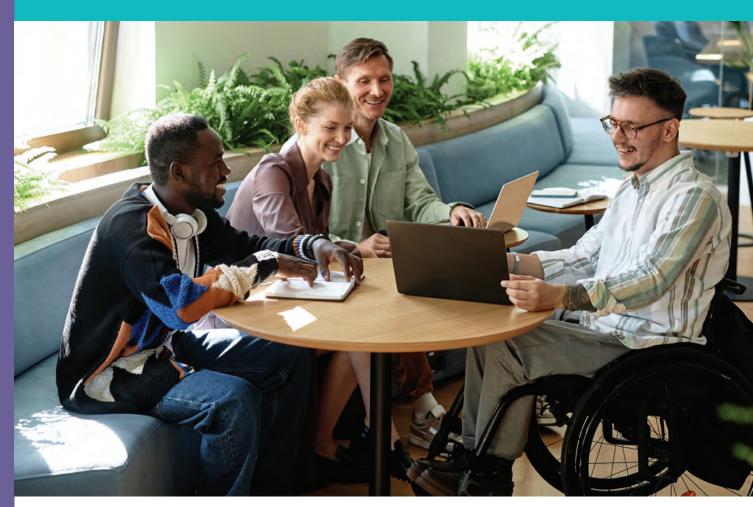# MIND THE GAP

Supporting people with disabilities into employment

Main Report - June 2025

By Mary Anne Webb

Contents

Project summary

Mind The Gap is a cross-border project which aims to drive improvements in the disability employment rates across the island of Ireland. We work collaboratively with employers, policymakers, support organisations and people with disabilities.

What we did

- One year project
- Steering committee
- 2 x Study visits
- 36 x Engagements
- 207 people
- 8 x Roundtables
- 14 x Focus groups
- 14 x Individual feedback
- 40 x Survey responses
- Disability Employment Summit (June 2025)

Barriers and areas for improvement

- Limited policy implementation and cross-departmental collaboration
- Lack of strategic partnerships with employers and the disability sector
- Insecure funding arrangements can impact delivery of specialist support
- Lack of investment in Supported Employment programmes
- Patchy provision of transitions support and careers guidance
- Limited diversity of job roles
- Lack of access to qualifications, skills and work experience
- Lack of part-time positions
- Low employer disability awareness
- Inaccessible recruitment processes
- Lack of reasonable adjustments / accommodations
- Stigma; discrimination in workplace
- Difficulty accessing sign language interpreters; communication support
- Limited; inaccessible transport
- Complex welfare benefits system.

Lead recommendation

1. **The forthcoming National Disability Strategy (ROI) and Disability and Work Strategy (NI) should each set out a long-term implementation plan to reduce the disability employment gap, which includes:**

- Clear leadership and ownership assigned to each planned action to ensure accountability for achieving the overarching strategic goals.
- Specific targets and milestones to be achieved within a set timeframe, supported by adequate resources, a co-ordinated cross-departmental and outcomes-based approach, and clear communication channels.
- Robust and transparent reporting, monitoring and evaluation processes within a shared measurement framework to improve accountability, measure success and promote continuous improvement. This should be supported by improved data collection, disaggregated by disability type.

Section A: Introduction and background

Employment has many social, economic and health benefits for individuals and wider society. It promotes independence and social inclusion, and can improve confidence and overall well-being. Northern Ireland consistently exhibits the lowest disability employment rate within the United Kingdom; while the Republic of Ireland (ROI) has one of the lowest disability employment rates among European Union member states.

Mind the Gap is a partnership project between the Northern Ireland Union for Supported Employment (NIUSE) and KARE, funded by the Shared Island Civic Society Fund, administered by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. It was established to drive an improvement in disability employment rates across the island of Ireland, by creating a foundation for strengthening cross-border collaboration and learning. The project was co-ordinated by a cross-border steering committee comprising representatives from 12 disability employment support organisations (see Appendix 1).

This report provides an overview of the main activities undertaken to achieve a shared platform. [1]It also includes the findings and recommendations from a landscape review of disability employment policy and practice. This was based on consultation with support organisations, decision-makers, employers and people with disabilities.

It is anticipated that the evidence generated through Mind the Gap will usefully inform the development and implementation of new employment strategies and approaches in each jurisdiction.

We look forward to working with all partners and stakeholders to reduce the disability employment gap across the island of Ireland, and to achieve our shared vision of sustained employment for people with disabilities.

Northern Ireland

- Action Mental Health
- Mencap NI
- Orchardville
- Triangle Progression to Employment
- NIUSE

Republic of Ireland

- Gheel Autism Services
- Ability@Work, Horizons
- KARE
- Open Doors Initiative
- OWL Project, House of Oireachtas
- SOS Kilkenny CLG
- WALK

The Mind the Gap project aligns with Article 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) which recognises the right of persons with disabilities to work on an equal basis with others; including the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities.

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[1] For a copy of the summary report, email NIUSE at info@niuse.org.uk

Acknowledgements

Please note the report includes detailed quotes throughout, reflecting our commitment to hearing the voice of people with disabilities, and groups who support them.

Key terminology

Disability employment rate

The disability employment rate is the percentage of disabled people of working age who have jobs and are currently working.

Disability employment gap

The disability employment gap is the difference in employment rates between people with disabilities and those without disabilities.

Reasonable adjustments

Reasonable adjustments, also known as reasonable accommodations, are changes an employer makes to remove or reduce a disadvantage related to a person's disability.

Learning disability

A learning disability, also known as intellectual disability, is a reduced intellectual ability and difficulty with everyday activities. Learning disabilities are diverse in nature, ranging from mild to moderate, to more severe and profound.

Time for change

Northern Ireland[2]

21% of the working age population (aged 16-64) has a disability

The disability employment rate is 38.7%, compared with 54.4% in the UK

The disability employment gap is 47.6%

The economic inactivity rate (27.5%) is higher than the UK rate (21.4%), and the highest of the 12 UK regions

55% of 16 – 64 year olds with no qualifications are inactive.

Republic of Ireland[3]

19.7% of the working age population (aged 15-64) has a disability

The disability employment rate is 43%, below the EU average of 54%

The disability employment gap is 37%

In 2022, Ireland had the largest disability employment gap of all 27 Member States.

It ranks near the bottom of all Member States for disabled people in severe material deprivation and risk of poverty.

Key statistics[4]

Disabled people are more likely than non-disabled people to be:

- Working in lower-skilled occupations
- Working part-time (and subsequently less hours)
- In low paid work
- On a zero-hour contract
- Working in a job with less career opportunities
- Working for a small employer

People with disabilities are more than twice as likely to have no qualifications than non-disabled people.

Disabled people have to apply for 60% more jobs before finding one.

Only around 3 in 10 working age people with autism are in employment, compared with around 5 in 10 for all disabled people and 8 in 10 for non-disabled people.

Disabled people are more likely to move both in and out of work if their main health condition is a mental health condition.

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[2] Disability prevalence from UUEPC (2022); NI disability employment data from NISRA (2024); UK data from DWP (2024); Economic inactivity data from NI Labour Market (2025).

[3] ROI data from National Disability Authority (NDA) (2024); Disability employment rate / employment gap from European Commission (2023), p.86. NOTE: Official figures for disability employment rates vary across reports, ranging from between 32.6% in European Disability Forum (2023) European Human Rights Report Issue 7 (pg.30-32, 35); to 49.3% in NDA, 2024. Poverty and deprivation data from NDA, 2024.

[4] Main data from Department of Work and Pensions (2024); Autism data from Buckland Review of Autism Employment [2024]; Data on finding jobs from Scope (2017).

Why employment matters

Research consistently highlights the significant impact of employment on various aspects of a person's well-being and the economy. Whereas unemployment is associated with increased health risks and social isolation, being in work is linked to better physical and mental health.

People with disabilities who participated in Mind the Gap said they want to work mainly to earn their own money and have opportunities like everyone else. They identified many different reasons why being employed is important to them:

- Independence; live independently
- Financial freedom
- Social inclusion and belonging
- Making new friends
- Builds confidence and self-esteem
- Positive for mental health
- Builds resilience
- Sense of purpose
- Contributing to society
- Feeling valued
- Enjoying work
- Learning new skills
- Sense of pride
- Being treated equally

"It makes me feel that I am valued, and obviously it gives me a wage packet at the end of the month like everyone else, which is the better part of it."

