

Influencing and Informing Engage to Change Supported Shared Apprenticeships in South Wales

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Background

This paper explores the experience of delivering job coach support to people with a learning disability and/or autism taking part in 2 models of inclusive apprenticeship programmes commissioned by Welsh Government. The models being a Supported Apprenticeship and a Supported Shared Apprenticeship. In particular it concerns people supported by ELITE Supported Employment Agency working in partnership with training providers Cardiff and Vale College and Cambrian Training.

The Welsh Government's 2018 Employability Plan recognised the small number of disabled people in work and set commitments to reduce the number of disabled people out of work (Welsh Government, 2018). Moreover, A Stronger, Greener fairer Wales – WG Employability and Skills Plan (2023) states that WG will be:

“Taking forward activity to improve access to, and outcomes on our employability programmes for people with significant learning disabilities by providing specialist intensive job-coach support.”

They also pledge to:

“Ensure the best possible outcomes for disabled people on our programmes including Apprenticeships and Jobs Growth Wales+, supporting disabled people to enter and progress in the labour market.”

Engage to Change, a pan Wales supported employment programme operated between 2016-2023 and was funded by the National Lottery Community Fund in partnership with Welsh Government. Engage to Change supported more than 1000 young people with specific learning difficulties, learning disabilities and/or autism to increase their employability skills and to gain paid employment. Led by Learning Disability Wales, it brought together Elite and Agoriad Cyf supported employment agencies to deliver job coaching, unpaid and paid placements, supported internships, supported traineeships, supported apprenticeships and paid jobs in ordinary workplaces.

Research and evaluation of the project was conducted by the National Centre for Mental Health (NCMH) at Cardiff University, supported by self-advocates from All Wales People First.

The evaluation of Engage to Change contributed to highlight, together with previous studies, what is best practice in getting people with learning disabilities and/or autism into paid employment. Our research has shown that a needs-led approach and the support received by a specialised job coach within a supported employment framework is key to getting young people into employment.

To this end, a Supported Apprenticeship pilot was launched in 2021 including the use of job coaching to encourage people with learning disabilities and/or autism to participate. Job coach support for potential apprentices was delivered by Engage to Change through their supported employment delivery partners, Agoriad Cyf and Elite Supported Employment agencies in 7 pilot award sites. The Engage to Change project ended in May 2023, but the pilot was successful, and Supported Apprenticeship models continue to be delivered across Wales, funded by Welsh Government.

This evaluation report focuses solely on the Supported Apprenticeship provision delivered by ELITE Supported Employment Agency and training providers Cardiff and Vale College (left the arrangement in July 2023) and Cambrian Training.

What is a Supported Apprenticeship and a Supported Shared Apprenticeship?

Supported Apprenticeships are an important pathway in getting young people with a learning disability into employment, only 0.5% of people who participated in an apprenticeship identified as having a learning disability (Mencap, 2023). An apprenticeship is a combination of a work-related educational study module and practical training in the workplace. In the case of a Supported Apprenticeship, job coach support is provided by a supported employment agency. Education and training programmes that come together to promote employment opportunities through work-based learning, tailored and specialistic job coach support, can make a real difference. In a recent report (2023), Mencap highlighted how the 3 ships – supported internships, traineeships and apprenticeships can be part of the solution. These employability schemes provide an educational and training element, which can support people with learning disabilities into employment. A key priority for the Welsh Government is the equality of access to apprenticeships and to guarantee that a proportion of apprenticeships are undertaken by people with disabilities.

In a Supported Shared Apprenticeship, the supported employment agency acts as the employer providing the contract, paying the apprentice and the employers host them in the workplace. There is often a scope to work with up to 3 employers whilst completing the apprenticeship. Over time the supported employment agency encourages the employer to take them onto their payroll while other employers might want to employ the apprentice directly from the start.

Apprenticeships are key in the delivery of the Welsh Government's Young Person's Guarantee, which pledges provision of support to gain and maintain a place in education, training and/or to find employment or self-employment. The Young Persons Guarantee is applicable to all young people across Wales aged 16 – 24, including people with learning disabilities and/or autism.

