

COMMITTEE ON THE AUTISM ACT 2009

NOTE OF COMMITTEE VISIT TO ST THOMAS' HOSPITAL, LONDON BOROUGH OF LAMBETH, 19 MAY 2025

Introduction

On 19 May 2025, a delegation of the House of Lords Committee on the Autism Act 2009 visited St Thomas' Hospital in the London Borough of Lambeth.

The Committee delegation comprised:

- Baroness Rock (Chair)
- Lord Addington
- Lord Crisp

The delegation visited St Thomas' Hospital to hear about the partnership between Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust and CareTrade, a charity founded in 2009 to support autistic people into employment, including through The Autism Project (TAP), a full-time, two-year employability programme for autistic young people aged 18-25 with an Education Health and Care plan (EHCP).

Baroness Rock and the other members of the Committee introduced themselves. Baroness Rock summarised the work of the Committee.

Katherine Dymond, Engagement Officer The Autism Project (TAP) Job Coach at CareTrade, spoke about CareTrade's work with employers through TAP, and her role in providing a link between the Learner and placement host.

Karen Edwards, Chief Executive Officer, CareTrade, said that CareTrade had a strong relationship with the Trust that has changed over time. She noted that attitudes to and understanding of autism had changed in that time, for instance through the Autism Act, changes to approaches to education and the pandemic.

Jacintha M said that she worked at the Trust. Her department had hosted a placement which was supposed to be for six weeks but had in fact lasted for three months. It had been a positive and rewarding experience both for the employer and the Learner.

Judith Kerem, Development Director, CareTrade, said that she had worked for CareTrade for 13 years. She had undertaken lots of work with over 25s and with employers to upskill them to be neuroinclusive and to support people in the workplace in relation to access to work.

George Byford said that he had come through the TAP project as a Learner. He was now a full time employee with the NHS in the portering department. He had worked at the hospital for nine years.

Elliott Ayling said that he had also been a CareTrade client, and they had helped him find a position at the hospital in the dental records departments. He had worked there for 19 years.

Savita Rana, Deputy Director for Inclusion, Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust, said that she welcomed the opportunity to think about equipping the future workforce and providing a pipeline of talent.

Jo Young, Widening Participation Manager, Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust, said that in 2020 the Trust took 6 interns a year. There was now capacity to take 25, working with CareTrade and other partners. They took on autistic Learners and people with a learning disability. She said that CareTrade do so much more than supporting internships. They provide support for managers, training, and promote the Access to Work scheme.

Ciara MacKay, Director of Nursing, Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust, said that she was leading work to develop a Trust strategy. This began as an autism strategy and was now being expanded into a neurodivergence strategy. To its credit, the Trust charity provided funding to appoint a project manager and develop a co-production strategy. This is the first time the Trust has paid patients, carers and families to be committee members. The strategy is now entering stage two.

Harriett Rossouw said that she had previously worked at Royal Brompton Hospital for ten years and had recently joined Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust as the Project Manager for its autism and neurodivergence strategy. She said that she is neurodivergent and co-chair of the staff neurodiversity network.

Hilary Fertig said that she is Executive Manager of Employment Autism, a separate charity which was taken on by CareTrade.

Baroness Rock asked how TAP works in practice at the Trust, and how the knowledge and experience of the project could be rolled out more widely among other employers in both the public and private sectors.

Jo Young said that her role is Trust-wide. The Trust has a Memorandum of Understanding with CareTrade. However, because CareTrade has been working with the Trust for so long they know who to speak to in order to get things done. They have free rein to source placements in dialogue with Trust managers. There are struggles. This work is not the Trust's primary focus—it is a health care organisation, and during times of backlogs or emergencies like the pandemic managers will focus on their primary purpose. There is therefore always that challenge of keeping the work with CareTrade and other partners at the forefront of managers' attention. When they engage with TAP, managers realise that the interns are not a burden but rather a very useful free extra pair of hands. Then they are converted to come back year after year to host an intern. The Trust employs 25,000 people and the aim is to chip away manager by manager to debunk myths, and to show that autistic people are no easier or harder to manage than anyone else. People like Katherine Dymond provide a bridge to get the relationship going.