"I want to help my mum pay bills and it gets me out socialising."

"I want to move out of my parent's house, and I need money to do that."

"Being employed is important to me because I enjoy working and it makes me feel good. I like meeting other people, and I feel so proud to be busy. It makes me feel independent".

"To have more independence. To have a bit of money and being out there talking to the public."

"Just try to make it a level opportunity for us ... It has been getting better over the last few years with changes slowly being implemented, but it's not good enough yet. It feels like a fight to be heard or to be counted as an equal. It is a vicious circle at times as now most jobs require experience doing a type of job for up to two years, but no one wants to take on people with disabilities to give them that experience!" (Service User)

Project aim and objectives

Aim: Create a foundation for strengthening cross-border collaboration and learning to drive improvements in the disability employment rate across the island of Ireland.

Objectives

- Facilitate opportunities for key stakeholders (people with disabilities, support organisations, employers, and decision-makers) to convene and explore the factors contributing to low disability employment rates.
- Identify and contrast barriers and enablers in employment policy, practice and services for people with disabilities.
- Identify examples of innovation and good practice.
- Identify solutions and develop actionable insights via recommendations for policy and practice.
- Disseminate and share learning.

Steering committee

A steering committee comprising representatives from 12 disability employment support organisations across the island of Ireland was set up to co-ordinate the work of the Mind the Gap project (see Appendix 1).

The committee also provided a space for stakeholders to share their perspectives and identify key issues, challenges and opportunities related to the project.

The committee worked collaboratively through regular online and in-person meetings to design and implement a shared programme of activities which successfully met the project's main aim and objectives.

This included study visits to learn about policy and practice in each nation, and undertaking various engagements with employers, decision-makers, support organisations and people with disabilities. They also reviewed and discussed key findings from the project, including the development of recommendations.

What did we do?

Mind the Gap partners facilitated 36 different engagements and 2 study visits across the island of Ireland to explore how to improve low disability employment rates. The original aim to engage with 80 people across the different stakeholder groups was more than doubled, with a total of 207 people participating in the project.

207 Participants	**112** Republic of Ireland	**95** Northern Ireland

15 Decision-makers

- **2 x Roundtables** – 12 decision-makers from NI (6) and ROI (6) took part in roundtable discussions as part of the nation study visits.
- **3 x Individual** – 3 decision-makers from NI (1) and ROI (2) took part in one-to-one meetings.

113 People with disabilities

- **14 x Focus groups** – 67 people took part in an in-depth online or in-person focus group. This included 49 people from NI and 18 from ROI.
- **6 x Individual** – 5 people submitted written feedback (ROI); and 1 person participated in a one-to-one interview (NI).

  63 Male
  50 Female

- **40 x Survey responses** – 40 people submitted written feedback to a survey question about barriers to employment.
- **Pan disability** - people with physical, learning and sensory (visual and hearing) disabilities, mental ill-health, and autistic and neurodivergent people.

32 Employers

- **3 x Roundtable –** 23 employers from NI participated in an in-person roundtable (21) or online roundtable (2); and 4 employers from ROI took part in an online roundtable.
- **5 x Individual –** 5 employers from ROI took part in one-to-one interviews (2) or provided written feedback (3).

47 Employment support staff / organisations

- **3 x Roundtables –** 15 people from NI participated in a roundtable discussion. A further 32 people from ROI took part in two online roundtable events.

Section B: Study Visits

Policy roundtables

The study visits in each nation included engagement via policy roundtables between steering committee members and key decision-makers. Some individual meetings were also undertaken later with officials who were unavailable on the day.

Table 1: Key topic areas in policy roundtables / meetings

Northern Ireland	Republic of Ireland
Background - 'Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities'	Background - Comprehensive Employment Strategy and Review
Strategic direction – Overview of the proposed Disability and Work Strategy	Strategic direction - Overview of the proposed National Disability Strategy
Disability equality legislation (Employment)	Disability employment policy
Disability equality, diversity and inclusion in the Northern Ireland Civil Service	Disability employment support levers (Education; health; enterprise / trade)
Disability employment programmes	Disability employment programmes

The **outcome** of these engagements:

✔ Learned about the current policy context and framework for delivering disability employment services

✔ Gained an understanding about the future strategic direction of disability employment policy, and alignment with other relevant strategies and services

✔ Learned about good practice relating to positive action in recruitment processes; and supporting people with disabilities in the workplace

✔ Shared information about current challenges and priority issues

✔ Agreed further opportunities for shared learning and partnership working.

Based on these discussions and analysis, the following provides a short summary of the policy landscape with regards Disability Employment Strategy; and an overview of employment support programmes (Table 2). Where relevant, other points are reflected in Section C which presents common themes across all the engagement events.

Policy and strategic direction

Northern Ireland

The main aim of the previous 'Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities' (DEL, 2016) was to improve the job prospects and working careers of people with disabilities. Its key objective was to directly assist disabled people to find, sustain and progress within paid employment, or to start up

a business. A key proposal of the strategy was to implement the Supported Employment model on a wider scale throughout NI.

The Strategy also documented a clear alignment between a range of departmental initiatives, and specifically aimed to positively influence a more integrated and collaborative way of working. Implementation was to be through an annual action plan, however none were subsequently published beyond Year One. The strategy ran for five years until March 2021, however, in comparison with the Republic of Ireland, there was no reported evaluation to assess progress against the Strategy's implementation plan.

A new Disability and Work Strategy has since been in development, and will be out for consultation in 2025. It has been informed by independent research with disabled people, employers and support organisations, and through a co-design approach via stakeholder workshops. The new Strategy will align with a number of other key policy drivers, including:

- Skills Strategy and Economic Pillars

- SEN Reform Agenda

- 14 – 19 Framework

- Mental Health and Autism Strategy

- Community Planning and Neighbourhood Renewal

- City Deals

- NDNA Social Strategies (Anti-Poverty)

Labour market capacity

Recent evidence highlighted labour shortages (unemployment is now below 2%) which could hold back economic growth, reflecting the need to tackle economic inactivity in NI (Magill et al, 2024). This presents opportunities to maximise the participation of people with disabilities in the workforce, with the right conditions and support.

Republic of Ireland

The Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities 2015-2024 (CES) was a cross-government approach to addressing barriers to employment amongst disabled people. A final review of progress made under the strategy by the National Disability Authority (NDA, 2025) highlighted improvements in relation to education and skill development, and some employment supports. However, notable gaps and challenges were reported, including:

- Persistent disability education and employment gaps

- Unresolved issues in making work pay

- Limited provision of career guidance

- Gaps in supported employment

- Issues with strategy coordination and implementation

- Challenges in developing indicators.

Learning from the CES has informed development of the forthcoming National Disability Strategy, which will contain a dedicated employment pillar. The Programme for Government (PfG) committed to adopting a 'whole-of-government approach' to deliver a National Disability Strategy under the oversight of a National Implementation and Monitoring Committee (Department of Taoiseach, 2025). Although specific details about the implementation process are not yet confirmed, discussions with officials indicate that a more collaborative approach will be taken. Notably, commitments in the PfG to ensure that people with disabilities can access employment on an equal basis include:

- Provide careers guidance in special schools
- Develop bridges between special schools into employment
- Provide disabled students with clear paths into employment
- Expand and build on WorkAbility, Employability, and the Work and Access Programme to support people with disabilities into employment
- Promote training initiatives to raise awareness and understanding of disabilities in the public employment service (Intreo)
- Examine ways to make it easier to regain Disability Allowance if employment ceases
- Review the minimum hours requirement under the Wage Subsidy Scheme for people with disabilities and examine an increase to the payment rate.

