

Work and Pensions Committee

Oral evidence: Disability employment gap, HC 975

Wednesday 24 February 2021

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Members present: Stephen Timms (Chair); Debbie Abrahams; Steve McCabe; Nigel Mills; Selaine Saxby; Dr Ben Spencer; Chris Stephens; Sir Desmond Swayne.

Questions 48 - 85

Witnesses

I: James Taylor, Executive Director of Strategy, Impact and Social Change, Scope; Gemma Hope, Director of Policy, Leonard Cheshire; and Fazilet Hadi, Head of Policy, Disability Rights UK.

II: Tom Pollard, Independent Policy Expert; Professor Melanie Jones, Professor of Economics, Cardiff Business School; Dr Mark Bryan, Reader in Economics, University of Sheffield; and Ben Baumberg Geiger, Senior Lecturer in Sociology and Social Policy, University of Kent.

Written evidence from witnesses:

[DEG0132](#) University of Sheffield

[DEG0127](#) Leonard Cheshire

[DEG0147](#) Scope

[DEG0103](#) Disability Rights UK

[DEG0003](#) Tom Pollard

[DEG0002](#) Melanie Jones

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: James Taylor, Gemma Hope and Fazilet Hadi.

Q48 **Chair:** I warmly welcome everybody to this meeting of the Work and Pensions Select Committee in our inquiry about disability employment. I particularly thank all the witnesses who are joining us for the two panels this morning. I will ask each of the three witnesses who have joined us for the first panel to very briefly introduce themselves and then I am going to ask them a question. Let's do those introductions first, starting with James Taylor.

James Taylor: Good morning, Chair. I am delighted to be here. I am James Taylor, Executive Director of Strategy at Scope, the disability charity.

Gemma Hope: Thanks for inviting me today. I am Gemma Hope, Director of Policy at Leonard Cheshire. We are a disability charity working in the UK and internationally, supporting disabled people to live, learn and work as independently as they choose.

Fazilet Hadi: Good morning, everyone. My name is Fazilet Hadi. I am Head of Policy at Disability Rights UK, which is a national disability organisation led by disabled people.

Q49 **Chair:** Thank you all for joining us. In this first panel, members of the Committee are asked to say our names before asking a question so that it is clear who is asking.

I will put a question to all three of you about disability employment. In 2015 David Cameron set a target of halving the disability employment gap and then that was fairly quickly replaced with the current target of getting 1 million more disabled people into work by 2027. The National Audit Office said that that "cannot be used to measure the success of the Government's efforts". I am interested in the views of each of you about whether you think there should be a disability employment target and, if so, what it should be like. I put that to each of you, starting with James.

James Taylor: There should be a target and you are right that there have been a number of targets and measures over the years. What is frustrating is that none of those ambitious measures, whether it is halving the gap or 1 million more disabled people in work, have come with any sort of milestones or yearly progress reports. While we have seen the employment gap fall slightly over the last 15 years, the increase in employment rates of disabled people has not led to a reduction in the number of disabled people out of work. As you quite rightly highlighted, the NAO has said it is less than clear the extent to which any action from DWP has had any meaningful impact on the employment gap in the first place.



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If the Government had stuck to their 2015 target of halving the employment gap and had achieved it, we would have seen UK productivity output boosted by £50 billion a year and Exchequer benefits of around £17 billion per annum. One million more disabled people into work sounds catchy, but it only focuses on job creation and that figure does not look at the number of disabled people who are falling out of work. Scope research has found that for every 100 disabled people who get a job, 116 disabled people lose a job. The focus on 1 million more into work is doing nothing to increase the overall numbers of disabled people in the labour market and in employment.

That is why Scope wants to see a measure that is focused on tackling the employment gap, looking at job creation and also crucially retention, and plugging that gap where many people are falling out of the workplace.

Chair: You think there should be a target around the gap?

James Taylor: Yes.

Chair: Thank you. Gemma?

Gemma Hope: Leonard Cheshire completely agrees with Scope's position. The point that James made about people falling out of the labour market is very important; 83% of people of working age acquire their disability while they are of working age. Our own research shows that of those people, 73% who acquired a disability at work fell out of work and a quarter of those fell out of work within the first six months of being at work. Focusing on the number of people entering work completely forgets about the people who fall out of work. Focusing on the gap will show the net impact of how many disabled people are in the labour market, as James has rightly said. We also agree with focusing on the employment gap as a measure.

To go further though, there needs to be some way of looking at the quality of jobs that disabled people are in. I think witnesses from your next panel can tell you that their research showed that in the last recession disabled people were not necessarily more likely to lose their jobs, but were more likely to have taken up part-time working, reduced hours and reduced pay. Our research shows that so far 71% of disabled people have had their work impacted by the pandemic by job losses and changes to working hours. As well as looking at the gap, we think there needs to be some examination of the quality of work disabled people are in and what is happening to their working hours.

Chair: Thank you very much. Fazilet?

Fazilet Hadi: I absolutely agree with my colleagues. If we did not think a target to indicate ambition was required, we certainly do now after the pandemic, with many more disabled people falling out of work, having reduced hours and younger disabled people going to have immeasurable problems getting into work. Like any organisation, when you set a target you normally have a plan to deliver the target and that has been sadly



lacking for many years. The Government have quite a lot of levers and are spending quite a lot of money in this area.

For example, they have employment programmes targeted at disabled people, generic job coaches and disability employment advisers, Access to Work, the Disability Confident scheme and there is new procurement legislation, but we do not see these initiatives and levers being corralled into making a difference. We do not have an annual plan or a three-year plan or a five-year plan and we do not have any progress measures for a given year that we can monitor to see what is working and tweak things. My frustration is that to set a target without a plan feels meaningless.

Q50 **Chair:** Thank you all very much. You are in agreement about the kind of targets that there ought to be. Do you think you should look beyond the disability employment gap to the gap for specific impairment groups or is it enough to look at the disability employment gap as a whole? Does anyone have any comments on that?

Fazilet Hadi: I definitely think you need to look at impairment groups because we need people to understand that we have different barriers that are caused by things outside our control, that our impairments cause us challenges that we need specific support for. I think we have seen that very specific impairment-specific programmes have more success. From my own point of view as a blind person, there are some very specific issues that people advising me would need to understand about how I could use Access to Work and how I could use IT equipment.

We must not assume that a disabled person knows any of that because, as has been mentioned, a lot of us acquire our impairments later in life and for those of us who have grown up with impairments, we don't know what it is like to be at work or what the options are. I think that unless we have that kind of expertise around us and around the employer, giving confidence to the employer, for some of the impairments that struggle to get into work like blind people and people with learning disabilities, we will not get that step up.

Q51 **Debbie Abrahams:** Good morning, everyone. Do you think we should break down the disability employment gap target, which I think you are all agreeing we should have, into a job retention target as well as a target for getting disabled people into work?

James Taylor: Yes, absolutely. The focus on job creation has been very positive and we are seeing many more disabled people in work. The bit where it falls down is disabled people falling out of work at a much higher rate than people are finding and staying in work. There is a big problem there and I think it is vital that Government work on disability employment looks at job creation and job retention and measures both. Otherwise you are potentially filling a bath, but the plug is not in the plughole and you are doing nothing to keep disabled people in jobs. It is vital that measures of the employment gap look at both the into-work



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measure, but also the retention and staying-in-work measure. Yes, I completely agree.

Gemma Hope: I will add to that. For all the reasons James said, it is important, but also primarily Government policy making focuses on the job creation side and programmes to move people into work and there is far less, apart from Access to Work, on the job retention side. There have been various schemes tried in the past, Fit for Work, for example, that mainly have not been that successful, but unless you have that target to focus minds for job retention you are not going to get the policy to enhance employers and the tools employers and individuals have to remain in work.

Q52 **Nigel Mills:** Given the state of the pandemic, it is quite likely we will end up with a big employment programme to get people back into work, which obviously will also need to help disabled people back into work. Does the panel have any thoughts or comments on how this should be done? Were the existing Work and Health Programme or the Intensive Personalised Employment Support scheme good models to follow? What lessons should we learn from the Work Programme that we had in place after the last recession?

Gemma Hope: The Work and Health Programme has so far supported about 120,000 disabled people. The Intensive Personalised Employment Support programme, IPES, is set to support 10,000 disabled people. There are currently about 3.7 million disabled people out of work. Not all of those people can work or will want to work, but the scale of demand and the scale of the response for tailored programmes to support disabled people into work is very disproportionate. An important point to make is that if we want to support more disabled people into work who have been affected by this pandemic—and I said before our research shows that that impact is great; almost three-quarters of disabled people had their work impacted by the pandemic—the response needs to be proportionate and geared at it much more than it has been.

In the Restart programme in the CSR the Government set out a number of measures for jobs, but none of those were tailored to disabled people. The most effective programmes for disabled people are those that are individually tailored to disabled people's needs. We are concerned that the Restart programme, even though it will be there at scale for 1 million people, does not offer that tailoring of support. If we learn a lesson from the Work Programme, which was there to support the same number of people at scale, the tailoring was not there and the outcomes for disabled were quite low, about 18% for the Employment and Support Allowance groups.

Our message is that you need to invest in specialist disability employment support and use what we know works to ensure that disabled people can re-enter work if they have lost their jobs during the pandemic.



