

# Still Locked Out

Breaking down  
the barriers to  
disability inclusive  
employment

Leonard  
Cheshire



## Introduction

Heading into the pandemic, **disabled people faced an employment gap compared to non-disabled people of 28.1%, and a pay gap of 15%, which equated to £3,000 less a year.**<sup>1,2</sup> Previous research from Leonard Cheshire carried out in the early stages of Covid-19 found disabled people were already carrying the greatest burden in the pandemic, as 71% reported having their work impacted. Our 2020 report 'Locked out of the Labour Market' warned this burden would continue to be carried by disabled people in the subsequent economic recession, and existing employment and pay gaps exacerbated unless urgent action was taken.<sup>3</sup>

Our new research and analysis – based on polling data provided by Savanta ComRes – updates the picture for disabled people. Our 2021 data shows that **69% of disabled people have had their work impacted by the pandemic** (71% in 2020) including working reduced hours, receiving reduced earnings, and leaving the workforce.

Our data also shows continued negative attitudes from a significant minority of employers. **1 in 5 (19%) employers are less likely to hire a disabled person.** The government must act urgently and invest in a disability inclusive recovery, to further prevent the disability employment gap widening.

## Impact of Covid-19 on disabled people's work

18 months into the pandemic, and one year on from our previous report on disabled people's employment, Covid-19 is still having a significant impact on the financial security and working status of disabled people across the UK. Seven in ten (69%) disabled people who were in employment before Covid-19 told us their work has been impacted by the pandemic, with disabled people in England most affected (70%). Across all devolved nations at least half of disabled people's work has been impacted (Scotland – 68%, Wales – 54%, Northern Ireland – 58%).

69% of disabled adults say their work has been impacted by the pandemic:

- 1 in 4 worked reduced hours
- 1 in 5 lost out on income
- 1 in 20 are no longer employed

18-64 year old disabled adults in employment before the Covid-19 outbreak



# Disproportionate burden carried by disabled young people

There are worrying signs of an employment crisis amongst disabled young people, with 89% of disabled young people reporting that their work has been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.

89% of disabled 18-24 year olds say their work has been impacted by the pandemic:

- 1 in 3 worked reduced hours
- 1 in 5 lost out on income
- 1 in 10 are no longer employed

18-24 year old disabled adults in employment before the Covid-19 outbreak

Our 2020 report highlighted that disabled young people (aged 18-24) risked becoming a “lost generation” due to the pandemic’s scarring effect on their future careers. Yet far from abating, the impact of the pandemic on disabled young people’s work has risen slightly (from 84% in 2020).

Across the labour market, disabled young people have experienced the largest fall in employment rates between 2019 and 2020.<sup>4</sup> As a result, **the majority of disabled young people (55%) say they feel at greater risk of redundancy due to employer judgments based on their disability (compared to 44% of working age disabled people).**

The two major employment support schemes announced, Kickstart and Restart, though available to disabled people, have provided no scope for tailored support, and have no mechanisms to monitor in real time whether any disabled people are actually participating in them.<sup>5</sup>

The Department for Work and Pensions has committed to publish data on outcomes for disabled people in the programmes following final evaluation. However, persistent issues in how disability data is captured and stored in the Universal Credit system suggest it will not be possible to effectively measure whether the schemes delivered positive outcomes for disabled people.<sup>6</sup>

There is significant evidence that personalised, specialist employment support for disabled people is more effective at moving disabled people into work than mainstream programmes. We recommend that following the end of the Kickstart Scheme in March 2022, a successor programme is introduced, which is tailored to disabled young people out of work. This would help ensure disabled young people are included in the economic recovery and not left locked out of the labour market, at risk of long-term unemployment.

# Employer attitudes

“I don’t feel safe disclosing my disabilities to my line manager. She has made discriminatory comments about mental health and neurodivergence in front of me. I’m not ‘out’ as disabled to my team but I did disclose my disabilities to occupational health. I don’t receive any support at work.”

‘Jude’ aged 24, currently employed

Discrimination and negative attitudes towards disabled people remain clearly entrenched among some employers, as **one in five (19%) state they would be less likely to hire a disabled person** (20% in 2020).

1 in 5 (19%) employers are less likely to hire a disabled person.

