HOUSE OF COMMONS

Work and Pensions Committee

Oral evidence: Employment support for disabled people, HC 1227

Wednesday 12 November 2025

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Debbie Abrahams (Chair); Rushanara Ali; Johanna Baxter; Mr Peter Bedford; Steve Darling; Damien Egan; Amanda Hack; John Milne.

Questions 1-49

Witnesses

I: Michelle De Oude, Co-Chair, Greater Manchester Disabled People's Panel; Conor D'Arcy, Deputy Chief Executive, Money and Mental Health Policy Institute; Evan John, Policy and Public Affairs Advisor, Sense; and Geoff Fimister, Head of Policy, and a spokesperson for the Campaign for Disability Justice, Inclusion Barnet.

II: Kate Nicholls OBE, Chair, UKHospitality; Jamie Cater, Senior Policy Manager, Make UK; and Patrick Milnes, Head of Policy—People and Work, British Chambers of Commerce.

Written evidence from witnesses:

Greater Manchester Disabled People's Panel (ESD0011)

Campaign for Disability Justice, and Inclusion Barnet (ESD0062)

Sense (ESD0098)

Money and Mental Health Policy Institute (ESD0044)

UKHospitality (ESD0038)

British Chambers of Commerce (ESD0050)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Michelle De Oude, Conor D'Arcy, Evan John and Geoff Fimister,

Q1 **Chair:** A very warm welcome to this first evidence session for the Work and Pensions Select Committee inquiry into employment support for disabled people. It is a pleasure to welcome our first panel. Michelle De Oude is joining us virtually, and is from the Greater Manchester Disabled People's Panel. We also have Geoff Fimister, a regular guest at the Committee; it is lovely to see you again, Geoff. Conor D'Arcy is from the Money and Mental Health Policy Institute, and Evan John is from Sense. A very warm welcome to you all.

I will start the questions and then hand over to my colleagues. What do you believe are the drivers around the disability employment gap?

Michelle De Oude: Good morning, everyone. It is fair to say that the disability employment gap has not massively changed over the last 20 to 30 years. I am a disabled person—I was born visually impaired—and I have been in employment ever since I was old enough to be in employment, essentially.

The issue is primarily that it is a push approach. If you can imagine yourself as a disabled young person and you have been excluded from various opportunities because, "Oh, we couldn't make it work for you," or, "It's not possible to do that," or various reasons why barriers have not been removed, you start to internalise that, and you can become fatalistic about the opportunities. You are then hit with, "We need to fix you. We need to do something to you because you are not adequate as you are. We need to do something to make you employable and then to sell you to employers somehow," like you are a commodity that nobody really wants. You can imagine how that makes that disabled person feel.

There are, then, two issues. One is whether they are going to engage positively with an employment support provision that is about fixing them and trying to make them better. Secondly, are employers going to engage with that when it feels like a burden and like something that is going to take more time and money?

There are two essential issues. One is that we need to enable disabled people to understand the social model and to understand that they have a right to claim reasonable adjustments, and how to ask for those adjustments, because that is very different from understanding your rights in principle. Also, they need to understand that the reason why they are finding it much more difficult than non-disabled people to bridge that employment gap is because barriers are persistent and consistently there—they are not being removed at the rate that we would like them to be.

You can imagine how it is important for that person to feel they have an opportunity, and that they have worth and value. If you support them to

ask for the right reasonable adjustments in the right way, and support the employer to understand that ask and to implement it in the right way, you will really start to tackle the employment gap.

A constant push mechanism for disabled people that makes us feel as if we are somehow a problem for society is never going to create people who suddenly feel, "I'm really inspired to work because you're making me feel good about myself." I could say lots more but I believe other colleagues want to come in.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you, Michelle, that is very helpful. Would anybody else like to add to that? What do you think are the key drivers? It has hovered around the 30% mark for a number of years, as Michelle alluded to. I think it is just under that at the moment, at about 28%. Geoff, would you like to add anything to what Michelle said?

Geoff Fimister: Michelle put her finger on a key dichotomy in this whole discussion, which is about how far the focus should be on disabled people and their readiness and preparedness for work, and how far the emphasis should be on employers and their capacity to understand the potential contribution of disabled people and make the necessary adjustments to provide accessible employment. Our experience is very much the latter. Obviously, good-quality employment support is important but, crucially, it is the readiness of employers to employ disabled people that is key.

Chair: Would anybody else like to add a quick sentence or two on what the drivers are, adding to what Michelle and Geoff have said?

Evan John: It is worth emphasising that not every disabled person can work. Sense research has found that 82% of disabled people with complex needs are out of work, and only 13% are in full-time employment, and there are a group of people—for example, people in our residential care—who perhaps will never be able to work. That is okay, it is not their fault and we should not make them feel like burdens because of that. That is a really important element.

Q3 **Chair:** Yes, that is a really important point—you are absolutely right. Again, can we have quick responses? Do you think we should focus on any metrics other than the disability employment gap that? We do not talk about absolute numbers or the employment rate as much as the disability employment gap.

Conor D'Arcy: The employment rate is definitely an important one to look at. For us, people falling out of work due to their mental health is a really big issue. With the right kind of support and the right kind of preventive steps put in place, people would not drop out. It is important to keep a close eye on that. We also need to look at the quality of work that people get into, and the idea that employment support is pushing you to take any job that is available, rather than a good-quality one that is going to be sustainable, meet your needs and give you a decent standard of living.

We did some work a few years ago looking at the income gap between people with and without mental health problems, and it was about £2,400 a year. How that follows through is ultimately really important for living standards and how well someone can stay for the future.

Michelle De Oude: One of the other key metrics that is often used is termed economic inactivity. The Government will use statistics to look at who is economically inactive. On the Greater Manchester Disabled People's Panel, we have challenged this terminology, because if you think about it, unless you are living on an island in the middle of the sea with no services—you are not buying anything, selling anything or consuming anything; you are living in a vacuum—you are economically active. You are buying services in your local community, you are consuming online services, you are engaging with local communities, you are going to your local café. Whatever it is, that is economic activity.

The reason why we challenge this is because it is implying that if you are economically inactive, you are therefore not contributing to the economy, you are costing the country money and you are an economic burden to the rest of us in society who are working. That narrative is extremely damaging for disabled people. It is a struggle for all of us. I work full-time in two jobs, and I still struggle to make ends meet as a lone parent on my own with my son. I am not saying it is not difficult for everybody—it is—but that terminology does not recognise those people who volunteer, unpaid carers, who save the Treasury millions of pounds a year, and people who are undertaking other kinds of activities.

Let's not forget that funding for charities is very difficult to get. Many services, including ours at Embrace Wigan and Leigh, are primarily run by volunteers—people who are giving their time for free to the economy without being recognised in any financial way. If all those people suddenly withdrew their labour—and it is labour in the true sense, in my view—imagine the economic cost to the country. To label people economically inactive is incorrect and very inappropriate.

What we would prefer at the panel—I have been working with our combined authority on this—is to talk about people being economically excluded or excluded from the labour market. That focuses much more on what the issue actually is. The terminology is really important in terms of metrics.

Q4 **Chair:** Thank you so much, Michelle. My next question is about the employment rate and so on. What is the potential for improvements in the employment rate for people who have a health condition that could be amenable to healthcare? Also, what is the potential capacity for disabled people who are able to work and want to work but have not had the opportunity?

Geoff Fimister: That is a very important point. Of course, with impairments you have a continuum from people who have absolutely no health issues whatsoever right over to people who are very severely

impaired. It is a continuum; it is not a set of boxes. The system puts people in boxes and creates problems.

There is a whole lot of people who are quite significantly disabled but who would be able to work with the right accessible employment. They need to have that opportunity and support. But also, as Evan was saying, for some people it is not a realistic prospect and they should not be pressurised. The important thing is for people to be able to make their own choices, which is why we are very unhappy about pressure, work-related conditionality and sanctions. We may come on to all that.

Chair: Does anybody else want to add to that?

Evan John: It is definitely a matter of there sometimes not being the right jobs available. Sense research has found that 40% of disabled people with complex needs on benefits say it is hard to find work because the jobs are not there. That figure rises to 57% for people under the age of 35. There are definitely cases where people could work but they cannot find the jobs that offer them the right support.

Conor D'Arcy: We did some work a few years ago looking at the differences across the regions and nations, and the size of the disability employment gap really does vary. It will probably never be completely closed, but I think that gives us some sense of that—I think in some places it is like 40 percentage points, and in some places it is more like 25. But closing that gap is definitely possible.

Chair: Very good point. Damian Egan is going to explore that with you in a bit more detail now.

Q5 **Damien Egan:** We will draw on those points, but first, what are the main barriers to employment for disabled people and those with long-term health conditions who want to and who are capable of work?

Michelle De Oude: One of the main barriers is the lack of employment advocacy. What I mean by that is as an employer—I work for an organisation that employs lots of disabled people—you have to have a very good understanding of reasonable adjustments. They are context-specific to enable you to adapt a role or a workplace to make it accessible for disabled people. You could paper the walls of Westminster with the generic guidance that is available to employers to understand how to do this.