Fazilet Hadi: To add to Gemma's point, when huge schemes that cost billions are introduced, like the Plan for Jobs, it is not acceptable to not even think about how disabled people can benefit from those schemes. We find unintentional barriers, such as to get on to Kickstart you have to be on Universal Credit. Why put these barriers in the way? Also with the huge investment in more job coaches, why not have more disability job coaches? The whole push from the Government is very much around generic provision. I understand that to a certain extent, but I fear that disabled people, maybe people from black and minority ethnic groups and other protected characteristics, don't do so well out of these big generic programmes. I do not know what the data is either and I do not know if the Government are monitoring it, but I think they should be.

Nigel Mills: James, do you have any initial comments on that?

James Taylor: I echo what both my colleagues have said. I also point to what the NAO found recently, that the DWP has limited knowledge of what gets disabled people into work and keeps them in work. Some of the issues with big generic programmes are that they miss some of that tailored support, but we have an opportunity now to totally rethink how employment support for disabled people should be done rather than just doing the same thing again and again. Our own employment services, which are completely voluntary and have no sanctions at all associated with them, achieve slightly better outcomes than the Work and Health Programme, which has some mandate related to it. We think there is an opportunity there.

Crucially though, any employment programmes or employment support have to be based, created and delivered on the views and experiences of disabled people. There are some real tangible changes that would make a big difference to disabled people that feel quite easy to implement. One of the main ones is attitudes in the system and I think there is an opportunity to follow the lead of what is happening in Scotland with the dignity, fairness and respect principles that run through all of the welfare policy, but also how employment support is delivered. It makes a massive difference to disabled people to feel dignified, that they are being treated fairly and with respect. Our worry with some of these larger programmes is that that is not happening because they are so generic.

Q53 **Nigel Mills:** Is your recommendation to the Government that if we end up with a big restart programme or a big work programme, we have a separate scheme for people with disabilities so that it is easier to target the support they need and they should be directed to a separate scheme? Or is the key thing to have just one scheme and make sure that is set up so that there are financial incentives to work with disabled people rather than just park them and work on the easier to help groups? What preference would you all have for the structure?

Fazilet Hadi: Disabled people are so varied that we should have an absolute equal right to the big generic schemes and that should be thought about. Then some of us will need the more specialist, specified



and personalised. All schemes should be open to us, but there should be more investment in the specific disabled-targeted schemes. I think without that additional thinking about what we specifically need for disabled people the gap in our employment prospects is likely to start growing.

James Taylor: I agree with Fazilet.

Q54 **Nigel Mills:** A follow-up question on that point: should people go through the main scheme and then move on to the specific one if the first one does not work, because the Work and Health Programme had a mandate after two years, or should we be trying to look individually at people's needs and direct them to the right scheme in the first place?

Gemma Hope: We should be looking at people's needs and directing them to the right scheme in the first place. For a lot of these larger programmes you have to wait, to have been out of work for 12 months or 24 months and that is just too long. You are more likely to be in poverty, but also the more time you are out of work the harder it is to get back into work because you have a huge gap in your CV. If someone is going to the jobcentre to claim benefits and is saying, "I need some support to get back into work," from that day one they should be signposted to the most appropriate programme to work with them to get them into the right job. Yes, absolutely, quicker support is needed and personalised support is needed from the start.

Q55 **Steve McCabe:** Good morning, panel. I think all of you alluded to this when you were talking about targets, but one of the problems for the Department seems to be that it can't say authoritatively what works and what doesn't because it does not collect any systematic evaluation of its programmes. I think, to be fair, the Work and Health Programme does have an evaluation component now, but I do not think any of the previous programmes did. From your experience and the evidence you have come across, can you help them? Can you tell us what works, what keeps people in employment and what are the obvious barriers we have to remove? I am not sure who wants to go first. Should I start with Fazilet?

Fazilet Hadi: I am sure Gemma can give you more chapter and verse, but if I just kick off. I am quite tired of the Department saying it does not know what works. We are in 2021 and it has had an awfully long time to find out what works, and I do not think it is rocket science. As Gemma was saying earlier, it is personalised support quickly to people. It is making sure people have the right confidence and are given the right support to get that first job if you are young and, as James was saying earlier, to stop you falling out of work when you become disabled and you are completely traumatised about what that means for your future.

I feel that the disability sector has been talking to many Governments for many years about these issues, but we don't see a response that is large enough or significant enough to meet the programme. The figures



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Gemma gave earlier were so stark. These programmes are tinkering, where we need a big investment and a big ambition, and we just need to get on with it. I do not know what they are waiting to find out, but I think we do know what works. If they talk to disabled people, if they had personalised support, they would see the results. There is probably some sort of policy aversion or financial aversion to putting more money into this area and it desperately needs more funding and then things will work.

Steve McCabe: Thank you. Gemma, what is your view?

Gemma Hope: I agree with Fazilet. We do know a lot about what works. That point specifically references the NAO report and DWP did not set previous programmes up to have a control measure. For Work and Health there is a Jobcentre equivalency. You can compare whether providers working with Jobcentre are providing services more effectively. One of the things we know works, if we use international evidence, is individual placement and support, which is where you work with somebody very briefly, but it is more around job matching and getting them into the right job and working with them and their employer to support them in work. There is so much evidence internationally, granted they are smaller programmes, but we have seen about 60% of people with learning disabilities or people with mental health conditions moving to work and there is loads of great evidence internationally of what works.

DWP produced its own evaluation paper of those programmes before as well. It is just that we don't tend to use that best practice. With IPS, DWP is doing the large-scale randomised control trial with the West Midlands Combined Authority, which should be reporting back this year or next year. We will have a bit more of an idea of what works in that, but I think what we do disregard—as Fazilet alluded to—is programmes run by charities, programmes run at a local level that are successful at working with individuals and helping them into work.

As Fazilet said, it is not rocket science. It is about personalised support, very good matching of the right person to the right job and then working with the employer to address any issues and to flex job support. When you are in work, it is about employers understanding how they can adapt a job if someone acquires a disability to ensure they remain in work. An example of someone we supported in the previous organisation I worked with is a gentleman who had MS. He was a prison guard and he was unable to do as many of his duties, so they flexed his working hours. As his condition progressed, they just changed his job role and used his expertise in a different function in the admin team, so he kept in work.

There is a lot of evidence and a lot of best practice. Just because it does not follow a formulaic pilot does not mean that we don't know what works. I would say to DWP look at the international evidence and use what charities and local authorities are telling it and use that best practice to feed into the design of future programmes.



Q56 **Steve McCabe:** James, I don't know if you have anything you want to add to that, but what about the employers? We are always told that they are too anxious and too nervous. Is there anything easy that could be done with employers that would change things?

James Taylor: I am happy to come in. On your last question, I echo what Fazilet said. Given DWP have had over 50 years on employment support it is disappointing that we are not further ahead in knowing what works. Our research that we published with the Social Market Foundation this morning shows that if you halve the gap, you benefit the Exchequer by £17 billion. For us, it is a bit of no-brainer that if you invest in specialist disability employment support the benefits go far beyond improving the lives of disabled people. It can help with levelling up this country.

There are lots of great employers out there who are taking the time to understand how they can be better employers of disabled people. Sadly, what we still see is that there is a negative and outdated attitude and perception of what disabled people can and can't do in the workplace that pervades in many places in this country. That either stops disabled people from getting the job that they want or forces them to get a job that they are more than qualified for. That is an issue that we need to address. There are programmes like Disability Confident and lots of others that are working with employers to try to address this issue and share good practice, share best practice and ensure that disabled people are treated fairly in the recruitment process, but are also supported to stay and to progress with that employer.

Q57 **Steve McCabe:** To summarise that, I want to make sure I have understood it correctly. You would all put an emphasis on personal support. Gemma put a strong stress on the value of individual placement and support as a model, which I think sometimes is also called place then train, that kind of approach, and make sure that employers are getting proper information and support themselves.

I will ask now about Access to Work as a specific scheme. I have read there has been a lot of concern that since the call centre approach was introduced it has been quite a time-consuming and bureaucratic programme to access and there is a very low number of people benefiting from it at the moment. What is your own experience of Access to Work and are there specific problems that need to be addressed?

Fazilet Hadi: There is a link between your last question and the Access to Work question because I do not think enough employers know about Access to Work. I think the Government could do an awful lot more to showcase the employers that are doing fantastic things to promote Access to Work, to get rid of some of the attitudinal assumptions that James was talking about earlier and use Disability Confident differently.

Coming on to Access to Work, I could not have worked in my life without Access to Work, so I am complete advocate for it as a scheme. I have



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needed equipment and support workers. In the days when I could access less information through digital, I literally needed someone to sit and read stuff to me, and I still do to a certain extent when things are not formatted in a way I can access.

It is a personal anecdote, but I think it does reflect people's experience, that over recent years it has felt like a little bit of a battle, like I have to prove something, like I am apparently not the expert on my needs. I remember two or three years ago having my three-yearly review and having an argument because he was saying I did not need what I said I needed, and he then rang my boss and had a 45-minute conversation with her.

That sense that you are battling is so unfortunate, because at that point I was very senior in an organisation and I had the confidence to battle. I fear for disabled people who do not have that and who are browbeaten by Access to Work. There is a feeling that you are trying to get something you are not entitled to. There are far too many forms; there is far too much bureaucracy. They are not quick, and they have not moved with the times. I have nothing to say in terms of praise for the way it is administered.

Steve McCabe: That is pretty clear, thank you. Gemma.