Welsh Government has provided important adjustments to the qualification level as a minimum entry requirement to be more inclusive and widening participation (Welsh Government, 2024). In addition, Welsh Government has enabled a 6-month pre apprenticeship preparation period for the supported employment agencies to work with the young people to increase their confidence and skills, and to provide work preparation activities.

Why a Supported Employment Agency?

People with a learning disability and/or autism need help to find a job to overcome the challenges they face; supported employment offers solutions to assist them into employment by spending time understanding people's job interests, abilities, and the work types and environments they need. Supported employment agencies work to the National Occupational Standards for Supported Employment ([National Occupational Standards | British Association for Supported Employment](#)) and employ suitably trained and qualified staff who provide job coach support and engage with employers. They find and negotiate a job that meets the person's detailed talents and needs, not just any available job. A key component is the supported employment agency connection with local employers, and the ability to inform and support employers to provide placements and jobs to people with learning disabilities. The supported employment agency is also in an excellent position to help the individual and their families in receipt of welfare benefits by supporting the transition to work and ensure perspective employees will be better off in work. Therefore, the supported employment agency has a vital role in supporting a young person with a learning disability and/or autism while finding, getting, and learning the necessary tasks associated with an apprenticeship placement. In addition, can provide support to the training provider and employer around inclusive training and assessment processes suited to individual needs.

Why a training provider?

An apprenticeship training provider offers support with the specific educational element for the apprenticeship course. There are various levels of apprenticeships, and they cover a multitude of sectors. The training provider should recruit the right apprentice for each specific apprenticeship, recognising the employer's and the potential apprentice's requirements. A training provider should develop a training programme that meets the needs of the apprentice, offer ongoing feedback on the activity, support the apprentice to work at the apprenticeship standard and help the apprentice to gain a nationally recognised qualification.

Mencap highlighted how there are still some obstacles in accessing apprenticeship courses by people with learning disabilities. The qualifications requirement in English and maths may prevent many accessing an apprenticeship, despite being able to fulfil the job role requirements of an apprenticeship. There is also a general concern around the working culture and disclosing a learning disability, due to anxiety about potentially being excluded because of individual learning needs. In the same report, it was noted that finding inclusive providers could be a challenge. Traditional teaching approaches represented an obstacle because they were not person-centred (Mencap 2019).

The Supported Apprenticeship Programme in South Wales

Referrals

ELITE received 134 referrals in the period between August 2022 to December 2023. The source of referrals varied and were mainly self-referral (44 young people). A quarter of the referrals came from Supported Internship programmes, including Project SEARCH and Alternative Supported Internship Models (Meek et al., 2024). 24 young people were referred from Engage to Change, 14 young people from the Restart programme, 6 from Job Sense, 5 from Job Centre Plus, 4 from parents, 2 from Job Growth Wales+, and 2 from other alternative sources.

Referral source	Frequency	Percentage
Self-Referral/New Referral	44	33%
Supported Internship	33	25%
Engage to Change	24	18%
Restart	14	10%
Job Sense	6	4%
Job Centre Plus	5	4%
Parent	4	3%
Job Growth Wales+	2	1%
Other	2	1%
Total	134	

Eligibility

A substantial proportion of referrals (51%) from the Supported Internship programmes did not proceed. 5 young people were not eligible for a Supported Apprenticeship, 1 because of the area they lived in and the other 4 because they could not achieve the minimum educational level to access the apprenticeship scheme. 41 young people withdrew or were withdrawn by the supported apprenticeship scheme, but the reasons were not specified. 22 young people were signposted to other organisations, programmes, but details are not available.

	Frequency	Percentage
Not Eligible	5	4%
Withdrawn	41	31%
Signposted	22	16%
On Project	25	19%
On Framework	24	18%
For assessment	17	13%
Total	134	

In January 2024, 25 young people were attending the six months work preparation to starting on the Supported Apprenticeship programme. 24 young people were working as an apprentice within the supported apprenticeship framework in a variety of roles and 17 were undergoing assessment procedures.

