



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Economy and Fair Work Committee

Wednesday 1 May 2024

Session 6



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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ECONOMY AND FAIR WORK COMMITTEE

13th Meeting 2024, 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)

*Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)

*Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab)

*Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)

*Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP)

*Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Elizabeth Baird (Inverclyde Local Employability Partnership)

David Cameron (Scottish Union of Supported Employment)

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)

Oxana MacGregor-Gunn (Scottish Action for Mental Health)

Dave McCallum (Skills Development Scotland)

Philip Ritchie (Edinburgh Local Employability Partnership)

Ashley Ryan (Enable)

Alasdair Scott (Scottish Borders Local Employability Partnership)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Anne Peat

LOCATION

The James Clerk Maxwell Room (CR4)

Scottish Parliament

Economy and Fair Work Committee

Wednesday 1 May 2024

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Claire Baker): Welcome to the 13th meeting in 2024 of the Economy and Fair Work Committee. I have received apologies from Gordon MacDonald; Bob Doris is attending as committee substitute. Our first item is for the committee to agree to take item 3 and all future consideration of evidence for the inquiry in private. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Disability Employment Gap

09:00

The Convener: Our next item of business is the first evidence session of the committee's inquiry into the disability employment gap in Scotland. The committee undertook some initial work in the area last year, as part of which we visited Enable and Dovetail Enterprises in Dundee and the National Autistic Society in Glasgow. This month, the committee welcomed young people and staff from The Usual Place in Dumfries and we visited the Giraffe cafe and Push reuse centre in Perth on Monday to hear directly from disabled people about their experiences of accessing the labour market. I thank all those we have met so far for giving up their time and giving us the benefit of their experience as we begin our inquiry.

This morning we will hear evidence from two witness panels, focusing on employability services for disabled people. I welcome Elizabeth Baird, who is joining us online, representing the Inverclyde local employability partnership; Dave McCallum, head of career information advice and guidance operations with Skills Development Scotland; Philip Ritchie, representing the Edinburgh local employability partnership; and Alasdair Scott, representing the Scottish Borders local employability partnership. Thank you all for attending this morning. If members and witnesses can keep their questions and answers focused, we will make good progress.

I have a broad opening question and I will come to Elizabeth Baird first. What progress has been made to reduce the barriers that disabled people face when accessing and retaining mainstream employment in Scotland? We have a commitment from the Government to close the disability employment gap and part of our inquiry will scrutinise whether we are on track to do that. Could I have your reflections on what progress has been made?

Elizabeth Baird (Inverclyde Local Employability Partnership): I think that progress has been made. We still have some way to go and it is encouraging that we are continuously learning lessons from putting processes and practices in place. We also continue to gather the lived experience input, which is very important for us going forward. The LEP process and the systems that the LEP and its partners bring together enable us to focus on where we are not meeting our requirements and what we can do to improve that. It needs to be done collectively and I genuinely think that all the local employability partnerships are working towards that.

The Convener: Are there particular groups of people who are not making progress as quickly?

Elizabeth Baird: People with disability, in its broadest sense, are not making such quick progress. I know that the committee has also touched on the health barriers to employment and, since the pandemic, we are seeing more people with stress and anxiety. If we look at those with a disability, whether that be a learning disability or a physical disability, progress is probably slower than we would want. However, it is not a new issue for us within employability. We always wish to support those clients on the longest journey possible for them. It is a very bespoke journey for the disabled client base, but we do not want to leave behind those who have a health barrier. We want to prevent them from becoming the long-term unemployed people of the future.

The Convener: Philip Ritchie is here from City of Edinburgh Council, representing the Edinburgh local employability partnership. I put the same question to you, Philip. Where do you think there has been progress? Are we on target to meet the Government's commitment to close the disability employment gap?

Philip Ritchie (Edinburgh Local Employability Partnership): In Edinburgh, delivery is in quite a good place. There has been quite a transformation in employability in the past few years, bringing various programmes together under that "No one left behind" banner. Alongside that, we also have local provision. We have a successful support in employment model delivery in Edinburgh specifically for those with a disability. That goes a long way towards supporting the client group with what is needed. We have a good model in Edinburgh, alongside the other local provision that is available.

The Convener: Has there been anything recently that has improved the offer that you make? One thing that we are thinking about is whether the Government understands where it needs to do more. Is it introducing the right policy measures in order to address those challenges?

Philip Ritchie: No one left behind is a wide-ranging policy. It is about looking at that and making sure that it covers the disability employment gap and meets those challenges. Making sure that the resources are there to support what is needed is a key issue. It is about recognising that a significant resource is required. The more resource that is available, the more we are able to achieve.

The Convener: Do you find that there are different abilities or challenges that people face within a group of disabled people? Do you find that there are groups of people that it is harder to make

progress with and that we need to focus more on them?

Philip Ritchie: The service that we offer in Edinburgh is a pan-disability service. There is not a focus on specific disabilities; we would support all disabilities and people with long-term health conditions. We do not separate out that aspect of our service delivery. Again, the more resources we have, the more we are able to deliver. There will obviously be differences in how people are supported and some will take longer, depending on their circumstances, but what we try to offer in Edinburgh is an all-disability service.

The Convener: Alasdair Scott is here from Scottish Borders Council. To build on the questions we have had so far, some of the research that has been done by the Fraser of Allander Institute says that, although the Government is making progress on closing the gap, progress is slower for people with neurodivergent conditions and people with learning disabilities and there are more difficulties in getting them into work. Does the Scottish Borders strategy focus on that area or does it take a broader approach to the issue?

Alasdair Scott (Scottish Borders Local Employability Partnership): Yes, that is what we are focused on. As Philip Ritchie's organisation is, we are pan-disability; we are working for everyone. We have certain projects in place to focus on those with neurodivergent conditions. DFN Project Search, for example, is a well-known project specifically for those with a learning disability, additional support needs or autism. That is an example of good practice, I would say.

We do focus directly on specific disabilities, but in a broader sense we cater for everyone as the "No one left behind" policy has set out to do. In the Borders, we are more aligned now than we ever were through collaboration with other organisations and services to hopefully meet the demand and make more of an impact.

The Convener: As I said earlier, the committee did have a look at this last year and one of the issues that we identified was unmet need. All organisations talk about how many people have been supported. Do you think that there is an unmet need out there in the Borders and what have you done to reach out to or identify people with those needs?

Alasdair Scott: We are out in the community a lot more. We try to engage with people who previously would not access services or have access to support. There are certainly people out there who will not have access to services or who might not be engaging with services. It is about how we reach them. A lot of work is going on across the region. As you are probably aware, the

Borders is a rural setting so there are limited resources and service provision. Outwith the local authority, the third sector in the Borders is relatively small, so we are doing what we can to support growth so that we can reach those people who are not engaging in the same way as others.

The Convener: I now come to Dave McCallum. The original question was about the barriers that are faced by disabled people in accessing and retaining mainstream employment. Can you reflect on that? Do you feel that Government policy and measures are on the right path? Are the policy interventions that the Government is bringing in the right ones and are there enough?

Dave McCallum (Skills Development Scotland): My team is responsible for delivering careers information and advice across Scotland and we work very closely with our partners that are here today and other third sector organisations across the 32 local authorities.

We are an all-inclusive service. We support individuals from school age all the way up to further education, higher education and beyond. We help them to identify the support that they need or the skills that they need to move into employment. We also link with our local employability partners to see what provision is available to move those customers on to the appropriate provision and to support them into a sustained destination.

That can be challenging at times because provision can vary across the 32 local authorities. The 32 local authorities and the communities that we serve are bespoke and the opportunities are bespoke so they will be different, but it can sometimes be challenging to identify the appropriate provision to support people to move on. The partners work closely together to ensure that we are providing the right support. It is not just about one service, but how we all work together to support individuals into employment.

The Convener: You described the service as being inclusive and bespoke. When it comes to supporting people with disabilities, how does your organisation make sure that it can provide support for everybody who comes in, regardless of what disability they have? Is that more done through working with partners than just yourself?

Dave McCallum: Everything we do is in partnership but we are responsible for making sure that we provide all school-age children who are moving on to transition to a destination, be that further education or employment, with the appropriate support, working with schools and so on. Everybody is entitled to careers information, advice and guidance, but we work with the schools and the practitioners in the schools to identify those school-age children who have the greatest

need to make sure they get the right support to move forward.

If we have people in a post-school situation, we will also work with them and partners to make sure that we are providing them with the right support to move forward. Everything we are doing to try to support those individuals is inclusive, but we also recognise that sometimes the advice and guidance might not be the appropriate support. We need to work with our partners to get each individual to the right place to take on those opportunities.

The Convener: As I said at the beginning, we have met young people and people with lived experience. Most of their experience of school or of leaving school and transitioning has been not very positive. Do you think that is an area where we are letting down young people with neurodivergent conditions and learning disabilities?

Dave McCallum: There are always opportunities for all partners to improve. Nobody is ever perfect. However, we work closely with guidance teachers and teachers in schools and we use our needs metrics approach so that individuals in schools get the right support as they transition on to new opportunities. I am pretty confident in our work on that.

We have partnership agreements with our schools to make sure that we have the right mechanisms in place to support those individuals. Of course, there is always the odd teething problem in schools or with the opportunities of going into FE or HE, but we work closely with partners to overcome them. We are part of the solution but we are not the only solution.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): I have a wee supplementary on that, convener. The young folk from Dumfries and Galloway whom we talked to last week definitely had a difficulty with school. You talked about further and higher education, and one of the things that all those young folk that Mr Smyth and I talked to last week said was that they felt that, as far as the college was concerned, they were a bit of a tick-box exercise and they were not listened to. How do you work with FE and HE partners to make sure that young folk are listened to and that they are able to fulfil their hopes and aspirations? The folk whom we spoke to last week were very articulate and they had a strength of feeling that they put across very well about not being listened to in higher education.

09:15

Dave McCallum: I cannot speak for FE and HE, but what I can say is that our team works closely with the schools to support that transition. We

have partnership agreements in place with colleges, for example, and, where there are individuals who need additional support, we will help with that transition to hand them over to our college partners. However, I cannot comment on provision in colleges and what happens in colleges because the FE sector is different across Scotland.

Kevin Stewart: You obviously have a job to do in helping folk move on, hopefully into work. How often do you and other partners actually ask for those folk's opinions about how they have been served and how they have been treated on that journey?

Dave McCallum: We ask them all the time. After every appointment with a careers adviser, we will ask them to fill in a survey. We will contact young people who have recently transitioned and left school. We will do a young person's survey in August. I can provide the committee with all this information. We are always looking for our pupils' voice and our customers' voice so that we can understand how to make the appropriate changes to our services to serve our customers. I can provide all that to the committee.

The Convener: We are taking evidence from Colleges Scotland in the coming weeks.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): Good morning, panel members. Almost every business that I speak to at the moment tells me about the recruitment challenges that they have. They struggle to fill vacancies, particularly in some rural areas in the Borders and in Dumfries and Galloway, where I am based. At the same time, we have a significant disability employment gap. We have this huge group of potential employees who are not getting opportunities. Why is it that we appear to be failing to make the business case for closing the disability employment gap? Why is it that businesses seem reluctant to take on people who have a particular disability? What are we failing to do? It is an easy question to kick off a Wednesday morning with, I am sure—tell us the answer. *[Laughter.]*

I am based in Dumfries and Galloway, and the gap is bigger in Dumfries and Galloway than it is in the Borders, which is interesting. Alasdair Scott, I am not praising you or anything, because you still have big challenges in the Borders, but is there something there that businesses are grasping that we are not doing in other parts of the country? You still have a gap there. Why is it that businesses are not seeing the opportunities?

Alasdair Scott: There are a lot of microbusinesses in the Borders that contribute to that. There are aspects such as travel in the rural area that contributes to it, and having the right job for the right person in the area of their abode.

There are those challenges, which have always been there, to be honest with you.

The Scottish Borders Chamber of Commerce sits on our local employability partnership, so we work closely with it. Through our LEP, we have made quite a lot of headway on that focus, certainly over the past year.

We offer key worker support to people with disabilities on moving into employment. Every individual has a key worker to look at their strengths and attributes and to navigate around what achievable opportunities are out there for them. Part of that is doing employer engagement, often with employers in the area, to see whether we can get an opportunity. It might be a work trial, but whatever tool we have, we will use to support those individuals.

Without a doubt, there are challenges in the rural area, but we are trying to tackle that as a whole region. Rather than working in individual silos, we are working across the local employability partnership as a network to try to improve opportunities.

Colin Smyth: Are businesses feeding back on why they are not grabbing all the opportunities that you are proposing around support for the people whom you get into employment?

Alasdair Scott: There is work to be done on that, to be perfectly honest with you. We recently had a jobs fair at the local Jobcentre for employers that had vacancies, and about 250 clients attended the event. It was in Galashiels, and it was centrally based for transport ease. We are waiting to see what the outcome is in terms of how many people moved into employment from that and what engagement was made.

Colin Smyth: I assume that the same challenges exist in Edinburgh, Philip Ritchie, although you do not have the geographical challenges such as having to get from Hawick to Galashiels. Why do you think that the businesses with all these vacancies often appear to be reluctant to give opportunities to the disabled?

Philip Ritchie: The matching process when someone has a disability is much more complex in terms of the opportunities and incentives that we have for employers to encourage them to recruit from among the people whom we are supporting and working with. Sometimes, bringing together the needs and support requirements is quite challenging and difficult. There is work to be done to improve that process to make it smoother. It is improving as more technology comes on board and employers become more aware of the ways in which they can make adjustments.

