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Research into Employment Outcomes for Young People with Autistic Spectrum Disorders

Summary Report



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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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Summary report

Introduction

1. The Welsh Government is aware that many young people with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) face difficulties in the transition to employment from school, college or university¹. In April 2008, the Welsh Government published its ASD Strategic Action Plan², which created a number of funded actions aimed at improving understanding and provision of services for individuals with ASD in Wales. In relation to the transition to employment, these included:

- The provision of ASD awareness training for all Careers Wales specialist advisers and Jobcentre Plus Disability Employment Advisers (DEAs)
- The engagement of Robert Lloyd Griffiths from the Institute of Directors as Wales Autism Employment Ambassador
- The funding of a project run by Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan local authorities to develop and pilot materials for supporting people with ASD to consider employment and to seek work
- The development of a range of booklets aimed at raising awareness of the issues affecting people with ASD, one of which focuses on employment and work related issues.

2. The Welsh Government has made a commitment to a refresh of the 2008 ASD Strategic Action Plan, which will concentrate, in particular, on diagnostic assessment services, post-16 transition

¹ National Assembly for Wales (2010) Enterprise and Learning Committee: Specialist Provision for Young People with Autism in Further Education. Cardiff: National Assembly for Wales

² Welsh Assembly Government (2008) The Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Strategic Action Plan for Wales.

<http://wales.gov.uk/topics/childreynyoungpeople/publications/autisticspectrumdisorderplan/?lang=en>

pathways and improving employment opportunities for young people and adults (Thomas, 2013)³.

3. In order to inform the development of the refreshed ASD Strategic Action Plan, and in response to concerns about post-education employment outcomes of young people, the Welsh Government commissioned this independent research to investigate the extent and nature of employment outcomes and barriers to employment for young people with ASD living in Wales. The key objectives of this research were:
 - To map the extent to which young people with ASD living in Wales secure employment
 - To identify the barriers to employment faced by this group of young people
 - To document which of these barriers are being reduced or overcome in Wales currently and which are not
 - To identify and document initiatives in Wales and elsewhere which are working effectively to overcome or reduce barriers to employment for young people with ASD
 - To consider how any un-addressed barriers might realistically be reduced or overcome.

Research approach and methodology

4. The research was conducted from November 2012 to October 2013 and involved three main phases:
 - A scoping stage which involved informal interviews with key stakeholders; secondary analysis of national statistics on employment outcomes for young people with ASD; and an evidence review to highlight barriers to employment for young people with ASD and how these might be addressed
 - An online practice survey and follow-up research with mainstream, pan-disability and ASD-specific employment

³ Thomas, G. (2013) Article for the Wales Autism Research Centre, Research-Policy-Practice. Accessed on 27th November 2013.
http://www.autismrpphub.com/sites/default/files/articles/gwenda_thomas.pdf

support services currently operating in Wales^{4 5} in order to understand the extent to which they are able to address the key barriers to employment for young people with ASD

- Interviews and survey work with 26 young people with ASD and their families to understand more about the lived experience of securing, or trying to secure, employment after leaving formal education, the nature of support received and the difference this made to any employment outcomes achieved.

Post-education employment outcomes for young people with ASD

5. The secondary analysis of national statistics, undertaken as part of this research, suggests that employment rates⁶ for young people with ASD, three to nine months after leaving formal education in Wales, are currently in the region of:

- **0.4 per cent for school leavers aged 16**
(source: Careers Wales survey of pupil destinations 2011/12, based on a total cohort size of 275⁷)
- **0 per cent for school leavers aged 18**
(source: Careers Wales survey of pupil destinations 2011/12, based on a total cohort size of 115⁸)
- **8 per cent for FE college leavers aged 16 to 24**
(source: Lifelong Learning Wales Record 2011/12, based on a total cohort size of 125)

⁴ Data were collected between September and October 2013 and relate to provision available in 2013. Forty-six separate employment support provider organisations (ESPs) responded to the online survey. These 46 ESPs between them offered 99 work based learning (WBL), mainstream, pan-disability or ASD-specific employment services or programmes. The WBL programmes included Apprenticeships, Traineeships, Steps to Employment (now Work Ready) and Jobs Growth Wales.