Level of education

ELITE Supported Employment Agency provided a description of the education level of young people referred to the Supported Shared Apprenticeship programme. Out of the 134 applicants, a small proportion, 7 young people (5%) had entry level qualifications; of this group, only 1 was on the framework and 1 other going through assessment.

	Entry level	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7	Don't know	TOTAL
On Framework (working as apprentice)	1	7	0	5	1	2	1	0	7	24
On Project (6 months preparation)	0	7	7	8	0	0	0	0	3	25
For assessment	1	2	1	7	0	0	1	2	3	17
Signposted	2	6	7	3	0	0	0	0	4	22
Withdrawn	2	8	16	7	0	1	1	0	5	40
Not Eligible	1	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	5
TOTAL	7	32	32	30	1	3	3	2	23	134

32 young people (24%) reported Level 1 qualifications; of this group, 15 young people were on the programme attending the 6 months preparation period or on the framework, actively working. 32 young people reported a Level 2 qualification, with 7 of them being currently on the programme and 1 being assessed. 30 young people reported a Level 3 qualification, with 13 young people currently on the programme or on the framework. Finally, 9 young people reported higher qualifications, with 4 of them being on the framework.

This suggests that some young people had benefitted from a reduction in the entry criteria for an apprenticeship to below Level 2. They appeared to have potential for Level 2 outcomes qualifications. The data on people's qualifications in English and maths is unknown. Elite had also supported 5 additional participants onto the general Disabled Person Apprenticeship.

Demographic of participants

Considering all referrals, there is a prevalence of male applicants with most young people being male (65%). The average age for all young people referred to the Supported Apprenticeship programme is 24.

If only young people currently on the programme were considered, the average age was 21. The proportion of male and female is similar, with young people on the programme being mostly male (68%). There is no difference for the group of apprentices currently working on the supported apprenticeship framework as the proportion is similar (67% are male). The average age for the group working on the framework is 22.

Diagnosis

Seventeen of the young people on the programme had a primary diagnosis of autism, 3 of learning disability, and 3 of learning difficulty. 10 young people had a diagnosis of both learning disability and autism. 10 had a diagnosis of autism and specific learning difficulties. 2 young people had reported a physical disability not associated with other conditions and 2 other young people reported a sensory disability not associated with other conditions.

The table below on the following page summarises the total reported diagnosis and highlights the complexity and unicity of the cohort of young people engaging with Supported Apprenticeships.

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Self-reported diagnosis	Autism	Learning Disability	Specific Learning Difficulties	Physical Disability	Sensory disability	Mental Health	Other
On Framework (working as apprentice)	14	7	4	1	1	1	3
On Project (6 months preparation)	17	2	10	2	6	2	0
TOTAL	31	9	14	3	7	3	3

Eighteen of the 49 young people had had clear special needs status within the education system under the new Additional Learning Needs (ALN) code or had a Statement of Special Educational Needs. This suggests that at least 37% of young people concerned had recognised, relevant needs in terms of the aims of an inclusive apprenticeship scheme. Information for the ALN status of 29 young people was unavailable.

Supported Apprenticeship and Supported Shared Apprenticeship

Twenty-seven supported apprenticeship programmes were delivered over the proposed timeframe in a wide variety of settings.

Supported Apprenticeship type	Apprenticeship Level	Number of Apprentices
Business Administration	Level 2	12
	Level 3	1
	Level unknown	1
Customer Service	Level 2	3
Cleaning and Support Service Skills	Level 2	3
Fashion and Textiles Foundation	Level unknown	1
Hospitality/Food Production	Level 2	1
Facilities in Healthcare	Level 2	1
Gym Instructor	Level 2	1
Horticulture	Level 2	1
Logistic & Warehouse	Level 2	1

The most popular was the Level 2 Business Administration apprenticeship, followed by Customer Service, Cleaning and Support Service and then a variety of different apprenticeships in Fashion, Hospitality, Healthcare, Gym Instructor, Horticulture and Logistic and Warehouse.

