

# Engagement events summary – Public Services Committee inquiry into the transition from education to employment for young disabled people

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## 5 Introduction

This document summarises the engagement events the Public Services Committee undertook as part of the Committee's inquiry into the transition from education to employment for young disabled people. There were three sets of events with young disabled people who had experience of the transition from education to employment, both successful and unsuccessful.

10 Firstly, an event in November 2023 with young disabled people identified by Disability Rights UK, Leonard Cheshire, and the National Children's Bureau. This involved two 'break out groups', each chaired by a Member of the Committee. The summary of this event can be found on pages 2-9.

15 Secondly, a follow up event with the same group of young disabled people in March 2024. This involved two 'break out groups', each chaired by a Member of the Committee. The summaries for these breakout group discussions can be found on pages 10-17.

20 Thirdly a series of events with young disabled people, broadly grouped by type of disability or by geographic area, and one group of parents of young people with learning disabilities, which took place in March 2024. These were identified by a range of organisations, which are listed in their respective summaries, and were coordinated with the support of Claire Bonetree, the Partner Engagement Manager at Family Fund. Each of these events was chaired by a Member of the Committee. These can be found on pages 18-37.

25 The names of attendees have been removed to protect their identities, and attendees have had sight of the summary notes to ensure identifying details are removed and that they reflect the discussions in the events. Each note summarises the key themes emerging from the discussions.

30 We are grateful to the young disabled people and parents who shared their experiences and ideas with us, and the organisations who supported the arrangements of these events.

## Summary of engagement event with young disabled people - 15 November 2023

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### *Background*

5 This event took place with young disabled people with a range of different health conditions and disabilities, who were identified by the following organisations: Disability Rights UK, Leonard Cheshire and the National Children's Bureau.

The attendees who attended this session are, almost by default, engaged with services. Members reflected that this could mean that their experiences and outcomes are unrepresentative.

### 10 *Introduction*

Many participants noted that they were lucky to have had supportive family and a network around them. Had they not had such support they would have felt lost and did not know what they would have done with their lives.

15 The word cloud on the next page included illustrates the emotional experiences of the participants in trying to access employment. One participant, who is autistic and non-speaking, wrote to the Committee: "I am in my final year at college and I am panicked for my future. My fears resonate within my head".

### *Physical accessibility*

20 Attendees noted that physical accessibility was important: it is "fundamental to get the basics right—like ramps; and information available in multiple formats. Universal design."

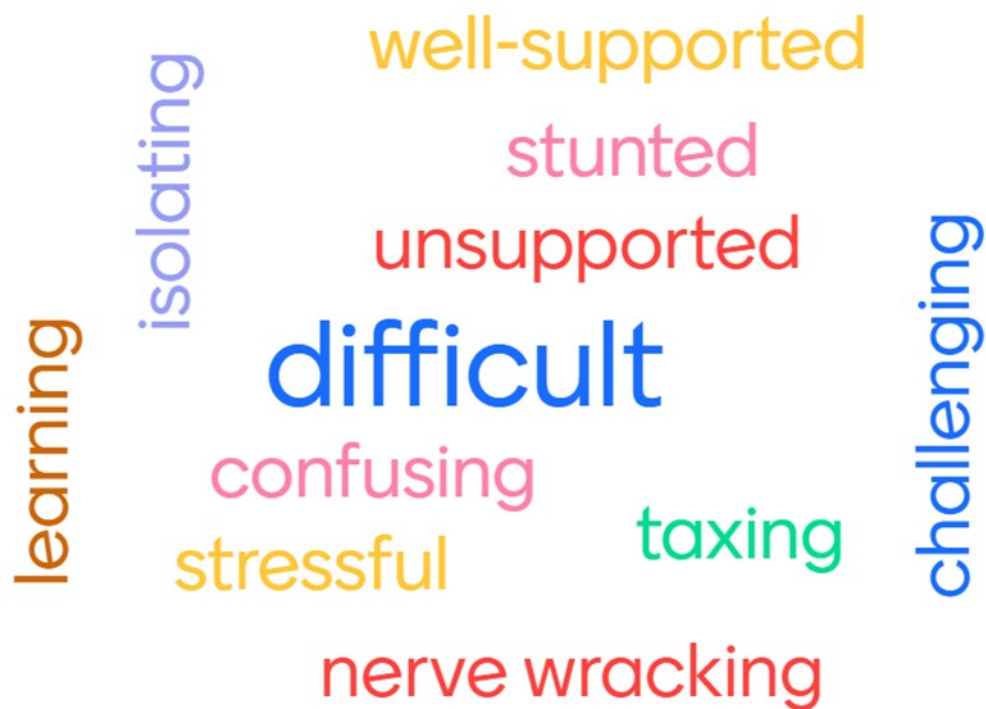
### *Discrimination*

25 The discussion did not explicitly focus on discrimination, but it was raised by attendees several times. One argued that crimes against disabled people should be treated as a hate crime, and that this was not consistently done.

Another thought that there would be likely discrimination from prospective employers—when applying for jobs, she did not declare her disability until interview stage because: "there's always an unconscious bias when you declare your disability."

### *Word cloud*

30 Attendees were asked to submit, via Mentimeter, one word to describe their experience transitioning from education to employment. The below is the result.



### *Diagnosing disability*

Several participants felt that their diagnosis came later than it should have done, with some explaining that they had displayed many symptoms of their conditions which could have been picked up earlier. This was felt to be a particular problem for girls.

There was more than one example of attendees accessing private testing for their condition: this was attributed to a lack of teacher understanding and long NHS waiting lists.

### *Visible/invisible disabilities*

Attendees told us that invisible disabilities made it more difficult to receive assistance. It also made diagnosis more difficult: “as someone with hidden disabilities, I had to go through rigorous screening to prove that I had a disability”.

One attendee had experienced a shift in her life where her disability had initially been invisible but had become visible. She reflected that, “the wheelchair means you’re believed.” However, the presence of the wheelchair had meant that people had assumed that they knew what she would need.

### *Understanding of disability*

Attendees had had poor experiences that arose from a lack of understanding around disabilities.

### *Employer understanding*

- 5 Attendees thought that employers had variable understandings of disability. Some did not know how to help.

Several told us that there was a nervousness among employers of saying the wrong thing, and that they could be uncomfortable discussing the subject. (It was noted that well-intended comments can be discriminatory).