Table 2: Main employment support for people with disabilities

Northern Ireland	Republic of Ireland
Department for Communities[5]	Department of Social Protection (DSP)
Access to Work NI	**Work and Access Programme**
Various supports, including communication and adaptations, to help disabled people access and remain in employment. Support for employers, including with additional costs.	Various supports, including job coaches and assessments, to help people with disabilities access and remain in employment.
Workable NI	**WorkAbility (Co-financed by EU)**
Delivered by disability support organisations providing in-work support to people with disabilities. Particular focus is on those with a learning disability or difficulty, and mental ill-health; and on early engagement and education for the employer and key staff.	Funds projects providing progressive pathways into work via education, training, skills development, and in-work supports. Includes employer engagement, awareness and capacity building to recruit, retain and progress disabled people in the workforce.
Condition Management Programme	**Wage Subsidy Scheme (WSS)**
Work-focused rehabilitation which helps people understand and manage their health condition(s) to enable them to progress towards, move into and stay in employment.	Financial incentives to private sector employers for hiring people with disabilities. For example, to cover the cost of adapting the job requirements.
Labour Market Partnerships	**EmployAbility Service**
Multi-agency initiatives led by each Council to improve local employability outcomes. Thematic areas include economic inactivity, unemployment and disability.	Employment support and job coaching for people with a health condition, injury, illness or disability. Also provides recruitment advice for employers.
UKSPF Economic Inactivity projects	**Willing, Able, Mentoring (WAM) / GetAHead**
(Funded by Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government) Includes coalitions of organisations that support people with disabilities to gain accredited qualifications and access sustainable employment.	The WAM programme arranges work placements for graduates with disabilities and builds the capacity of employers. GetAhead supports students and graduates with disabilities to transition from higher education to full-time employment.

Web-links for further information about these programmes can be found in the References section.

[5] Funded by DfC, with the exception of the UKSPF projects which are funded by the UK government.

Sharing good practice

Northern Ireland

The steering committee visited two organisations in NI who support people with learning disabilities and / or autism. The aim was to learn more about their services and good practice utilising the Supported Employment model.

- Orchardville offers a variety of services aimed at helping people to live, learn, and work. This includes employment and skills development, community inclusion, and social enterprises. The visit also included discussion about the barriers people with a learning disability and / or autism experience when accessing employment.

- Triangle Progression to Employment provides employment services, promotes social inclusion and challenges discrimination. Services include pre-employment training and skills development; job coaching and in-work support; and advice and guidance to employers regarding positive action recruitment practices. The visit included discussion about employer engagement and barriers when employing disabled people (See Case Study, p.34).

Action Mental Health (AMH) also delivered a presentation to the group during the visit. AMH utilises a person-centred approach (Supported Employment) to provide employment programmes for people with mental health conditions and other disabilities. These focus on personal development and employability skills, and include accredited employment courses, training placements, paid and voluntary work, and further education / training (See Case Study, p.35).

Republic of Ireland

The group went to Walkinstown Association for People with an Intellectual Disability (WALK) during a study visit to learn about their range of Supported Employment programmes. The Green Kitchen & Garden Shop is a social enterprise that partners with WALK. It supports, trains and creates employment pathways for people who have disabilities. The trainees build skills and confidence, and many go on to secure paid employment.

OWL (Oireachtas Work Learning) Project

During a visit to Leinster House for a policy roundtable, the group heard a presentation from the Houses of the Oireachtas Service and KARE about the OWL Project. Young people also attended and shared their experience of the programme.

Key features:

- Work-based learning programme for young people with intellectual disabilities

- Provides practical training and work experience within the Houses of the Oireachtas

- Includes the Journals Office, Facilities Team, HR, and government departments

- Delivered in partnership with disability support organisations, KARE and WALK

- Trainees participate in an accredited QQI training programme

- OWL graduates are eligible to participate in a confined competition to secure permanent part-time employment. This is undertaken as a positive action to increase the representation of people with disabilities in the Civil and Public Services in Ireland.

Section C: Engagement events – Key themes

Thematic analysis

The engagement events were either recorded and transcribed, or a detailed written note was taken. The data was analysed, and key issues identified within five thematic areas.

1. **Policy and funding**
2. **Access to quality employment**
3. **Support systems and infrastructure**
4. **Disability awareness and support**
5. **Programme effectiveness / specialist support**

1. Policy and funding

Key issues:

- Limited implementation of disability employment policy and strategy
- Lack of accountability, co-ordination and cross-departmental collaboration
- Lack of engagement with employers to support policy implementation
- The voluntary and community sector are often undervalued as strategic partners
- An absence of sustainable mainstream funding, combined with an over-reliance on EU funds, results in financial 'cliff-edges' in the provision of specialist disability employment services, and the loss of staff expertise and critical infrastructure.

Policy implementation

There was consensus in each nation across support organisations and many employers, that government failure to implement disability employment strategy significantly contributes to slow progress and persistently low disability employment rates. This is underpinned by a lack of accountability, co-ordination and cross-departmental collaboration. It is often unclear how different policy strands relevant to disability employment are being aligned and where responsibilities lie. For example, there is a lack of clarity about what is happening to ensure that people with disabilities are key features of employment and economic growth strategies.

In ROI, key learning in the CES review included the need for the new strategy to have a clear and structured implementation process to ensure that a coordinated and whole government approach is maintained; underpinned by support, resources, and active engagement from all relevant government departments and their agencies. Concern was expressed that there had been no similar evaluation of the disability employment strategy in NI to assess impact / lessons learned, and a four year gap since it ended.

Some support organisations suggested that the new strategies in each nation must have specific targets in relation to a percentage improvement in the disability employment rate. There was

broad consensus there should be timeframes in place for achieving priority actions, and adequate levels of associated funding. This should be supported by monitoring and evaluation to measure success.

> "...The action plan for the final phase (2022-2024) was never agreed, resulting in limited oversight and momentum in the strategy's concluding years. Part of the reason for not reaching agreement was the siloed approach taken by Departments and the lack of clarity around where responsibility lay for supporting people into employment, particularly where they had high support needs. This gap in implementation and monitoring impeded the realisation of the full potential of the CES."
>
> (NDA, CES Review, 2025)

> *"[In ROI] the emphasis on disability within the Programme for Government is really positive, but there needs to be a new approach to implementation or nothing will change."* *(Support Worker)*
>
> *"[In NI] over ten years they are talking about halving the disability employment gap. But that needs to be properly funded, followed through and reported on." (Support Worker)*
>
> *"[In NI] I think the Action Plan needs to be teased out, it needs to be timebound and there needs to be money against it." (Support Worker)*

Strategic partnerships

Participants across the different stakeholder groups agreed that multi-agency working, including partnership with employers, disabled people and the voluntary and community sector (VCSE), is critical to ensure positive outcomes. However, support organisations and employers often pointed to a lack of alignment with the private sector and the need for stronger government engagement with employers. This was also viewed as key to ensuring the sufficient provision of information about disability awareness training and support organisations, and to develop employer partnerships.

Despite considerable expertise in supporting people with disabilities and delivering vital employment services, many support organisations believe their role as a strategic partner is undervalued. As evidence, they highlighted inadequate funding / funding cuts (see below), a lack of meaningful and sustained collaboration with disabled people, and limited recognition of the VCSE's role in delivering essential frontline services.

Funding arrangements for specialist support

In each nation, the lack of mainstream funding for specialist disability employment support programmes and an over-reliance on the European Social Fund (ESF) has resulted in insecure funding arrangements. Organisations in NI and ROI described their recent experience of financial 'cliff-edge' situations between funding allocations, leading to a loss of services, staff expertise and vital infrastructure. At present in ROI, disability employment projects have received five years funding under ESF+ between 2024 to 2028. While this was generally welcomed as a positive investment, the long-term funding picture remains unclear.

Following the cessation of ESF in Northern Ireland after Brexit, the long-term future of replacement funding through the United Kingdom Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) is unclear beyond March

2026 when funding ends. Social inclusion is no longer within the remit of the new fund, leaving some organisations concerned that its sole focus on economic inactivity may not fully meet the needs of people furthest from the labour market. Some also noted concerns that the UKSPF is not managed in NI but centrally through the UK government, with limited devolved input into design of the fund to ensure it aligns with local strategic priorities.