Job Role	Number of apprentices
Admin Assistant	6
Care Services	3
Facilities Operative	2
Hospitality	2
Records Dept	2
Cleaning Operative	1
Community Aids / Drivers Mate/ Stores	1
Domestic	1
General Assistant	1
Gym Instructor	1
Horticulture	1
Receptionist	1
Sewing Machinist	1
Technical	1
Web & Telecoms	1
Missing	3

A wide range of apprenticeship types were reported, with a dominant role of admin assistant and care services.

What works in getting young people into a Supported Shared Apprenticeship programme

Researchers at NCMH had the opportunity to interview two members of staff at Elite Supported Employment Agency working on Supported Apprenticeships and Supported Shared Apprenticeships.

Their recommendations on what works involves various aspects of the Supported Apprenticeship programme and can be summarised as follow:

- Apply robust selection process: this should be based on vocational profiling, which is routinely used in a pure supported employment model. This step is fundamental to make sure the Supported Shared Apprenticeship is successful.
- Clarity with young person: clarity is recommended with the young person regarding what is on offer in a Supported Shared Apprenticeship, to understand if this is the right pathway for them.
- “It's not just about eligibility, it's about suitability”.
- Job coaching provided by a Supported Employment Agency is a key element: this 1 to 1 support is provided by a trained job coach. The supported employment model works with the overarching structure of apprenticeships.
- Importance of partnership work with training providers: some training providers might be worried about missing targets, failing to complete and achieve the apprenticeship due to the additional learning needs of the population being worked with. There is often a lack of understanding of how simple reasonable adjustments can greatly assist with achievement. Overall, the strategic work is cascading down operationally, but some of the assessment methods still need to be challenged. There have been several occasions where the employment advisor or Job Coach worked well with the tutor to support the apprentice.
- Broad apprenticeship offer: many opportunities have been on offer to cater for a wide variety of conventional apprenticeships, also traditionally unconventional such as retail and cleaning groundworks. This is important to make an appropriate apprenticeship match, to make sure a person-centred approach is adopted by the supported apprenticeship programme.
- Pre-apprenticeship course and job clubs: these courses might help to understand if the apprenticeship is the right pathway for the individual. Having a previous experience is important for the success of a Supported Shared Apprenticeship, because there are 6 months available to deliver pre-employment activities, such as increasing skills and confidence, CV building, interview preparation. Six months is not a long time.
- Working hours: Some young people with learning disabilities might not be able to work over 16 hours, or they might benefit from building up the hours from lower hours up to 16 hours or more. There is a limited amount of time to do that within the apprenticeship framework. It is advisable to consider a level of consistency in working patterns, to make sure people do not drop from the apprenticeship because of this.

- Reasonable adjustments: need to be made available in the assessment process, not just in the workplace. Having a Job Coach for support with tasks is not the only reasonable adjustment possible to increase employability. There is a range of reasonable adjustments that could be adopted in each phase of the Supported Shared Apprenticeship. The training provider often viewed the Job Coach as the reasonable adjustment and did not recognise the need to use different assessment methods, such as film, voice to text and witness statements.
- Wales Essential Skills Toolkit (WEST) Assessment: we should be moving away from the West assessment to get the literacy and numeracy level, because it excludes too many people, who might not be able to pass the assessment but have the potential to work. In some instances training providers would not allow the Job Coach to support with the WEST Assessment. The vocational profile could replace this formal assessment as a reasonable adjustment.
- Finance: benefits are less of a constraint because there is a general awareness that an apprentice gets paid. It is essential before starting on the Supported Shared Apprenticeship that the participant wants to work a minimum of 16 hours and it is part of the eligibility and suitability criteria.
- Managing gaps: sometimes the timing of the job start does not coincide with the apprenticeship framework and time is lost, with people waiting while they need to maintain their level of work readiness. This is a real obstacle with the timeframe set by the Welsh Government and also impacts on agreements with employers, especially where financial support has been offered, ELITE is the employer or there is a fixed term contract.
- Wage incentives for employers: the wage incentive for employers is flexible, capped to £2,400 over a 12 to 15 months period. More employers are needed to get involved in the Supported Shared Apprenticeship programmes. Employers involved were able to understand and put in place reasonable adjustments to support an apprenticeship, creating a more inclusive workplace culture. The wage incentive is also used to encourage employers to take the apprenticeship onto their payroll.
- Managing expectation from referrals source: there is a need to manage expectations from the job centre, Careers Wales and other stakeholders, because this is not the Engage to Change project, which was providing tailored support that was suitable for everyone. Supported Shared Apprenticeships, are quite niche and might not be suitable for everyone, therefore there needs to be alternative employability provision available, working within the fidelity model.