Gemma Hope: Just to add to what Fazilet said, some of our research showed that only 23% of disabled people access and benefit from Access to Work. That take-up is low. For some of the larger employers we work with through schemes like our graduate internship scheme, Change 100, they just put in place the adjustments or equipment themselves because it is so much quicker than Access to Work.

Our research also showed that 60% of people are waiting more than three months for that adjustment or support to be in place. There are some things employers need to work around that, but if you need BSL you can't wait three months or longer for support. It will risk you falling out of work and not working at your best or being isolated in the workplace. While Access to Work is a brilliant scheme, so much needs to be done to improve the speed that support is put in place for individuals.

On the point around the quality of support, there is always a default position, particularly around assistive technology, that you need a specialist piece of equipment, rather than the Access to Work advisers being aware of what a normal smartphone can do or what working on Microsoft Teams can do. Instead of advising about the accessible support available at someone's fingertips, they go through this lengthy process to procure a piece of equipment. We also say that the quality of support does need to be improved around assistive technology as well.

Q58 **Steve McCabe:** Just before I move to James, is this quite a good idea that needs a bit of modernisation in terms of its administration and perhaps more up-to-date information in terms of what is available? Or is



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there an implicit welfare cultural problem about whether someone is deserving that is holding people back from giving the support that they should be giving?

Fazilet Hadi: I don't know whether it is the way it is managed, whether they are told, "You have to be sure someone needs a support worker," because that is an ongoing revenue. I don't know whether it is an attitudinal thing or a managerial thing, but the impact for the disabled person is that it makes a good scheme difficult. Gemma made a point about some employers walking away from it, and I have heard that as well from the Business Disability Forum.

That is all right for big employers, but some of us want to work for small employers, and Access to Work would be vital because we want to come to that as equal members of the staff group, not with the employer thinking that we cost more. Access to Work is truly a fantastic scheme, but I think attitudes, non-managerial, a sense that maybe disabled people are—I want to say taking the piss, but you probably shouldn't say that at a Select Committee—but that sense that you are not being truthful and that you don't know about your own needs.

I have been using Access to Work for 30 years, so I think I know what I need from it. Also I don't get any sense that disabled people are involved in it or co-produce the way it is delivered. Why not? We are the main users. Why aren't we given a seat at a top table in terms of shaping how it is delivered?

Q59 **Steve McCabe:** Presumably if that was available, then people having up-to-date knowledge about what was on a smartphone would be a bit easier. James, is there anything you want to add? Can I also ask, James, some people say that it would be better if Access to Work was available while people who are seeking employment are in the preparation stage, rather than just something that becomes an issue with employers. What is your view on that?

James Taylor: I would agree. To go back to what I said at the beginning of this session, for every 100 disabled people who get a job, 116 lose a job. The Government's focus on 1 million more disabled people into work is a bit up-ended. You see what we have heard from Access to Work, it sounds like the actual programme that could reduce that number of people falling out of work by providing very vital support, either to help people do a job or support them to do a job, is completely divorced from the Government drive to get people into work.

If they invested in Access to Work, that disability employment gap figure, that commitment to 1 million more people into work might be more achievable. Instead you have disabled people, like we have heard from Fazilet, waiting for up to three or four months, having to prove a disability and employers getting frustrated. In the meantime, people might be losing a job because the support they need to keep them there



has not appeared yet. If you invested in it, we think the employment gap could potentially go down.

I think you are right, starting that support you might need in the workplace before you get a job, whether it is in a jobcentre or a support programme or another place, is a very important thing to do because that will potentially reduce the amount of time a disabled person and an employer are left waiting for a decision that could take up to three or four months.

Q60 Dr Ben Spencer: I would like to pick up on some of the comments around the Disability Confident scheme and go into that in more detail, and just a bit more on the theme of the last set of responses regarding Disability Confident. Does it work? What is the evidence that it works and how can it be improved? James, would you start off? I think you were the person who mentioned it in the last round.

James Taylor: Yes, absolutely. Overall I think Disability Confident, while a very good scheme at promoting disabled people in the workplace, has had a very limited impact on the number of disabled people in work. You can point to a number of things, but crucially the employment gap has not shifted that much over the last 15 years, so it is hard to see what actual impact Disability Confident has had on disability employment levels.

Secondly, the scheme has been viewed as being too reliant on the employer's own self-assessment. I know there is some assessment from external organisations like charities or disabled people's organisations when you reach those top tiers, but there is a lot of reliance on the employer's own self-assessment of how well they are doing at employing disabled people. Some anecdotal evidence that we have had from disabled people over the past couple of months and years has suggested that their employers have not been particularly supportive of them, despite being signed up to the Disability Confident scheme.

You have a situation where some disabled people feel that their employer should be more supportive because they are signed up to Disability Confident, but they are struggling to access support or whatever else they might need to support them in the workplace. I will also just point to a recent DWP survey of employers who are Disability Confident, which found that only half had hired at least one disabled person since joining Disability Confident. I think while it is a great promotion of disability employment equality in the workplace, the thing that it is trying to do—tackle disability employment and increase disabled people in work—still needs work.

Dr Ben Spencer: Thank you. Gemma, I saw you nodding as James was talking. Do you want to come in?

Gemma Hope: Yes. For Disability Confident, there is no measure of its success, so we cannot say if it is successful or not. As James said, the



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evidence on the employment gap would suggest it has not been that successful so far. You can be a level 3 employer and the assessment generally focuses a lot around recruitment practices, but you do not necessarily need to employ a disabled person to be a level 3 employer so long as the policies and procedures are in place to allow you to inclusively recruit someone.

It is not robust enough; it does not have teeth. Our own research shows that one in 20 employers still say that they are hesitant to employ a disabled person. When we ask why, 40% of employers say it is because they found the work too physically demanding or manual, which when we asked a cross-section of employers—including lots of employers with office jobs—we find hard to believe. The stigma is still very pervasive. Disability Confident has not even started to tackle that properly.

It is a great principle and we support the principle, but it does need reform to be effective. Just to use an example of a volunteer of ours, Owen, he is looking for work at the moment and he has phoned up a number of Disability Confident employers to ask about various opportunities. When he has mentioned he is a wheelchair user, they have all said that they do not have any available jobs or that there are no suitable jobs for him. He does not feel, from his personal experience, it has helped open a door for him to have an honest conversation about work.

What we would suggest instead, if you are a level 3 employer you can voluntarily report on the number of disabled people you employ, but we would like to see that mandatory for large employers as well as data on the pay gap for employers, so we can make sure those employers who say they are the most confident and they are level 3 are practising what they preach.

Fazilet Hadi: I fully agree with Gemma's last point. If you are going to have a scheme—and we discussed earlier how maybe we needed to see some of these Government initiatives tying into getting more disabled people into work—of course the scheme could showcase from employers to other employers the win-win of employing disabled people. To the points Gemma just made, why shouldn't the highest level be able to show that it employs 10% disabled people, that it has pay gap monitoring in place, that it monitors the satisfaction and progression levels of its disabled staff and that it makes reasonable adjustments and so on? Why wouldn't you have a scheme that is showcasing the richness that disabled people can bring to the workforce and a scheme that allows you to shout about it? At the moment it just feels meaningless.

Q61 Dr Ben Spencer: Thank you. I was looking through and I can see that as at the end of last year, about 20,000 employers had signed up to the scheme. That does not seem like a huge amount in the scheme of things. What do you think the barriers are for people signing up and getting involved with it?



Fazilet Hadi: They probably don't know what the point is. I would not know what the point is. I think it has to be a lot clearer what the employer gets from it in terms of support or being able to promote their brand. It is not very clear, is it? It is a Government initiative that is free floating, it is not clear what it is designed to achieve and, as Gemma says, it has not been monitored. If I was an employer, I am not sure I would sign up to it.

Q62 **Dr Ben Spencer:** That is very helpful. Gemma, James, do you have any further comments on that? No.

My last question on the topic is around the Disability Confident commitments that people put in place. I was wondering whether using an IPS approach or something similar in terms of supporting people at work should be part of those commitments or whether you think the commitments work or they need a bit of reform. I can go through the list if you want, if you do not have them at your fingertips. Yes, I can see some nodding.

The five commitments are ensuring your recruitment process is inclusive and accessible; communicate and promote vacancies; offer an interview to disabled people; anticipate and provide reasonable adjustments as required; and support any existing employee who acquires a disability or a long-term health condition, enabling them to stay in work. What is your take on those commitments, and should they be changed?

James Taylor: Yes, they are worthy things, all the correct things, by and large, on how you would want a workplace to be more inclusive of disabled people. Just going back to what Fazilet said, you have some disparate schemes—Disability Confident, Access to Work—which are not necessarily speaking to each other and are not necessarily getting disabled people into work.

I think something that is missing is committing to employing X number of disabled people in your first year and in your second year to reduce that employment gap or get 1 million more people into work, whichever target you go for, so that the employer scheme is linked to the overall policy direction that the DWP wants to take on disability employment.

You could meet all of those commitments and potentially not employ a disabled person, which is slightly worrying, that a scheme designed to increase disability employment might potentially have employers that are doing some wonderful things, but do not employ any disabled people. I think there is a commitment missing around employing disabled people.

Fazilet Hadi: As James says, those commitments are all around process, not outcomes or impacts. Once you get to the third level or whatever, surely it should all be around outcomes. The process will get you there, hopefully, but it is not enough.