Northern Ireland

Post-conflict society: In NI, long-term sickness or disability is the main reason for high levels of economic inactivity. Some participants suggested that being a post-conflict society is a key factor. Associated inter-generational trauma and mental ill-health may impact on some people's ability to participate fully in the workforce.

Prolonged periods without a functioning government: The further legacy of a post-conflict society, NI has experienced recent periods without a functioning government in place. It was suggested this has contributed towards delays in the implementation of key strategies aimed at improving the lives of people with disabilities.

Economic research found that disabled people in NI have a higher incidence of more limiting conditions and a lower qualifications profile which contributes to, but doesn't fully account for, the wider disability employment rate gap (Ulster University Economic Policy Centre, 2022).

2. Access to quality employment

Key issues:

- Multiple and 'tokenistic' work placements which do not lead to sustainable jobs
- Lack of employer accountability to provide jobs for people with disabilities
- Limited diversity in job roles for disabled people
- Low application rates from disabled people to professional roles
- Lack of access to relevant skills training and accredited qualifications
- Shortage of flexible, part-time jobs (which often suit disabled people)
- Lack of support, resources and training for self-employment opportunities.

Opportunities for sustainable employment

Participants with a disability reported being in many different voluntary or work placements that never led to permanent, paid employment, leaving them feeling discouraged. Some participants with a disability thought that financial incentives for employers were 'tokenistic' and did not guarantee long-term employment. One participant in ROI described feeling like a "charity case", while another in NI thought the employer was "begged" to give her a job.

"My experience started off volunteering for eight years with expenses which was ten pounds a week so you kind of felt like a work experience person nearly, you were there just to fill in the gaps basically ... and then a new support came in a fella called xxx and eventually I got a job. He practically begged them to give me the job." (Service User)

Many support organisations also reiterated concerns about employer tokenism, sometimes described as "box-ticking" or paying "lip service."

"I suppose what I'm coming across a lot with employers is tokenism. And while they might come on board and they're very enthusiastic they might only employ one person and job done. Then you know we've somebody in for like five hours a week or they're in for ten hours a week and that's it, and they're treated very much in a tokenistic way or something very special or different." (Support Worker)

"You'll often have that it's essentially a box-ticking exercise where employers are like yes we want to do corporate social responsibility, we want to offer a placement, and they want to be able to say we're doing this great thing." (Support Worker)

In France, employers are legally required to employ a certain number of disabled workers, and penalties are imposed if they fail to meet that quota. This quota is 6% of the workforce for companies with 20 or more employees.

Many support organisations suggested that government should require accountability from employers to provide more jobs for disabled people. Several organisations in each nation mentioned that the quota system used in France could be beneficial. It has had some positive impacts, such as increased awareness about the employment of disabled people and the need for reasonable adjustments. However it has also been suggested that the system places too much focus on meeting numbers rather than matching disabled workers' skills with job requirements, and that some employers may prefer to pay fines rather than actively recruit and support disabled people.

"There has to be a follow up like an audit, a review, and actual penalties put in place. There has to be employer accountability because otherwise it will just continue the way it is indefinitely." (Support Worker)

Types of job roles / skills and qualifications

Support organisations noted a lack of diversity in terms of job roles. This resonated with many participants with a disability who reported they are steered towards cleaning, hospitality and retail positions. This is often casual (agency) work and low-paid. A few participants noted a high turnover of staff and managers in these types of jobs, which can sometimes make it more difficult to build rapport (and understanding about their disability). Participants also highlighted that without the right support, their disabilities and health issues often placed limitations on the types of work they could do.

"(It is hard) finding the right job that is suitable for your disability. I have been looking for a retail environment job suitable for me to handle the stock and I keep trying to find somewhere suitable for my needs. And having the right employer is always a good thing as well so they might treat you with respect." (Service User)

Most stakeholders thought a lack of skills and qualifications inhibited disabled people's choice of work. Many participants with a disability thought there were not enough opportunities for them to build on and improve their skills and qualifications. This meant they were less likely to be in jobs they are really interested in.

"I think it is to do with the qualifications they have in terms of the limited knowledge they have. They don't think what they are passionate about." (Service User)

Support organisations and employers also suggested that government needs to develop more partnerships with employers across a wider range of industries to improve career diversity for people with disabilities. Some good practice in this area was reported, for example this NI participant highlighted the value of Supported Employment models in creating diverse employer partnerships:

"Previously people with disabilities were only really offered opportunities in hospitality or retail so for us it has been such a big thing to go to employers and align ourselves with employers who are in tech, who are in solicitors, who are in marketing, who are all different types. And we are co-designing, co-producing Supported Employment models to really help people into sustained employment and offer other opportunities." (Support Worker)

Part-time working

Many participants with a disability reported difficulties accessing employment due to a lack of part-time positions, which they most often preferred. Stakeholders generally thought that employers should be more open minded about adapting job roles and taking on part time workers with a disability.

In NI, the public sector accounts for approximately 27% of employee jobs, while in the UK overall, it accounts for around 18%.

"Due to my mental health and physical disabilities, I find it incredibly challenging working full time. There are very few jobs that are part time." (Service User)

Some support organisations noted that the public sector in Northern Ireland is a larger employer compared to the UK. They suggested that over-reliance on this sector can be a barrier for disabled people. There are fewer part-time jobs advertised in the public sector compared to other sectors.

Self-employment

Across the project there were limited examples of people who have moved into self-employment with the support of organisations, and little resources to facilitate this. Participants with a disability had little awareness about opportunities for self-employment, and did not know what this would entail or where to go for information.

Some organisations thought that self-employment was often overlooked as an option for people with disabilities because it may be seen as isolating. It was generally regarded as a gap in provision, especially with growing numbers of the workforce becoming self-employed and increased opportunities for remote working. While not for everyone, it may suit some people with disabilities, including where limited access to public transport is an issue.

Support organisations in ROI indicated more examples of good practice and opportunities for self-employment compared with NI. For example, through local enterprise offices, although they noted that provision was patchy:

"I know in the Republic, the local enterprise offices can have great resources for people who are moving into self-employment, so we've had one or two cases of someone whose gotten fantastic advice from a business analyst on here's what you need to do to explore your next steps. However, the level of support that can be offered through a local enterprise office varies significantly, so again that lack of consistency across the country is an issue. It just depends on how well funded or how good the resources are in that local office."
(Support Worker)

'A' is a young male interested in self-employment:

"I was going to think about an independent YouTube career. I did look at some of the original content of creators that had ideas like those. I have been looking at some sponsors that could actually help. I haven't had anyone to help me. I did look it up for guides that's all."

What support would help you the most to take this forward?

It would be the visual effects would probably be the one I might need support with. It's more like the visual effects like if you need something created like a title sequence."

3. Support systems and infrastructure

Key issues:

- Inconsistent and poorly coordinated provision of transitions support between school and employment

- Lack of specialist careers guidance, with particularly limited provision in ROI special schools

- Bureaucratic, slow and restrictive government disability employment initiatives, including application processes and restrictive thresholds for support

- Inflexibility within the welfare benefits system inhibiting workplace progression

- Delays accessing funded sign language interpreters for interviews, low awareness about communication support, and inconsistency in funding

- Lack of rural public transport, and inaccessible transport options

- Inaccessible buildings, for example, ramps, lifts or accessible bathrooms.

Managing transitions

A number of different stakeholders in each nation highlighted the lack of consistent transition support from education into employment for young people with a disability / special educational needs as a key factor in low disability employment rates. Multiple reviews in Northern Ireland have reported the need for better integration in transition planning and provision between departments and services (NI Assembly, 2024). Provision across NI was regarded by many stakeholders as being patchy, and it was suggested that pockets of good practice should be built on and expanded more widely.

"[In NI] We are not getting young people early enough, inspired and ready to work. I think if we were, if there was an effective programme around transitions for young people with disabilities, I think that would prevent more people becoming economically inactive." (Support Worker)

The transitions landscape in the Republic presents particular challenges, where there is limited careers guidance in special schools or engagement with potential employers. Young people tend to make the transition from school into day opportunity services rather than any expectation they will enter into training or employment.

