**Written evidence submitted by Ambitious about Autism (BYC022)**

**Ambitious about Autism**

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability which effects one in 100 people in the UK. It effects the way a person communicates and how they experience the world around them.

Autism is described as a spectrum condition. This means that while people with autism, including Aspergers Syndrome, share certain characteristics, they will be highly individual in their needs and preferences.

Ambitious about Autism is the national charity for children and young people with autism. We provide services, raise awareness and understanding, and campaign for change. Through TreeHouse School, Ambitious College and the Ambitious about Autism Schools Trust we offer specialist education and support. Our mission is to make the ordinary possible for more children and young people with autism.

**Ambitious about Autism’s Youth Patrons and Youth Council**

Ambitious about Autism work with a wide network of young people with autism, to shape what we do. These young people sit on our Youth Council, our online Ambitious Youth Network, on advisory boards we support and create content for our site. Youth Patrons volunteered more than 1000 hours to making the ordinary possible for children and young people with autism in the last year.

Ambitious about Autism’s response to this Youth Select Committee on Work Experience has been collated from the views of our Youth Council and online Ambitious Youth Network. The responses draw directly from their experiences of being young people with autism and accessing work experience and their work on the ‘Employ Autism’ campaign of 2016 as well as information about our Autism Exchange work experience scheme.

**Employ Autism**

In April 2016 our Youth Council launched their ‘Employ Autism’[[1]](#footnote-1) campaign. They believed that the opportunity to have meaningful employment is vital for young people with autism but their research found that only 15% of adults with autism are in full time work. They also discovered that a quarter of young people with autism have had no access to work experience.

Employ Autism aimed to: give the UK’s 75,000 young people with autism a fighting chance of getting a job by ensuring that the right support is in place for them to get meaningful work. To deliver this change, Ambitious about Autism called for:

1. Better careers advice for young people with autism
2. **Better access to work experience**
3. More opportunities for young people with autism to develop skills post 16

Following on from this campaign, Ambitious about Autism and our Youth Patrons developed the **Autism Exchange[[2]](#footnote-2) programme**.

The award-winning Autism Exchange programme aims to ensure young people with autism are given the careers advice and **work experience** they need to prepare them for the work place and employers have the training and understanding to recruit and support people on the autism spectrum.

The **Autism Exchange Programme** aims to:

1. Inform the development of careers advice and employability skills in the curriculum for education providers so young people with autism aged 18-25 are better prepared for the workplace;
2. Increase awareness and understanding of autism in the workplace with our partner employers and support them to recruit young people with autism for their work placements;
3. Support young people to develop their employability skills and understand their career goals for the future by supporting them to apply for work placements with employers who have received autism awareness training.
4. The Autism Exchange programme has developed a unique partnership between young people, employers and post 16 education providers. It is tailored to support young people with autism from across the spectrum, including those with complex needs. Young people can access work placements in all different disciplines, including HR, finance, communications and IT.

The Autism Exchange Programme was developed by Ambitious about Autism and the Youth Council in partnership with the Civil Service. The programme offers young people with autism the opportunity to experience being in a work environment. The “exchange” is that companies offering work experience placements are offered training for their staff on understanding what autism is, and how to make adjustments for young peoples with autism’s needs in the workplace.

Ambitious about Autism’s experience from delivering Autism Exchange, in partnership with the Civil Service, is that employers are pleasantly surprised at the benefits they see when offering employment or work experience opportunities to people with autism. Employers say that specific guidance around the kinds of reasonable adjustments that young people with autism might need is particularly useful to them.

In order that more employers are able to experience this kind of support and increase confidence Ambitious about Autism supports the expansion of the Disability Confident employer scheme, as a key mechanism to support employers to be more inclusive.

The programme won the Extending Reach award at RIDI[[3]](#footnote-3) (Recruitment Industry Disability Initiative) 2016.

**Response to the call for evidence for the Youth Select Committee**

Our Youth Patrons have responded to the areas that they felt were most pertinent to the experiences of young people with autism. All quotes in italics are from our Youth Patrons unless otherwise stated. They were collected via an online survey of the Youth Select Committee questions and our Employ Autism report.

