OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Economy and Fair Work Committee

Wednesday 25 January 2023

Session 6

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Wednesday 25 January 2023

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ECONOMY AND FAIR WORK COMMITTEE
3rd Meeting 2023, Session 6

CONVENER

*Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green)
*Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
*Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP)
*Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
*Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con)
*Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab)
*Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Emma Congreve (Fraser of Allander Institute)
Ashley Ryan (Enable Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Anne Peat

LOCATION

The James Clerk Maxwell Room (CR4)

Scottish Parliament

Economy and Fair Work Committee

Wednesday 25 January 2023

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:45]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Claire Baker): Good morning, and welcome to the third meeting in 2023 of the Economy and Fair Work Committee. Our first item of business is to decide whether to take item 3 in private. Are members content to do so?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Disability Employment Gap

The Convener: Our next item of business is an evidence session on the disability employment gap. The committee has agreed to undertake some initial work to identify and address the barriers that limit the ability of disabled people to get and keep employment. We have launched a call for views, which will remain open until 16 February. At our next meeting in a fortnight, the committee will hear from the Minister for Just Transition, Employment and Fair Work. We plan to return to this work later in the year.

I welcome Emma Congreve, deputy director of the Fraser of Allander Institute, and Ashley Ryan, director of Enable Works at Enable Scotland. I ask members to keep their questions and answers as concise as possible so that we get through as much as possible.

I come to Ashley Ryan first. In general, participation rates for disabled people in the labour market have improved in the past 10 years. How has that been achieved? In your view, what is the employment outlook for the disabled population?

Ashley Ryan (Enable Scotland): There has been a real focus on providing specialist support for disabled people across Scotland, and on putting in place a plan not only for participants but to upskill employers, which is key because there needs to be confidence in employers. During the Covid-19 pandemic, as members will have seen, disabled people were the first to be furloughed and often the last to be brought back to the workplace.

The real focus on disability support that we have seen in local authorities such as City of Edinburgh Council and Dundee City Council has led to greater participation, because grass-roots third sector organisations can reach those participants who are not engaged, or are reticent to engage, with the jobcentre. That support is key, and it also involves aftercare. It is about not just the support that is put in before someone gets a job, but supporting someone after they get a job—funding for that support has come through in the past few years—which allows them to continue that work for around six months.

The Convener: Enable Scotland—I think—recently worked with the Fraser of Allander Institute to produce a report. We know that the number of disabled people in employment has increased, but are some disabled people now further away from the labour market? The report focuses on those with learning disabilities, and the Government has a target in that regard. Do you have any insight into where greater focus might be needed?

Ashley Ryan: The employment rate for people with learning disabilities in Scotland has not

improved much in the past few years. In fact, that group is the most marginalised of all those groups, partly because there has been a focus on 16-hour and 35-hour jobs. There is also a massive postcode lottery. We do not know exactly how many people with learning disabilities are looking to access work because the data is not currently there. We rely on people being known to social work to be able to gather that data.

The key aspect is supported employment. Although the supported employment review confirmed that supported employment exists in many areas, the support is inconsistent and tends to be provided by third sector organisations or in small local authority areas. It is the most successful way of supporting someone with a learning disability into work, but it is a massive postcode lottery.

Someone with a learning disability who lives in Bettyhill, all the way up in the north-east of Scotland, will not be able to access support because there is no one there to provide it. That is a massive challenge, because although we are focusing on disability, and in some cases the rates of employment among those with a disability have improved, the employment rate for those with a learning disability has remained static. That is despite organisations such as Enable Works supporting more than 5,500 people each year. We are getting more than 1,000 people into work, but those challenges remain. They start before people go into work—they start in school. We consistently see that 20 per cent of young people with a learning disability who go through school do not achieve qualifications past level 2. That should not be happening today; we should not see 20 per cent of school leavers with a learning disability leaving school with no qualifications and nothing to show for it. We are seeing a real lack of aspiration for that client group in school. For a parent of a child with a learning disability, diagnosis is a very negative time, and from then on, they go through life being told more about what their child will not do and less about what their child will do, so their aspirations are significantly lower.

We still see young people with learning disabilities leaving school and going into supported college courses with no vocational focus. At the end of a three-year course, they effectively fall off a precipice. If someone leaves school without a positive destination, they are five times more likely to be unemployed by the age of 25, which creates a reliance on benefits and the welfare state. Many of those young people have aspirations to do more, but we are not getting the support right for them, even at that early stage. Employment support starts way before a young person leaves school, even as early as primary school.

The Convener: Can you describe the barriers? When we think about the disability employment gap, we may think that the solution is the same for everybody, or that employers all need to do the same things to support more people into work. However, are there different barriers for people who are living with different disabilities?

Ashley Ryan: Absolutely. We are seeing a significant increase in mental health concerns among our client group. We have to support them to think about their primary barriers. Sometimes a lack of confidence, aspiration, ability or self-belief is a massive barrier for them, and we have to work hard to overcome some of those key problems. We are working with young people much earlier to get them out of the house and engaging in their community where they are disengaged and perhaps not engaging at all. Covid put them back in their homes for a long time. The statistics on learning disabilities and Covid have made young people and adults afraid to be outside and to be unwell, as have the statistics on people with learning disabilities dying. There is a lot of work to be done at the beginning to prepare people for when they come into work so that they are confident and are able to access the employment support.

The Convener: Thank you for that, Ashley.

I turn to Emma Congreve. My initial question was partly about the outlook for continued progress. We recognise that there has been progress and that disabled people are getting into employment, but what does the picture for continued progress look like? The Government has a target to increase the employment rate for people with disabilities to 50 per cent. Do you think that it is on track to meet that target?

Emma Congreve (Fraser of Allander Institute): The Scottish Government target is about halving the disability employment gap: that is the difference between the number of disabled people who are working and the number of non-disabled people who are working. It has made some progress towards that, but there are two things to consider. We need to look at what is happening to the disabled population, which is growing. To be clear on the definition of disability—although it is a bit of a tick-box exercise—a disabled person has to say that they have an impairment, illness or condition that is expected to last more than 12 months and that limits their day-to-day life either a little or a lot. In general, in relation to the statistics, we tend to use the definition in the Equality Act 2010.

We have seen an increase in the disabled population, particularly throughout the Covid period. I will come back to the issues with data, but the main drivers of that increase seem to relate to mental health. Evidence from across the

United Kingdom shows that there has been an increase in mental health conditions, which has led to people falling under the definition of "disabled" in the 2010 act. There are other illnesses and disabilities that may be part of long Covid, but it is difficult to know that conclusively. The disabled population has increased, which of course has an impact on the disability employment gap.

I point out that people who are becoming newly disabled—that terminology does not feel quite right—may be more likely to be employed, because their condition has not been long term. They do not have a lifelong condition; the evidence seems to point to it being something that is acquired. There is a reasonable chance that those people were in employment anyway, so that may be leading to some of the improvement that we see in the disability employment gap, particularly over the past few years.

We have to look at both sides of those figures in order to understand what is going on. If it is more likely that the improvement has happened because the disabled population has increased and those people are more likely to be employed, the question is this: what is happening to everyone else? Has there actually been an improvement in employment rates for people who were disabled before the pandemic? Distinctions need to be made when looking at whether there has been an improvement.

The Convener: The report also made recommendations around data, which you mentioned. You described the difficulties that exist in calculating the employability gap because of the number of adults who identify as having a disability. The report also talked about

"an audit of the current employability support schemes".

The report was published in 2021. Has there been any Government response to it, or have you had any discussions with Government about some of the recommendations on data and audit?

Emma Congreve: The report to which you refer—"Invisible no more: Recommendations to build evidence-based effective action for people with learning disabilities in Scotland"—was from a programme of work that we carried out through 2020 and 2021 on learning disabilities in particular. We are now returning to that project—the Fraser of Allander Institute is partnering with Enable to disseminate some of the findings; that is where our link comes in. To be clear, the work that we did was funded by a charity called Acorns to Trees, which is separate from Enable.