Lord Crisp asked what the conversion rate is for TAP Learners in terms of gaining employment in the Trust or elsewhere.

Jo Young said that TAP Learners usually get paid employment subsequently if there is a vacancy in the department but it can be a challenge if they have to go back into a recruitment pool. They are doing a lot of work with managers on recruitment adjustments.

Judith Kerem said that 22 TAP Learners had moved into paid employment at the Trust over the past 13 years. Others had gained employment in other NHS trusts or in other jobs. Some young people go back into education or are not quite ready for work. There is an alumni job club for people not quite ready to go into work.

Karen Edwards said that the difficulty is in banding of jobs and finding the right match. It is different with each employer. CareTrade place quite a lot of Learners with other organisations.

Katherine Dymond said that Learners develop transferable skills. TAP is a two-year project. The Trust is a good option for people with less experience because of the variety of potential roles. Learners can try administrative office-based roles and physical roles like portering and get an idea of what they like and don't like. In the final year it is more like a supported internship with a focus on roles the Learner may want to go into in the future. If someone prefers an administrative role then they may go and work with another local employer in the local area in the second year. Katherine said that she looks around the local area to find organisations that would be a good fit and then works with them on training. This can be used as a work trial as opposed to a work placement—it provides an opportunity to volunteer and demonstrate skills, which may then lead into a paid job. That has happened on several occasions.

Karen Edwards gave examples of working with the hospitality, retail and transport sectors.

Baroness Rock asked how CareTrade identify employers who are willing to use the supported internship model, and how they get employers to be excited about these opportunities.

Karen Edwards said that this was why working with the Trust is such a strength—there are lots of opportunities in one large organisation. The capacity can vary widely depending on the employer.

Savita Rana said that there was the potential to scale up TAP with NHS trusts across South East London. It is about showing employers what the future workforce will look like in terms of diversity and inclusion. There was a case for a consistent approach across the NHS, beginning in South East London and then applying more widely across the country using the NHS as an anchor organisation. They want to scale it up. Data shows that such initiatives are crucial in terms of the future workforce and delivering a pipeline of employees from schools and universities. The NHS has recruitment criteria in terms of education qualifications. That needs to be reviewed and the NHS needs to look at that. No-one is questioning the appropriateness of entry level requirements.

Jo Young said that they are working with the recruitment team around the concept of transferable skills in recruitment, for instance considering work in retail in relation to numeracy. It is about ensuring managers understand that when they are shortlisting. They are undertaking a piece of work around knowing what 'or equivalent' means in a recruitment exercise.

Hilary Fertig said that it is not about getting round the recruitment process but rather having one that is flexible enough.

Elliott Ayling said that the NHS is very flexible in terms of how the internship system works. Other employers may be more fearful or hesitant to take on someone who is different.

Judith Kerem said that it is key to have flexibility. It works at the Trust because CareTrade is embedded in the system. When the Trust is thinking about recruitment adjustments CareTrade will get a phone call. Judith has advised the Trust around making recruitment adjustments. The Trust is open to this because they recognise the value of taking on neurodivergent staff. There needs to be a holistic approach with buy-in and resources from the organisation. The best thing to do is ask, but you need to know who to ask or have someone to ask. There is a strong support network in the Trust.

Savita Rana said that the Trust could not have achieved what they have without CareTrade.

Harriett Rossouw said that CareTrade are approached by a lot of individuals looking for employment. They are also approached by employers who want to employ autistic people and take advantage of their neurodivergent abilities. CareTrade is the thread between them.

Judith Kerem said that there is a lot of trust between the hospital and CareTrade. CareTrade also works with a hospital in North London and other trusts have similar set-ups. It is about the information and the knowledge—telling people that CareTrade are there.

Elliott Ayling said that CareTrade are trying to educate employers so they understand about autism. Autism is an obscure, hidden disability. It is a spectrum condition and people have different levels of need.

Jo Young said that the Trust was commendably forward thinking. Her role doesn't exist in every trust, although Bart's also has a dedicated team. In other trusts the tasks that Jo undertakes may be added on to existing posts. A trust needs to recognise its role as an anchor organisation, creating resource. There is a lack of understanding among parents of school-aged children that supported internships are a route. They will look at college routes, but supported internships are not well known. There would be a huge demand if they were known about, but as it is there is not so much demand for them. We need to ensure communities know it is an option available to them.