There is a way to go on that, and there is also the training piece and awareness raising with

employers. With our partners, we have been trying to do employer engagement to raise awareness with employers, so that they do not see it as being a bad area and are willing to make leaps of faith for people with a disability to give them an opportunity and support. There is a way to go, but I think that we are making inroads into that with employers. The change in culture in workplaces is a slow process.

Colin Smyth: Elizabeth Baird, is it the same experience in Inverclyde? Why are we not getting the message across about the business case to lots of businesses?

Elizabeth Baird: Yes, it is a similar situation in Inverclyde. However, although, across the LEPs, we all have employer engagement as part of our provision and we are reasonably successful at it, that is an element on which we need to focus. It would be helpful to have policy or input that looks at the longevity of employer engagement to take the burden off the employer as much as possible when it comes to identifying potential suitable roles in their workforce. It would also be helpful to have on-going support for the supervision and release of current staff to be able to have an impact on the roles that we could make available to people with a disability in the initial stages. There is perhaps an element of fear among employers about the unknown. If we can provide on-going professionalism to support them, I would imagine that we would be more successful in moving people with a disability into fair work.

Colin Smyth: Dave McCallum, you will see the pattern right across the whole of Scotland. There are clear variations in different parts of Scotland. In your experience, are there variations in the support that employers get? Is there anything that Skills Development Scotland can do to break down the challenges that witnesses are talking about? It seems to me that it is about follow-up support, and, when somebody goes into a workplace, that is about supporting the business. However, perhaps it is getting them into the workplace in the first place that is the challenge.

Dave McCallum: Sometimes, the challenge is in getting them into the workplace. We work very closely with the 32 local employability partnerships, and I would say that the majority of them have provision to provide opportunities for employers to take customers on who are neurodivergent or disabled. That can be challenging in rural locations due to transport and so on. We work very closely with the LEPs and wider partners when we are working with our customers to support them into the appropriate opportunity. It varies across the 32 LEPs.

Colin Smyth: Do businesses get the business case for this? Is there work to be done around that?

Dave McCallum: There are businesses out there that really want to help—we see that. We work with our developing the young workforce partners. They run employability fairs and they work with employers. We have our own teams who go out and do employer engagement sessions with other internal teams in Skills Development Scotland. We always try to highlight the opportunities of the skills and attributes that our customers can bring to the workforce, and we will always do that. It is definitely a partnership approach in how we work together and put provision in place to support those individuals.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): There are a couple of areas around employers' input that I would like to explore a little bit. You have already touched on some of those areas. How can employers' recruitment processes be improved? You already have a partnership with some employers, but let us look at the generality, because not all employers are in partnership with you. How can the average employer improve the recruitment process for disabled people?

Dave McCallum: If we take it from a school and college perspective, there are plenty of examples of us working with LEPs and DYW. We bring in employers to speak to young people and young adults to help them to see what it looks like coming in, what the process is to get various different jobs and what employers are looking for. The benefits are not just for the individuals who are meeting employers but for the employers in learning what the young people and young adults are bringing to the table. Such activities are definitely happening across Scotland, and that is changing the ways in which employers look to go out and recruit.

Colin Beattie: Interestingly, we had a round-table session with young people last week, which was really informative, but none of them referenced employers coming in and having any meaningful discussion with them. Overall, just from the ones whom I spoke to, they had had a fairly negative experience. Philip Ritchie, do you have a comment?

Philip Ritchie: Yes, I definitely have a comment on that, because it is disappointing to hear that that has been their experience. In the LEP in Edinburgh, we have developing the young workforce, which is doing significant work with schools—both special schools and mainstream schools—supporting them with the employer engagement piece and bringing industry into schools to have conversations about potential opportunities when young people leave school. There is significant work happening in Edinburgh. I cannot comment on other local authorities, but we

certainly see a lot of work happening on the employer engagement piece.

On the recruitment piece, there is definitely work to be done with employers to look at more innovative ways of recruiting. As part of our employer engagement, we looked at whether there are other ways in which they could recruit, whether that is about work trials or about looking at different ways from the traditional standard interview process, which does not work for those with a disability. It is not really a fair process for them, so more adjustments to that process are needed. One of the things that we do is to look at volunteering, work trials and paid placements as incentives for employers to consider how to give someone a chance before they take the next step of a permanent post.

Colin Beattie: Following on from that, you obviously want workplaces to be inclusive and you want any required adaptations to be done for the person who is hopefully going there. If they were going for a short-term placement, to what extent would you expect employers to make those adaptations and changes to accommodate the person?

Philip Ritchie: That would have to be the case, because it would not be possible otherwise. We have looked at different ways in which we can provide resources—through access to work schemes or resources that we have from other funding—to make such adjustments, because that is required and necessary.

Colin Beattie: Do you provide funding at least if some physical changes are needed?

Philip Ritchie: Absolutely.

Alasdair Scott: Our key workers are key to paving a way to employers. They often look at work experience as a good working example for people to consider whether the job is suited to them and to find out a wee bit more about the job. We have used employer recruitment incentives on the back of work experience to allow people the time to be trained up and develop their ability to do the job. Sometimes, people with disabilities might not cope well with interview scenarios, depending on their condition, mental health issues, confidence or whatever the reason might be. Sometimes, we have to look at an alternative.

Changing the mindsets of employers is all about relationships. A lot of work needs to be done in building relationships with employers and in them understanding the difference that we are trying to make to people's lives, so that, I hope, they will offer opportunities and be willing to discuss options.

09:30

Colin Beattie: Is there any common theme as to the size or type of employer that is more amenable to taking on disabled people?

Philip Ritchie: From our experience, a range of employers are involved with our services and I do not think that there is a theme. It depends on the willingness of the employer to be supportive and accommodate whatever adjustments are required. I do not think that there is a particular theme in our experience.

Colin Beattie: So there is no link to size or the ability to absorb that.

Philip Ritchie: Obviously, there will be resource implications, and lots of smaller businesses would struggle with that resource piece, but we still see lots of small employers engaging with our services and that are willing to help us with what we are doing.

Colin Beattie: Elizabeth, do you want to comment?

Elizabeth Baird: Our experience is similar. I would highlight the DYW input that we have in Inverclyde, working along with the education service and the college. That has proved to be successful in terms of school transitions, by providing opportunities for employers to go into colleges and schools and give talks, as well as arranging visits to workplaces to make the industry more real to the young people. That applies across the board, for those with disability and those without disability.

With physical adaptations, the access to work process is very useful. Adaptations have to be done, even in the shorter term to allow for work trials. That is still very important and it also gives us an in with the employer to look at the longer-term ability to increase the disability workforce within the workplace.

We have used employer recruitment incentives fairly successfully, and probably the majority of LEPs have done so over the past few years. That involves providing some financial incentive for an employer to look at disabled clients as a source of recruitment. However, recruitment processes need to be changed. We know that not everyone performs well at a standard interview, especially people with neurodiversity and sometimes those with physical disability.

We are working towards improving that situation, but that is about how we support the employer rather than just expecting the employer to do it. We need to support the employers more to identify what roles are available in their specific workplaces and to give them the confidence that, if they start on this journey with us and with the disabled person, we will not go away any time

soon. We are there from the beginning of the process and we will be there at the end of the process. However, obviously, funding and its longevity play a part in that.

Colin Beattie: I want to pick up on the references that several of you have made to working in partnership with the Department for Work and Pensions, jobcentres and all the rest of it. Do we have any understanding of disabled people's first-hand experience of dealing with those agencies? To again refer to the young people who we met last week, the ones who I spoke to were unanimous that the experiences that they had at the jobcentres or the DWP were less than good, because the people there did not understand the person who they were dealing with. The young people had various degrees of autism and so on, and they felt that they were just parked and pushed aside.

Do we have any data on that experience? Do we have an understanding from first-hand experience as to how this is working?

Dave McCallum: We have our own data from asking the customers who we support, and I could provide that. I can also double check what our apprentices, in foundation apprenticeships and modern apprenticeships, are saying about their experience with employers.

To go back to your previous question, if you do not mind, I note that we support employers by offering apprenticeships for people with a disability up to the age of 29, recognising that they might go into the workplace a wee bit later. We have also noticed that year on year we have started to see an increase in those with additional support needs or disability in FAs and MAs. The figure dropped back slightly during the pandemic, although that was just a realisation that some disabled people with a disability work in the hospitality sector, which was hit hard during Covid.

We survey and get feedback from those who either get guidance from us or enter into an apprenticeship programme, and I can provide more information on that to the committee.

Colin Beattie: That would be interesting, I am sure.

Philip, what has the experience been in your area?

Philip Ritchie: I cannot really comment on what the DWP would say, but I would expect that the DWP role is almost triaging those who are coming to see it and then—

Colin Beattie: I am asking whether you have had any feedback from disabled people who have experienced—

Philip Ritchie: That certainly has not come up in discussion with our partners on their delivery with disabled clients. That has not been flagged up as an issue in our area. As I say, in our process specialist support would usually be put in place by the DWP, but it would not necessarily be the DWP that would deliver that support. The frustration might lie in that onward referral process, which is maybe not as smooth as it could be. That is my only explanation as to why there may be that frustration from those who you have spoken to.

Alasdair Scott: I do not have anything evidence-wise, other than hearsay. Maybe some people have struggled more than others with engagement and interaction. We pick people up when they come to the service to ensure that they are getting the wraparound support that they need. I do not have any data to say whether that is a big issue.

Colin Beattie: It seems that no specific data is being collected.

Alasdair Scott: There is not, that I am aware of, certainly in the Borders.

Elizabeth Baird: I am not aware of whether we are collecting that data. I am sure that DWP colleagues have a mechanism for recording customer satisfaction and what have you. I think that the key worker support that we have within the employability pipeline could aid that, so that the individual always has that one point of contact. It just depends at what point in their journey they are. If their interaction with the jobcentre is the first point of contact, things will change when we move them into the employability pipeline and they are provided with a key worker.

I am sure that, locally, we would have some statistics on the disability clients of the local jobcentre and the satisfaction rate. I am sure that lessons are learned, as we try to do across our provision. I could ask for that information and provide it to the committee.

Colin Beattie: Again, that would be interesting. Thank you.

The Convener: Before I bring in Maggie Chapman, I want to ask about data, which Colin Beattie has referred to. It feels as if, in Scotland, we are sometimes good at starting initiatives but we are not really sure which ones are working so we do not know where to focus our resources or where to make the best progress, especially when we are trying to tackle something as difficult as the disability employment gap. As organisations, how do you define and measure what is successful? The Scottish Government recently established the employability shared measurement framework. Do you feed information into that framework?

Philip Ritchie: Through the “No one left behind” approach, we gather all our data on our delivery, which is then fed back into the Scottish Government as part of our delivery. In addition, we have our supported employment service, which is not part of that delivery and is not funded through that route at the moment. We collect data on that delivery as well, which informs what we are delivering to make sure that it is the right thing if we are to achieve the outcomes and make the impact that we want to make with the resources that we have available. We measure what we get for that investment and what the impact is.

Going back to what was discussed earlier, we could do more if we had more resource, and there is probably unmet need in Edinburgh, given what we are delivering, but we are delivering what we can within the resource that we have. The data has shown that what we are delivering is the right thing and that the service is working well and providing good outcomes for those with disability.

The Convener: Alasdair, you might want to comment on that as well. Some of the figures that have been published on retention, for the previous fair work scheme—I cannot remember what it was called—and for “No one left behind”, show that people get into employment but that four weeks, eight weeks or a year later, the number starts to tail off.

Alasdair Scott: Is that about fair start Scotland?

The Convener: There is fair start Scotland, but some of the data is on no one left behind, although issues have been raised about the difficulty with transparency around no one left behind funding. Is your local authority also monitoring and working out what works and then feeding into the shared framework measurement?

Alasdair Scott: Yes, absolutely, we feed in quarterly, as Philip Ritchie mentioned. We keep data. We are quite successful at sustaining employment for people, because we put in a lot of work early on to ensure that we understand the individual and that the right support is in place for them. We spend a lot of time with people to ensure that we know what support they need when they go into work. We also support the employer with that. It is key that the employer knows that support is available for them through the process and that it is on-going and is always there.

We have wraparound support, so we will always be in contact with the employer and the person who goes into work to ensure that they do not fall off. There might be a blip here or there where people maybe struggle with work at times and need additional support. We are always there for them with that key-worker approach.

Yes, we feed into the data, but we are quite successful on retention of jobs when we move people in. It is all about matching the person to the right job for them. We follow a five-stage process, which is a traditional supported employment process. From the very start, there is engagement and vocational profiling so that we know the individual’s skills, what their needs are and where the barriers are. It is about understanding the individual. That takes a bit of time, but it pays dividends in the long term to ensure that we get the right outcome for them.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Good morning. Thank you for joining us, and thank you for what you have said so far.

I want to drill down to get a better understanding of the issue. You all do phenomenal work. There are clearly good examples of success in getting people into work and sustaining and supporting them in that employment. I have heard comments about the need for sustained and sustainable funding, and we have talked about data.

Despite all that, the disability employment gap remains stubbornly high. My question links to Claire Baker’s question about whether we are measuring the right things. How are we missing people who should be getting support? Essentially, I am asking how we make sure that we reach more people. Philip, do you want to kick things off?

Philip Ritchie: I think that this year will be another year of transformation. The “No one left behind” programme came in in 2019. There have been a few phases of that, and we are now at the stage where fair start Scotland has come to an end. A lot of people with a disability got support from fair start Scotland, so there will be a bit of a transformation as people transfer into local services. It is crucial that we measure the changes there and see how we manage to engage with those people who would previously have engaged with fair start Scotland.

As any referrals will come through to us, it will be a question of how we manage to get those people engaged in our services. My hope is that, because we are offering person-centred local services, we will have good engagement levels. The challenge will be to do with how we make sure that we have enough resource to be able to meet that need.