⁵ The research targeted post-education providers of employment support only. Some further education institutions (FEIs) and higher education institutions (HEIs) were included as providers of WBL and/or other mainstream employment support programmes. It was outside the scope of this research to survey all FEIs, HEIs or schools about their careers advice and/or vocational and employment support and learning programmes for young people with ASD.

⁶ Full time, part time or self-employed.

⁷ Careers Wales destination data for 2011/12 school leavers aged 16 represents 86 per cent (n=275) of pupils with ASD identified by the Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC) (n=320) in January 2012.

⁸ Careers Wales destination data for 2011/12 school leavers aged 18 represents 81 per cent (n=115) of pupils with ASD identified by PLASC (n=140) in January 2012.

- **35 per cent for HEI leavers aged 18 and over**
(source: Higher Education Statistics Agency's survey of destinations of leavers from higher education 2008 to 2011, based on an aggregated cohort size of less than 50).
6. These figures contrast with employment rates for the general population as follows:
- **1.6 per cent for all school leavers aged 16**
(source: Careers Wales survey of pupil destinations 2011/12, based on a total cohort size of 34,935)
 - **9.8 per cent for all school leavers aged 18**
(source: Careers Wales survey of pupil destinations 2011/12, based on a total cohort size of 13,075)
 - **18 per cent for all FE college leavers aged 16 to 24**
(source: Lifelong Learning Wales Record 2011/12, based on a total cohort size of 28,205)
 - **62 per cent for all HEI leavers aged 18 and over**
(Higher Education Statistics Agency's survey of destinations of leavers from higher education 2008 to 2011, cohort size not available).
7. It is important to be mindful of the completeness and quality of the Lifelong Learning Wales Record data, in particular. Nor is it clear if young people with ASD in Wales are more or less likely to be employed than other groups of young disabled people: investigation of this issue was outside the scope of this research.

Barriers to employment experienced by young people with ASD living in Wales

8. Using data collected from 26 young people with ASD and their families from around Wales, the researchers documented young people's pathways to employment, the support received, and the extent to which this helped them overcome specific barriers.
9. Twenty-three of the young people included in the research were men, whilst three were women. Ten of the young people had Asperger syndrome, five had autism and the remaining eleven

had learning disabilities and an ASD. With regard to their most recent education leaving point, thirteen of the young people were school leavers, eight were further education leavers, and five were higher education graduates. The ages of participants ranged from 16 to 33, with 21 young people aged from 16 to 25, and five aged 26 or over.

10. Paid employment outcomes for the 26 young people with ASD included in the research were low – just eight had paid jobs, with only two being in full time work. Despite this, almost all of the young people wanted to work and showed great motivation and determination to achieve their employment goals in the face of multiple barriers. It was more likely for older young people to be working, indicating that it appears to take some time for young people with ASD to find and stay in meaningful work. It was more likely for higher education graduates to be working in the open market, as opposed to being self employed or working for a family business. Meaningful employment outcomes for the young people included full and part time paid work, voluntary work, and work experience. The range of employment choices and desired job roles highlighted the individuality of young people with ASD.
11. There was variation in access to formal support from work based learning (WBL), mainstream, pan-disability and ASD-specific employment support providers (ESPs). Overall, young people had mixed experiences of support from WBL, mainstream and some pan-disability providers, except when (in the case of one provider) the support had been specialised to meet their ASD-specific needs. In contrast, the young people receiving support from ASD-specific providers were consistently positive about their experiences and interactions with these specialist providers. These points highlight the need for ASD-aware employment support, whoever the provider. Very many of the young people were hugely reliant on their families for support with the pathway

to employment, even those who were in regular contact with a formal provider of support.

12. The research confirmed that, even for those young people who had access to support from an ESP (WBL, mainstream, pan-disability or ASD-specific), many were still experiencing a range of barriers to employment, including:

Barriers to considering employment

- Lack of follow-up to work experience placements, or linking of these to vocational discussions and development of CVs or personal profiles
- Variable access to pre-vocational and vocational training that meets their ASD-specific needs
- Lack of benefits or 'better off in work' advice for the whole family leading to concerns for family financial well-being if the young person takes up employment

Barriers to seeking employment

- Variable access to and quality of Jobcentre Plus services, including DEAs
- Concerns about employer attitudes and discrimination
- Unresolved issues relating to the job seeking and recruitment process

Barriers to keeping employment

- Unresolved issues relating to social, cognitive and sensory barriers in the workplace
- Workplace stress and anxiety
- Variation in access to job coaching or in-work mentoring for all those in work
- Variation in access to on-going support for employment-related needs
- Lack of support, advice and information for those young people who are self-employed.