Quite frankly, I would prefer not to see another guidance document ever produced. I would prefer to see funding spent on an advice service for employers and disabled people, where employers can say, "I've got this particular situation, and these are the barriers or the challenges. What do I do? What is the best way of doing this? How do I navigate through this? How do I navigate what occupational health are telling me, what the doctor is telling me, what the disabled person is telling me? How do I reconcile all that? I still have to deliver a service, I still have to perform as a manager." That kind of advice is virtually non-existent. If it existed,

I think you would see a massive increase in employers feeling confident to employ disabled people, and many more opportunities for disabled people being opened up. That is what is missing.

Geoff Fimister: I would very much agree with that. There is also a very important issue about perception among disabled people and employers. If you have a system that is not working very well, the perception of disabled people is going to be one of discouragement—in many cases they are not going to think it is worth trying—whereas if we had a system that worked well, and there were reasonable adjustments and disabled people were finding work, the perception on the street would be, "Yes, this is possible." That perception is key.

Evan John: As an organisation that represents disabled people with complex needs, we particularly represent people who have very high barriers to work. We often find that disabled people with complex needs just cannot find support that actually helps them to overcome those barriers. Our research found that half of disabled jobseekers with complex needs did not have all the support and equipment they needed to look for work.

We also found that that is not often provided in jobcentres, so half of disabled people with complex needs who are looking for work actually said they did not feel supported by their work coach. We do not find that surprising because we have done research into the support in jobcentres and we found really basic gaps in the training for work coaches and disability employment advisers, even around things like basic disability equality training.

Conor D'Arcy: We hear very similar things as well. When it comes to mental health problems, there is a lack of understanding from employers and from employment support providers about the practical ways that it affects us—how it can affect your memory or decision making or ability to ask for help. While obviously there are massive issues for lots of other people with different kinds of disabilities, because mental health has not been historically as well understood or discussed, there is still quite a long way to go there. Improving some of that training, as Evan was getting at, is essential.

Q6 **Damien Egan:** Could someone from the panel highlight the variance in the regional inequalities that exist in the employment gap? Also, what other characteristics, beyond geography, are particularly associated with ill health-related economic inactivity?

Michelle De Oude: I am not going to talk statistics, as other colleagues have clearly got very good data, but what I would say is you would need to look at the nature of the economy, the nature of the transport and economic infrastructure in different places.

In Greater Manchester, we are fortunate that we have a very good transport infrastructure. Obviously, there are still barriers and issues with

it, but it is very good. For people living in places where that is not the case—like where I live in Norfolk and where I grew up in the east midlands—you are not really going to tackle regional employment issues for disabled people if you are not improving the transport, and particularly this thing about travel before 9.30 on various types of bus pass, which assumes disabled people don't need to travel before 9.30. A lot of us do to get to work or to get to activities that might lead to work. The transport infrastructure definitely goes hand in hand with employment opportunities.

The other thing is about the type of economy. If we look at our economy of the last 30-odd years, it has changed dramatically from manufacturing, and that infrastructure, to much more digital delivery, and less manufacturing. The economy has changed significantly, yet the support around understanding that and giving people the right opportunities is still lacking.

There are so many disabled people who are still digitally completely excluded from Government services, local services and so on. There are little projects here and there—we have done some work at Embrace to tackle that—but it is not invested in systemically. You do a little project, and you might get a few people a computer and get them trained to use it, but it is not sustained input. If something happens to the computer or if they forget how to use it or something else happens, most of us at work have an IT department we can ring up and go, "It's not working. What do I do?", but disabled people who are job hunting, or even trying to negotiate daily living, do not have that support. It just is not there.

How can we expect an economy that has changed so drastically towards a digital framework, without having invested systemically in support, to enable not just disabled people but older people and other people to engage with that system in a consistent way? It isn't there. It just isn't there. Why isn't it there?

Geoff Fimister: The only thing I would add to that is that different impairments have different employment rates, of course. Some are particularly low, such as learning disability. The lesson from that is that employment support needs to be very much pan-disability, to look across the whole range and to have that support and expertise right across the range of impairments so that some people do not get left behind.

Evan John: I would emphasise again the fact that young disabled people with complex needs face particular barriers. Our research has shown consistently that young disabled people are less likely to know about key aspects of their rights, such as Access to Work and reasonable adjustments, and it is also the case that the barriers they face are often greater because of their lack of experience, because they have not received enough support in schools.

Geoff Fimister: As Michelle raised the point about IT, just to add on employment support, the IT training and support that people can access

needs to be appropriate as well. I can think of examples of a middle-aged woman in London and a young woman in the north-east, who I have spoken to, who had training under threat of sanctions. They have had training that was completely elementary when they already had quite good IT skills. Pitching it in the right way is very important. I don't think that speaks directly to your question but since Michelle mentioned it I thought I would jump in.

Damien Egan: It is a very important point, because also that world, as Michelle highlighted, is changing so quickly when it comes to employment and needs.

Q7 **John Milne:** Good morning. There are four parts to this question, so I will share it between you. Michelle, the Government has quite rightly made reducing ill health-related economic inactivity a top priority. Out of 10, how are they doing so far?

Michelle De Oude: Two or three out of 10, I would say. Essentially, the narrative that goes with this is that disabled people are a problem because we are not employed, or we are not employed enough, or we are not doing enough to get employed. It is framed as a problem because that is costing the country money. Non-disabled people resent disabled people because we are seen to cost the country money yet we are not contributing anything. We need to challenge that narrative first off, and that is what we are trying to do in Greater Manchester.

Secondly, as I said before, the models that are being put out are reiterations of pretty much the same thing over and over. If you keep doing the same thing and expecting a different result, you might ask yourself why you are not getting a different result. The reason why it is not changing is because disabled people are not given the information, nor are the work coaches, as alluded to quietly by another colleague just now. When I went to the jobcentre, when I was unemployed three years ago for a brief period, I said to them, "So if I need my employer to make adjustments, how do I do it?" Their answer was, "Well, why not go for a Disability Confident employer, because they will understand it, won't they?" The colleagues in the jobcentres, well meaning as they may be, do not have the understanding of how to support disabled people to ask for reasonable adjustments and how to negotiate with an employer to make those reasonable adjustments.

In Greater Manchester, the WorkWell initiative was launched recently. We are trying to work with our own initiative in Wigan to support them to deliver, but we are finding that both disabled people and employers do not know what adjustments would work most for them. They are not given an opportunity to try things that might work, and neither is the employer. There is no structure around that.

The employment support programmes that say, "We can pay the person for six weeks," or, "We could provide you with support for six weeks," are fine as far as they go, but then that support disappears. It goes away to

the next person going through the sausage machine—and it is a sausage machine because it isn't adapted to individual disabled people's requirements. I would also like to use the word "requirements" and not "needs". We are not needy; we have rights and we have requirements that employers should be meeting.

The organisation does not really learn, "Okay, so that was a situation, now what can we do in our organisation to make us more inclusive so that next time a disabled person appears in our organisation or is recruited, we know how to deal with it better?" The disabled person doesn't learn anything because they are not supported to learn all of that complex negotiation about making the reasonable adjustments work in line with KPIs, service delivery targets, customer focus—all the things that a good business or a good service needs people to be able to do. Then they lose their job because the employer says, "They cannot really do it any more," and then you are back to square one. That format is cyclical and it has been cyclical for the last 30 years. It needs to fundamentally change if you are going to get that type of support to really work and make a real difference.

Q8 **John Milne:** Evan, we have already talked about the really big regional discrepancies in employment rates. The Government are going to devolve more power and responsibility down to local areas; do you think that will make a material impact on those differentials?

Evan John: Yes, it does have some positive potential. For example, we have colleges who support young disabled people, and that can be into work. We often work with local employers and local jobcentres. Those local partnerships can be really important. At the same time, it is also important that we have the same consistent standard of service throughout the country, because we would not want to get to a situation where somebody thought, "We don't need employment support for disabled people in x area because there aren't enough disabled people." Obviously, there are disabled people everywhere, so there needs to be a base level of support.

Q9 **John Milne:** We talk a lot about postcode lotteries. We do not want to create one. Conor, the Government says that it is reforms to welfare, which including the cut to UC health—

Michelle De Oude: I am so sorry to interrupt you, but could I make a point, please? In Greater Manchester we do obviously have our own mayor, so we have devolved authority. I think for our city the potential is huge, because you can work with disabled people, as we do on the panel, with our mayor, with the combined authority and with our 10 local authorities to look at how in Manchester and Greater Manchester we can make things work more in line with the things I have been explaining this morning, and give ourselves the opportunity to test things as well. I think devolution has a huge potential, certainly in Greater Manchester

Chair: Thank you.

John Milne: Reforms to welfare are going on right now, including a cut to UC health and introducing the right to try work regulations. Do you think they will successfully incentivise sick and disabled people to try work? Is this the right way to go?

Conor D'Arcy: As has already come out, given the scale of the challenge we are talking about, any of the positives within that probably are not going to be enough. I think things like the right to try are a really positive step. We have heard lots of stories from people who were really nervous about going for any opportunity in case it did not work out. As we have heard, so many employers do not really know how to support people with disabilities. If you are switching a job or taking a job for the first time, there is the idea that they are not going to be able to support you and this is all going to set you back, not even to square one but pre square one, because you are going to lose your benefit claim. That seems like a massive risk. Making that really clear and as available as possible is great.