Gemma Hope: Yes, I would agree. We need to have specific measurable targets. Also some of those are just your legal requirements as an



employer, so you need to demonstrate that you are going above and beyond that.

Finally, and to your previous question on barriers and to support James's point, so many employers do want to employ a disabled person or want to support their disabled staff more effectively, but they do not know how. They need to have access to advice, information and support. Disability Confident does not effectively provide that. There are some employers, particularly some of the larger ones, who share their case studies and best practice, but there is no one to pick up a phone to if you want to say, "My colleague here has acquired a disability and I think I am doing the right things, but can I just check? This is what they say they need, but I just want to make sure we are doing everything we can to support them". Disability Confident does not offer that. There is a real gap for that employer support. For a long time we have called for an employer portal where you can at least access the starting point of that advice to truly make employers Disability Confident.

- Q63 Dr Ben Spencer:** Building on that last point, do you think this scheme works for employers of all sizes? It strikes me from what you are saying, if you are a very big firm with an established HR function, etc. these commitments, as you say, should be what people are doing anyway. This may be more difficult to set up if you are a very small employer with one or two employees. What is your experience in terms of how this scheme works in different sized employers? Do you think there needs to be, like you say, more focus on the smaller employers and the support offered as part of this scheme so it is a reciprocal process?

James Taylor: Considering most people are employed in small or medium businesses, there should be more of a focus on that. There could be something quite innovative and new that DWP could do, which is matching up its very top Disability Confident leaders—the 40 or 50 employers who meet all of the commitments, go above and beyond them—with perhaps some small and medium-sized employers to support those who are getting started, share what they have learnt, what they have been doing, offer advice and support, a bit like employer mentoring for those who perhaps do not have the resource or don't know how to get started or where to go for information and advice.

Gemma Hope: I completely agree with James. There has been quite low take-up among smaller employers. I think it goes back to Fazilet's previous point of, "What's in it for me? If I have to fill out all these forms and do lots of box ticking, what am I going to get from it?" I absolutely second James's point, there needs to be some form of mentoring or access to advice and support for those small businesses to increase take-up and genuinely help them support their disabled staff members effectively or support them to recruit disabled talent into their business.

- Q64 Chris Stephens:** First of all, a question to our three panellists in relation to Jobcentre Plus. First question—fairly easy—what improvements should the Department make to the support of offers to unemployed disabled



people via Jobcentre Plus? Maybe we will start with James.

James Taylor: I think there are a few things. I mentioned one of them a while ago, which we think is straightforward and is learning from what has been done in Scotland, which is a system that is based around principles of fairness, dignity and respect. Embedding that into the whole of the welfare system, particularly employment support, would go a long way to tackling some of the issues that disabled people have reported to us around either Jobcentre Plus or employment support programmes.

The main thing that Scope wants to see though is a removal of conditionality and sanctions from the employment support system. Our own employment programmes are completely personalised and voluntary and achieve very similar—if not slightly better—outcomes than Government statutory schemes, which demonstrates that a voluntary approach really works.

When we speak to disabled people, what we hear is that often they feel that the benefits system might push them further away from work and a feeling that they have been written off. I think that echoes the point that some disabled people distrust the motives behind any DWP or Jobcentre Plus offer of support, even if in theory they were attracted to what was on offer. There are some great job coaches out there, fantastic job coaches, but there is a need for JCPs to be focusing on a much more voluntary and personalised approach to getting disabled people into work.

Chris Stephens: I will pick up some of what James has said there in a second. Fazilet, Jobcentre Plus, what more can be done?

Fazilet Hadi: I very much agree with what James said. People want job coaches to be on their side and people want to work. Why wouldn't we? It brings income; it brings inclusion; it brings self-respect. But that tone about sanctions—that we don't want to work or we have to be forced into work—is completely unhelpful. I would like more disability specialist coaches and better training on disability for all coaches. As I said, I think people have assumptions about what disabled people can and can't do and that needs to be dispelled from the job coach profession.

I think they can use something called the Flexible Support Fund to help get some things that I need to apply for roles or to get myself in the right sort of place. That flexibility should probably be enhanced so that a job coach can work with the person to get the greatest benefit. As James says, I think we have some clashes of culture going on here between a service that really wants to help me and others get into work, with a service that is all about punishing and sanctions and making me feel like I am not a valued member of society.

Q65 **Chris Stephens:** Thanks, Fazilet. Obviously five years ago this Committee expressed concern about the decline in specialist staff in jobcentres to support people. Three years ago we were told there was a disability employment adviser per 28 claimants. Two years ago the



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Department said it had invested £140 million to improve the support that is offered to those with disabilities and health conditions. Do you believe those investments and the promised improvements have been delivered?

Fazilet Hadi: I don't know whether they have. It does not feel like they have from what we are hearing from disabled people. Certainly as the numbers of disabled people have gone up over the last year and job coaches are being increased by 25,000, I would love for your Committee to revisit to check where those figures are now.

Q66 **Chris Stephens:** That is something we will certainly do as a Committee. There are a number of people who are nodding their approval to what you have suggested there.

Gemma, is there anything you want to add about the support to Jobcentre Plus and whether you believe the investments the Department has made are cutting through and being delivered?

Gemma Hope: I absolutely agree with Fazilet's point around disability employment advisers. I think very recently the DWP said it will increase it, but if it is doubling work coaches, why isn't it doubling the number of disability employment advisers? The previous role was a disabled person would work directly with the DA and now they provide advice to work coaches. We understand that work coaches cannot be experts in every single thing, but in your first contact with a work coach, if you do not feel that you are understood or valued and they are having to go and research to try to find someone else to find out how best to support you, you are not going to want to engage in the system. As James rightly says, there is so much distrust in the system anyway that that first contact has to be critical so that disabled people want to go to Jobcentre Plus for support.

The only other thing I would add—and I completely agree with the points my colleagues have made—a few years ago DWP insourced a lot of this employment support directly back to jobcentres. We have no idea how well that is working. It does not publish statistics on how many people it is supporting, what outcomes it is getting and what support is on offer. We want to see that increased transparency so we can answer your question of whether the investment has been effective.

Q67 **Chris Stephens:** Thanks, Gemma. James, going back to something you said earlier, Scope's view is that the current design of the Work Capability Assessment is not effective or a fit for purpose method of determining eligibility for financial unemployment support. What would be a more appropriate method?

James Taylor: In our view, the WCA, the assessment needs building from the ground up. I think the forthcoming welfare, disability and health group, which I believe is due in spring, is a great opportunity to think again about what the welfare system looks like. Some of the things you talked about, some of the investments we have seen over the last few years and the question you asked, "Has that made a tangible difference?"



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I think my argument would be no, because the disability employment gap has not moved. That is either because of under-investment or potentially we are just doing the same things again and again and it is not making a tangible difference to people's lives.

The assessment itself, we want to see that employment support conversation separated from any conversation about financial support. We know from many disabled people and colleagues' research and other research over the years that the WCA is very stressful for people and it is anxiety-inducing. It is often overturned and is taken to tribunal and found in the claimant's favour most of the time. Therefore we want to see it rebuilt with disabled people at the heart of that policy making and input and sharing their experiences and crucially, as you said, separating financial support from employment support.

Fazilet Hadi: I am just going to say something I forgot, which is that locating job coaches with disability organisations or outsourcing job coaching to disability organisations could be very successful. I think job coaches need to go to where disabled people are. It should not be assumed that disabled people have to go to jobcentres.

Chris Stephens: Thanks very much. I am conscious of time, Chair, but if our other panellists want to write to us around Work Capability Assessments, I am sure we would welcome that. Thank you.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed, Chris. We are coming towards the end of our time, but Debbie Abrahams has some important questions to raise.

Q68 **Debbie Abrahams:** Thank you, Chair. We know that over the last 10 years with different social security measures and cuts disabled people have been disproportionately and adversely affected, increasing poverty. We also know after Covid struck that this was exacerbated even further. We had anecdotal evidence when the Select Committee undertook an inquiry early in the pandemic and obviously there is more evidence now. I just wanted to know what you are aware of in terms of how the pandemic has affected disabled people in employment.

Gemma Hope: We have done our own research on this, which showed 71% of disabled people have had their work impacted by the pandemic. About 22% of people were in furlough, 25% of people had a reduction in working hours and a similar number as well have had a reduction in pay. We know that it has already had an impact and that is also reflected by what our employment advisers are telling us. Importantly, the pushback we have had from DWP when we have spoken to it about our research is, "Is it disproportionate? Everybody is having a very difficult time right now".

We have worked with the Institute for Employment Studies, which does show that the impact is disproportionate, using the Labour Force Survey, showing that 10% more disabled people than non-disabled people have



had their work impacted by the pandemic. Critically, the unemployment statistics show that a disabled young person is 3.5 times more likely to be unemployed than a non-disabled young person. We know that the pandemic is exacerbating the existing problems that we have spoken about today. That is why we feel that the Government needs to respond urgently to those statistics.

Only yesterday, the Institute for Employment Studies published some more data from the Labour Force Survey that showed the progress towards reducing the disability gap slightly, which we had seen progress on before the pandemic, is now flatlining. Progress has stopped.

Debbie Abrahams: Thank you so much, Gemma. Do you want to add to that, Fazilet or James?

Fazilet Hadi: I just want to reinforce what Gemma said. All the evidence coming through—Citizens Advice also did a big report last year—shows that disabled people are disproportionately affected. We all know that in any type of recession, disabled people find it harder to get into work. I echo Gemma's comments.

