Boosting employment for people with a learning disability.

Evidence Review

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October 2024

# Abstract

Employment provides not only economic benefits, but also social inclusion and self-esteem; however, individuals with learning disabilities often face significant challenges accessing meaningful work. This evidence review explores the employment motivations, barriers, opportunities, and experiences of individuals with learning disabilities, with a particular focus on their perspectives and those of their families regarding opportunities and barriers both within the workforce and to enter the workforce.

Evidence suggests that common barriers include employers' negative attitudes, lack of workplace accommodations, and inadequate support services during job placement, which collectively limit job opportunities and hinder meaningful workforce participation. Furthermore, complex benefit systems can discourage employment by creating financial disincentives. Despite these challenges, supported employment programmes, school-to-work transition services, and technological supports show promise in enhancing employment outcomes. Effective strategies involve early vocational training, individualised supports, job coaching, and family involvement in employment planning.

Family members often play a key role in supporting employment efforts, but they also express concerns about capability, job stability, safety, and the potential loss of disability benefits. Positive employment experiences are linked to workplaces that foster inclusive cultures, provide necessary accommodations, and offer training for both employees with disabilities and their coworkers. By embracing a comprehensive approach that considers the perspectives of all stakeholders, significant progress can be made toward achieving meaningful employment opportunities for this population.

Key words:

Learning disabilities; developmental disabilities; barriers to employment; supported employment; job satisfaction; self-determination; family-carer perspectives.

Contents

[Abstract 2](#_Toc181267412)

[Introduction 5](#_Toc181267413)

[Methodology 7](#_Toc181267414)

[Defining Learning Disability 8](#_Toc181267415)

[Employment Motivations 8](#_Toc181267416)

[Personal and Social Drivers 8](#_Toc181267417)

[Employment as a Bridge to Social Inclusion 9](#_Toc181267418)

[The Role of Early Exposure and Supported Employment 9](#_Toc181267419)

[Family Impacts on Employment 10](#_Toc181267420)

[Addressing Barriers and Enhancing Support 10](#_Toc181267421)

[Aspirations and Realistic Career Goals 11](#_Toc181267422)

[Barriers to Employment 11](#_Toc181267423)

[Discrimination and Stigma 11](#_Toc181267424)

[Systemic Barriers 12](#_Toc181267425)

[Educational and Training Gaps 12](#_Toc181267426)

[Health-Related Constraints 12](#_Toc181267427)

[Workplace Barriers 12](#_Toc181267428)

[Family-Related Barriers 13](#_Toc181267429)

[Economic and Policy Barriers 13](#_Toc181267430)

[Regional and Socioeconomic Challenges 13](#_Toc181267431)

[Limited Access to Inclusive Vocational Programmes 14](#_Toc181267432)

[Inadequate Transition Planning and Fragmented Services 14](#_Toc181267433)

[Employment Opportunities 14](#_Toc181267434)

[Supported Employment Programmes 14](#_Toc181267435)

[Integrated Employment and Inclusive Workplaces 15](#_Toc181267436)

[Transition Programmes and Vocational Training 15](#_Toc181267437)

[Technological Supports and Self-Management Interventions 16](#_Toc181267438)

[Policy and Legislative Frameworks 16](#_Toc181267439)

[Incentives for Employers 16](#_Toc181267440)

[Innovative Employment Models 16](#_Toc181267441)

[Social Enterprises and Microenterprises 17](#_Toc181267442)

[Family Involvement and Advocacy 17](#_Toc181267443)

[Community-Based Programmes and Employment First Initiatives 17](#_Toc181267444)

[Employment Experiences 18](#_Toc181267445)

[Inclusive Employment Models and Social Enterprises 18](#_Toc181267446)

[Microenterprises and Self-Employment 18](#_Toc181267447)

[Policy and Legislative Initiatives 18](#_Toc181267448)

[Family Perspectives and their role in Employment 19](#_Toc181267449)

[Family Involvement in Transition Planning 19](#_Toc181267450)

[Advocacy and Support Roles 20](#_Toc181267451)

[Emotional and Practical Concerns 20](#_Toc181267452)

[The Impact of Family Expectations 20](#_Toc181267453)

[Family-Centred Approaches to Career Planning 21](#_Toc181267454)

[Navigating Concerns About Safety and Stability 21](#_Toc181267455)

[Family Perspectives on Employment Experiences 21](#_Toc181267456)

[Welsh Policy Context 22](#_Toc181267457)

[Legislative Framework 22](#_Toc181267458)

[Strategic Plans and Programmes 23](#_Toc181267459)

[Employment Programmes and Initiatives 24](#_Toc181267460)

[Challenges and Barriers 24](#_Toc181267461)

[Recommendations and Future Directions 25](#_Toc181267462)

[The North Wales Context 25](#_Toc181267463)

[Conclusion 26](#_Toc181267464)

[References 28](#_Toc181267465)

[Systematic Reviews 28](#_Toc181267466)

[Journal Articles 29](#_Toc181267467)

[Grey Literature 35](#_Toc181267468)

[Policy Context 36](#_Toc181267469)

# Introduction

“Perceived ‘unemployability’ has been synonymous with the identity of adults with intellectual disability for the last century” (Thoresen, Thomson, Jackson, & Cocks, 2018, p.161).

Employment is a fundamental aspect of adult life that fosters self-worth, social inclusion, independence, and financial security. For individuals with learning disabilities, access to meaningful employment is not only a right, as established by international agreements such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD), but also a pathway to achieving a better quality of life. There is considerable evidence that work promotes well-being and enables individuals to achieve their goals and fulfil their potential (Dik, O'Connor, Shimizu & Duffy, 2019). For most people, work is an essential part of their lives.

