

Written evidence submitted by Sense (RJ0094)

About Sense

Sense is a national disability charity supporting disabled people with complex needs, including those who are deafblind. We offer a range of support services including specialist social care, specialist colleges and support to help disabled people find work. We believe that every disabled person should have the opportunity to connect with others and be included in the world. We use our knowledge and expertise to deliver personalised, creative and flexible support at every stage of life, no matter how complex someone's needs.

As part of the range of services we offer, we run employment support services at our services in Birmingham and Loughborough. These services provide advice on welfare and benefits, employability skills workshops, assistance with applications and support learning about accessible technology. We would welcome a visit from the Work and Pensions Committee as part of its evidence gathering for this inquiry. Our disability jobs fair on 16 May 2025 in Birmingham could be a particularly useful event for the Committee to attend.

Recommendations

As it develops the new Jobs and Career Service, the Department for Work and Pensions should:

- Work with disabled people to make sure that Work Coaches and Disability Employment Advisors understand the barriers to employment faced by disabled jobseekers and employees. This should include disabled people with complex needs who face the greatest barriers to employment.
- Make sure that all jobcentres are equipped with specialist assistive technology.

N.B. More information about our research on assistive technology in jobcentres can be found [here](#).

Key statistics

Sense research has found that:

- 41% of disabled people with complex needs on benefits did not feel that the welfare system enabled them to move towards paid employment. ¹
- 42% of disabled people with complex needs on benefits said that the welfare system did not offer them access to specialist careers advice tailored to their needs as a disabled person. ²
- 54% of disabled jobseekers with complex needs did not feel supported by Work Coaches. ³
- 46% of disabled jobseekers with complex needs did not feel supported by Disability Employment Advisors. ⁴
- 35% of disabled jobseekers with complex needs said they would be better supported in their work search if jobcentre staff were more aware of the unique barriers they faced. ⁵

Response to questions

The purpose of Jobcentre Plus

Are the aims and purpose of Jobcentre Plus (JCP) sufficiently ambitious?
How effectively is it meeting its aims?

Jobcentres should be places where disabled jobseekers can access the support and equipment they need to overcome the barriers to work they face.

But, as a provider of specialist support for disabled jobseekers, we often find that people use our services because jobcentres have failed to meet their needs as disabled people.

One person with complex needs we supported, for example, described her last visit to a jobcentre as a ‘disgrace’, as the Work Coach did not accept that she wanted to look for work, instead insisting she go back into education. After being supported by our employment service, however, she was able to enter work for the first time in her life. This is typical of many of the disabled people we support, who find that jobcentre staff often do

¹ Sense polling of 1000 people with complex disabilities in receipt of benefits conducted by Censuswide between 24 May and 30 May 2024

² Ibid.

³ Research on the employment support available to people with complex disabilities, Sense (2023), <https://www.sense.org.uk/information-and-advice/for-professionals/policy-public-affairs-and-research/employment-support-for-people-with-complex-disabilities/full-research-report/#key-findings>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Research on the employment support available to people with complex disabilities, Sense (2023), <https://www.sense.org.uk/information-and-advice/for-professionals/policy-public-affairs-and-research/employment-support-for-people-with-complex-disabilities/full-research-report/#key-findings>

not understand the barriers to work they face, or the support available to help them overcome them.

This is backed up by our research into the experiences of disabled jobseekers, which found that 41% of disabled people with complex needs on benefits did not feel that the welfare system enabled them to move towards paid employment. ⁶

Previous polling of disabled jobseekers with complex needs also found that:

- 54% did not feel supported by Work Coaches.
- 46% did not feel supported by Disability Employment Advisors.
- 35% would be better supported in their work search if jobcentre staff were more aware of the unique barriers they faced. ⁷

These findings suggest that jobcentres are not effective at offering the right support to disabled jobseekers.

To what extent does JCP have an “image problem”? How might this be addressed?

Jobcentres, like the rest of the benefits system and the Department for Work and Pensions as a whole, are not viewed positively by many disabled people.

Disabled people often have an antagonistic relationship with the benefits system, with 58% of disabled benefit claimants with complex needs who've been through a benefits assessment saying that they felt humiliated beforehand. ⁸ While jobcentres are distinct from assessment services, both are part of the wider benefits system, meaning that a disabled person's experience of jobcentres might have a negative impact on their interaction with jobcentres. The process of addressing this image problem should therefore be put in the context of addressing the image problem of the benefits system and the wider benefits system.