George Byford said that he went straight from sixth form into the CareTrade project. At the start, it was nerve-wracking. He said that he has learned over the years not to worry too much. At the start, he was worrying that he had upset people. It took him a long time to realise that he could come and do his job and didn't have to get to know everybody. That has helped him to

understand who he is. George said he also has a strong network of friends who love him for who he is. On the second placement at CareTrade, he worked with one person who showed him all the ropes, and another who subsequently became a good friend.

Judith Keren said that the model CareTrade use teaches resilience. George's confidence came from his own determination and because he was embedded in the workplace. It is about future-proofing the support and giving Learners the opportunity to practice these things.

Jo Young said that not every placement works out at the beginning. CareTrade can recognise when something is not working and switch the Learner to another placement.

Lord Crisp asked about the sustainability and resourcing of the model, and whether all employers can do this.

Jo Young said not every trust has a partnership like this. She said that CareTrade is a small organisation.

Judith Kerem said that TAP is funded through education – all Learners have an EHCP. That is great but it is also a barrier. They are grant funded for work with over 25s. Supported employment should not stop at 25.

Karen Edwards said that CareTrade receive charitable grant funding. That is really important. The benefit of TAP is that it lasts for two years whereas a typical internship lasts a year. There is a focus on education in the first year and longer exposure to the workplace. DWP Access to Work funding is also available, providing continuity with training offered to employers. Many organisations do supported internships.

Savita Rana said that there should be a focus on sustainability and scalability. Wraparound support is so fundamental at the moment, and expansion would present a risk. There is a need to consider education, awareness and cultural barriers. We have moved forward with awareness of mental health and we are still at the beginning of the journey in relation to autism, and considering sustainability and scalability. There are some conversations going on. They would welcome a dialogue about how the Trust's model and Jo Young's role can be used elsewhere to scale up and educate others.

Judith Kerem talked about the knock-on benefits. People who get a job will need less access to Access to Work support because of the skills they have learned. They are a phone call away to anyone who needs them for support.

Dylan joined the meeting. He is in his final year as a TAP Learner and is part of the bank staff for the portering team. In his previous placement at Royal Brompton he worked with the stores team. He applied for bank work at St Thomas' and was successful, starting a few months ago. He said that he is enjoying the work.

Ciara MacKay said that in the first phase of the Trust's autism and neurodivergence strategy they engaged with 200 members of the public, including patients, carers and family members. They

stressed the Trust's responsibility to employ autistic and neurodivergent people and also to help manage employees' health conditions to enable them to attend work. There is scope to apply the things they have learned across the country, including through the Job Centre network.

Baroness Rock asked what recommendations the Committee should make to the Government.

George Byford stressed the importance of facilitating the work of organisations such as CareTrade in working with businesses to try to get more people with different disabilities and situations into a workplace that they can enjoy.

Harriett Rossouw said that it is important to stress to employers that if you are going to employ someone who is neurodivergent, autistic and/or has a learning disability, it is an investment but you get a return. Neurodivergent people are representative of the community, which is particularly important in the healthcare sector. If you can see yourself in the workforce you will engage more. That is an investment and a return.

Karen Edwards stressed the importance of changes to make for smoother avenues into work. If 50–60% of autistic people go into work, you still have 40–50% who don't. Many are ready for work but if you don't make that journey into the workforce in a certain period of time you start to de-skill. CareTrade do work to give people confidence, and that is key. Young people come to CareTrade and don't realise they already have the skills they need. One interesting area to explore is supported apprenticeships. These provide a longer period of support but in work, enabling people to move from unpaid work experience into a stronger, paid support structure.

Savita Rana said that thought needed to be given to making apprenticeships accessible.

Judith Kerem said that it is important to make employers aware that you can adapt or extend traditional apprenticeships.

Baroness Rock asked what the barriers to this are.

Jo Young said that it is the same as employment. She gets told that employment law says every job must be advertised, and employers wrongly think the Equality Act means people need to be treated exactly the same. Apprenticeships should be ringfenced. There is a need to break through misunderstandings of employment law and show employers that they won't be taken to a tribunal.