The benefits of employment extend beyond economic gains; they include psychological, social, and health-related advantages (NICE, 2015). Evidence shows that having a job is associated with a greater sense of autonomy, reduced depression and anxiety symptoms, improved well-being, enhanced social status and opportunities for personal development (Modini, Joyce, Mykletun, Christensen, Bryant, Mitchell & Harvey, 2016). Engaging in work can improve self-esteem, provide a sense of purpose, and foster social relationships that enhance community integration (Gilson, Sinclair, Whirley, Li & Blustein, 2022). The structure and routine associated with employment also contribute to mental well-being by providing a daily rhythm that supports overall life satisfaction​ (Dean, Shogren, Hagiwara & Wehmeyer, 2018; Jahoda, Kemp, Riddell, & Banks, 2008).

For individuals with learning disabilities, employment can also mean an opportunity for personal growth, enhanced quality of life, and social integration (Lysaght, Petner-Arrey, Howell-Moneta & Cobigo, 2017), as well as a way to secure a sense of belonging and purpose (Petner-Arrey, Howell-Moneta & Lysaght, 2015). This is because of the increase in opportunities for social interaction, autonomy and skill development (Jahoda et al., 2008), among other benefits (Robertson, Beyer, Emerson, Baines, & Hatton, 2019).

The pursuit of employment does not feature as a priority in transition planning, even though the evidence shows that employment improves confidence and increases independence (Fullarton & Duquette, 2015). Despite increased advocacy and policy efforts aimed at improving employment opportunities for people with learning disabilities, the labour force participation rates for this population remain very low (McConkey & Mezza, 2001; McMahon, Bowring & Hatton, 2019; Melling, Beyer & Kilsby, 2011). In developed countries, estimates suggest that only 5-30% of individuals with learning disabilities are employed, a stark contrast to the employment rates for non-disabled individuals, which often exceed 65%​ (AlFozan & AlKahtani 2021; Coñoman, Ávila & Carmona, 2024; Robertson et al., 2019). It has been estimated that 65% of people with learning disabilities would like a paid job (Emerson, Malam, Davies, & Spencer, 2005). However, in 2011 the employment rate for people with learning disabilities in England was just 7.1% (Emerson, Hatton, Robertson, Roberts, Baines, Christie & Glover, 2012). It remained the same in 2013 with 7.1% of working age adults with learning disabilities were employed in England, (Hatton 2018). Five years later, in 2018, only 6% of working age adults with learning disabilities in England (7,907 people) in receipt of long-term social care support were in paid or self-employment; of these, 68.3% were working for less than 16 hours per week, (Public Health England, 2019). There was also a difference in employment rates for men (6.6%) and women (5.2%).

The literature provides insights into diverse employment contexts, including integrated and sheltered settings, and covers various influencing factors across different geographies and economic conditions. However, significant barriers – ranging from systemic issues in policy and education, to societal attitudes and discrimination – limit the ability of individuals with learning disabilities to access and sustain meaningful employment.

This evidence review aims to explore the motivations for employment among people with learning disabilities, identify the barriers they encounter, and examine the opportunities available to support their employment. It also discusses the experiences of individuals and their families to understand the complexities involved. By highlighting these factors, this review seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on how to effectively support individuals with learning disabilities in achieving meaningful participation in the workforce.

# Methodology

This review addresses the following research questions:

* What are the key areas for consideration when exploring employment for people with learning disabilities?
* What evidence is there as to motivations, barriers, opportunities, and experiences of individuals with learning disabilities when it comes to employment and employment sustainability?
* Is there evidence on the perspectives of the family carers of people with learning disabilities on the topic of employment?

Three databases were searched for systematic reviews and academic papers looking at boosting employment for people with learning disabilities. The following search terms were used to search for articles published between January 2000 and September 2024 in ERIC, Medline, and PsychINFO databases:

* Search terms: (‘intellectual disability\*’ OR ‘developmental disability\*’ OR ‘learning disability\*’ OR ‘IDD’ OR ‘ID’ OR ‘LD’) AND (‘employment’ OR ‘workforce’ OR ‘supported employment’ OR ‘job’) AND ‘(‘family’ OR quality of life’ OR ‘job satisfaction’ OR ‘well-being’ OR ‘wellbeing’ OR ‘integration’ OR ‘inclusion’ OR ‘autonomy’ OR ‘economic inclusion’).

After an initial search, abstracts were reviewed to select the most relevant papers for this review. The inclusion criteria excluded employer or educator focussed articles but was expanded to identify papers which specifically focused on voices of lived experience, namely people with learning disabilities and their families. Grey literature and relevant research websites were also searched for relevant policies, strategies and reports on employment issues for people with learning disabilities.

# Defining Learning Disability

In the literature, the population we are considering here are alternately described as having ‘learning disabilities’, ‘developmental disabilities’, ‘intellectual disabilities’ or ‘intellectual and developmental disabilities’. For the purposes of this review we will be referring to individuals with ‘learning disabilities’; the term most commonly used in the UK by policy-makers, academics, experts and practitioners.

A learning disability is defined by the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) (2001) as:

“a significantly reduced ability to understand new or complex information, to learn new skills (impaired intelligence), with a reduced ability to cope independently (impaired social functioning), which started before adulthood.”

# Employment Motivations

Employment is a crucial element for individuals with learning disabilities, significantly influencing their economic independence, social inclusion, self-esteem, and life satisfaction. Research consistently emphasises that work fulfils basic psychological needs, such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which are essential for job satisfaction and mental well-being (Akkerman, Kef & Meining, 2017; Adams et al., 2019). Employment provides a structured routine and a sense of purpose, further enhancing quality of life and psychological health.

## Personal and Social Drivers

Motivation to work among individuals with learning disabilities arises from various intrinsic and extrinsic factors, encompassing personal fulfilment, social acceptance, and financial independence. Self-Determination Theory identifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as critical motivators (Garrels & Sigstad, 2019; Lysaght et al., 2017). Supportive environments amplify these intrinsic motivations, allowing individuals to experience a sense of achievement and well-being through their work (Kaehne, 2009; Kocman & Weber, 2018). The desire to achieve social inclusion and integration into the community often encourages individuals to seek employment, as it provides opportunities to build social connections, increase autonomy, and enhance self-esteem (Jahoda et al., 2008; Akkerman et al., 2017).