"[In ROI] Parents are not being encouraged to see their young people turn into young adults who turn into people who work. They're tended to be minded and cared for and not doing qualifications other than filtering into day services fairly quickly." (Support Worker)

Some organisations in ROI also reported a lack of support provided to young people with disabilities between college and accessing employment.

"[In ROI] I do find that the young people particularly leaving college while they do have a lot of supports in college and they have the disability support services it's when they leave college all that seems to fall off a cliff." (Support Worker)

Bureaucracy and restrictions (thresholds)

Support organisations in each nation expressed frustration with slow application processes and restrictions in government programmes which provide financial incentives and other support. They frequently highlighted thresholds before programmes and support could be accessed as being a challenge.

For example, in Northern Ireland, the 10-hour threshold of the Workable programme inhibits access to those who can work less hours initially and then gradually build up their hours. The sixteen hour employment threshold in Access to Work before a deaf employee can have a funded interpreter was also highlighted as a key barrier.

"[In NI] Access to Work doesn't kick in until sixteen hours a week so anybody working less than sixteen hours a week can't have an interpreter paid for, so their employer has to pay for it." (Support Worker)

In the Republic of Ireland, a significant number of organisations reported limitations with employer incentives and support schemes. Some thought that overly bureaucratic processes were counter-productive and off-putting for employers.

"[In ROI] Another barrier is the getting in applications to support employers with the Wage Subsidy Scheme ... it's very, very slow to get that support back for the employers as well when you've kind of used that nearly as a marketing tool to encourage employers to come on board with the programme." (Support Worker)

Department of Education (ROI)

Pilot programmes are supporting young people with disabilities to make optimal transitions from school into post-school options, and are being evaluated to inform policy in this area. This includes transitions programmes in schools as part of the Comprehensive Employment Strategy (CES); and the DAF 22 Transitions programme in partnership with WALK.

"[In ROI] All this paperwork you've to give them [employers], the Wage Subsidy Scheme, the Work and Access programme it's just a nightmare for them and they're kind of like we've enough to be doing I don't have the time to do it, I need to hire somebody to do this for me." (Support Worker)

Participants in ROI generally regarded the 15-hour minimum threshold in the WSS as being too restrictive for many people with disabilities who work less hours.

"[In ROI] Allow more flexibility with the Wage Subsidy Scheme, not having to work a minimum amount of hours to be able to access it. Not all of our members would be able to work 15 hours, but would make an incredibly valuable contribution to a business in the 6-12 hours per week that they would be able to contribute." (Support Worker)

Notably, while several organisations highlighted their benefits, others thought that the use of wage subsidies may have the unintended consequence of devaluing disabled people and their capabilities. They advocated that employers should be actively supported in the workplace to create sustainable jobs.

Welfare benefits system

Many stakeholders in each nation thought that inflexibility within the benefits system can inhibit disabled people moving into work or increasing their hours. Some noted that it can be difficult for individuals living at home with their parents to claim disability allowances, which in turn affects their eligibility for other employment schemes. Several participants with a disability thought the benefits system was difficult to navigate, and some described it as being a barrier or a "trap."

"For me it is the benefits system that stops you because you go into a job, and you're only allowed to do so many hours a week. I know that's the system, but I just think the system is behind where it needs to be. It should be helping people get work and stay in work rather than take the money from them for being there." (Service User)

Concerns included being financially worse off after becoming employed, being reassessed and losing benefits, or finding it difficult to access benefits again quickly if a job does not work out. Many stakeholders noted the need for a more flexible approach.

"It's actually a scary thing to do in leaving the benefits system behind. If there was a period of time where you could earn for longer or even work schemes that train you up, then place you in steady employment that is secure. So many companies offer temporary short term contracts, and the fear is you might not get back on to benefits if your contract ends." (Service User)

"I think in terms of ways of dealing with that it's about being more flexible you know giving people a chance to try things out without affecting their benefits." (Support Worker)

Communication support

Challenges accessing sign language interpreters for job interviews and in the workplace were reported, which often impacts on deaf people finding and sustaining employment. For example, organisations in each nation highlighted there is such a high demand for interpreters that booking an interpreter for an in-person interview can take two weeks.

It was welcomed that deaf people new to a job in ROI, or in existing employment, can now access 24 hours of communication support funds for an interpreter over the course of one year, through the Work and Access scheme. However, some challenges were noted with accessibility of the booking system, and a lack of awareness about the scheme across the deaf community.

"[In ROI] People maybe get into employment but for progression within the employment then that would be having an interpreter there to communicate, to translate the information. And it's confidence as well. It's changing but it's the actual paperwork and the process and that is a bit of a barrier at the moment. It came in last year and I think there was in January or February only three people had taken it up." (Support Worker)

There is a lack of interpreters to cover the NI population of British and Irish deaf sign language users. Differences were noted in the provision of Access to Work in NI for deaf and sign language users compared to England, where people control their own budgets and have more support.

"They book and pay their interpreters in England. Whereas here in Northern Ireland the employer has to book and pay for the interpreters and then claim it back. People [in England] can have an interpreter for much longer, they have bigger budgets. It's very restrictive here." (Support Worker)

Public transport

Difficulty accessing public transport outside cities and large towns was identified by many stakeholders as a significant barrier to employment for people with disabilities across the island of Ireland, notably those living in rural communities. This often limits the types of jobs they can access, the areas they can travel to, and their hours of work.

"I was successful in [supermarket], but the area wasn't great for my transport so then I had to decline. They couldn't change the hours to support me in my transport." (Service User)

"It is actually quite challenging at the moment, just trying to find something that is local that it would be easier to travel to." (Service User)

Modes of public transport are often inaccessible for people with a physical disability. Some people, including those with mental ill-health or a learning disability can experience high levels of anxiety when using public transport. Using taxis as an alternative can be a very expensive alternative.

"Because there's only one wheelchair accessible seating area and if that's taken up with a buggy or another wheelchair user then there's no hope of getting that bus into work or training or wherever it is they need to go." (Support Worker)

Top three priorities

Participants with a disability said government and services should focus on these three priorities to improve employment rates:

✔ More employer disability awareness

✔ More placement opportunities which build skills that lead to permanent jobs

✔ More public transport in rural communities.

4. Disability awareness and support

Key issues:

- Lack of understanding about different types of disabilities and associated requirements can lead to employers being fearful about recruiting disabled people

- Gaps in employer knowledge typically include mental health conditions, autism, learning disability and hidden disabilities; and reasonable adjustments and positive actions

- Lack of disability awareness leads to inaccessible recruitment processes, rigid work environments that don't allow for flexibility or accommodation, and inconsistency in approach across employers

- Limited disability awareness amongst employers and staff can result in stigma and discrimination in the workplace

- Lack of government engagement with employers about available information and support, including specialist disability employment providers.

Employer knowledge and understanding

Improving employer disability awareness was a predominant theme across stakeholders in the engagement events. They suggested that a lack of understanding about disability and associated policy and legislation, means that employers can be fearful of recruiting people with a disability. Without the necessary awareness, they are less likely to make job adaptations and reasonable adjustments.

"There is a fear of making mistakes, of causing unintentional harm, of being sued. That fear is especially in small businesses. They don't have HR departments." (Employer)

"They're afraid of saying the wrong thing. They're afraid if they bring someone in with additional needs and they ask them to do something that they're not capable of doing that they could be sued, they could use the wrong language. How do they explain to the other employees that somebody has an additional need, if that person in particular doesn't want it disclosed and it's not visible?" (Support Worker)

"I find from our experience with employers over the last number of years there's a nervousness around recruiting people with disabilities because of their own lack of knowledge, their own lack of skills in engaging with people with disabilities." (Support Worker)

Many stakeholders in each nation thought that employers can lack knowledge about the range of diversity and need in relation to disability[6], including mental health and associated different conditions. It was often highlighted that people can have autism, communication difficulties or need a bit longer to understand instructions and workplace expectations, which may not be appreciated. People may also have hidden disabilities or different accessibility needs related to a physical disability.

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[6] Some NI policy stakeholders shared examples of good practice in the workplace e.g., The Mental Health Charter (ECNI); Supporting Autistic People (DOH/ECNI); Neurodiversity: Northern Ireland Civil Service Line Manager's Toolkit (NICS, 2021).

