

Written evidence from I have a voice CIC (DEG0139)

1. We are young disability rights campaigners with the social enterprise I have a voice. This call for evidence is timely as the Pandemic not only poses a significant threat to employment rates for people with disabilities, but also creates opportunities to support people with disabilities into work by tweaking the initiatives the Government is already putting in place to tackle broader unemployment, and because of the transition away from the tradition of office working to virtual workspaces.
2. We are campaigning to raise awareness of the Government's Disability Confident Scheme. Only 18,000 employers are signed up to the Disability Confident Scheme.¹ Yet in 2019 there were approximately 5.9 million private sector businesses in the UK, of which 24% are employers – so 1.4 million.² Even discounting the vast number of employers in the public sector, who account for many of the employers signed up to the Scheme, this means only 1.3% of employers are signed up to the Scheme, and are therefore disability confident employers. This is despite great efforts from the DWP to promote the campaign. It is time for the Government to consider some form of incentive or sanction, perhaps even compulsion, to make employers aware of this Scheme and to make sure if they can participate, that they do.
3. Our key recommendations are:
 - a. The Government should fulfil its commitment to working with disability organisations and charities to develop and publish a National Strategy for Disabled People. We believe this should be published in 2021 to tackle the impact of the Pandemic on employment rates for people with disabilities, and involve the voices of people with a range of disabilities.
 - b. The Government should review the Traineeship, Apprenticeship and Kickstart Schemes to encourage employers to take on people with a disability. This could be a quick win as the Kickstart Scheme requires employers to offer 30 job placements, it could be made mandatory for at least 5 of these to be offered to someone who is disabled. They should also review their approach to those who operate through a virtual workspace as they are currently excluded from these schemes.
 - c. The Government could make a minor tweak to its website to alert businesses employing staff for the first time to the Scheme. Namely, by adding the Scheme to the considerations listed here <https://www.gov.uk/employing-staff>.

¹ <https://disabilityconfident.campaign.gov.uk/>

² [House of Commons Library \(2020\) Business Statistics, Briefing Paper Number 06152](#)

4. We have limited our response to those questions where we have evidence, or our own perspective to share with the Committee.

Progress so far and impact

What progress has been made, especially since 2015, on closing the disability employment gap? How has this progress been made?

5. Since 2015, different strategies have been implemented to meet the Conservative Party's 2017 manifesto commitment to get "1 million more people with disabilities into employment over the next ten years". This means there would need to be an increase of 350,000 more disabled people in employment - a growth of 8%.³
6. A significant development is the 'work, health and disability' initiative, jointly run by the DHSC and DWP. It is positive that the disability employment gap is being considered across government and that financial support for individuals with disabilities is being progressed alongside initiatives to encourage employers to employ people with disabilities – such as the Disability Confident Scheme.
7. However, despite these strategies, the gap is not reducing significantly - "Between April-June 2013 and April-June 2020, the disability employment gap reduced by 5.0 percentage points. This is because the employment rate for disabled people has been rising faster than the employment rate for people who are not disabled. In the year to April-June 2020, the gap reduced by 0.8 percentage points."⁴ Analysis of the impact of the coronavirus pandemic (as set out throughout our response) indicates that progress is likely to be reversed, at least in the short-term.
8. To ensure that the Government meets its targets we recommend it fulfils its commitment to working with disability organisations and charities to develop and publish a National Strategy for Disabled People. We believe this should be published in 2021 to enable employers, charities and others with an important role to play in closing the employment disability gap with certainty about the Government's priorities. This would mean they can align their resources with supporting those efforts accordingly, and allow for early identification of any strands of the Strategy that are proving more difficult to meet, thereby facilitating early intervention.

What is the economic impact of low employment and high economic inactivity rates for disabled people? Are some disabled people (for example, young disabled people or people with different health conditions) more at risk of unemployment or economic activity than others?