James Taylor: Yes, I think absolutely the same and I would point to two other things. Over the last 15 years, we have seen 2 million more disabled people fall into poverty. Covid has accelerated both falling into poverty and falling out of work. As we begin to come out of the worst of the pandemic and start thinking about what happens next, if we fail to place disabled people and their families at the centre of post-coronavirus policy, we will continue to see a huge increase in the number of disabled people in poverty, poor labour market outcomes and increasing costs to the welfare system as well. It is critical therefore to put disabled people at the heart of post-Covid policies.

Q69 **Debbie Abrahams:** Thank you so much, all of you. Can I ask very quickly about particular impairments and conditions? We have not talked about people with mental health conditions. Are you aware of any particular disabilities or long-term conditions within the overall group of disabilities being disproportionately affected?

James Taylor: I would say people with learning disabilities have been among the most forgotten groups in this pandemic. Sadly, there have been a huge number of deaths from Covid and also from responses to the vaccine roll-out. It is very sad to see. I would say that people with learning disabilities are among those who have been most forgotten and side-lined during the last year.

Gemma Hope: Our research shows that people with learning disabilities have been disproportionately affected compared with other groups of disabled people. People with mental ill health have also been disproportionately affected. Also some people with sensory impairments have been very much left behind, particularly when we look at redundancies.



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Fazilet Hadi: I agree with all that and want to also mention the digital divide. Some disabled people with energy-limiting conditions who have professional jobs but who have trouble accessing transport have found the move to digital working just amazing and want to retain the same flexibility of work as we move out of the pandemic. For others, it has not been good. They have struggled to move to digital. It might be unaffordable, for instance, or they may not have the skills and abilities. It is a double-edged sword, but the hope of those disabled people who have benefited from digital is that it remains a feature of flexibility in the workplace.

Debbie Abrahams: Fantastic. That answers my last question about whether disabled people had had equal access to opportunities as far as working from home was concerned. I don't know if Gemma or James want to add to what Fazilet has said about that.

James Taylor: Nothing from me.

Debbie Abrahams: Thank you so much, all of you.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. We have a final question. We will have to make it fairly brief, but it is an important question from Dr Ben Spencer.

Q70 **Dr Ben Spencer:** Super brief. The Government plan to publish a national strategy for disabled people this year. How do you think the engagement with disabled people has gone or is going? What would you like to see in the strategy, your top headlines, given where we are for time?

Fazilet Hadi: We would like to see full engagement with disabled people across all channels, people who cannot very easily fill in an online survey being interviewed, people spoken to in digital meetings and so on. We feel there should be full engagement with disabled people before any publication of a strategy and we do not believe there has been so far.

James Taylor: I agree. Going back to what we want included in the disability strategy, the vital thing that seems to be missing from disability employment policy is any tangible milestones. I think it is critical that the strategy includes a requirement for yearly employment reports.

Gemma Hope: I echo James's points. We want to see a clear plan for jobs for disabled people, outlining how disabled people can be supported into work post the pandemic, but also fixing the fault lines in Government policy, making sure that every Government Department is thinking about how they can be inclusive of disabled people in their policies.

Dr Ben Spencer: Brilliant, thank you.

Chair: Thank you all very much indeed. The session has been extremely helpful and useful for our inquiry. Thank you very much, all of you, for joining us and for putting up with the technological challenge of it all.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Tom Pollard, Professor Melanie Jones, Dr Mark Bryan and Ben Baumberg Geiger.

Q71 **Chair:** We move now to our second panel and welcome our witnesses. I will ask, if I may, as I did at the start of our first panel, if you would all tell us very briefly who you are, then I will put the first question to you. First, Tom Pollard.

Tom Pollard: My name is Tom Pollard. I have worked on policy around social security and mental health for the last 10 years or so, part of that time at Mind and part of that time advising DWP on secondment. I also work as a mental health social worker in the NHS.

Professor Jones: Hello all. I am Melanie Jones. I am Professor of Economics at Cardiff Business School. My research interest is in labour market inequality relating to disability. My submission was jointly produced with my colleague, Professor Victoria Wass. I am one of four academics who collectively make up a group known as Disability at Work, which is committed to making sure that the academic evidence that is produced does inform Government policy and employer practice.

Dr Bryan: I am Mark Bryan. I am a Reader in Economics at the University of Sheffield. My research interests are in the areas of employment, health and wellbeing. I am part of a team led by Jenny Roberts, which submitted evidence to do with the way that Covid has affected disabled people's employment prospects.

Ben Baumberg Geiger: Hi, I am Ben Geiger. I am at the University of Kent. I have done a lot on various things to do with disability, work and the benefit system, including on what should replace the WCA and indeed had a stint on secondment with the DWP as a policy adviser about that and also things to do with disability and employment measurement. I am also currently co-leading a big rapid response project on the benefit system during Covid-19.

Q72 **Chair:** Smashing, thank you all very much indeed. Given time constraints, I would be grateful if you could give fairly succinct answers. I think you were all listening in on the earlier session when we had a discussion about the target for disability employment. Can I ask each of you to say very briefly if you think there should be a disability target? If you do, what do you think it should look like? Let's do it in the same order, starting with Tom.

Tom Pollard: Yes. I think there certainly should be a general target on closing the disability employment gap. My question would be to what extent is that a useful measure of DWP activity. I think this is part of the issue. The majority of DWP's interactions with disabled people have to do with the administration of benefits. There is an issue with the assumption that through those interactions about the administration of benefits, DWP



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has an instrumental role to play in moving people into work. I would say that in some ways a more useful measure would be a measure of DWP's activity in people moving on to and off relevant benefits. Quite significant shifts in the disability employment gap might not necessarily reflect DWP's performance.

The only issue with that is that historically DWP has framed its interactions with disabled people through the receipt of benefits and that has driven a lot of problems, for example, distrust of the DWP and people being fearful of interacting with the Department and engaging with employment support because they see employment support as intrinsically tied to their receipt of benefits.

A target is good thing to work towards. We also need to be realistic about who has the capacity to have an impact on the target, what role DWP has to play in that and what else about DWP's performance we should be measuring, for instance, people's experience of claiming benefits and whether they are getting the support they need. For me, that is the critical role that DWP plays and it does not have a significant impact on disability employment.

Professor Jones: I agree that there should be a target. Perhaps a couple of ways of thinking about it are about what the measures should be and what the targets should be. I think the target is important as a signal and as a commitment. During my time of studying in this area, the target has raised the profile of disability inequality, regardless of the precise nature of the target.

On the measurement itself, I think it is important that we do consider the disability employment gap rather than an absolute commitment to the number of disabled people in work for two important reasons. One is that if you are dealing with an absolute number, you are not adjusting for the prevalence of disability in the population, which is important.

The second reason is that measuring a target does not measure inequality. The disability employment gap is a better measure because it measures the number of disabled people in employment relative to the number of non-disabled people and does to some extent take into account things like the economic cycle, which otherwise is a big driver of the absolute number of disabled people in work.

Another thing to consider is the level at which the target is set. When Government sets their target in relation to the disability employment gap, they set a very ambitious target. Prior trends predicted that it would be very unlikely that the target would be met. An exceptional step change would have been needed to meet that target so it is not surprising that Government recognised quite early on that they would not meet that commitment. However, they then changed to the 1 million target, which prior trends clearly indicated they would meet just on the basis of prior performance, so it was not sufficiently ambitious. There is an important



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role for the measure itself, which needs to be significant, but also for the level of aspiration and the extent to which it is achievable.

Dr Bryan: I agree with a lot of what Melanie said. A target is a useful guide as a kind of aspiration, but it can be a quite blunt and crude measure. There is a sort of question zero here, which is what the target should be. I don't think anybody thinks the overall disability employment gap should be 30 percentage points, which it is at the moment, more or less, but equally nobody thinks it should be zero. It should be somewhere in between, but I have never seen a rationale for what it should be. There are many complex issues here, such as preferences, abilities, productivity, the types of jobs available to disabled people, what expectations society has of disabled people and what expectations disabled people have of society. We should be taking account of all these factors in fixing a target.

Fixing the disability employment gap is a very crude target anyway and there are several different disability employment gaps. You can define the gap according to gender, education level or type of condition. For example, the mental health disability gap, at 35 percentage points, is significantly larger than the physical health disability gap of 25 percentage points. The gap also varies a lot by region. This kind of crude measure does not take account of these things.

There is also a job quality gap between disabled and non-disabled people once they are in employment. We know that disabled people are much more likely to be on zero-hours contracts, much more likely to be in temporary work and those things also need to be taken account of. If you just have this single crude measure then you are not going to make progress necessarily on these more nuanced issues.

I also agree with what Melanie said about the 1 million target versus the gap target. Initially they were the same, as the 1 million target corresponded to about half the gap, but now because of the overall growth in employment in the economy and because the number of disabled people has increased a lot that has also had the effect of getting more disabled people into employment in the figures. I agree that the gap is a better measure than the absolute number of disabled people in employment.

Ben Baumberg Geiger: What Tom said is very important. I am going to bracket that as something I am sure we are going to come back to later in the session.

Regarding what the target should be, there are various things with gaps versus levels where I agree with Melanie and Mark. One of the important things is what you mean by disability. If you do not have a sensible measure of disability then your target does the worst thing a measure could do, which is it will look like things are getting better if they are getting worse. That is absolutely what you do not want to have with a measure.