The significance of work extends beyond financial gains, with many individuals valuing their contribution to society and recognition as capable members of the community. The nature of the work and the degree of integration in mainstream work settings can affect motivational outcomes. Integrated employment tends to offer better psychosocial benefits compared to sheltered or segregated settings, supporting greater life satisfaction through meaningful social interactions and a sense of accomplishment (Almalky, 2020; Bates, Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2017; Robertson et al., 2019).

Young adults with learning disabilities often view employment as a path to independence and self-fulfilment, with many expressing preferences for roles that offer social engagement and personal development opportunities (Blacher, Kraemer & Howell, 2010; Davies & Matuska, 2018; Pallisera, Fullana, Puyaltó & Vilà, 2016). Participatory approaches focusing on involvement rather than merely skill acquisition have shown positive impacts on job satisfaction and motivation, though individuals may still require significant support (Morris, Christianson-Barker, Stainton, Mills, Rowley, Cox, Schroeder & Hole, 2024). Factors such as the type and severity of disability also influence motivations. For example, individuals with Down syndrome may experience higher job satisfaction in community employment compared to those with autism, possibly due to better social adaptability (Bush & Tassé, 2017).

## Employment as a Bridge to Social Inclusion

Employment serves as a means to engage more actively in society and gain financial independence, particularly for those who have faced social exclusion. Research shows that work leads to improved life satisfaction among people with learning disabilities, largely due to the routine, social interactions, and sense of purpose it provides (Carter, Bendetson & Guiden, 2018; Robertson et al., 2019; Baxter, Cullingworth, Whitworth, Runswick-Cole & Clowes, 2024). Meaningful work is highlighted as essential, with individuals expressing a preference for roles that align with their interests and strengths (Blacher et al., 2010; Meltzer, Robinson & Fisher, 2020).

The transition from school to work plays a critical role in shaping employment motivations. Work-based learning programmes during school and vocational training opportunities help align career aspirations with realistic goals, boosting motivation and job readiness (Gebhardt, Tretter, Schwab & Gasteiger-Klicpera, 2011; Joshi, Bouck & Maeda, 2012). Programmes that integrate internships or community-based work experiences enhance confidence and bridge the gap between education and the labour market, preparing individuals for competitive employment (Kaehne & Beyer, 2014; Kocman & Weber, 2018).

## The Role of Early Exposure and Supported Employment

Research emphasises the importance of early exposure to work-based learning, vocational training, and supported employment in fostering motivation. These experiences contribute to developing the necessary skills and confidence for navigating the labour market (Pallisera et al., 2016; Scanlon & Doyle, 2018). Programmes which offer structured internships with consistent support, have been successful in enhancing participants' readiness for competitive employment and promoting self-determination (Romualdez, Yirrell & Remer, 2020).

Although supported employment is not explicitly included in the UK Equal Opportunities Act 2010, it has been used effectively for decades as an individualised model of support for individuals with learning disabilities (Peña-Quintana & Santana-Vega, 2022). Supported employment programmes enable individuals to gain valuable work experience while receiving the necessary support to succeed, making the transition to the workforce smoother and more effective.

## Family Impacts on Employment

Families play a vital role in shaping the employment motivations of individuals with learning disabilities. They often view employment as a crucial step toward independence, enhancing not only financial well-being but also social skills, self-determination, and overall quality of life (Barczak & Cannella-Malone, 2022). Families recognise the transformative potential of work in improving life satisfaction, though they may express concerns regarding job stability and the adequacy of workplace support.

## Addressing Barriers and Enhancing Support

Barriers related to school experiences, including limited vocational support and inadequate exposure to meaningful work, can negatively impact motivation and employment outcomes. Programmes that address these barriers by offering vocational training and work-based learning experiences tend to increase confidence, motivation, and job readiness (Howell, 2024; Merrells, Buchanan & Waters, 2017).

Moreover, choice-making opportunities, such as the ability to select work schedules and tasks, have been identified as significant motivators for achieving positive employment outcomes (Almalky, 2020; Garrels & Sigstad, 2019). Allowing individuals to make decisions regarding their work environment fosters a sense of control and aligns with their personal interests, further enhancing job satisfaction.

## Aspirations and Realistic Career Goals

Young adults with learning disabilities share similar aspirations to their non-disabled peers, including independence, stable employment, and contributing to society. Early exposure to vocational training and work-based learning significantly boosts self-confidence and aligns career aspirations with achievable goals (McMahon et al., 2019; Sankardas & Rajanahally, 2015). These opportunities not only prepare individuals for employment but also promote a broader sense of empowerment and self-determination.

Employment for individuals with intellectual and learning disabilities goes beyond financial benefits, offering opportunities for personal growth, social integration, and an improved sense of self-worth. Motivations to work are shaped by various intrinsic and extrinsic factors, including autonomy, competence, relatedness, and the desire for meaningful social interactions. The role of early exposure to vocational training, supported employment, and family support cannot be overstated in fostering motivation and preparing individuals for the workforce. Addressing barriers and enhancing choice-making opportunities are crucial for improving job satisfaction and long-term employment outcomes.

# Barriers to Employment

Individuals with intellectual and learning disabilities encounter numerous barriers that hinder their access to employment, affecting their ability to achieve economic independence, social inclusion, and a sense of purpose. These barriers are multi-dimensional, encompassing societal, organisational, and personal challenges (Goodall, Mjøen, Witsø, Horghagen & Kvam, 2022). Understanding these obstacles is crucial to developing effective strategies that promote meaningful and inclusive employment opportunities.

## Discrimination and Stigma

Discrimination remains a persistent barrier to employment for people with intellectual and learning disabilities, manifesting in various forms such as negative employer and community attitudes, low expectations, and inadequate workplace accommodations (AlFozan & AlKahtani, 2021; Barczak et al., 2022). Employers often perceive individuals with learning disabilities as less capable or are concerned about the cost of accommodations, leading to limited job opportunities and a concentration in low-paying or menial roles (Traina, Mannion, Gilroy, & Leader, 2023). Misconceptions about productivity, safety, and the feasibility of accommodations further exacerbate exclusion (Jacob, Pillay, Adeoye & Oni, 2023; Hennessey & Goreczny, 2022).