"No two people are the same. Physical and mental health affects people differently. Sometimes employers don't spend time understanding their employees' specific needs." (Service User)

"[We need] more training for employers about mental health. It's a spectrum not just anxiety and depression." (Service User)

Several participants with a disability thought that worry about social anxiety / awkwardness due to communication difficulties compounded an overall lack of confidence about being in a workplace. Some also suggested that a lack of understanding about disability means that employers can underestimate the skills and capabilities of disabled people.

"The main things that get in the way of an autistic person finding and staying in a job are the work culture and the work environment." (Service User)

"I think employers don't know that we can do things ourselves. Employers don't know how good we are, and everyone is different, it doesn't mean (because we have a disability) that we are worse." (Service User)

Many stakeholders felt that a lack of employer awareness affects how people with disabilities are perceived by staff in the wider workplace. Several participants with a disability reported being treated differently at work by not being included in team meetings, not being asked for their opinion, or the staff "talked over me as if I'm not there." Another participant highlighted a negative experience while doing training:

"When I was at a course someone actually discriminated my mental disability. There was one person who talked behind my back thinking I was like a complete R person. I don't want to say the word for the R because that might offend. It made me feel low like I was like angry and upset, big time." (Service User)

Recruitment processes

Stakeholders, including many employers, suggested there was a lack of consistency in terms of recruitment policy and practice to ensure employment is accessible for people with disabilities. They thought that employers should be more aware of legislation, for example, that they can target positive action job and training opportunities to disabled people who are likely to be the most disadvantaged in the labour market.

Many participants with a disability said they struggled with inflexible recruitment processes. This included online applications, interviews and assessments that are not accommodating for different needs (e.g., screen readers, and executive functioning challenges). As noted in the previous section, this is compounded by challenges accessing external funded support for interviews, such as sign language interpreters.

Some participants with a disability thought that a lack of knowledge amongst employers can lead to stigma and discrimination in the recruitment process. Several worried that the reason they found it difficult to secure work was because employers regarded them as "not good enough", "not able", "too much trouble", or even as being "a health and safety issue". Some participants

referenced unconscious bias in the recruitment process, and described feeling stigmatised by potential employers.

"When I say I have a disability or a job coach they lose interest." (Service User)

"There is still stigma and discrimination once you declare on an application form that you have mental health problems." (Service User)

"I really get frustrated when it feels like my disability [sight impairment] is being used against me. I live with it, and I deal with it, why can't employers?" (Service User)

Reasonable adjustments

Some participants with a disability said they were reluctant to ask for reasonable adjustments for fear of not being seen as a team player or judged for being "different". This left them feeling unsupported, with no network or backup, and led to feelings of isolation and burnout. Several reported poor experience of accessing accommodations in relation to mental health, when returning to work after a period of sick leave.

"I think employers need more help to understand what people like us need in jobs to keep them in the job and also to help them gain understanding as well." (Service User)

Most stakeholders thought employers should be more willing to make reasonable adjustments. These may be small requests, but could make a real difference to an individual's confidence and ability to do their job well. This might include improvements in basic tools; flexible policies which consider individual needs instead of a "one-size-fits-all" approach; and assistive technologies which are inclusive of blind or visually impaired employees.

"I really believe employers didn't want the hassle of employing someone with a sight impairment, but this was obviously never the reason given. I just wish it was fairer. It really feels sometimes that equipment costs and having someone in the workplace scares employers. I just want reasonable adjustments to help me, not huge adjustments." (Service User)

Some participants with disabilities cited their own positive experience of workplace adaptations, or being assigned another member of staff as an onsite mentor or 'work buddy'. A few participants suggested a workplace mentor who understands the employee's disability as essential, including those with lived experience. Pre-work support by the employer was also described as helpful, such as videos about the organisation and having site visits to ensure people feel more "relaxed." Comments included:

Good practice using reasonable adjustments included:

- Flexible, tailored policies
- Interview questions in advance
- Pre-employment videos and site visits
- Longer induction periods
- Workplace mentors / buddies
- Peer support mentors
- Flexible working hours
- Hybrid-working (office / home)
- Smaller, quieter workspaces
- Sensory break-times
- Clear instructions broken down into manageable steps
- Written or recorded instructions
- Inclusive assistive technology, e.g., screen readers; listening systems; alternative keyboards

"I asked for to have a work buddy to reach the higher shelves. They responded well and gave me a wee work buddy."

"Have someone as a work coach/buddy/mentor from the onset. This should be someone who understands about mental ill health. They need to be patient and have good people skills. This can really help someone settle in a new job and lessen their anxiety."

"Use the lived experience of people who have mental ill health to support others in the workplace. They have such a wealth of experience that could really enable an employer to have a better understanding of how mental ill health affects people."

Good practice in disability awareness

There was broad consensus on the need for mandatory disability awareness training for all employers as a key way to promote inclusive recruitment practices and improve disability employment rates. This should include HR professionals and smaller businesses which may have less policies in place. Employees should also be required to undertake disability awareness training to prevent isolation or victimisation of people with disabilities in the workplace.

Many stakeholders thought there needed to be a culture change across government departments in terms of employing more people with a disability, as a key way to promote good practice. Other suggestions for improvement by participants with a disability included more workplace disability champions, a specific advertising campaign targeted at employers, and more employer talks in schools and colleges about different career options.

Information and support for employers

Information and support for employers was a top priority area for improvement amongst stakeholders, and to promote good practice. A report by the OECD (2021) found that ROI has an underdeveloped employer engagement structure in terms of providing information and support with regards employing people with disabilities. This was reflected in discussions with employers across each nation who reported limited knowledge in both NI / ROI about available training and support.

"Employers are reluctant [to recruit disabled people] as they do not know about what supports might be available." (Employer)

They highlighted a lack of engagement from government to raise awareness of financial incentives and local disability employment support (including voluntary and community sector programmes); or to create employer partnerships across a more diverse range of sectors.

Employer recommendations to improve disability awareness, included:

- Create a centralised information hub for employers to access training and support

- Conduct regular employer audits to identify skills gaps

- Introduce mandatory employer exit surveys to learn about people's workplace experience, reasons for leaving, and improve staff retention

- Promote more job fair / events between employers, support organisations and disabled people

- Create learning platforms or networks for employers to meet, and share good practice / good news stories.

Moving forward, there was strong consensus amongst employers and support organisations that government needs a more streamlined approach towards employer engagement. This is key to improving employer attitudes towards recruiting disabled people and then facilitating workplace support and career progression. Greater access to information, training and support for employers was widely regarded as integral to this. Many employers suggested there needed to be some type of centralised "one-stop-shop" or "hub" that moved beyond online information and provided in-person support.

"There needs to be more information given to employers about the benefits of supporting people with disabilities in the workplace. If there was some form of central hub that would be a good step change, and give employers that confidence to take the next step." (Employer)

5. Programme effectiveness / specialist support

Key issues:

- Lack of evaluation to assess the effectiveness of disability employment services for people with a disability
- Short-term employment programmes may be less effective for disabled people who often require longer-term support
- People with disabilities benefit from tailored, person-centred support
- Supported Employment is an effective, evidence-based model which is not part of mainstream provision in NI / ROI, and at risk of further decline without investment
- The provision of Supported Employment is especially patchy in ROI without a shared platform to support good practice, training and implementation.

Evaluation of disability employment programmes

There was support across disability organisations for greater investment in longer-term programmes for people with disabilities / more complex needs, based on evidence of 'what works'. Concern was expressed about the lack of evaluation of employment and training programmes to assess their effectiveness in supporting people with disabilities. This was particularly noted in relation to mainstream provision which is often short-term and may therefore be more beneficial for those closest to the labour market. Some people may also need ongoing support in the workplace to promote job sustainability.

"If you only focus on short programmes they're never going to benefit and they're never going to get a job. That long-term support is critical." (Support Worker)

Tailored and person-centred support

There was broad consensus amongst participants with a disability in each nation that it can be difficult to find a job without specialist support. They reported a wide range of support from disability employment organisations which they felt had improved their employability skills. Several highlighted how this had made them feel more confident in themselves, and their ability to find work. A lack of

confidence about being able to work with a disability was a key feature amongst participants, and they particularly valued support in this area. Some appreciated training they received to overcome a lack of knowledge about using public transport to get to work, and travel anxiety.