13. The importance of disclosing an ASD appeared to be key to meeting individual support needs, both in terms of accessing appropriate support to consider and seek work, and also in terms of keeping a job. For those young people with access to an ASD-

specific ESP, disclosure was an issue with which they could seek help, discussion and support. It was not evident if similar support was available from the WBL, mainstream or pan-disability providers with which young people were in contact.

To what extent is the current provision of employment-related support, advice and training delivering solutions to the identified barriers faced by young people with ASD living in Wales?

14. The research identified that 65 per cent of the 99 WBL, mainstream, pan-disability and ASD-specific services and programmes (offered by 46 separate employment support providers, or ESPs) who responded to the online practice survey said they worked with young people with ASD. Compared with other providers, fewer WBL providers (50 per cent) said they were working with young people with ASD. However this is likely to represent a very small number of young people overall: national statistics⁹ show that just 30 young people with ASD completed WBL programmes in Wales for 2011/12.
15. Analysis of the geographical distribution of employment support clarifies the lack of ASD-specific services outside of the south and west Wales areas. However, it also demonstrates that other provider types have a fairly even coverage of most areas of Wales. This may present an opportunity for providing more ASD-specific support and advice via the existing national infrastructure of WBL, mainstream and pan-disability providers. For example, as a national organisation, Careers Wales has recently offered ASD-specific training to its network of advisers – such training could be replicated across a wider breadth of the employment support provider network.
16. We asked employment support providers to describe the nature of the services they offered, from a list of 31 potential types of

⁹ Source: Lifelong Learning Wales Record 2011/12.

employment support known to be effective in tackling barriers to employment for young people with ASD¹⁰. The survey results showed that most of the barriers to employment for young people with ASD highlighted by previous research¹¹ were being tackled by at least a proportion of provider organisations, although there were a number of areas where specific support was low, or lacking. Key issues which were not well-addressed for this group of young people included: benefits advice and ‘better off in work’ calculations; advice on self employment and/or to develop a business idea; in-work support; travel training; regular contact with families; behavioural and counselling input; and many of the key components of a supported employment model such as vocational profiling, job matching, work place analysis, task analysis, services of a job coach and access to training in systematic instruction. Given the short-term nature of many of the programmes, the employment support offered was unlikely to be on-going, or to provide the in-work mentoring that many young people with ASD need although a few services said they had found ways to meet young people’s on-going needs.

17. Across all provider types, analysis showed that pan-disability and ASD-specific services were proportionally more likely to be offering a level of support sufficient to address the specific barriers to employment faced by young people with ASD. A few providers in Wales have developed ASD-specific, or ASD-aware support, designed to meet the individual needs for employment support that these young people have, and, in some cases, to offer advice and training on ASD-related employment issues to other organisations. Common features of these initiatives include: employment support which is personalised to the needs of the young person; vocational profiling and careful job analysis

¹⁰ See the Chapter 4 of the evidence review, published separately.

¹¹ See Chapter 3 of the evidence review and Chapter 2 of the main report, both published separately.

and placement; help with job searching, personal presentation and interview skills; on-going (light-touch and more intensive as needed) in-work training and mentoring from support workers and job coaches who have a good understanding of the specific needs of people with ASD and who are able to advise and educate employers and supervisors.

18. Very many provider organisations were keen and willing to work with young people with ASD, but felt that they lacked the skills, knowledge and training to do so with confidence. Organisational confidence about meeting the employment-support needs of young people with ASD was very mixed amongst WBL providers, mainstream providers and some pan-disability providers, and nearly half of all services/programmes working with young people with ASD reported at least one area where they were lacking in competence. Barriers to providing adequate employment support included insufficient funding; funding criteria and restrictions; variability of inward referral routes, and lack of access to ASD specialists who can provide advice or run training. However, the apparent willingness of many providers to engage with this group of young people, and the range of employment support they currently offer, provide an encouraging foundation on which WBL, mainstream and some pan-disability providers could be enabled and trained to expand and personalise their offer to better meet the needs of young people with ASD.
19. The survey results showed that provision and take-up of training are areas where improvement is needed. Of the 43¹² separate WBL, mainstream or pan-disability ESPs who said they worked with young people with ASD, 16 per cent (n=7) had received ASD-specific awareness training, whilst just 14 per cent (n=6)

