

Health and Community Care Research Programme

“Go for it!”: Supporting People with Learning Disabilities and/or Autistic Spectrum Disorders in Employment

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This study, commissioned to inform The same as you? National Implementation Group, looked at what employment support there is in Scotland for people with learning disabilities and/or autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) and identified good practice. The research surveyed providers of employment support, looked at the literature on best practice, gathered opinions about barriers and key issues, and explored experiences and views of supported employees, their families and employers.

Main Findings

- A Scotland-wide survey found a variable landscape of small and large-scale organisations providing employment support to people with learning disabilities and/or ASD, most of which were part of broader services.
- Individuals interviewed for the research and their families were highly satisfied with supported employment and reported positive outcomes such as having more money, increased self-esteem and self-confidence, and having friends at work.
- Anxieties about employing people with disabilities proved largely unfounded. The decision to employ a person with learning disabilities and/or ASD was influenced by several factors including the predisposition of the company; difficulties with filling specific posts; labour shortages; putting the ‘business case’ that employers would gain reliable, motivated and consistent workers; and, by the professionalism of the supported employment service.
- Less than half the 69 providers who responded to the survey were supporting jobs that would meet an international definition of supported employment, i.e. real paid work with a community employer with ongoing, individualised support. The greatest challenge was in supporting full-time jobs of 16 hours or more.
- From survey responses it appears that those less well represented in paid jobs are people with severe disabilities or high support needs, people with ASD, women with learning disabilities and those from minority ethnic communities.
- Traditionally, the ‘benefits trap’ is perceived as the main barrier to employment but this research showed that this can be overcome with the right knowledge and motivation. Key stakeholders, employment support providers and some authors were of the view that the biggest barrier is the lack of a consistent national framework from which to commission and audit the performance of supported employment.
- The literature review highlighted best practice as making sure individuals are fully involved in the employment process; employment specialists adopting a career based approach and becoming facilitators rather than experts; taking employers’ needs into account; using ‘natural supports’ and supporting jobs in ways that are ‘typical’; using strategies to enhance social integration; supporting self-employment; providing follow-on support; and widespread implementation of the supported employment model.

Introduction

This study looked at employment support in its broadest sense and included a range of work opportunities such as open employment, work placements, voluntary work, 'permitted work', unpaid jobs, sheltered or non-open employment, as well as supported employment. Given this broad remit, a distinction was made between the model of supported employment and other types of employment support. Supported employment was defined as *'real work that is for 16 hours or more in an integrated settings with ongoing support.'*

The study's aim was to examine the nature and availability of support to gain and remain in employment, and to identify good practice in this field. In summary, its objectives were to:

- Review the literature on best practice in supported employment
- Identify which agencies provide employment support in Scotland
- Identify the number and characteristics of people with learning disabilities and/or ASD supported in employment
- Identify examples of good practice
- Explore the views of people with learning disabilities and/or ASD in employment, their families and employers.

Provision of employment support

A postal questionnaire survey was sent to over 160 services identified as providing employment support to the target groups and the results showed considerable variation in terms of what 'employment support' meant in practice. Commonly, this translated into pre-vocational training activities, job finding, job coaching, developing natural supports in the workplace, providing ongoing support and employer support.

The majority of employment support services or projects were part of wider local authority services or were in the voluntary sector, while some were Jobcentreplus or Careers Scotland services or based at local further education colleges. Most were part of broader services and in urban or mixed urban/rural areas. While most were targeted at people with disabilities generally, 22% worked with people with learning disabilities and a minority supported people with ASD.

With the variety came inconsistent use of the term 'supported employment', not helped by the lack of a nationally agreed definition and leadership. While there is

nothing inherently wrong with part-time work, voluntary work and unpaid work experience per se, they are not the same as, and therefore, should not be labelled as, supported employment.

The survey found that just over 3,000 adults with learning disabilities and/or ASD were currently supported in employment (paid and unpaid) by 69 separate providers. Few of those in jobs were people with ASD or people with more complex needs.

The majority of supported jobs (66%) were paid but only a third were full-time i.e. over 16 hours. Although 81% of jobs were paid at the national minimum wage level or above, several individuals were reportedly working more hours than they were getting paid for. Pay rates generally were low with many paying less than £50 a week, although there were exceptions. This likely reflects the high proportion of part-time jobs in the sample. In general, jobs that were unpaid were short-term but 14% had lasted over 4 years, which demonstrates that placements do not necessarily lead onto paid jobs.