Maggie Chapman: You would say that it is primarily a resourcing issue rather than anything to do with structures or anything like that.

Philip Ritchie: Absolutely. From an Edinburgh perspective, I think that we have good structures in place. I think that we have the right partners around the table and the right mechanisms and

levers that are needed to be able to support people with a disability.

Maggie Chapman: Okay. I put the same question to Alasdair Scott.

Alasdair Scott: In the Borders, we are in a good place right now from the point of view of the local employability partnership and our members. As I said earlier, we are more aligned than we have ever been in our approach to tackling these issues as a collective. To be honest, a lot comes down to the yearly funding for sustaining staff. We spend a lot of time training and skilling staff, but the year-on-year funding plays a big role in ensuring that we can keep our trained staff. This year, that will again be a challenge for us.

09:45

Maggie Chapman: I come to Elizabeth Baird. How do we ensure that we make the most of what you are telling us is a good system?

Elizabeth Baird: The system has certainly improved, and I think that the “No one left behind” approach is the correct one. The LEPs across all 32 geographical areas have worked hard in coming to the table and being quite honest and open about where our specialisms are, where the gaps are and what we can do about those gaps.

Disability is still an issue. I have been working in employability for 35 years, and although there has been a slight shift, it is still an issue. When it comes to improving things, we have good structure and good partnerships locally, and we want to work together, which is very important. We do not want to deliver everything ourselves; we procure and commission to get experts into the process.

However, it is genuinely the case that the annual funding process makes it extremely difficult to improve the situation and achieve a good level of quality without feeling that the good work that we are doing will tail off and will have to be re-established because of the lack of cohesion in the funding stream. That said, we know that that is not always within certain people’s gift and we do the best that we can. I genuinely believe that the partnership approach that combines the “No one left behind” policy and the LEPs is the correct one.

Maggie Chapman: Thank you. I come to David McCallum. Given the work that you do with all 32 local authorities, you get a whole Scotland picture. What are we missing here?

Dave McCallum: We have great mechanisms in place, but there are challenges. We are responsible for the 16-plus data hub, which tracks young people up to the age of 19. We report that information back to the Scottish Government. That is a great mechanism. I will not go into detail; I can

provide more information on that. If one of our customers drops out of FE or school or does not go on to a positive destination, we can respond as the careers service and across the partnerships.

Beyond that, we also work with the LEPs. We identify when people drop out and how we can deploy resources, but because our local employability partners face a challenge with regard to resources, that provision is sometimes not in place. We are responsible for careers information, advice and guidance. We deliver the modern apprenticeships programme. Employability services were moved across to the local authorities—I cannot remember exactly when that happened.

The key thing is the partnership. As my colleague Elizabeth Baird said, the disability employment gap has remained a challenge, but the partners are trying their best to work with the resources that they have to ensure that we have a safety net to support our customers in their communities. We always advertise the opportunities that exist to contact us through our helpline, through our centres and through the community venues that we operate in. We also have staff who are based in jobcentres across the country, so we do a bit of a handover there as well.

We are doing everything that we can to make sure that that safety net is there. Unfortunately, however, as a partnership, we sometimes miss people.

Maggie Chapman: It sounds as though you have a good tracking mechanism and good processes, which means that if somebody drops out or has a wobble, you can come in with an offer. How does somebody get into that? To what extent does that require proactive searching by the individual—the young person themselves, their family or support worker, or whoever? Last week, we spoke to folk who did not know what support was out there and who fell into support by accident or by chance. That is not the situation that we want to be in.

Dave McCallum: It is a shame that that was the feedback that you had. We are there—we are spread across the partnership. We use community planning partnerships as well; we are a statutory partner there. Our LEPs feed into the CPPs. We have local outcomes improvement plans, which are targeted at key areas. We and our LEPs work in partnership to see how we can enhance provision in those areas.

Following the recent review of careers provision across Scotland, as an organisation, we are making sure that we are meeting the recommendation that we deliver the careers service in communities. We are doing our best as

a partnership and in our own right to make sure that people can contact us through the partners, through our My World of Work website, through our contact centre and through visiting our community venues and centres. With our partners, we have a presence in pretty much every major town across Scotland.

Maggie Chapman: I suppose that that enables you to deal with the tension that we have identified exists between providing an inclusive service that is open to everybody and meeting bespoke needs. I know that other members might want to ask about specific areas of need or groups of disabled people with specific needs, but do we have the agility to say, “Come all, but here is a bespoke service for you”?

Dave McCallum: We are there to support everybody. If someone comes asking for support, we will provide that support. If we are overwhelmed by the demand for support in a particular area, we will redeploy our resources to make sure that those individuals get the support that they require from our service, and I am pretty confident that the same would be true across our partners.

Maggie Chapman: My final question is open to any of you. It is clear that good things are happening in your different areas and your different work, but how do you learn from one another? If something is working well, how do you share that? How do you say, “This is working really well. Hey, over there, have you tried this? It might help.”? Do the LEPs share good practice through Dave McCallum? How can we learn across the country?

Philip Ritchie: We have an event for our region next week, at which six local authorities will come together to look at how to share best practice. That will enable us to share examples of what we are doing. Support for people with disabilities is one of the issues that we will look at. That is an example of what we are doing locally.

Nationally, there is a Scottish Local Authorities Economic Development Group conference coming up, at which all local authorities will come together to share good practice examples of delivery. There are regular opportunities to share good practice. We have fortnightly meetings with other local authorities to look at particular issues and gaps, and how we can meet those challenges with regard to delivery. There are good national mechanisms for sharing best practice and meeting one another to discuss any challenges and issues. There are opportunities for that.

In addition, as part of the reporting process, we provide the Scottish Government with case studies and examples of our delivery. That is done quarterly to show what good practice is being

delivered in each area. Every local authority provides that to the Scottish Government.

Maggie Chapman: Elizabeth Baird wants to come in on this point, too.

Elizabeth Baird: I think that communication is key. Between the 32 local authorities, we have a fortnightly meeting on Teams. That is beneficial from the point of view of lessons learned, good practice and sharing frustrations. That helps people in the employability arena in the local authorities to stay focused and positive when the challenges appear and to learn from one another. That is a great mechanism, which will continue.

On top of that, each LEP will probably meet every six to eight weeks. That is when the partnership formally gets together, but the informal daily working arrangements that we have with SDS, DWP and college colleagues are an inherent part of the “No one left behind” approach. We all need one another on the ground, at operational level, as well as having a strategic input. Those forums and that way of working are very important and very positive.

We also have the formal mechanism of reporting to the Scottish Government every quarter on what money we have spent, what we have achieved with that money, what the successes have been and what the challenges have been. There is that more formal mechanism, too.

Dave McCallum: I reiterate what partners have said. Recently, we have worked with the Scottish Government Improvement Service and LEP managers on how to support LEPs to do their data returns to the Scottish Government. We also have area managers from the careers service who sit in the 32 local employability partnerships, who will work together to identify what is going well and what is not going well and how we can use our resources to support one another. When it comes to how we respond to support our communities and customers across Scotland, it is very much a partnership.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Good morning. I will start by following up on Maggie Chapman’s question about funding. On Monday, the committee was in Perth, where we visited two excellent social enterprise projects that help young people with autism and learning difficulties to get into the workplace. It was very positive to see the outcomes from those projects. However, the people involved raised the issue of certainty of funding and—as Alasdair Scott touched on earlier—the difficulties that can be caused by the lack of such certainty year to year. Even worse than that, some weeks into the current financial year, some projects had still not received

an award letter, which made it almost impossible to do any sensible forward planning.

The committee's briefing from the Scottish Parliament information centre says that, in the Scottish Government's budget for the current year, employability funding has been cut by 24 per cent in real terms, which is a very substantial cut. There is perhaps an expectation that local authorities will pick up the slack.

I am interested in your perspective on two issues. The first is about the impact that that cut will have on the overall quantum of employability funding, and the second is about future planning and certainty.

Alasdair Scott: That is a big and live issue. Last year, there was a three-month delay in getting funding allocated to us through a grant offer letter, and I do not know how long it will be this year. The expectation was that we would be told in early April to allow us to plan for the year ahead.

On the 24 per cent cut, the issue is how the funding is divided between the different sectors that address child poverty and the "No one left behind" policy. It is about how we use the resources and best match them to ensure that we get the most that we can from the funding, with it going far and wide. We need our third sector partners to be an active part of that, because we, in local authorities, cannot do it all ourselves. We need the LEP to be the vehicle that drives that work and promotes the uptake of opportunities through our third sector providers. If we knew what our budget would be, we could work on that basis, but we do not know what our budget will be, so it is very difficult to plan for the whole year.

On your second point, all sectors, including the third sector, rely on staffing costs being met. That is core to ensuring continuity of delivery before we even look at individual projects. We cannot just stop a service on 31 March; we need to continue to work with the clients with whom we have built relationships and keep the support mechanisms in place. It is a real struggle just now, and it is quite a worry for a lot of people.

Elizabeth Baird: In my opinion, uncertainty about the annual funding cycle is our biggest challenge. I am not saying that we would get everything right if we got multi-annual funding, but we would be able to plan and there would be more scope to learn lessons, to implement those lessons and to listen to the voices of people with lived experience, which could be taken into account in future delivery.

The future planning aspect is crucial. That applies to employability overall, but it is especially the case for those working with people with learning disabilities, people with physical

disabilities and neurodivergent people. In Inverclyde, we have lost staff with expertise in such delivery—not in the local authority but in other organisations—because of uncertainty of funding. That is very discouraging, because you then have to go through a recruitment process to try to re-establish some level of expertise. The lack of certainty has a negative impact on the quality of provision for the client, and this is all about what is best for the client. We now have the process, but we need the funding element to attach to that in order to be on a sustainable footing.

10:00

Currently, we are not aware of what our funding allocation will be for the current year, which makes it extremely challenging for local authorities that do not have any other funding sources. Local authorities that have other funding sources have a bit of leeway, but that is still not the way in which we want to operate, because we want to provide genuine quality provision that is best for clients and best for sustainability of outputs. To get sustainability of outputs, we need certainty of funding so that we can provide a service to employers that take on people with a disability. Employers need to know that we will be there to support them through that process.

Murdo Fraser: It seems extraordinary to me that, one month into the financial year, you still do not know what your funding settlement will be. I cannot imagine how impossible it is to plan ahead.

Philip Ritchie, you were nodding throughout that answer. Do you want to add anything?

Philip Ritchie: As Elizabeth Baird said, that is the key issue that we want to flag up as part of this process. When the fair start Scotland service was commissioned, there was a long lead-in time to put in place that service, and we had certainty of delivery for a long period, and there is now a two-year period to give clients the proper exit that they need from the service, with the right support provided all the way through the process. As has been said, we cannot just stop services on 31 March; people need services after that in order to transition to their destination.

We need a level playing field in relation to what we are trying to deliver. Most of our delivery is done in partnership with the third sector, so we need time to commission services with the third sector, and we need certainty of funding and a lead-in time in order to deliver services and provide people with an exit from them. That is our biggest challenge.

Edinburgh is in the same situation as Perth, in that we have not yet received our award letter from the Scottish Government, so we cannot give

award letters to those in the third sector. In the majority of cases of delivery with the third sector, we are working on trust at the moment. Some of those organisations will have had to give notice to staff, because they have not been given certainty, but they are still, very kindly, delivering services for us. They could have, quite rightly, turned around and said, "Well, you are only funding us until 31 March, so we will stop the service." Thankfully, they have continued that delivery, but we could have been in that position.

We need to resolve that situation, because it is the biggest issue that we face each year. The situation has not improved in the past four years; if anything, it has got worse.

Dave McCallum: We work with neurodivergent young people and those with disabilities, and it takes a considerable amount of work to support them and get their confidence up to take on opportunities. We are noticing that, as young people transition, there is a change in the available provision across local authorities. The issue is not just lack of provision but the negative effect that that has on those customers. It makes it even harder for them to engage, so there is a longer-term impact beyond the provision for supporting young people and adults to move forward.

Murdo Fraser: Thank you.

The Convener: Elizabeth Baird, you said that you are providing wage incentives or wage supplements for employers. Did your local authority decide to provide that from the money for the no one left behind policy? Does that flexibility come with that funding? How are you delivering that?

Elizabeth Baird: The employer recruitment incentive was available across the LEPs or the local authority delivery mechanism. The level of funding dictated how much a local authority could put towards that specific aspect of delivery. Sadly, the fair work first agenda will alter the position, because we will be able to use the funding to support only employers that meet all the fair work first conditions, and a lot of smaller organisations do not. However, local authorities that have other funding sources or their own money might still be able to support small and medium-sized enterprises by incentivising them, with some financial support through the employer recruitment incentive, to take on someone with a disability, but only on the basis of the longevity of that employment once the employer recruitment incentive has been maximised.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Good morning. We have heard today, and in previous evidence sessions when we have spoken to the young people involved, about many of the great

services that are available, but we have a comparatively high level of unemployment among our disability communities. Are employability services in Scotland managing to reach out to enough people in our disability communities in order to tackle the issue?

Elizabeth Baird: There are a few points to make. It is about reach. We have spoken about being out in the community and using community link workers and our health service, and we need to work in partnership with SDS to co-locate and have youth hubs in its offices. All that helps with reach. We should ensure that, while people are in settings that have nothing to do with employability—they might be doing a health activity or a craft activity—they hear about and see the provision that is available. We do all that, which improves reach.

However, we still have a lot to do to make employers come along with us on this journey. Across all 32 local authorities, we need to have a serious look at whether employers could be provided with specialist support on needs identification or to carry out a training needs analysis of their workforce. That might allow some folk in employment to move further up the ladder, which would free up entry-level jobs. There have been such programmes over the years, but they are quite expensive and it takes quite a long time before we reap the rewards. We need to look to the long term, but, to do so, as we have mentioned, we need a more sustainable funding model.

