

The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on jobs for people with intellectual disabilities and autism in Wales

Elisa Vigna | Andrea Meek | Stephen Beyer

National Centre for Mental Health, School of Medicine, College of Biomedical and Life Sciences, Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK

Correspondence

Elisa Vigna, National Centre for Mental Health, School of Medicine, College of Biomedical and Life Sciences, Cardiff University, Hadyn Ellis Building, Cardiff CF24 4HQ, UK.
Email: vignae@cardiff.ac.uk

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Abstract

Background: The study reports the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns on jobs for people with intellectual disabilities and autism. The study focuses on the impact of the first and the fire-break lockdowns and the actions taken to support young people.

Method: Data was collected from the cohort of young people currently working in Wales, and that received job coach support from the Engage to Change Project, on furlough arrangements, job retainment and job losses. Innovative initiatives to support young people are described.

Results: Review of the working situation during the pandemic was conducted for 184 jobs, evaluating the proportion of young people being furloughed or working remotely and compared with the general population in Wales.

Conclusions: Supported employment agencies adapted their practice during the COVID-19 pandemic, offering new and innovative ways to support young people and facilitate their return to work.

KEYWORDS

autism, coronavirus, COVID-19, employment, intellectual disabilities, supported employment

1 | BACKGROUND

Employment for people with intellectual disabilities and/or autism is a real challenge as the level of employment for them is low. Only 4.8% of adults with an intellectual disability known to social services in England (BASE, 2023) and 21.7% of adults with autism are in some sort of paid employment in the United Kingdom (Office for National Statistics, 2022).

However, with the right, personalised support, individuals with an intellectual disability and autism can access the labour market and lead independent lives (UK Government, 2010). The model adopted over the last 30 years is the supported employment model, also known as Place, Train and Maintain (Beyer et al., 2010). This model

encompasses several stages, starting with vocational profiling, where the support provider gets to know the individual to determine their abilities and preferences. This stage is followed by job finding activity where the individual's abilities and aspirations are matched with a potential real job. The job is then analysed, and tasks are broken down into steps by a job coach, to make it easy to understand and more accessible for the individual. When the job has been fully analysed, the job coach trains the individual in the workplace to perform the task to the employer's specification, often using systematic instruction to pursue errorless learning (Steere & Cavanagh, 1997). The job coach fades their support progressively as the individual learns the task to leave them independent and confident in carrying the tasks of the job (Wenzel et al., 2022).

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The supported employment model has been found to be effective in delivering paid jobs in a more cost-efficient way (Cimera & Rusch, 1999; Eggleton et al., 1999) than other models such as sheltered employment. A review of the literature has also highlighted the business case for employing a person with an intellectual disability and/or autism (Beyer & Beyer, 2017) with key benefits to employers being the reliability of workers with intellectual disability in terms of punctuality, time-keeping and job retention (Needles & Schmitz, 2006). When employed, people with intellectual disabilities and/or autism also help to develop increased levels of cooperation among co-workers in the workplace (Beyer & Beyer, 2017; Kregel & Tomiyasu, 1994).

The supported employment model has been adopted by the Engage to Change project to assist young people with intellectual disabilities and/or autism aged 16–25 into paid employment.

1.1 | The Engage to Change project.

Supported employment is at the heart of the Engage to Change project, an all-Wales project that supported young people aged 16–25, Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET), to develop employment skills through unpaid and paid opportunities, with the aim of providing real paid jobs in the community. Young people could self-refer, or they could be referred by someone. The project was delivered through a Consortium of five organisations working in partnership, being funded by the National Lottery Community Fund and in partnership with Welsh Government. The project aimed to support over 1000 young people in ordinary work places and to work with over 800 employers over 5 years (Beyer et al., 2020). The Engage to Change project was extended for 2 years, ending in 2023.