## Systemic Barriers

Systemic obstacles, including policy gaps, inadequate vocational support, and economic disincentives, contribute significantly to employment challenges. While policies aim to encourage inclusive employment, inconsistent implementation often limits access to necessary services (Coñoman et al., 2024; Dean et al., 2018). Economic policies can also create disincentives for employment, as individuals risk losing essential disability benefits when they secure a job, a phenomenon known as the "benefit cliff" effect (Hatton, 2018; Jenkins, 2002).

## Educational and Training Gaps

The transition from school to work presents a significant challenge for individuals with learning disabilities, often due to a lack of tailored vocational training and career guidance. Educational systems frequently fail to prepare students for the labour market, resulting in poor post-school employment outcomes (Traina et al., 2023; Jacob et al., 2023). Segregated educational settings contribute to lower expectations and limited exposure to practical work experiences, further hindering employment prospects (Coñoman et al., 2024). Inadequate person-centred planning during this transition period compounds the problem, leaving many young adults unprepared for employment (Båtevik, 2019; Howell, 2024).

## Health-Related Constraints

Physical and mental health conditions can impact the ability of individuals with learning disabilities to sustain employment. Although work can improve health outcomes by promoting physical activity and social interaction, some conditions still pose challenges to job stability and consistent participation in the workforce (Dean et al., 2018; Robertson et al., 2019).

## Workplace Barriers

Workplace environments often present obstacles due to insufficient supports and accommodations (Hart, Psyllou, Eryigit-Madzwamuse, Heaver, Rathbone, Duncan & Wigglesworth, 2020). Despite legal requirements like the Equality Act (2010) in the UK, practical implementation is inconsistent, and many individuals with learning disabilities face difficulties obtaining necessary supports, such as job coaches, adaptive equipment, or flexible work arrangements (Blamires, 2015; Fasching, 2014). Employers may be reluctant to hire due to concerns about productivity, workplace safety, and the perceived costs associated with accommodations (Giri, Aylott, Giri, Ferguson-Wormley & Evans, 2022; Almalky, 2020). Consequently, individuals may be excluded from competitive employment opportunities or face high job turnover due to a lack of necessary supports.

## Family-Related Barriers

Families play a crucial role in shaping the employment aspirations of individuals with learning disabilities. Concerns about job safety, stability, and the potential loss of benefits can influence preferences for sheltered or part-time work over competitive employment (Meltzer, Kayess & Bates, 2018; Jacob et al., 2023). Low parental expectations can further limit employment opportunities, whereas high expectations are linked to more successful employment outcomes (Doren, Gau & Lindstrom, 2012; Kelley & Prohn, 2019). A 2023 study into family perspectives by Carter, Lanchak, Guest, McMillan, Taylor, Fleming, & Dao, identified family-perceived challenges around abilities both cognitive and physical; skills (both foundational and role-specific challenges which could be addressed through instruction); mindset of the family member with a learning disability; access to support; and their own limited knowledge, were all barriers to achieving employment.

## Economic and Policy Barriers

Economic challenges, such as austerity measures and cuts to public services, significantly affect the employment prospects of individuals with learning disabilities. Reductions in social support services make it more difficult for people to secure and maintain employment, disproportionately impacting those reliant on such programmes (Bates et al., 2017). The fear of losing access to disability benefits upon securing a job can act as a deterrent to employment, particularly when wages are low or job security is uncertain (Adams et al., 2019). The "benefit cliff" effect is a substantial barrier for many, dissuading them from pursuing competitive work due to the risk of losing essential financial or healthcare supports (Khayatzadeh-Mahani, Wittevronge & Zwicker, 2019).

## Regional and Socioeconomic Challenges

Barriers to employment can vary significantly across different regions and socioeconomic contexts. In rural areas, limited job availability, lack of accessible public transportation, and economic challenges exacerbate employment difficulties (Adams et al., 2019). Low- and middle-income regions face additional barriers, including higher stigma, scarce educational opportunities, and limited access to supportive employment services, often leading to informal or self-employment (Mokhtar, Zaharudin & Ghazali, 2024). These challenges are compounded by poverty, which intersects with disability to create significant barriers to stable and meaningful employment.

## Limited Access to Inclusive Vocational Programmes

Individuals with learning disabilities who attend specialised schools or segregated programmes often have fewer opportunities to engage in vocational training or work-based learning, which are critical for developing employability skills (Howell, 2024; Joshi et al., 2012). Supported work experience programmes have been shown to positively impact readiness for competitive employment, but access to such programmes remains limited, especially in rural or low-resource areas (Beyer, Kaehne, Powell Was Grey, Sheppard & Meek, 2008; Blacher et al., 2010).

## Inadequate Transition Planning and Fragmented Services

The transition from school to work is frequently marked by uncoordinated services and inadequate planning, which can limit employment opportunities for young adults with learning disabilities. Transition plans often prioritise further education over employment, and vocational programmes may not be tailored to individual needs, leaving many underprepared for the labour market (Kaehne & Beyer, 2013; Hunter, Runswick-Cole, Goodley & Lawthom, 2019). The absence of person-centred approaches in transition planning further reduces the likelihood of successful employment outcomes (Ankeny, Wilkins & Spain, 2009).

The barriers to employment for individuals with intellectual and learning disabilities are multi-faceted, involving discrimination, systemic issues, health-related challenges, and gaps in education and training. These barriers intersect across different domains, such as the workplace, family expectations, and socioeconomic contexts, to create a complex web of challenges. Addressing these barriers requires a comprehensive approach that includes policy reforms, better implementation of inclusive practices, improved vocational training, and increased support during the transition from school to work. By understanding and mitigating these obstacles, society can foster more meaningful and inclusive employment opportunities for individuals with intellectual and learning disabilities.