That report found that there were some really troubling issues with the data. It was very difficult to understand what was happening in the employability landscape. At the time, the "No one left behind" approach was starting to become more prominent, and the answer to any question that we had seemed to be that, "No one left behind" will sort that out. We are still struggling to understand what the "No one left behind" approach will do for disabled people. How will it be different from what came before? What are those pathways?

Since then, new documents have come out. For example, a shared measurement framework is now being used to help to shine a light on what is happening. A lot of that is still in development, so we are still not clear about what data will be gathered. We are doing a second-round project, recognising that there are still many unanswered questions, in which we will try to do the audit that we described. We will also do a lot of work with data and on those who gather the data, including the Scottish Government and the Office for National Statistics, which—to be frank—is quite poor on disability data, in particular with regard to disaggregating it for Scotland.

We are not necessarily seeing the progress on data that we would like, but we understand that the Scottish Government recognises that it has a lot to do in that respect and is trying to make progress. There are difficult issues.

The Convener: I have one final question, and then I will invite Graham Simpson in.

Last week, we had the cabinet secretary in to talk about the budget. There has been a £53 million cut in funding for employability services. The cabinet secretary outlined that that money was not committed, that opportunity was being lost and that the cut was necessary in a difficult financial situation. That was the decision that the Government made.

I go to Ashley Ryan first. It was anticipated that that money would come through, but it has been removed. Do you have any comment on the employability landscape for people with disabilities? What funding is required to deliver in that area?

Ashley Ryan: Obviously, we have seen a slight decrease in the disability employment gap, but—as Emma Congreve said—some of that could be related to the fact that higher numbers of people are now classed as economically inactive, and higher numbers of people in Scotland are claiming benefits related to their health. Although that looks like a decrease, the reality could be masked by some of the things that Emma discussed.

In the funding landscape, although youth unemployment has improved, there is still a key cohort of disabled young people and young people with complex barriers who are not able to access the support that they require. Similarly, for adults with a disability, the employment gap is higher

among 35 to 49-year-olds. If we are seeing uptakes in older workers coming back into the workplace and that gap is higher, that creates a disproportionate lack of opportunity for disabled people to access the world of work later in life. Funding challenges remain, because we have to focus on the cohort of people who are not able to access support.

We may be seeing the employment rate increase, but, even though youth unemployment did not go up to 21 per cent, as we thought that it would, during Covid, that key cohort of people is still not progressing. If the employment rate for learning disability is still 4 per cent, we need a real focus on those key groups. The situation is not improving for that group. The statistics have remained static for that group leaving school, and continue to be static for those people as they progress.

10:00

We have seen some key successes where local authorities have put in place significant and sustained provision. One of our provisions is "All in Edinburgh", which is a partnership of four charities—we are one of the four—that has been funded for the next six years. The City of Edinburgh Council has recognised that, although it does not have all the funding answers right now, there is a challenge that has to be supported and funded. That allows us, as a partnership, to retain staff, and it also allows those staff to become qualified. They are all qualified in supported employment; they understand the client group; and they are there to be a sustained presence for that group. That is key; it means that we are achieving higher rates of jobs in that client group than ever before. The local authority recognised not only the funding challenges, but that that area needs to be funded. It has committed to funding that partnership for the next six years, which is highly unusual.

Emma Congreve: We looked into the cut in funding at the end of last year. It was a worrying development so late in the financial year, given the scale of the challenge with regard to getting disabled people in employment. We understand the rationale, given that the money had not been allocated and that there was a tight settlement. We understand those fiscal pressures and why that happened at that time. What is less clear is why the money had not been allocated by that point. What were the reasons for that? Is it about the capacity in the system to get that money to the right place at the right time? If that money was in the budget, why did we get to that point?

As Ashley Ryan said, certainty is a key point for the people who provide the services. They need to know that the money will be there so that they are able to plan. Disabled people often have complex challenges and need a lot of support over a long time; it is not necessarily something that can be done in a few months. People will ask whether the same thing will happen again next October. Although what happened is understandable, it is concerning that we reached that point with such an issue.

The Convener: Was it anticipated that the £53 million was coming? Was there planning under way or expectations linked to that?

Emma Congreve: It is unclear. Quite a lot of that information is not publicly accessible. Obviously, the process involves 32 local authorities, so a lot has to go on to get the money to the right places, but it is hard to understand why that money had not been allocated by that point. We do not have the answer to that yet.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): Good morning, and thanks for coming. I am really interested in what you have said. You have both touched on data. As you were speaking, I was thinking that it must be difficult to know what the true picture is. Some people might not even realise that they have a disability, if we are talking about mental health, because people just struggle on. Correct me if I am wrong, but I presume that someone has to have some kind of diagnosis and be flagged up somewhere to appear in the figures that you are talking about.

Emma Congreve: That is a good question. Because the Equality Act 2010 has a clear definition of "disabled person", as I described, there is a lot of data available to determine the number of disabled people in the population, notwithstanding what you said about those who might not realise that they are disabled. The same question is consistently asked across a lot of surveys. The ONS asks it in its surveys, as does the census. In Scotland, we have what are called the core questions, and the same question is asked across the three big surveys that the Scottish Government administers. There is a lot of data on that question, and that is really good and important.

The question is whether people have a condition that is lasting for longer than 12 months. It might be that, with mental health issues, there is a hurdle to identifying that. People do not necessarily need a medical diagnosis, because there is a question on the extent to which the condition limits their life. The question is asked in the right way to capture that but, of course, it will miss people.

However, the key issue on the data is about it being disaggregated into the type of disability. That question is inconsistently asked across surveys. Sometimes, it is asked in outdated

language that will mean nothing to people. I hope that this is being changed, but I noted that the Scottish health survey talked about "mental incapacity" for people with a learning disability, which is a very outdated term. There is no source of reliable disaggregated data on disability to separate people with a physical disability from those with mental health or learning disabilities. That is really concerning because, as the convener mentioned, different support is required for different people. How do you know that you are putting in place the right support if you do not know who the people are? For planning, that is worrying.

Graham Simpson: You are absolutely right. There is such a variety of disabilities. We have been talking about mental health, but there are all sorts of disabilities as well as physical ones.

Perhaps Ashley Ryan could answer this next question. From your experience, are we doing better for particular types of disability? Are there glaring gaps where we should improve?

Ashley Ryan: The learning disability statistics are pretty static. The support can be varied, and it is a bit of a postcode lottery. We have also seen real challenges in getting the right support for someone who has a visual impairment or someone who has hearing loss, because a lot of the traditional employability providers no longer do that. It is challenging.

Funding an interpreter to support someone who uses British Sign Language is incredibly challenging. It might be £75 an hour to get an interpreter. It is not fair if someone cannot access that support but, if that is not built into a budget and the funding is not there to provide it, it becomes a double-edged sword.

People in those key groups struggle to get support when they could absolutely go into the world of work and do something really great. With learning disability, there is again very much a postcode lottery, so those are real challenges. We have seen some uptake among those who have a physical disability, where it is easier to understand the adaptations that are required. We can see real successes there, but we are struggling to see successes with learning disability and in the field of visual impairment and hearing loss.

We are also seeing challenges for people with autism, because it is not as obvious to employers how to support those people. You can bring in equipment and widen access, but how do you support someone with autism? It is a more complex minefield for employers. They are less likely to take that chance, and they might require specialist support to do that. The adaptations tend not to cost any money, but employers can often have the mindset that it might cost them money and the people might not be at work.

In fact, with the right support, employers have been able to see that representing the communities that they serve in their entirety is really important. Post Covid, we are seeing that employees want to work for organisations that represent them and their communities, which is really important. The challenge for employers is not about adaptations that they can pay for, such as a lower desk, but specialist support, which often does not cost any money.