**Question 1: What does good quality work experience look like? What do young people and businesses expect to get from it?**

Overall they felt that good quality work experience was a placement which:

* Was inclusive, person-centred, flexible and accessible
* Allowed you to develop other social and vocational skills alongside the placement
* Provided adjustments in the workplace
* Had dedicated and consistent staff members
* Had follow-up support and job coaching
* Made you feel part of the community
* Was a mixture of bonding with your fellow employees whilst gaining new skills and knowledge

They stated that young people expect to be supported and respected throughout the placement and learn new skills whilst the business would expect a hardworking and valuable member of the team.

**[[4]](#footnote-4)Question 3: What evidence is there that work experience boosts social mobility?**

The Employ Autism campaign states that only a quarter of young people with autism have accessed work experience placements. Before entering the job market it is essential that young peoples’ educational experiences prepare them for work. Yet just 19% of young people with autism say they have had good careers advice and a quarter of young people with autism have had no access to work experience.

Good quality work experience provides young people with the skills needed to access the workplace and secure employment, which in turn boosts the chances of social mobility. A successful work experience placement could also aid in a smoother transition from education to employment, with collaborative support between the two areas.

It is estimated that if young people with autism were supported to access employment the long-term costs to society would be reduced by £9 billion.

**Question 4: How do differences between young people (e.g geographic location, socioeconomic background, ethnicity, disability) affect the work experience opportunities that people have?**

In this response our Youth Patrons have chosen to focus on disability. Employment rates amongst disabled people reveal one of the most significant inequalities in the UK today with less than half (48%) of disabled people in employment compared to 80% of the non-disabled population. Evidence shows that employment rates are even worse for people with autism - just 32% of autistic people are in full or part-time work.

* *“It can be really difficult to convince some employers to take on people with disabilities. For example, they did not want me working with them because they worried I would be a lot of effort due to my autism”.*
* *“How does autism take its place in the workplace? It doesn’t. At least, that’s the opinion from most modern workplaces.”*

Our Youth Patrons felt that lots of young people with autism are denied work experience placements because employers either do not understand enough about autism or are not willing to learn, believing it will take too much time and effort.

They also found that lots of people resort to stereotypes when trying to help them find work experience placements; employers can assume that all young autistic people are interested in data and computing and that they cannot interact with people – which evidently isn’t the case.

The Youth Patrons also stated that there is a real lack of individuality in work experience placements and because employers don’t take the time to get to know people, they may underestimate their skills.

* *“Just because an applicant requests additional help with some things, it doesn’t mean they won’t have the skills to do a good job… if anything, they have better knowledge of their autism and what their limitations are”.*

This can lead to a lack of self-esteem amongst autistic young people and reduce their confidence in applying for roles they know they are qualified and suitable for. Gaining meaningful work experience, on the other hand, can truly make the world of difference.

* *“[gaining work experience] could help us to view ourselves in a more positive light… work experience could help us improve the quality of our lives through respecting us and helping us with independence”.*

**Question 5: How could resources to help young people find out about and access work experience be improved?**

Our Youth Patrons recommend that young with autism should get specific support from their school, college or university when applying for work experience and that all application processes should be subject to adjustments. They also suggested that Careers Advisors should have an understanding of autism in order to provide tailored sessions that are of real tangible benefit rather than vague aspiration setting and ‘imagining the future’.

* *“They [colleges] should offer more consultation on work experience… maybe a specific day where we could do some educational and qualification planning. Or they could make work experience a requirement on relevant courses… like my Entry Level 3, I could do an extra day a week to do work experience”.*
* *“They [colleges] need better links with the local community and our parents”.*

As an example of collaborative working, the Autism Exchange programme has a large bank of educational partners through which we promote our work experience placement opportunities and create a pipeline of talent from institutions to employers. Our opportunities are promoted nationally and we have an expanding programme of placements across the country in a range of sectors.

**Question 6: Should compulsory work experience for under-16s be reinstated? What is the right age for work experience within compulsory education: 14-16 or 16-18?**

* *“Compulsory is never the answer. I think it should be up to the students what age they feel comfortable working from”*

Although 70% of young people with autism access mainstream education, a lot of our Youth Patrons have stated that their education was interrupted in a range of ways. This meant that a large number missed out on the compulsory work experience as they were absent from school for an extended period of time or were not well enough to access placements at that time.