I think the broader cuts to UC health, and the discussion around PIP, particularly from a mental health problem point of view—there has been lots of discussion around whether there has been overdiagnosis and questioning how legitimate some of those claims or needs are—have been a real backward step and unhelpful.

If we were really going to take a bite out of the disability employment gap, the scale of ambition needs to be much bigger with much more of the things that we have spoken about—for instance, ensuring proper training is there, and that the money is there to actually make the changes in workplaces that disabled people really need.

Q10 **John Milne:** Are there figures on failed work placements, where people have to leave within six or 12 months?

Conor D'Arcy: I would not have any, but it is something we would look into for you.

Q11 **John Milne:** Thank you. Geoff, the Government commissioned Charlie Mayfield to review the role of employers, and his report was published last week. He made a set of recommendations; do you support them? Do you think he is missing something?

Geoff Fimister: That is an interesting report—in fact, I have just finished reading it. It is obviously very broad; it does not go into a lot of detail, and for us the devil is in the detail really. There are a lot of good intentions there. It is more about retention than about the barriers to employment in the first place. Obviously it is important that people should not fall out of work because of the effects of disability.

The Mayfield proposals probably work better with large employers than with small employers, as far as I can see. I also think he maybe misses a trick in not saying much about disabled people's organisations and their potential role in providing advice and support to employers, not just to

disabled people themselves. That overlaps with the localisation question you raised. Obviously local is good as far as we are concerned but, again, disabled people's organisations can play a key role in that scenario.

DPOs vary a great deal in so far as how far they exist and what resources they have got in different parts of the country. We would like to see the Government produce a programme of support for disabled people's organisations to promote their existence and their contribution to this whole employment scenario. Yes, the Mayfield report is interesting, but we would like to see further work and more detail.

If I could just jump on to the interesting question you asked about marks out of 10 for the Government, I thought that was an interesting idea. It is interesting that it is difficult to answer, because you have basically got a rather confusing agenda. There is, I think, a genuine desire within the DWP to improve employment services, but there is also an agenda about saving money. The PIP escapade was a good example of that, where the driving force behind that was to make savings, whereas the Government represented it as being something to do with helping people into work, which is very confusing since PIP is an in-work benefit. That was an example of overlapping agendas that created confusion.

I think there is an understanding within the DWP that employers are important, but there is perhaps an overemphasis of the problem lying with disabled people and the need for employment support. Both of those are important, but it is a question of the relationship between them and the proportions.

John Milne: Thank you. I very much agree with you on the PIP comparison and we need to make sure that does not happen again.

Q12 **Amanda Hack:** Thank you to the panel for coming to speak to us. We are already short on time so I will focus the conversation. I think Evan was talking about the work coach and the basic gaps. What is the experience of disabled people trying to engage with employment support? How does that need to improve?

Evan John: We run an employment service that particularly focuses on disabled people with complex needs, and the experience of them is often not good. They come to us because they have been let down by jobcentres. I spoke to one woman, who is deafblind, who really wanted to work but instead basically decided that nobody really wanted her to work and gave up. I have spoken to another person who gave up engaging with jobcentres because she was told to go back into education when she wanted to go back into work. Often there is just not an understanding of the specialist support that disabled people need, and that can leave them feeling discouraged and distrusted.

Q13 **Amanda Hack:** Geoff, you raised the huge variance of people with learning disabilities not being able to engage with the employment market. That has certainly been my experience from my previous working

life. How do you think that engagement with job coaches works for people particularly who are learning disabled? How does that need to improve?

Geoff Fimister: It is a very important point that work coaches cannot possibly be experts in a whole wide range of difference impairments, so they do need back-up support from specialists when they need it. However, work coaches need enough knowledge of different impairments to know when they need to seek more detailed advice.

Clearly, with specific impairment areas such as learning disability or visual impairment, there are lots of specific areas of knowledge that the work coach is going to need. Success in managing to provide that is very patchy—very variable—and people have very different experiences. As long as the system is backed up by the threat of work-related conditionality and sanctions, there will be a lack of trust, and getting that trust and engagement from disabled people is crucial. Moving away from pressure and towards support is where we need to be going.

Q14 **Amanda Hack:** Michelle, your commentary about adjustment understanding was really key. On jobcentre work coaches and the work we need to do with the Pathways to Work advisers, how do you think understanding the adjustment market and what people might need from an adjustment point of view would improve support for disabled people?

Michelle De Oude: First, I think we need to move away from the word "need". I do not have a need, I have a requirement—a legal requirement for reasonable adjustment. If an adjustment is reasonable, it is therefore something that an employer should do. I think using the word "need" places disabled people in the position of being needy rather than having rights as individual disabled people. I would like to challenge that narrative.

In terms of the way that work coaches operate, I think the colleague who spoke to the question previously pretty much nailed it. In relation to disabled people's organisations, which I work for, we employ lots of disabled people, and every day we are making reasonable adjustments and checking whether they work. When we introduce new systems or projects, we look at how we can make them inclusive. It takes a lot of thinking and it takes some good will as well.

We know that we have lots of resources to draw on from our peers across Greater Manchester. Lots of employees don't—they feel alone with this. They can access guidance, and job coaches will say generically this or that, but they do not really understand what the barriers are and they do not really understand how to remove them. Job coaches need much more specific access to support, which can come from DPOs and other organisations that work with disabled people, so that in a specific situation there is a clear course of action that everyone signs up to and everyone is supported to make happen.

What if we had a different revolution? What if, rather than the Government saying, "This is what we think will solve unemployment for disabled people and here is some money to do it," we said to disabled people—this is what we would like to do in Greater Manchester—"If we were going to spend x amount of money on supporting disabled people to access work, and employers to remove barriers, what would we do?" We would not do what the Government are doing now and what successive Governments of any colour or coalition type have done for the last 30 to 40 years. We would do something that focuses on the expertise—the individual knowledge—and on the plans with employers and disabled people working together to remove barriers, to explore things and to try things. That is what we would do.

Q15 **Amanda Hack:** Great—thank you. That answers my next question as well. What difference do you think the Pathways to Work advisers will make, bearing in mind that they are existing staff redeployed to undertake this new role? What work do you think we could do around that? Conor, you have not had the opportunity to respond.

Conor D'Arcy: I would come back to the previous point: if the actual knowledge is not there in the people delivering that support, that is going to be the main challenge when it comes to a mental health problem. We did some work asking our research community, which is a group of 5,000 people with mental health problems, whether they felt the support they got from DWP had ever got them into a job that had actually understood and was suitable for their mental health. Only 9% said yes.

We are starting from a very, very low base. There are lots of ideas. Some of the other things out there around Connect to Work and lots of other programmes are starting to get more of the right ideas in place but, to Geoff's point earlier, the level of nervousness and anxiety and the question around the ultimate aim is still going to be a doubt for lots of disabled people when they engage with these systems.

Q16 **John Milne:** We have touched on conditionality already. Basically, it is a question of how you get people back into work. Is it the carrot or the stick? What do you think of the proposals from the Government on conditionality? What impacts do you think they might have?

Geoff Fimister: As and when the work capability assessment is abolished, I think the Government's vision is that some sort of conditionality will extend right the way across to almost everybody, including people who are in the current LCWRA category, and the intention is that will be relatively light touch to engage people in a conversation. Our view is that as long as there is any kind of threat, however semi-concealed it might be, it is not going to engage disabled people in the way that they need to be engaged.

There needs to be a confidence that what is on offer will actually lead to employment, and decent employment, and is not backed up by the threat of loss of income. It is about winning people over and getting them to see

the system in a positive, supportive light. As long as any kind of financial threat is hidden behind that, that is going to frustrate the confidence that people need to have.

The word out there needs to be that this is a system that is friendly and supportive and it will actually succeed. It is the record of success that will sell the system, rather than pressurising people.

Chair: We are going to have to make answers really brief.

Q17 **John Milne:** Less stick, more carrot is what you are saying. Do we think that if DWP take that off the table, it will be sufficient to encourage people back into work if they use less stick—less strict conditionality?

Conor D'Arcy: Some of the best evidence on what really works are things like the individual placement and support system—services where it is really wraparound support and where it actually understands the needs of the person. The assessment and the knowledge is there at the start, but that is not the end of it, and it carries through into the ongoing relationship with the employer. That way, we can make sure that people are not falling out, and that the adjustments or requirements are all met when the person is starting, rather than being an afterthought or something you might get through Access to Work, if you can wait a long time for the claim to come through. Those are expensive and aren't always the easiest things to implement at scale, but they are the things that really work and will build trust and confidence for disabled people.

Q18 **John Milne:** Michelle, my next question might apply to you particularly. The Government said they are going to strengthen their approach to safeguarding, which has been a big issue over the years. In that context, do the proposals to incentivise work raise any safeguarding concerns for you?