Graham Simpson: Do you have examples that you can share with us, perhaps in writing, of good and not-so-good practice? I suppose that we want to hear the good practice. Who is doing things well, particularly for the disabilities that, as you described, cannot be seen? If someone has a physical disability, that can be obvious, and maybe an employer can buy stuff that would help. If the disability is not physical, that might be a bit more challenging.

Ashley Ryan: Absolutely—we can share lots of examples in writing. We have some really great examples, as we work with around 1,000 employers each year, some small, some medium-sized and some large.

For example, one of our biggest successes is Diageo. It is a worldwide organisation, but its commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion goes beyond ticking a box to get "disability confident" status. At every level of the company, everyone has bought in entirely to supporting the communities that it serves. It has a skills gap. It recognises that it has an ageing workforce, and it wants to bring young people into its business. It wants to bring in new ideas and creativity.

We have had great success in the factories out in Shieldhall. I can share a video with the committee about a young man called Liam and his experience of coming into work. He is an autistic young man who has come in and thrived in an environment where there is that shop floor or factory mentality. With Diageo, we have built in training at every level, because you have to have buy-in at every level. Liam has a mentor who works with him, and he has thrived in that environment. He has completed his modern apprenticeship and done things that he did not think that he would do.

That was a real journey with Diageo, and seeing the change in people's perspective on disability has been really exciting. That partnership has so much opportunity, because the food and drink sector, including whisky, is a growth sector in Scotland. Unsurprisingly, people love visiting distilleries. Diageo is an exceptional example—it is a great organisation to work with.

Emma Congreve: It is important to share descriptive examples of things that have worked well. We try to look at case studies of what has worked well, but we struggle to look comprehensively across the piece at what did not work well. You get the good news stories, and you can learn from them but, in Scotland, across a range of areas—this is becoming more of an issue because the "No one left behind" strategy is leading to more dispersed funding and schemes—we lack that comprehensive evaluation of what is happening in those areas.

Such an evaluation would allow us to hear about the challenges, the things that are not working and the people who are being left behind, which will undoubtedly happen in some areas as things develop over the next few years. We need to learn from that, so we need to look for evidence for a more comprehensive evaluation piece, which is harder to do but is critical.

Graham Simpson: You are absolutely right. We should look not just at the good stuff but at what has not worked so that we can learn from it.

I am happy to leave it there, convener.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): I want to follow up on that point with Emma Congreve. Is the challenge the fact that there is such a cocktail of different funding pots that all have their own criteria and evaluation? Are you arguing that we should try to streamline that and bring the funds together?

Emma Congreve: No, not necessarily. There are obviously pros and cons with different funding models. We have no particular view on whether the way that we are going is right or wrong. Even when pots are centralised—we see this with fair start Scotland and some of the other schemes—the evaluation that is in place is okay, but it does not get to the root of exactly what is not working in those schemes. The success rates for disabled people are a lot lower in fair start Scotland than they are for other members of the population who enter the scheme. Why is that? What would have happened in the absence of the scheme?

It is important to get a full picture of the difference that support schemes make. To be honest, it does not matter whether it is centralised or decentralised; we still have problems in Scotland with that proper evaluation. There is no reason why that evaluation cannot be done at dispersed level.

Colin Smyth: It is about consistency in the evaluation.

I want to come back to the point about the recent cut to the budget. Like you, I am confused about the impact. One issue that organisations have raised with me has been the delays in allocating funding, although I am not sure—I do not know whether this is something that you have picked up from your work—whether the delay was caused by the £53 million not being forthcoming or just general delays in the whole system. At the moment, many organisations are in a really precarious position and are waiting for funding that normally would have been allocated, but that has not happened. Have you picked up that in your work?

Emma Congreve: Ashley might be better able to comment on that.

10:15

Ashley Ryan: The challenges remain for us. Last year, we were asked to procure services with six months to go. Local authorities said, "Can you do three months of work?", but that is not possible. It is not ethical to recruit staff on three-month contracts. We are losing very qualified staff by the bucketload from employability, because organisations cannot sustain their funding or have no ability to retain that funding. We were getting to the point of the employability fund ending, and there was going to be a significant delay of six or nine months in what came next.

The young people dropped off a precipice. They had no training agreements or support just as a result of the significant delays. We are still waiting to find out what will happen next year and whether it will come to that again. Last year, many local authorities put out funding in October and November, but you cannot do anything with it in that time. Under the principles of supported employment, in that situation, you cannot operate a good model, because you cannot do something in 10 weeks—in that time, you are just getting to know someone. If I put in a bid in October, they tell me in December and, by the time that I recruit someone, it could be February. What can you do in six weeks? That is unsustainable, and it is not ethical for us to bring in staff in that way.

Colin Smyth: You touch on a major issue for an organisation that I am involved with at the moment. It has had a funding application with the Scottish Government for months. Where are the delays coming from? Why is it different this year from how it was two or three years ago? What has happened to cause the delays?

Ashley Ryan: When the funding goes out, it can be challenging for smaller local authorities to administer it quickly, because they do not have the backing of huge departments. Very small local authorities find that really challenging. We were told by local authorities that they did not have confirmation of their funding. Some of the ones that hedged their bets and put out funding to providers then had it cut and had to go back to

those providers to say, “I’m really sorry, but your money has been cut.”

Local authorities are rightly reticent in putting out funding because, if they tell you that you have £100,000 and later come back and say that you are getting only £50,000, that raises wide-ranging issues. Going on what local authorities told us, it appears that there were significant delays in their grant letters being administered and in getting information. That remains a challenge.

Colin Smyth: Funding in general seems to be a bit of a lottery. Groups of people are employed full time just, in effect, constantly chasing funding. What do we need to do about streamlining the process to make it a more regular source of funding rather than one that requires constant running around trying to get it? Surely we need to do something about streamlining it.

Ashley Ryan: A small organisation that works in one or two local authorities faces challenges: it does not have a bid team, so it is overtaken by private providers with big bid teams who are in employability for profit. We do not have that luxury—it would be great, but we do not. A national organisation has to put resource into 32 different bids that have to be localised—rightly so—because it wants to provide that service. That also creates challenges, because it takes people away from delivering front-line services.

With EF going and the new service coming in, yearly funding is a massive challenge. I am now at the point in January when, if I do not know what I am doing next year, I am considering whether staff will be here next year. Although we have been really lucky and not had any redundancies in more than 10 years, that is not the case for colleagues across the sector. It is incredibly challenging. I am on the executive board of the third sector employability forum, and we are hearing from members that they are incredibly concerned about the funding landscape.

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): I would like to follow up on that. The £53 million was intended as additional funding, so nobody’s funding was actually cut, but do you think that the disruption of not knowing whether it was coming may have delayed some of the regular contracts? I am trying to get a sense of what actually happened and the impact of it.

Emma Congreve: The honest answer is that we do not know. What happened in the lead-up to that is just not clear. You are right that it was additional money. It was not a cut to employability funding in that year, but clearly that money was expected by someone, somewhere.

Fiona Hyslop: That is what I am trying to understand. Were people holding back from commissioning because they thought that they would have a larger amount? That is what I am trying to work out.

Emma Congreve: It ties in with what Ashley said about the general uncertainty around when funding letters are coming out. The situation with the £53 million came on top of that uncertainty and created a further feeling that big numbers can be taken away at short notice. The real issue to try to understand is what happened over the full year to the funding agreements and the funding letters and where the issues are in the system that got us to a place where that was able to happen, because clearly the money had not been allocated. That has also led to issues with third-sector providers being able to have certainty. The money comes through local authorities to them, so there is a double level of uncertainty. Clearly, it should be a lot easier than this, and why it is not is unclear.