Brian Whittle: I have held a couple of events with employers in my communities to get them to understand what support is available to them when bringing disabled people into the workforce. I was surprised by how little they knew, at the outset, about what is available to them, so are we missing a trick here?

Dave McCallum: We provide opportunities and work with employers that provide apprenticeships. We explain the opportunities and what funding is available, and we direct people to the appropriate partners to pick things up. DYW is doing a great job in recognising employment opportunities for young people and for adults, too. We do our best to get employers to recognise the skills that neurodivergent people and disabled people can bring to the workforce. There is some evidence that shows that, with hybrid working, there has been a slight increase, but there is definitely more to do.

Philip Ritchie: We have put in place the Edinburgh Guarantee, which is a recognised brand, in relation to how people can access our services. That is about ensuring that anyone can get access to the support that they need to get into training or employment, and it is how we try to

ensure that people who do not usually engage with services are aware of what we are trying to do. That brand is quite strong in Edinburgh, so it is, I hope, helping us to engage with people who would not usually engage with employability services.

There has also been the national young persons guarantee, which was really successful in engaging young people through a concerted effort to address youth unemployment. That national brand and programme engaged with people who would not usually engage with, or who did not know about, such services. There is the opportunity to do something similar for people with a disability.

Alasdair Scott: We have started to work closely with Business Gateway in the Borders and are looking at the opportunities that might come from that. New businesses are coming to the area, so the work is expanding. Along with DYW, it is everybody's role to promote opportunities in the workplace. However, if we had a dedicated resource, that could make a significant impact.

Brian Whittle: I will change tack a little with my next question. Last week, the committee heard from some young people about their journeys to employment, and we heard that many young people face a number of steps before they get to employment. We asked them about their experiences at school, and many of them said that their experiences were poor or even traumatic. We also heard about their interaction with the DWP and that they did not have the appropriate skills, and some said that they got to employment through a third sector organisation. Are we joining up the dots enough? Are we supporting young people early enough? Schools and the DWP cannot provide all the skills that they will need, but are we catching them early enough to help them on that journey?

Dave McCallum: We work closely with schools and teachers and we target all our service offer to schools, so it is available to everybody. As I said, we work with guidance teachers and others to make sure that we identify young people who may need that extra support, and we adapt our service offers to support young people as they transfer from school. Whether they leave at the end of the fourth, fifth or sixth year, we will support them. We also make sure that support is in place to help them with their transition, be it to college or across to one of our LEP partners to take on some provision. The mechanism is there and we have a good, robust system in the 16+ data hub as we know that young people can fall out at that stage. We have recently reinforced that with some His Majesty's Revenue and Customs data that is coming in, so we can now identify people who are in employment.

We are trying to improve all the time. Where there are gaps, we will speak to our local employability partners. We also update FE and HE partners on what we are picking up across the economy and what employers are telling us nationally about the opportunities that are coming up, and we try to promote the diversity of our young people and adults through our support across Scotland. We have focused a lot on young people this morning, but this is also about people who are neurodiverse and disabled people who are in employment. How do we support them to upskill and take the new opportunities that we are providing across Scotland? People can contact us and come to our service at any age.

There is a strong partnership from CPPs all the way down to the local outcome improvement plans and the local action plans that are put in place with our LEP partners. We are trying and we keep improving. As we improve, something else might come along that we need to adapt to in order to move forward. The challenges for the public sector finances have brought public sector organisations and our LEP partners closer together, and we have considered how we operate as a partnership and how we can ensure that we are using our resources wisely to target the key areas across local authorities and seize the opportunities that are coming through in employment. At times, that can be challenging, given that some of the lack of provision might impact local authorities in different ways.

Brian Whittle: I will bring Philip Ritchie in, but something that interests me is how we utilise the third sector as a resource in this area. How easy is that, especially given the stringent funding constraints?

Philip Ritchie: In practical terms, each school has 16+ meetings. The way that that is delivered in Edinburgh is that we have SDS and third sector partners round the table and we have specifically commissioned services involving the third sector to offer support with transition when young people are leaving school. Sometime this year, we will add to that delivery a specific service for those with additional support needs, subject to funding being available to do that.

With the schools' mechanisms, there is a well-established robust tracking process, and that is followed up as part of the participation measures, as well as the destination. Something that will change this year is that, whereas we previously had fair start Scotland with the DWP, there will now be a single point of contact through the "No one left behind" approach. I hope that, through that single point of contact, we will have a similar process where we can look at who is on the DWP's books and needs that support. We will then look at how we can make sure they are given

access to the services that are available in the partnership.

In Edinburgh, the majority of our services are delivered by the third sector. We do very little delivery as a local authority. Obviously, there is significant resource from the DWP, Skills Development Scotland and the other partners, but the third sector delivers a significant part of what we do.

10:15

Alasdair Scott: The only thing that I will add is that, in the Borders, we have a 14+ meeting, which is similar to the 16+ one, with all the key partners round the table to discuss individuals to ensure that they are going to positive destinations and that the right support is there. That happens through all the main high schools. The same partners are in the LEP, so there is a collective approach to ensure that individuals get the right opportunities at the right time.

Elizabeth Baird: The third sector is key to the delivery of no one left behind in totality, which includes the disability aspect. We could not deliver the quality of provision that we have across local authorities without the third sector. Our challenge often lies in determining which mechanism we will use to engage the third sector. It is usually done through a procured or commissioned group, which is a lengthy process by its nature. I am sorry to repeat this, but the funding element really does have a bearing on that. However, in Inverclyde, we use the national third sector and local third sector experts, and that provides the quality of provision that we are looking for.

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): Good morning, panel, and thank you for your answers so far. Dave, you said in your opening statement that provision varies across local authorities. How important are the partnership agreements that you mentioned in the final delivery of provision?

Dave McCallum: Our partnership agreements with schools are key as they define our service offer is for the year and how we will deploy our resources to deliver the services across the broad general education and the senior phase. They also identify anything that we need to put in place to support transitions from school to FE, HE and apprenticeships. The agreements are critical. We do them every year, and review periods are built in where we work very closely with school leadership teams and guidance teachers. That work is delivered by both our practitioners in schools—our careers advisers—and a local leadership team. In that way, we ensure that we have the appropriate agreements and mechanisms in place to ensure we are deploying our resources to give the appropriate support.

Evelyn Tweed: If you felt that there were issues or things that you were not quite on top of, would you raise them in those annual conversations?

Dave McCallum: Definitely. We speak to them annually and we meet the directors of education or the heads of schools bi-monthly or quarterly, so we pick up any concerns. Our partnerships with schools across Scotland are very strong, and it is a two-way process. It is about how we can improve, how they can improve and how we can bind the resources together to support our young people. It is a pretty robust process, and that has been picked up when we have been inspected by Education Scotland.

Evelyn Tweed: I have not looked at the partnership agreements. Are they generally the same across the piece?

Dave McCallum: Our service offer is the same across Scotland. How we deploy that and when we do things during the year as part of the curriculum can differ, at times, from school to school. Even if the service that we are both providing is fantastic, we can always improve in some areas, and that will vary from school to school. The needs of the young people that we support and the communities that they live in are all different, so we have nuances across Scotland. We make sure that we are deploying and enhancing our service to make sure that we are delivering for those young people and schools.

Evelyn Tweed: Does anyone else want to comment on the partnership agreements?

Philip Ritchie: As far as we know, they work well. From what we see in Edinburgh, SDS has a good relationship with schools. I have nothing else to add.

Evelyn Tweed: That is fine. What specific progress has been made in delivering on the recommendations of the 2022 review of supported employment?

Alasdair Scott: A big part of it is about ensuring that there is a consistent approach through standards. I mentioned the five stages of supported employment and the specialist service. We put some staff through the training that is provided by the British Association for Supported Employment, which is similar to the professional development award model. That training has been very well received and it ensures that there is a consistent approach and awareness among our staff. We have even put experienced staff through the training so that there is theory behind the practice and we can ensure that we get the most out of it.

We will continue to look at how we can upskill our staff to ensure that that support is there. I truly believe that that standard has to be in place to

ensure that everyone is getting a quality service, and the report highlights that as well.

Philip Ritchie: In Edinburgh, we have our supported employment service. That is a tried and tested model of delivery and it is working really well for us. We have added to that the Project Search service, which is specifically for young people, so we have good models that are supporting reducing the gap. Good work is also being done with our partners and on the employer engagement piece. A lot of training and awareness raising is happening with employers, so the message is getting out there more than it was in the past. There is still a long way to go, but inroads have been made.

Elizabeth Baird: There is certainly progress with the work on decreasing the disability employment gap. The Scottish Government is looking to include in the offer of grant for the year some specifics on what the allocation of “No one left behind” funding will entail, but we are waiting to see what that will be. Ahead of that, we have to push on and either procure or deliver directly.

In Inverclyde, we have supported employment following the true fidelity model, which Enable provides for us. We have a local third sector organisation working under a contract on health barriers to employment. That is slightly different but, again, it will make inroads in having a positive impact on the disability employment gap. Within our Enable contract, we also have an employer engagement aspect, which is about raising local employers’ awareness of recruitment practices and the positivity of having a more diverse workforce. That sits alongside the other work.

Work is progressing but, again, for some, it has probably been halted until we get some funding certainty.

Kevin Stewart: I am interested in the voices of lived experience. We were very lucky last week to have a group of folk who told it like it was, which was beneficial to all. It is key that all of us listen to people about their experiences in order to improve.

Alasdair Scott mentioned Project Search earlier, and Philip Ritchie just mentioned it. One of the positives from last week’s discussion was the high opinion of Project Search. In my consistency in Aberdeen, Project Search is run by the University of Aberdeen and backed by the likes of Values into Action Scotland. It has immense outcomes, with folk going into work and, in the main, staying in work. Why do we not learn from the experiences of Project Search and create more of those types of schemes throughout the country?

Philip Ritchie: We need to be careful how we balance and manage the structure of our delivery. Short-term initiatives can have positive impacts,

but we need to look at longevity in services that we deliver. I err on the side of caution regarding short-term projects that might have short-term results; we want to look at the long-term structural side of things.

One of the challenges is that in a lot of the delivery that we do—we have the structure in place with “No one left behind”—we hide the wiring. The person on the ground who is getting the service does not necessarily realise that it is a “No one left behind” service, and that is quite right. They know the branded service on the ground that is giving them support—that is their touch point for support. A lot of people will be getting support from services but not realise where the funding is coming from and what route that support takes. With “No one left behind”, we have the opportunity to make sure that we have in place structure, initiatives, projects and programmes, and that we have the opportunity to have them over a longer period.

Kevin Stewart: I am interested that you said “short term” there because Project Search in Aberdeen does not seem short term to me. Obviously, the job opportunity in the university is short term and it involves changed roles, but the key thing is that a large majority of folk go into employment and retain employment. That is not short term to me.

Philip Ritchie: There is a challenge with that delivery model. The funding piece is for the delivery of the Project Search. It is about making sure that there are structures around that follow-on supported employment model, which is what we try to deliver in our services. The supported employment model is about full-length delivery, not just about when a person gets into employment. It is about making sure that anything that we put in place is in place for long enough to do it justice, if that makes sense.

Kevin Stewart: Does anyone else want to come in on that?

Alasdair Scott: The Project Search model is a great model that has fidelity. It was for people with learning disabilities, but we have opened it up to people with additional support needs, to ensure that we can reach the people who will get the benefit of it. Something similar could be done for different client groups.

It is quite an expensive model but you are right: its outcomes are pretty good. The key is to have wraparound support after the project ends. There needs to be on-going support so that we do not undo all the good work. We want to ensure that people are linked to a key worker, so that there is continuity and point of contact if something happens, which it could easily do. If someone loses their job, it might not get picked up, so we

need to ensure that there is on-going wraparound support.

Kevin Stewart: Grand—I agree with that. That seems to happen in the Aberdeen scenario anyway. There was a great video of folks who had been through Project Search who gave their opinions about it, and it was fantastic to hear their experiences.

I want to move on to diversity, because we are living in a world with a huge amount of diverse jobs and we need a diverse workforce. We need employers to have not only a level of understanding of people, but flexibility. How can we ensure that employers become more flexible when it comes to employing neurodivergent people? What do you think could push them further?

The Convener: Could I ask the panellists to be brief in any replies? I am keen to bring everybody in and we are getting a bit short of time.

Dave McCallum: There is stuff that we are doing as an organisation. So that I can be brief, I will provide that to the committee in a paper. We have teams that are going out to work with modern apprenticeships and with employers. We are trying to highlight the opportunities of having a flexible workforce and other opportunities and skills that Scotland needs to grow our economy. I will provide a paper to the committee.

Kevin Stewart: It would be absolutely immense if you could give examples of employers.

Dave McCallum: I will do my best.

10:30

Philip Ritchie: The work that we are doing in Edinburgh is about that relationship and building that employer engagement. We need to keep on at that and make sure that there is a continual piece of work. We need to keep working with employers, raising that awareness and offering that training, and we need to keep the message about the benefits out there.

Kevin Stewart: I will leave it at that. I hope that we will get that paper from Mr McCallum.

The Convener: We will hear from employer representatives in the next few weeks.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I know that we are pressed for time, so I will try to be brief. I have two brief questions.

The first goes back to comments that Elizabeth Baird made about supporting employers to take on people living with disabilities. That can, of course, happen when vacancies arise, but it could also be possible to say to a large employer, “Let us look at

your set-up as an employer. Where could there be positions that would be suitable for someone with disabilities?” Does that second thing happen? Could you say a bit more about that?

