**Written evidence submitted by my AFK (BYC021)**

Introduction

my AFK welcomes the Youth Select Committee’s decision to inquire into work experience for young people.

We work exclusively with young people with special educational needs and disabilities (‘SEND’), aged up to 25. Typically, these young people have learning disabilities, autism and/or communication/interaction difficulties. They usually have an Education, Health and Care Plan (‘EHCP’),[[1]](#footnote-1) reflecting the fact that their impairments are more severe and/or complex.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In view of this, **our evidence relates to the experiences and needs of disabled young people, principally those with learning disabilities, autism and/or communication/interaction difficulties in mainstream and special schools/colleges or who have left education.**

As education and support into work are devolved matters, references to “national” and “Government” policies refer to England. The practical issues are, of course, unaffected by geography or jurisdiction.

Summary

1. Many professionals in education, health and social care, as well as the general public, believe that most disabled people cannot work, particularly those with learning disabilities and/or autism;
2. The social model of disability is essential to understanding the barriers facing disabled young people trying to get paid work;
3. Disabled young people, especially those with autism and/or a learning disability, are very poorly served by most preparation for work;
4. There is a huge gap between the employment rates for non-disabled and disabled people – the Disability Employment Gap;
5. The Gap can be closed by:

* raising aspirations, ambitions and expectations amongst students, parents/carers and professionals;
* including work-related content in the curriculum from an early age;
* providing work skills training;
* more, high quality, work experience;
* effective job coaching to support young people to get, and keep, jobs.

1. All schools and colleges should be made significantly more accountable for preparing their pupils with SEND for work & independent living;
2. Much employment support is inadequate for learners with autism, learning disability and communication/interaction difficulties;
3. Many professionals fail to appreciate that disabled people are not all the same and so need different support;
4. In order to meet the diverse needs and preferences of disabled young people, a wide range of work experience opportunities needs to be available;
5. Commissioners of services, whether schools/colleges, central or local government, need to make sure that employment support, and related work experience, is of a suitable quality and supported by experienced job coaches.

About my AFK

1. **my AFK’s** mission is to give as many disabled young people as possible the chance to work or volunteer in their community ([www.my-afk.org](http://www.my-afk.org)).
2. We are a well-established provider of support to young people with SEND, aged 14–25. Our services include school holiday programmes, education and training services, work experience and an employment support programme.
3. We have partnerships with over 40 schools and colleges from nine London boroughs, working closely with students and teachers to provide individualised work experience placements and to teach employability skills from our office in Haringey.
4. Our employment support programme works with disabled young people, aged up to 25, on work preparation and work placements leading to paid work. Our team of specialist employment brokers/job coaches have experience in finding and supporting work placements and of matching candidates with suitable employers. They also support the employers to make a success of placements. We work with 50 employers across London and we consider our employer partners to be key to our success.
5. 88% of the young people we placed into paid work during 2014-16 remained in work for at least one year after finding employment.
6. my AFK subscribes to the **“social model of disability”** whereby people are disabled, not by their impairments but rather, by the actions, and inactions, of the society in which they live. See Inclusion Scotland’s explanation of the social model and its antithesis, the “medical model”.[[3]](#footnote-3) The social model is essential to understanding the barriers facing disabled young people trying to get paid work.

Unemployment & disability

1. It is a tragic fact that many people, professionals in education, health and social care as well as the general public, believe that most disabled people cannot work. That is, however, not the case as repeated surveys carried out by my AFK with disabled young people and their parents have demonstrated.
2. It was, partly, concerns over the negative underlying attitudes of professionals that caused the Department for Education (DfE) to emphasis that[[4]](#footnote-4):

*“The overwhelming majority of young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) are capable of sustained employment with the right preparation and support. All professionals working with them should share that presumption.”*

1. The SEND Code of Practice, 2015[[5]](#footnote-5) (SEND Code) reinforces the point:

*“For students who are not taking qualifications, their study programme should focus on* ***high quality work experience****, and on non-qualification activity which prepares them well for employment, independent living, being healthy adults and participating in society.”*

1. Despite this clear national policy framework, disabled young people, especially those with autism and/or a learning disability, are very poorly served in terms of preparation for work. Ofsted reported in March 2016[[6]](#footnote-6):

*“Provision [is] not focused sufficiently well on preparing learners with high needs for adult life” and “… too much provision lack[s] meaningful work experience.”*

1. As a direct consequence, disabled people are far less likely to be in employment than non-disabled people. The statistics are clear:

* only 50% of disabled adults are in paid work compared to nearly 80% of non-disabled adults;
* only 32% of autistic adults are in paid work, falling to 16% for full-time work[[7]](#footnote-7);
* only 5.7% of adults with a learning disability in England are in paid work, a figure which has been falling for the last 3 years[[8]](#footnote-8).