- 10 The mother of one young disabled person said “we are sometimes primitive”, noting that employers did not seem to see the value that disabled people bring to employers as opposed to the costs of any adjustments.

We were told that some employers say they have done a lot of work for their disabled employees. This did not always translate to a good experience. The mother of one

- 15 participant described employers as “naïve”, understanding very little about neurodiversity.

### *Training*

Several attendees thought that there needed to be training for employers to help them understand disabilities. This training needed to be compulsory and meaningful.

- 20 *Understanding in education settings*

Two participants told the Committee that, because they had got good marks, their schools did not seem to believe that they had disabilities. One felt that the pupils who were receiving poorer marks were prioritised over those who had disabilities.

- 25 One participant felt they were labelled as lazy “when I was working twice as hard as other pupils”. There were two separate examples of teachers deliberately giving out disability aids (such as coloured paper or overlays) to the wrong students.

At university, one participant felt that the university did not have a choice but to support them—they had been very flexible and had adjustments in place for them. Another, though, had found the constant work and timetabling of university very difficult.

- 30 One attendee reported that a university disability adviser had focused on what they could not do: “because you have so and so, you cannot do this”. This had been maintained despite the young person citing examples of other similarly disabled people who had been successful in the same circumstances: the adviser was felt to focus more on dissuading them than looking for reasonable adjustments or equipment/technology
- 35 to enable them. In this case a lecturer had had to get involved to rectify the student’s experience.

### *Disability education*

Attendees suggested that, at school, students should be taught British Sign Language and disability history. This would, one thought, help with a “culture change so that disabled people are seen as valuable despite what they can or can’t do.”

### 5 *Careers advice*

University careers services were generally described as helpful for participants. Some included coaching, support teams, and specific courses for disabled students. One attendee noted that assistance with preparing applications for work placements could be improved.

- 10 School career advice was described by one participant as “half and half”. One participant described meeting her school adviser only once over her entire school career. This adviser had discouraged her from pursuing her chosen career. We also heard that careers advisers might not focus on the needs arising from disabilities: “it was not helpful because it only looked at my skills and not my needs”. Similarly, a non-speaking autistic person had been given careers information which did not consider the fact that he was non-speaking.

15 The value of meeting with a career advisor multiple times was emphasised by a participant who had met with them three times: each conversation with their advisor was better than the one before.

- 20 There was a feeling that career advice should continue through the young person’s journey, and that there was too much focus on advice at ages 16 and 18, rather than at other times.

### *Peer support*

- 25 There was strong advocacy for the value of peer support. One participant in particular had had a very good experience with a peer mentor, who had made her experience of apprenticeships easy: the peer mentor had helped her deal with lots of staffing changes in a short time.

### *Work experience*

- 30 One of our participants described work experience as the most useful experience for him. He had gained confidence, and the knowledge to speak with disability advisers and ask more questions.

### *Support from employers*

#### *What makes a good employer?*

Some employers were described as supportive, but most participants had had varying experiences. One participant felt that the experience with an employer depended  
5 heavily on individual line managers.

Some individual employers named as being particularly good for disabled people, including disability organisations and charities: “That is the case with a lot of disabled people, where we end up working in disability because that is often the most inclusive environment for us”.

10 One participant told us of mentoring, disability networks, and scholarships for their chosen career, which had been helpful experiences. However, they had gone through an accessible application process organised by a charity which had assigned them to two firms for possible internships and neither firm had responded to their application.

Attendees thought there was a need to tailor the job to the person, rather than tailoring  
15 the person to the job, focussing instead on the skills that the person can bring.

Attendees felt that there was a need for supporting HR around adjustments, and that more training, with external speakers, should be provided for staff.

#### *A need for reminders*

The Committee were also told that while employers might say they would make  
20 adjustments, that would not always happen. “At work, colleagues will say they’ll do something and then not do it”. This meant that several participants had to keep reminding employers of what they needed. One attendee thought that this was because the adjustments might seem very minor and were therefore easily forgotten.

More than one participant described the experience of handing over a list of disabilities,  
25 or a list of required adjustments. This was not enough. Attendees also noted a difficulty in identifying what adjustments they might need, and that this required time: “How do you learn which adjustments you need?” The point was also made that disabilities can fluctuate or change over time and so adjustments will as well.

#### *Enforcing rights at work*

30 Some attendees proposed an external enforcement body for disabled people’s rights in the workplace. This could include membership from workers and employers. They felt there was nothing like this at the moment, and that it could support individuals to feel confident holding employers accountable if they do not provide enough support; as well as providing support to employers who might not have HR in place.

### *Empowerment*

Attendees thought there was a need for a culture of empowering their disabled staff, “what also needs to change is empowerment, the attitudes that employers have”. One participant felt that people need to be supported to have the courage to speak up.

### 5 *Government support*

Most of this discussion focused on support for people working, or applying to work, as employees. However, the two participants who were self-employed told us that the process of applying for support was much more complicated, and that there was less available, than if they were employees. This was felt to be disappointing, because self-employment could be a good avenue, with great potential for young disabled people to meet their potential.

### *Awareness of available support*

Several participants told us they did not know about the support that is available to them. One participant only learned that there were schemes available in the event.

15 There was limited information about what support was available: “there are services out there that can help but they are not well-advertised.” One participant wished she had been made aware at a younger age: “those key services need highlighting and signposting.”

20 One participant’s mother said, “you don’t find anything unless you’re talking to other parents or people with lived experience”.

### *Availability of support*

One attendee described being denied the funding for the technology that they needed.

25 It was important to have the services prepared for demand, and to ensure that there was the right funding and skills for the services to be able to support those people that come in.

30 One attendee said that the constant fighting for services made it difficult to access a job: “if our health and social care is so limited then we are not going to be able to find a job. If we are stressed about fighting services, then we are not going to be able to find a job”. She said that there was “a huge fight to get these things and even when we get them, they do not always meet our needs”.

### *Local authority support*

35 One family had had a particularly difficult experience trying to access support from the local authority. There had been two years where they had been unable to access anything, and eventually had to instruct a solicitor to access the support they needed. They described local authorities as inflexible, particularly for those who struggle to

communicate. They said also that local authorities were not accountable, and have a high rate of failure when challenges are brought to court. Authorities had given them the wrong information: “the people running things don’t know what they’re doing”.