Fiona Hyslop: I want to ask Ashley Ryan about partnership working. Obviously, we understand that it is a complex landscape, and I very much appreciate what you have said. I want to understand some of the key partnerships, what is successful and where there are challenges. If we are to move the agenda on, what do we need to work on?

Ashley Ryan: Following on from what Emma said, we did not necessarily see the same amount of money going to the third sector that we saw being allocated when provision was centralised. That is something to bear in mind. For example, the employability fund previously went wholly to further education, but when responsibility was moved to the third sector, the same amount of money did not seem to come with it. The challenges for the third sector came when that money did not flow through: it was filling gaps and making sure that the employability provision at local authority level was kept and did not flow past that in some areas.

We lead the largest third-sector partnership in Scotland in Dundee, which some of the committee will visit on Monday. There was a commitment to strengthen and start investing in the third sector and have that partnership because we recognise that, together, we are significantly stronger.

We want to offer a clear landscape for clients. Clients come into our service—it is a one-stop shop—and the partner that they work with is determined by their needs. So, we are not all fighting over the same clients because that can become very competitive. That works really well for the local authority because, although it only has to engage with us as a lead partner, it is still able to work with 10 partners.

In Dundee, we work across the full local authority area with everyone who has barriers,

such as young parents, lone-parent workers and disabled clients, and we have mental health support services. That has created a really clear landscape for the local authority to engage with us in partnership and for the client to engage with us because they know that they will get the right service for them, and not for any other reason.

That has been a massive success, and we are looking to replicate that work in other areas. We are starting to see real progress because local authorities recognise the benefits of that and of only having to engage with a lead partner. It is like the prime model that you see in fair start, but it is not a prime and sub-prime relationship; it is very much a partnership. It has a steering group, and you will get to see some of the benefits if you visit on Monday.

Fiona Hyslop: Other colleagues might go into Placebase, the different geographies and their impact. I was struck by what you said about the aspirations of young people. In terms of partnership, developing the young workforce is a key issue in the employability sector generally. Can anything more be done for young people in school? Early preparation was mentioned, and it is about what you can do as opposed to what you cannot do. Is that partnership strong enough, or does something more need to be done for young people with disabilities in school, working with Developing the Young Workforce?

Ashley Ryan: We are part of that partnership. We deliver in 70 schools, through the young persons guarantee and DYW, but, again, there is a postcode lottery. We deliver that in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee, Inverness and down in Ayrshire. If you are not in those areas, there is a recognition that the specialist support is not there. As I said, in rural areas in particular, there are significant challenges for young people.

We have heard reports of young people not getting a work placement, and therefore no work experience, unless their mum or dad organises it. We have seen an example of a young person sitting under the stairs for a full year and doing nothing. So, there are some real challenges, but by bringing us in, Developing the Young Workforce is recognising that that specialist work needs to be done.

It involves more than careers advice and guidance. Our staff work with 25 young people on a one-to-one basis under the principles of supported employment. If you are a careers adviser to 1,000 young people in a big school like St Andrew's secondary school in Glasgow, you cannot provide that significant support. Our staff are with those clients for four years. We work with those families, and we get them independent-travel trained so they can get to their jobs and we work with them alongside the teacher. It is a real partnership model with teachers. It allows them to focus on education while we focus on work and aspiration.

That probably does not take place early enough, however. We work with the young people from age 14. The issue around whether it is funded as education, employment or social care is a challenge—in other countries, that is not a challenge because it is all funded as one. We do not go in young enough, so the aspirations of young children in primary school and their families are a real challenge for us. By the time we get them at 16, it is sometimes too late, and there are parents who may be nervous about putting their young person out into the world.

Fiona Hyslop: That is a helpful insight.

I would like to ask Emma Congreve about the employment economics of the issue. Obviously, there is a moral responsibility to ensure that everybody can take part in the workforce, but there is also an economic benefit to employers. In a tight labour market, retention of staff is key. Any data about retention rates of people with disabilities in the workplace would help that argument. There is also the issue of diversity. Customers want to buy from companies that look like them, and there is a need to recognise that wider perspective.

Are we seeing shifts in the understanding of employers of the benefits of employing people with disabilities? Is there an issue about the economic imperative in an ageing workforce in which more older people will be in the workforce, with people developing disabilities as they get older? Is that where the thinking needs to be, particularly in a Scottish context? Is there anything that we can learn from the international context about how different countries view this issue from a clear economic perspective?

Emma Congreve: That is an interesting question. I am not aware of studies that have quantified that sort of economic analysis. Clearly, you can get a lot of descriptive or anecdotal evidence about it if you speak to employers who are involved in some of the programmes as partners. Breaking barriers is a scheme that works with Scottish Power in the University of Strathclyde business school. It provides training and then a work placement. You hear strong views about the benefits that it brings to the employer and to the colleagues they work with in the organisation.

Beyond that point, it is difficult to get data from partner organisations and employers about people who are disabled. Not everyone will tell their employer that they are disabled, for fear of stigma, which means that there is an issue about the extent to which employers know that information.

People self-declare disability to their employer, so it would be difficult to make a wide study of retention rates, and we do not want to just cherry pick those who lead the pack in this. We want to look across the piece. When the data from the census comes out, it might be able to help us understand what work people are doing, where that has been and some of that work history.

In terms of whether there are better examples internationally, our work on the international context has very much been on people with learning disabilities. Again, it is difficult, as different societies view the issue differently, and data can be quite anecdotal—you will hear that there has been a study in one place that shows something good, or that someone has visited somewhere that has been really inspirational.

It is fair to say that those are challenges across the world. The developed world is the comparison that we look to. There has been interesting work done in New Zealand, where the Government is very active in this area. That might be a place to look for examples of employability support and how that can be done. However, getting the data and the robust evidence from across countries is challenging.

10:30

Clearly, there are economic benefits. You talked about an ageing workforce. During the pandemic, people were leaving the labour force in their 50s and 60s for reasons that might be partly due to ill health, and that has continued after the pandemic. A couple of things are relevant in that regard. One of them relates to the national health service and the extent to which issues around something as simple as, for example, hip replacement surgery—things that mean that although people are living longer, they are living with pain—mean that people cannot work.

It is not that we have evidence here; it is more a correlation. We have long waiting lists, and we have more older people declaring themselves inactive due, we think, to ill health. That is one thing to consider. There is a correlation, not necessarily causation, there.

The second issue is a counter to that. Employment rates among those with some of the acquired conditions, such as arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions, are a bit higher than the rates among those with a range of other disabilities. I am using evidence from the United Kingdom on that, because we do not have the Scottish data. It is relevant to the disability employment gap, but they are the less problematic conditions in respect of employment.

If you look across the population of disabled people, you will see that the real challenges are around issues such as visual impairment, severe autism and learning disabilities. However, there are opportunities people with those conditions to be in work, particularly in the hospitality industry, which is a big employer of people with learning disabilities and autism. Clearly, there are benefits there because there is a shortage in the labour force. Yes, it should be a win-win, but it requires support to get to that place.

Fiona Hyslop: Ashley, is there anything that you want to add?

Ashley Ryan: We have tried to work closely with some of the growth sectors in Scotland in the food and drinks industry, and we work closely with hospitality providers. The Breaking Barriers partnership now includes EY—Ernst & Young—so we are thinking about finance. We have had great successes in the tech industry for people with autism who are able to work in cybersecurity. We are trying to open people's minds about those jobs, because there was an assumption that they would go into low-level, low-paying entry-level jobs, but we are seeing evidence that, with the right support, they are going into key growth sectors in Scotland and filling the skills gap.

The issue is about employers understanding how they find that talent and have inclusive recruitment practices, because anecdotal evidence suggests that retention is better if you have a workforce that represents your community and yourself. However, there are key barriers around recruitment. For example, timed application forms are something that we should not see anymore; if you are dyslexic, you are going to fail because of that. Similarly, we have seen people having to take a maths test even though the job involves working in a stockroom.