Employers’ perceived barriers to hiring disabled people:

- Cost of making workplace adjustments (69%)
- Practicalities of making workplace adjustments (67%)
- Accessibility of the application process (44%)
- Nearly 1 in 3 employers (29%) concerned whether a disabled person could do the job
- 1 in 10 employers (11%) concerned whether a disabled person would be mistreated by other employees

Employers’ attitudes to hiring disabled staff

The cost of making workplace adjustments is now a barrier for 69% of employers compared to 54% in 2020. Yet concerns about workplace adjustments should not be serving as a deterrent to employers, particularly given that programmes such as Access to Work exist to ensure disabled people can access funded workplace support. However, a lack of awareness of the availability of such support among employers and disabled people may be working to keep these perceived barriers in place among employers.

“Most of them cannot do the job. I always find some excuse not to employ them.”

Construction employer (250+ staff), London

“I would be a little concerned with their internal stamina to do the job. I would think twice before employing such a person.”

Information and communications employer (250+ staff), London

“I would prefer a person without disability as the job grounds does not have disability access.”

Property employer (1-4 staff), Scotland



# Policies designed to reduce the disability employment gap

## Disability Confident

The Government must make sure employers are treating all candidates equally through their legal responsibilities under the Equality Act. Alongside such legal responsibilities, Disability Confident was introduced in 2016 to educate employers who signed up to the programme on the processes needed to recruit, retain, and develop disabled people in their careers, as well as the confidence and skills to do so.<sup>7</sup> It currently has three levels, but our research suggests it has not moved the dial in ensuring recruitment processes are inclusive and accessible among all those but employers at the top level.

Employers must treat all candidates equally through their legal responsibilities under the Equality Act.

Inclusive workforce practices also reap tangible financial benefits. Research by Accenture shows that companies that embrace best practices for employing and supporting more people with disabilities in their workforce are, on average, twice as likely to have higher total shareholder returns than their competitors.

Source: Getting to equal: The disability inclusion advantage, Accenture, 2018

Ensuring the interview and application processes were accessible were seen as considerable barriers to employing disabled people (40% and 44% respectively). These figures were higher still among all employers who were Disability Confident accredited (52% and 54% respectively), with only those at the highest level less likely on average to see making both processes accessible as barriers to employing disabled people. This suggests that Disability Confident is not supporting employers to develop the necessary skills, knowledge, and practices to ensure they meet a key commitment of the programme: providing inclusive and accessible recruitment processes.

Greater emphasis should be placed on ensuring Level Three employers are actively recruiting and retaining disabled employees. As a founding member of the Disability Employment Charter, alongside 37 other signatories, we are calling for all employers at Disability Confident Levels Two and Three to be required to meet minimum thresholds regarding the percentage of disabled people in their workforce.<sup>8</sup>

“I was referred to Leonard Cheshire by my work coach at the job centre and had my initial assessment soon after this. From the moment I spoke to Sandra at the assessment stage, she made me feel comfortable and was very understanding of my anxiety. Sandra has made me aware that for many jobs, there are adjustments that can be put in place for my anxiety which I was not previously aware of, and this has helped me feel that there are jobs out there I can do.”

Sarah aged 23, currently seeking work

## Access to Work

The Access to Work programme can be a lifeline for disabled people. Being able to receive funding for support such as special equipment, adaptations, support worker services or transport to and from work can mean the difference between remaining in or moving into work and unemployment for many disabled people. Despite the benefits of the programme, particularly given the current labour market for disabled people, Access to Work still faces longstanding issues around awareness, applications, and delayed payment processes.

**Just one in five (20%) disabled adults in the UK said they currently or have previously received Access to Work support**, which is a slight decrease compared to 23% in 2018. Similarly, only **37% of employers told us that Access to Work was among the schemes offered to employees** to help manage their health at work (compared to 28% offering the programme to employees in 2020). Access to Work has been in place since 1994, yet disabled people receiving support from it and employers offering it to employees are still in the significant minority.