### *Role of lived experience*

5 There was an agreement that people with lived experience should be on panels making decisions, whether that be on interview boards or in making policy decisions. One participant reported: “The Government needs to listen to people like me. Just because I do not speak does not mean I cannot make a contribution to society. Autistic people like me feel as if we have no value to the workplace and it is hard for us to make a  
10 meaningful contribution unless we are heard.”

It was also important that including people be meaningful: “there are lots of talking shops.”

Attendees reflected that their discussions about the needs of disabled people had continued unchanged: “I can guarantee that a lot of the answers are the same as the  
15 last time you were around a table”.



## Summaries of follow up engagement event with young disabled people, with lived experience of moving from education to employment, March 2024:

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### 5 Breakout group 1

This event was a follow up exercise with the group of young people the Committee met on 15 November 2023, where the Committee discussed inquiry findings and the young people's experiences. The event included splitting the young disabled people and Committee members into two groups, and to capture the distinct discussions the groups had we have created separate notes for each breakout group.

The young disabled people had a range of different health conditions and disabilities, who were identified by the following organisations: Disability Rights UK, Leonard Cheshire and the National Children's Bureau.

#### *Universal design*

15 One participant argued that a 'universal design' approach, where adjustments or support is made available to all pupils, students, or employees, would reduce the burden on disabled people having to push for their own adjustments.

#### *Did education prepare you for the transition to work*

20 Attendees suggested that there is "not really a link that is helpful" between schools and work. Careers information is often not provided in accessible formats. Participants stated careers advice should consider pupils needs not just their abilities, and that it would be useful for young disabled people to understand how learning will benefit their employability. Discussions around careers and work should start early, to help embed positive attitudes around the move into work.

25 Several attendees shared that they had little careers support in school. One attendee told us that teachers and special educational needs coordinators would often contact her saying they did not know how to support disabled young people and argued that support is frequently a tick box exercise.

30 Poor experiences were not universal, with one attendee noting a college where employment for disabled people was a key priority, with careers advice and employment plans running alongside education from year 7. The college also had strong links with local employers.

Participants stressed the importance of having mentors and role models for young disabled people and argued that this should happen "as early as possible" —even at

nursery. Such role models should be diverse in their career paths—young people’s interest will change throughout their time in education.

### *Work experience*

5 Positive experiences of work were seen as key to building confidence in the workplace, and attendees argued that policy to do with work experience in schools needed to be enforced. One attendee suggested that summer schools could be extended to people with disabilities due to the access they provide to work experience.

10 One attendee suggested an agreement be put in place for work placements setting out what the young person will do and what they expect from employers, which would help with culture change by employers.

### *Experiences in university*

15 One attendee noted they had positive experiences at university, including careers counselling, the Disabled Students Allowance, and one-to-one support from someone with their condition who had previously been through the transition from education to work. Careers counselling led to Leonard Cheshire’s Change100 scheme, which included workplace mentoring and an accessible workplace.

However, others highlighted the lack of careers support they had received at university and how this, alongside poor support at school, had knocked their confidence.

### *Challenges in education*

20 Attendees noted low aspirations and negative attitudes in schools. One attendee told us how, at the age of 7, she would amount to nothing if she could not spell and that she knows someone with profound and multiple learning disabilities who was told they would never write but who is now an author.

25 Schools often take a “one size fits all approach”, which does not work for disabled pupils. Participants discussed the fact that disabled people do not always meet the same milestones as non-disabled people at the same stages. One attendee explained that they had been able to support their disabled child using a personal education budget from the local authority, but that this had been reduced by the local authority, forcing the parent to find care and services. Attendees had found themselves unable to access  
30 mainstream or specialist education settings. Responsibility for accessing education and work is placed on the individual or their family. This can mean the young person develops strong specialist knowledge in a single area, which could benefit employers.

35 One participant stated they had been able to attain level 3 education qualifications through one-to-one education, but that this could be challenging, because she was unable to get funding via an Education, Health and Care Plan for level 3 qualifications.

### *Employer attitudes*

Attendees stated the most important recommendations the Committee could make were on the role of employers, as many were not inclusive. People are not taught about disability or disability history as part of the national curriculum, so they should receive training on disability in the workplace. Disability should be recognised as more than a legal status, but as an identity, culture and community—it is the only minority group someone might join at any time.

Participants noted that employers did not always know how to support disabled people in the workplace, for example autistic young people. In some cases, employers provided no support for young disabled people on long-term work placements such as internships, with one attendee saying they were “left to it.” This included large companies, which despite having Equality, Diversity and Inclusion departments did not look at disability issues.

Attendees argued that employers need better training on how to support disabled people. This can be delivered by disabled people—experts by experience. They argued this type of training can be far more effective in changing employer attitudes as employers are often afraid of asking the wrong questions, and training with people with lived experience can address this.

Employers should be incentivised to take on such training. However, employers should not just have a “duty” to include disabled people but should have a positive view of tapping into disabled people's talent.

### *Workplace adjustments*

Attitudes around workplace adjustments need to be changed—in some cases they are seen as a burden on the organisation or something the individual has to fight for. They should, instead, be seen as the means for the employer to get the best out of the person. One improvement would be making it standard for employees to put down their preferred communication styles, which would make it normal for disabled people to do so and a standard part of workplace culture.

Language around “reasonable adjustments” should be changed to “workplace adjustments.” Making adjustments available to everyone would also reduce toxicity in workplaces, with employees complaining they are not receiving adjustments others are.

Attendees argued they had to learn to manage their conditions themselves, and that the onus is on disabled people to state what adjustments are needed. However, it can be difficult to know what to request when in a new workplace, and both employers and employees often lack the knowledge on how to support employees.

### *Role of parents*

Attendees emphasised the key role that parents played in supporting their children, including through finding work opportunities, for example through LinkedIn. However,

parents may be less welcome in the workplace than in education settings, so young disabled people need to be trained to advocate for themselves.

### *Recruitment processes*

- 5 Attendees argued that recruitment processes could be more inclusive and noted that sharing interview questions in advance would help with this.

### *Positive experiences in the workplace*

More positively, one participant shared experiences of employers who had been willing to customise work to meet their needs. They needed additional support, sometimes including a carer, an assistance dog, and a specialist in the relevant work setting.

- 10 Several attendees shared their positive experience of work through Leonard Cheshire's Change 100 scheme, saying it showed them how employers could make adjustments (such as flexible working and working from home).