Michelle De Oude: I will briefly respond on conditionality and then answer that question. If conditionality worked—if threatening people worked—then all the conditionality that had ever been in place would have worked, wouldn't it? The employment gap would have reduced. The fact of the matter is that it does not work, because you are penalising disabled people for the fact that there are consistent, persistent barriers across the employment market, which I am sure the employers in the next session will refer to, and that they need more support to deal with, understand and remove. You are beating people with a stick about something they have no control over. They have no control over what an employer does or does not do, regardless of legal rights and so on. Conditionality does not work. If it worked, we would not be where we are now. A total rethink is required.

In answer to the other question, this is one of those questions where we are looking at disabled people as a risk—by definition of the fact that we have a disability, we are more risky than non-disabled people. What does that actually mean? What do we mean by risks and safeguarding? Do we mean that as disabled people we are less able to deal with risk? Do we

mean that because of the barriers that we need removing we are more difficult to deal with? I am not saying there are not particular things that need to be done, but there are very simple things that can be done to support disabled people in the workplace around risk management. The biggest risk is probably a risk to people's mental health if we are seen as automatically, by definition of being disabled, a risk, and we therefore need looking at in a special way. We do not. We are people.

Even a question about whether you think this is going to be more risky highlights to me an assumption about disabled people that somehow we pose more of a risk or a threat or are more complicated. We are just people. We are just people who want to live our lives in an equal and barrier-free world. If we were to understand that, we might start getting a bit more progress.

John Milne: Thank you very much. We are going to have to move on because of time.

Q19 **Steve Darling:** Evan, Geoff alluded to the proposal to end the work capability assessment, which was going to be explored in a White Paper that the Government said would be published this autumn. However, it appears to have been walked away from. What are the implications of walking away from this White Paper? What reflections do you have on that?

Evan John: I do not think any disabled person will mourn the passing of the work capability assessment. Half of the disabled people with complex needs who have been through it say that it is humiliating. We will be glad to see the back of it. But you are right that there is a lack of clarity now that the White Paper has been seemingly postponed. We would like to see the Government bring forth more detailed proposals around what that would mean, because at the moment they are not the answer.

Q20 **Steve Darling:** What hopes and fears do you have given the vacuum that now exists?

Evan John: When it comes to the work capability assessment, one of our fears is that if everything depends on PIP, which as we know can be quite a flawed assessment, too much support will hinge on one assessment, which can mean somebody losing all their support in one go. It is really important that we get answers about how we will stop that from happening. Without further detail about the policy, we do not know.

Q21 **Steve Darling:** That is really helpful; thank you. Do other panel members have any brief reflections?

Conor D'Arcy: One fear we have is that a move to face-to-face assessments only has been discussed. If people are really struggling with social anxiety or travelling to get to somewhere, what about the idea that you are able to give a good account of yourself and how your disability affects you? It is not going to be as effective. The risk that people get wrongly assessed goes through the roof.

Q22 **Steve Darling:** We went from one extreme to the other extreme. Where is the sweet spot for face-to-face assessments?

Conor D'Arcy: We always find that it is about offering people what works best for them. Some people really struggle with some communication channels. It is just about giving people a chance.

Geoff Fimister: From talking to DWP officials and others, my understanding is that there is not going to be a White Paper, but the Green Paper proposals are still there and will come forward in bits and pieces over a period. My impression is that a lot of work has not yet been done on getting rid of the WCA, but it is still on the table.

Q23 **Johanna Baxter:** Good morning, everybody. The new deal for disabled people was a national voluntary programme that was successful in getting disabled people into sustainable work. How could the learnings from that programme, and from programmes like the work and health programme and WorkWell, be replicated across the country?

Michelle De Oude: One of the first questions we need to ask is whether the learning is the learning of the system, or the learning that disabled people would want the system to have had. They are two very different questions. I am not saying either point is more valid than the other; I am just saying that there are two types of learning. There is what the system thinks it has learned and there is what disabled would like the system to have learned from having invested an extraordinary amount of taxpayers' money into initiatives.

The second question would then be that that question you have just posed should be asked to disabled people who work with disabled people, so that we can help with the design of what would work. If we simply say, "Can we decide what works? Okay, let's get some experts in and the Government will then decide what works," the voice of disabled people is absent.

Q24 **Chair:** Can I interject, Michelle? In terms of sustainable employment outcomes, the new deal for disabled people in the early 2000s was evaluated to have, as a voluntary scheme, successful employment outcomes, which were sustained for over three years. Is that something we can learn from?

Michelle De Oude: Potentially, yes, because if the sustainable outcomes for employment are for a longer period of time, that does tell you that something must have worked, because disabled people are not then going through a revolving door. What you might find, especially when you talk to employers, is that when the employment situation changes, because reasonable adjustments are so context specific, they are not then clear on what they need to do to adjust their practice, systems, policies or approach to continue to employ that disabled person effectively. That is when problems arise. That is when the disabled person is seen as not performing, they get out of a job or are forced out of their

job in some cases, they end up back at the jobcentre and they go through the whole cycle again.

Again, it goes back to the point I made about employment advocacy. If there was a service there that employers could lean on when things change for good-quality, authentic advice, you would find that the longevity success of those programmes—if that is a good way of saying it—would be much higher.

Geoff Fimister: A track record of success is crucial. That is what gets the impression out there that this is worth being engaged with, so that is very important. The only thing I would add is that maximum engagement locally with disabled people's organisations will strengthen those initiatives.

Evan John: Briefly, the key word there is voluntary. The fact that that was successful shows that you do not need to force disabled people to look for work. It is about making sure that they can access the support that helps them to overcome the barriers they face. We have seen a lot more investment in employment support under this Government and that has been really positive.

Q25 **Johanna Baxter:** My next question is about some of the types of support. Personalised, tailored, holistic approaches to employment support, like the individual placement and support, can be very effective. Can those models be scaled up? Are there practical limits to their reach?

Evan John: They definitely can be scaled up. There are still lots of patches of the country where they have not—IPS as one example—been rolled out as broadly. It has gone from secondary services into primary care services and it seems really sensible to expand it as much as possible.

On the affordability question, one of the numbers that came out a lot from the Mayfield review was the £1 million of lost earnings across a young person's lifetime. The scale of the financial cost to the individual is massive, and there are huge costs to the state from not acting, through worsening health outcomes and supporting someone who is not in work. When there is decent evidence around things like the new deal, IPS and employment advisers—talking therapies is another one that we think has been pretty effective—it seems daft to just continue putting money into systems that are not actually delivering the outcome we are seeking.

Q26 **Johanna Baxter:** Michelle, do you think there are enough people with the skills needed to provide that support?

Michelle De Oude: These things can be scaled up. We have to look at what is it that we are actually paying for. A lot of the time you are paying for expertise, for knowledge and for human resource and expertise from employment support workers or whatever guise they come in. When it comes to people with professional insight, disabled people and peer support, you are mostly paying for human resource, time and expertise.

Anything that requires that should theoretically be scalable to any level, provided you are willing to invest in it.

I think that answers the second question: no, I do not think there is enough expertise on this area. There is an awful lot of guidance, as I said—there are pages and pages and libraries full of it—but there is nowhere that people can get specific advice. That is why some of these programmes, like the placement support programmes that another witness was talking about, are much more effective. They are practical. They are negotiating, looking at all the different aspects and coming up with a way that might work, with the opportunity to test things and review things without it being a blame culture of, "The employer's failed," or, "The disabled person's failed," which leaves both parties feeling unwilling to try again.

We need to look at what it is we are investing in. We are not investing in lots of expensive equipment. I realise that some disabled people need that to work, but essentially you are investing in expertise and knowledge. If some of that investment could go to disabled people's organisations like ours and others—we employ disabled people and have done for many years, and they face different barriers, so we have that knowledge about how to make it work, but we are a small charity, so we have all the financial pressures that other small businesses would have—we might be on to something.

Geoff Fimister: It is worth adding that while we are scaling up the workforce, it might be worth considering recruiting disabled people into those roles, possibly by reserving roles for disabled people. That would set a very good example and would feed in a lot of first-hand experience as well.

Q27 **Mr Peter Bedford:** We have had the new deal for disabled people, the work and health programme and WorkWell. Different Governments bring in their own programmes. A new Government come in, a new programme comes in, something changes, and they say they are going to focus on a new objective. What are your thoughts on the continual launching, relaunching and changing of Government programmes? Would it be better to have a longer-term view of addressing this issue?

Geoff Fimister: That is interesting. My experience is that there is actually quite a lot of continuity. We have had dealings with DWP civil servants over many years and there is a continuity in the thinking. As you say, the programmes tend to be relaunched politically, as it were, but there is more continuity than one might think. A lot of lessons of the kind we have been discussing this morning need to be incorporated into that.

Mr Peter Bedford: Does anyone else have anything to add to that?

Michelle De Oude: Your point is excellent. I think a long-term vision is important. If you think about it, those of us who have children would ask

them, "What would you like to do in your life?" You have to try things out. You might try something that does not work, you might find something that you like doing and so on. That expectation and ambition that we all have for our children or grandchildren, or anyone in our family, is the same for disabled people as it is for non-disabled people. We accept somehow that for non-disabled people all of that will take time, "He's finding his feet," or, "She hasn't quite worked out what she wants to do yet. That didn't work out," and that is fine. There is no blame attached to that for non-disabled people, yet somehow there is for disabled people.