Savita Rana stressed the importance of developing skills for the future, such as cyber-skills. People with neurodivergent conditions often have the best skill sets. There is a need to look at different routes for developing these skills, for instance through apprenticeships.

Hilary Fertig said that there is a cohort of people stuck in their bedrooms. So many people say they have given up when they are unsuccessful in applying for hundreds of jobs. Parents ask how that can be changed.

Jo Young said that the key is finding a way to make an individual known to the organisation so that managers know how good they are. Managers will find a way to make adjustments for someone who is known to them, but won't always make those adjustments for someone they don't know.

Karen Edwards said that some neurodivergent people may appear over-qualified for an apprenticeship (for instance if they entered university), but that may be exactly what they need.

Judith Kerem said that people in their bedrooms may have skills around tech and gaming, for example. There is not enough joined-up thinking. CareTrade get referrals from job centres. They have built relationships with local job centres and get emails from a wide variety of organisations, but they have invested in developing these relationships: they do not exist organically.

Savita Rana said that she had an issue with unpaid employment. Why shouldn't they pay people to work? These are colleagues supporting their organisations. Paid employment has to be the way forward. It empowers people in a different way by providing a sense of worth.

Jo Young said that there is a problem in the way that jobs are designed. She gave an example of inflexibility in the domestic team to meet the requirements of a potential employee. She said that jobs are designed around how we envisage they have to be rather than around the individuals who might do them.

Judith Kerem said that there is a need to scrutinise traditional jobs and see if they are fit for purpose.

Lord Crisp asked about how to transition from policy into practice.

Harriett Rossouw said that the discussion had been about chipping away one manager at a time. That is a very slow way but it is the only way you can do it. It is about hearts and minds. To scale up, a way needs to be found to engage with multiple managers at a time. A way needs to be found to change people's fundamental views, using a carrot approach as much as a stick.

Savita Rana said that it is about holding employers to account as well as educating them.

Lord Addington asked if they have quantified the benefits to the Trust of the TAP project and such internship models.

Jo Young said that they talk about this but haven't written it down. Because every autistic person is different it is difficult to generalise. However you can look at the people the Trust have employed and see how reliable they are in terms of longevity and a low absence record, for example.

Savita Rana said that there was a case to do some modelling on this.

Harriett Rossouw gave the example of a neurodivergent person who put on their records not to be taken to A&E because of sensory overload. But if they saw someone who they could identify with and who would look after them, would that enable them to see healthcare in a more positive way?

Savita Rana asked if the Committee have spoken to any large employers who are not following best practice.

Baroness Rock said that the Committee is looking at autism policy and why it is not being implemented.

Jo Young said that the education sector leaves a lot to be desired. Autistic people and others are coming out of the education system broken.

Lord Addington asked how good the nursing profession is at employing autistic people.

Ciara MacKay said that nurses are recruited having trained at universities, so they are dependent on what qualifications universities require. However, there are also associate and apprenticeship role opportunities. There is an openness to look at this but it is not a focused piece of work on autism, but rather the broader neurodivergence strategy. She said that they should be challenging themselves on this.

Jo Young said that they now have interns in clinical roles but not nursing. She would love to see an intern on every ward.

Harriett Rossouw said that the neurodiversity staff network is looking at neurodiversity within the nursing and midwifery cohort. Many autistic people also had other conditions such as ADHD. She praised the work of Autistic Doctors International.

Jo Young stressed that trusts are beholden to universities and who they recruit to their courses.

Judith Kerem said that one of the benefits of CareTrade's work with the Trust is that it becomes embedded. Five years ago TAP Learners had not taken on clinical roles in their internship, but that is now happening more and more.

Jo Young said that they are just about to launch a new declaration campaign to get data on neurodivergence among employees.

Harriett Rossouw said it is about creating a safe space to declare.

Karen Edwards said that the neurodiversity movement has helped with this. People didn't know what autism was but people have an understanding that neurodivergence means that someone will think differently. This helps employers be less anxious.

Elliott Ayling said that there was still a huge degree of uncertainty around autism and what people need in terms of support. It's not right for the Government to tell someone that

because they have a job they don't need any support and their benefits can be cut. People get forgotten about.

Baroness Rock thanked all participants for their contribution and closed the meeting.