### *Local authorities*

- 15 One attendee was extremely critical of local authorities, saying they were “toxic” with disabled people being written off. They gave an example of the local authority trying to close an Education, Health and Care Plan before her child reached age 25. Going to the media was the only effective way to address this.

### *Other issues raised*

- 20 Siloes: Participants noted that advice and support was often siloed between services, with support for health and learning disability support being provided by different teams.

Diagnoses: It can be difficult to access advice and support with possible diagnoses.

Managing conditions: Attendees stated it was essential that disabled people learned to manage their own conditions.

- 25 Self-employment and Access to Work: Participants stated that they had gone down the self-employment route, but that it was difficult to get Access to Work funding as a self-employed person. This could affect many people in the arts, or non-traditional work.

## Break-out group 2

This event was a follow up exercise with the group of young people the Committee met on 15 November 2023, where the Committee discussed inquiry findings and the young people's experiences. The event included splitting the young disabled people and Committee members into two groups, and to capture the distinct discussions the groups had we have created separate notes for each breakout group.

The young disabled people had a range of different health conditions and disabilities, who were identified by the following organisations: Disability Rights UK, Leonard Cheshire and the National Children's Bureau.

### 10 *Incentivising employers*

Attendees argued that managers needed to have compulsory training regarding different disabilities. Training should be compulsory, as voluntary training would generally not reach key people but would reach those who do not need it. Employers should also develop relationships with charities to gain expertise on how to support disabled employees, which proves valuable in practice. One participant also suggested that there should be monthly meetings where the disabled person can raise concerns.

Attendees emphasised the value of communications to employers about creating supportive plans for disabled employees. One attendee stated that “[her] manager knew nothing about my condition” and that she was having to advise them on what best practice on supporting her as a disabled employee—a situation which could have been addressed through training for the manager.

Participants noted that there was often high turnover in managers, and that support was often dependent on individual managers—“things fall down when one person leaves.” One attendee noted the value of having a mentor or separate person to get advice from.

Attendees suggested that training would be challenging for small businesses and training would never cover every disability and every aspect of every disability, but argued that disabled people should not be made responsible for educating employers and educators about accessibility everywhere they go.

Regarding employers reporting disability employment levels in their workforce, one participant noted it was hard to know what the right thing to do was, stating monitoring was importing but such reporting “can often make it feel like that is the only reason we have been employed”.

One participant called for funding to be put in place for companies to visit schools and hold workshops with young people, particularly young disabled people. Currently, companies may do so voluntarily but this could be challenging. For example, employees may need to volunteer their time and work additional hours. Such outreach would help inform students’ choices and boost companies’ recruitment and reputation. One attendee stressed the importance of representation in such outreach, arguing young

disabled people significantly benefit from seeing “some like them in a career they are interested in”, saying it is “fundamental to their motivation”.

### *Support in schools*

5 Participants argued that support in schools should be improved, with all lessons being made accessible to people with learning needs rather than schools singling out disabled people. They also noted teachers sometimes made adaptations for the disabled student which singled them out and worsened their learning experience.

10 Resourcing was highlighted as an issue, with one participant noting that specialist exercise books which are easier for dyslexic people to use were available but may have to be bought by students’ families. They argued companies providing such materials should be supported by government grants to offer materials to people in work.

### *Rights education for young people and employers*

15 Improved education in schools on the rights of disabled people in the workplace would be valuable for both disabled and non-disabled pupils as anyone can become disabled. Understanding rights would help disabled people and employers understand what employees are entitled to. Levels of support vary significantly between school, university and work.

20 Attendees noted that language was different in different settings (for example, "SEND" in schools, "disabled" in the workplace), and that people may not be aware of their rights because they do not identify as disabled. Attendees argued that there needed to be clear, simple information about entitlements and how to access them for all people, at all levels, and at every stage of their careers. One attendee argued that school and employer language around disability should be changed to match universities’ approaches, arguing universities had better acceptance of disabled people.

25 They also told us that many are unwilling to disclose their conditions to employers due to concerns they will face discrimination.

### *Careers guidance and advice*

30 Participants noted that careers advice rarely referenced disability, and that there is not enough about adjustments or what support a disabled person might access as part of careers guidance. Participants also noted careers advisers and education staff lacked specialist knowledge about disabilities. One attendee stated her careers adviser did not know she was disabled before their one face to face session took place, and another refused to believe she was had dyslexia due to her A-Level choices.

35 Attendees stated that their careers advice and information had little information about different career paths, and about the routes into different careers they expressed an interest in. In some cases, careers advice was “shocking”, with one attendee saying she was asked to research a career she had no interest in for six weeks. One participant also

stated their careers lead “made some of the most incorrect and unfair comments regarding my dyslexia.”

Several attendees stressed the importance of getting careers advice and support in primary school, before the young person internalises stigma around what people think they can/can’t do based on that stigma. This would help embed aspirations for careers. Early careers advice would also help young people make decisions on GCSE subject options.

Participants questioned schools’ motivations around careers education, saying that schools were only interested in students going to university, studying medicine, or going to Oxford or Cambridge. One attendee stated they knew of schools who would not allow people to attend careers fairs to speak about alternative career paths such as apprenticeships.

One attendee argued that careers education could include “how to spot an inclusive employer”.

#### 15 *Information sharing and awareness*

Participants argued that there is an information sharing gap between education and employment but suggested it should be for the individual disabled person to decide what information was disclosed to employers. One attendee noted that their information was incorrectly shared or had expired when they moved to further education, which meant they had to go through an assessment process.

Attendees called for better signposting to relevant information for all people so that, when a person began showing signs of a disability or health condition, they could easily find information they need. Currently, ‘word of mouth’ is often how people find out about support. They also suggested that channels such as social media would be useful in spreading information effectively, noting that many disabled people connected with each other through social media.

Participants argued that discussions around disabled people’s experiences and challenges they may face were not discussed in school (such as PHSCE lessons), and stated that this should be made compulsory to improve awareness and understanding, and to address stereotypes and common misunderstandings.

#### *Schemes supporting young disabled people*

Participants spoke positively about placement schemes such as Leonard Cheshire’s Change100 scheme, saying it helped cut through recruitment processes which people might not be able to get through. Such schemes let employers ‘try before you buy’, making it easier to bring in disabled people. They called for further funding of such schemes.