¹² For the three ASD-specific employment support providers, this question was not relevant: as specialist services, they were themselves providers of specialist ASD training and advice to other organisations and had the skills in-house to train any new staff if needed.

had received training on the ASD-specific employment needs of their potential clients. The research highlighted that low referral patterns may make it difficult to prioritise or fund specialist training; and lack of confidence and expertise makes it difficult to provide a service which meets young people's needs, leading to low referrals. Up-front training, advice and input from ASD specialists, and sharing and publicising of existing good practice is key to breaking this deadlock and would enable more WBL, mainstream and pan-disability ESPs to feel confident about providing ASD-aware employment support as the rule, rather than the exception.

How might un-addressed barriers to employment for young people with ASD be reduced or overcome?

Recommendation 1: Secure, support and evaluate the few ASD-specific employment providers currently operating in Wales and explore how best to ensure wider access to ASD-specific and ASD-aware employment support

20. Findings from both the evidence review and the empirical data collected for this research highlighted the need for wider access to ASD-specific and/or ASD-aware employment support. Some examples of such services are given in Appendix D of the main report. As 'hubs' of expertise and knowledge, and regular providers of training and advice to mainstream and pan-disability services, it is important that these initiatives are publicised amongst the employment support provider network and enabled to share their good practice more widely. The outcomes for young people, families and professionals also need to be evaluated and documented more consistently so that the benefits of these services can be more clearly understood in terms of impact on quality of life, employment outcomes and value for money. This is an area which would benefit from further research attention.
21. As part of its commitment to improving employment opportunities for young people with ASD, the Welsh Government should take

an invest-to-save approach to ensure that the good practice, knowledge and experience held by the few ASD-specific ESPs currently operating in Wales is, at the very least, safely secured and not left prone to the vagaries of short-term, project-based funding. There may be various routes and options for achieving this is practice which would benefit from further discussion and exploration with the organisations concerned. There may also be possibilities for developing and extending the reach and scope of ASD-specific and/or ASD-aware employment provision across Wales, but clearly this will be dependent on the extent and nature of resources available. At the very least, WBL, mainstream and pan-disability providers already working with young people with ASD should be enabled, through appropriate training and input from ASD specialists, to feel confident about providing ASD-aware employment support as part of their existing offer.

Recommendation 2: Explore how best to enhance the potential of WBL programmes and other mainstream providers to offer employment-related support and training to young people with ASD

22. Mainstream WBL programmes offer un-tapped potential for young people (particularly school leavers) with ASD. Providers of WBL programmes may claim 'additional learning support' funding from the Welsh Government to assist them with the costs of making their provision accessible to young people with additional learning needs (including ASD). Additionally, the Traineeships and Steps to Employment/Work-Ready programmes have recently been able to extend the maximum amount of time a learner can spend on the programme and to link activities to experience in work, rather than formal qualifications. Jobs Growth Wales includes a 'supported strand' of the programme which is delivered primarily through third sector providers to assist those young people who need a more supported employment environment. There is currently no information available about the extent to which any of these options are being

used to enable young people with ASD to access WBL programmes, and routes for accessing additional funding and support appear not to be well-understood by providers.

23. The research has also highlighted that many mainstream and WBL providers are keen to extend their provision to young people with ASD but (a) may lack the skills and knowledge to do so effectively; and (b) may be unsure about how best to mitigate the risks inherent when attracting a group whose outcomes may not meet national comparator targets for learning activity success rates and positive progressions. There is also some evidence from this research, and from a recent review of Traineeships and Steps to Employment by Estyn (2013)¹³ that (a) not all learners disclose personal issues which affects the identification of learning and employment barriers; (b) some referring agencies do not always pass on sufficient information about clients' learning and employment support needs to WBL providers; (c) referring agencies do not always have clear information about what individual WBL programmes offer and which programmes are most suitable for individual young people. These issues will need exploration and discussion with relevant Welsh Government officers, DWP representatives, mainstream providers and their representative bodies (National Training Federation for Wales, Colleges Wales and the Wales Council for Voluntary Action) and ASD-specific providers (as potential providers of advice and training).