There should be long-term support for when things change. I go back to my idea about giving people almost an individual budget to spend on what they think would help them the most, depending on the circumstances they find themselves in at the time. That might be a better solution. As a colleague said about continuity, it has a different label on the box but essentially the content is the same. That is really why none of them ever really succeed, as I said before. We need to change the content of the box rather just the label.

Q28 **Johanna Baxter:** Geoff, do you think the newer programmes, such as Connect to Work and the youth trailblazers, have sufficient focus on disabled people?

Geoff Fimister: Connect to Work is interesting in that its voluntary nature rather appeals to me. I think there is potential there if it is orientated in the ways we have been discussing. It is early days, so I do not have much feedback, but I have been involved in some research relating to Connect to Work and I think it does have potential should it be informed by those considerations that we have been raising.

Q29 **Johanna Baxter:** The Government have said that Connect to Work services will be embedded within healthcare teams, including GP surgeries and mental health services. Would you support that, Evan?

Evan John: Given the fact that jobcentres have such a bad reputation among disabled people, it can be helpful to bring support into other contexts, provided that doesn't then lead to that distrust feeding into other contexts. But, of course, the emphasis has to be on making sure that that is voluntary so that we do not bring an element of compulsion into services like GPs.

Q30 **Johanna Baxter:** As part of our recent inquiry on reforming jobcentres, we heard about the lack of trust and confidence that you have alluded to in the DWP. Conor, how important will it be to use a trusted third-party organisation to help with engagement?

Conor D'Arcy: It is absolutely vital. That does not mean that jobcentres should not try to improve, build that trust and get that knowledge in. The things that we always find work best are the co-location of services, where you have really good close working relationships between people who are employment advisers or debt advisers and people who are

actually providing support with people's mental health. You trust that that knowledge is there about how someone's condition is affecting them, that there is a good working relationship behind doors, and it just makes everything that much easier, more effective and trusting.

Michelle De Oude: We need to be mindful of the pressure that is on the NHS and access to GPs in general for everybody. So I am not convinced on aligning a service with GPs. I also think that health professionals' expertise is in health and in understanding someone's condition or impairment, and some of the effects; they are not employment advisers. They are not people who understand how to make reasonable adjustments in the workplace. That is a very particular area of expertise that is really lacking and that employers and disabled people need to access.

The co-location of services can work if that element is also there. You need somebody there who understands, for example, someone who has autism and the particular effects on how they manage their life and how they manage their work, what the employer can do, what is realistic, what is helpful and what works. That is the bit you need. If that is missing, it will not work, in my view.

Q31 **Steve Darling:** As somebody who has been registered blind since the age of 18, I have benefited from the Access to Work scheme. However, I am just in a bubble of my own. Michelle, I would welcome some reflections about those who might have fluctuating conditions. Also, you said you are with an employer with a number of people with disabilities working there. Hopefully, you can reflect some of that experience back to us, and reflect on the current situation with Access to Work and processing applications, and whether you are seeing any shrinkage in offers.

Michelle De Oude: Access to Work has already been alluded to. If there is a system that is there to support disabled people and employers to employ disabled people, it has to be efficient and it has to be properly invested in. From what we can see, certainly over recent times—the past year or two particularly—that is not what is happening with Access to Work. It is going in the opposite direction, so it will be very counterproductive. The Government need to have a very clear and robust discussion about Access to Work, properly investing in it and stopping the delays.

If someone requires something to enable them to work like I do—I need something called ZoomText to enable me to work effectively, or at all—I have to wait 12, 13 or 14 weeks for an assessment, let alone a decision on whether that will be funded. I am fortunate that my employer has already bought that and invested in that technology because they are a good employer. But lots of employers may not be able to afford to do that or want to do that. What happens to the disabled person? "I'm sorry but we can't wait any longer. We will look at it again if we get any other opportunities." That is why disabled people lose out in employment.

Access to Work needs a proper look. I understand that there is a review going on, but the delays and the lack of funding needs more investment, not less.

In terms of fluctuating conditions, it is about understanding and having employment advocacy and support for employers and people with fluctuating conditions to go to and say, "This has changed and that has changed. What do we do now?" Because the same reasonable adjustment that worked a year ago might not work any more, and you need that advice on what we could try next, what would work next, and what other employers who employ disabled people do. What do people with fluctuating conditions do? That peer support is missing and it is really, really needed.

Steve Darling: Thank you. Any brief reflections from other members of the panel?

Geoff Fimister: Could I comment on Access to Work? It is a very important scheme but it needs rescuing. As long as I have been involved with it, there has always been a tension between reasonable adjustments and Access to Work. It has always been there, but the Government are pushing hard on employers to make reasonable adjustments, and Access to Work is becoming more retrenched. We think that employers do need to make reasonable adjustments, but we do not want them not doing that while Access to Work pulls back and disabled people fall through the middle. What is happening to Access to Work at the moment is that there are quite severe backlogs. There is a real issue there, but what shape or form a review might be taking is not very clear.

What is happening is that there is an unofficial cutting back in Access to Work. People are finding, when they have their packages reassessed, that they are getting much less than they were getting before. The DWP denies that this is happening. It says it is just trying to stick to the original policy objective, so we are having some very surreal conversations. It is like looking out the window, seeing it is raining, and the DWP saying, "Well, the policy intention is that it is not raining." That will not do. Access to Work is in need of rescue.

Conor D'Arcy: On fluctuating conditions, generally there is not enough knowledge among the caseworkers, from what we have heard, about mental health problems and about how conditions fluctuate and how the support could then be more flexible and tailored. Raising the knowledge that is there as well as all the other points that have been made around speed and funding is important.

Evan John: The experience of the people who we support is that Access to Work can be transformational. In the narrative around Access to Work at the moment, it is treated solely as a cost and there is not much emphasis on the economic benefits of helping people into work. It should be part of any efforts to reduce economic inactivity.

Chair: Thank you so much. That concludes our oral evidence from this panel. Thank you so much for all your contributions; we are very grateful.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Kate Nicholls OBE, Jamie Cater, and Patrick Milnes.

Q32 **Chair:** Welcome to the second panel of this first oral evidence session for our inquiry into employment support for disabled people. It is an absolute pleasure to welcome Jamie Cater from Make UK, Patrick Milnes from the British Chamber of Commerce, and Kate Nichols from UKHospitality. Many thanks to you all. I want quick comments from the panel on why you think, from an employer's perspective, the disability employment gap is so high.

Jamie Cater: Thank you, Chair, for the invitation to come and speak to the Committee. Make UK represents over 20,000 engineering and manufacturing employers in the UK, and we have made reasonable progress in the manufacturing sector in improving the workforce participation of people with disabilities and long-term chronic health conditions. That has generally been on an upwards trajectory over recent years. The percentage of people with disability employed in our sector has increased.

Chair: Do you want to give me some figures?

Jamie Cater: Yes. I was just going to say that 76% of manufacturers have increased their investment in health, safety and wellbeing support for their workforce. Those sorts of interventions support manufacturing workplaces to become more accessible. It is about investment not just in occupational health services, but in technologies that enable more people to participate in the manufacturing workforce, such as display screen equipment, automation of tasks, and technology that enables more flexible working, which is critical for enabling more people with disabilities to work in manufacturing. One of the challenges for our sector is creating that culture in an organisation of inclusivity.

One of the real challenges we find is around leadership and management. For pretty much all of us in employment, the most significant relationship that we have at work is with our line managers. One of the real challenges that manufacturers face is equipping their line managers and people managers with the knowledge, understanding and skills to be able to have sensitive conversations and to be able to signpost people to the right support that enables those people with disabilities to feel that they are properly supported and that they can come into a working environment in manufacturing that meets their requirements. That is one of the particular challenges for our sector. Against the backdrop of

general progress, it is where we have more to do, with more support, ideally, from Government for investment in training line managers.

Q33 **Chair:** I have a number of questions and I am conscious that we are already a little bit behind. Can you give us a view on whether the different employment programmes that the Government are running support disabled people into work? Do they encourage you as employers and employer organisations to help disabled people and people with long-term conditions into work?

Patrick Milnes: The issue that a lot of businesses see at the moment is the patchwork nature of the number of different schemes that are available. It means that when businesses are trying to do the right thing and they want to bring into employment people, including those with disabilities who are far from the labour market, they do not know what route or channel they should be going through. I was chatting to one representative from one of our chambers based in Yorkshire, and she listed eight or nine different programmes that exist in her local area. The overlap and minor differences between who they are for, and how you use them in some cases, provide a fairly substantial barrier to employers, particularly smaller employers who do not have the expertise, time or understanding to navigate a system of that nature. That then leads to quite a cautious approach, because no employers want to do this wrong and, therefore, they pull back from the system entirely.

Where employers do use the system, they have quite positive feedback. Access to Work is one. As an example, BCC data shows that only 7% of businesses have used Access to Work, because of what was touched on in the earlier panel—the delays and the under-resourcing of that system make it impractical in a lot of cases. But in the scenarios where it does work, it works really well and employers would like to see that investment in it to make it a more effective streamlined process.