³ [ONS, Labour Market Bulletin, Table A08](#)

⁴ [House of Commons Library \(2020\) Disabled people in employment, Briefing Paper Number 7540](#)

9. As a group of young disability rights campaigners (we are aged 17 to 19) we are particularly concerned about the economic impact of low employment rates for young people. Our concerns are not unfounded - disabled people aged between 16 and 24 are least likely to be in employment. Some of this can be explained by people in this age group still being in education, however our prospects are concerning for us given that only 60% of disabled people aged 25 to 49 were in employment before the pandemic, compared with 89% of people without a disability.⁵
10. We are concerned that if we are not able to access employment at the start of our working lives this will have a negative impact on our earning potential and financial security over our lifetime. We are also concerned this would have a negative impact on our mental health – for us, meaningful employment is something we are either actively seeking now or looking forward to once we finish studying.
11. We are also worried about the impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic. It will likely take a toll on our employment prospects now and for years to come. Some of our campaigners' personal experience is that it is already difficult for those in the 18-24 category, who are just entering the first stages of employment, to find meaningful employment.
12. The Government has ramped up its support for Traineeships and introduced the Kickstart Scheme in response to the Pandemic. There should be specific incentives for employers to employ people with a disability. For example, the Kickstart Scheme requires an employer to have 30 job placements – a proportion of these should be designated to people with a disability. 7.7 million people of working age (16-64) reported that they were disabled in April-June 2020, which is 19% of the working age population.⁶ This would mean allocating at least 5 of these placements to people with a disability would be proportionate.
13. In addition, I have a voice has tried to take on a young person through the Traineeship, Apprenticeship and Kickstart schemes; but they are not available for businesses who are having to operate remotely at this time – as they need to be onsite. In an increasingly digital world, many businesses are using virtual workspaces. Virtual working has the potential to create more opportunities for people with disabilities, yet employers are not being supported to take on young people at this time.

What has been the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on disabled peoples' employment rates?

14. The ONS reported that "worries about the future is amongst the most frequently cited ways well-being has been affected for both disabled (68%) and non-disabled people

⁵ [DWP: The Employment of disabled people 2019 statistical publication](#)

⁶ [House of Commons Library \(2020\) Disabled people in employment, Briefing Paper Number 7540](#)

(64%); however, disabled people were less optimistic about the future than non-disabled people, with 1 in 10 (11%) of disabled people thinking life will never return to normal compared with only 1 in 20 (5%) of non-disabled people."⁷ Whilst this may not specifically cover employment, it does give an early indication that disabled people are less optimistic about what they see for themselves in the future, which could damage future employment rates and widen the disability employment gap.

15. A document more specific to disabled people in employment, by People Management UK, reported that "almost half (45 per cent) of working-age disabled people polled said the pandemic had negatively affected their ability to work, increasing to 71 per cent among those aged 18 to 24. Similarly, 48 per cent said the COVID-19 crisis had affected their future earnings, increasing to 54 per cent among young disabled people."⁸
16. That is why it is vital to understand the importance of preparing employers to embrace a diverse workforce now, to support disabled people to get on a stable track of employment, especially those in the younger age group (18-24) who have been impacted the hardest.
17. We reiterate our positive perspective that the Pandemic also presents an opportunity, if utilised effectively, to encourage more disabled people into the workforce. As the Government is already putting in place initiatives to tackle unemployment that could be tweaked to help those with disabilities; and the tradition of working in an office is changing, with home and remote working being normalised. Interventions now could have a long-lasting positive impact for the employment of people with disabilities.

Providing support

Where should lead responsibility for improving disabled peoples' employment rates sit (for example, DWP; Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy; Health and Social Care)?

18. All of these departments should have responsibility for providing financial, well-being and learning support to both disabled individuals and employers. The 'Work, Health and Disability' initiative led from both the DHSC and DWP proves this model can work. Disabled people are not homogenous, and so personal strategies will be needed to assist some people with disabilities to find suitable and meaningful employment; and employers may need support to ensure that they are accessible to people with a range of disabilities.