The reason behind this is—I am not saying this is definitely what has happened, but it is one possibility—if you imagine a world where things got worse for people with impairments that made them more likely to say in a survey that they have a disability that interferes with their day-to-day life, then you see a rising level of disability but the people who are just on the cusp of saying that or not saying that are likely to be less severely disabled on average than other people.

What you will see in that situation is the numbers of people saying they have a disability goes up and the disability employment gap goes down. That is as a consequence of more people feeling that their disability interferes with their day-to-day life. To me, that is absolutely the opposite of what you want in a target. Having a target, something around the disability employment gap is very important, but it is important to have a better definition of disability and a bit more attention to make sure the target rewards success rather than failure.

Professor Jones: Just to reiterate Mark and Ben's points, what I would support is not just a target. We have previously called for a basket of measures, which is very much aligned to what was mentioned in the earlier session about having a range of supportive indicators that would include in-work measures around the disability pay gap, disability job satisfaction gap, but critically also includes a measure of prevalence.

When the disability employment gap is presented it is presented on its own without the prevalence of disability. Even if, as Ben said, you take what we might think of as a good measure of disability, like the Equality Act definition of disability, because it is self-reported, because it is changing over time, then we need to understand why that change is taking place. We would argue that you would have to have some kind of functional additional measure of disability in order to benchmark and understand why the prevalence of disability is rising. That context would provide a much greater understanding of why the disability employment gap has fallen.

Indeed, if you look at the proportional changes in the disability employment gap and the prevalence of disability, as we have done, what we see is the combined measure, those two things net each other out, and so what we see is a much more level picture. You can think of it as the total employment loss due to disability over a period when the gap has been narrowing.

Chair: If any of you are able to put on paper what you think the target ought to look like and what the definition ought to be, that would be very interesting to us.

Q73 **Sir Desmond Swayne:** We have pretty well covered my questions, so if anyone has anything else to say on the question of whether the 2017 target of 1 million more jobs by 2027 is achievable or on target and/or was ambitious enough in the first place, speak now.



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Dr Bryan: I was just looking beforehand at the trends and to me it looks like it will be achieved by 2025. The ONS data released recently on employment disability shows that in the year before Covid the number of disabled people went up by almost 500,000 and 93% of those were in employment. That 93% is higher than the non-disabled employment rate, which is about 80%. This backs up what Ben and Melanie were saying: depending on how you record disability and how you define disability and measure it you will get a very high disability employment rate, which will affect how the gap changes.

Professor Jones: Just to follow up on that, I entirely agree that the target will probably be met sooner than it was set. Even in light of Covid, which is going to have this disproportionate impact on absolute levels, it may still be the case that the target will be met. That is because when it was set the target was on the basis of being attainable on the basis of prior trends.

Ben Baumberg Geiger: There are various different alternative measures and I will definitely write something and try to co-ordinate with Melanie on that. If you use a very simple alternative measure that both Melanie and I have suggested, there has been no progress since 2010. This is the difference between being on track to meet that measure through things that are out of control versus a simple alternative measure showing we have not made any progress in a while.

Q74 **Selaine Saxby:** Good morning, everyone. We have had suggestions that the Government should monitor the disability pay gap, so that would be the gap between average wage for the disabled and non-disabled workers. Do you think that is a useful measure to be looking at and what might we learn from it or are there any other measures that we should be monitoring, do you think?

Tom Pollard: As Melanie touched on in the last answer, there is an argument for having a real suite of measures, so beyond just looking at something simplistic like the disability employment gap. Pay is one thing. It was mentioned in the previous session about quality of work, and I guess thinking about the impact of work on health and wellbeing, because as a general rule work is good for your health, but lots of work is bad for your mental health and it does not necessarily follow. Although we work towards these big general targets of work being good for your mental health and it being good to have more disabled people included in the economy, that is all well and good, but it is breaking it down and disaggregating what is going on there: pay, prospects, quality of work, the impact on health and wellbeing.

This comes back to something I wanted to touch on in response to some of the previous answers, which is looking at disability as the primary thing that defines the people we are talking about here is problematic as well. Disability interacts with a lot of other characteristics and those characteristics will often have a multiplier effect, so if someone has low educational attainment and disability it is going to have a much greater



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impact on their prospect of work than someone who just has a disability alongside being well qualified.

Similarly, your socioeconomic circumstances. I have experience of mental health problems, and it has not had a particularly significant impact on my career, but for someone else who is not in as comfortable a position as I am, it would have a significant impact on their career. For me all this is about getting beneath the surface of what is going on. While it is good to have good headline mission ambitions to work towards, we need to dig under the surface and look at the reality and the complex reality for individuals.

Professor Jones: I entirely agree that we need this suite or basket of indicators, which not only looks at work and getting people into work, but at job quality and the in-work experience. We know from national data there is about a 15% disability pay gap, there is a job satisfaction gap that is about 10%, and those things are true even after accounting for other characteristics of people's jobs. It seems strange that we do not monitor those things routinely and have annual statistics published on a whole range of indicators. That should include information on the prevalence of disability.

The other thing that we perhaps haven't mentioned but was mentioned this morning is on the dynamic. We see the disability employment gap as something that is quite static, but that is people going into work and people moving out of work, so I would like to see disability statistics published on the probability of moving in and out of work.

By publishing that information in support of maybe the target measure, what it would allow us to do is to look at getting back to the point of looking at policy roles. Some policies are much more targeted at getting people into work and some are much more targeted of getting people to retain work. It would just allow us to gain a deeper insight into the actual indicators that might be more specifically related to particular policy initiatives.

Ben Baumberg Geiger: I will be very quick because I am aware of time. Just to echo what both Melanie and Tom said, particularly around the education side. Just to give a vivid example, I remember some qualitative research I was doing, talking to a Bangladeshi man that worked in a restaurant kitchen who was developing quite severe leg problems. What you have for people like that—but is a broader issue—is their disability means they cannot do the job they were previously doing and their education and skills mean they cannot possibly do any other work, given their age and other situations.

The interaction of disability with skills and education is a very important thing. When you do look into it you see those things very strongly. Maybe that helps focus our minds a little bit on what sort of combined disability-related and employability-related interventions might be affected.



Dr Bryan: I agree with all that. It is crucial to measure the job quality gap and the pay gap as well as the employment gap.

Q75 **Selaine Saxby:** My second question was about the pandemic and what views you had on how that has impacted the disability employment gap so far, what it might do in the longer term and also how the DWP's response in the new back to work programmes that are coming in is going to help or if they are enough for those who are disabled and looking for work.

Tom Pollard: As mentioned in the previous session, not much of what has been announced so far has specifically focused on disabled people in terms of additional job support. Realistically, what we have seen in the past is that you only make significant progress on things like the disability employment gap when there is high general employment, so low general unemployment rates.

Unfortunately what we are likely to see in the wake of the pandemic is you will have a huge number of people who are out of work in more frictional unemployment who are ready to go if the right job comes along. People who have additional barriers to work, be that their disability or the other complex social issues that interact with that, are going to be at the back of that queue, to put it crudely. It is going to be difficult. It will be interesting to see how honest the Government are when they bring out their new strategy around disability and the new Green Paper around disability and employment.

The situation has fundamentally changed and it is going to be much harder for disabled people who have these additional barriers, whether that is real barriers or barriers that are perceived by employers around discrimination and don't have as a full a CV to fall back on. Realistically, I would expect it to be a lot harder for disabled people to get back into work.

My argument would be it is a good opportunity to have a fundamental rethink about how we provide employment support for that group. I am sure we will go on to this later, but my argument would be to think about who else might be well placed to provide that rather than DWP, who are going to be focused on that big group of people and frictional unemployment.

Selaine Saxby: Would anyone else like to come in?

Ben Baumberg Geiger: Very quickly to say my big worry would be around the employment support that DWP offer being focused on people that are closest to the labour market and anybody who is seen as difficult or problematic or complex not really receiving any support. Given the wider pressures in the labour market that Tom was talking about, we know this is a big risk. In the project I am involved with, we are going to try to monitor it, but I would be very surprised if it didn't happen. That



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would be disappointing in terms of the consequences for what we are talking about today.

Professor Jones: Just to talk about the impact of the pandemic itself, obviously data collection has been affected. When we are dealing with statistics we are dealing with them at a lag. We are yet to see probably the biggest impact on employment from the Government's job retention scheme, but despite that the evidence from 2020 is that the disability employment gap has stalled; it is no longer narrowing and has risen during that time. There are early indications to suggest that disabled people have been disproportionately affected.

There are also other indicators that we now can use. Perhaps—*[Inaudible.]*—have not been as effective, but in terms of data on people away from work who remain employed—potentially on the Government furlough scheme—disabled people have been disproportionately affected. In relation of some of the evidence we have from previous recessions, and some work I did relating to the financial crisis, it suggests that those people who retain work, they don't lose their jobs as a result of Covid, disabled people during the financial crisis were disproportionately affected in terms of wage freezes and changes in workload. There may well be an impact of the economic effects of Covid-19 on those who even remain in work that we need to monitor as well.

Dr Bryan: I agree with Melanie there that the closing of the disability employment gap seems to have stalled in progress that during the pandemic. The furlough scheme is in place, but there are these other indicators that we have been looking at, for example, whether people are temporarily away from work and also whether they are working fewer hours due to economic circumstances. In both of those indicators a gap has emerged between disabled and non-disabled people. These may be lead indicators or precursors of what is likely to come after the pandemic. It does look like disabled people may be or are very likely to be more severely affected after the pandemic.