Attendees also noted the value of support from small charities, and advice which is personalised to your own condition.

Participants stressed the importance of reaching young disabled people about support schemes while they were in education, as once people leave school and college they can feel or be abandoned.

#### *Government schemes*

- 5 One participant stated Access to Work was “definitely a step in the right direction” but did not address employer misconceptions of disability.

#### *Other issues raised*

Participants noted they faced a cliff edge when leaving university and moving into work, going from having some support to none at all.

- 10 One argued that to “eradicate the stigmas” associated with disability, there should be no obvious difference between disabled and non-disabled learners. However, they noted that they had faced more difficulties and misjudgement from senior staff in education and work than from their peers.

- 15 One attendee argued it should be possible for medication for disabilities to be paid using Disabled Students Allowance, noting that financial support for other inequalities issues (such as taxis for mobility challenges).



## Summaries of engagement events with young disabled people, with lived experience of moving from education to employment, March 2024

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## Scottish Group – 5 March 2024

### *Background*

This event took place with young disabled people identified by the following organisation: the Usual Place.

#### 5 *Did education prepare you for work*

Participants reported a mixed experience of getting careers advice and work experience support in school, with some students in mainstream education getting good quality support while others stated they received poor advice, and that schools “didn’t know what they were doing.” In one case, a young person was told he should do a course  
10 which did not relate to their ambitions/desired career.

Participants who had positive experiences noted that one to one support in school, and support outside of the classroom, had made a significant difference. Several participants stated they would have like more support or supervision from teachers, as their health conditions sometimes meant they lost focus during lessons—they needed someone to  
15 help them keep focused.

### *Seeking work*

Two participants spoke positively about the Kickstart scheme during the pandemic, having previously had negative experiences of seeking work while receiving support from the jobcentre.

20 Attendees also noted that potential employees might be well-meaning but did hold prejudices about disability and work, even if they did not state them.

Participants stated that information was not shared between education providers and first employers, saying they had to “explain everything from scratch”.

### *Positive experiences in the workplace*

25 All participants in this group were in work with The Usual Place, an organisation focused on employing and training disabled people. They spoke very positively about that employer. The employer had provided support, which included being gradually trained up to do a job rather than having been given lots of information at once, getting to practice different skills and learning different jobs with the employer, and receiving  
30 support from a mentor when in work. Several participants shared that succeeding in work had boosted their confidence.

### *What could the Government be doing?*

We heard a mixed picture about the Government’s Access to Work scheme, with some participants reporting it was a “painful” experience with long delays, while others had  
35 received good support.

Poor public transport was highlighted as an issue for many young people in rural areas, both due to limited options / routes, and intimidation on buses. Some roles, particularly in the care sector, require jobseekers to drive, which participants stated was “unfair”.

## Group of young people with visual impairments – 6 March 2024

This event took place with young people with visual impairments, who were identified by the following organisation: Thomas Pocklington Trust.

### *Did education prepare you for work?*

5 We heard a mixed view on this. Some participants had been well supported in school. Students who were in a special school or mainstream schools with specialist departments regarding visual impairments had received good support in education, while those in mainstream school without specialist support had less positive experiences, including the requirements of their Education Health and Care Plans being  
10 ignored.

One participant noted that support was generally provided on the school's terms rather than the pupil's and might be done in an isolating manner—for example printing exams on oversized paper making it very obvious the person was receiving an adjustment (a less obvious adjustment would have been printing the exam with a larger typeface on a  
15 paper.)

Participants were not universally supportive of specialist education, noting that it would give them limited opportunities to mix with other types of people. Some participants argued that in special schools things were “given to you on a plate”, and that when going to university people found suddenly having to self-advocate difficult.

### 20 *Experience of accessing and moving into work*

Participants shared poor experiences of the transition from education to work, describing it as “horrible” and “challenging”, noting negative employer attitudes, and sharing experiences of employers ignoring requests for adjustments during the recruitment process. Employer attitudes were highlighted as an issue, with one  
25 participant saying she felt like “an inconvenience” during an interview due to the way they discussed her visual impairment. Inaccessible recruitment processes—including online processes for graduate schemes—were highlighted.

One participant had a positive experience of beginning work but shared that when she was registered as severely blind, having been in work for 8 months, her employer  
30 became difficult, refusing to allow adjustments or let her use a cane due to health and safety concerns. She eventually quit due to worries she would be fired. Before registration of her visual impairment, she stated she had effectively pretended to be fully sighted.

Participants had a more positive experience of working in the sight loss and charity  
35 sectors—they received clear information ahead of and during the interview, and when starting work they received an inclusive induction.

### *What support was helpful or would have been helpful*

Participants shared that employees wouldn't necessarily know what support would be useful when they were first in work and argued that it can be difficult to judge how much to ask employers for and how far to push the employers regarding these requests. One participant noted that they had applied to Access to Work and never received a response.

Participants stated that when in university they had to self-advocate to get support including career support, and that learning how to phrase requests in a way people would respond to was key. They also had to actively seek out support—the local authority and their university did not signpost to bespoke support.

### *Recommendations for government*

Participants discussed several areas where improvements could be made. They argued that:

Better signposting was key—good support is available from specialist organisations, but awareness of that support is low. When you are diagnosed there is a whirlwind of information, and the disabled person needs to ask the right people the right questions.

Better information for people with visual impairments is needed as people may not be aware of specific types of support or technology/equipment which would help.

More education on independent living skills, and steps to address wider accessibility barriers, such as inaccessible public transport, are needed.

Career support through government services such as jobcentres needs to be more tailored and person centred, not generic. Greater understanding and support is also needed in education, including tailored career support.

Availability and training about assistive technology should be improved and introduced as early as possible—both specialist technology and training about what phones and laptops can already do. This would help people with visual impairments be more independent.

## Group of young people with hearing impairments – 12 March 2024

This event took place with young people with hearing impairments, who were identified by the following organisations: Manchester Deaf Centre.

5 This session demonstrated the importance of thinking through accessible formats for engagement. The session had originally been planned to run on Microsoft Teams, but the participants informed us that, for people who use a British Sign Language interpreter, Zoom is more accessible as both the interpreter and the person who is at that moment speaking would be clearly visible.

10 An interpreter should also only interpret for around twenty minutes at a stretch, to reduce errors creeping in from fatigue, but we were only joined by one interpreter.