The Engage to Change project consortium was formed by the following organisations:

- Learning Disability Wales, project leader, an umbrella organisation for intellectual disability bodies in Wales, delivering a strong well-informed voice of people with intellectual disability and their families.
- Two supported employment agencies, Elite Supported Employment Agency and Agoriad Cyf. The agencies delivered job coach support in a supported employment framework to both young people and employers. They covered all areas of Wales.
- All Wales People First, representing the united voice of self-advocacy groups and people with intellectual disabilities in Wales.
- National Centre for Mental Health research team, independent evaluator of the project, ensuring the project is influencing policy makers and create a legacy for the project.

The project offered a wide variety of employment opportunity, including:

- Short unpaid employment opportunities, lasting about a week.
- Up to 6 months paid placement, subsidised by the Engage to Change project. The wage incentive was reduced over 6 months duration from 100% and tapered by the employer waiting to employ the employee with a regular contract.

- Seven supported internships programmes, 4 DFN Project SEARCH,¹ and 3 alternative internship schemes. Supported internships were first introduced in Wales through the Engage to Change project.
- Paid Employment into the open labour market.

The Engage to Change project had a specific route to support eligible young people but applied a personalised needs-led approach to the support offered. The supported employment route included a first home visit, where two members of the supported employment agency staff visited the young person and their family to gather useful information about the young person. This visit was followed by a Vocational Profiling visit, usually held at the agency's premises, to understand the young person abilities, preferences and type of employment. Both visits informed future work related training, travel training and job match. Pathways to employment were different for each young person and tailored on individual needs and local employment availability. Supported employment agencies performed a Better Off in Work Calculation to determine if the person was economically better off in work when compared with their benefit situation. Universal Credit was introduced in 2013 in Britain to streamline and simplify the benefits system, to better support those in work on low incomes, as well as those who are unemployed and who cannot work. Universal Credit was not fully implemented in Wales at the time of the study but is to be fully rolled out to everyone on benefits by 2024.

Job coaches were in charge of job matching, job training in the workplace and job maintenance. Their support was often intense to begin with, but it faded away as the person became more independent in the workplace. The job coach was also in charge of supporting employers and mentors in the workplace, to allow a successful experience and to make sure the young person was working according to the employers' specifications.

Job coaches from both supported employment agencies received core training from the same training provider, including Disability Awareness Training, Vocational Profiling, Training in Systematic Instruction, accredited training, employment legislation, equality, diversity and inclusion etc. The job coaches completed a 'Certificate for Supported Employment Practitioner', exploring core values of supported employment, engaging and working with job seekers, job matching, in work support and training and engaging employers.

1.2 | COVID-19 impact on employment and the Engage to Change project

The Engage to Change project was about to reach the end of its fourth year of operation when the COVID-19 crisis hit the community, and consequently the labour market. This led to lockdowns and

¹The DFN (David Forbes-Nixon) Foundation was established by city financier David Forbes-Nixon. He became aware of the lack of effective provision to meet his young people's needs and was determined to try and make a positive difference. The Foundation committed to improve employability programmes, DFN Project SEARCH is a registered charity, having over 650 licensed programmes around the world, offering supported internship to young adults with intellectual disabilities.

“firebreaks” where movement and mixing of the general population was restricted, the closure of workplaces and public venues, the consequent laying-off employees and restrictions in taking up new jobs. In Wales, as elsewhere in the UK, ‘furlough’ arrangements were put in place which re-imbursed employers for a proportion of staff wages paid while businesses were closed during government-imposed lockdowns. Employees with intellectual disabilities were eligible for these furlough arrangements as any other employee.

With the beginning of the pandemic, businesses faced many challenges, with direct consequence for young people, many seeing their placement or job suspended. Businesses were affected by closure or suffered the general effect of a decrease in demand for goods and services with consequent economic challenges, leading to staff redundancies or furloughing. In addition, some individuals had concerns about the risks of COVID-19 while being employed, leading them leaving their employment.

The Engage to Change consortium faced a number of challenges in delivering employment in a pandemic. It had to reinvent itself and found new ways to support young people as explained in the method section.