We have also looked at the distribution of disabled people across different industrial sectors. In particular for people with mental health disabilities, they are much more likely to be in the shut-down sectors, in particular, hospitality, retail and in arts and entertainment. Arts and entertainment is obviously quite a small sector, but retail and hospitality is a very large sector and 14% of people with mental health disabilities are in hospitality and retail. To the extent that those sectors don't recover after Covid, and that is what it looks like is going to happen, disabled people will be disproportionately affected by lack of employment prospects in those sectors.

Q76 **Chair:** Could I just pick up a point here? We have a big unemployment problem. The Government are setting up major schemes, Kickstart and Restart. Do you think the data are going to be collected to assess how those schemes are going to support disabled people specifically? There



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was a lot of data from the Work Programme about what happened to disabled people. Do you know if we are going to see that data for these new schemes?

Tom Pollard: I haven't seen anything on that specifically. I do know that Restart is focused on people on Universal Credit who are expected to be engaging with employment support. That is not going to be the equivalent of the ESA group and it won't include ESA. The big group of around 2 million people who are out of work primarily because of disability or health will not be engaged with that scheme, as far as I can see.

Kickstart is obviously focused on young people. I am not sure within that bracket of young people whether they will disaggregate around disability. My guess is it will be focused on people who are more likely to be newly unemployed rather than long-term unemployed because of disability or health.

Chair: That is a concern. Chris Stephens has our next question.

Q77 **Chris Stephens:** I have some questions for Tom Pollard. How well is the benefit system achieving its aims of supporting disabled people who want to work get into work?

Tom Pollard: In many ways I feel the benefit system has the opposite effect. My key criticism of DWP, having spent 18 months working there and advising on mental health, is the problem is that the people it supports with disabilities and health conditions are seen primarily through the lens of their receipt of benefit. Historically the way DWP has worked is to use that receipt of benefit as a way of incentivising people to undertake activity to move towards work through conditionality and sanctions.

For a lot of disabled people who are now in the support group of ESA, or the equivalent group in Universal Credit, there is not the option to use conditionality and sanctions and my experience within DWP is that they are at a bit of a loss of how they engage with people without that tool. My argument would be that is not a route to engaging with people, that is a route to achieving compliance. The key to supporting people who have more complex needs—so it is not just about short-term circumstances or motivation—towards employment is about building trusting working relations.

In the session earlier on there was a lot of talk about whether or not DWP knows what works for this group. There was a big internal review—it is a bit old now; it was 2010 or something like that—that reviewed all its existing evidence of employment schemes for this group. The thing that came out is that the deciding factor is not often about what the intervention is or the programme, it is what is the quality of relationship between the person providing support and the person receiving it. That is the critical ingredient. You see that in mental health support and other



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areas as well. My argument would be the problem is because of that relationship around benefits and the assessment quotas for benefits, to a large extent the DWP is incapable of building the sort of relationships needed to support people back into work, because those relationships rely on trust and that trust simply is not there.

My argument would be the relationship around benefits stands in the way of it providing good support. I would say there are a lot of other agencies that are better placed and DWP should focus on that financial support and not try to use it as a route to push people into employment.

Q78 Chris Stephens: Looking at your report from last October, Tom, it noted that people on disability or health-related benefits who are required to engage in work-related activity only have marginally better employment outcomes than those who are not required. What conclusions do you draw from your own observations on future policy development within DWP?

Tom Pollard: Both groups—those who are required and those who are not required to engage with DWP support—had very low job outcomes. You are talking about 4% of the caseload moving into work each year. Clearly conditionality isn't a deciding factor in whether that support is effective or not.

My argument would be that even where conditionality is not there, this group on the whole do not trust DWP, they do not see DWP as a supportive agency. I work in local mental health services and the people that I support see the DWP, if I am honest, as largely predatory. They see it as an agency that is there to provide their financial support, but they worry constantly about losing that financial support and they do not see it as a source of support around employment.

The report we wrote tried to reframe this whole thing and say that really this about people with complex disadvantages. Disability and health is a big part of the picture, but it is about poverty, it is about other social issues they are experiencing—often mental health in the picture in as well. It does not make sense to look at disability or benefit receipt as a single defining characteristic. It needs to be about providing holistic support to people to address the range of issues they are experiencing with employment being part of that rather than the driving factor in the relationship, if that makes sense.

Q79 Chris Stephens: This is my last question to you. You also note in your report that the DWP is sceptical about the high job outcome rates that have been reported by local and specialist providers, saying that those figures do not always meet the DWP definition, for example, 16 hours a week employment over a sustained period of time. My question to you is fairly simple: are DWP definitions fit for purpose?

Tom Pollard: There are two sides to this. There is an issue around local charities and stuff maybe not always being rigorous enough about the



data and evidence they collect about their impacts. They might say someone has found a job, but that person might be in work for a couple of hours a week and that would not meet the DWP definition.

The flip side is that DWP has a very rigid definition of what work should look like, but also the key criticism for DWP of these kind of local figures is that these people are cherry picking because they are not using conditionality and not requiring people to be there; they are only having the people turn up who want to be there. Its argument is they have taken the low-hanging fruit and reporting good rates based on that.

My argument would be DWP is not even able to claim the so-called low-hanging fruit because people don't trust and engage with it. If we could engage all the so-called low-hanging fruit of people who were keen to work and think they could, you could make a big dent right there. The fact that is seen as gaming the system somehow tells you a lot about the DWP's world view and the problem it has engaging with this group.

I would argue what you need to do is start again by building from the bottom up with the services people already work with—health services, local authorities and local charities—and build those services designed around the wishes and views of disabled people. Start from that point of view, rather than starting with this top-down, DWP-knows-best view that because you are on benefits you need to engage with the support. The whole thing needs to be flipped on its head and that would create a much more effective system, but also one that was fairer, better for people's health and would engage people more effectively.

Ben Baumberg Geiger: Very briefly to say that the wider international evidence, and UK evidence as well, is that conditionality and sanctions are particularly ineffective for people with disabilities, for all of the reasons that have been outlined. I know the Committee has heard some of that evidence before, but I just wanted to emphasise that and completely agree with what Tom said.

Q80 Nigel Mills: I suppose it is pretty key in this system that we have an assessment that works out what people's abilities, capabilities, needs and challenges are. What we have is the Work Capability Assessment. Do we think that assessment is getting better and is now a useful exercise or does it still have challenges and concerns that it is not going to get the right outcome and give us the information we need?

Ben Baumberg Geiger: A very quick thing on how things have changed. I wrote a 2018 Demos report on it. To begin with the things that have changed, one of the problems that we have is that DWP is still not publishing anything about the Work Capability Assessment as it works for Universal Credit. There is no way of updating our knowledge of what is going on. It keeps being one of those things that Ministers say in response to parliamentary questions and so on, "It is going to be done at some point soon". It has been a while now, and it means that we cannot pay any attention to this at the moment. If the Committee can try to put



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some pressure on the Department around those statistics, that would enable us to have a better picture of what has been happening recently.

Regarding the fundamentals of the WCA, I want to emphasise two things. One of them is just that the system itself works incredibly badly at the moment, partly in terms of getting a sensible impression of what people's lives are like and how their disabilities affect them, but also because it doesn't do a very good job of relating that to the world of work. It has these two fundamental failings that can't be done by a bit a tweaking, but just need a completely different system.

The title of my 2018 report on this was "A Better WCA is Possible". One of the problems, my feeling is that the Treasury no longer believes that the DWP is capable of instituting a better assessment. Indeed, a large part of the push for basic income from some groups, for example, is that people have lost faith that we could have a better assessment that does not traumatise people and come up with such wrong outcomes. From looking around the rest of the world, no other country has quite the same issues as the UK. There is a whole range of different ways of doing it, many of which will be substantial improvements on it.

We can talk about the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches, but more than anything I think we just have to have a better system. We have to move away from what we have at the moment and not think, "We might change it, but it is always going to be hated in the same way". That is just is not true.

Nigel Mills: Any comments from anyone else? Tom.

Tom Pollard: Just quickly because I am aware I spoke a lot previously. Part of the question is about the purpose that it is supposed to be performing. The problem is it tries to fudge that and perform multiple purposes. It is supposed to be partly about gauging what would be the appropriate group to put someone in around the employment support they get and the level of conditionality that is applied to them and it is also about deciding how much money someone needs. My argument would be to separate those questions out, focus initially on, "Is this person likely to be out of work for a longer period of time because of the complexity of their situation, including disability?" If so, they are going to need more money because they are out of work for a longer period of time, and the basic rate of UC in normal times is not intended as a long-term income replacement.

As for the question of what employment support someone needs, I would have that as a separate process and a separate question because I do not believe you can do both things at the same time. What ends up happening at the moment is it does not do either effectively. As Ben says, for a lot of people it is very traumatic. Even just the prospect of something that is coming up in a few months for people that I support will throw people into a bit of a crisis.



It is madness that we are in a situation where a system that is ostensibly helping people—for example, with mental health problems—is often making their mental health worse and perversely pushing them further away from being in a position where they might return to work.

Q81 Chair: Tom, can I just come back to you? The alternative approach that you are arguing for is more community-led, locally commissioned approach to employment support for disabled people. Can you tell us a little bit more about what this would look like and how local should it be? Should it be regionally commissioned? Should it be local authority level commissioning, or would it vary from one place to another? Tell us a little bit more about why you think that would work better than the current national commissioning does.