Elizabeth Baird: It needs to happen more, as it would make a real inroad. Although we are doing employability, getting people ready and supporting their confidence and vocational skills, we need employers to take in individuals.

I genuinely think that employers need support at a real, practical level. They might want to help with tackling the disability employment gap, but they are busy—they are businesspeople—and they genuinely need that support. They need people to come into their workforce and provide them with a short sharp intervention by looking at the roles that are available, and suggesting how they could be adapted and made more flexible, such as having two part-time roles instead of one full-time person. Consequently, within X weeks, someone with a learning disability could be fulfilling a role, in a proper fair work scenario, at a standard that the employer and employee were comfortable with.

Bob Doris: Because of time constraints, I will not ask other witnesses whether that happens more often, but if it does, the committee would be quite keen to hear about it. If employers wait until they have vacancies before they ask you, “How can a disabled person fit this role?”, they might have already created a job that is not suitable for someone who faces additional barriers to—sorry for the clumsy expression—mainstream employment.

I will pursue my final question with Elizabeth Baird. Employers might be close to having a business case to employ maybe another 1 or 1.5 employees, irrespective of whether those people have disabilities. It is a fine line and there is a tipping point if you go into recruitment and are not expanding your number of employees. I think that Ms Baird talked about wage subsidies earlier. Could you give a little bit of clarity about where those wage subsidies come from and what role the DWP has in that?

A lot of people seeking employment will be on employment and support allowance. I know that they can keep some of the ESA if they are in employment for under 16 hours a week, but there must surely be a business model in which we can get people into long-term well-paid jobs and off ESA. That way, the taxpayer will be a winner, the DWP will be a winner and, more importantly, the person with the disability will be a winner. Community jobs Scotland, for example, was very good at doing that kind of thing. Can you say anything about where wage subsidies play a part? Are there opportunities for them to do more?

Elizabeth Baird: Across the local authorities we have the employer recruitment incentive, and in Inverclyde we also have a wage subsidy programme that is funded by the council's own resource and "No one left behind" funding. That provides up to £10,000 for a local employer to hire a local person. We had an apprentice wage subsidy programme in which, if we could not match a role to a specific formal apprenticeship, we could have that as a traineeship, and we had the wage subsidy programme. Again, the issue is about incentivising the employer to take into employment people from the local workforce and/or specific clients who face specific barriers.

Bob Doris: I am not trying to get at an issue that is not there; I am thinking about an opportunity. Was there a proactive partnership with DWP? Would that be beneficial in the future?

Elizabeth Baird: We work in partnership with DWP, especially when we are looking at moving people with a disability who have been on specific benefits. It is an on-going piece of work and I am meeting colleagues next week to consider how we can refine and maximise our approach, looking at economically inactive residents and those who have stated they have a willingness to work. We are trying to come together to see how we can combine those two strands and make things more attractive to the employer.

Bob Doris: I would love to hear more, but I know that we are pressed for time and I will not ask any more questions. Thank you very much.

The Convener: That concludes the first part of the evidence session. Dave McCallum has generously offered to send us more material. If anybody else has more material that they feel they could not share with us this morning, we would be happy to receive it. Thank you all for your contributions. We will suspend the meeting while we change over witnesses.

10:35

Meeting suspended.

10:43

On resuming—

The Convener: I welcome David Cameron, chief executive officer of the Scottish Union of Supported Employment; Oxana MacGregor-Gunn, assistant director of operations at Scottish Action for Mental Health; and Ashley Ryan, director of Enable Works, Enable Scotland. Thank you all for coming.

I will start with a question that relates to our previous panel and come to Ashley Ryan first. We have a change in the delivery model from fair start

Scotland to no one left behind, which in turn led to the creation of the local employability partnerships, from which we had witnesses earlier. I am interested in your view on how the LEPs are working. What has their impact been and have they been a positive move?

Ashley Ryan (Enable): We have been engaging with the LEPs for a number of years now. Post-Covid, they can be quite inconsistent about how regularly they meet. How transparent the process is can also be quite inconsistent, but in the last year or so we have seen real strides forward being made, in that LEPs are looking to engage the third sector a bit more closely to understand the needs on the ground. We have seen some real strides forward, but they remain a little inconsistent in terms of how transparent they are, who is on the LEPs, how you can become a partner and engage with the LEPs more closely, and the purpose of what they are doing.

The Convener: Yes. That is reflected in the Institute for Public Policy Research report that was recently published. I will come to Oxana MacGregor-Gunn with the same question about how you feel the delivery model with "No one left behind" and the LEPs is working.

Oxana MacGregor-Gunn (Scottish Action for Mental Health): Our view is very similar. LEPs are inconsistent and vary from one local authority to another. In some, they are working very well indeed; in some it does not really work for us. I am only talking about our experience, which I would say is inconsistent.

10:45

The Convener: Where your experience is inconsistent, what is it about the LEPs that is not working? Ashley mentioned a lack of transparency and difficulty engaging. Is that your experience?

Oxana MacGregor-Gunn: Yes. Communication might be inconsistent, again. Sometimes it is quite difficult to identify who is on the LEP, although that information is published. Engagement with LEPs can be problematic sometimes.

The Convener: David, is that similar to your view of how they are operating?

David Cameron (Scottish Union of Supported Employment): Certainly. Curiously enough, our conference is in a couple of weeks' time and our panel discussion is based on how "No one left behind" is working for disabled people. We are curious to get feedback from our membership and the wider sector. So far, I think that we are hearing that it is a mixed bag. It is fair to say that it is early, but we are not getting a huge amount coming through to say that it is making a

radical difference to and improvement for disabled people, which obviously is what we want to see.

The Convener: With “No one left behind”, we saw the devolution of employment policy to local authorities and local partnerships, to deliver policies that were bespoke to their local area. It is the Government’s policy to close the disability employment gap. Is enough being done from a Government policy level? Evelyn Tweed might come back to this, but most of the recommendations that came from the 2022 “Review of Supported Employment within Scotland” are aimed at the Scottish Government, or at that level of Government. The Fair Work Convention did a recent report into Scotland’s progress as a fair work nation where we come sixth in a list of eight, in terms of our progress on closing the disability employment gap. Denmark is way at the top, but Denmark at a national level has invested a lot in employment services, whether that is subsidies for firms or various other Government policies such as wage subsidies, positive discrimination and preferred access to employment for disabled applicants.

While the “No one left behind” money is funding the local employability partnerships, it is the Government’s commitment to close the employability gap. Do you feel that there is more that the Government could be doing? We recognise that we are in difficult financial times, but do you think it could be doing more?

David Cameron: We wait to see what happens with the review of supported employment that was published in late 2022. We brought together our members with quite a bit of excitement in 2023; it does not happen often in our sector but we were quite excited about something happening. There were elements of the review that we thought were excellent. It certainly spoke to investment in the sector and—this was a big issue for us—staff development and skills development in the sector. We had put forward the proposal for a supported employment guarantee, thinking about the geographical sphere of supported employment and what disabled people might or should be entitled to expect in all parts of Scotland. The review spoke about quality. There are many elements in it that we were very excited about. I had some conversations with senior civil servants in 2023 about some preliminary ideas for implementation. There has literally been nothing since.

This is not a promotion exercise, so I apologise for mentioning our conference again, but we have invited Scottish Government civil servants to come along and give an update on the review. I felt that we could not have another conference at which we did not mention it, because it feels as though we have forgotten about it; it has disappeared. We are

keen to see the review recommendations taken forward. We understand the financial constraints and I suppose that there must now be a question of where the responsibility for implementation sits. Is it with central Government? Is it with local authorities, which now have so much responsibility? We look forward to seeing something resolved and some progress on that, particularly.

The Convener: Thank you. In the earlier panel, I think it was Philip Ritchie who talked about the young person’s guarantee. Edinburgh has introduced an Edinburgh guarantee. One of the review recommendations is for a supported employment guarantee. Would you look for clarity around the 2022 review?

Ashley Ryan: Edinburgh is a prime example of somewhere that has heavily invested in supported employment. We deliver a partnership of four organisations that deliver full fidelity supported employment. We have already been funded for seven years and are funded for another six years. That is an absolute outlier and does not usually happen. We have found our greatest success in a local authority that has invested heavily in supported employment.

From our point of view, the inconsistencies come from local authorities’ understanding of what supported employment actually is, in some cases. We have had a lot of conversations about whether a programme could be “supported employment lite”; that is not supported employment, it is employability support. From our point of view, local authorities that heavily invest in and understand the need for such programmes see the greatest success.

The Convener: Is some of the difference between local authorities to do with their understanding of definitions or a lack of clarity on what they are trying to deliver?

Ashley Ryan: In some cases it is resource. Some of the smaller local authorities potentially do not have the resource that the larger local authorities have to implement large-scale supported employment provision. David talked about the supported employment review. We have seen elements of it come through the local authorities’ provision, but there is not a consistent approach to it. That is probably where we would like to see the Scottish Government taking a stand. We are not seeing the need for qualified staff or the quality framework being implemented. For services such as individual placement and support there has been a greater focus on fidelity reviews and quality reviews of IP services and the kitemark to say that you are delivering an exceptional service. That does not happen in supported employment and it absolutely should happen because that kitemark in IPS means that

you are following that model and having great success. I would love to see something like that more consistently delivered across Scotland.

Kevin Stewart: Thanks for that answer, Ashley. I recognise what you are saying about smaller local authorities maybe not having the resource. Are there any good examples of local authorities co-operating with one another to make sure that the right resource is there? I know from my home patch that there are some collaborations between Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeenshire Council, for example. Is there good practice out there with collaboration between local authorities on this front?

Ashley Ryan: We have seen good practice from Forth Valley, where local authorities tend to work closely together. They have commissioned us to deliver supported employment across the Forth Valley region. That allows us to deliver the principles of “No one left behind”, understanding the nuances between Clackmannanshire and Falkirk and Stirling, but also allowing us to deliver a real team around quality, with qualified staff. That is a good example of local authorities coming together to create that resource.

Colin Smyth: Good morning. I will ask a specific question about delivery of services. An Institute for Public Policy Research report recently noted a perceived conflict of interests for local authorities, which have, obviously, responsibility for commissioning and delivering employability services. That report suggested that local authorities might be incentivised to prioritise in-house services over third-sector services. Is that a fair comment?

David Cameron: One third of our members are from local authorities, so we have to be quite balanced in how we approach that matter. Local authorities deliver plenty of high-quality services; there is not an issue about them not delivering. I worked in the service-delivery front line for about 20 years and there was always the perception that a higher standard was required of in-house services, with more being expected in return for investment, with better job outcomes.

I suppose the question is, if you choose to do something in-house and it is not successful, what do you do next? Is it likely that the local authority will close down the service or hand it over to the voluntary sector and have issues with staffing and things like that? That is not to say that there are not plenty of good local authority services. A very big proportion of the cake is kept in-house.

Colin Smyth: Is that a fair reflection?

Ashley Ryan: We have had some success. In Dundee, for example, we are commissioned to deliver in a partnership of eight providers, of which the local authority is one. An interesting change in

the dynamic is that we manage the performance of our local authority’s delivery. We have had great success because there is a more cohesive and clear offer. People come to one door; they do not go to Dundee City Council then go to in to All In Dundee, for example. There are examples of that working really well, but in some areas you will certainly find that most of the money is kept in-house.

Colin Smyth: Is that because it is natural, at a time when budgets for local authorities are under such pressure, to retain services in the local council?

Oxana MacGregor-Gunn: That is quite a natural way of carrying out business. In better times there is more engagement with the third sector, which is always very successful. My fellow panellists have highlighted that the third sector is transparent and the outcomes give value for money. However, there is usually a financial decision as well as an engagement decision to be made.

David Cameron: There can be an issue with control as well; I understand that. We recently did an interesting piece of work for a small local authority, which asked us to talk to organisations in the area that were working with young disabled people who were looking for work in some form or another or for volunteering, further education, other activities or actual supported employment. In that small local authority area we spoke to 24 organisations. One of the reasons why the authority asked us to do the exercise in the first place was that there was a real sense that there was no co-ordination: people could not find the right thing to do or would move between things. It was not quite clear why that was the case. Also, there was no pathway to employment. People were asking, “What’s the next thing? That didn’t work for me.” There was no real sense that planning was being done and, certainly for the people involved, there was no sense of their having ownership of their journey towards employment.

It is understandable in some ways that local authorities might feel that keeping things in-house means that they can control it and manage people better through the process, but there are other ways of doing that effectively. There can be consortia, for example. Various relationships and partnerships can be managed very effectively if you get communication, record keeping and so on right.

Colin Smyth: That is helpful. I will move on to a different subject with a question that I asked the employability partnerships in the previous panel. Every week when I speak to businesses one of the biggest issues is the challenge of recruitment. Businesses cannot fill vacancies, but we still have

the significant disability employment gap: the two things are completely disconnected. What do we have to do? Why do so many employers not get the business case for closing the employment gap? There is a huge potential workforce out there at a time when businesses are struggling to fill vacancies. Why do business not understand the opportunities? What are the barriers to their understanding?

Oxana MacGregor-Gunn: I can say, from the mental health perspective, that the gap can be closed significantly by taking the right approach. My colleague Ashley Ryan already mentioned the individual placement and support model, which is a supported employment model that is specifically designed to support people with severe and enduring mental health issues to seek and get employment, including sustained employment.

The beauty of the supported employment model is that it also supports employers to educate, support and engage with a workforce that they did not previously know existed. That can be very successful because people are very appreciative of all the support. People with disabilities become an excellent workforce, but for that to happen we need to work very closely with employers because there is still ignorance and misunderstanding and they are not quite sure how to engage with a workforce that is diverse and maybe not familiar to them. The gap can be closed to a significant extent through tailored work with employers.