1. There are a number of reasons for this “**Disability Employment Gap”**:
2. There is a pervasive lack of belief that disabled children and young people can actually work. At a conscious level, professionals say that they believe that is possible, but their actions undermine their words;
3. Most parents of children with more significant SEND have been told by professionals, sometimes from before the child is born, that their child will never do anything, let alone work. This amounts to brainwashing even though it is honestly said and well-meant. This is most prevalent with young people with learning disabilities. As a result, disabled young people typically believe that work is simply not for them.
4. Despite almost every school and college claiming to provide preparation for work and independent living few build their curriculum around it. Offering significant amounts of work experience is rare, as is emphasising the development of effective self-advocacy skills;
5. This is partly because schools and colleges, both special and mainstream, hold to traditional delivery models – of curriculum, timetable patterns, teacher skills and experience – making committing to extended work experience very difficult;
6. Perhaps most critically, senior school leaders do not believe that it is their job to prepare under 19 year olds for work. Unlike further education colleges and universities, which are at the end of the educational process, schools are in the middle and are not held accountable for the subsequent (un)employment rates amongst their pupils.
7. Demographic trends mean that the problem is growing:

* in England, the number of statements/EHCPs naming autism as the primary need has increased by 55% between 2010 and 2017 to nearly 61,000. In addition, there are a further 13,000 statements/EHCPs where autism is listed as the secondary need.[[9]](#footnote-9);[[10]](#footnote-10) This is in the context of the total number of statements/EHCPs rising by ‘only’ 8% in the same period;
* research carried out for the Department of Health projected a 32% increase, between 2010 and 2030, in the number of young people with a learning disability in England.[[11]](#footnote-11), [[12]](#footnote-12)

Closing the Disability Employment Gap

1. The Disability Employment Gap can be closed. However, it has to be addressed as an integrated strategy that includes:

* Raising aspirations, ambitions and expectations amongst students, parents/carers and professionals;
* Including work-related content in the curriculum from an early age: trips to businesses; games such as setting up a shop for a day or two; talking about the jobs people do;
* Planning activities to build the self-confidence of the young person;
* Work skills training: answering a telephone in a work environment, how to behave in a professional workplace;
* And, of course, work experience. However, not just a single brief placement but a planned series starting with short work “tasters”, to a few days placement leading to a prolonged placement.

All this needs to be properly planned and supported. Questions need to be asked, such as ‘what **sort** of placement is needed next?’ to ‘what **preparation** is needed for that placement so that the student gets the most out of it?’ and ‘what **does this person want to do in the future** and therefore what placement would be best today’. Work experience is vital, but it is only a part of the jigsaw.

1. Perhaps, most crucial of all, is for professionals to appreciate that disabled people are not all the same. Many schemes, including major government ones, fail to allow for the obvious fact that disabled people are all different. What is needed by someone who is strong academically and uses a wheelchair may be completely different from the needs of someone with autism and learning disability. Similarly, disabled young people are ready for work at different ages depending on their circumstances. Some are ready at 18, the same as their non-disabled peers whilst some mature later and hence are ready in their mid-20’s. It seems obvious but, surprisingly, it is frequently ignored.

Range of types/venues for work experience

1. Work experience placements for young people with more severe SEND can be simply classified as ‘sheltered’, ‘semi-sheltered’, and ‘open’[[13]](#footnote-13). From my AFK’s perspective, the ideal is for every young person to have work experience in ‘open’ settings (commercial businesses, public sector organisations etc) since that is where there are the most opportunities for paid work and inclusion into society. Sometimes that is achieved after one or two placements in sheltered and/or semi-sheltered locations. However, realistically, not everyone can thrive in open settings. Some people with autism may get overwhelmed with the noise, colours and general distraction in some places. Others become overly anxious. It is, therefore, vital that a wide variety of placements are available so that the young person has the best opportunity to succeed. Similarly, disabled young people, just like non-disabled people, have personal preferences. They want to work in a shop or a school or for London Underground. Meeting their preferences will greatly improve the value of the placement and its chances of leading to paid employment in the future. That is why my AFK provides sheltered work experience in its own office, semi-sheltered experience at a social enterprise cycle shop/café and ‘edible garden’ as well as open opportunities with nearly 50 commercial and public sector organisations. These range for ‘magic circle’ law firms and international urban design firms to local libraries and fast food chains.