There are key barriers that we can remove easily if we can provide employers with the right support. We are seeing a growing number of people looking to enter the workforce in key sectors where we have those gaps, and we have to create the right pathways for them to do that.

The Convener: Before I bring in Maggie Chapman, I will say that it was anticipated that Skills Development Scotland would be on the panel this morning, but for understandable reasons it is not here. Do you want to say a wee bit about the national bodies and national partnerships that are important to delivery in this area? You have spoken about local authorities, the postcode lottery and local delivery, but who are the national players here that are important?

Ashley Ryan: We work closely with Skills Development Scotland in relation to its support of young people through the modern apprenticeship programmes. Obviously, losing the employability fund was a key issue for lots of providers and

support in terms of the national picture. We work with the Department for Work and Pensions, but there are challenges around that. There are a lot of DWP programmes, such as job entry targeted support—JETS—and the new jobcentre programmes. That means that, perhaps, those clients are not filtering out into something like fair start Scotland or some of the local providers, but we try to work as nationally as possible, as well as with the national employability providers, such as Barnardo's and Street League, because we try to create as cohesive a picture for clients as possible.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Good morning. Thank you for joining us and for the information that you have given us so far. I have two broad areas of questioning, which touch on things that Colin Smyth and Fiona Hyslop have picked up on.

Emma, you mentioned the strategies and plans that we have and you said that the "No one left behind" scheme was seen as an answer to all questions and challenges. Your October 2021 report contained key recommendations on ensuring that reforms of strategies, plans and social security benefit design and the national care service all work together. Over the past 18 months, have you seen the progress that you expected to see in that linking, overarching and working together at that level?

Emma Congreve: I am not sure that we expected to see progress, to be honest. There are still big concerns. The difficulty in joining up across Government is not a new story and we see it in a range of areas. It is difficult, because what we know publicly might be very different from what is going on behind the scenes. That is one of the problems. Nothing really appears to be joining up things such as the national care service, social security and employability for disabled people, putting the disabled person at the centre and working out how all those systems support them. It feels like there is a silo approach.

We know from some limited conversations that we have had with officials that they recognise that but they do not feel able to give a firm answer and say, "We are definitely doing this." I have questions about the extent to which those things have been joined up in practice.

Maggie Chapman: Do you see particular areas of weakness? In your 2021 report, you talked specifically about the relationship between unpaid carers and people who draw on unpaid care to function—never mind to gain employability, but just to live. Are there other areas of particular weakness or, if not weakness, areas that we should be mindful of ensuring that we focus on to get that joining up?

Emma Congreve: Carers are a really important part of it. They are not counted as part of the disability employment gap but, clearly, the people whom they care for are disabled, so there is an impact on carers' ability to work as much as they would ideally like to. Again, it comes down to the social security element and carer support, but the national care service is also a huge part of the right support being there for people.

The problem is that it is difficult for anyone to have an overview of all the moving parts. We find it difficult. It is easy for us to say that they should be joined up, but it is difficult to understand what is happening. You will see those different factors being talked about in reports, but the important thing is what happens in practice.

Most recently, we have the Government's fair work action plan, which incorporates actions towards reducing the disability employment gap, and a few years ago we had the previous disability employment plan. The actions in those plans make a lot of sense. With many other people, including representatives of SDS, I was part of the short-life working group that helped with some of that. In relation to the previous plan, however, we saw which actions had been taken forward, but we did not see an assessment of their impact, or what had resulted from them. That would not necessarily have had to state the number of people in employment, but an analysis of what happened and the outcomes would have been helpful. With the plan that is out now, we therefore have another list of actions, but very little understanding of the impact that they will have.

That links back to the point about evaluation. It is about having the evidence to say, "We're going to do this because we think it will have a really big impact" or "We're going to do this because there's a gap and we expect this particular group of people to benefit from it." If we took that approach, we could then measure the impact, which would help us to assess the extent to which things are joined up, because there would be reporting back. Where an action was linked to social security, what had happened in social security and what impacts had that had on employability and the employment targets?

More scrutiny of the reporting would be helpful when actions are made. We need to be able to return to them and figure out what has happened and what we think their impact was. Otherwise, it is impossible to know what is going on and why. As I said, we do not know why the disability employment gap has improved or which actions that the Government has put forward, if any, have led to that. That is quite a hard place to be in.

Maggie Chapman: It makes me wonder what the follow-up strategies are based on, if not that

solid scrutiny. It comes back to collecting data in the first place and then its interpretation.

Emma Congreve: Yes, although it is not just about data. When we talk about data, people often say, "We're doing a measurement framework". We need robust information. That can include quantitative data, but it can also include other forms of information. It is about having transparency and clarity about what is happening and best estimates of what the impact of those things may be.

Maggie Chapman: There is also the impact of—I was going to say, "doing the wrong thing". I do not mean that uncharitably, but I refer back to Colin Smyth's point about single-year funding. We have been talking about multiyear funding for decades now, and we are still talking about it. Your comments are really helpful and they give us something to dig into.

Ashley, you spoke about something that I see fitting into the social model of disability when you said that people's employment chances start long before they leave school. I suppose that one of the challenges is to educate society as a whole so that people understand what they are entitled to and what support is out there, and to help employers to understand how they can upskill and what they should be doing legally, never mind ethically or morally.

Will you unpick that a little more? How are we not getting the right support either for people who need employment support or for people who provide employment to know what they can and should be doing? How are we not getting that right?

Ashley Ryan: We did a piece of research for the Scottish Government, which will probably be published soon, on parental aspirations and children's aspirations. It may well be worth while for you to review that. Our teachers are not always equipped with the skills that they require in order to support children with learning disabilities who come into their classrooms. There is no mandatory module on that in teachers' education, but many classrooms have children and young people who have additional support needs and they may be diagnosed or undiagnosed, which is also challenging.

We are not getting that part right early enough because our teachers are not equipped with the knowledge to support those children and young people. That education should become mandatory for all teachers, particularly given that, as Emma Congreve said, children are going into schools with the presumption that they will go into a mainstream class. They are not always going into a special educational needs school or a language and communication base. If they are in a mainstream school, that support is vital and key.

We continue to not think about transition until much later. The Disabled Children and Young People (Transitions to Adulthood) (Scotland) Bill could represent a key opportunity to think about that much earlier. Transition for a young person with a disability tends to happen in the last year of school, because there are an awful lot of other things to worry about before that. If we can start to talk about it much earlier, we can prepare that young person and their family much earlier. We tend to think of transition as being in the sixth year or seventh year, but we need to do that earlier.

We do not ask employers to report on these things, so the evidence is anecdotal. Employers talk about diversity, but they tend to think that becoming a disability-confident employer means that the job has been done and they can move on. There is a key focus on E, D and I. It is worth looking at a key recommendation that came out of the Shinkwin commission that focuses on how businesses can support more people into them. That spoke their language in terms of how they understand the benefits of things like the purple pound, to look at it from an entirely selfish economic perspective and not a moral one. It also got them to think about how they can make the adaptations and attract more talent into their businesses.

10:45

We are not upskilling employers enough, so, for absolutely the right reasons, employers are afraid of making the wrong decision or saying the wrong thing, or they may have had a bad experience. Their understanding of disability is incredibly poor in some areas. We get real successes with small to medium-sized organisations that are doing it because they know someone or they are bringing them in, but we are not putting enough emphasis on the large employers that have the ability to create real and lasting change in Scotland because they are influencers and they can make that change.