Individual aspirations and choice were only being explored to a limited extent. The predominance of jobs in certain sectors indicated a degree of stereotyping of people into certain job types and industries. Effective supported employment services however, were placing people in jobs that clearly matched personal preferences and therefore represented a broader spectrum of occupations and employers.

Supportive self-employment was rare, although some examples were uncovered by the research. Its' potential to offer choice, flexibility and to closely match individual preferences with careers has led some to predict this is the "next logical step for supported employment".

Individuals' experiences

All 15 individuals interviewed as part of the research, and their families, were highly satisfied with supported employment. The gains from employment included increased self-confidence, more independence, developing new skills and having more money, which enabled some to enjoy a more varied lifestyle.

Having a job had increased some people's independence and they were now able to travel alone, go out more socially, go on holiday and take responsibility for finances. Being able to tell other people where they worked rather than say they were unemployed or went to a day centre, enhanced people's sense of self worth as well as how others perceived them.

People with learning disabilities and/or ASD thought there should be more supported employment agencies and that employers generally needed to be more understanding. They advised others to “go for it” and that jobs can open up new opportunities and offer the chance to contribute financially to the family as well as in other ways. Families themselves benefited as relationships improved and they worried less about their sons or daughters now that they were in a job. There was widespread praise for the support received from job coaches and/or the supported employment agency. Their experiences showed that quality outcomes are possible when supported employment is well implemented.

Employers’ opinions

Usually a number of factors combined to influence the decision to employ someone with learning disabilities and/or ASD. For example, a vacancy had arisen and the company was “keen to set a good example”. Employers referred to gaining reliable, motivated and consistent workers as ‘the business case’ for employing workers with disabilities.

The approach and professionalism of the supported employment agency was a critical success factor. The agency supported employers by matching people to vacancies, providing ongoing job coach support if necessary, and providing information and training to other employees.

Without exception, employers said the impact on the company had been one of raising their profile and they had been pleasantly surprised at the response of their other staff. Employees with learning disabilities and/or ASD were frequently referred to as “a real asset”.

Perceived barriers to employment

Key stakeholders and employment support providers perceived the lack of implementation and national leadership for supported employment and not having a consistent framework for commissioning and auditing its performance as the biggest barrier. This finding was further supported by the literature review.

The traditional view that the ‘benefits trap’ is the biggest challenge was disputed by the research and case studies from North Lanarkshire’s Supported Employment Service, which support the view that with the right knowledge and motivation there are ways to work with the existing system. In the longer term however, it was the view of some key stakeholders, employment support providers and authors

that systemic change is needed to address, for instance, the problems experienced by those living in registered accommodation who want to work.

Key stakeholders and the literature review also identified negative attitudes and low expectations among those supporting people with learning disabilities and/or ASD as a barrier. For example, respondents suggested care managers were not routinely considering employment as an option during community care assessments.

Best practice features

The following features of good practice were highlighted in the literature:

- A values based approach to implementing supported employment;
- A user-led approach promoting choice and emphasising careers not jobs;
- Employment specialists that facilitate and enable
- Employment specialists that adopt a business-like approach and also take account of employers’ needs
- Awareness raising and training for employers, co-workers and supervisors
- Employment specialists receiving the training and support they need;
- Using ‘natural supports’ within the workplace and supporting jobs in ways that are ‘typical’ for the setting;
- Emphasising social integration;
- Supporting self-employment opportunities;
- The availability of follow up services;
- Services supporting people with complex disabilities;
- Tackling systemic barriers.

Implications for policy & practice

The findings from this study point to a need to build on the well-developed practice, skills and expertise of existing supported employment services in Scotland. In addition, development initiatives in 6 key areas could be helpful as follows:

1. A national definition, framework and standards for supported employment
2. Making services more user-led and career based

3. Targeting school leavers to expand expectations and options
4. Equipping employment specialists to facilitate self employment
5. Developing strategies to include people with complex disabilities
6. Making supported employment more accessible to adults with autism.

In addition, it will be important to continue to promote and publicise good practice. This includes involving people with learning disabilities and/or ASD and employers directly in developing and evaluating these initiatives.

Methods

The research was in 4 distinct parts:

- A postal questionnaire survey of over 160 relevant providers across Scotland about the support provided to people with learning disabilities and/or ASD and the types of jobs and individuals supported
- A review of the literature within the past 5 years on best practice in supported employment
- Interviews with 10 key stakeholders in policy and strategic planning positions in the statutory and voluntary sectors
- Interviews with 15 supported employees, their families and 10 employers carried out by 3 people with learning disabilities recruited as paid Research Associates working alongside the researchers.

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