



APPGA Meeting on Employment

Date: Tuesday 14th April

Time: 17:00-18:00

Location: Room M, Portcullis House

Attendance:

Alison Hume MP (Chair)

Minister Stephen Timms MP

Char Bailey (Director of People – Birmingham Pride & Board Member – Neurodiversity in Business)

Danae Leaman-Hill (Director of External Affairs and Development – Ambitious About Autism)

Gavin Simpson (Lived Experience Speaker)

Kim Hoque (Professor of Human Resource Management and Vice Dean (People and Culture) – King's College London & Disability@Work)

Leo Capella (Project Officer – National Autistic Society)

Lesley Burrows (Managing Director – Positive Footprints)

Linda Royles (Urban Forest Collective CIC - Support into Education/Employment Through Horticulture)

Rebecca Sterry (Interim CEO – Autistica)

Shona Williams (Wellbeing, Mental Health and Neurodiversity Lead – CACI)

Stuart Stoner (Committee Clerk – House of Lords)

Tegan Mulby (Administration Support – Positive Footprints)

Tom Purser (CEO – Autism Action)

Agenda:

Meeting Opened at 17:00

1. Welcome and introductions from the Chair, Alison Hume MP

Alison introduced each attendee and explained that they would have around 25 minutes until the Minister's arrival, and so this time would be used to plan a discussion and questions for him.

2. Discussion for coming up with questions to the Minister and examples of good practice to share

Danae explained that Ambitious About Autism has been running Employ Autism for around ten years now and the programme has been very successful. They aim to train careers professionals in schools, colleges and universities to provide autism friendly careers support and paid internships. The scheme has been favourably evaluated by UCL and Autistica, but they've seen a dip in appetite by employers and are curious to understand why this is the case. She suggested it might be elements of the Employment Rights Act deterring employers.

Alison asked how many people were put through the scheme, and Danae said 500 people.

Leo found that employers are often scared about things going wrong on their side, and autistic people are worried about their adjustments not being implemented. He noted that there is more work to be done to lower the fear level among both groups.

Alison suggested we ask what the government is doing to give employers confidence in hiring and supporting autistic people.

Gavin said that many businesses are keen to get it right, but middle management lacks understanding and training to support neurodivergent hires. He asked whether this was something Lesley and Tegan had experienced with Positive Footprints.

Lesley replied that Positive Footprints is part of a bigger group which offers paid internships for people with autism (Project Search). As an organisation they are positively curious about autism, but they understand that not everyone feels comfortable expressing it or in some cases, they don't see that they need an adjustment.

Shona said CACI has been working with NAS to gain the gold inclusive employer award, and that they are the first in the UK to get this. As a result, they've seen increased disclosure and people saying they think they might have ADHD and autism. They are keen to support people who suspect neurodiversity outside of diagnosis, because waiting list are typically 4-6 years in the UK. She said that adjustments and accommodations are becoming a standard. For example, an employee disclosed to CACI for the first time at 50 that he was autistic, despite being diagnosed in his teens, because he trusted them to support him.

Gavin referred to this as a curb cut effect – curb cuts help cyclists, delivery drivers, etc and not just wheelchair users. Accommodations can be used to support everyone as a baseline.

Char added that this must be provided on an intersectional basis: a huge number of people fear discrimination, and this is exacerbated for marginalised identities.

Tom said that there is no clear pathway or autism employment system. Employers are acting on goodwill and further policy/frameworks are needed to amend employment systems and build a greater sense of capability amongst employers.

Stuart wanted to share what the House of Lords Autism Act 2009 Committee's conclusions were on employment. He reviewed the six core recommendations of the strategy, adding that he himself was diagnosed as autistic last year and was very grateful to the people in the room who had contributed evidence to the report. On the topic of middle managers, he agreed it is an issue of understanding.

Rebecca mentioned that we are now two years on from the Buckland Review and much good practice and lots of recommendations came from this report. She explained that the Neurodiversity Employers Index (NDEI) is an Autistica product developed out of the back of this research, and this has been used to measure that fear that employers have, and to assess where they are in the inclusion journey and give recommendations, though she is worried we are preaching to the converted.

Kim added that he also gave evidence to the committee, and that this was just one of many government investigations and reports into this topic in recent years, it's now about implementing next steps. He mentioned that he is a member of the DWP Neurodiversity Panel, who are due to report back in May, which should contribute greatly to this topic of employment policy.

3. Alison Hume MP to give brief overview of discussion once Minister arrives. Intro from Minister on work ongoing to close employment gap (17:30 – 17:35)

Minister Timms arrived, and Alison introduced him. She explained that attendees had been discussing the employment gap, fear from employers about getting it wrong with neurodivergent employees, and the lack of knowledge by middle management in implementing adjustment and supports even with higher-up attempts to encourage neurodivergent engagement. Attendees also discussed how they are seeing increased disclosure and how they might break down the issue of 3/10 autistic people not being in employment. She finished the summary by noting that while

there were lots of examples of issues and best practice, questions are likely to be on what the government is going to do to act on these.