Some of the work that Sandy Begbie did on the young persons guarantee and the aspirations around DYW is key, but the reality is that some of that became a tick-box exercise. Some organisations will just go into an ASN school once a quarter and there is no real aspiration for the young people there to go into their world or into work. We have probably not got that bit right. We brought it in and the ideas are fantastic, but the reality on the ground is that it has not necessarily worked.

Maggie Chapman: You said that the reality of what is happening on the ground is not matching

the expectations. Is that a capacity issue or is it to do with understanding? Why are businesses going into schools but not galvanising any continuity or any relationship?

Ashley Ryan: Some of it is about businesses just ticking the box of being involved in those sorts of programmes. They get the logo on the website and it looks great. It looks as though they are providing support, but the reality may be that they do not have the capacity to do that.

It is no different from doing a recruitment event anywhere else. If a business has a gap but it is unable to access people where they are or to access disabled potential employees, it will not see the issue in the same way. There is a huge focus on E, D and I, but it tends to be on other elements of it, such as race and gender. Disability tends to come at the end. Actually, there is a huge workforce out there that wants to work but is unable to access it.

Maggie Chapman: There are different schemes for disabled-positive employers, with accreditations and so on. Is there a role for formalising that in a more coherent and standardised way across business sectors in order to support employers to understand what they should be doing and what they could be doing very easily?

Ashley Ryan: Yes. We have had some real successes through the Scottish Union of Supported Employment—SUSE—and its inclusive workplace award. That approach is much more cohesive in that it involves businesses evidencing how they are inclusive, rather than their just being asked whether they have looked at their policy. Some aspects of the disability-confident employer scheme can become about ticking a box, whereas the inclusive workplace award asks the employer to put some real emphasis, work and resource into it, and there have been some real successes.

There has also been some success through Apt, which is a public social partnership. That work is worth looking at, because it encourages employers to really think about diversity in their business and not to look at it as a box-ticking exercise. Employers have to invest in it and put in resource, so there is much more buy-in.

We see greater success in those programmes than we do in the disability confident employer scheme, which just becomes something that is put on the website. It is where there is a real focus—it has to be a top-down approach and there has to be buy-in at every level—that we see real success.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): I would like to explore a little bit more an area that has been discussed in connection with the adaptations that employers might have to make to accommodate disabled staff. Can you give some more concrete examples of how working practices have been changed successfully in businesses to accommodate disabled people? Ashley, I will start with you.

Ashley Ryan: We have had lots of success. Everyone talks about access to work being kind of the hidden hero, in that sometimes no one really knows how to access it. There are some real challenges in access to work, and it can take months and months to come back to someone and get support in place. For some physical adaptations or software support, we can put things in place.

I think of a young man with whom we worked. We got him things such as a personal evacuation plan. He required music because he got very distracted in an office environment. He was an excellent administrator who worked on a computer, but he got very distracted by the environment, so he played music. The challenge for everyone in the office was that he liked to sing. When he became more confident in his role, he used one headphone, and now the radio plays in the background. That adaptation cost the employer nothing, but it had meaning for that young person, because it meant that he could continue in the world of work.

I think of mentors in the workplace. People often get informal mentors when they come to work. We try to formalise that a little so that an employee has an understanding of whom their mentor is. We also try to ensure that training is accessible, so we look at whether people require a scribe if they are going in to do health and safety training. All those things are provided by organisations such as Enable Works at no extra charge or are funded through provision, so they do not cost employers any money. However, they have an impact on people who are looking to enter the world of work. I am talking about things such as providing a personal evacuation plan if someone requires that support. It is just about providing confidence to employers.

What we also do for employers is come in at times of challenge. We often find that an employer will come to us when it is too late—perhaps when someone has already lost their job because of behaviours or other things. We will come back in at any point, because we recognise that there might be challenges. We come in and support both the employer and the employee.

All those adaptations cost not a lot of money. They are basic adaptations that often happen informally. Someone will often show an employee around the office even if the person does not have a disability. We do those things in advance. Take the young man whom I was talking about who listened to music. We took him to his workplace in

advance so that he got to see it. He got to see whether there would be an issue with the lights because, in some settings, he experienced sensory overload. We planned with the employer how we would do his induction. It is about providing confidence to employers; it is not always about making physical adaptations.

Colin Beattie: You mentioned Enable Works going in and providing support. You must be a bit limited in the resources that you have to be able to do that. If you really started to achieve the targets for disability employment that you would like to achieve, how would you cope?

Ashley Ryan: We have the resource. We have a dedicated E, D and I team that is funded to do that work, and it works really closely with employers. We recognise that all employers are at different points on their journey. Some are well versed and are ready to start employing people, while others are right at the very beginning and do not have in place the policies or procedures to support someone. That work is done as part of our supported employment commitment.

We work with a limited number of people. A programme such as fair start Scotland is challenging for us, because the model is set up to work with 65 clients. That is not supported employment. Supported employment is working with 20 to 25 clients. That work is built into our employment co-ordinator's day. The employment co-ordinator works with those employers. We can provide job coaching. We have hired job coaches who do only job coaching. They go around employers and work intensively with them to deliver support. We recognise that it might be intensive at the beginning, but it drops off, because the natural supports in the workplace start to take over from the paid support. The jobs that we achieve are not in supported workplaces; rather, they are all in the open labour market. That is key, as well, because it is about changing people's mindset.

Colin Beattie: Do you think that there is a role for the Scottish Government in supporting this?

Ashley Ryan: It can be quite challenging for some public sector organisations to look at adaptations. When you are in a big machine, it is very difficult to make changes quickly, and we recognise that. Sometimes, it is about public sector organisations leading the way and making their processes as accessible as possible to encourage others to do that. That can be quite challenging in big organisations.

Colin Beattie: You have highlighted examples of fairly low-key adaptations that have been made. They are things that do not cost a lot of money, such as providing training to understand the person's needs. What about the more complex successes that you have had?

Ashley Ryan: We have had lots of success working intensively with employers in areas in which someone has autism and perhaps more complex requirements. What we do is job carving. That is about making sure that the job is appropriate for the person. Sometimes, there are elements of a job that do not fit with the person's skills, so we work with the employer to carve out the job in which they will be most successful. That is part of the principle of supported employment. For example, the young man whom we were just talking about really struggled with finance. Part of his role originally involved paying people for elements of finance, but he really struggled with that. We agreed with the employer to take that element of his role away, and we gave him something else that he was particularly good at. It is about working with the employer to carve that out.

We have had great success in our work with a young man who is deaf. He is now in hospitality as a pastry sous-chef in one of the most luxurious hotels in Scotland. He could not get a job, despite being probably one of the most qualified young men I had ever met, because no one would take a chance on him. We put adaptations in place in terms of lights and communication and supported the employer to think about learning some basic BSL for that young man. He is incredibly talented, and it was more about providing specialist support and saying, "This is what this young man has to offer". He was not getting through the first stage with lots of employers, so we did some of that work for him to say, "This is this young man, and this is his talent". He has been incredibly successful and is now working in a five-star hotel in Scotland, but he could not get an interview, much less a job, through a basic practice without any support.

Colin Beattie: Emma, would you like to comment?

Emma Congreve: I do not have much to add to what was said by Ashley, who works much more on the day-to-day aspects of this.

There are just two points. First, funding models need to be inclusive of the expectation that that type of support is required. If you look at economic analyses of employability schemes, particularly paid-by-results schemes, you see the concept of creaming, whereby people who are easy to get into employment are put into employment but the right funding model is either not always there for those with more complex needs or is not tailored enough to them. That evidence tells us that some of the work that Enable Scotland and others do is more expensive but gets results in a much more

sustained way. The funding packages need to be right and must understand that.