⁷ [ONS: Coronavirus and the social impacts on disabled people in Great Britain: September 2020](#)

⁸ [People Management: Disabled workers facing coronavirus jobs crisis](#)

19. Therefore, we recommend a cross-government group is established / the cross-government working already undertaken by DHSC and DWP is built on to support employment for people with disabilities.

How can DWP better support employers to take on and retain disabled employees, and to help them progress in work?

20. Promote the existing schemes. The Disability Confident Scheme, alongside the personal support package and Access to Work grants, are all useful initiatives. Yet awareness of them is low. For example, only 18,000 employers are signed up to the Disability Confident Scheme.⁹ Yet in 2019 there were approximately 5.9 million private sector businesses in the UK, of which 24% are employers – so 1.4 million.¹⁰ Even discounting the vast number of employers in the public sector, who account for many of the employers signed up to the Scheme, only 1.3% of employers are signed up to the Scheme. It is time for the Government to consider some form of incentive or sanction, perhaps even compulsion to make employers aware of this Scheme and to make sure if they can participate, that they do. The Pandemic provides the Government with an important opportunity to promote these initiatives to employers through its existing support packages.

How effective is the Disability Confident scheme?

21. The Scheme is a helpful initiative designed to teach businesses about the importance of, and effective strategies to, hiring those with varying disabilities. However, the low take-up rate is a major concern and quite frankly abysmal. We know that the DWP is working hard to promote the campaign and we think its efforts are engaging and we've greatly appreciated that they've listened to our suggestions to make it more prominent. However, promotion alone is not working. As set-out above in paragraph 20, we think the Government must take more significant steps to embed this scheme across a greater proportion of employers.

22. Our view is that the scheme could also benefit from a more engaging learning process for employers as it currently consists of lots of documents, text and tick boxes. As a Disability Confident committed employer, we found the process to be a tick box exercise and would need further support to progress through the stages of the Scheme. If mandatory training were required when new businesses are established, we would have been eager to undertake the training – this could be delivered through standardised e-learning to minimise costs.

23. We have also written to the Minister for Disabled People and the DWP suggesting a minor tweak to gov.uk to alert businesses employing staff for the first time of the

⁹ <https://disabilityconfident.campaign.gov.uk/>

¹⁰ [House of Commons Library \(2020\) Business Statistics, Briefing Paper Number 06152](#)

Scheme. Namely, by adding the Scheme to the list of considerations here <https://www.gov.uk/employing-staff>.

Enforcement and next steps

What would you hope to see in the Government's National Strategy for Disabled People?

24. In the Government's National Strategy for Disabled People, we want to see measures to significantly increase the uptake of the Government's Disability Confident Scheme.
25. It will also be important to recognise that disabled people are not homogenous. As a young group of disability rights campaigners, we want to see specific measures for young people that mean they are supported into meaningful employment early in life. We would also like to see consideration of people with hidden disabilities – 80% of disabled people have hidden impairments.¹¹
26. The Government should involve disabled people, like some of our campaign group, in their discussions. We would hope to see the voices of people with a variety of disabilities represented in the Strategy.

How should DWP look to engage disabled people and the organisations that represent them in formulating the Strategy?

27. Contact them. Organisers, representatives and ambassadors of organisations that support people with disabilities and who advocate for their rights will be keen to get involved – we are. This would help to ensure that the Government reaches people with a broad range of disabilities. We strongly believe that the voices of people of varying ages and disabilities should contribute to the Strategy.
28. The use of technology means people can take part without leaving their homes, or care settings. The Government could use social media, online surveys and sessions, in addition to traditional methods of engagement.

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¹¹ <https://wearepurple.org.uk/not-all-disabilities-are-visible/#:~:text=We%20know%20that%2080%25%20of,during%20their%20adult%20working%20life>.