Employment support for 19-25 year olds

1. We are concerned about how support for 19-25 year olds with SEND is developing. More organisations are starting to offer support to get into work, yet it is increasingly apparent that the quality of much of what is being offered is poor.
2. Based on what we come across in our work, our concerns over quality include:
3. poorly trained and inexperienced staff. Job coaching does not simply involve filling in a few forms, taking the trainee to the place of work and then hovering over them, getting in the way of their experience;
4. inadequate choice of employers and job roles so that trainees do not get experience that matches their preferences;
5. poor preparation of the trainees ahead of their placement with inadequate job skills training. Training in soft skills is essential, not just “here’s how to write a CV”. Disabled young people rarely have anything to put on a CV;
6. poor quality placements resulting from the employers being ill-prepared by the job coach;
7. training periods that are too short, and inadequate amounts of face-to-face support. Disabled young people with learning disabilities, autism and/or communication/interaction difficulties need significantly greater support from expert job coaches;
8. low rates of placement into paid work that is sustained over a reasonable period of time.

We appreciate that in a time of tight budgets, commissioning low cost job support is very tempting, however the long term budget savings are lost if the support is inadequate and jobs are either not gained or not sustained.

Recommendations

1. The following actions that need to be taken:
2. improve training of professional staff to create an environment where disabled students, and their aspirations (not their disabilities) really are at the centre of planning processes to prepare for work and life beyond school/college;
3. training of professionals (education, health and social care) should emphasise the reality of disabled people working in paid jobs and the need to raise expectations;
4. all pupils and students with SEND (and probably those without) should, *throughout their education,* be taught with a curriculum that has, as a central component, preparation for work and independent living. The assumption should be “***when*** you get a job”;
5. commissioners of services, whether schools/colleges, central or local government, need to make sure that employment support, and related work experience, is of a suitable quality and supported by experienced job coaches;
6. ensure that disabled young people have an adequate choice of work experience and paid work opportunities;
7. make all schools and colleges significantly more accountable for preparing their pupils/students with SEND for work & independent living.

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1. Since 2014, Education, Health and Care Plans have been replacing Statements of Special Educational Needs and Learning Disability Assessments for children and young people up to the age of 25. An EHC plan details the education, health and social care support that is to be provided to a child or young person who has SEN or a disability. It is drawn up by the local authority after an EHC needs assessment of the child or young person. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The SEND Code gives information on broad areas of need - DfE. 2015. *Special Educational Needs and Disability. Code of Practice: 0-25.* p97-98 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://inclusionscotland.org/socialmodelofdisability/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. DfE. 2018. *16-19 Study Programmes: Departmental advice for education providers*. p7 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. DfE. 2015. *SEND Code of Practice: 0-25.* Para 8.30 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ofsted. 2016. *Moving forward? How well the further education and skills sector is preparing young people with high needs for adult life.* p5 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. National Autistic Society. 2016. *Government must tackle the autism employment gap*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. NHS Digital. 2017. *Measures from the Adult Social Care Outcomes Framework, England – 2016-17*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. DfE. 2010. *Special Educational Needs in England*, *January 2010.* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. DfE. 2017b. *Special Educational Needs in England, January 2017*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Economics of Social and Health Care Research Unit. 2011. *Projections of Demand for Social Care and Disability Benefits for Younger Adults in England.* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This is partly the result of increased life expectancy. As noted above, the life expectancy of a person with Down’s Syndrome has risen very sharply since 1983. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. At its simplest, work experience can be divided into:   
     - ‘sheltered’ where the setting is closed to the public and run/overseen by specialist staff (eg. school students preparing food to be sold only to staff and other students);   
     - ‘semi-sheltered’ where the location is run by specialist staff but is accessible to the public (eg. a social enterprise café, perhaps with a modest volume of customers made up of members of the public);   
     - ‘open’ where it is a business/organisation open to the public/customers of the business and run by employees of that business (eg. a commercial office or a high street shop). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)