# Employment Opportunities

While significant barriers to employment persist for individuals with learning disabilities, several strategies and programmes show promise in improving outcomes. Effective approaches span integrated employment, supported employment models, innovative policies, and vocational training, all contributing to increased access to meaningful work and social inclusion.

## Supported Employment Programmes

Supported employment, based on the "place-then-train" approach, involves placing individuals in integrated work settings while providing ongoing support, such as job coaching. This model has demonstrated success in enhancing job retention and satisfaction compared to sheltered workshops (Traina, Mannion & Leader, 2021; Meltzer et al., 2018; Baxter et al., 2024). Programmes emphasising natural supports like peer mentoring further aid in acclimating workers to social norms and expectations, resulting in sustainable job outcomes (Jahoda et al., 2008). Supported employment also addresses skills gaps and offers individualised support, helping individuals thrive in competitive work environments (Beyer & Beyer, 2017; Awsumb, Schutz, Carter, Schwartzman, Burgess & Lounds Taylor, 2022).

## Integrated Employment and Inclusive Workplaces

Integrated employment settings, where individuals with learning disabilities work alongside non-disabled peers, foster social inclusion and higher job satisfaction. Research indicates that these environments lead to better social and financial outcomes, as employees gain not only wages but also social connections and career growth opportunities (Akkerman et al., 2017; Beyer et al., 2008). Community-based programmes, such as "community conversations," involve local stakeholders in identifying and addressing barriers to integrated employment, tailoring solutions to the unique needs of different regions (Carter, Blustein, Bumble, Harvey, Henderson & McMillan, 2016).

Social enterprises present another opportunity by bridging the gap between sheltered and open employment. These organisations balance profitability with social impact, providing work environments tailored to individual needs while promoting skill development and social inclusion (Giri et al., 2022; Kocman & Weber, 2018). Customised employment models, which match job roles to the strengths and interests of individuals, offer alternative pathways to meaningful work (Båtevik, 2019; Almalky, 2020).

Shared-life communities were reported to enable a diverse range of employment and leisure opportunities and positioned work as a means of sustaining the daily life and economy of the ‘village’ (Cumella & Lyons, 2018). Employment in shared-life communities does not involve work for an employer in exchange for wages but is rather a shared enterprise vital to the economic success of the community.

## Transition Programmes and Vocational Training

School-to-work transition programmes play a crucial role in facilitating employment opportunities. Programmes that combine vocational training, internships, career counselling, and individualised support effectively bridge the gap between education and employment, providing a smoother transition to the labour market (Jacob & Pillay, 2023; Coñoman et al., 2024). Effective transition programmes incorporate work-based learning and emphasise skills development and self-advocacy, which significantly increase the likelihood of future employment (Beyer & Kaehne, 2008; Howell, 2024).

## Technological Supports and Self-Management Interventions

Assistive technologies and self-management strategies help individuals with significant learning disabilities enhance their job performance and independence. Tools such as mobile apps for task reminders and visual prompts aid in staying on task, reducing the need for job coaches (Barczak et al., 2022; Nevala, Pehkonen, Teittinen, Vesala, Pörtfors & Anttila, 2019). Self-management interventions encourage individuals to monitor their behaviour and regulate their actions, improving their job performance and boosting confidence in the workplace.

## Policy and Legislative Frameworks

Policies such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) have set standards for disability-inclusive employment, advocating for equal access to work opportunities. While these frameworks support inclusive practices, gaps in enforcement and inconsistent implementation continue to pose challenges (Almalky, 2020).

Employment First initiatives prioritise integrated employment as the default option for individuals with learning disabilities, emphasising pre-employment services and vocational rehabilitation as critical components of successful employment transitions (Bush & Tassé, 2017; Carter & Bumble, 2018). These programmes advocate for person-centred planning and support services that align with individual goals, increasing the likelihood of successful job placements.

## Incentives for Employers

Providing financial incentives and raising employer awareness about the capabilities of individuals with learning disabilities can reduce stigma and encourage inclusive hiring practices. Incentives such as tax breaks for companies that hire individuals with disabilities, as well as grants for workplace accommodations, have been effective in increasing employer willingness to create inclusive job opportunities (Beyer et al, 2008; Khayatzadeh-Mahani et al., 2019).

## Innovative Employment Models

The emergence of remote work offers new opportunities for individuals with learning disabilities who may face challenges in traditional work environments. Technology enables accessible workspaces, virtual job coaching, and support services that help individuals succeed in their roles (Bates et al., 2017). Additionally, customised employment and self-employment models allow individuals to tailor job roles to their strengths, providing alternative pathways to competitive work (Caldwell, Parker Harris & Renko, 2019).

## Social Enterprises and Microenterprises

Social enterprises, which integrate social objectives with business operations, create accessible employment opportunities for individuals with learning disabilities. These organisations promote inclusion and skill development, offering meaningful work that aligns with individual abilities. Microenterprises, in particular, provide flexible work arrangements and foster autonomy, making them viable options for self-employment (Reddington & Fitzsimons, 2013; Meltzer, Kayess & Bates, 2018).

## Family Involvement and Advocacy

Family support plays a vital role in the employment outcomes of individuals with learning disabilities, especially during the transition from school to work. Programmes that actively involve families in employment planning tend to achieve higher job retention rates (AlFozan & AlKahtani, 2021; Jacob & Pillay, 2023). Family members can advocate for necessary accommodations and help ensure that work environments meet the specific needs of their loved ones. High family expectations are also associated with better employment outcomes, while low expectations can hinder access to competitive job opportunities (Doren et al., 2012).

## Community-Based Programmes and Employment First Initiatives

Community-based programmes, such as "community conversations," actively engage local stakeholders to create tailored solutions for integrated employment. These programmes often leverage existing community resources to support sustainable job placements (Carter & Lunsford, 2005). Employment First initiatives, which advocate for competitive employment as the primary service goal, incorporate vocational training and job coaching into policy frameworks, improving access to integrated employment for individuals with learning disabilities (Bush & Tassé, 2017).