Kate Nicholls: I echo the comments made by both colleagues, particularly around Access to Work and delays, and the difficulties of employers and line managers in having difficult conversations. In hospitality we have quite a positive story, so there are some lessons that could be learned from hospitality. We are predominantly a sector of SMEs. We at UKHospitality represent 750 companies. They operate 150,000 outlets across the UK, and 80% of those will be SMEs on a single site—independent pubs, cafés, restaurants, guest houses, hotels. The advantage we have is that we have very local jobs and we are embedded in our local community, and a lot of very good practice happens at that local level.

Of our workforce, 17% are registered disabled under the Equality Act. We think that is an underestimation, because we have a high proportion of undeclared, undiagnosed, neurodiverse and those with special educational needs or learning difficulties. Across the population as a whole, 24% of the population are registered disabled. So for a sector that

is seen to have quite a few access problems, we are one of the better ones at getting people into work and helping to support them into work.

I have just stepped down after a four-year term as a Government disability access ambassador. That is predominantly looking at physical access into premises for customers, but obviously any adjustments that you make there can be translated across to working in the workplace. We found there that small businesses often do not know where to reach for support and advice, do not know what is a reasonable adjustment, and are not aware of some small-scale changes that could be done, through technology in particular, that would broaden access for a wide range of disabilities.

We trialled a lot during Eurovision. I am chair at the ACC in Liverpool and we put in place quite a lot of adaptive technology to help with translation, reading, literacy and numeracy skills, reading out notices and menus and things like that for blind people, and providing sign language translation for deaf people through the technology. So there is a lot that can be done, but employers are nervous about whether that constitutes a reasonable adjustment.

When you look at Access to Work, there are masses of delays, with some people in our sector reporting that the average is eight to 10 weeks for an assessment, and many reporting that it is 30 weeks. There is a need to differentiate between those with maybe fluctuating demands and fluctuating needs but more straightforward needs, and those with complex needs that need to be assessed differently and separately and will need much more intervention to support them into employment.

I will touch on two other points. Sixty per cent of our workforce is under the age of 24. There is a real problem with Access to Work programmes for young people and the fact that a lot of young people with neurodiversity, special educational needs and learning disabilities are in the education system for longer, and therefore there is a crossover and a gap that they can often fall into between the Department for Education and the Department for Work and Pensions. That also relates to children who are coming out of care, so some of those schemes need to have a bleed-across into different age bands.

Secondly, there is that point about making sure that people have access to part-time work. Two-thirds of disabled people say that what they need is part-time working to be able to get access. It is not just about short hours; it is the variability and flexibility of hours. We need to make sure that is retained.

Q34 **Rushanara Ali:** In terms of the recruitment processes that your organisations are undergoing, could you talk us through some of the barriers that employers face and what mitigations are put in place to help to address them? We are aware of not only with those with disabilities but other groups experiencing all sorts of barriers, including discrimination. What are the things that you can see are examples of

good practice? How are the barriers coming through in terms of impacts?

Kate Nicholls: I would differentiate between the mass recruitment that we would be doing on frontline roles and roles in hospitality venues versus head office or more management roles, and traditional routes through often for full-time work. There is a lot of blind recruiting that goes on now. You have blind CVs that are stripped of anything that potentially has the ability to flag discrimination. For frontline roles, increasingly there are no CVs. It is video entries that people are doing and quick video interviews, which can be more accessible. That is partly to try to make it accessible for those who have neurodiversity or educational needs because, as I say, we know that we recruit a lot of people in with autism, Asperger's and ADHD, so we try to make that as accessible as possible.

One of the things that is a challenge, particularly for smaller employers, is that they do not know when they can ask if somebody has a long-term health condition or a disability. They do not know what the right questions are. They are fearful about being discriminatory and they do not necessarily have that open and frank conversation that talks about what people can do. There may be some times that people make an assessment about what somebody cannot do, but finding out what they can do and what they want to do starts with having a frank confrontation about the condition you are presenting with.

Rushanara Ali: So having better advice on dos and don'ts could be helpful to employers.

Kate Nicholls: Better advice, better guidance and knowing when you can ask those questions. It is the same as the long-term health and fitness for work certificates that people have. Demystifying that, particularly for smaller employers, and giving them the certainty that they can, would open access for a large proportion of the population and a large proportion of employment opportunities that do not require complex specialist adjustment.

Jamie Cater: I agree with lots of what Kate has said, particularly for SMEs, about the lack of confidence in knowing what they are able to ask people. In manufacturing it is similar to what Kate said around things like blind recruitment processes. One of the things we have heard from member companies, particularly around the recruitment and retention of younger workers, is that using opportunities like supported internships and supported apprenticeships, where that provides perhaps a clearer framework for the employment, training and development of those younger workers with particular requirements, means that some of those interventions in terms of adaptations and adjustments happen quite early on. It helps to provide them with a bit more of a pathway and a bit more visibility quite early on in their career, and perhaps gives them more of an opportunity to progress. That is something in particular that we hear from our member companies that makes a positive difference.

Patrick Milnes: I concur with what my fellow panellists have said, but I want to touch on the Disability Confident scheme as well. That scheme has done a good job in raising awareness of inclusive employment practices. Anecdotally, firms that have signed up for Disability Confident do see an increase in the number of candidates with disabilities who apply for those jobs. That pipeline to attract candidates from different backgrounds, and people with disabilities, is useful.

Having said that, much as I alluded to in my earlier answer, some of the principles in the Disability Confident scheme can be trickier for SMEs to understand and to implement the changes into their business. Clearer guidance, practical toolkits and things like that being built into the scheme and into the offering of the scheme will make it as easy as possible for businesses to implement that into their own recruitment practices.

Q35 **Rushanara Ali:** You have already mentioned the challenges around navigation with lots of different organisations, and that clearly is a pressure for employers. In the previous panel we heard suggestions about the need for an advice service where employers can go to a designated institution and get practical advice and help, so that they are supporting the potential employee into work. That helps with retention and other things, of course, and the navigation in relation to Access to Work and the rest of it. Can you cite examples of places you have approached that have been helpful? Or is there a major gap? We heard in the previous session that there is, that that would help with addressing the employer side of the equation, and that not enough focus has been provided on that.

Kate Nicholls: There is a major gap in the central repository of information and advice for employers on this particular issue. There will be good-quality, sector-specific advice and guidance on adjustments that have been made. We worked with Visit Britain and Visit England across tourism to look at reasonable adjustments that could be made in premises in the tourism sector, and that does bleed across into employment.

But for a broad range of conditions, for the generalised adjustments, there is no standard place that you can go to talk about what might be reasonable and what might not, nor is there a place to go that signposts you to schemes like Access to Work or some of the other areas that we have talked about. Disability Confident is good, but that is about intentions and your willingness to employ disabled people and your willingness to have those flexible conversations. It does not necessarily help to take it to the next step.

It goes back to the point about there being a lot of complexity. There will be a lot of times, as we heard in the previous session, when you need to have something that is very specific to that individual and to that set of circumstances. Equally, there is a broad range of disabilities and impairments and conditions that could be dealt with in general. That

would also help to de-clog some of the system from Access to Work, where you could signpost for general and then leave it to look more quickly at those who need a financial contribution and a particular adjustment.

Patrick Milnes: In terms of a centralised repository for guidance and advice, that is a good idea. Businesses do struggle with knowing where to go. You mentioned setting up a new organisation. I am not sure that is necessarily the right angle to take. There are plenty of existing networks. The chamber network would be a good example of this, where you could build on the offering that it already has. Lots of businesses—50,000 businesses across the UK—are part of the chamber network. They employ 6 million people. That is a mighty big chunk of the UK's working population. Rather than creating a new organisation to handle that, you could use an existing organisation that they are already working with and used to engaging with to help to address some of those concerns.

Jamie Cater: I agree about there being a major gap. Manufacturers are probably relying on their occupational health provider to provide that advice on adjustments. Are they necessarily always the people who are best placed to make those very tailored, specific suggestions on adjustments and adaptations? I think that there is a gap there. We may well come on to talk about the "Keep Britain Working" review, but I think that in some of what that review has suggested on workplace health provision, case management, stay in work and return to work plans, there is an opportunity, as the Government reflect on that, to think about whether there is a service within that that could advise on adaptations.

Q36 **Rushanara Ali:** Do any of you have any reflections on the recommendations of the Mayfield report? Are there ones that you are particularly supportive of or others that you are not?

Kate Nicholls: As Jamie has said, there is widespread support for the notions around fit to work and getting fit notes correct, equipping employers to have the conversations and managing it in an occupational health capacity. You cannot get away from the fact that there is a significant cost to employers associated with that. In sectors like mine, where they have been faced with significant increases in jobs, taxes and employment costs, and the margins have been halved since covid, there is a question of how you can afford to provide that kind of service. I do think that the Government need to engage with employer groups to be able to look at how it is affordable, particularly for SMEs, and whether a tax credit or similar approach could be looked at to offset the costs against employment costs.

Q37 **Chair:** Surely if somebody becomes sick or disabled, there is also a recruitment cost. Has no cost-benefit analysis been done for if somebody leaves recruitment, rather than going through what has been proposed?

Kate Nicholls: We would much prefer to retain our staff as much as possible and invest in them. But when you are looking at that ongoing

cost, it is not necessarily of that individual; it is about a provision of an in-work, in-house occupational health service. Many small businesses will not have access to that and will not know where to get that. There are no schemes that are readily available. It is a form of almost private provision, so there is a cost that comes alongside that.

