

Written evidence from Sense (DEG0130)

About Sense

Sense is a national disability charity that supports people with complex disabilities to be understood, connected and valued. Sense supports children, young people and adults in their home and in the community. Sense campaigns passionately for the rights of the people it serves, and offers practical help and support to families and carers, including information and advice, short breaks and family events.

Sense regularly employs disabled people in a range of different roles across our workforce. In the People Count - Third Sector 2019 survey,¹ Sense confirmed that 7.2% of our employees were disabled, in comparison to a median rate of 4% across our chosen peer group, and a median rate of 3.1% across all participants

Introduction

The disability employment gap is unacceptable and there has been insufficient action from Government to remedy this issue over the last decade. Sense supports people with complex disabilities including those who are deafblind, and this group are frequently furthest from the job market. We believe the needs of people with complex disabilities are often forgotten or simply not understood by Government in both the welfare system and in employment support. Any approach to tackling the disability employment gap must be fully inclusive and address the needs of all disabled people, not just those closest to the jobs market.

Who does Sense support?

Sense supports people with complex disabilities including those who are deafblind, and therefore we represent a diverse pan-disability group, including individuals with learning disabilities, autism, sensory impairments and complex health conditions. The individuals with complex disabilities we represent often require significant or constant care and support from family members or social care, including support with personal care. Many of the people we support are also deafblind, this includes individuals with congenital deafblindness and also those who are visually impaired or d/Deaf or Hard of Hearing who then acquire an additional sensory impairment. Those who have acquired deafblindness tend to have less complex care needs, but have communication needs which require the right support.

At Sense we are committed to a 'total communication' approach which means providing an individual with information in as many methods or formats as are appropriate to enable choice. We also believe in empowering individuals to communicate in the way of their choosing, including recognising that behaviours which may challenge are communication.

The right communication support provides information in accessible formats and enables preferred communication methods:

¹ Agenda Consulting, August 2019, People Count- Third Sector Survey. Third Sector Human Resource Benchmarking. Vol. 1.

- British Sign Language including hands-on or tactile sign language
- Visual or Symbol communication like photos or symbol pictures of objects or concepts.
- Easy Read
- Large print or Braille
- Objects of reference, e.g offering someone a cup to ask if they would like a drink.
- Facial expression, gesture or movement.

Supporting individuals with complex disabilities

The welfare, benefits and employment support system needs to take a more holistic approach to supporting disabled people. Many of the disabled people Sense supports are reliant on welfare benefits, either to support them because they are unable to work, or because they face additional living costs as a result of their disability. We need a welfare system that recognises the long term financial support needs of those with complex disabilities who are furthest from the workforce. It is essential that services and support can empower individuals with complex disabilities to live independent lives as active parts of their community, and where appropriate support disabled people into work.

For those disabled people who want to work, it is key that government schemes provide the necessary funding, resources and support for those with more complex needs. Individuals Sense supports report that often Jobcentre Plus services, training or schemes for disabled people are inadequate for those with more complex disabilities and communication needs. Government needs to focus on creating a more meaningful journey towards work for those with complex disabilities. This journey needs to recognise, support and develop skills including communication, independent living, using accessible travel support, technology and most importantly enable the confidence to apply for work. By investing in these vital skills and ensuring the right support is available, those with complex disabilities will be more likely to access employment and stay in work.

Currently, Government benefit and employment services do not fully recognise or appropriately support those people with complex disabilities for whom work is not an appropriate outcome. For those disabled people with the most complex care and medical needs we need welfare services that celebrate essential skills and outcomes, including communication skills, wellbeing and health. These are outcomes that need to be achieved through joined up working between Local Authorities, Jobcentre Plus, social care services, VCSEs and most importantly co-produced with the disabled person and their family. By supporting individuals with complex disabilities to develop independent living skills, participate in the community and volunteer, the DWP can reduce the impact of health inequalities, social isolation and also reduce the need for complex care and medical interventions. This is also a vital step in taking a more holistic and cross-government approach to disabled people and their support needs.

It is vital that the Government uses the Disability Benefits Green Paper as an opportunity to create a holistic system that supports those with complex disabilities to live as active independent citizens in their communities, and, where appropriate, join the job market.