Multiple strategies show potential in enhancing employment outcomes for individuals with intellectual and learning disabilities. Supported employment models, integrated work settings, vocational training programmes, and inclusive policies contribute to increased access to meaningful work and social inclusion. Family involvement, employer incentives, and innovative models like remote work and social enterprises further expand opportunities. Addressing barriers and leveraging these strategies can improve employment prospects, fostering economic independence and a higher quality of life for individuals with learning disabilities.

# Employment Experiences

Despite facing significant barriers, various strategies and models show promise in improving employment outcomes for individuals with intellectual and learning disabilities. Key approaches include inclusive employment models, social enterprises, microenterprises, and supportive policies. Butcher & Wilton (2008) argue that a broader goal – ‘transition to meaningful activity’ – is more appropriate, as it recognises that while paid employment is possible for some people with learning disabilities, it may not be a realistic or desirable goal for others.

## Inclusive Employment Models and Social Enterprises

Employment in integrated work environments, where individuals with learning disabilities work alongside non-disabled peers, is linked to higher job satisfaction, increased social inclusion, and better quality of life compared to segregated settings (Hatton, 2018; Hennessey & Goreczny, 2022). Such outcomes are more achievable when adequate workplace supports, such as job coaching, peer mentorship, and accommodations, are provided to address individual needs (Baxter et al., 2024).

Social enterprises offer another pathway to meaningful employment by combining commercial activities with social objectives. These organisations create job roles tailored to the skills and interests of individuals with learning disabilities, promoting job retention and satisfaction (Hutchinson, Lay, Alexander & Ratcliffe, 2022). Customised employment approaches, which design job roles to accommodate individual abilities while fulfilling business needs, further enhance these positive outcomes (Jenkins, 2002).

## Microenterprises and Self-Employment

Microenterprises provide a viable employment option for individuals who encounter difficulties in traditional job settings. These small-scale business ventures offer greater autonomy and personal growth opportunities, fostering self-determination and skill development. However, ongoing support is necessary, particularly in areas such as financial management and business development, to ensure the sustainability of microenterprises (Hutchinson et al., 2022).

## Policy and Legislative Initiatives

Policies like Employment First initiatives prioritise integrated employment as the primary option for individuals with learning disabilities. These initiatives advocate for person-centred planning, support services, and access to competitive employment as default options (Hatton, 2018; Howell, 2024). Supported employment programmes, which incorporate tailored vocational training, job coaching, and ongoing support, are essential for facilitating successful transitions from school to the workplace.

Incentives for employers, such as tax breaks, grants, or wage subsidies, encourage businesses to hire individuals with learning disabilities. Employer-focused education and training programmes can also help reduce stigma and improve workplace inclusion by increasing awareness of accommodations and the benefits of a diverse workforce (Jacob et al., 2023).

The employment experiences and outcomes for individuals with intellectual and learning disabilities improve significantly when inclusive employment models, supportive policies, and alternative pathways such as social enterprises and microenterprises are implemented. While integrated work environments and customised job roles promote higher satisfaction and social inclusion, policies and supported employment programmes provide the necessary framework for enhancing opportunities. Ensuring ongoing support and educating employers can further reduce barriers, creating a more inclusive labour market for individuals with learning disabilities.

# Family Perspectives and their role in Employment

Families play a crucial role in shaping the employment experiences of individuals with intellectual and learning disabilities. Their involvement extends beyond practical support to include advocacy, emotional encouragement, and active participation in transition planning, all of which contribute to better employment outcomes. Family members' perspectives can influence decisions, career trajectories, and the success of transitioning from education to work.

## Family Involvement in Transition Planning

The transition from school to employment is a critical phase where family engagement significantly impacts outcomes. Families are often involved in setting employment goals, navigating complex service networks, and advocating for necessary supports (Ankeny et al., 2009; Ellman, Sonday & Buchanan, 2020). Active participation in transition planning, including attending case meetings and collaborating with educational and vocational programmes, has been linked to improved post-school employment outcomes (Davies & Beamish, 2009).

High family expectations play a vital role in employment success. Research consistently shows that when families maintain high expectations for their children's potential, the likelihood of securing meaningful employment increases (Kelley & Prohn, 2019; Kramer, Bose & Winsor, 2018). Educating families about available employment options and encouraging early engagement in the transition process are essential strategies for enhancing employment participation.

## Advocacy and Support Roles

Families often serve as advocates and facilitators, working to secure job placements and necessary accommodations. This role involves practical assistance, such as providing transportation and advocating for suitable workplace adjustments, as well as offering emotional support that motivates individuals to seek and maintain employment despite challenges (Neece, Kraemer, Blacher & Ferguson, 2009; Morris et al., 2024). The role of informal support systems, where family members assist with tasks like social skills coaching and daily living, can be crucial for job retention and satisfaction (Giri et al., 2022).

Family-centred approaches, which integrate parents' perspectives into career planning, have shown to improve employment outcomes by ensuring that job roles align with individual strengths and needs (Scanlon & Doyle, 2018). Collaborative planning helps identify appropriate opportunities and addresses potential challenges early, creating a more coordinated and effective transition.

## Emotional and Practical Concerns

While many families advocate for inclusive and competitive employment, there are significant concerns that influence preferences for sheltered or part-time work. Families frequently express worries about job security, workplace safety, fair wages, and the potential loss of disability benefits, which can discourage pursuing competitive employment (Adams et al., 2019). The fear of losing benefits if a job does not work out, often referred to as the "benefit cliff," can create a disincentive to employment.

These concerns highlight the need for flexible policies that can provide a safety net during the transition to competitive work, such as temporary continuation of benefits or wage subsidies. Addressing these issues through comprehensive support services can encourage families to consider integrated employment opportunities over sheltered settings (Francis, Gross, Turnbull & Turnbull, 2014; McMahon et al., 2019).