Based on the Government's own figures, in the last decade, there has been no significant extension of the programme: 37,170 people received a payment from Access to Work in 2020/21, while in 2010/11 payments were made to 32,810 people.<sup>9</sup> This marginal increase over a decade can be seen in government spending related to Access to Work (In 2020/21, £106.6 million was spent on the programme compared to £127.6 million in 2010/11).<sup>10</sup>

There are further issues with the programme even among those who manage to receive any funding. **61% of disabled people who have received support from Access to Work said that it took over three months for their application to be processed and for 1 in 5 (20%) it took over six months.** Such delays mean necessary equipment and support will not be in place from day one. Further investment in Access to Work and reforms of the scheme such as improving efficiency and personalisation of application processes, entitling disabled job-seekers to 'in principle' indicative award, and passporting awards between organisations, is needed to make that day one support a reality.

Disabled adults who have never received support from Access to Work varies across the UK:

- 77% in Scotland
- 77% in Wales
- 68% in England
- 42% in Northern Ireland

18-64 year old disabled adults in employment before the Covid-19 outbreak

## Signs of progress

Despite the persistence of negative attitudes and stigma towards disabled people among a minority of employers, there has been a substantial increase in employers who said their organisation currently employs disabled people (from 33% in 2020 to 51% in 2021). This is mirrored by an increased number (29%) of employers stating that they had hired a disabled person in the last 18 months (compared to 21% in 2020).

## Mandatory reporting

It is clear employers are regularly monitoring information on disability among their workforce as well as new hires, and that these figures are improving. Only 3% of the employers surveyed said that they didn't currently record any information on disability, which did not differ significantly based on the size of the organisation.

The recent National Disability Strategy included a commitment to consult on workforce reporting on disability for large employers, which aims to explore voluntary and mandated workplace

transparency.<sup>11</sup> A voluntary reporting framework on disability, mental ill health and wellbeing has been in place since 2018.<sup>12</sup> This aims to encourage large employers (with over 250 employees) to detail their activities in relation to the recruitment and retention of disabled people, and 'where possible' report on the number of disabled people they employ.

To date no details have been provided publicly on the number of employers who have engaged with the framework. Prior to gender pay gap reporting being mandated for large employers, only 5 of the 280 employers who signed up to the previous voluntary scheme went on to publish their gender pay gap data.<sup>13</sup> However once this reporting was made mandatory, full compliance has been achieved by all large employers.<sup>14</sup>

Almost all organisations are currently recording information on disability among their workforce and are strongly in favour of mandatory reporting of this data for large employers.

Almost two thirds of employers (63%) would support mandatory reporting for businesses with 250+ staff on the number of disabled people they employ:

- This rises to 73% of employers in organisations with more than 100 employees
- 72% of employers in organisations that already employ disabled people are supportive of mandatory reporting

Employers' attitudes to mandatory reporting

## Flexible working

The shift towards greater flexible working seen since the pandemic is one almost half of disabled people have been able to avail of. 47% said that their employer was open to them working flexibly, a slight increase from 43% in 2020. The wider acceptance of flexible working practices may have also increased awareness of support options employers can provide, which are of particular benefit for disabled people.

At present, employees must have been in post for 26 weeks before they are able to request any new flexible working arrangements. This should be changed to a day one right, to help retain and build on flexible working arrangements that have increasingly helped disabled people in the last 18 months.

“The switch to remote working has been really positive for a lot of disabled people, including me. I benefit from working from home because it allows me to tailor the environment to my needs. I have more control. I worry about that being taken away. I’m worried that if the situation of the pandemic improves, employees will lose benefits like flexible working and working from home.”

‘Jude’ aged 24, currently employed

## Support for disabled people who cannot work

While this research and analysis has focused on the impact of the pandemic on the employment of disabled people, it is important to recognise that not all disabled people are able to work, and the last 18 months has further shown how insufficient our current social safety net is in supporting those unable to work. The removal of the £20 uplift to Universal Credit coupled with the failure to extend this uplift to so-called legacy benefits such as Employment and Support Allowance means many disabled people are now left struggling to pay essential bills or afford essential items.<sup>15</sup>

The newly announced reduction of the Universal Credit taper rate from 63p to 55p will help disabled adults in work as they continue to earn. Disabled adults who are unable to work, however, including over 600,000 who are not expected to look for work because of their illness or disability, are left out from such support. This is why we are still calling for the £20 uplift to be retained and extended to legacy benefits as well as additional measures such as ending the five-week wait for Universal Credit.