⁶ Sense polling of 1000 people with complex disabilities in receipt of benefits conducted by Censuswide between 24 May and 30 May 2024

⁷ Research on the employment support available to people with complex disabilities, Sense (2023), <https://www.sense.org.uk/information-and-advice/for-professionals/policy-public-affairs-and-research/employment-support-for-people-with-complex-disabilities/full-research-report/#key-findings>

⁸ 'Putting disabled people at the heart of the benefits system', Sense (2024), <https://www.sense.org.uk/about-us/policy-public-affairs-and-research/putting-disabled-people-at-the-heart-of-the-benefits-system/>

Sense research shows that many disabled people do not feel that jobcentres, and the benefits system as a whole, offer them the support they need to overcome the barriers to employment they face.

In our polling, we asked disabled people with complex needs on benefits what support they felt the benefits system offered them. The results consistently showed that more disabled people felt that the benefits system did not offer that support than those who said it did. We found that:

- Over 40% said that the benefits system did not support them to find employment opportunities that meet their needs as disabled people – compared to 36% who said it did.
- 42% said the benefits system did not offer them support to develop the skills they need to prepare for work in the future, compared to 38% who said it did.
- Similarly, 42% said that the benefits system did not offer them access to specialist careers advice tailored to their needs as a disabled person, compared to 38% who said it did.⁹

As highlighted above, previous Sense research has found that disabled jobseekers with complex needs do not feel supported by jobcentre staff.

Of disabled jobseekers with complex needs, we found that:

- 54% did not feel supported by Work Coaches.
- 46% did not feel supported by Disability Employment Advisors.
- 48% did not feel supported by jobcentre staff who are not Work Coaches or Disability Employment Advisors.¹⁰

With our research showing consistently that around of disabled jobseekers with complex needs feeling unsupported by key jobcentre staff, it is clear that jobcentres do have an image problem. As we will discuss in more detail below, improving the training available to jobcentre staff will need to be a key part of addressing this image problem.

⁹ Sense polling of 1000 disabled people with complex needs in receipt of benefits conducted by Censuswide between 24 May and 30 May 2024

¹⁰ Research on the employment support available to people with complex disabilities, Sense (2023), <https://www.sense.org.uk/information-and-advice/for-professionals/policy-public-affairs-and-research/employment-support-for-people-with-complex-disabilities/full-research-report/#key-findings>

What should be the role of JCP in getting those who have been out of the workforce in the long-term ready to begin a journey into work?

Disabled people, and particularly disabled people with complex needs, who have been out of the workforce in the long-term are likely to need specialist support that addresses the specific barriers to employment they face. While jobcentres should look to provide this support, they should also work in partnership with local third-party organisations with expertise in helping disabled people into work, such as Sense.

The experience in Jobcentre Plus

How effective is the support provided by Work Coaches, particularly to groups that experience disadvantages or particular challenges in the labour market (e.g. young people, disabled people, older workers)?

Sense's research into the experience of disabled jobseekers has found that disabled people often do not feel that Work Coaches can help them to overcome the barriers to employment they face as disabled people. Our polling found that 54% of disabled jobseekers with complex needs, for example, did not feel supported by Work Coaches.¹¹

Disabled people's experience of being supported by Work Coaches

Our interviews with disabled jobseekers found that there are a range of reasons why they do not feel supported by Work Coaches. Some people told us that Work Coaches did not take the time to listen to disabled people's own aspirations for work, with one disabled person with complex needs saying that the Work Coach "didn't listen to what [they] wanted and [told me] to go back [into] education which I didn't want to do." They preferred to attend Sense's specialist employment service, who were able to help them into work for the first time in their life.

It was also common for people to tell us that jobcentre staff, though supportive and well-intentioned, did not always have the expertise needed to support them.

One person with autism and learning difficulties we spoke to said that Work Coaches could not help her with queries about Access to Work. As a result, the person was anxious about

¹¹ Research on the employment support available to people with complex disabilities, Sense (2023), <https://www.sense.org.uk/information-and-advice/for-professionals/policy-public-affairs-and-research/employment-support-for-people-with-complex-disabilities/full-research-report/#key-findings>

the level of support they would be eligible for upon entering employment. She also felt that having this knowledge would mean that she would be better at answering interview questions about the support she would need.

The initial training received by Work Coaches

Our research leads us to conclude that this lack of awareness is not simply the result of individual Work Coaches' gaps in knowledge, but the consequence of a training that fails to adequately prepare them to support disabled jobseekers.

Working with MPs, Sense has used written questions to examine the initial training given to Work Coaches.¹² Based on the responses we received in 2023, we have confirmed that Work Coaches do not go through specific training on supporting disabled jobseekers.

The only disability equality training they receive is through is a module on 'Becoming Disability Confident', which focuses on interactions with disabled colleagues, rather than jobseekers.¹³

Though important, this 'Becoming Disability Confident' module is not a substitute for training in the specific challenges faced by disabled jobseekers, and how to support them.