An international study examining the effects of the pandemic on employment through an online survey, found that over half of people with intellectual disability employed before the pandemic were negatively affected by COVID-19 (Fisher et al., 2022). In the same study, people with intellectual disability reported job loss, changes in work hours or income or working from home. A cross-sectional analysis of the effect of the pandemic on people with intellectual disabilities in Spain, highlighted how 72.7% of workers experienced an interruption in their job (Amor et al., 2021). Another study highlighted how the COVID-19 pandemic led to some positive experiences, such as being able to maintain a job by working from home. However, the vast majority reported negative experiences on employment, such as feeling fearful and worried about finances due to reduced work hours and employment loss (Okyere et al., 2021). It was challenging for people with an intellectual disability to retain their job (Pellicano & Stears, 2020), also considering the limited access to resources and support by employment services (Okyere et al., 2021).

Looking at the overall COVID-19 pandemic impact, an analogous study of 818 families of people with intellectual disabilities found out that the majority of the participants reported a loss of some educational service and just half of the sample received some form of support remotely (Jeste et al., 2020).

This study aims to describe the employment situation of young people with intellectual disabilities and/or autism before and after the COVID-19 crisis, including work lay-offs and their inclusion in furlough arrangements, redundancies, and return to employment after lockdown, and the role supported employment can play in this type of crisis.

2 | METHOD

Data on employment outcomes was collected on all participants referred onto the project between June 2016 and May 2020.

Informed consent was collected on the first visit from all participants, according to the Ethics protocol for this study. Data collection points reflected different milestones of supported employment:

1. First home visit: personal information (gender, diagnosis etc.), preference in support style, personal needs, employment preferences, and so on.
2. Vocational profiling: abilities and personal aspirations.
3. Employment form: recording information about the type of employment, pay rate, hours worked, duration, and so on.

Data were recorded and sent securely to the research team by Job Coaches using a bespoke application (www.harvestyourdata.com) installed on iPads or Android tablets.

Job coaches from the two different supported employment Agencies followed the same training programme with the Engage to Change researchers on data collection. Re-training sessions were also available on a monthly basis and on request, to make sure job coaches could ask any questions regarding data collection.

Regular data collection continued throughout the pandemic and afterwards, but additional information on current employment status was provided to the research team for those in employment at the time of the pandemic.

This article provides a description of referrals received at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, gender description, diagnosis, and age range. A description of type of jobs is provided, together with the average hours worked and wage earned.

A description of the impact of COVID is provided on the 184 people who were in employment when the pandemic began. During the pandemic, every young person on the project was offered support by the Engage to Change project, delivered mainly through a supported employment agency. The project provided support to minimise the disruption of the pandemic for young people:

1. Financial advice if work hours reduced or support to apply for furlough to support employees and employers.
2. Support with advice, advocacy and welfare benefits.
3. Support with remote home working.
4. Vocational accreditation courses in support of people's move into paid placements or paid jobs. The accreditation courses were transferred online, allowing young people to achieve more employability skills, supporting their personal development and work-readiness.
5. Elite Supported Employment Agency designed an accredited certificate in ‘Promoting Safe Practices During COVID-19 and Other Infectious diseases’. This focused on helping young people with an intellectual disability and/or autism to better understand the virus, use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), COVID-19 appropriate personal hygiene, safe travel and managing social distancing. These courses are now delivered across the Engage to Change project and are facilitating placements or jobs.
6. Online Job Clubs, where young people could keep contact with job coaches and learn new employment skills. Job Club/Induction

Sessions were Engage to Change initiatives to support young people recently referred to the project, waiting to receive job coach support. These initiatives initially operated face-to-face, and online during the COVID-19 pandemic. Job clubs were organised in small groups of young people engaged in tailored activities to improve their skills; develop their confidence; CV preparation and editing; and support with job searching activities while waiting for a placement.

7. In order to support social engagement, the Engage to Change Lead Ambassador set up a weekly appointment open to anyone enrolled on the Engage to Change project with the aim of keeping young people socially connected. These initiatives helped in reducing anxiety, social exclusion and mental health issues of young people while waiting to return to work.
8. Support with returning to work after restrictions were lifted. The support included re-training the young person in the workplace or travel training to accomplish to the new COVID-19 restrictions.
9. Job coaches delivered explanations and demonstrations of new COVID-19 rules, which were practised in the workplace to increase young people's confidence and their understanding of regulations.
10. Job coaches provided travel training to learn and follow safely new COVID-19 rules on public transport.

