessing education. Children with SEN have great abilities and remarkable talent and whilst they may struggle with some aspects of mainstream education, they deserve the chance to fulfil their potential.

partnerships between local authorities and employers as well. It goes a long way in trying to meet a huge subject, but it helps if you are doing it together in a combined and consensual way. Those would be my recommendations.

**Rob Walters:** I think government needs to put its money where its mouth is to some extent, in the sense that, yes, the Government are keen to increase employment; however, Access to Work is woefully underfunded and diagnosis is woefully underfunded. There are these areas where it is absolutely essential for us to help autistic people to get into employment that the Government have responsibility for that they simply are not funding. Over and above that, placements and vocational training are really useful, more widely as well but particularly for autistic people in allowing them to demonstrate skills over a much longer period of time. As I mentioned, things such as Kickstart and the Future Jobs Fund, which was the previous incarnation of the same rough thing, were both really useful. They were generally not targeted measures, but something that was specifically targeted towards conditions like autism could be particularly valuable.

I found the panel earlier today really useful. One of the things discussed was: what is the gold standard for employers? I found the Autistica Neurodiversity Employers Index really valuable. I would like to see government promoting things of that nature much more, because that does allow employers to earn a grade for how well they are doing these things. It also opens your eyes and broadens your horizons: "What sort of things could we be doing? Oh, I had not thought of that one". It is not just about what you do; it is about, "Here are some things that you could work on, and here's a report about how you could improve over time". These are all things that I would absolutely like government to do, but I think diagnosis is absolutely at the heart of that, because you have got a whole pool of people who may know they struggle but may not know why. You might have a pool of people who know they struggle, think they know why, and do not have a bit of paper to justify that. Diagnosis is absolutely at the heart of that, particularly, as Peter mentioned, in groups that do not present typically, like girls. I have two autistic daughters—been there, done that, for definite.

**The Chair:** Before I close the meeting, is there anything else that any of our witnesses would like to add that you have not had a chance to say today to us? Obviously if, after this meeting, there are things that you feel, "Oh, I wish I'd said that", please do not hesitate to write to us and let us know. I think you promised Baroness Rock, Mr Stokes, to send us some further information—thank you.

I thank all three of you very much. It has been really informative and has given us a very good cross-section of businesses to see exactly how the autistic community is faring—and with quite a lot of encouragement. But I can see that, from other things you have said, we still have a lot of work to do, and we will try to encapsulate that in our final report, which we will produce by the end of the year.

In that case, then, I need to bring this meeting to a close. The committee meets again in public on Monday 16 June. In the meantime, the public meeting is concluded, and I now draw today's evidence sessions to a close.