11:00

David Cameron: We recently led a public social partnership on the disability employment gap, of which 40 organisations were members. It was focused on assisting employers to be better at attracting, recruiting and retaining disabled people. That was delivered over the past four years and has just finished. We have handed over everything that the partnership developed to the Government.

That was a fascinating piece of work. It was focused on employers and gave us real insight into, for example, discriminatory practices that employers do not know are discriminatory because they do not test them. For example, there are online recruitment platforms. Employers have all gone online, but nobody checks whether that works for disabled people. They also do not gather data, or gather only some data through a basic equality monitoring form when people apply for a job, for example. Employers do not really know whom they employ and they do not know what proportion of people who apply for jobs or are interviewed for jobs are disabled. For example, 10 per cent of applicants might be disabled people, but if only 5 per cent are getting through to interview, what is that telling you? If only 2 per cent get a job, what is that telling you? Employers

do not have that data; they do not know very much about the people they employ.

We do not do nearly enough on disclosure. There are more disabled people in employment than we and employers know about, which means that people are not getting the support that they need in employment, so they are more likely to leave employment. I did work a number of years ago on behalf of the Scottish Government on the number of people who leave employment every year. Back then, it was 400,000 a year in the United Kingdom; the number must be much higher now. If 40,000 people a year in Scotland leave employment due to a disability or a health problem and we were able to reduce that significantly and get 10,000 of those people staying in jobs, stopping those people leaving work would make a big impact on the disability employment gap without putting a single extra person into work.

Employers do not know how to do that. They do not know enough about reasonable adjustments, flexibility and getting the support that is out there. There are many agencies that could help them with that—although one of the challenges is that there is not really enough resource for that. There is resource for getting people into jobs but not nearly enough for keeping them in jobs. There should be more proper in-work support.

Quite often, a person has a small problem that, because nobody addresses it, snowballs and becomes a big problem. It could be a health, housing, transport or finances issue. If that is not dealt with, it can become a big problem and, before you know it, the person is out of a job although they did not need to be. A key part of the supported employment model is in-work support, on which we would like a lot more attention to be focused.

Colin Smyth: That is interesting. Ashley Ryan, do you want to add to that point?

Ashley Ryan: We work with about 2,000 employers each year and our experience shows us that disability tends to be the thing that employers will tackle last. They focus on gender and on having ethnically diverse employees, and disability tends to be the thing that comes last. Our work with employers is heavily focused on saying that just having a policy on disability is not enough; it needs to be a living, breathing policy that is part of their everyday work. There are some easy adjustments that employers can make to attract a more diverse workforce. We have tried to talk using business language to tell employers that they will be more productive, have better problem solving and make greater profits if they have a more diverse workforce, which has to include people who are disabled. Employers need training.

Among the basic things that we have seen are timed application forms that stop people who might take longer to fill in an application form from applying. We have seen, for people applying for work doing stock in the back of a large shop, a maths test that most of my staff would struggle to pass. That was an entry-level maths test that was completely irrelevant to the job.

We are trying to get employers to focus on taking away things that they do not need. We ask whether they need all the criteria. Are they stopping people? We ask them to be much more direct in their diversity policies and to talk about what can be done and what adjustments can be made. People do not know what adjustments they can have and what they can ask for. Employers should be very blatant about what they can offer.

We are working with some very big organisations, including Diageo. We are putting supported internships into the business. One of its distilleries had something like 70 vacancies for really well-paid jobs which would be great careers for people, but Diageo could not attract young disabled people—or any young people—into the business. Some really small changes there are starting to result in some really big wins.

It is not enough to train our clients to be ready to go into work if they cannot progress in their careers. We are trying to work with employers to say that not everyone is born disabled. A person might develop a disability or health condition while they are at work, so it is the employer's duty—this is similar to what David Cameron said—to keep in their jobs people who are already in their business. They have to ask about disclosing disability. How do people talk about their disability other than just through a network that meets once a quarter at which they talk about it with other disabled people? A very top-down approach for employers is needed.

Colin Smyth: Is there sufficient support for raising awareness among businesses through the various funding models? Is there a gap there? Last week we met lots of young people from The Usual Place in Dumfries. In addition to support for young people, it provides a general autism awareness course for businesses. It seems to slip through every single funding model because it is not one thing or another. The Usual Place is not about individual people, but is about trying to support businesses generally to understand autism, and it struggles to get funding. Is there a gap in terms of getting the message across to businesses about opportunities, or should there be specific support for the person in the workplace?

Ashley Ryan: People focus heavily on the disability confident scheme. Employers call themselves disability confident leaders, but there is no quality benchmark behind that. They can

literally just say, “We do this” and people go, “Great!” They do not need to provide evidence of what is being done. That can make an employer look disability confident when the reality is that they are much less than that.

Businesses need to recognise the economic benefit of employing disabled people. Certainly, Enable can be funded to deliver training. We have something like 16 courses that we can deliver to employers on a variety of things. Businesses need to have a greater understanding of the huge economic benefits of having a diverse workforce and of investing in disabled people as they have invested in other areas to do with diversity.

Colin Smyth: You made the important point that we have done gender and ethnicity. Why is disability way down at the bottom among priorities for businesses?

Ashley Ryan: I do not think the disability has ever had a big national campaign, in the way that gender has. People report on the gender pay gap—even though the bot on Twitter hunts them down and tells them whether that is the reality. We, as a nation, do not focus enough on the disability employment gap and we do not talk about the disability pay gap. Disabled people earn 83p for every £1 a non-disabled person makes and they work the last 53 days of the year for free. That is not acceptable. For a world in which we want fair work and everyone to have a working life, we need to focus on those things because it is not enough just to get someone a job. We want them to have a career and to thrive.

Colin Beattie: I want to pick up on one or two of the points that I raised with the previous panel. Last week, we had the opportunity to talk to some of the youngsters who have been through the system of employment. They were not very complimentary about the path that they had to follow. Bear in mind, however, that those were only the people that I spoke to myself. For example, going to jobcentres had a negative impact on them because the jobcentres did not understand them or where they were coming from and they could not cater for their needs. They were just parked to one side and that was it. Is that an experience that you are aware of? Is any data collected on how many people experience that negative situation?

David Cameron: I do not think that there is data. Most young disabled people will typically go around the houses a bit before they land somewhere that works for them, because there is a lack of good quality information for people and their families to make informed judgments.

We are talking about the provision of services such as supported employment in local areas and a local authority area might have one supported

employment service that does not support that many people. Hopefully it is a great one and everybody goes through it successfully, but if it is not, disabled people do not often get much choice.

I talked previously about there being lots and lots of services that can help people, but if you are focused on getting a job, you do not often get a huge amount of choice in an area. If it does not work for you, are you empowered to talk about that? Are people coming back and asking you about your experience and then using that to improve the quality of the offer? Not nearly enough of that happens, and that is why Ashley Ryan was talking about quality standards being important. A quality standard would be a 360-degree service and it would talk about the user experience as much as anything else.

People need much better quality information. It could be online but there should also be face to face, one-to-one stuff where people can go and investigate things, try things out, or perhaps talk to other people who have been through a similar process and ask what has worked for them. We do not do nearly enough of that and I would say that it probably works particularly badly for young disabled people.

Colin Beattie: I turn to Oxana MacGregor-Gunn but maybe I will ask a slightly different question. As there is no data, do we have any impression of how good jobcentres are at catering for the needs of disabled people? Do they have the skills to do it? Based on what I have heard, it does not sound as though it would give you as much confidence as you might wish.

Oxana MacGregor-Gunn: I would ask if they have the time and the skills to do it. Our experience is that the young people who our services support give various feedback about their engagement with Jobcentre Plus, and most of it is not positive, I have to say. When they come to us for support, we make sure that we engage them with Jobcentre Plus in the right way. They need support to engage because, at the end of the day, Jobcentre Plus is crucial to their journey. However, in terms of the support that we provide, we feel that young people are a special group. I pass the question to Ashley Ryan at this point.

Ashley Ryan: In our experience with young people, we do not have enough aspirations for disabled young people. We are still seeing about 20 per cent of young people with a learning disability leaving school with zero qualifications above level 2. We need to start much earlier. Roughly 72 per cent of our clients are aged 16 to 29. If we were delivering enough aspirations for those young people, they should not need our services as an adult. We need to work them much earlier because the key to halving the disability employment gap is for young disabled people to

see employment as a viable option for them when they leave school.

We deliver transition programmes in school. We find that there are not only issues with Jobcentre Plus; at times, there are issues with careers advice not being tailored enough or it feels as though young people are being pushed into supported college courses. I do not think that work is explored enough as a viable option. We are still seeing young disabled people not getting a work placement in school unless their mum or dad can support them to do that. That is not acceptable and we need to aspire much more for young people so that, by the time they have left school, work is a real aspiration for them and they want to work—they have a drive to work. Otherwise they will become adults who rely on welfare and get stuck on that hamster wheel of being on welfare or universal credit.

We engage with about 7,000 clients each year and most of them do not come through a jobcentre. We do not get huge numbers of people who engage particularly well with the jobcentre because the it has become a place where they can be sanctioned and lose their benefits.

We all know that sanctions do not support people to go into higher-paid jobs. They support people into worse positions and lower-paid jobs. Our young people do not have a particularly positive experience with jobcentres, but equally their experience is not particularly positive before that because we do not have high enough aspirations for them.

11:15

Colin Beattie: Given that you seem to be validating the position of the young people whom we spoke to, which was quite negative about what they were given in schools and at jobcentres, what feedback is being given on this? Do jobcentres know that they are not doing a great job? Do schools know that they are not doing a great job? Who is giving the feedback?

David Cameron: The issue is not new. I used to work for Enable Scotland many years ago and we had our first skills transition programme 16 years ago. At the time, going into schools was groundbreaking, and we were talking about that point, from 14 years up. However, young disabled people do not necessarily come through school with the expectation that they will work.

That is changing and getting better, but people do not ask them, "What will you do when you grow up? What job will you have?" Unfortunately, people sometimes talk to young disabled people quite differently.

There is a great deal to do in that area. Yes, it would be a valuable to carry out a piece of research with young people who have come through the education experience in particular, and ask them “How did it work for you? What did transition look like for you? What options were put on the table for you? How long did it take you to get to where you wanted to be?”

I remember talking to one local authority and two senior figures in education. One of them said, “We have such a high proportion of young people going into a positive destination”. The person sitting next to them said, “Yes, but what are they doing six months later?” That is an interesting question. That is the thing that you need to pick up: how does it work in reality for people beyond the headline figures?

Colin Beattie: If the system is not working, who is giving feedback to the jobcentres and the schools that it is not working?

Oxana MacGregor-Gunn: We are not quite sure how the feedback loop works in that respect. We provide a lot of support to people with severe and enduring mental health issues when they are adults that started when they were a lot younger, and when I talk about it enduring, I mean more than 10 years. People who we are supporting as adults have been expecting that since a very young age. It all starts very early. Lack of aspiration and life skills, mental health issues—it all goes on and on and on without being addressed.

Part of the issue with Jobcentre Plus is that, statistically, they have about six minutes per person for an appointment and they are filled with completing the administration tasks. I doubt that talking to a young person—or any person—for only six minutes can address any issue. That is why the young people you met felt so disappointed at the whole treatment.

When they come to us, there is time and special skills and we know how to work with young people to give them the confidence so that they can have aspirations and develop their skills to go into the workplace and have the confidence to voice their concerns to their employers. We work with employers.

The sooner we start the journey the better. We need to start with young people so that they do not become users of adult services for people with mental health, learning difficulties and neurodivergent needs. This work is very important.

Ashley Ryan: We did some research with teachers about their concerns for young disabled people and they felt that they did not have the right training. It is still an optional element of training for teachers. The number of young people who identify as having an additional support need has

grown exponentially in the past few years. It is not about a school or DWP not doing a good job, it is about the circumstances. In a school, employment is not necessarily the focus. Their focus is on educational attainment and the curriculum for excellence, but we find great success when qualified staff can be brought in to support it. Our schools programme focuses on employability alongside school. When a school and Enable can work closely together, we see the greatest success because it balances educational attainment with what comes next. It is very difficult to do it all—we have to be mindful of that. This is not about saying that schools are not doing it well.

As Oxana MacGregor-Gunn said, the DWP has a number of programmes that it can send people into, giving them time to deliver a quality service. I have not worked in a jobcentre but I can imagine that it can be quite challenging.

The Convener: I want to make some progress. Kevin Stewart, do you have a supplementary?

Kevin Stewart: I have a very brief one. In your answers to Mr Beattie, you said that some of the bureaucracies might not be doing things in the way that they should be and might not be taking the time to listen. You have all talked about aspiration a great deal. How do we help young disabled folk and neurodiverse folk who want to establish their own businesses? We heard about that last week. Is there anything out there to help young folk who have the aspiration and the talent to establish their own businesses?

David Cameron: That question has been asked for many years. There should be—after all, we are not talking about something that is unique. The different local services that are there to help anybody to establish a business should be able to put in adjustments and supports for disabled people who want to do likewise. I have had a variety of conversations with people about that over the years. It is always as though that is something that is massively radically different, but it never is. It always feels a lot bigger than it is.

It is never a good idea to invent something brand new. We need to go back and look at what we are doing and what can be done better in a way that properly includes all of society instead of excluding young people. I would look at the existing structures that are in place and ask what we can do within those to ensure that services are accessible and welcoming. I assume that they celebrate achievement, but do they celebrate disabled people’s achievement by putting that out in the community and saying, “We are for you—come to us if you need support”?