Tom Pollard: In this report that I wrote with New Local, we said that there should be some flexibility about the exact regional footprint. Probably local authorities seem like a sensible place to start because, of all those kinds of complex needs and disadvantages that people face, local authorities are often in touch with people in relation to a bunch of those, so their housing and their social care needs. Then, in combination with the NHS and local charities, our argument is that those are the agencies that people already work with and often already have a greater degree of trust in. There was some Demos research that demonstrated that previously, so why not start with the places where people are already engaging? If the critical ingredient is relationships and trust, start at that point.

The other advantage of starting locally and building from the bottom up is that there is much more potential then to engage with the people who will use those services and allow them to have a significant say in how those services are run and what they look like. There is a lot of emerging literature around how you commission for complexity. What we are talking about here—certainly for the ESA caseload in particular—is complexity. It is people who have complex, difficult lives. Disability and health is a big part of the picture, but it is lots of other things that are really causing them problems.

Often it will be maybe the NHS support that person gets or the social care support that person gets that will be the critical ingredient in whether they get back to work, rather than anything coming from the jobcentre. Why not build it around what we call an ecosystem of support that already exists and better resource that ecosystem to deliver support around employment and make employment one of a number of things that you are looking at?

That also allows you to do much more to look at the kind of quality of work you are supporting people into, the health impact it has on them and also doing things on the labour market side, so policy shaping and building, encouraging and facilitating jobs at a local level that are going to be receptive to supporting that local population of ill and disabled people, so looking at this from all sides. You cannot do that at a distance.



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DWP and the Jobcentre, when you are working inside these local ecosystems, feel very remote and very national and centralised. It does not feel connected. It is not integrated in the same way that these other services are. Our argument is that the only way you can support people who have needs that overlap and are very complex is to take it from all angles and to have something much more co-ordinated and purposely designed to do that rather than pieced together from different national Departments.

Q82 Chair: Do you think the arguments are different for disabled people than for others? Should we leave support for youth unemployment or for general unemployment with the national organisation and separate off support for disabled people? Is that what you would envisage?

Tom Pollard: I would not necessarily frame it around disability. I would frame it around complexity of disadvantage. I know that sounds a bit kind of airy-fairy, but it is about the combination of factors. Someone who is young is obviously not inherently disadvantaged, but someone who is young and poor and faces other disadvantages is a more complex picture.

I would say that DWP does a good job when it is fairly straightforward, someone has fallen out of work and they are going to spend a short time on benefits and move back into work. That is fine and the jobcentre works for people like that. When it is people who have complex needs, whether that is disability, whether that is caring responsibilities or housing issues and all other sorts of other things that make their life more difficult and mean that it is not just about their motivation to move into a job and it is not just about placement into any job, I say other agencies are better placed to do that because they are already dealing with that complexity.

I recognise it is not a tightly defined definition. I would say health and disability is a big group, but there are other aspects of complexity where I would say you should think about who might be best placed to provide support to that person. If they do not trust DWP it is a non-starter. If people in that position do not trust the agency that is supposed to be supporting them, you are not going to make any progress. That is just the reality.

Q83 Chair: I would be interested in the views of the other witnesses. Do you agree that there is potentially quite a strong case for separating off employment support for disabled people and commissioning it locally rather than nationally, or would you be a bit sceptical about the case for doing that?

Ben Baumberg Geiger: Just very quickly to say that I think Tom makes a persuasive case. One way of putting it would be you want an organisational structure that enables person-centred support. One of the ways of doing that is to move things on to a local level. There are obviously various things around the preconditions you need at a local



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level in order to do that successfully, because this is not an easy thing to do.

There are places in the country that do this very well at a local level. I am sure you have heard a lot about Working Well in Greater Manchester and so on. Other local authorities would need more help getting to that point and then they could do it. From the perspective of you are dealing with a person that gets supported from the state at a local level through various different means, at a simple level joining up things around social care and employment support is important for lots of people because people's awareness of where support comes from and what is available does not work in terms of Government silos. It works in terms of their life.

Dr Bryan: Just to add, as I said, there are huge gaps in the disability and huge differences in the disparate employment gap across local areas. A lot of it seems to be connected with local economic conditions. It is not just a support to the individual at the local level, it is developing connections with employers. I guess that may work better at a local level than trying to co-ordinate that nationally.

Chair: Melanie, any comment from you on this?

Professor Jones: No, nothing further.

Q84 **Chair:** That is a very interesting and different model for implementing this. I have one final question for you. You have made the case for a target around disability employment. Where in Government do you think lead responsibility for that should be? Particularly in the light of the discussion we have just had, is DWP the right place for it or should it be somewhere else?

Ben Baumberg Geiger: This is something that Tom touched on at the start and we have not really come back to it, but I think it is important. At a very crude level, the two things that matter for the disability employment gap are moves from people out of work into work and moves from people in work out of work. A lot of our discussion has focused about the latter, but it is clear that—as you heard in your earlier session and in many previous evidence submissions, and Resolution Foundation did a report called “Retention Deficit” a few years ago on disability employment, which focused on this—retention for people with disabilities, either they have pre-existing disabilities or they acquire them while they are in work. That is an incredibly important issue that cannot be understated in the role of making improvements around disability in employment.

Putting it simply, it is much easier to keep somebody in a job they already have, where they have lots of skills for it and they have the connections to an employer and so on and so forth than to find a new job for people. Sometimes people do need a completely different sort of work, but a lot of the time what they need is adjustments and support in the job that they already have.



The reason that it relates to your question is obviously around who should have responsibility for that. I think it is difficult. It is not conventionally DWP's responsibility, although DWP is picking up a lot of the costs for it. You are getting these cross-departmental issues around where regulation or incentives or other policy measures take place and where they have their effects. I know it has come up before. Carol Black mentioned it before in an earlier evidence session.

If you take the Dutch model, for example, where you deliberately get employers to pay for a couple of years in the original reforms and to have responsibility for rehabilitation, you do that as a deliberate measure to get employers really signed up to helping people overcome their barriers as quickly as possible, that was really transformative for them in tackling both the costs in terms of benefit claims, but also the disability in employment rate.

I am sure we would all think that it is not just a matter of localism and joining things up, but it is also a matter of employment policy and retention. Should that be DWP or another Government Department working in concert around it?

Q85 **Chair:** That is the question. Do you have an answer for where you think it ought to be?

Ben Baumberg Geiger: There will be others that understand the politics between different Departments at Westminster better. My feeling from my time at DWP and things I have seen since is that a lot of things come back to arguments with the Treasury. Obviously it would not be the Treasury that has responsibility for this. Wherever it was situated, it would need to be people that were able to successfully have an argument with Treasury about the cost and benefits to various actions.

One thing just to mention in passing, for example, is that England does very badly in comparative terms around disability employment, at least among older people, where I have more trust in the figures. We could do something better. A large part of that would be employment-related policy. DWP has had that at the edges of its responsibility for a little bit, but it has not really worked. What is more important than where it is situated is the amount of power it has in terms of negotiations with the Treasury and No. 10. That is what matters, I think.

Professor Jones: Just to come back on something that Ben mentioned, I agree that it requires a broader-than-DWP focus. It requires co-ordination and effective co-ordination across Government Departments. The thing that we have not perhaps talked about very much in our evidence session, we talked a lot about welfare and what I would think about the supply side, but we have not talked very much about the role of employers. I think the demand side has a critical role to play. It is one that is perhaps not researched as much and it is certainly not something that has had so much policy change, but employers clearly have an important role.



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We have talked a lot about data and support for employers. We understand the complexity around monitoring and measuring disability, but I think that the Government have an important role to play in supporting employers do the same thing. I do not think we know what works on the demand side. A lot of the reason for that is because employers are not measuring and monitoring what is effective within workplaces. The Government have an important role in helping employers do that, providing information and best practice about how they have monitored disability within the workplace and how they calculate their disability pay gap at an organisational level.

We talked this morning about things like Disability Confident and I think public procurement also came up. Without those sorts of hard outcomes at the employer level, it is very difficult for the Government to know what is working in terms of Disability Confident and therefore make proactive change on the demand side.

Chair: Thank you. Mark or Tom, anything to add to that?

Tom Pollard: Just to say that I think it has to be cross-governmental to be meaningful for two reasons. First, because so many Departments' activity will touch on the things that will influence the disability employment gap, whether that is the health support people get, whether it is the social care people get, whether it is education and skills, people moving from being children into being young adults and people who have disabilities and how that all pans out.

I think it has to be cross-governmental to make sense, but it would also be good to make it more cross-governmental so that it is not so seen through the lens of DWP. So often when Government stuff comes out about disability it ends up being about disability benefits. Perpetually that is the lens through which this group is seen. I think when we shift away to thinking about a much broader, more comprehensive complex strategy for addressing the disability employment gap and stop seeing it as just a thing about moving people off benefits into work, it is much more likely to be successful.

Chair: Thank you all very much indeed. This has been an interesting and helpful session with lots of good ideas and helpful perspectives in it. Our time is up so I will close the meeting. If there are any further thoughts that any of you have following the discussion—and Ben mentioned a point earlier—do email them through. That would be very valuable to us as we reflect on this over the next few weeks. Thank you to everyone who has taken part. I will now close the meeting.