The project monitored the employment situation overtime, by getting updates from supported employment agencies on a monthly basis, beside the regular ongoing data collection. Supported employment agencies informed the research sharing information about furlough arrangements, redundancy, working from home, employment or sustained employment during the COVID-19 period and the following 2 years from the beginning of the pandemic.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Pre-COVID results

The Engage to Change project received 818 referrals since its start in June 2016 and supported 685 (2019) employers around Wales that offered a variety of employment opportunities. Until the beginning of the pandemic, the Engage to Change project had developed 382 unpaid placements (many still in progress at the time of the pandemic), 351 paid placements of up to 6 months and found 184 paid jobs (120 sustained for 3 months or more at this point). This represented an employment rate of 22%, based on numbers of referrals in 2019. The majority of the young people were men (73%); 25% of young people had an intellectual disability and 20% reported that they had autism. Sixteen percent of young people reported to have a specific learning difficulty, 16% a co-occurrent condition such as autism and an intellectual disability and finally 16% reported autism and specific learning difficulties (Table 1). Table 1 also reports the age range for participants, with an average age of 21 years old.

For those entering paid and unpaid work placements, supported internships and paid jobs, data included: job/placement title; employer name; type of work; pay (where relevant); and hours worked.

Table 2 shows the list of real jobs offered within the Engage to Change framework; jobs varied considerably, including jobs in sales and retail, kitchen and catering, administrative, cleaning and so on. On average, young people worked 15 h a week and were paid £ 7.90 per hour.

3.2 | COVID-19 pandemic

Before the first lockdown, Engage to Change secured paid jobs for 184 young people in paid employment and 136 (74%) of these people

818 referrals	Descriptor	Categories	N	Percentage
	Gender	Women	188	23%
		Men	597	73%
		Missing	6	
	Diagnosis	Autism	160	20%
		Autism and intellectual disability	127	16%
		Autism and specific learning difficulties	133	16%
		Intellectual disability	207	25%
		Specific learning difficulties	130	16%
		Other	6	1%
Age (average 21)	Missing	55		
	16–19	263	32%	
	20–22	333	41%	
	23–25	186	23%	
		Missing	36	

TABLE 1 Demographic characteristics.

were still in those jobs 3 months after they started (called 'sustained' by the project), a measure of success often utilised in Department of Work and Pension funded employment rehabilitation schemes.

A total of 34 employment opportunities due to start in the near future, were suspended or postponed across Wales during the first lockdown, from March to June 2020, and during the 2 week 'Fire Break' lockdown in Wales in October 2020 (Table 3).

A small number of participants who were in paid placements, and their families questioned whether it was worth continuing a placement or if it was a more sensible decision to postpone the current opportunity for safer times. Furthermore, some participants were asked to shield due to a medical condition or needed to isolate as a result of the COVID-19 policy in place during lockdowns. Only two people reported leaving a paid job due to these conditions. Some

young people had to leave a placement or a job as a direct consequence of businesses temporarily closing down or moving into smart, remote working. In addition, restrictions on public transport or their temporary closure hindered young people's chances of travelling to placements.

During the pandemic, Engage to Change's supported employment agencies, Elite and Agoriad Cyf, continued to provide their support using new approaches. They supported young people and employers with welfare benefit advice and advocacy, as young people went out of paid work or placement onto welfare benefits. This issue was addressed promptly by the partners, ensuring people were accessing the right benefits while out of work.

Nine people (5%) shifted their job to remote working, supported by employers and supported employment agencies. Fourteen people (30% of those furloughed) were made redundant or did not return to work following the lockdown and firebreak measures and have been supported since then by the project.

TABLE 2 Paid job description.