Secondly, you talked about the public sector as an employer. That is a feature of the most recent fair work action plan, in which the Government has put down commitments and actions for how, it feels, the public sector needs to respond. Obviously, the Scottish Government wrote the report, so that is a good place to look to see how its practices are changing. It is sometimes difficult for big organisations to get the machine to make changes. The Scottish Government, as an employer, probably struggles with that as much as anyone else, so, given what is in the fair work action plan, that will be a really great place to look over the next few years to see how the Scottish Government fares with its own policies. You could perhaps dig into and scrutinise that in a way that you would not be able to do in the private sector.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): If we are to improve the situation for disabled people, we need to understand what has worked and build on that. Labour market data states that, under the Equality Act 2010, employment levels for the disabled have increased from 40 per cent nine years ago to 50 per cent now—a substantial 25 per cent increase—and that the disability employment rate gap has dropped from 38.7 per cent to 31.2 per cent, which is a 19 per cent closure of the gap. What has worked that we can look at as a good example? Ashley, you touched on the partnership working in Dundee. What parts of the fairer Scotland action plan that are delivering for disabled people can we build on?

Ashley Ryan: Again, it is probably about focus. It is about allowing local authorities to commit at local level to what they require. Although there have been improvements in the disability employment rate gap, we are not seeing improvements in areas relating to learning disabilities, which we have talked about. We see improvements for people who have a physical disability and for whom the adaptations are more obvious. We consistently see that the cohort of people with a learning disability is the most marginalised; the improvement in the employment rate gap is not there in the same way. I think that that is because we have got better at understanding adaptations from a physical perspective but perhaps not for those that are not as obvious.

11:00

What is working is the commitment to thinking about the groups that are the most marginalised and allowing us to put focus and support in. It tends to be because it follows the principles of supported employment, because it allows us to put aftercare support in and it is funded. We find greater success where commissioners have recognised that aftercare is a key part of the provision. It is about looking at the whole life and thinking about where we have got joined up with housing and health.

Someone asked earlier how we do that. The learning disability, autism and neurodiversity bill is a key place in which we could enshrine how to consider people from a whole-life perspective. The number of people with a learning disability living in poverty is quite staggering. There are reports that 20 per cent of such people are living in absolute poverty, and those rates are getting worse. We have seen the fairer Scotland action plan working where people have committed to providing support for the cohort that is often missed by traditional programmes and where they are not accessing fair start.

Our all-in models deliver three jobs for the cost of one job on a traditional supported employment model, but that is because we have had six years to get the provision right. There was a commitment to putting that in at local authority level on a large scale. In Edinburgh, we work with 800 people each year. The outcomes are really great. We are getting 45 per cent job outcomes, but our sustainment rate is at 80 per cent after 12 months. That is because there was recognition of the need to fund aftercare, and we have that provision, and because it remains loyal to the principles of supported employment.

Gordon MacDonald: There are vacancies across public, private and third sectors. You talked earlier about how you are getting 1,000 people a year into employment. Is it equal across the board, or are there certain sectors in which it is easier to get placements for disabled people?

Ashley Ryan: At times, we find it most challenging to work with the public sector. That is just a big machine, so it can be challenging to go in and work with a human resources department that is perhaps not based where you are. Getting a big cog to move is challenging, and we recognise those challenges. It often relies on having a really excellent people manager. In a big organisation in the public sector, people are often not interviewed by their eventual line manager, so that has become challenging in itself.

We have seen some great strides in some of the NHS boards, where they are looking at adaptations and really putting a focus on that. However, we tend to get the greatest success in third sector organisations because their values are already enshrined and they understand. In the private sector, we work with small to medium-sized businesses that we are able to engage with on a personal level. As an organisation, we are never going to put 10 people into 10 jobs in Tesco,

because we operate on a “right job, right person” basis. That means that we have to build a personal relationship with each business. Our employment co-ordinators have personal relationships, and that is why the public sector can sometimes be a bit challenging for us.

Gordon MacDonald: Emma, is there anything that you would like to add?

Emma Congreve: I go back to your first question and the fact that we need to ask that question and that we are not able to give full answers as to why the statistics have improved. As I said right at the beginning of the meeting, some of that is due to changes that are not about getting people into work; it is just that the characteristics of the disabled population have changed. We do not know the breakdown for which disabilities had those successes. We do not actually know what the employment rate is for people with learning disabilities—the data does not exist—but all the data that we have says that it is incredibly low. We are not really able to even understand that or track it properly over time. The fact that we still do not know the answer to that question is really worrying. A very basic understanding of the disaggregated data is just not there.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Good morning, and thank you very much. There is some really interesting stuff coming out today, and some of the areas that I was going to ask you about have already been covered.

I represent the Highlands and Islands, which is obviously a large area with remote rural populations. You have talked about postcode lotteries and about aftercare and how important it is. I can imagine people who live in very rural communities having to travel, and I wonder whether there are other barriers. What are the particular barriers that people in remote rural communities face? How can we address them?

Ashley Ryan: The Highlands and Islands is a perfect example of a really challenging landscape for people who are looking for work. We deliver our “All in” model in the Highlands. We committed to delivering it in the area, so we have one staff member all the way up in Wick, we have staff in Golspie and we have staff over on Skye. We are probably one of the few providers that work across the local authority area. Things tend to be Inverness-centric; people are expected to travel to Inverness or to be provided with a remote service.

The challenges in that area, particularly around funding, arise because we will lose the grass-roots organisations that work in places like Bettyhill and Wick. They are very small organisations that rely on funding coming through, but the funding model is changing and is going back to the hourly or pay-by-visit rate, which will be incredibly challenging in those areas. The public transport system is so poor that there is no expectation on people to travel, so we have had to build a cohesive remote offering that includes a bit of in-person meeting. For a girl from Glasgow, who built a bid in Highland, not knowing how difficult it is to get to Ullapool, it was a real eye-opener.

The challenges persist. We have 200 schools in the Highlands, but we are not able to access them all because there is no funding model for us to provide such support. We have to rely on third sector organisations to provide support because that is the right thing to do rather than, necessarily, because they are funded to deliver that support. We have huge challenges.

The other challenge is around the mix of barriers that a person has. Our clients in Wick tend to present with multiple barriers: for example, they might have a learning disability, addiction issues and have significant mental health concerns. We have to ensure that we have staff who can work and support people with such barriers.

That can be challenging, because there is also a bit of a recruitment crisis in some rural areas because the 9 to 5, Monday to Friday routine does not necessarily work. If we want to work with disabled parents or parents of disabled children, we have to think very flexibly about providing support at night or at the weekends so that they can access jobs.

There are also massive skills gaps that were previously filled by European workers. Employers are not able to fill those jobs, and we cannot get people there and upskill them because the funding model is just not right in those rural areas. We have significant challenges.

In the islands, for example in Shetland, one provider or the local authority tends to deliver the work. The unemployment rate is often really low in those areas, and the benefit is that people can have personal relationships with employers. However, we are seeing a mass exodus of young people from those areas down to the central belt because they are not able to access jobs.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: On what you were saying previously, I imagine that all the parts have to be right, otherwise the whole system breaks down.

I will go back to funding and come to Emma Congreve. Before I was an MSP, we were talking about multiyear funding and allowing organisations such as yours to make decisions that would have consistency over a number of years. Has there been any improvement in that respect? Is the situation the same or is it getting worse? What is

the impact of that not quite hand-to-mouth, but short-term, funding?

Ashley Ryan: The Highlands are a perfect example. Our European social fund funding is due to end on 31 March, and we have had bids in since October for which we have not yet had results. We also have to recognise that local authorities are under significant pressure and face challenges in getting money out the door. We do not know what will happen.

The concern is that we will lose staff. We have not been able to recruit staff in the past six months because we are sitting with only six months of funding, and the right thing to do is to let people know that. That has been really challenging. We are now at the end of January, but the promise of additional funding is not there, yet. Should we fund positions ourselves and hope that the money comes through, or should we stop provision altogether? There will be a drop from ESF funding; everything will be incredibly challenging in the next 12 months, because the shared prosperity fund money will not fill the gap.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Emma?