## The Impact of Family Expectations

The expectations and attitudes of family members significantly affect employment outcomes. Higher expectations are associated with increased employment participation, whereas low expectations can limit the pursuit of opportunities (Beyer, Kaehne & Powell, 2018; Blacher et al., 2010). Educating families about the capabilities of individuals with learning disabilities and the benefits of inclusive employment can shift attitudes and foster a more supportive environment (Schwartzman, Lanchak, Carter, Guest, McMillan & Taylor, 2023).

Programmes that involve families in career planning and raise awareness about available employment supports can help overcome low expectations. When families are well-informed and actively participate in employment planning, individuals are more likely to find suitable and rewarding job placements (Cheatham & Randolph, 2020; Timmons, Hall, Bose, Wolfe, & Winsor, 2011).

## Family-Centred Approaches to Career Planning

Family-centred approaches that incorporate parents' insights and concerns into career planning have been linked to improved employment outcomes. These approaches involve setting realistic but ambitious goals, identifying necessary supports, and ensuring a coordinated transition from school to work (Scanlon & Doyle, 2018). By involving families in decision-making, service providers can better align employment plans with the individual’s aspirations and capabilities (Vigna, Meek & Beyer, 2024; West & Wehman, 2005).

Research also emphasises the importance of early family engagement in career planning, as this lays the foundation for setting higher expectations and building pathways to employment (Fullarton & Duquette, 2015; Gilson, Carter, Bumble & McMillan, 2018). This involvement is crucial for advocating for services and supports that may be needed during the transition.

## Navigating Concerns About Safety and Stability

Families often prefer sheltered work environments due to concerns about safety and job stability. Sheltered settings can offer a structured and predictable environment, which some families perceive as safer than competitive employment (Giri et al., 2022; Giorgetti, Magenes, Boerchi, Cancer & Antonietti, 2022). However, these preferences may limit individuals' opportunities for growth and social inclusion. Addressing these concerns through flexible benefit policies, robust workplace supports, and safety measures can help alleviate anxieties and encourage families to support competitive employment options (McMahon, Moni, Cuskelly, Lloyd & Jobling, 2020).

Policies that provide transitional support, such as on-the-job coaching or phased withdrawal of benefits, can make competitive employment more accessible. By reducing the perceived risks, families may be more willing to pursue integrated employment pathways for their loved ones (Kaehne, Kiernan, Ridley, Maden, Onochie & Pilkington, 2018).

## Family Perspectives on Employment Experiences

Family members often experience mixed emotions regarding employment for individuals with learning disabilities. While there is appreciation for the benefits that work brings, such as increased independence, social inclusion, and self-esteem, there are also challenges related to securing appropriate placements, navigating support services (Traina et al., 2021), and maintaining employment sustainably over time (Taubner, Tidemand & Staland Nyman, 2021). Families play a dual role as advocates and support providers, often stepping in to help overcome workplace challenges.

Positive employment experiences, where individuals feel valued and supported, foster a sense of accomplishment and belonging. However, negative experiences, such as limited career advancement or inadequate accommodations, can diminish job satisfaction and reinforce family concerns about the sustainability of competitive employment (Jahoda et al., 2008; Robertson et al., 2019).

Families play an integral role in the employment experiences of individuals with intellectual and learning disabilities, from the initial transition planning to ongoing support and advocacy. High expectations, active involvement, and informed decision-making positively influence employment outcomes, while concerns about job security, safety, and benefits need to be addressed through supportive policies. Family-centred approaches that integrate the perspectives and insights of parents can significantly enhance employment success by creating pathways that align with the individual’s strengths and aspirations. Addressing practical and emotional concerns through flexible supports can further shift preferences towards competitive employment, fostering greater social inclusion and life satisfaction.

# Welsh Policy Context

The policy context in Wales regarding improving employment opportunities for people with learning disabilities emphasises inclusivity and integration across various sectors, including health, education, and social services. The following summary outlines key initiatives and strategies found in the provided documents that contribute to the employment landscape for individuals with learning disabilities in Wales.

## Legislative Framework

Several key legislative frameworks underpin Wales’ policies for supporting employment for people with learning disabilities:

**Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014:** This Act aims to promote independence and improve well-being for all citizens, including those with learning disabilities, by integrating services and providing person-centred care. It emphasises reducing the need for long-term services through early intervention and prevention, with a specific focus on transitioning from school to work​.

**Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015:** This legislation requires public bodies to work towards improving the economic, social, environmental, and cultural well-being of Wales. It promotes long-term sustainability and encourages cross-sector collaboration, which is essential for supporting people with learning disabilities in accessing employment.

**Equality Act 2010 and Health and Social Care Act 2008: These** Acts mandate “reasonable adjustments” to reduce inequalities in health and social services for people with learning disabilities. The focus on equal access to services and reasonable workplace accommodations aligns with the broader agenda for inclusive employment policies​.

**UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD):** Wales’ policies also align with international standards such as the CRPD, which advocates for the right of people with disabilities to work on an equal basis with others. The CRPD supports inclusive education, vocational training, and employment opportunities.

## Strategic Plans and Programmes

Wales has introduced several strategic initiatives to support employment for people with learning disabilities:

**Learning Disability – Improving Lives Programme (2018):** This cross-government review aims to enhance services and policies affecting individuals with learning disabilities. It highlights employment as a critical area for improvement and advocates for integrated support across health, social care, and education. The programme’s recommendations include increasing employment and skills opportunities, reducing health inequalities, and promoting community integration​.

**Learning Disability Strategic Action Plan 2022-2026:** This action plan, developed through stakeholder engagement, outlines specific actions to be achieved within the government's term. It includes priorities such as reducing health inequalities, improving social services, facilitating independent living, and increasing employment opportunities. The plan builds on previous programmes, such as the Improving Lives initiative, and aligns with the Well-being of Future Generations Act principles​.

**Learning Disability Delivery and Implementation Plan 2022-2026:** This delivery plan focuses on implementing the actions outlined in the strategic action plan. It includes exploring lessons from pilot programmes like "Engage to Change," reviewing supported employment schemes, and updating employer support resources. The plan also emphasises enhancing training and skills competitions to improve employability among young people with learning disabilities.

