

# Submission to the House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee from the National Autistic Society

## Inquiry: Disability employment gap

December 2020

### Introduction

1. Autism is a lifelong disability that affects how a person communicates with, and relates to, other people. It also affects how they make sense of the world around them. It is a spectrum condition, which means that while there are certain difficulties that everyone on the autism spectrum shares, the condition affects them in different ways. Some autistic people are able to live relatively independent lives, while others will need a lifetime of specialist support. It affects more than one in 100 people in the UK.<sup>1</sup>
2. The National Autistic Society is the UK's leading autism charity. Since we began more than 50 years ago, we have been pioneering new ways to support people and understand autism. We continue to learn every day from the children and adults we support in our schools and care services. Based on our experience, and with support from our members, donors and volunteers, we provide life-changing information and advice to millions of autistic people, their families and friends. We also support professionals, politicians and the public to better understand autism, so that more autistic people of all ages can be understood, supported and appreciated for who they are.
3. Our charity's Employment Team produce literature on Autism at Work and top tips for remote recruitment for recruiters to understand autism better. Our website also has a dedicated employing autistic people guide for employers.
4. The National Autistic Society provides the secretariat to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Autism (APPGA). We supported the APPGA in carrying out an inquiry in 2019 into the impact of the Autism Act 2009, a landmark piece of legislation that remains the only law dedicated to improving support and services for a specific group of disabled people. This included an inquiry session on employment. The Group's findings, and recommendations for the new national autism strategy that is due to be published in early 2021, are set out in a detailed report.<sup>2</sup>
5. This submission also addresses how the coronavirus outbreak has accelerated our already increasing reliance on digital technology and how this has affected people on the autism spectrum. It considers what this means in relation to public attitudes, autistic people's health, social and economic wellbeing, quality of working life and access to physical health and mental health services. The National Autistic Society is happy to provide any further information that the Committee would find useful, or to provide oral evidence if required.

### Autism as a disability under the Equality Act 2010

6. Under the Equality Act 2010 it is clear that autism is a disability. It is an impairment that has a long-term and substantial adverse effect on the autistic person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities. However, for many people on the autism spectrum, autism is a hidden disability. This means that the wider public may not be aware of the things they struggle with and their need for support or adjustments.
7. It may not be obvious that a child or adult on the autism spectrum has a disability until their needs are not met to the extent that they become clearly overwhelmed. As a result, their behaviour may be perceived as 'challenging' if they are unable to follow instructions or fit in with existing societal rules and structures. It is important to recognise that an autism meltdown is not the same as a temper tantrum, and that 'challenging' behaviour is in fact 'distressed' behaviour.
8. **At this time of national crisis during the coronavirus pandemic, it is more essential than ever for everyone to be aware that not all disabilities are visible – including businesses and organisations employing people.**

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<sup>1</sup> The NHS Information Centre, Community and Mental Health Team, Brugha T et al (2012), *Estimating the prevalence of autism spectrum conditions in adults: extending the 2007 Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey*, Leeds: NHS Information Centre for Health and Social Care.

<sup>2</sup> All Party Parliamentary Group on Autism/National Autistic Society (2019), *The Autism Act, 10 Years On: a report from the All Party Parliamentary Group on Autism on understanding, services and support for autistic people and their families in England*. London, UK.

## Autism and the disability employment gap

9. In 2019, we celebrated the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Autism Act, which was a landmark in the long campaign to improve the lives of autistic adults in England. The Act puts a duty on the Government to produce and regularly review an autism strategy and produce statutory guidance.
10. The APPGA, chaired by the Rt Hon Dame Cheryl Gillan MP, held an inquiry into the Act's implementation ahead of the Government's strategy review, and published findings in its [The Autism Act – 10 Years On](#) report in September 2019. The inquiry was informed by the views of 11,000 autistic people and their families in England, alongside many professional experts and other charities.
11. Our inquiry examined evidence that found that worryingly, there has not been a significant improvement in the number of autistic people in work over the last decade **and we are concerned that the coronavirus outbreak has only made this worse**. 2016 research from the National Autistic Society found that **16%** of autistic people are in full-time work and a further 16% are in part-time work, which suggests the autism employment gap is wider than the overall disability employment gap.<sup>3</sup> Not all autistic people will be able to work, but according to the NAS' [Autism Employment Gap](#) report, over three quarters of unemployed autistic people want to work.<sup>4</sup>
12. Taking additional evidence, alongside its survey, the APPGA's inquiry uncovered that autistic people struggle to get into work and get the support they need while in work:
  - **Poor understanding of autism among Jobcentre Plus staff:** Our survey uncovered very poor understanding of autism among Jobcentre Plus staff, with only **4%** of autistic adults reporting that they understand it. We heard that this can have a really detrimental impact on autistic people's lives, as it can result in them missing out on employment support, work placements and routes into employment. **That is why we are calling for autism training to be made mandatory for all Jobcentre Plus staff.**
  - **Autistic people struggle to get the employment support they need:** **42%** of autistic adults told us they need employment support, but just **12%** receive this support, which means that the majority of those who need it, do not get it. Employment support can be vital in enabling autistic people to find work, which is evident in the fact that over a third of autistic adults said that with greater employment support they would enable them to find work.
  - **Employers' poor understanding of autism and the support autistic people might need:** Lack of understanding about autism and the support autistic people might need to get a job or stay in work was identified as one of the key barriers to closing the employment gap. Many employers lack the confidence or knowledge needed to make adjustments for autistic people, and in a YouGov poll in March 2019, **31%** believed that an autistic person would require too much support.<sup>5</sup> **We believe that the Government should address this by establishing an online information hub for employers**, which would provide information and support to improve recruitment and retention of autistic people.
  - **The need to capture how many autistic people are in work:** We called for autism to be recorded in data collected by the Labour Force Survey, to give a comprehensive picture of autism employment and to see what works in closing the autism employment gap. The Government agreed to test this, which was underway before the pandemic hit. Following testing, we would like to see autism permanently recorded in the Labour Force Survey.