### *Overarching experience*

15 Many participants had struggled to find work, and to interact with hearing colleagues. As a result of this, attendees told us that many deaf people prefer to work with other deaf people: one “found it easier to work my way up within a deaf community”. There were also comments about wellbeing and mental health—unemployment can compound these issues.

### *Attitudes*

Attendees reported poor attitudes and discrimination among prospective employers. “Employers have a misconception and automatically have this bad attitude”.

20 Attendees were asked what messages they would like to pass onto employers: “just give us a chance, just allow us to try”; “look at the skill of what people have”; “the only thing we can’t do is hear—that’s the only thing we can’t do.”

### *Advice and support*

25 One attendee described careers advice services as “a bit lazy”. It was noted that advisers could help delve deep into a person’s interests but that did not always happen. One attendee reported being treated as “a lower class of person—like I was never going to achieve anything”. Generally, career advice and support had been worse at schools than colleges. However, this was not universal, at least one person had had a positive experience with a specific teacher for the deaf giving useful advice and support.

### 30 *Work experience*

Several participants had been unable to do work experience in their chosen field. One attendee had never been asked what their interests were, and others were “pushed” towards administration or working with other deaf people against their preferences. Others had been given cleaning roles.

Several participants had been rejected from possible placements (including one that trained service dogs for deaf people). Attendees reported that employers had rejected them on the grounds of possible liability: “constantly deaf people get rejected due to what they say is insurance reasons”, and reported employers stated “we can’t accept you because of health and safety, what if there’s a fire”. Attendees noted that this approach was a misunderstanding and a poor approach: “deaf people don’t pose a high risk at all”.

### *Accessibility at work*

Attendees had had varied experiences with employers. Two attendees noted that employers and colleagues (including in application processes) preferred contact by phone—which they couldn’t use—and that this had been stressful. Some employers had been unwilling to make adjustments such as supplying pagers linked to fire alarms.

### *Access to Work*

Access to Work was appreciated by the attendees, one of whom said that it “pays for everything.” Another said that problems at work “can be gone so quickly just with Access to Work”. This includes interpreting at interviews.

Attendees noted that there was low awareness of the Access to Work scheme among employers: they did not have “awareness or that basic understanding of what is available”. This was noted as improving.

### *Funding for interpreters*

Funding for interpreters is, in some cases, available through Access to Work scheme and the Disabled Students Allowance (the latter provides a personal budget.) However, there is a shortage of interpreters.

Funding is not available for interpreters during work experience placements, which meant that “communication proves to be the biggest barrier”.

Participants told us that it can be difficult to find interpreters at short notice, or indeed for long term. One participant regularly had to attend lectures without an interpreter.

Once established, the use of interpreters through both schemes had been positive for participants.

30

## Group of young people with additional support needs – 12 March 2024

This meeting was with young people with additional support needs, who were identified by the organisation Wigtownshire Stuff.

### *Overarching experience*

- 5 Participants described their experience of careers planning and employment as generally poor. Many were not in work, though they had repeatedly tried to get employment. The Committee were told that Dumfries and Galloway, where the majority of participants were from, had the highest disability employment gap in Scotland.

### *School experience and transition planning*

- 10 Participants had had mixed experiences with school: at least one had had to withdraw as their mental health was suffering. Participants called for “education for the education providers” to increase understanding about how to work with and alongside people with disabilities. One attendee said that a lot of people with additional support needs were “sort of pushed to the side”. A number of participants had, though, had good  
15 experiences with teachers or support workers who had worked with them one on one.

Transition planning from school was described as weak. One participant said: “Unfortunately pretty much [the] universal experience of individuals with ASNs [additional support needs] and their families is terrible around transition.”

- 20 A number of attendees thought that schools were overly focussed on students going to university and didn’t focus on other options or pathways. One attendee felt that schools were “just ticking the box” instead of providing real support—supported by another who said that nobody asked her what she wanted to do, and others who had never had any conversations about what would happen after school. We were told that “young people are failed by education and have a terrible introduction in the adult world”. One  
25 attendee said that everything they had achieved and obtained was “absolutely in spite of the school instead of because of it, unfortunately”, and others called for more one to one support, specific expertise in additional support needs, and transition planning before the age of 16.

- Attendees had found some attitudes from schools very difficult. One parent reported a  
30 headteacher saying that young people should “be in the learning centre because that’s where those young people go...I actually don’t understand why these young people are at school; why do they not stay at primary school.”

At least two participants raised that parents had had to be very proactive to make a plan for employment or college, without which things would have been significantly worse.

- 35 One parent said: “the planning was put in place because myself and my wife pushed for it”, and another had said that parents had to do everything, because the transition plan didn’t mean much.



One participant had had a person-centred plan built around her, which was excellent, but staff had not wanted to read through or engage with the plan. Social workers had been invited to one participant's transition planning meeting but had never attended.

- 5 A comment was raised after the meeting that schools record students' 'positive destinations' after they leave school: the participant was unclear what 'positive destinations' means, particularly for students with additional support needs—"is it a true indicator or just a tick box?"

### *Awareness of support*

- 10 Participants noted that they only knew what support was available by speaking to other families and the organisation "if we'd never have met Joe [who runs Wigtownshire Stuff] we'd never have known".

### *Attitudes*

- 15 Attendees also mentioned a lack of ambition from the young people and their families: there "seems to be a lack of aspiration... families don't want to talk about it and don't want to set their young people up to fail".

A lack of aspiration for young disabled people was mentioned, with the attitude described as: "well, there might be a little bit of time spent at the local day centre".

### *Work experience*

- 20 Work experience and volunteering opportunities were very dependent on what was available locally. Participants shared that most were not "set up to allow that [thought] processing and allow that timing".

We were also told that pupils with additional support needs "are left in school where their fellow pupils are on work placements".

### *Volunteering*

- 25 Attendees also shared that people with disabilities were often accepted into a workplace as a volunteer, but that they do not move to employment in that workplace. This was described as a "rut" and a missed opportunity to create a path to employment.

### *Employers*

- 30 Participants felt that some employers wasted their time by never responding to them. After the event one participant reported being repeatedly asked to meet with an employer after an interview: "I once applied for a job and was led to believe I had got it, as the company really needed to see me before a certain time. During that time, I had taken ill and had to go into hospital. I was receiving emails saying that if I didn't meet them by a certain time, they would have to reconsider, which is fair enough. I was

pleased that I was well enough to meet them, however when I went there, they only wanted to discuss why I was unsuitable for the role, which was incredibly frustrating.”