¹³ Estyn (2013) Initial Review of the Effectiveness of the Welsh Government's Traineeships and Steps to Employment programmes. Cardiff: Estyn.
<http://www.estyn.gov.uk/english/docViewer/264946.5/initial-review-of-the-effectiveness-of-the-welsh-governments-traineeships-and-steps-to-employment-programmes-january-2013/?navmap=30,163>

Recommendation 3: Explore how best to facilitate and implement an ideal pathway to employment for young people with ASD, from Year 9, through transition and onwards into adulthood

24. The research has confirmed and clarified the key barriers to employment and how these can be overcome effectively through on-going, careers focussed, ASD-specific support, from Year 9 of schooling onwards into adulthood.
25. The ‘ideal pathway to employment for young people with ASD’ (see Appendix F of the main report) represents a mechanism whereby many of the core issues highlighted by this research could be addressed, including all of those listed in paragraph 12. It should also be linked to the Welsh Government’s new plans for a ‘Pathway to Work’ for 16-17 year olds as part of the Youth Engagement and Progression Framework (Welsh Government, 2013¹⁴). The precise ways in which such a pathway for young people with ASD could be implemented and monitored need further discussion and exploration, but options might include:
- Ensuring that all young people diagnosed or recognised as having an ASD have access to a named transition key worker¹⁵ who themselves (a) is ASD-aware; and (b) can work in partnership with an employment support provider who has the necessary skills in this area
 - Considering how best to facilitate the provision of job coaching for young people with ASD undertaking work experience placements at school, at college and post-education
 - Ensuring on-going, regular training on ASD-specific employment issues continues to be available to all Careers Wales advisers and all Jobcentre Plus advisers

¹⁴ Welsh Government (2013) Youth Engagement and Progression Framework. Implementation Plan. <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/dcells/publications/131007-ye-framework-implementation-plan-en.pdf>

¹⁵ New proposals as part of the Youth Engagement and Progression Framework include the offer of a lead worker to young people most at risk of becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training).

- Ensuring that all Careers Wales and Jobcentre Plus advisers have access to adequate information about local options and pathways to employment for young people with ASD, including all relevant WBL options; other mainstream, pan-disability and ASD-specific programmes and services; and relevant benefits to support disabled young people in and out of work
- Creating a clear system for keyworkers to 'refer on' to local authority social services, or ASD community mentoring and support services, once a young person has reached age 25 or earlier if appropriate and for any employment-support needs to be documented with forward action planning agreed
- Ensuring that any ESPs contracted to deliver government or ESF funded programmes/projects (where there is a remit to support disabled young people into employment), have an adequate skill-set and funding model by which to facilitate inclusion of young people with ASD. This includes current, and future, contracted providers of the Work Programme and Work Choice
- Establishing mechanisms for ASD-specific ESPs to provide regular training, advice and consultancy to mainstream and pan-disability ESPs to ensure that delivery staff remain up-skilled and up-dated and that ASD-specific support is replicated more widely
- Considering the possibility of a requirement to sub-contract, where the skill-set of a provider organisation is not deemed adequate to deliver appropriate employment support to clients with ASD – this would also ensure that the expertise of ASD-specific services remains available to those who need it
- Considering the use of direct payments to fund employment support for some young people with ASD who are eligible for this type of support – the proposed Social Services and Well-being Bill (Wales) is advocating the extended use of direct payments across a range of support possibilities and there may still be scope to feed into the consultation process for the Bill.

Recommendation 4: Maintain a focus on improving and monitoring employment outcomes for young people with ASD

26. There is a need to maintain the current momentum centred on the issue of improving employment outcomes for young people with ASD. It may be helpful for a Welsh Government officer to take lead responsibility for co-ordinating ASD-related employment actions at national level and to ensure active communication and collaboration between key stakeholders and partners, of which there are many. Many opportunities exist for positive and fruitful partnerships at local and national levels, but these will need supporting and directing to ensure they are working together to meet nationally agreed objectives.

27. The existing ASD infrastructure presents many opportunities: local employment leads might be one option, for instance. The two new websites created as a result of actions from the ASD Strategic Action Plan (www.asdinfo.wales.co.uk and www.autismrpphub.com) offer structured hubs for sharing information and resources about national and local services, policies and good practice. It may also be helpful to share case studies of successful pathways to employment, in order to support the Wales Autism Employment Ambassador's on-going work with employers, and to show-case what is possible and achievable for individual young people with ASD, given access to the right support.