## The disability employment gap and the coronavirus pandemic

13. The coronavirus outbreak and ensuing lockdown changed the lives and daily routines of most people in the country. While it was hard for everyone, it was particularly challenging for autistic people, who typically experience intense anxiety and extreme unease around unexpected change. We are worried that this may have had a detrimental impact on the disability employment gap.
14. Adjusting to the sudden change in their lives and routines is a huge challenge, alongside concerns about the availability of health services or special educational support. Changing daily routines to access digital modes of applying for jobs online, for example, has been a challenge for many autistic people. Autistic people may have required a lot of support and understanding from their employers during this change. Others may have required

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<sup>3</sup> The National Autistic Society (2016). *The Autism Employment Gap - Too Much Information in the workplace*. London, UK.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> The National Autistic Society (2019). *Auto Trader leads drive for businesses to be autism friendly*. Available at: <https://www.autism.org.uk/get-involved/media-centre/news/2019-04-03-autotrader.aspx> (Accessed: 10 October 2019)

specific reasonable adjustments and support from Access to Work to make these happen. Anecdotally we have heard very mixed experiences of both employer attitudes and getting support from Access to Work.

15. For some others, the pandemic has demonstrated that previous requirements to be based in an office full time were meaningless, with many jobs being done perfectly well from home. For some autistic people who find in-person social interactions, visiting new places or dealing with loud and overwhelming environments challenging, this has been a real benefit. For autistic jobseekers during the pandemic, the option to apply for jobs or even work digitally has helped to alleviate these challenges and help them into the workplace. We absolutely cannot return to previous attitudes around being physically present in the office and must capitalise on when some autistic people are able to work as well – or better - from home.
16. We have also heard reports, through our employment pathways programmes, of autistic people who have been strong ‘on paper’ candidates for jobs, but have found it too difficult to leave their house for work or an interview. It’s important that reasonable adjustments, such as digital support, are continued to be used as we move on from the pandemic.
17. However, experiences of remote working and digital solutions is not universally positive. We are worried about the potential impact too much of a reliance on digital technology for recruitment and working would have on autistic people. Many autistic people, for example, cannot, or choose not to, use the internet. We are also worried that many autistic people have struggled with aspects of remote interviews and employers not understanding autism enough, or where to go for advice. It can, for example, be even harder to read social cues in an online meeting, or assumptions might be made about some autistic people needing time “off-camera” in meetings.
18. It is important to note that, for many, increased anxiety about coronavirus and the huge impact it has had on autistic people’s lives might mean that they are not currently in a position to work or look for work. Many autistic people have lost resilience to doing new things during the pandemic and meeting new people or coping with day-to-day activities outside their homes during coronavirus lockdown.

#### **Autism accreditation for Jobcentre Plus**

19. We are encouraged that over the last year, many Jobcentre Plus centres have expressed an interest in making adaptations and changes to their environment, hosting “quiet hours” in some cases. We would like to explore how we can work with Jobcentre Plus strategically to improve the quality of experiences of autistic customers, including for example through schemes like our Autism Accreditation award. This is a quality assurance programme for organisations providing services to autistic people across health, education and care.

#### **Autistic people’s difficulties accessing benefits**

20. The APPGA inquiry also looked at autistic people’s access to benefits. It found that too many autistic people are having negative experiences with benefits assessments, and that as a result too many autistic people miss out on benefits and the support they offer. **60%** of autistic adults told us that they found benefits forms difficult to complete, while just **14%** said they were satisfied with the length of time it took for their claim to be processed.
21. We heard in the inquiry that very often, the challenges autistic people face in accessing benefits can be attributed to assessors’ poor understanding of autism. To ensure autistic people have equal access to the benefits system, the Government should **include a requirement in all contracts for assessment providers to provide assessors with autism training and develop guidance for providers carrying out benefits assessments on how to properly identify autistic people’s needs during assessments.**

#### **Conclusion**

22. We believe it is imperative that the upcoming National Disability Strategy sets out **concrete actions** for the next phase of tackling the disability employment gap. This needs to recognise that a one-size-fits-all approach will not work. The picture our evidence has painted above shows that autistic people need specific support that meets their needs as an autistic person, from people who understand autism. However, accessing specialist support is far too difficult, with primary providers giving support that is too general to meet many autistic people’s needs. At the same time, referrals to specialist support are not happening.

23. Any progress must rest on good intelligence. This means tackling the dearth of data collected on many conditions and impairments, including autism. The system will not know what is working to close the autism employment gap unless it can monitor it. It must also reflect the experiences of autistic and other disabled people. As yet, disabled people's engagement on the new Disability Strategy has been very limited.

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