Patrick Milnes: To reiterate what has been said already, the broad ideas in the review are good, and businesses are very keen to engage. One thing that was outside of the scope of review but that we would like to see the Government look into moving forward is potentially reductions in insurance premium tax for insurance products that support workplace health. You could reduce that cost to business. The high rates of tax that we see at the moment are quite prohibitive to a lot of businesses in using those products. If that tax was reduced, you would see an uptake in the number of businesses that would be able to use those for workplace health schemes in particular and help people back into the labour market and retain people as well, as Kate said.

Jamie Cater: I have a couple of additional reflections further to points that colleagues have made. The principles that the review puts forward around the healthy working lifecycle were interesting, as was the idea of turning this into a formal accreditation or standard for employers. We have talked a little bit already about things like Disability Confident. Rather than thinking more about accreditation for employers, we would probably like to think about the question of SME confidence, understanding what to do, what adaptations to make and what to invest in. The previous Government did work on occupational health in particular, creating a baseline quality standard for providers of occupational health to give employers confidence of a return on investment that they will get the quality of the service provided, and that that will be enough to support people in employment. That would be a better way to think about it than what the Mayfield review suggests about employer accreditation.

To echo a couple of the points that Patrick and Kate made about cost, clearly tax policy was outside of the scope of Sir Charlie's review, but we made the point very early on that it should not have been. We understand why it was but, as colleagues have said, the most significant barrier that we hear about from employers in making adaptations and supporting people with disabilities and health conditions in the workforce is the high cost of those interventions. Anything that can be done to help to mitigate that is really helpful. We have made that point in the review.

Q38 **Rushanara Ali:** You have already made some suggestions, but can you suggest any further practical interventions that would accelerate progress without it presenting undue financial or administrative pressure on businesses? Do you have any further ideas for what the business world—the employer world—can do, and that the Government can introduce?

Patrick Milnes: One thing that we would quite like to see at the BCC is the introduction of a very targeted wage subsidy scheme for young

people with disabilities. This could be either an expansion of the recently announced youth guarantee or a scheme similar to Kickstart, which we did see some success with previously. What we mean by this is targeting employment support opportunities specifically towards young people who are not in education, employment or training, but who have a health-related barrier to accessing work, keeping it very highly targeted to that cohort that we know are one of the cohorts probably furthest from the labour market at the moment.

Q39 **Rushanara Ali:** The future jobs fund that was introduced after the global financial crisis was co-financed between Government and employers, giving a guarantee of a period of employment along with a subsidy. Is that what you have in mind? Or is it wholly subsidised?

Patrick Milnes: In an ideal world, it would be as heavily subsidised as possible, to mitigate that cost for the businesses and ensure that they are able to engage with it to the fullest extent. Obviously, the role of the employer would be to guarantee employment for a suitable period of time to ensure that it was a worthwhile, meaningful career opportunity for that young person rather than a token job opportunity.

Kate Nicholls: I echo Patrick's point. The youth guarantee, as I have said, is focused on 18 to 21-year-olds. There are a lot of young people with disabilities, particularly on the learning side, where you need to expand that up to 24 or 25 to make sure that you do not have that gap. So there is something where the youth guarantee does need to go, particularly for young disabled people.

More generally—again, this would be wholly subsidised—there is a scheme in which if employers take on a veteran for one year after they have left the armed services, they do not pay employer NICs for entry-level jobs or starting jobs. That would certainly help when we have the situation that we have at the moment where you are seeing large-scale job losses in sectors like hospitality—part-time jobs, flexible jobs, entry-level jobs that would be accessible to disabled people, particularly younger disabled people. That is a particular challenge and it is directly linked to the change in the national insurance contributions, and the halving of the threshold. A lot of disabled people want to work short hours or need to be able to work short hours. You used to be able to work about 15 hours a week at an entry-level job without attracting employer NICs; it is now down to about seven hours. That is why you are seeing significant job losses across hospitality and retail.

If we were to have that extension of an NIC exemption, or a holiday for one year, that would provide a seamless transition into work and would give those young people and disabled people the dignity and decency of a small number of hours, which many of them want—particularly those with autism, neurodiversity and learning disabilities, who have the highest disability employment gap of all disabilities. Those are the ones who struggle the most. These are the roles that could help them, and we have effectively taxed that out of existence, so that extension of a one-year

holiday would go some way to helping to deliver that, and it would also make it seamless.

We have done a pilot project in hospitality with those furthest from the jobs market—a sector-based work academy with four weeks' invested training—and at the moment we do not have that guarantee of work at the end of it. It had an 80% success rate. It is simply the NICs policy that has stopped us being able to offer that to so many more people, and particularly disabled people.

Jamie Cater: Thinking about policy that enables industry to do more of what it knows works, and effective employer interventions, I would come back to Access to Work and addressing some of the issues that we have talked about and the previous panel talked about around delays in processing applications. We know that in a sector like ours, even before you get to changes in the workplace, lots of manufacturing sites are out of town, on industrial estates, and for anyone with a condition that means that they cannot drive their own car, for example, that can make those opportunities potentially inaccessible before you even start to think about how they do their job once they are there.

We have a lot of good examples of manufacturers using Access to Work to fund taxi services or access to public transport—that sort of thing—but, as others have shared, the delays in processing the applications is making that challenging. Employers in those situations know what they need to do and want to be able to do that, but the operation of some of those programmes in some cases is making it more difficult, so it is about addressing those challenges.

Q40 **Steve Darling:** I want to focus on Access to Work, which is meant to be there to help. Sometimes it appears there are barriers with Access to Work. What barriers around Access to Work have you found—some of that has already been unpacked—and what is on the horizon? Are you aware of any other barriers that could be coming your way?

Jamie Cater: It is just the length of time it takes to process the applications that is the most substantial challenge. As Patrick said at the start, the feedback we have from member companies is that when that works and is efficient, it works really well and has a really positive impact. But too often people are left waiting for months and months on end for anything to happen, which makes it difficult and it leaves the employee feeling unsupported. It leaves the employer feeling that it is too difficult for them to make the interventions that they want to make. It is about making sure that that programme has the capacity to process the applications much quicker and become more efficient.

Q41 **Steve Darling:** I think there is movement towards the Government encouraging employers to share more of the burden of the Access to Work costs. How reasonable is that?

Jamie Cater: I do not think that employers necessarily always expect the Government to fund everything for them and do everything for them. They would accept the principle that there is a shared responsibility for making sure that those opportunities are available. As colleagues have said already, there is the significant increase in employment costs in particular, and the general cost of doing business, and investing in all that technology that helps the wider workforce to become much more productive and more efficient, is challenging. As I say, I think employers would be very happy to accept the principle that that is a shared investment and a shared responsibility, but we need to be careful that we are not actively dissuading employers from making that investment.

Steve Darling: Any other reflections from other members of the panel?

Kate Nicholls: I agree on the public-private partnership to be able to deliver some of the technological changes and adaptations. Some of the issue for small businesses is that they cannot afford the upfront cost. Having that pump-primed and being able to reclaim it would help. Being able to move and share technology between businesses would also help to reduce cost burdens.

The biggest thing we have found is that there is often a low awareness of Access to Work by employers. There is not enough awareness of where people can go and what can be done. Secondly, it is just overwhelmed. If people do have complex needs, it is not sufficiently swift enough to be able to respond to those who have to have some very specialist adaptations. One of our hotels said that they had a blind employee working on reception, and it was initially a very good service. As her condition has fluctuated and deteriorated, they are now looking at an hour's wait before you can get through to talk to an adviser. She had 30 weeks before her claim was even begun to be assessed, not processed. That means it is very difficult for that person to remain in work.

We had another hotel where they were taking on a deaf Ukrainian, and Access to Work could not come through with some basic sign language interpretations. It was a small business—a small guest house—and it paid £1,000 upfront. It is very difficult to pull that out when you have a very limited cash flow and times are tight. It is about making sure that you can have the speed of processing, and that there is a triaging point to be able to push towards easy solutions and quick solutions and then ones that need further cash. Finding a way that employers could have funding upfront if they need it, because they cannot afford it, would undoubtedly help.

Q42 **Amanda Hack:** I want to direct this question to Make UK. I was guesting on the Transport Select Committee last week and we have been looking at skills shortages. When we have ongoing recruitment challenges in certain sectors and there is huge demand for employees, what steps could the sector take to improve disability inclusion and retention?

Jamie Cater: My first thought is to come back to the point that I made at the start around management skills. It is something that we do not often talk about a huge amount in manufacturing. When I came to give evidence to the Transport Committee a couple of weeks ago, we were very much focused on those technical and vocational skills that the manufacturing workforce needs. Often in manufacturing what we find is that we have people in team management and people management positions who have a huge amount of institutional knowledge and understanding of the business. They are very good at their day jobs with their technical expertise, but they have not necessarily been able to have training in how to manage people effectively, how to communicate sensitively and to have those difficult conversations. That is important in making manufacturing workplaces more inclusive, particularly with regard to retention, but recruitment as well.