Minister Timms drew attention to the neurodiversity panel Kim mentioned, noting that the report is a very thorough piece of work which will build on the valuable findings of the Buckland Review, with an aim to increase autistic employment long term. The Government funded ACAS between January and March to deliver neurodiversity masterclasses for Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs), with a focus on inclusive workplace design and what people should be doing. 1,800 SMEs took part. They also hope to implement the Connect to Work programme by the summer of this year – 47 groups of LA's have signed up to deliver Connect to Work, including Wales. In this scheme the LA will be responsible for what is actually delivered, a far more devolved approach. This should connect NHS, skills providers, colleges and local authorities in a way that cannot be organised from Whitehall, with a specialist pathway for neurodivergent people.

They also hope to strengthen the Disability Confident Scheme. 19000 employers have signed up, suggesting there is a willingness to be inclusive, but few go further to act on it. They are keen for people to progress up a level, with employers no longer being able to stay at Level One for more than two years. They hope this will give them time and opportunity to address this employer “fear factor”. Finally, they are committed to reform Access to Work. He agreed that this process currently takes too long, but that they are hoping to work with a series of committees, like the Independent Disability Advisory Panel. He said that while it is an important provision for support, it is not currently in good shape. He accepted that there is still a great deal of work to do.

4. Roundtable discussion chaired by Alison Hume MP, with lived experience speakers, accredited employers & national autism and employment charities (17:35 – 18:00)

Alison asked the Minister about DWP's involvement in the next Autism Strategy. Minister Timms responded that the panel Kim is sitting on is a key part of DWP's strategy and is releasing next month.

Alison then suggested they move on to questions, adding that the most important people here are those with lived experience.

Tegan explained that when she was at college, she was often frustrated and would regularly get stressed but knew that her

education was coming to an end. She wanted to go into work but did not know what options were available and felt options were limited because of her autism and complex disabilities. She said she was fortunate to get an internship with Project Search and to have a tour around. She had to make a choice between remaining in college – where she wasn't really learning anything – or take the step forward into work. She was able to learn more about her own personal qualities and strengths.

Leo agreed that Tegan is a great example of someone who's been furthered professionally by this kind of support. He agreed that there is a lot going on to support autistic people and a commitment to progress but was keen to know how they were planning to support autistic people in having an equal seat at the table alongside their employers.

Danae said this was a welcome update and good to hear. She asked what was being put in place to make sure barriers to autism aren't being diluted.

Minister Timms said he is very pleased to hear about Tegan's experience. He said there were some specific ATW issues around Project Search and the work it does, and these questions should be put to Charlie Mayfield and his team. He said they are quite open to receiving this sort of thing. He asked Leo whether his point about charities was that charities should have the further input in the classes?

Leo clarified that he would like to see these classes expanded effectively and to work more extensively with charities.

Minister Timms thanked Leo for mentioning co-production, explaining that the model they have now for the Minister Timms review is two co-chairs and a recruited panel. They've now had four meetings, with another in Manchester due to take place next week. He said he is keen to do more engagement at this point, and for people to know what is going on in government. He said he has spoken to Robert Buckland on this.

Alison said she is keen to bring in Char Bailey on this to talk further about the significance of intersectionality.

Char said she'd like to hear more about how they're providing support for those who are in marginalised identities and enabling them to advocate for themselves to be accepted.

Gavin said he is proof of the difference that can be made, and that he was bullied at school. He said that while we've spoken a lot about the trouble students might have, we need to talk about investment; what will it mean for businesses to have that commerciality. At the other end of that, everyone at work was once a child. How are we holding them accountable for the future work force? He added that he has 3 neurodivergent children who are made to feel different at school.

Tom asked to see further details around Connect to Work, and the Minister promised to get that information to Alison.

Kim said that employers respond to reasonable adjustments. He asked that now the government are committing to introducing mandatory pay gap reporting, whether they might be able to include this in their overhaul of Disability Confident.

Minister Timms agreed that intersectionality is very important and is firmly on his radar, particularly with regard to PIP. He agreed that it is not embedded everywhere yet, but they are working on coming up with a framework to enable this to be delivered.

He said that the point Gavin made leads into discussion of the Milburn Review. Far too many pupils are ending up as NEETs, which makes the chance of getting into work later on much harder. He asked Gavin if he thought the system was as bad now as when he was in school.

Gavin replied that things are worse now than they were before.

Shona added that the workplace also looks very different now than it did then, with a whole generation of people who have been diagnosed later and now children who are increasingly self-aware. She suggested we work on bridging the gap between education and employment. The office does not look the same anymore, with remote and alternative methods of working offering different routes into employment. CACI invited a ten-year-old boy in and he felt much more confident about going into work after seeing that the typical office, 9-5 setting does not really exist anymore.

Minister Timms said that employers are now understanding the need for diverse thinking in their ranks, and that they are near the end of having workplaces without neurodivergent people. He said that he was very grateful to Kim for the work he had done personally on Disability Confident and was pleased with the progress that had been made. He acknowledged that he

hadn't thought about linking pay gap information with Disability Confident, but that he would think more about how this was going to have an impact.

Lesley said that one of the main things with Tegan was realising her qualities and skills. understanding the values they can apply to work and looking at all opportunities.

Tegan added that even though she had no qualifications, she was able to secure employment because of support with personal and professional progression.

5. Minister's Reflections, AOB, thanks and close from the Chair (18:00)

Minister Timms thanked everyone for an interesting discussion, and Alison asked that everyone stay behind at the end for a photo.