Kevin Stewart: Are there any good examples out there of where services have adapted to help

young folk with that? Maybe you cannot think of any off the top of your head.

David Cameron: I cannot think of any.

Kevin Stewart: That might be too difficult.

Oxana MacGregor-Gunn or Ashley Ryan, do you have anything to add to what David Cameron said?

Ashley Ryan: We have had some good examples where clients have gone into business, for example to provide virtual assistance. That might be suitable for someone who had a fluctuating health condition that meant that they were not sure how they would be from day to day. It is a case of them understanding that they could use access to work to come in and do some of that work. Dr Danielle Farrel is a good example. She has her own business, and she uses that really effectively.

In some cases, it is a question of recognising people who are role models for other young people and who have done it themselves. We all know that young people will engage in something when they see someone who looks like them, and what that means to them. Showcasing some of those good examples would be a great way to alert young people, because if they are not thinking about employment as an option, they will certainly not be thinking about self-employment as an option.

Oxana MacGregor-Gunn: For young people with mental health issues, self-employment can be a bit of a challenge in itself. I agree with Ashley Ryan and David Cameron. Young people are strongly influenced by their peers. If we could have more positive role models with regard to self-employment, there would be a big win.

Maggie Chapman: Good morning, and thank you for joining us. You have all touched on this in different ways. Earlier this morning, we heard from representatives of LEPs and local authorities that they thought that there were robust structures and processes in place regarding employability services for disabled people, and that capacity and sustained funding were the key issues in preventing us from tackling the disability employment gap. From what you have said, I get the feeling that you do not think that the employability system is working as well as it should be. Are there structures or processes that we need to transform or change, or to get rid of or replace, in order that we can do what we all want to do, which is to free you up to focus on supporting people into employment?

Ashley Ryan: We have seen the greatest success where local authorities have put in investment. What is challenging for us is that the funding mechanisms are set up annually at the

moment. If somebody is coming into a programme in nine months, the onus is on us as a third sector organisation to continue that support regardless of funding. It is not about the amount of funding; it is about recognising that disability employment will not—sadly—be done in 12 months. We need to have a multiyear structure for investment that allows us to heavily invest in things such as aftercare. We have seen some real shifts where local authorities understand the need for aftercare, but in an annual cycle of funding, the reality for them is that they cannot go beyond 12 months.

It also needs to be recognised that qualified staff cost a bit more. The biggest issue that we have at the moment is that I am signing up to the principles of fair work under my contracts, but I often cannot offer fair work to my own staff teams, because contracts are coming out for six months or three months and I am not able to retain qualified staff.

All our employment co-ordinators go through a supported employment PDA at higher national certificate level. That is our commitment. They then go through the National Institute of Disability Management and Research programme, on which the committee has received submissions. We have a commitment to providing qualified staff, but in a yearly contract cycle, if they cannot go through it in the first six months, they will have only six months to get through it before potentially moving on.

Therefore, there are issues to do with the structures around funding mechanisms and what it costs to have qualified staff. That is also linked to the Procurement Reform (Scotland) Act 2014, under which only a certain amount of local authority services can be commissioned. That is challenging, because it has not changed since 2014.

Oxana MacGregor-Gunn: We are in a similar position, in that our most successful services are long-term funded services, because if you support people with disability, you need time to develop that relationship. You need time to set up the service and to continue improving it year on year. If you are working specifically with people with severe and enduring mental health issues, it takes time to be successful.

However, if the funding is arranged, it is possible to have a very successful service after year 1. Unfortunately, the fact that the funding goes up and down, and people's nervousness about whether it will be extended, have a direct impact on the behaviour of people who work in the service and people who use the service. That is not a good thing. Our collective ask has always been for long-term stable funding so that we can embed the service, keep improving it and keep delivering really good results.

David Cameron: I agree with what has been said. When it comes to our current structures, one issue is ensuring that there is a wide enough range of the specialist services that are required in some areas. An area that I would highlight that has not been mentioned so far is employment services for people who have experienced sensory loss or who were born deaf or blind. Those services have fallen off a cliff—they have literally disappeared. There is a little bit of provision here and there across Scotland, whereas, years ago, there were large national organisations that had teams of staff with specialist skills. That has pretty much gone. There is an issue, particularly as we take a more local approach. The issue is to do with market stewardship, whereby we need to make sure that the market out there can deliver all the things that are needed. We need to take a bigger and more strategic view of the situation.

Services for people who have experienced sensory loss, which we are trying to do some work on, is a particular issue at the moment. I know from discussions that we had with civil servants about data for fair start Scotland that the Scottish Government was of the opinion that people were moving through that system and getting jobs, but I am not entirely sure about that. We certainly need more of that. There will be other specialist areas in which services are required, such as people with learning disabilities and neurodivergent people. There are some parts of the country where a lot is happening and other parts where there are only tiny wee services.

Maggie Chapman: That is interesting, and it leads me on to my next question. Earlier, we heard about the desire to have an open-for-all come-one, come-all service that can be made bespoke or tailored to the individual's needs. Are you saying that we might need to think about the needs of different groups of disabled people, or is it a case of ensuring that we have flexibility and agility within that?

11:30

David Cameron: Mainstream services—that is the terminology that is used—are not nearly as accessible as they should be. They should be accessible anyway. They should work for the vast majority of people, including disabled people.

However, there are specialist areas where specific knowledge is important. That is not to say that mainstream services cannot build and develop such knowledge and develop their staff teams in such areas, but in order to provide supported employment for someone who is sight impaired, it is necessary, in having conversations with employers, to be able to answer detailed questions and to have good knowledge of issues to do with technology, accessibility and so on.

Such issues are very important, and people are often muddling through, which is not good for anybody.

Maggie Chapman: Last week, we heard a clear example involving a young person with vision impairment and what screen readers can and cannot read. That comes back to one of Ashley Ryan's earlier points about what people are doing.

Oxana MacGregor-Gunn or Ashley Ryan, do you have any comments about the tension between an inclusive-for-all disabled people employability service and the need for the bespoke tailoring of support?

Oxana MacGregor-Gunn: I want to make the point that, when people gain employment, their journey is just starting, and on-going, in-work support is so important in helping them to retain their job, to sustain them in it and to get development. Again, that relates to the funding issue. The funding should be available for a long time, because the person will need such support for a long time. If you are supporting a person with a disability, there is a clear understanding that the disability will not disappear—they will continue to be a disabled person, so they will still need in-work support.

Employers can present challenges to a disabled person throughout their career. A change in line manager will be a huge change in the disabled person's working life. There might even be some positive stressors, such as a promotion, that require new reasonable adjustments and new support. The provision of on-going support is incredibly important.

Ashley Ryan: We are in a similar position to David Cameron, in that we have had to try to bring in resource to do more specialist work. At its heart, Enable is a learning disability organisation. Enable Works delivers across disability and long-term health conditions. We have started to train staff in British Sign Language, but it takes a long time to get staff trained in BSL, and if you have only a year's funding, that is challenging.

With regard to assistive tech for people who have a visual impairment, we have had to bring in people with a specialism in that area to do that work. David Cameron spoke about people muddling through, which is probably what we were doing in the first wee while, but that does not represent an acceptable service. Although great strides forward have been made in closing the disability employment gap, that has not been the case for some key groups, including people who have a learning disability.

There is a need for specialism, but making services as easy to access as possible can work for anyone who has a barrier to employment. As David Cameron said, there have been real

challenges for people who have a hearing impairment or a visual impairment. Interpreters cost upwards of £75 an hour, which an organisation that receives £50,000 of funding a year will simply not be able to fund. That leads organisations to cherry pick clients who are easier to move into work, which is not what we are trying to do here.

Therefore, we must be clear about the need to be able to fund things appropriately so that young people in that position do not have a negative experience. We do not want someone to come in and have a bad experience with us, so we have to bring in that specialism.

Maggie Chapman: Ashley Ryan, you talked about the different structure that you have in Dundee and how that seems to work better than elsewhere. Are there opportunities for sharing models or systems or examples of good practice that you know work? Are people willing to say, “Yes, we can learn from that. How can we do something differently over here?” Are there enough opportunities to share good practice?

Ashley Ryan: The local authority does a lot of sharing through the likes of SLAED. John Davidson, who is our contact in Dundee, does a lot of that. He is heavily involved in that, and some big strides forward have been made. Through the national conversations for “No one left behind”, we talked about our Glasgow model, which has 19 partners. As David Cameron said, we brought in 19 partners who all have a different specialism. There is no duplication—we all know exactly what we are doing and we know who is supporting who—but we have a varied offer. There have been better opportunities to share that.

As a nation, we have probably not yet got it right in understanding the nuances of rurality. We deliver a supported employment model in the Highlands. We do that through the full local authority all the way up to Wick and across to Skye. In the first year, I wrote a bid for the Highlands as a Glasgow girl who had probably not spent enough time there, and I did not really understand the nuances and the challenges of rurality. There is not enough choice. We need to make sure that we have a spread. We are probably not sharing that enough in rural areas. That is the challenge.

The Convener: Sorry, Ms Chapman, I want to make some progress. We are a bit short of time.

Murdo Fraser: I want to follow up on the question of funding and ask you the same question that I put to the earlier panel, on funding for employability programmes, which is something that came up on Monday in the committee’s visit to two social enterprises in Perth that work with young people with autism and with learning

difficulties. The issue that came up was the lack of certainty over funding, as they were not getting their award letters until well into the financial year. If you heard the evidence from the previous witnesses, you will know that they confirmed that that was a pattern that they were very familiar with. According to the SPICe briefing for today’s meeting, the Scottish Government’s budget for the current year for employability is down 24 per cent in real terms compared to last year. What impact is that having on your ability to deliver services and how does the issue of year-to-year funding and short-termism impact on your ability to deliver?

Ashley Ryan: We ultimately have the greatest success in areas that commit to multiyear funding. They do not always have to commit to a particular level of budget; we acknowledge that things change. In Dundee, we are funded for the next two years and we were funded for the past two years, which means that we have a lower turnover of staff and are able to keep qualified excellent staff. It is the same in Edinburgh and Glasgow, but the smaller local authorities have a challenge. They are not willing to take the same risks if they do not have their grant letters, and I can completely understand that. However, we are losing qualified staff every day. We are losing staff who have been in the sector for many years into other sectors and other areas because continuity of funding is a real problem.

As the director of Enable Works, I have to make a decision on balancing the risk of whether funding will come in again in a year or whether we have to put staff through redundancy processes. We have been in a fortunate position because we have flexibility of funding and I have not had to make anyone redundant. Certainly, in the 14 years for which I have been at Enable, we have never done that, but that is because of the decision that we have taken to balance the risk. Last year was particularly challenging because local authority letters came out very late. Most of the funding came out for six months and some of it came out for three months. If we are not getting a bid out until September, we cannot get started until December and what can I deliver in three months? Nothing of any quality. Therefore, we had to make a decision not to go for those, which is a shame for the clients, who ultimately do not get what we would deem a very good service.

Murdo Fraser: Presumably, you benefit from being part of a large national organisation that has reserves, so you are not necessarily reliant on that very short-term funding, because you have something that you can fall back on.

Ashley Ryan: Yes, we are very aware of the privilege that being a large organisation gives us. Among our smaller partners, we have seen some

employability organisations close, such as Right Track Scotland. It was part of our Glasgow partnership and it closed after 41 years in service as a result of changes to funding. Post-European funding, it was unable to manage the risk.

The funding mechanism of paying in arrears can be challenging as well, because if you are paid quarterly in arrears and you have quite a big process to go through, sometimes you are not getting the funding for five months. That can be challenging for a small organisation.

Oxana MacGregor-Gunn: We have a similar experience delivering a 12-month service in a six-month period. This year will be no different. We already know that a couple of services that we are delivering, which are very important services for people with mental health issues, are going to be closed because of the uncertainty with funding.

David Cameron: It is just such an obvious point. We have experienced it for many years and the point has been made for years. I do not understand why it has not been resolved. I appreciate the budgeting pressures and things like that, but it stands to reason that, as has been said, if you want to build a team, if you want to build a presence in a community and if you want to build relationships with employers, referral agencies, education, social work and everyone else, it makes sense that you can say that you will be here for three or five years.

Brian Whittle: I am trying to move on from what I was asking earlier this morning about employability services. Is there an offer to reach out into the disabled community? We have heard from you and from many other organisations about the fantastic work that is being done, yet we have comparatively high unemployment in the disability community. We heard last week from some youngsters who have got into employment and have reached positive destinations. We heard about the journey. You mentioned the journey that they go on, especially those with neurological and learning difficulties. We heard about some of their difficulties at school, and some of their experiences were not great. We also heard about their experiences at the DWP with people who wanted to help but did not know quite how to do so. It was by chance that they got into a third sector organisation that was able to gather them and get them ready for employment. It is about the joined-up thinking about the journey of all our young people but very specifically those in the disability community. Are we reaching into schools enough? Are we on the journey with them from an early enough stage?

Ashley Ryan: We have challenges as a result of how the Government provides funding, in that young people who are in school sit under the education budget and then education and skills.

Young people in employment then go into a slightly different budget, and young people who are disabled sit under the social care budget. Sometimes those are not joined up enough, which means that we have challenges in being able to support someone all the way through their journey. Lots of the time it can be a funding mechanism, as David Cameron said. Our schools programme starts at 14. A schools programme should start much earlier but, because of the nuances with it being an employability programme and not an education programme, it falls into a slightly different funding pot. We should be reaching in much younger for young people.

There have been big strides forward with things such as developing the young workforce programme, but they are term-time programmes and young people require support outwith term times. We do a lot of work with young people in the summer. They are not independent travellers and there are things that have to continue on through their journey. A lot of organisations in the third sector are well placed to deliver that support because they are tried and tested, usually community-based, organisations that people know and trust. They provide a very different experience because they are not a statutory service.