Discussion:

Supported Apprenticeships, have great potential and provide an inclusive framework to allow people with a learning disability and/or autism to get a qualification and enter the labour market. This report covers only Supported Shared Apprenticeship programmes provided by ELITE Supported Employment Agency and it is not inclusive of supported apprenticeship provision delivered across North Wales. Interviews included only 2 staff members from the supported employment agency and did not include training providers, employers or apprentices.

Similarly to the Engage to Change project, the role of prior experience was key, with people having had previous work experience, employment or volunteering more likely to achieve paid employment with Job Coach support (Vigna, 2023).

In this report, about 60% of young people had had previous work experience. For most this had come through the Engage to Change project, Supported Internship programmes, JobSense, RESTART and Job Growth Wales+. This suggests some benefit are given by strong pre-apprenticeship supported work experiences, such as supported employment and supported internships, although direct entry to employment without apprenticeship must remain an option. This is important because the supported apprenticeship pathway, is not for everyone.

There is a need for clear communication of what a supported apprenticeship pathway entails, to make sure the young person, their families or carers and other referral sources understand. Half of the people who were initially interested in the supported apprenticeships soon withdrew from the scheme, or through discussion with their Job Coach were found to be unsuitable, with a lack of reasons for this choice, which leave little chance for an interpretation.

Entry criteria, which imposed someone to have minimum grade level to access an apprenticeship were adjusted by the Welsh Government to embrace an inclusive culture and as reasonable adjustment (WG, 2024). In this report, the lowering of entry criteria enabled at least 18 people to take part; they would have been ineligible under previous rules and demonstrates the benefit of this reasonable adjustment. There is a lack of information about ALN status for many, but we can certainly say that a proportion of young people had recognised and relevant needs.

A clear “suitability assessment” with the young person about the characteristics and practicalities of a supported apprenticeship should be an essential part of the assessment criteria.