What we are calling for:

At Sense Centre Touchbase Pears we provide an employment support service, this services provides advice on welfare and benefits, employability skills workshops, assistance with applications and support learning about accessible technology. Sense has consulted with the people we support through our employment services and our response below shares their experiences.

- Recognition of and support for the importance of independent living skills and active citizenship as part of a journey towards employment.
- Funding for specialist technology and assistive technology training for individuals with complex disabilities and sensory impairments.
- Additional training for Jobcentre Plus staff regarding complex disabilities, accessible information and communication support needs.
- Improved accessibility of online resources for disabled job seekers using DWP initiatives and improved accessibility of the Access to Work system.
- Greater support for employers, including training regarding access to work and reasonable adjustments.
- A Government awareness campaign about disability employment, including Access to Work.
- A more transparent and accountable Disability Confident scheme with more rigorous membership requirements.

A holistic approach to employment support

“Unemployed people on benefits with complex disabilities have enough daily barriers and challenges in life” – Sense Employment Support Group Member

The majority of the people Sense supports are unable to access employment due to the complexity of their needs or because the workplace is not an appropriate outcome. We remain concerned that the support around disability and employment as well as the welfare system continues to exclude this group.

Fundamentally, there needs to be a more holistic approach to disability employment which recognises the care and support needs of individuals as part of their employment journey and development. Without social care support, many disabled people cannot develop the independent living skills required as a foundation to employability. Building confidence to independently manage health and wellbeing, a home, and support accessing the community are the first steps for many people with complex disabilities before work is an appropriate outcome. We need an employment support system that recognises, supports and celebrates these achievements.

There must be a cross Government approach to ensure that disabled people and their families have access to the right care and support to develop a foundation of independent living skills and

active community participation. As expressed by an individual supported by Sense, Government, the DWP and employers must all “work more cohesively together to better support the individual. When all departments work separately from one another and don’t communicate then this makes the process even more challenging”.

Government must provide funding and support for programmes which build confidence, communication skills, independent living skills and promote active citizenship, like volunteering or social prescribing opportunities. This is particularly vital as we plan for life after the pandemic, during which many disabled people have become more isolated, lost support or lost employment opportunities.

“Knowing where to look for work, applying for jobs, preparing for interviews and attending interviews are vital elements of employment. Also online skills training and volunteering are very important to the development of a person seeking employment. A disabled person has enough daily barriers and challenges to overcome so when it comes to seeking paid employment ‘self-confidence’ is key” – Sense Employment Support Group Member

It is more important now than ever that once services are up and running at full capacity again that disabled people seeking employment are supported in regards to their health needs, financial needs, travel needs, personal skills and career prospects. In the words of one of our employment support service users “it is imperative to invest in the individual rather than just the system”.

Providing Support

“Getting back to work is sometimes a slow process as it takes time to regain confidence and this confidence can come from knowledge of what support is available” – Sense Employment Support Group Member

The overwhelming feedback from disabled people using Sense employment services is that the process of applying for work is a challenge due to a lack of advice and support, and that Sense is the only organisation meeting their needs, rather than the DWP, Jobcentre Plus or programmes like Work and Health. The result of this absence of information and support is a lack of confidence in searching for work, which means the existing barriers to employment become overwhelming.

“There is not enough information, support and advice available for people with accessible information or communication needs.” – Sense Employment Support Group Member

Many of the individuals Sense supports have sensory impairments and communication needs. This means they require information in accessible formats like large print, Braille, British Sign Language or Easy Read. An ongoing challenge is the lack of information about job seeking support in accessible formats or understanding of communication support needs from staff and work coaches at Jobcentres. This means that disabled people cannot independently manage their benefits claims or job applications. People Sense supports have reported that assistance looking for work provided by DWP is often inaccessible to people with complex disabilities due to the lack of information or resources in accessible formats or the lack of provision of communication support.

“Every Jobcentre Plus office should have a team who look after disabled employees and they should be regularly trained to meet the needs to identify the correct job opportunities for the disabled employees’ skill set.” – Sense Employment Support Group Member

Feedback from the people Sense supports is that much of the advice and support available isn't accessible. Although some individuals have had positive experiences, like an autistic person being given a quiet space to job hunt and fill out forms by a Job Centre who took time to understand their needs. However, several people Sense supports mentioned the challenges created by inaccessible online portals or lack of staff awareness or training regarding complex disabilities. Furthermore, the opportunities provided like work skills or volunteering are not suitable for individuals with complex disabilities as the required support isn't available.