The only specific module on disability employment seems to be 'the Health Adjustment Passport', which is a form that can be used to support people to identify what help and changes are available to help them move into work. While the Health Adjustment Passport is important, it is only one small part of a disabled jobseeker's search for work. It is vital that information like this is placed in the wider context of the barriers disabled people face while looking for work and staying in employment, but our research found no evidence that this was the case.

While there are modules that will cover some aspects of disability, such as 'Complex needs' and 'Health', these topics are broad, with the definition of 'complex needs' potentially covering social factors such as addiction. It seems unlikely, therefore, that this training would be able to cover in enough detail the specific barriers to employment faced by disabled jobseekers and employees, and the support needed to overcome them.

¹² <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2023-01-06/117414>

¹³ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2023-01-09/118801>

It is true that Work Coaches can refer disabled jobseekers to Disability Employment Advisors, who do receive specialist training in disability employment. But Work Coaches remain the primary point of contact for disabled jobseekers at jobcentres, and so it is vital they understand the barriers to employment faced by disabled people. Without this understanding, it is less likely that disabled jobseekers will be able to access the specialist support they need to enter and stay in work.

Disability Employment Advisors

When disabled jobseekers are referred to Disability Employment Advisors, they do not always receive the specialist support they need, with 46% of jobseekers with complex needs said that they did not feel supported by them.¹⁴

One deafblind person we support said that there was only one Disability Employment Advisor at the jobcentre, and that they were never there. Even after meeting with the Disability Employment Advisor, she found that they did not seem to have listened to her, recommending 'random' jobs that she would not be able to do, such as being a hairdresser. She eventually disengaged completely from the jobcentre, coming to the conclusion that 'no one wants to listen to the fact I wanted a job and I would just have accept it'.

While Disability Employment Advisors do receive training that covers disability employment, the training guide released by the Department for Work and Pensions in response to a written question in 2022 showed that there were clear gaps in this training.¹⁵ They do not, for example, receive any specific training on assistive technology, which many disabled people need to do their jobs effectively.

Although they receive training in 'assistive digital', this seems to focus on digital exclusion rather than assistive technology. It is true that disabled people are disproportionately likely to be digitally excluded, but training on digital exclusion should not replace training in assistive technology.

This reflects our informal conversations with Disability Employment Advisors, some of whom were not aware of assistive technology such as screen readers.

¹⁴ Research on the employment support available to people with complex disabilities, Sense (2023), <https://www.sense.org.uk/information-and-advice/for-professionals/policy-public-affairs-and-research/employment-support-for-people-with-complex-disabilities/full-research-report/#key-findings>

¹⁵ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-09-06/48251>

Improving the support offered by Work Coaches and Disability Employment Advisors

Disabled jobseekers themselves want Work Coaches to be more aware of the barriers to employment they face. In our polling, 35% of disabled jobseekers with complex needs said they would be better supported in their work search if jobcentre staff were more aware of the unique barriers they faced.¹⁶

As the Department for Work and Pensions begins the process of developing the new Jobs and Career Service, it should work with disabled people to make sure that Work Coaches and Disability Employment Advisors understand the barriers to employment faced by disabled jobseekers and employees. This should include disabled people with the most complex needs and the greatest barriers to employment.

What opportunities exist for digital and AI-tools to improve JCP?

Provision of assistive technology in jobcentres

Many disabled people with complex needs need specialist assistive technology to use a computer. This can include speech-to-text software, screen readers and large print keyboards.

Some types of assistive technology are too expensive for an individual to own themselves. An individual licence for JAWS, a leading screen reader, for example, can cost over £700.¹⁷

While disabled people in employment can use funding from Access to Work to cover these costs, this option is not available jobseekers who need assistive technology to apply for jobs.

Jobseekers can use the computers in jobcentres to apply for jobs. However, the Department for Work and Pensions have confirmed to us that none of these computers have been installed with specialist assistive technology at any jobcentre in Great Britain.

Although these computers come with 'standard accessibility features', these do not offer the support disabled people need. For example, standard screen magnification leads to

¹⁶ Research on the employment support available to people with complex disabilities, Sense (2023), <https://www.sense.org.uk/information-and-advice/for-professionals/policy-public-affairs-and-research/employment-support-for-people-with-complex-disabilities/full-research-report/#key-findings>

¹⁷ <https://www.sightandsound.co.uk/product/jaws-home/>

pixelation, making it more difficult for people with visual impairments to use. Specialist screen magnification software, in contrast, corrects this pixelation, making it better suited for people with visual impairments.

Informal discussions with Disability Employment Advisors suggest that some jobcentres instead signpost disabled jobseekers to third-party employment services, such as those run by Sense.