Brian Whittle: Oxana MacGregor-Gunn, to develop that point, are schools aware enough of what is available to them? Are the DWP and employers aware of what is available to them to help our children through that journey?

Oxana MacGregor-Gunn: I would not talk about schools in this respect. However, as we are supporting people's mental health issues, young people come into our services from child and adolescent mental health services. We have referrals from CAMHS and we have a service specifically in Edinburgh. It is very well regarded with excellent feedback. We work with CAMHS and that is where quite a lot of referrals come from. There has to be a lot more done in raising awareness in schools and throughout the education sector.

David Cameron: I talked before about people having access to much better-quality information and advice. I like the idea of independent brokerage for people—that is a really old idea, but, then, there are no new ideas. About 30 years ago, you could go and talk to someone independently and talk about options and they had knowledge and access. Disability employment advisers in jobcentres used to do something similar as well. They generally had a good understanding of their area. There were four or five or six or seven in Glasgow and they knew their patch in Partick or Maryhill, for example. Therefore, there is a big issue. Moving with the times, that information needs to be in a language and presented in way

that makes sense to young people, presumably online and so on.

11:45

Brian Whittle: To try to draw a circle around that, would it be a fair assumption to say that you are looking for more specialist employability services in the disability community? Is that a fair assessment?

David Cameron: Yes.

Ashley Ryan: Yes.

Evelyn Tweed: I was interested in the initial comments that you all made about relationships with local employability partnerships. You used language such as “inconsistent communication issues” and “engagement issues”. Why do you think that is and how might we make that better?

David Cameron: We have 32 local authorities. Unlike my colleagues here, I am not in service delivery any more, but I know that, even if you are a significant and substantial national organisation with resource, trying to develop relationships and understanding and knowledge in 32 different areas is a big undertaking.

You would maybe target some key areas for your business—you are going to do it for your business, apart from anything else—where you already have a presence. There would be other places where you do not have much of a history as an organisation. Are you going to try to invest in that area and have a presence and develop relationships with no great guarantee that it will lead to opportunities for your organisation? If it does lead to an opportunity, it might be only for a year. You have to think about it in those terms. It may be the case that in some local authority areas there will be a lot happening and a lot of people engaged and in other local authority areas there will not be that many.

Ashley Ryan: It is inconsistent as well because this is not people’s day jobs. They have other jobs to do. Last year some of the people in the LEPs lost their jobs. There was no consistent funding for them either, so the LEP just fell apart in the last three months of the financial year. As things change, you are maybe not getting a consistent membership of organisations such as SDS or the DWP as things have changed and shifted in each local authority. We are in 29 local authorities and not one LEP is done the same. They are all done differently and their engagement is different. Their transparency and their willingness to take feedback is all very different across every single one of them. That is because it is an add-on to what can be a very complex job. It is challenging to get the resource.

Oxana MacGregor-Gunn: There is a lack of a standard approach. You go into any of the 32 local authorities and you will see a different set-up, a different structure, different engagement lines and a different communication appetite. A national approach and a local approach both have their merits, but when it comes to engagement with LEPs, you need to work 32 times harder to engage with them all.

David Cameron: We started the conversation talking about the supported employment review. The supported employment guarantee and the supported employment quality standard would apply across all 32 local authority areas. It would be about ensuring that, no matter where you live, there will be minimum level of service available and it will be of a certain standard in every area. That would go a long way to dealing with some areas of inconsistency.

The Convener: Could I come back to why we are undertaking this inquiry? The Government has a commitment to halve the disability employment gap by 2038. We know that some progress is being made. Are you confident that we are on track to meet that target? According to some of the evidence that we were provided with, if we focus just on education and have disabled people reaching the same standard of education as non-disabled people, that will close the gap by 4 percentage points. If we do something significant about structural barriers, that will close the gap by 28 percentage points. Do you think that we have a clear path to 2038 and that the target will be met?

Ashley Ryan: Probably not in some cases. There have been strides forward for certain key groups in relation to the disability employment gap but, for some of those groups—particularly people who have a learning disability or, as David Cameron covered, people who have a visual impairment or a hearing impairment—we are not making the same strides forward. Although we have closed the gap by about 7 percentage points in the past couple of years, it is not getting better for those groups. In the case of learning disability, the employment rate is about 5 per cent. It has not improved and, if we are failing that key cohort of people, we will not close the gap enough because there is not a level playing field for everyone.

As David said earlier, we also need to stop people leaving the workplace, with more work and support that recognises people who are in work. How do we keep them in work? How do we keep people healthy? How do we tie in things such as health and wellbeing to work? We need to get rid of some of the stigma on disability and do that work as well but, until we get some of the structures right, we will not close that gap for some of the key cohorts.

The Convener: Do you think that the “No one left behind” funding and model of delivery is sufficient or is informed enough on what the structural barriers and the challenges are to help us get there? Do we need to look more closely at how that is being delivered? Do the local authority partnerships recognise where you have the biggest challenges in closing the gap?

Ashley Ryan: We have seen some strides with the local authority partnerships, but we need to invest in specialist support. The one-size-fits-all approach has not worked for people who are disabled in Scotland. Equally, the principles of “No one left behind” are how third sector organisations operate every day. It is about person-centred support, it is quality driven, it is flexible and it is about local delivery. All those principles are great, but without correct investment in that support and without continued commitment to that support, we will not make strides forward. Ultimately, third sector organisations have been delivering the principles of “No one left behind” for many years.

Kevin Stewart: Ashley Ryan, you mentioned a diverse workforce. I asked the previous witnesses about the diverse jobs that we now have, which require a diverse workforce. What would you do to persuade employers that employing disabled people, learning-disabled people and people who are neurodiverse is the right thing for them to do? What would be your message to them?

Ashley Ryan: We talk to a lot of employers about the economic benefit—you have to be able to talk businesses’ language and they have to see the economic benefit in having a diverse workforce. We have seen massive strides forward with our employer engagement in the past year, particularly in food and drink, technology and finance, where businesses recognise that they need a skill set that they are not attracting at the moment or that they have an ageing workforce and big skills gaps. However, we have to provide them with qualified staff to be able to go into that, and sector-based academies are a great example of ways in which a disabled person can get the skills that are required.

We have seen some big strides forward in some of the big national employers, based on explaining the economic benefit to them and saying, “You cannot afford not to do this.” Ultimately, 18 to 30-year-olds are four times less likely to apply to an organisation that does not support their diversity needs, so organisations cannot afford not to do that. That is the conversation that we need to start having with businesses.

Oxana MacGregor-Gunn: We need to give employers confidence that, with the right support, they can engage with a workforce that they are not engaging fully with now—that is, people with disabilities. We need to ensure that employers

understand the concept of reasonable adjustments and all the support that providers like us can give them to help them to successfully engage with people who have disabilities.

That is what is working. We engage with employers every day and, after we have worked through the initial difficulties, in-work support is quite straightforward. After overcoming the initial issues with engagement and setting up a person in a job, giving employers confidence that support will be available for the employee and themselves is one of the key factors for success.

David Cameron: We need to do a lot more work with employers. Ashley Ryan made the point about the business case: that is the language that needs to be used, because the proposal needs to make sense to people. People want to do the right thing, but they do not know how to do the right thing and are afraid of doing the wrong thing—they are afraid of creating an awkward situation by bringing people into their organisation and then not being able to properly support them. There is a need for investment in that area or, at the very least, employers to be encouraged to make that investment themselves.

Following our work on the public social partnership that I mentioned earlier, we recommended to Government that there should be a centre of excellence for Scotland’s employers, which would be a place where they can access the wealth of specialist knowledge and information that exists, including mentoring, support, training and consultancy. There is an enormous resource in Scotland to assist employers but they do not know that it is there, they do not know what they need and they do not know the benefits that it could bring them. Incidentally, I do not think that that is something that the taxpayer should pay for, because most employers are private sector and I do not think that the taxpayer should pay for private sector employers to become more diverse. They should look to make those investments themselves, but the Government could pump prime some of that to establish that institution.

Kevin Stewart: I am a carer positive employer. Would it be wise to establish a scheme—not a tick-box scheme, because I cannot abide them—to award employers who have a positive approach to employing diverse people?

David Cameron: Yes, a properly accredited and measured scheme that offered a proper insight into what happens inside an organisation would be good. It is perfectly possible to establish such a scheme. It would need to look at how it is recruiting people and how it is supporting people. If it has a high number of people leaving every year, that tells us something, and the scheme could look at how it is addressing that.

People like prizes and medals, so why not? However, such a scheme would need to be real, and the current ones are not really real.

Ashley Ryan: If you are a disability confident employer, you should be a leader in your field, but that is not the case in most cases. Being named as a leader in your field should be difficult to achieve, because you should be aspiring to be leader level and should be accountable in terms of what that means. I would love to see a huge overhaul of the disability confident employer scheme, so that it is assessed independently and does not involve people saying that they do things without providing any evidence that they do. It might be that you have never hired a disabled person in your life but you are called a disability confident leader. An improvement in that sort of scheme should be invested in.

David Cameron: I was at an event recently where someone from the University of Strathclyde gave a presentation on research that they had done on the issue, which looked at the proportion of organisations' workforces who are disabled at each of the three levels of the disability confident employer scheme. The research found that there was no difference whatsoever between having an accreditation and not. In fact, at the leader level, the level of employment of disabled people was 0.1 per cent lower than the level for organisations that did not have the accreditation. It has made no difference whatsoever.

We are not in favour of that kind of accreditation; we are in favour of having proper accreditation and proper standards.

Oxana MacGregor-Gunn: I agree with Ashley Ryan and David Cameron. The arrangement is already there; it just needs to be real as opposed to what we have now.

Kevin Stewart: So, you are saying that we should get rid of the tick-box approach and make sure that folk are living up to what they claim they are doing.

Oxana MacGregor-Gunn: At the moment, it is a declaration, not a measurement of factors or achievements. You can declare that you are disability positive and that is it. It is not enough.

The Convener: Before we close, I have a question about supported workplaces. When we went to Dundee last year, we visited Enable and also Dovetail Enterprises. This morning, we have talked more about employers and people being supported into employment, but does anyone want to say anything about the role of supported workplaces, such as Dovetail? As other people have said, we visited the Push reuse centre and the Giraffe cafe in Perth, which are workplaces whose purpose, in part, is the provision of that

support. Do you understand the distinction that I am making?

David Cameron, you may come in first, because you represent supported employment. Does that include supported workplaces and supported employment?

12:00

David Cameron: Sort of. Supported workplaces have always been quite controversial in our sector because people sometimes see them as being a ghetto, to use the harsh word, where people go and never leave. Some of our members operate supported workplaces, but we believe very much in the supported employment model—we are the keepers of the flame for that and that is what we promote.

In some cases, there is perhaps not a lot of difference between a supported workplace and what someone else might just call a social enterprise, which might take the form of a cafe or something like that. The important thing is: is it a throughput for people that then moves them out into open employment in the wider economy? Sometimes, that is quite challenging, because people do not want to move on because where they are is really nice and they like it—I fully understand why that would be the case.

I am choosing my words carefully. Supported workplaces are part of the landscape. I do not think that they are going anywhere, so we need to make sure that they are utilised effectively to ultimately move more disabled people into work in the wider economy.

The Convener: Ashley Ryan, there is a question that is linked to that about how we measure success. The Government's target is about employment, which is a legitimate target and it is the one that we are scrutinising, but does that maybe not recognise that some people are involved in other roles? For example, some of the young people we met yesterday were in volunteering work. I asked whether they wanted to move into paid employment and they said that they felt that the volunteering role suited them more in the circumstances that they were in. Voluntary organisations say to us that, sometimes, it is about increasing somebody's confidence and their life skills and it is not always about employment. Do you think that we are measuring enough or we are measuring the right things?

Ashley Ryan: We should also make sure that people are sustaining employment once they go into it. That would be a greater focus for us. We placed almost 1,100 people into work last year and 87 per cent of them sustained that employment to six months. We will now track them to two years, because there is no point in putting

someone into work if it is just a hamster-wheel situation and they drop in and out.

Young people and adults need to be able to make an informed choice about work. I met a young person who had been working in Burger King for 15 years. When I asked him whether he had been paid, he said no. Burger King can absolutely afford to pay a young person to be in work. Yes, we see volunteering as an option but some of that involves the informed choice about permitted work under their benefits. For me, work is not about full time and part time, 17.5 or 35 hours; it is about what someone can contribute that is meaningful. However, we should be tracking sustainment into work rather than just recording people at the point of them going into work.

We do not track volunteering as an employability outcome, because we are heavily focused on the principles of fair work and putting someone into a good job. We believe that everyone has the ability to enter a job that is high quality and well paid and we see volunteering as a gateway to that. When we look at young people leaving school, we do not count volunteering in our schools programme as an outcome because it is an outcome that will not necessarily lead them right away into a well-paid job, although it is definitely a gateway to a job.

One of the issues that young people think about is that of permitted work: "Can I do that? How will that impact my benefits? How will that impact my life moving forward?" If you are going into a low-paid entry-level job, in some cases you will not be in a better-off position. That is a difficult position for young people to think about.

Oxana MacGregor-Gunn: I agree. We feel that there is a place for supported businesses or supported placements, but we advocate for competitive employment, independent employment and people being supported in employment to develop their skills and get trained. It is a place-and-train model, which is the principle of supported employment and is what we feel provides the most rewarding work for people. Permitted work is key to starting someone on their career path and enabling them to potentially build up their hours, after which they can see what will happen next.

The Convener: Thank you all for giving evidence this morning. The committee will now move into private session.

12:04

Meeting continued in private until 12:30.

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Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

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