Emma Congreve: I have nothing to add.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Okay. I am conscious of the time, so I will very quickly ask a more general question. Obviously, you are working with many people at the moment. Can you estimate how much need for support there is, compared with how much you are able to deliver?

Ashley Ryan: In the rural areas, demand is probably five times over what we can provide. In the big cities, we tend to have waiting lists for most of our early-stage provision. For early stage 1 engagement, the waiting lists have doubled. We just do not have the capacity or funding to do the all the work. We have to stick loyally to the principles of supported employment, because we know that it works for people. That is challenging. Enable is often the only provider that takes on more complex cases; one SDS worker said, “You take all the wee souls who no one else takes.” That is unfortunate. In rural areas, demand is high, but the provision is not there. In some of the central areas, because of the work that we do, we could have a case load two times or three times bigger.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): Thank you so much for coming along. It has been an absolutely fascinating session.

Long Covid was mentioned at the start of the meeting. It would be useful to understand a bit more about the context and, in particular, about the complexity of that issue. We know that it is extremely complex and that a multitude of presenting symptoms are being categorised. A lot of work is being done on that front. Long Covid has certainly moved quite a number of people into the category of being disabled. I want to get a sense of your opinion of the complexity. I am very struck by what has been said thus far about data collection and disaggregation. Will you flesh that out for me?

Emma Congreve: From what I understand from labour market data, long Covid comes under the “other” category. I do not think that there is detail about what the conditions actually are. The labour force survey is quarterly: because it is so frequent there is not much of a lag, so we can look across the Covid period. Some of the other big surveys—the family resources survey that is conducted by the DWP; the Scottish household survey, and the Scottish health survey—contain 2019 data, so we do not really have an understanding from them of what has happened. The picture is still emerging and it is really difficult to know.

People who were previously in employment but were then on sick leave might have decided that they would not be able to go back to work, so there will probably come a point when they will start showing up in the “inactive” statistics in the labour force survey. We are keeping an eye on the matter but, as yet, it is difficult to know what has happened, the extent to which it will be permanent and, therefore, the extent to which funding and provision needs to shift to those people. It is still quite a new issue and it is a really difficult one.

Something that has come out of the pandemic quite conclusively is that there was an increase in people not being employed because of mental health conditions. The numbers there are much bigger than the numbers in the “other” category. If we are focusing on the impacts of the pandemic, the mental health impacts are probably the most concerning, but for a slightly different reason: the pandemic brought new reasons for trauma and triggers for mental health disorders. There is more provision in the mental health sphere for employability support. A large number of people are inactive because of mental health conditions.

Michelle Thomson: I would like to know from both of you what your top two asks are of us, as a committee, in two scenarios. A lot of what we have talked about today has recognised the very real challenges that we have with data and with the economic climate and how it feeds into people not getting the multiyear funding that they would like. Recognising that constraint, what are the top two things that you would like to put on the record? Alternatively, if money and control were no object, what would be your top two asks?

11:15

Emma Congreve: I can probably answer the first question more easily than the second one. On what the committee could find, it is about painting a clearer picture of what is happening with funding streams, including where funding is coming from, how decisions are made and where there are delays. Obviously, it is a problem if there are delays in different parts of the system of funding from the Scottish Government to local government and then out to providers. We need to understand why that has been the case and what has been done to rectify it.

With a big change to the system, such as the shift to the "No one left behind" model, there will be issues along the way. The important thing is that we understand what has been learned and what is being improved, and that we are able to say confidently that the Scottish Government knows that it has issues that it needs to improve on, such as delays in funding packages. From all that we have looked at, we know that uncertainty cannot continue, so progress needs to be made. It is perhaps understandable why that has happened, up to this point. That is how I come at the matter.

Secondly, on data, I have a report that the ONS did on disabled people's employment, which I can send to the committee. It is a 2021 publication and it does not disaggregate data for Scotland. There is publicly available information—to be technical, it is called end-user licence—so that people like us can look at some of the detailed data. The data that we want on disabled people is not included, but it should be so that we can get that picture of Scotland. The ONS is an organisation to think about getting data from as well as getting it from the Scottish Government statisticians. The ONS has a lot of work to do there, too.

Ashley Ryan: On what to do next, we recognise that the specialist groups on learning disability are not progressing. Focus is needed on groups whose funding and provision have been static for a number of years.

Also, in thinking about what is next for fair start Scotland, we recognise that it has been a bit of a postcode lottery and that the model might not be set up to deliver supported employment as it should. That is almost a separate thing to think about if fair start Scotland 2 is to be successful and to create the rates that it needs to create for disabled people. We have to think about such support in a slightly different way, because it is not the same as supporting people who can move into work quickly; it requires a different model.

The data is a concern, but funding is for providing continuity of support for clients in the least complex landscape for clients that is possible. Our clients often tell us that they have a complex life and have so many people who are paid to be in their life. We have to start to funnel that down to make it as clear and easy as possible for them to access support. To hear that money is no object would absolutely be music to my ears.

Michelle Thomson: That is not going to happen.

Ashley Ryan: I know.

We need to make sure that we do not have a postcode lottery. For us, transition starts earlier; although, at the moment, it does not start early enough. Transition needs to start as early as possible; we need to build aspirations for our children and young people. Many children and young people with disabilities are not being asked what they want to be when they grow up. We were all asked that; we have to create that aspiration as early as possible.

We need almost to think about employment as a preventative measure, in the way that we sometimes think about criminal justice. If we put in the work on that in as early as possible, people do not require our services later on because they are able and confident and can go into the workplace prepared and ready.

It is about transition and the postcode lottery of services in general. Let us really start to make it as easy as possible for clients to access work and let us focus on the work with employers. We have so much potential. We have so many skills gaps in so many key sectors and we have a workforce that is dying to get in there. We just have to start making it easier for them to do that.

The Convener: Thank you. Those were really helpful final answers. We will have the minister here in two weeks. I am sure that those are issues that members will want to raise with him.

I have a final question about "A Fairer Scotland for Disabled People: Employment Action Plan". There have been a couple of progress reports; I think that we are lacking the most recent one. How important are progress reports? The plan includes a commitment on halving the gap by 2038, but there is also a commitment to have 50 per cent of disabled people in employment by 2023. How important is it that we get progress reports, and what are the key indicators that the Government should give us? The recent report focused on particular areas in Social Security Scotland and other public bodies, but that seems quite narrow for the scale of the challenge that we are trying to address.

Emma Congreve: Yes. Government strategies are always difficult for officials because they have to please a lot of people. Sometimes, the more valuable work is done behind the scenes and is

not in what comes out in published documents, unfortunately. Progress reports are very much about what we have done; they say, “We said that we would do this, and we’ve done it”. In the short-life working group for disability employment that I was on, many of us were asking what had been the impact of what had been done, and what had worked and what had not worked. That helps to inform the next plan, where we say what will be done and what the impact will be.

The slight issue that we have with the approach is that the document strategies, progress reports and measurement frameworks are processes. They do not really tell us about evidence of what has been achieved; they are not outcome-focused. That is not easy to do; it is much easier to have a list of actions and then to say, “We have done those actions”. The critical thing to do in order to understand progress is to shift the focus. Actually, it is not even about shifting it, because the Scottish Government has that outcome focus; rather, it is about joining up the outcome focus with the reporting in the plans so that it is understood what has changed over time.

The Convener: Thank you both for your insights and contributions. As I said, we will have the minister here in a couple of weeks, so we will put some of these questions to him. As Ashley highlighted, on Monday we are visiting the Enable project in Dundee. We will also go to a National Autistic Society Scotland project in the next couple of weeks. That is a short piece of work that might lead to more in-depth work later in the year. Thank you very much.

11:22

Meeting continued in private until 11:47.

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