Jobs	Job types	N	Percentage
	Sale and retail	28	15%
	Kitchen and catering	26	14%
	Administration	25	14%
	Cleaner and domestic	14	8%
	IT technician	7	4%
	Nursing and caring	7	4%
	Agricultural and farming	6	3%
	Hospital porter	5	3%
	Refuse and salvage	4	2%
	Teaching assistant	3	2%
	Other jobs	59	32%
Hours worked on average (initial contract)		15	
Wage earned per hour (initial contract)		£7.90	

3.3 | After lockdown was lifted

After lockdown, 13 (38%) young people out of the 34 people who had placements postponed or put on hold returned to their placement as businesses re-opened and the majority of people returned to their activities (Table 3). Despite the challenges, participants continued to return to placements during the Summer and Autumn quarters of 2020, with a total of 19 new paid placements offered during the period. During the same period, the project supported 34 young people entering new paid employment opportunities. Both return to work and new paid placement offers were fully supported by Engage to Change supported employment agencies, through the use of personalised job coach support and travel training to adhere to new COVID-19 rules.

TABLE 3 Impact of COVID-19 on employment.

What happened to young people in employment?	N	% based on young people employed before COVID-19 (N = 184)	What happened to young people after lockdowns?	N	% Based on people each category
Furlough	46	25%	Return to work	32	70%
			Redundancy/no longer working	14	30%
People working from home/ remote working	9	5%	Return to work	6	67%
			Redundancy/no longer working	1	11%
			Unknown outcome	2	22%
Employment opportunity suspended or postponed	34	18%	Return to work	13	38%
			Redundancy/no longer working	21	62%
People electing to leave job	2	1%	No longer working	2	100%
In Employment, off the Engage to Change Project	93	51%	Data not available		
Total of young people employed	184				

3.4 | Referrals, pre-employment support and way forward

Between June and November 2020, the project saw a decrease in referrals by 30% compared to the same period in the previous year. This is certainly a drop but considering the economic climate at the time, this drop could have been greater. Indeed, in April 2020 Universal Credit (UC) saw the largest expansion ever in numbers of claimants. Demands for Universal Credit surged amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced people out of work or to reduce their work hours. In Wales figures climbed from a 4% to 5% monthly increase in UC claimants, to 34% of new claimants during April 2020 (DWP, 2020). One of the interventions implemented by the Engage to Change was supporting young people with transition to benefits, which was key for young people postponing or losing their jobs. Despite the current difficult climate, young people continue to self-refer or be referred by others to the Engage to Change project and the support model seems to provide a way forward for young people into employment in uncertain times.

4 | DISCUSSION

Disabled people were twice as likely to become economically inactive, and a little more likely not to be working at all, than non-disabled people after furlough ended (Office for National Statistics, 2021). The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS), a furlough scheme, was introduced to Wales on 20th March 2020 and 320,000 jobs were supported through the CJRS up to the 1st of June 2020 (HMRC, 2020). During the first and subsequent 'firebreak lockdown', 46 young people from the Engage to Change Project were furloughed, 25% of those in paid work. The proportion of employees claiming the CJRS in Wales at the end of June 2020 was 29% of the working age population (UK Government, 2020), for the same period. This suggests that young people with intellectual disabilities and/or autism within Engage to Change were less likely to be furloughed than the general population (UK Government, 2020). COVID-19 greatly affected their employment opportunities as many young people had to postpone their placement to a later, unknown date as highlighted by existing literature (Amor et al., 2021; Fisher et al., 2022). Of those who had postponed their employment opportunity, two thirds did not return to work. We do not know what the cause was, but it could be because the job they wanted was not available anymore, and there was not a suitable alternative job as jobs were scarcely available in a post-COVID climate of uncertainty. A limit of this study is that there is not yet a follow-up to understand if these young people pursued employment elsewhere.

A very small proportion of young people were able to keep working remotely from home, but they had to have support to adapt to their new routine and to cope with new working arrangements. Other young people saw business closures and had to be supported to apply for the furlough scheme and to assess their welfare benefit situation.

The supported employment model offered through Engage to Change played a role as supported employment agencies adapted their support activities to suit employee and employer needs. Engage to Change had to create new ways to support young people to cope with social isolation. The activity of online Job Clubs run by job coaches, and the weekly online social engagement with the Project Lead Ambassador mitigated the social isolation experienced by young people and supported the development of new skills.