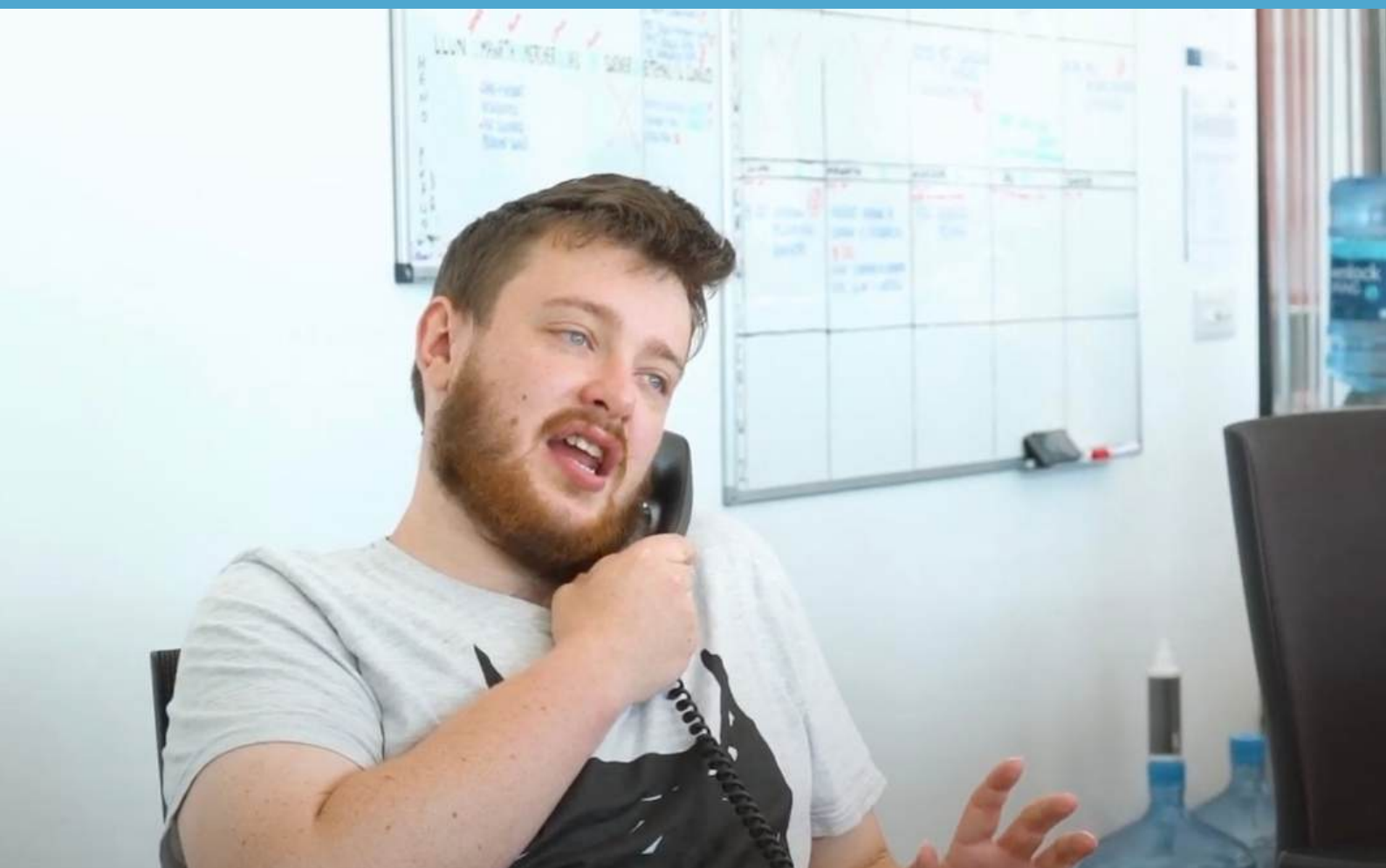
The entry assessment criteria, which at present is standardised and not accessible to people with learning disabilities and/or autism, should be substituted with a vocational profile, to underline the fact that even if the level of literacy and numeracy required is not achievable, that person can actually work, with the support provided by a job coach through a supported employment agency and meet industry standards.

In this report there is a wide variety of apprenticeship types, supporting the development of different career pathways to suit individual aspirations. More employers should be incentivised to offer supported apprenticeships, which will support this successful scheme and contribute to a culture change, where people with disabilities are actively included in the labour market, with equitable opportunity.

One of the current issues, at least in some areas in Wales, is that supported employment agencies receive referrals from Job Centre Plus, that cannot always be satisfied with a Supported Shared Apprenticeship. Since the Engage to Change project ended, there is no bespoke supported employment provision. People who are not suitable to start a supported apprenticeship, cannot access support and will stay economically inactive. There is a need for Welsh Government to have a National Job Coaching Strategy for Wales (Vigna et al 2024), where job coach support is provided for anyone who needs it in various stages of employment. Job coach support should be embedded in every employment programme, to ensure equity of opportunity.

Conclusion:

A pan Wales independent evaluation of the Supported Shared Apprenticeship programmes in Wales, should be completed to assess the benefits of this scheme. All stakeholders involved should be listened to, including training providers, employers, apprentices, young people withdrawing from the Supported Shared Apprenticeship, their families, in addition to the supported employment agency staff. There is some evidence that more time may be needed to see the full process through for some of the young people being supported than is experienced on average. There is a lack of evidence regarding the long-term employment outcomes from the Supported Shared Apprenticeship schemes. However, this initial information from this South Wales report is encouraging and suggests that job coaching is central in making apprenticeships more inclusive for people with a learning disability or autism.



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