"One of the big things we try to work on, we're constantly trying to work on, is building up confidence in the people we work with that they are very capable of doing so much. But they don't have that belief in themselves because of maybe family or just bad experiences in school or previous employment."
(Support Worker)

Several participants reported struggling with digital/ IT skills and thought the support they received in this area was also essential in learning how to navigate the increasingly online job market. This included job searching on websites, completing online application forms, and undertaking 'virtual' interviews.

With support, some had been successful in securing paid work. They valued the ongoing engagement from organisations when they were in work to address any concerns they had and to support job retention. Many highlighted the key role that Employment Officers (EO) played in supporting them to learn skills and find work. Comments included:

"I have engaged in job search and am currently looking for employment with help from the Employment Officer. Prior to this I would enquire about jobs and would not often hear anything back."

"They support me with interviews and interview prep, and being there if you need help."

"I meet them every week. Looking at my CV, doing like reviews, and searching on Google Maps to see what areas they have employment."

"I already have a job. It started out as a work placement that my EO sourced. They also helped with applying for work and job searching."

Supported Employment

Support organisations also discussed effectiveness in the context of Supported Employment, and thought this model should be implemented on a wider scale in each nation. Adopted across Europe, there is a wealth of evidence that Supported Employment has a significant positive impact on the lives of people with a disability who are furthest removed from the labour market. Most organisations and employers consulted in Mind the Gap said that there was a need for more Supported Employment, but a lack of information, training and resources to implement it.

Support received:

- Goal setting; achieving goals
- Confidence building; resilience
- Travel training
- Time management
- Digital and IT skills
- Communication skills
- Career profiling
- CV preparation
- Job searching
- Job applications
- Interview skills
- Life skills e.g., budgeting, nutrition, cookery
- Peer support
- Counselling
- Learning about reasonable adjustments
- Wrap-around support; workplace check-ins.

Organisations in NI noted that the DWP's five-year Connect to Work programme has utilised the Supported Employment model and is being delivered in partnership with local authorities in England and Wales. Without appropriate resources, Supported Employment services in NI are at risk of decline. An increased demand for training in Supported Employment cannot be met due to uncertainty around funding.

In ROI, while several organisations indicated they use the Supported Employment model, some were only applying certain elements of it in practice. It was noted that fidelity to the model and a consistent approach across providers is important to maximise its effectiveness. Following a loss of funding, the absence of a shared platform to facilitate a joined-up approach, similar to the Northern Ireland Union for Supported Employment, was considered to be a key gap in ROI.

"Supported Employment seems to be gone in Ireland. I found that a lot of services don't know about it. I am trained so I do use it." (Support Organisation)

Supported Employment Model

Engagement
Underpinned by the core values of accessibility to ensure informed choices are made

Vocational Profiling
Ensuring empowerment to the individual through the process to assess their skills, abilities and career interests

Job Finding
Self-determination and informed choice are central to identifying employment opportunities in the local area

Employer Engagement
Accessibility, flexibility and confidentiality are key values to be nurtured through the job matching process

Ongoing Job Support
The individual in paid employment and their employer are supported by the Employment Support Worker / Job Coach

"It doesn't take just putting in a CV to a job or applying for a job. Some of the people we represent maybe it takes building their confidence up, doing some work experience then going into a job. It does take longer, it doesn't happen overnight, and it doesn't happen without support. It's about empowering them as well to make decisions themselves." (Support Worker)

Closing the Gap

In 2025, a National Disability Strategy will be launched in the Republic of Ireland and a draft Disability and Work Strategy issued for public consultation in Northern Ireland. These will align with other key strategies and policy drivers as part of a wider framework of support for people with disabilities. This new strategy development presents us with a valuable opportunity to take a fresh, rights-based approach and be collectively ambitious in our aspirations to close the disability employment gap across the island of Ireland. The following timely recommendations for policy and practice are directly informed by evidence that the Mind the Gap project has gathered through engagement with people with disabilities, employers, support organisations, and decision-makers.

Project recommendations

Guiding principles

- Disability inclusion in the labour market requires systemic change and a fundamental cultural shift from a society which accommodates disabled people to one which creates the conditions for them to thrive and achieve their full potential.

- The views and lived experience of people with disabilities must be at the heart of policy making and service delivery that impacts on their lives.

- People with disabilities should be consulted as active partners in the implementation of employment strategies which recognise and promote their right to work on an equal basis with others.

1. **The forthcoming National Disability Strategy (ROI) and Disability and Work Strategy (NI) should each set out a long-term implementation plan to reduce the disability employment gap, which includes:**

- Clear leadership and ownership assigned to each planned action to ensure accountability for achieving the overarching strategic goals.

- Specific targets and milestones to be achieved within a set timeframe, supported by adequate resources, a co-ordinated cross-departmental and outcomes-based approach, and clear communication channels.

- Robust and transparent reporting, monitoring and evaluation processes within a shared measurement framework to improve accountability, measure success and promote continuous improvement. This should be supported by improved data collection, disaggregated by disability type.

Actions should include:

Collaboration

2. Create, fund and sustain multi-agency implementation workstreams within a partnership framework to formalise collaboration and promote a shared vision for the employment of people with disabilities. These should include disabled people and Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs); government departments; the voluntary and community sector; employers and their representative bodies; and Trade Unions.

Effective services

3. Undertake an evaluation of employment programmes to assess their effectiveness in supporting disabled people into paid employment, and to gain the relevant skills, training and qualifications they need to access better jobs. Identify what aspects of current provision are working well and where improvements can be made to maximise outcomes, including new programmes and approaches.

- Include a review of all government support systems and schemes to create a more integrated approach, improve slow administration processes, and reduce inflexibilities within the welfare benefits system.

- Include a specific action to address the lack of sign language interpreters and inadequate funding for communication support services which inhibit job access, progression, and overall workplace inclusion for deaf people.

Supported Employment

4. Integrate the Supported Employment model based on the Supported Employment Quality Framework (SEQF) into the design and delivery of transitions programmes between school and employment; disability employment and training programmes; and disability awareness and support for employers.

- This should be supported by an association in each nation with the resources to co-ordinate information and professional workforce training; and share learning and practice through the creation of an all-Ireland Supported Employment platform.

Sustainable funding

5. Develop a long-term funding strategy which includes securing investment to maintain specialist disability employment services and safeguard the role and expertise of the voluntary and community sector in labour market inclusion.

- Supported Employment services should be sustainably funded within mainstream provision to ensure equitable access to employment support for people with disabilities who are furthest removed from the labour market.

- Immediate action is needed in Northern Ireland to establish appropriate, devolved funding beyond March 2026 to replace the UKSPF which currently funds most specialist and Supported Employment services.

School transitions

6. Reform the transition process between school and employment to deliver co-ordinated and consistent transitions planning and programmes for young people from the age of 14 with special educational needs and disabilities.

- This should include careers guidance across all special schools; and the creation of transitions programmes based on good practice which maintain support until the young person is established in work experience, training and employment.

Employer awareness

7. Evaluate the effectiveness of employers in recruiting and retaining individuals with disabilities, and to what extent they are fulfilling their legal obligations to make reasonable adjustments and take positive actions.

- Develop a campaign to highlight the benefits of recruiting people with disabilities; and to raise awareness with employers about their legal obligations in making reasonable adjustments and taking positive actions to promote employment opportunities for disabled people.

Employer engagement and support

8. Develop a structured approach to employer engagement with access by employers to a centralised information hub providing a range of in-person and web-based support and resources relating to disability employment support.

- Include guidance on legal requirements; preventing discrimination; disability awareness training; recruitment processes; reasonable adjustments; positive actions; accessibility; and disability employment services.

- Provide a directory of specialist disability employment programmes and Supported Employment practitioners.

Self-employment

9. Review the accessibility of self-employment programmes for people with disabilities, and expand existing provision so that more disabled people can set up their own business and access start-up grants and business mentors. This should involve collaboration with the Supported Employment sector.