Not every area will have third-party services offering the use of assistive technology. And while those that do have assistive technology are likely to have the expertise to help disabled people find work, these services often have limited resources. It is not realistic for the Department for Work and Pensions to rely on third-party employment services to provide jobseekers with access to assistive technology when it could be providing it itself.

As well as potentially easing the pressure on third-party specialist employment services, equipping jobcentres with assistive technology would make it easier for disabled people to find and apply for jobs, increasing their likelihood of entering employment.

There are some positive signs that the Government is considering introducing assistive technology in jobcentres. The Get Britain Working White Paper committed to exploring how 'assistive technology could aid the accessibility and inclusiveness' of the new Jobs and Careers Service'.¹⁸ On 3 February, the Minister for Employment expanded on this by saying that the Department for Work and Pensions 'will radically enhance our use of technology so that people can access support through the channels that best meet their needs. Assistive technology can aid the accessibility and inclusiveness of the new service that we are building'.¹⁹

We welcome these commitments, and we are calling on the Government to put these into practice as soon as possible.

As part of the development of the new Jobs and Careers service, the Department for Work and Pensions should make sure that all jobcentres are equipped with specialist assistive technology.

¹⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/get-britain-working-white-paper>

¹⁹ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2025-02-03/debates/A0D49B98-D894-42B3-9547-769969EB4184/JobcentresEconomicGrowth?highlight=assistive%20technology#contribution-E0F9BCD3-5673-461A-B10D-B89DDE4F8A65>

Sense's proposal for a £5 million Jobcentre Assistive Technology Fund

As part of our employment research, Sense developed a costed proposal for a Jobcentre Assistive Technology Fund, working with our specialist employment service to develop a list of the most common forms of specialist assistive technology.

This estimate is based on the retail prices of these pieces of technology in 2023 and on the number of jobcentres in England, Scotland and Wales at the time, which was 639. We have assumed that the Government would pay the full retail prices for these pieces of equipment, but it is likely that they would receive a discount, given the size of the order.

The £5 million figure also includes a £2.1 million support fund for jobcentres to access if they need any additional pieces of assistive technology.

This breaks down as following:

Funding for specific equipment and software (£2.9 million)

1. Specialist screen reader and screen magnification software

Many blind and deafblind people use software that reads out the text on a screen, called screen readers. People with low vision may instead use specialist magnification software, which, unlike built-in screen magnification, is designed to prevent pixelation at high magnification.

We have assumed that each jobcentre would need three professional licences for Fusion, which is a popular programme combining both a screen reader and specialist screen magnification software. ²⁰

It would cost £1,815 to provide a jobcentre with one a business copy of Fusion, which would include three licences.

Specialist dictation software

Some disabled people who are not able to use a keyboard instead use specialist dictation software, such as Nuance Dragon, to write and edit documents. ²¹

²⁰ <https://www.freedomscientific.com/products/software/fusion/>

²¹ <https://www.nuance.com/en-gb/dragon/business-solutions/dragon-professional.html>

It would cost £2,040 to provide a jobcentre with 3 professional licences for Nuance Dragon.

2. Braille note taker and reader

Some blind and deafblind people use Braille note takers and readers both to read what is on a screen and to control a computer. As they are less popular than the other forms of assistive technology we've mentioned, we have assumed that a jobcentre would only need one.

We have used the RNIB's Orbit Reader 20 in our calculations.²²

It would cost £600 to provide a jobcentre with a single Orbit Reader 20.

3. Headphones (£90 for 3)

Headphones are required to use screen readers. During our research, we used the Logitech G231 Prodigy as an example, as this model has been recommended by the National Deaf Children's Society. While this model seems to have been discontinued, it is still possible to get a good-quality set of headphones with a microphone for £30.

It would cost £90 to provide a jobcentre with three sets of good-quality headphones.

Buying this list of specific equipment would work out at £4545 per jobcentre, or £2.9 million for every jobcentre in the country. The remaining £2.1 million of the Jobcentre Assistive Technology Fund would be available on a grant basis to any jobcentre wishing to purchase additional assistive technology used by disabled claimants at the jobcentre.

Working with others

How well does JCP connect with external partners? For example, schools, further education, employment support organisations and the third sector?

Given that the barriers to employment faced by disabled people are often complex, it is vital that jobcentres take a holistic approach to tackling them. The support offered by jobcentres is less effective when it does not work with the other organisations that support a disabled jobseeker, such as the schools, colleges and charities who support them.

²²<https://shop.rnib.org.uk/orbit-reader-20-braille-note-taker-and-reader>

While Sense has enjoyed positive relationships with jobcentres near to our employment services, this has not been universal. We therefore believe that jobcentres could do much more to work with the services many disabled jobseekers use. We welcome the current Government's plans to devolve more powers to jobcentres, as this could help to facilitate local engagement with charities supporting disabled jobseekers.

March 2025