## Group of young people with mobility impairments – 12 March 2024

This event took place with young disabled people with mobility impairments, who were identified by the following organisations: Whizz Kids, Shine, AFK.

### *Experience of going to university*

5 Attendees stated that there was a lack of support for young disabled people moving from school to university, and that this left young disabled people unprepared for the move to university. They noted that universities did not understand the needs of all disabled people, such as wheelchair users, and could be inaccessible—one solution to this is to not go to universities. Accommodation may be inaccessible, and information  
10 about accessibility of universities can be challenging to find without the individual going there themselves.

While there is guidance for wheelchair users going to university it does not put any duties on universities to be inclusive. Universities varied significantly on how well they responded to requests for further information, with some requiring individuals to jump  
15 through many hoops to get support.

Attendees reported mixed experiences of universities once they were there, with some lecturers and support staff improving their communications and support, while others remained poor. They note that students organising a society for disabled students had helped address this. Barriers to accessibility are not limited to education—disabled  
20 students will also want to access student societies and events and may face challenging to do so.

Attendees noted that classes and lectures might be inaccessible or difficult to get to, and might be cancelled with no notice given, meaning they made a lot of effort to get to the classroom for no reason.

25 Attendees also noted that adjustments at university needed to carry over to the workplace, but that this did not currently happen.

Participants argued that universities should be signing up to the new Disabled Student Commitment which is a call to the higher education sector to make organisations inclusive.

### 30 *How education prepared people for work*

Participants shared that going from A Levels to work is also challenging, as school/college does not prepare you for discussing reasonable adjustments with employers.

35 One attendee was advised that a course he wanted to do (in IT) was full and was told to take a course he did not want to go on, so he could change to his desired course the following year—however that next year he was told the course was already full. He received no support from teachers regarding changing course.

Participants argued that disabled students should be able to identify careers/industries and receive support from teachers and what adaptations might help. They shared that work experience can be challenging to access, and that many people also assume disabled people don't want to go to work.

- 5 Attendees suggested that teachers and other professionals needed better understanding and support regarding making work placements accessible. Accommodations are often not tailored to the individuals' learning needs and are framed as something the student should be grateful for, rather than an entitlement. When adjustments are made, information is not shared so, if someone has multiple  
10 placements or moves around an organisation, they must repeatedly set out what adjustments they need.

### *Experiences applying for work*

- Attendees noted that it was important to have information about roles and flexibility when applying for jobs, with one sharing that in her current role it was made clear what  
15 the working situation would be, how often she would need to be in the office, and what she would be required to do. Employers should also look at how roles could be made to work for disabled candidates.

- By contrast, some attendees had had to trawl through information to find out how accessible jobs were, for example job adverts do not state if the workplace is accessible  
20 for wheelchair users. Attendees argued this should be changed.

Attendees also described facing discrimination when applying for jobs they were qualified for and described inaccessible interviews—such as arriving at interviews to find there was no step-free route into the building or the interview room.

- One attendee told us that she never disclosed her disability before interview because it  
25 was “the only way that I can get a chance”. She noted that line managers tend to respond better when you are a person in front of them. Employers rarely share information or useful feedback on why candidates have not got jobs.

- Changes to recruitment processes—such as recruitment being done online through prerecorded questions—risked greater inaccessibility, but these initiatives are taken up  
30 by the Government and large employers as a way of saving time and cost.

### *Government support schemes*

- One attendee said she had applied to Access to Work once but it was it was “appalling”, with an assessor asking if she had sought faith healing in the Philippines to fix her  
35 problem. Another attendee shared that there were significant waiting times for Access to Work, and a struggle to get support.

Disabled Students Allowance is “hard to miss” but disabled people may not know what specific support would help them.

*What one change would help?*

Attendees highlighted the “lack of informed knowledge” in education and work, saying many universities and organisations say they are totally accessible—but it’s not easy to know if this is true, and such claims are rarely assessed.

- 5 Attendees noted public infrastructure such as pavements could be inaccessible to wheelchair users, with one sharing an example of where it had been unclear where the pavement ended, and they had fallen.

## Group of young people with learning disabilities - 13 March 2024

This event took place with young disabled people with learning disabilities, who were identified by the following organisations: Downs' Syndrome Association UK, Kids.

### *Overarching experience*

- 5 Many participants had struggled to find paid work and apprenticeships and had experienced a cliff-edge in terms of the level of support they received both when moving from school to college and then transitioning from education to employment. Many had also struggled to secure places in residential settings after finishing school.

### *Attitudes*

- 10 Participants reported dismissive and hurtful attitudes from employers and work-experience hosts, including instances where managers had told participants that they were unable to cope with the participant and had sent them away. Participants also reported job applications suddenly halting as soon as prospective employers found out about the applicants' disabilities and of workplaces being unwilling to put in place even  
15 the simplest of reasonable adjustments, such as a chair.

### *Advice and support*

- While there was some variation in the level and extent of support provided to the participants, it was clear that schools generally provided better support than colleges, who in turn provided better support than employers and wider society. It was also very  
20 clear that negative experiences of poor support stayed with the participants and affected their confidence and their willingness to take on challenges—for example, poor support resulting in a failed apprenticeship meant that the participant was nervous about undertaking a subsequent apprenticeship with another employer.

### *Work experience*

- 25 Most participants reported greater success in finding work that was either unpaid or paid a nominal amount. Some had been able to secure work at market rates, but these were generally only for very few hours each week. Participants also recounted instances where employers had intimated that disabled employees were less productive than those without disabilities.
- 30 Some participants had been offered apprenticeships and, in the abstract, these were seen as a good way of helping young people with disabilities into the workforce. However, there is a lack of level 1 apprenticeships, and the apprenticeships available were generally at too high a level.

### *Accessibility at work*

5 Some participants reported excellent support from employers, such as a catering establishment that used pictorial prompts for a participant that was unable to read. Some employers worked closely with education providers to understand and implement the necessary reasonable adjustments the participants needed to succeed. On the other hand, one participant was refused a chair for their work in a kitchen and fainted as a result.