# Recommendations

## **1. Invest in tailored employment support for disabled young people**

To enable a disability inclusive recovery and help those still locked out of the labour market, the Government must invest in a successor scheme to Kickstart, specifically tailored to disabled young people out of work. The scheme should be available to all those out of work, not just on Universal Credit. This scheme should include mechanisms to allow for real time monitoring of uptake by disabled young people and evaluation to ensure meaningful skills, training and job outcomes for disabled young people are being delivered.

## **2. Invest in Access to Work to improve awareness and reduce delays following applications**

A proactive marketing campaign needs to be undertaken, particularly in the devolved nations, to ensure that disabled people and employers are aware of the support available through Access to Work. Further reform of the scheme is also needed across key areas such as removing the support cap; ensuring application processes are efficient, personalised, and flexible; entitling disabled job-seekers to 'in principle' indicative awards; facilitating passporting of awards between organisations and from Disabled Student's Allowance to Access to Work.

## **3. Reform of Disability Confident to ensure employers are taking action on disability employment**

A reform of the scheme should involve placing greater expectations on employers, alongside providing better support. All employers at Disability Confident Levels Two and Three should be required to meet minimum thresholds regarding the percentage of disabled people in their workforce. In the event that employers do not move up within 3 years from Level One to Levels Two or Three, their accreditation from the scheme should be removed.

## **4. The right to request flexible working should be made a day one right for all employees**

Workplace adjustments for disabled people have increased during the pandemic, enabling many to better manage their disability alongside requirements of their role. Future working practices should not roll back this progress made for disabled people based on how long they have been in their current role. The current requirement for employees to be at their current employer for at least 26 weeks before having the right to request reasonable adjustments should be removed, so that it is a day one right.

## **5. Introduce mandatory reporting for large employers on their performance in employing disabled people**

The Government should build on the success of gender pay gap reporting while also harnessing the willingness of employers to report on disability in their organisations. Large employers employing more than 250 people should be required to undertake mandatory reporting of how many disabled people they employ, as well as publishing their disability pay gap.

## Endnotes

1. House of Commons Library. Disabled people in employment, (2021)
2. TUC. Disability employment and pay gaps 2019: TUC proposals for legislative and workplace change, (2019)
3. Leonard Cheshire. Locked out of the labour market. The impact of Covid-19 on disabled adults in accessing good work – now and into the future, (2019)
4. Learning and Work Institute, Disability Employment: from pandemic to recovery (2021)
5. Written answer by Mims Davies MP (UIN 45251): <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-09-08/45250>
6. Work and Pensions Committee. Disability employment gap. Second Report of Session 2021–22, (2021)
7. HM Government. Disability Confident: <https://disabilityconfident.campaign.gov.uk/>
8. Disability Employment Charter, (2021). Available at: <https://www.disabilityemploymentcharter.org/>
9. Department for Work and Pensions, Access to Work statistics April 2007 – March 2021, Table 6: The number of people who received a payment for any Access to Work provision of each type, 2009/10 – 2020/21
10. Ibid, Table 11a: Expenditure on Access to Work provision, 2009/10 – 2020/21 (Real Terms in 2020/21 prices)
11. HM Government. National Disability Strategy, (2021)
12. DWP & DHSC. Voluntary Reporting on Disability, Mental Health and Wellbeing. A framework to support employers to report voluntarily on disability, mental health and wellbeing in the workplace, (2018)
13. Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy. Ethnicity Pay Gap Reporting. Government consultation, (2018) Government Consultation
14. TUC. Disability employment and pay gaps 2019: TUC proposals for legislative and workplace change, (2019)
15. Disability Benefits Consortium. Pandemic Poverty, (2021)

## About Leonard Cheshire

Leonard Cheshire is one of the UK's leading charities supporting disabled people. We support individuals to live, learn and work as independently as they choose, whatever their ability. Led by people with experience of disability, we are at the heart of local life – providing opportunity, choice and support in communities around the globe. This includes providing social care through supported living and registered care homes – supporting nearly 3,000 disabled people at 120 Leonard Cheshire services – as well as enabling disabled people to participate in educational and employment opportunities.

Leonard Cheshire Disability is a registered charity no: 218186 (England & Wales) and no: SC005117 (Scotland), and a company limited by guarantee registered in England no: 552847. Registered office: 66 South Lambeth Road, London SW8 1RL

**Leonard  
Cheshire** 