

Written evidence submitted by *Equalise*: ESRC Centre for Lifecourse Health Equity on 23 September 2025

Work and Pensions Committee

Inquiry: Employment support for disabled people

Equalise: ESRC Centre for Lifecourse Health Equity is a £9 million ESRC-funded project (2024-2029) based in UCL's Department of Epidemiology and Public Health, with academic partners at City St George's University London, University of Essex, University of Glasgow, University of Strathclyde and Universite Toulouse III. Led by Professors Yvonne Kelly and Anne McMunn in partnership with experts in local and national government and a wide range of health equity-focused advocacy and voluntary groups, **Equalise** tackles avoidable health inequalities across four key themes: Learning, Care, Work and Place. The Work theme focuses on job quality, health and workforce participation/economic inactivity, and variations in work.

A. Executive summary

A1. Disabled women face compounded barriers to employment due to gender and disability, resulting in lower employment rates, fewer full-time roles, and limited career progression. Neurodivergent individuals are disadvantaged by standard hiring practices, especially interviews that emphasise social skills and unsuitable physical environments.

A.2. Line managers play a critical role in enabling access to accommodations, but inconsistent training and awareness limit their effectiveness. Workplace accommodations significantly reduce employment gaps, particularly for those with mental health conditions. Chronic conditions like multiple sclerosis and chronic pain require flexible support, yet many managers lack the knowledge to respond effectively.

A.3. Scotland's Work Choices Programme demonstrates the value of person-centred support, offering dignity, choice, and sustained engagement. Completion of structured employment programmes improves outcomes, especially for older and disabled individuals.

A.4. The Disability Confident scheme shows limited impact, with no significant difference in disabled workforce representation or employee experience.

A.5. Recommendations:

- Encourage organisational policies that embed inclusive practices at a structural level, rather than relying on individual managers' discretion or awareness.
- Expand access to workplace accommodations, which close employment gaps for disabled workers.
- Provide training for line managers to ensure consistency in supporting workers with health conditions and disabilities.
- Adopt person-centred employment support models, which emphasise dignity, genuine choice, and supportive relationships.
- Improve monitoring and reform certification criteria for Disability Confident.

B. What barriers prevent disabled people who want to work, or to work more, from doing so? How do these vary for different disabilities? How do these vary across the country?

B.1. Entries into work and career progressions for disabled women are influenced by intersectional inequalities that discriminate against women. Kim et al. (2020)¹ explored the intersectional discrimination which disabled women face in looking for employment in the UK. Their findings indicate that relative to any other group defined by gender and ability status, disabled women were less likely to be in employment, work full-time hours, or be in a managerial role. They also felt more limited in the type or amount of paid work they could do.

B.2. Current hiring practices disadvantage individuals who are neurodivergent and thus create barriers to entry for labour force participation. Davis et. al. (2023)² investigated how hiring practices create barriers to accessing work for individuals with autism and non-autistic neurodivergent individuals in the UK. Participants discussed how the focus on social skills within interviews adversely disadvantaged them compared to neurotypical candidates (people with no disclosed area of neurodivergence), while physical interview spaces were also sometimes unsuitable (e.g. bright lights, whispering between interviewers, circulating assessors).

Recommendations: New hiring policies – particularly for large organisations and the private sector – should address biases that disadvantage specific groups of workers, such as disabled women and individuals who are autistic or neurodivergent. Work trials could be particularly beneficial for this latter group as an alternative hiring method.

C. What kinds of support are most effective at supporting people with different disabilities (such as physical, mental or fluctuating conditions) to enter and stay in work?

C.1. Chandola and Rouxel (2021)³ used Life Opportunities Survey data to illustrate the importance of workplace accommodations in enabling workers with impairments, and particularly those with mental impairments, to remain economically active. Workers with impairments faced a 10% employment gap compared to those without impairments when no accommodations were provided. However, the provision of accommodations effectively eliminated this disparity.

C.2. Workplace accommodations are important in reducing the disability employment gap. However, in many workplaces, the ability to access these accommodations is often contingent on individual line managers who have varying degrees of knowledge and training. In their study of working women with multiple sclerosis (MS), Railton et al. (2023)⁴ found that line managers were crucial in supporting women to access accommodations. However, there was often inconsistencies in the line managers' understanding and effectiveness in helping individuals to manage the episodic nature of MS and to align the volume and nature of work with individuals' abilities.

C.3. Through interviewing workers with chronic pain conditions (a condition which affects 1 in 4 people in the UK workforce), Blake et al. (2025)⁵ reiterated the role of line managers in determining employees' experiences at work. However, there was a perception amongst

¹ <https://purehost.bath.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/203826759/pdf.pdf>

² <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36597955/>

³ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34399292/>

⁴ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/40479349/>

⁵ <https://academic.oup.com/ocmed/article/75/5/250/8178758>

workers that managers lack the knowledge and training to adequately address employees' support needs.

Recommendation: Workplace accommodation policies should focus on developing training for line managers to allow them to better accommodate individuals with disabilities, which may in turn facilitate these individuals to remain in work.

D. Are there any international examples, or examples from the devolved nations, of effective disability employment support that the Government could learn from?

D.1. There are several examples of effective disability employment support in Scotland from which the Government could learn:

- **D.2.** Re-employ Work Choices Programme (provided specialist employment support to disabled people): Participants in the Work Choices Programme reported substantial health conditions, lack of skills and confidence and practical obstacles to finding work. Elements of the Programme they found valuable were being treated with dignity, having genuine choice about their work and learning options, and experiencing a service underpinned by a supportive, helping relationship.⁶
- **D.3.** Work Programme (operated by Ingeus from April 2013-July 2014 which was designed to help people who receive welfare benefits find employment): In this welfare-to-work initiative, participants over the age of 50 and those with a disability struggled to return to paid employment after a reliance on welfare benefits.⁷ However, those who completed the entirety of the Work Programme were more likely to remain in employment than those who left early.

Recommendations: Disability employment support programmes should take a person-centred approach that values the individual and offers choices. The Government and the Department for Work and Pensions could work to better understand risk factors for job loss in ageing workers and those with disabilities and develop interventions for the extension of working lives.

E. How successful has the Disability Confident scheme been at improving employer practices? How could it be improved?

E.1. Hoque et al. (2024)⁸ found that the proportion of the workforce that is disabled is no higher in Disability Confident Level 1 'Committed' organisations and Level 3 'Leader' organisations than in non-Disability Confident organisations.

E.2. While the proportion of the workforce that is disabled is higher in Disability Confident Level 2 'Employer' organisations than in non-Disability Confident organisations, only 22% of Disability Confident organisations are at Level 2.

E.3. Disabled people's experience of work was no better in Disability Confident than in non-Disability Confident organisations, raising questions about the efficacy of employers' equality certifications.

Recommendation: Rather than prioritising an increase in the number of certified employers, the Government could implement greater independent monitoring to ensure certified

⁶ <https://ejournals.bib.uni-wuppertal.de/index.php/sws/article/view/545>

⁷ <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/14/7/e072943>

⁸ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/bjir.12799>

employers uphold expected standards. It may be helpful to review the Disability Confident certification criteria to place greater emphasis on demonstrated disability employment outcomes—such as minimum thresholds regarding workforce disability prevalence at Levels 2 and 3 alongside the adoption of specific processes and practices.

Acknowledgments

This response has been prepared by the **Equalise** Work theme with contributions from:

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