10 Another obstacle reported by the participants was in-job training and the lack of adjustments to make it accessible for those with learning disabilities. Participants reported being assigned lengthy, unsupported, computer-based training, rather than the on-the-job learning, supported by a mentor or buddy, that would enable participants to acquire the skills and knowledge required.

### *WorkFit*

15 Participants with Down's Syndrome were full of praise for the support provided by WorkFit and, in many instances, saw this as the key to their success in finding work and getting the correct support and reasonable adjustments once they were employed.

## Group of parents of young people with disabilities – 13 March 2024

This event took place with the parents of young disabled people with learning disabilities, who were identified by the following organisations: Downs' Syndrome Association UK, Kids.

### 5 *Overarching experience*

Parents' experiences with schools were generally positive—they reported receiving support throughout. However, this all changed once their children started college when support dried up, on the part of both colleges and local authorities. Parents reported poor quality information and a lack of understanding of their children's disabilities and needs.

### *Attitudes*

Parents felt that they had had to fight to get any support for their children and also to be listened to. They also reported a general belief that their children would not be able to work, with one parent saying that they are “gaslit by every professional they come across”. These negative attitudes, particularly when encountered by young people at every stage of their education and transition into the workforce, leads them to believe that this is the case and becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. This was also reinforced by a widespread media narrative that young disabled people are a burden.

In addition, parents felt that most of the work done by employers to support those with disabilities had focused on physical disabilities rather than learning disabilities and that there was a tendency across the board to try to fit people into rigid categories rather than recognising that the needs of disabled young people are individual, and that young disabled people may experience a mixture of physical and learning disabilities.

### *Advice and support*

Parents were generally positive about the support they received from their children's schools—some had also had good experiences with colleges, though this was unusual. But most viewed the level of support from local authorities and employers as inadequate. Some had been told by employers that the employers did not have sufficient support to enable them to feel able to employ and support young people with disabilities.

Parents reported a significant lack of support from local authorities, citing a lack of single points of contact and lengthy periods with no response at all. Those who had moved between local authority areas also reported significant differences in practice and the level of support offered by different local authorities, making it even more difficult to understand and access what support was available. This variation also meant that word-of-mouth support from those with similar issues was of little use as it would only apply to a specific local authority.



### *Work Experience*

The Committee was told that only 4.8 per cent of people with learning disabilities were in paid employment. Parents reported a lack of awareness of schemes such as Disability Confident, Access to Work, and the Down's Syndrome Association's WorkFit. Parents also saw many of the opportunities offered to their children as being little more than box-ticking exercises, making the employer look good without offering any tangible benefit to the young person. Parents felt that employers needed some incentive to engage with this issue and take it seriously and were not hopeful of change in the absence of proper support for employers.

### 10 *Accessibility at work*

Parents were upset by the lack of support and adjustments provided to their children in the workplace. In addition, they felt that there needed to be some kind of document that set out what an employer would specifically need to do for each disabled employee, including any reasonable adjustments and sources of help and support, that would travel with the disabled employee throughout their career.

## Group of young people with autism – 13 March 2024

This event took place with young disabled people with autism, who were identified by the following organisations: Ambitious About Autism.

### *Support in school and university*

- 5 Attendees shared that experience in school was poor, with little useful advice. However, university was much better. This included careers services focused and specialised in a relevant career area, with 1:1 support, which enabled one attendee to apply for roles. One attendee shared they had little support at school or undergraduate education, but that their experience had been better at master's level, due to changing university. They argued that support should be guaranteed, not due to luck.
- 10

### *Careers advice and support in school*

Participants stated they had little or no access to work experience at school and, where there was work experience, it was unhelpful, and the school provided little support.

- Attendees argued it would have been helpful to have someone to talk to about different options, considering the individuals aspirations, when she was 15 or 16. One stated that, because she had little work experience, she now felt pressure to volunteer to get relevant experience, saying “extra work experience would have been invaluable or me at that age.” Participants shared that with the right support in primary and secondary school she would have made quite different choices. Advice on picking A Levels and GCSEs is poor.
- 15
- 20

Information on goals is not transferred with pupils and may not be recorded at all, and disabled students may not be prioritised– “if you’re quite a good student then they don’t bother”. One-to-one support can be invaluable at different stages but is not often in place.

- 25 *Accessing support & would you know where to look?*

Attendees reiterated that it was not possible to get tailored careers support at school, and stated university careers teams did not have specialised knowledge relating to autism.

- There is a plethora of information online, which is not personalised or tailored to different conditions.
- 30

Participants stated that some charities provided very high-quality support, including mentoring and coaching, which would be incredibly useful even if it was only available for short amounts of time.

### *Experience of looking for work*

Participants shared they were unsure whether to disclose their conditions when applying to work, and had been advised not to by other autistic people or by academics. They were also concerned about sharing information about their conditions due to being  
5 told in school that they would “never be able to amount to anything” in school.

One participant stated that she had applied for roles she was overqualified for and disclosed her condition to see if it mattered—she kept being rejected and was told “we don’t employ neurodivergent people”, whereas when she applied without disclosing her condition, she got interviews.

10 Psychometric tests were highlighted as a barrier for neurodivergent people. However, one participant shared that when she highlighted this a third sector employer had taken steps to make the recruitment process more accessible, offering an alternative assessment.

One attendee told us that she had found it hard to get work that wasn’t voluntary work.

### 15 *Experiences in work*

Attendees shared challenges they had faced, with some employers being “horrible”, including not being flexible around a person’s health condition and taking a punitive approach. One attendee noted that some employers had very social work cultures which they struggled to engage with, impacting their work.

20 There were also more positive examples. One attendee highlighted examples of part time work where a supermarket had gone “above and beyond” to support her and had made her feel like part of the team. She had also had positive experiences working in the NHS, due to clear support through occupational health. They had also heard a family member who worked in the NHS talk about working with autistic colleagues which had  
25 made them more comfortable disclosing their condition.

### *What would have helped?*

Participants suggested:

personalised support from an early age;

30 improved awareness of support for disabled people, including among non-disabled people;

one-to-one coaching and mentoring regarding careers would be helpful. Alongside this, improved career support in school, such as a meeting specifically on careers once a term, would be useful;

35 clearer indications about what comes at different stages, and when people can think about work opportunities;

experience of talking to an employer when in secondary school;

supportive and understanding employers;  
informed, specialist advice at university from people who know about disabilities,  
including careers advice; and  
transition planning meetings being scheduled.