Online meetings hosted by the Lead Ambassador, a person with a lived experience of autism, created connection between participants and a sense of community. Specifically, having a weekly engagement activity for supported participation, with young people leading part of the event in a fun and relaxed environment helped to keep young people engaged with the project. Lawford et al. (2023) analysed how a grassroots disability self-advocacy organisation in Scotland increased the attendance of their members using online meetings, when compared to the face-to-face meetings they held before the pandemic. In this study, members lead these meetings and attendance was supporting mental well-being and digital inclusion within a group that has often been excluded from online technology (Lawford et al., 2023).

For the Engage to Change project, the weekly engagement with the Lead Ambassador, contributed to uniting young people from all areas of Wales and made long lasting connections among young people. In the existing literature, another study highlighted better digital inclusion for people with intellectual disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic, with social benefits for this population (Caton et al., 2022).

Supported employment agencies had to re-think how they helped young people returning to work after the pandemic, and how to support young people who referred to Engage to Change during the pandemic. This challenged agencies to develop an accredited course teaching participants how to cope with COVID-19 restrictions and to re-think the way they trained people to travel to and from work under new COVID-19 restriction.

After restrictions were lifted, the Resolution Foundation (2021) estimated that 136,000 of all furloughed workers (12%) ended the CJRS unemployed (3.4%) or became economically inactive (8.5%). The Labour Force Survey (2021) found that only 10% of all workers furloughed were no longer employed after CJRS closure. The Office for National Statistics (, 2021) estimated among disabled people in general who were furloughed, 12% were no longer working, 4% becoming unemployed (compared with 3% of non-disabled furloughed people) and 8% of disabled people furloughed became economically inactive (compared to 4% of non-disabled furloughed people). Overall, young people with intellectual disabilities and/or autism supported by Engage to Change returned to work in significant numbers but were less likely to be working after furlough than other disabled workers or workers in general (30% did not return to work). However, 70% of young people in furlough did return to work; the availability of job coaching to help workers and employers apply for furloughing for vulnerable workers, to help manage transition into and out of any additional welfare benefits, and to re-train these workers in new working

arrangements post-COVID emergency, appear to be crucial to this outcome.

Overall, the response in terms of support and creative thinking through emergency measures, supported young people staying in work and returning to work after the COVID-19 restrictions were removed. A limit of this study is that, out of the 184 young people in employment at the time of the pandemic, we had missing employment data for half of the young people. The missing data could not be retrieved because these young people were no longer being supported by the supported employment Agencies, and therefore they were out of the Engage to Change intervention and research because they reached the employment milestone long before the pandemic. With more research time and resources available, it would have been useful to follow-up on their steps into and out of the pandemic, to find out how their employment experience was affected and how they have dealt with it without support.

5 | CONCLUSION

Supported employment is a successful model for people with intellectual disabilities and autism to obtain, learn and maintain a job. Supported employment agencies had to be flexible in their approach to the pandemic, thinking about ways to support young people and employers at this difficult time. Engage to Change and supported employment agencies played an important role in supporting young people financially, developing their employment and social skills using innovative ways during the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve this, the job coach played an important role in keeping in touch with young people, offering support through innovative practice.

The support received by the supported employment agencies, was functional to transition from the pandemic to the post pandemic phase, and it created a legacy of interventions that can still be used today to cater for individuals and employers' needs.

Some of the emergency measures have inspired good practice, such as the use of technology for people with intellectual disabilities and autism and the advantages that can originate from digital inclusion. Digital inclusion led to a new way of connecting people, developing leadership skill and supporting mental wellbeing. This way of working can be embedded into the day-to-day life of people with intellectual disabilities and autism.

Flexible and remote working is now widely accepted by many employers; these new ways of working can be more suitable for many young people, for instance those living in rural area, where travelling to the workplace is a challenging option because of lack of public transport.

This research highlights how the supported employment model was adapted in practice during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the new, innovative ways to train and support young people. A blended approach including old and new practice, can support new and more effective ways of working.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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