As I say, that investment in technology is not just limited to the Access to Work conversation, but things like the automation of tasks, use of robots, cobots, exoskeletons. You do not need me to explain to you that work in manufacturing can still be very physically intense, with repetitive physical activity. So we need investments that help to reduce the physical load and physical intensity of that work and help to present the sector as a whole as modern, technologically advanced and accessible.

We might come on to talk about the role of employment support services in particular, but a lot of what our member companies find, particularly with potential candidates with specific requirements, is that often work coaches and other brokers of employment opportunities in the sector have quite an outdated perception of what work in manufacturing looks like. They think it is probably quite inaccessible, that it is in dark, dirty factories where people are doing intense manual labour. There is investment in technology that does make workplaces more accessible. We all need to do a better job of making sure that people know and understand that and that lots of work opportunities in manufacturing are accessible to people with a wide variety of requirements.

Q43 **Amanda Hack:** What are your organisations doing to increase the representation of disabled people at leadership and board level?

Kate Nicholls: In the trade association or in the members that we represent?

Amanda Hack: In the trade associations, but also at your larger employers. How are you working to ensure that they have representation at board level as well as in key senior leadership roles?

Kate Nicholls: At the trade association level I have a team of 24. We have three people within the team who are registered disabled and have conditions, and we have two who have undiagnosed conditions that do not require a reasonable adjustment, so we have quite a high proportion. We published a social productivity index earlier this year, which looks at key diversity and inclusivity metrics that are measured by the

Government. Hospitality comes out top as the most socially productive. We are the most inclusive, the most diverse. There are no barriers to entry, particularly for class skills, or for those who are coming through the workforce, rising from entry level to board level, who have no formal qualifications. Some 80% of our leaders have no degrees. They come through from entry level upwards. So we are doing pretty well. I do not want to rest on laurels; there is more that we can do.

Diversity includes disability and we are making sure that we have steps in place to have the most diverse, inclusive, representative board across our companies. We have in place a series of initiatives to drive and deliver that, including reverse mentoring and general mentoring schemes. I introduced speed mentoring: you get senior leaders and, exactly like speed dating, you can go and get advice in 10-minute chunks. That helps to demystify the mentoring and coaching process for a lot of people. They are focused on helping to develop those skills at an ExCom level below the board, so that people are board ready and we can have the most diverse boards that we can have.

We have worked quite hard on the gender side: we have 30% of our exec board levels. We do not do it through the non-execs and chairmanships—those are the easy routes to getting diversity. We do it through our executives. It is about investing in people as they go up. Clearly, representation is lower when it comes to race and disability. There is much more work that needs to be done, but in our sector what we face is a high proportion of people who will be neurodiverse and with hidden disabilities—hidden from themselves often—but we are working to make sure that they are represented within the boardrooms.

Q44 **Amanda Hack:** Disability employment varies across sectors and across the different parts of the country. What do you think are the greatest opportunities for further progress? How are you addressing some of the barriers that we might face in certain parts of the country?

Jamie Cater: For manufacturing, as I would expect with other sectors, it is about being able to accommodate flexible working practices. We know that that is critical for inclusion. Some of the conversations that we have with member companies are on things like co-ordination and the scheduling of shift work to accommodate perhaps people with fluctuating conditions, and ensuring that there is flexibility there, and broader flexibility as well in terms of the time and location of their work. We have come quite a long way, I would say, as a sector on that over recent years. That has been a positive cultural change in the sector and one where we can continue to do more.

Patrick Milnes: The BCC did some research last year with Scope. In that research we found that if we are able as a labour market to close the disability employment gap by just half of what it is, that would inject roughly £17 billion into the UK economy through increased tax revenue and reduced welfare spending, so the opportunity there is clearly very big. It is just about how we can create an environment that allows

businesses to invest in the correct technology in the right way and build that education and guidance piece that we have touched on time and time again today to ensure that people are able to do as much as they can to support people into work.

Kate Nicholls: Our biggest barrier at the moment is simply our ability to continue to create and maintain jobs in the sector. Since the changes in national insurance, we have seen a third of our businesses reporting that they are having to cut their opening hours because they cannot afford to staff the site, and two-thirds are cutting headcount or cutting staff hours. That falls across all parts of the sector and it falls across all employees, but clearly that reduction in opportunity will hit disabled people and hit the opportunities of those furthest from the labour market. In yesterday's stats that were published by the Government, you have seen a 177,000 fall in the number of payrolled employees, 64,000 of them in the last two months. Half of those are in hospitality alone.

Q45 **Chair:** In terms of the mandatory reporting that the Government are introducing on the disability pay gap, is there any voluntary additional information that you think will help in improving disabled disability employment outcomes?

Patrick Milnes: We are supportive of voluntary reporting in general, but we think it is important that that is tied to a wider workplace culture of inclusivity and practical support rather than mandating specific things that should be included in it.

Q46 **Chair:** Such as what? There will be mandatory reporting about disability pay, but what voluntary things do you think would help in trying to get rid of, or at least reduce, the disability employment gap?

Patrick Milnes: It is very difficult to say specifically what different businesses should be including in their reports, because that will vary regionally, and by sector, depending on what is appropriate for them as an organisation. More important is tying it back to what Jamie said earlier about building a culture, training line managers and stuff like that to ensure that your overall culture is inclusive. Once you have that culture, you can build a report that reflects that, rather than me suggesting businesses should include x, y or z.

Kate Nicholls: I agree with that. If we are moving on voluntary reporting, it should be sector specific and reflect the different styles and approaches that can be taken in different industries. First and foremost we need to focus on closing the employment gap and have the efforts directed there, and make sure that the employment opportunities are there. Then you can look at pay. As I say, the greatest gaps are in autism, neurodiversity and learning difficulties. Reflecting the fact that disabled people tell us they want to have part-time and short hours, all the settings for reporting are based on headcount, not full-time equivalent. That causes challenges for SMEs that are trying to employ large numbers of part-time people. Changing that would help.

Jamie Cater: I agree with Kate on that. I am not sure I have anything further to add.

Q47 **Mr Peter Bedford:** On employer engagement with Jobcentre Plus, the Government recently announced a campaign to encourage businesses to use Jobcentre Plus free of charge to help recruitment. What challenges are employers finding when they are engaging with Jobcentre Plus and using that service?

Kate Nicholls: Where it works well, it works really well. It often depends on localised relationships with particular jobcentres and how much of an appreciation those teams have for different types of work. We have talked about the perceptions of different sectors. It works particularly well where you are a national business and you have a national account manager. It is harder if you are an SME, and SMEs often have a different attitude and approach.

Often for people who are in those situations of doing recruitment, their last experience of the jobcentre would have been a long time ago, and it is very different from what Jobcentre Plus would be. That came up in the last session as well—they are not necessarily trusted places for some people, so we need to work to address that. We have done a sector-based work academy, and we are working with 26 Jobcentre Pluses across the country in areas of tourism density, high deprivation and high unemployment, and working collaboratively at a local level is helping that process. It is working incredibly well in those areas.

Patrick Milnes: The BCC research from last year showed that only 13% of businesses had engaged with their jobcentre in the previous 12 months, so there is clearly an issue in making that connection between the jobcentre and employers. Employers do want to be part of the solution, but they need to be able to engage effectively at a local level. We need to look into why there is that disconnect and ensure that we can connect employment services with employers.

Q48 **Mr Peter Bedford:** How do we improve employer engagement? What would help to drive better connectivity between employers and Jobcentre Plus?

Kate Nicholls: Jobcentres need to stop sitting in the centre and waiting for people to come to them. They need to be out in the communities where they are working, using the chambers and using local networks. That tends to be the mentality, and for a lot of people jobcentres are synonymous with benefits, so they do not think about going there. They need to be out, front and centre, in libraries, in shopping centres, in their communities.

Q49 **Mr Peter Bedford:** The statistic that I have from the CIPD is that 7% of employers find Jobcentre Plus effective for recruitment overall, which is very low. Specifically for those with disabilities, how can they improve—you have mentioned some of the ideas—outreach for employers? It is

more difficult for SMEs to engage than the larger businesses. What else could they be doing?

Patrick Milnes: The chamber network is already convening networks of local employers. There is a stronger relationship that you could build between the jobcentre and that existing network. We know that members of chambers go to the chambers when they have issues in this space, so I do not see why you would not utilise the existing network in a stronger way.

There is also some general support for the new integrated employment and careers service model that has been touted recently, but that would need to be developed in a way that works for the employers. We are looking at that being very locally responsive, ensuring that its actions and modelling is informed by employers, what they are looking for and how it will work best for them. Anything that comes out of that would need to be focused on long-term employment outcomes, not just getting people into the first available job regardless of suitability.

Kate Nicholls: The final point for me would echo everything said. We should also use sector networks where you have a density of employment. For young people, you need to have better join-up between local authority education provision and DWP. The overlap between adult education and jobcentre does not work very well. It is quite clunky.

Mr Peter Bedford: That is a point that I make in many, many Committees about the siloed approach of Government Departments, and something that I will raise when we see the Secretary of State. It is important that the Government do not act in silos and that all these things are joined up. I appreciate you raising that point.

Chair: Thank you so much. That concludes our second panel and their oral evidence to the employment support for disabled people inquiry.