One of the key issues that was raised by disabled job seekers was the challenge of accessible technology, especially during the pandemic. The increase of remote service delivery has left many people with complex disabilities at a disadvantage due to not having the equipment or training to access video calls or online services.

"I think there needs to be a lot more funding and grants provided to people with complex disabilities to enable them to job search at home." – Sense Employment Support Group Member

Accessible technology and equipment is often prohibitively expensive and devices with the necessary software aren't provided as standard in Job Centres. In the words of one individual supported by Sense "it isn't fair that a disabled person should have to fund specialised software out of their limited income just to put them on an even playing field". There was a consensus amongst people with complex disabilities supported by the Sense employment service that there needs to be more funding and training available for disabled people to access and learn how to use technology. In an increasingly digital world, being unable to access technology is a significant barrier to finding information, advice, support and employment.

Accessing Employment

"The employee needs to know what is available and from my experience some employers will have information freely available whilst others are more reluctant to give information, mainly because they do not know themselves." Sense Employment Support Group Member

There is a need for various government initiatives, including Access to Work, Disability Confident and various Work and Health Programmes, to be more joined up in order to provide a coherent and cohesive approach across the board to empowering employers, alongside government, to support disabled people in work. One of the existing challenges is that many employers are unaware of the support available to them as employers but also to disabled people seeking work. Many people and employers are unaware of the support that Access to Work can provide in work. In the case of sensory impairments many workplaces and employers are often unaware of the additional technological advancements that also provide support. Government needs to consolidate this information into an easily accessible place for employers, so that they can undertake training or access resources to enable them to support disabled employers and job seekers.

Sense believes that Access to Work is an excellent scheme that can be truly beneficial to supporting disabled people into work but we know awareness of the scheme is low. Access to Work exists to support disabled people and those with physical or mental health conditions in work but we wonder if the scope of what it can provide and who it can support is truly understood and known. We would welcome a comprehensive and wide ranging awareness campaign about the programme and to truly develop and inclusive and diverse jobs market for all.

“There needs to be better collaboration between the DWP and the claimant’s employer for a more successful outcome.” – Sense Employment Support Group Member

Whilst Access to Work is a positive initiative, the application process and ongoing administration can be complex and consuming for both employer and employee and we fear that this may be an additional barrier to support. As an employer we have direct experience of this, and feel that there are significant improvements that could be made to make it less burdensome and more agile to meet needs. Key to this is ensuring that reporting documentation and all associated paperwork is available in accessible formats for claimants to be able to manage their claims independently. This is not currently the case. One ongoing issue is the delays in getting Access to Work support in place, one individual supported by Sense employment service reported: “I have had times when upon starting new employment I have been waiting for essential magnification equipment to be installed. In this time one is left feeling helpless as we all wish to perform tasks as well as other employees but circumstances outside of our control make this sometimes impossible.”

Furthermore, there should be greater awareness of what constitutes a reasonable adjustment for disabled people in work, and support for employers to make reasonable adjustments where appropriate. One individual supported by Sense expressed concern about being unable to visit a workplace during the pandemic, and therefore being unable to trust what reasonable adjustments might be possible: “I had my job interview on Microsoft Teams but have never been to my new employer or seen what the environment is like. Hence the fact that I am particularly nervous as normally in an interview face to face we can get an indication of places and environments, at present this is not available.” It is essential that Government provides accessible information and awareness training for businesses so that they can understand the requirements of a reasonable adjustment and equality law for disabled employees.

Finally, at Sense we have concerns about Disability Confident and the accountability of employers who are part of this scheme. Too often it feels like a tick box exercise rather than a genuine commitment to assisting disabled people into work and providing the support needed in the workplace. We would like to see a more transparent approach and requirements like a percentage of disabled interview candidates and employees being a minimum for participation in the scheme. Furthermore, we believe those employers participating in the scheme should regularly undertake awareness training. This will give disabled applicants the confidence the scheme promises and help them to understand whether an employer actually has the experience and support they require.

December 2020