## Employment Programmes and Initiatives

The Welsh Government (2022) has implemented several programmes aimed at improving employment outcomes for individuals with learning disabilities:

Supported Employment Programmes: Programmes such as supported apprenticeships and supported employment coaching pilots aim to provide job placements and ongoing support for individuals with learning disabilities. Initiatives include financial incentives for employers to hire people with disabilities and exploring the feasibility of a national job coaching service.

Skills Competitions and Training: Since 2017, "Skills Competition Wales" has organised events to help young people with learning disabilities improve their skills in various sectors, including IT and catering. This programme aligns with the goal of raising skill levels and enhancing employability through inclusive competitions and training​.

Regional Integration Fund: This fund aims to support the integration of health, social care, and employment services. It builds on principles established by the Improving Lives Programme and emphasises coproduction and the inclusion of service users in designing and delivering services​.

## Challenges and Barriers

Despite the policies and programmes in place, several challenges hinder the effective implementation of employment initiatives, (Welsh Government, 2018 & 2021):

Fragmented Services: The lack of integrated planning across education, social services, and health sectors complicates the transition from school to employment for young people with learning disabilities. While various programmes aim to support this transition, more needs to be done to ensure cohesive service delivery.

Economic and Funding Constraints: Ongoing austerity measures and budget limitations impact the availability of resources for non-statutory services, such as day services and vocational training. This affects the overall quality of support for people with learning disabilities seeking employment.

Employment Gap: The disability employment gap remains a significant issue in Wales, with people with learning disabilities facing higher rates of unemployment compared to the general population. Factors contributing to this gap include stigma, low expectations from service providers, and limited access to meaningful employment opportunities​.

## Recommendations and Future Directions

To improve employment outcomes for people with learning disabilities, several recommendations have been put forward:

Enhancing Cross-Sector Collaboration: There is a need for better coordination across health, social care, education, and employment services to provide person-centred support. This includes implementing effective multi-agency planning to ensure smooth transitions from education to employment​.

Expanding Supported Employment: Scaling up supported employment initiatives and integrating supported internships or apprenticeships can help bridge the gap between education and the labour market. These programmes should be tailored to the unique needs and skills of individuals with learning disabilities​.

Addressing Economic Disincentives: Policies should focus on minimising disincentives to work, such as the loss of disability benefits, and provide flexible arrangements to accommodate the unique needs of individuals with learning disabilities in the workplace, (Department of Health and Social Care, 2001).

Strengthening Data Collection and Monitoring: Improved data collection on the employment outcomes of people with learning disabilities will help in refining policies and targeting resources effectively. Creating a data observatory for learning disability services could support better planning and service delivery​.

Wales has laid a comprehensive policy foundation for improving employment outcomes for people with learning disabilities. However, ongoing efforts are required to address systemic barriers, enhance service integration, and ensure sustainable funding to achieve meaningful progress.

## The North Wales Context

The strategic context for improving employment opportunities for people with learning disabilities in North Wales is shaped by several policies and strategies that emphasise inclusion, supported employment, and regional collaboration. The North Wales Learning Disability Strategy 2018-2023, (North Wales Social Care and Well-being Improvement Collaborative, 2018) sets out the vision to enhance the quality of life for people with learning disabilities by supporting meaningful activities, including paid employment. The strategy recognises that employment plays a crucial role in social inclusion, well-being, and independence.

The North Wales Supported Employment Strategy, (North Wales Together, 2024) addresses the low participation rates of people with learning disabilities in paid work, with only 4.8% of those known to adult social care employed, compared to the 76.6% employment rate for the general population in North Wales. The strategy focuses on increasing employment opportunities through supported employment models aligned with the Supported Employment Quality Framework (SEQF). It seeks to establish access to paid employment as a distinct pathway within social services, moving away from traditional day services and unpaid placements toward quality-assured paid work opportunities.

A key component of the strategy is implementing a five-stage supported employment model that includes job coaching and long-term support to help individuals find, secure, and maintain employment. However, the current provision has gaps, such as limited access for adults over 25 and a lack of comprehensive regional support, which the strategy aims to address through a unified approach across the six local authorities in North Wales.

The strategy aligns with the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014, (Welsh Government, 2014), which underscores the commitment to supporting employment as a fundamental aspect of well-being. Additionally, it supports the Welsh Government's Youth Engagement and Progression Framework by prioritising young people with learning disabilities who are at risk of becoming NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), ensuring they have a smoother transition into the labour market.

Regional initiatives like North Wales Together have played a role in fostering a culture of co-production and stakeholder engagement, which is essential for the strategy’s success. The strategy is also consistent with broader national and international policies, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, (United Nations, 2006), which advocates for equal access to employment and aims to eliminate stereotypes that limit opportunities.

Through these coordinated efforts, North Wales aims to transform the employment landscape for people with learning disabilities by providing the necessary support infrastructure, engaging employers, and changing societal perceptions about the abilities of individuals with learning disabilities.

# Conclusion

The employment of individuals with learning disabilities remains a critical issue that requires continued attention and effort to address persistent challenges and disparities. This review highlights the numerous motivations for pursuing employment, including the desire for social inclusion, financial independence, and personal fulfilment. It also underscores the significant barriers that hinder access to the labour market, such as discrimination, systemic shortcomings in policy implementation, and inadequate vocational training.

Despite these barriers, several opportunities can enhance employment outcomes for people with learning disabilities. Supported employment programmes, school-to-work transition services, self-management interventions, and technological supports all play a role in promoting independence and job success. Family involvement is also pivotal, as families can advocate for their loved ones and provide essential emotional and logistical support. The perspectives of individuals with learning disabilities and their families must be central to designing responsive and inclusive programmes that truly meet their needs. To fully understand the experiences, motivations, concerns and aspirations of people with learning disabilities and their families in the context of employment, their voices need to be heard more clearly.

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