- Establish more community work hubs / co-working spaces which are accessible for self-employed disabled people. These spaces could also be used by people with disabilities who are hybrid or remote working as part of their employment and / or have limited access to public transport.

Employer recommendation

10. Employers should develop Action Plans to promote inclusive practice, including:

- Engagement with specialist disability employment services for information, support and to create employer partnerships

- Disability awareness training and resources for HR staff, managers and employees

- Accessible recruitment processes that consider the diverse needs of applicants

- Reasonable adjustments for recruitment purposes, in the workplace, and to support career progression

- Assigning workplace disability champion(s) who raise awareness about disability training, advocate for disabled colleagues, and promote an inclusive workplace.

Case Studies

NI Case Study – Joe & James

Triangle's Progression to Employment service includes funding through the UKSPF to support people who are economically inactive and those with barriers to employment (e.g., autism) to secure paid work. It partners with a range of employers, including McDonald's, to create pathways into sustainable jobs, and provide ongoing support.

Joe and James were both struggling to find work before they engaged with Triangle. Joe, who is on a two-year Creative Media Studies course and hopes to become a filmmaker, says *"I visited a Triangle booth at the Northern Regional College to discuss employment opportunities with McDonald's. Triangle helped me understand how interviews work. They gave me questions and helped me build up my skills and confidence."*

James, who has autism and ADHD, was supported to gain employability skills and with confidence building. He says *"When I wasn't working, I became very introverted and isolated. I saw Triangle as my last shot to get back out there. They taught me so much, which helped with my anxiety, and my fears disappeared. I'm a changed man from the one I was beforehand."*

"We're proud partners of Triangle because it provides an essential liaison for people as young as 16 to gain employment." *(McDonald's)*

Both young men found that having a supportive employer and positive workplace makes all the difference in being able to sustain their employment.

"I'll be staying with McDonald's for the next few years at least. It's good money, the people are nice, the managers are good and it's a generally nice working environment." *(Joe)*

"I work in a great environment in McDonald's and the staff are friendly. They understand my autism." *(James)*

NI Case Study - Peach

Action Mental Health (AMH) utilises a person-centred approach (Supported Employment) to provide employment services and support for people with mental health conditions and other disabilities. This includes the SkillSET programme, which is funded by the UK government through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF).

Peach was struggling with her confidence and lacking support when she joined the SkillSET programme. *"I've been living with autism and struggling with mental health issues for many years. On top of that, a physical disability has made it harder for me to pursue certain types of work."*

With support from the Employment Officer at AMH, Peach says, *"I started to build up my confidence again. I learned new ways to manage my mental health and realised I had some skills and talents that I hadn't recognised before."*

Peach was supported into employment and receives ongoing workplace support from AMH. She says, *"I updated my CV and worked on my job application skills. When an opportunity came up at Puca Puca Games, a small business in creative [industries] retail, I entered an open competition for the job and ended up being successful. Now, I'm working as a 'professional gamer,' helping people who share similar interests, doing something I really enjoy."*

ROI Case Study - Aoife

Aoife joined Ability@Work (Horizons), a supported employment service in Cork which is co-funded through the Department of Social Protection's WorkAbility programme and the European Union. The service brings young people with an intellectual disability and / or autism closer to the labour market.

Aoife completed a vocational profile to assess her skills, abilities, interests, and employment support requirements, which showed retail would be a good fit. Referred by Doras training centre, where she excelled as a student, Aoife attended weekly job clubs. She participated in a six-week Job Shadow initiative at a Mr Price retail store, with support from her job coach and Mr Price staff. Following this work experience, Mr Price offered her a part-time paid contract due to her excellent performance.

Aoife says, *"In work I would be stocking shelves, checking prices, doing returns and helping customers. I was very happy to get my first job there because everybody is really nice and friendly in there. I have gained more confidence in work as part of a team and also working by myself, and more independence in getting to and from work by myself."*

NI Case Study - Eoin

Mencap NI provides services and support for people with learning disabilities. Eoin has been involved with Mencap for 20 years, initially receiving support from their employment service while he was a college student to enhance his skills, interests, and confidence. After obtaining a 2:1 BSc Degree in Cinematic Arts at the Ulster University, Eoin rejoined Mencap in 2021 as a sessional Inclusion Consultant. He received assistance in time management, clear communication, contributing effectively to meetings, and accessing public transport.

In 2023 Eoin gained a part-time Campaigns Assistant job with Mencap and was formally supported through the Workable NI programme for the first year of his employment. He now receives support only from Mencap NI as his employer. In his role, Eoin engages with people with learning disabilities, officials, MLAs and MPs, and gives presentations in the NI Assembly and Westminster. He travels independently by public transport and also works from home, or a local office as needed. Mencap NI says:

"Eoin is highly effective in his role, is an excellent communicator, and draws well and appropriately on his lived experience as a young man with a learning disability. He is always positive and cheerful and, despite making a long journey to work each day, is always smiling! He is a real asset to Mencap, and we are very lucky to have him work as a key part of our team."

ROI Case Study - Ross

Ross participated in Work4Life, which is SOS Kilkenny's Supported Employment Programme for adults with intellectual disabilities and autism. It is co-funded through the Department of Social Protection's WorkAbility programme and the European Union.

When a vacancy arose with WeCan, a local social enterprise, the team provided Ross with tailored support to help him prepare for a site visit and an informal interview. Their guidance helped Ross feel confident and ready to take the next step.

Following the successful visit, Ross was offered a job taster and a short work placement to experience the role first-hand. Work4Life also provided WeCan with training and advice on best practices for working with employees with intellectual disabilities, as well as assisting the HR team in developing easy-read employment contracts.

Ross quickly impressed the team and was offered a paid position with WeCan. He now works two days each week and hopes to increase his hours as WeCan grows.

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Main employment support for people with disabilities

Northern Ireland	
Access to Work NI	https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/access-work-practical-help-work
Workable NI	https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/workable-ni
Condition Management	https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/condition-management-programme
Labour Market Partnership	https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/contacts/labour-market-partnerships-lmp
UKSPF Economic Inactivity projects (Funded by Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government)	https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-shared-prosperity-fund-northern-ireland-project-information/uk-shared-prosperity-fund-northern-ireland-project-information

Republic of Ireland	
Work and Access Programme	https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-social-protection/services/work-and-access/
WorkAbility (Co-financed by EU)	https://www.pobal.ie/programmes/workability-inclusive-pathways-to-employment-programme/
Wage Subsidy Scheme (WSS)	https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-social-protection/services/wage-subsidy-scheme/
EmployAbility Service	https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-social-protection/services/employability-services/
Willing, Able, Mentoring (WAM) / GetAHead	https://www.ahead.ie/wam

Appendix 1 Mind the Gap Steering Committee

Northern Ireland

- Aisling Doherty, Action Mental Health
- Liam Burns, Mencap NI
- Edyth Dunlop, NIUSE
- Vanessa Hasson, Orchardville
- Victoria Redmond, Triangle Progression to Employment
- Norman Sterritt, Triangle Progression to Employment

Republic of Ireland

- Rob Sheridan, Gheel Autism Services
- Marian Hennessy, Ability@Work, Horizons
- Peter Furlong, KARE
- Anna Boda, Open Doors Initiative
- Wayne Howe, Open Doors Initiative
- Ann-Marie D'Souza, OWL Project, House of Oireachtas
- Mary Pat Murphy, SOS Kilkenny CLG
- Emily Quirke, SOS Kilkenny CLG
- Des Henry, WALK

Information is available in accessible formats, on request.

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MIND THE GAP

Partners

action mental health

Gheel Autism Services
acceptance • empowerment • inclusion

Ability@Work
leading the way in supported employment

Horizons
Cope Foundation in Cork Communities

Kare
Promoting Inclusion for People with Intellectual Disabilities

mencap Northern Ireland

NIUSE
Northern Ireland Union of Supported Employment

Open Doors
Creating Work Opportunities For All

Tithe an Oireachtais Houses of the Oireachtas | Oireachtas Work Learning Programme

opportunity employment support
Orchardville

TRIANGLE
Progression to Employment Service

WALK