* *“What about young people being admitted to hospital as in-patients? What about those who are undiagnosed and miss school? Everyone deserves an opportunity”.*

If work experience was provided at all stages of education from 14-onwards, young people with autism would have a better chance of accessing a placement.

* *“I think it’s unfair there are restrictions… the age should follow the Education Health and Care Plan [up to 25]”.*

For those who have an EHC Plan, they are entitled to education up to the age of 25 and therefore believe that the opportunity to gain work experience should be extended accordingly.

**Question 10: What does good practice in offering, advertising and recruiting for work experience look like, and how can businesses be encouraged to follow it?**

The Youth Patrons stated that the best indicators of good practice in offering, advertising and recruiting for work experience are **inclusivity, flexibility and accessibility**.

Employers and businesses should be encouraged to be flexible when it comes to their hiring practices.

* *“The process of applying for roles can often become a draining process in itself”.*

Application forms should be available in a variety of accessible formats; for example, in easyRead or as Word Document so that the applicant can change the fonts and sizes to those required. Even better, an audio clip of the application questions or a video for those who are better at processing information in a visual or auditory way.

The interview process should follow the same recommendations. Questions should be available in advance for those who require them; this takes away unnecessary anxiety and means that the young person is more likely to be able to express their skills and talents coherently.

* *“Adjustments don’t need to be big. Simple things, little things make a world of difference”.*

Applicants should be able to request pictures of the people who will be interviewing them and the room they will be in to alleviate any anxiety. Taking away elements of the unknown can mean that a young person with autism is much more likely to feel comfortable and perform to their best ability.

* *“Beyond having adjustments or being viewed as ‘high maintenance’, your contributions and talent are greeted with open arms”.*

Applicants should never be made to feel like they have caused undue effort or are ‘high maintenance’. Reasonable adjustments are a legal right and level the playing field for all candidates. The focus should always be on what the candidate can offer; their differences should never be considered a deficit.

All of these recommendations could be beneficial to all applicants to work experience placements, not just autistic young people. Quite often reasonable adjustments make the workplace and recruitment process better for all employees, not just the person they were intended for.

**Question 11: Does work experience benefit businesses? What are the motivations for businesses to offer work experience?**

* *“Yes! It encourages raw, new talent to apply to their business. Everyone will learn, socialise with new people, make new positive relationships and share their knowledge”.*

Businesses who have taken part in the **Autism Exchange Programme** have reported a wide range of benefits[[5]](#footnote-5):

* The internship ‘*keeps employees motivated to feel that they have a purpose”.*
* *“They [the team] took to it with open arms and especially appreciated being able to help develop someone and nurture their career. They were very caring”*
* A key employer said the experience with several interns around the UK had been a *‘genuine pleasure’.* Two separate employers described the experience as an *‘eye opener’*. Others said they were ‘*blown away’.*
* *“Once one of the interns had settled down after a couple of weeks in the placement, his work output was phenomenal”.*
* *“Employers all learnt a lot from this experience. Many learnt how to present tasks and instructions in a very clear way. Others learnt how to change their interview systems and induction processes. A younger manager found it personally helpful to plan the tasks one day at a time and reflected that this had helped with her own time management and prioritisation”.*

**Other documents for reference**

**National Autistic Society - The Autism Employment Gap Report** <http://www.autism.org.uk/~/media/nas/get-involved/tmi/nas%20tmi%20employment%20report%2024pp%20web.ashx?la=en-gb>

**Department for Work and Pensions and Department of Health - Improving Lives: The Work, Health and Disability Green Paper** <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/564038/work-and-health-green-paper-improving-lives.pdf>

**Paul Maynard Taskforce Recommendations on ‘Improving access to apprenticeships for those with learning difficulties’**

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/apprenticeships-improving-access-for-people-with-learning-disabilities/paul-maynard-taskforce-recommendations>

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1. <https://www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk/sites/default/files/Employ%20Autism%20campaign%20summary%20digital.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk/autism-exchange-programme> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk/understanding-autism/ambitious-about-autism-s-response-to-winning-with-the-civil-service-the> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 3 Knapp et al (2007), The Economic Consequences of Autism in the UK [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Responses taken from our independent evaluation of the Autism Exchange Programme, 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)