

United Response's submission to the Buckland Review into Autism Employment Public Consultation



About United Response

Since 1973, United Response has been supporting people with learning disabilities, autism, mental health, or physical support needs to live their life to the full. Our team of 3,400 staff work across 330 locations in England and Wales to support around 2,000 people aged 16 to 65+. We campaign to ensure those we support have equal access to the same rights and opportunities as anyone else, and challenge the negative attitudes and discrimination they face.

Introduction

As the cost-of-living crisis deepens, disabled people continue to be disproportionately affected by additional expenses as part of their day-to-day living. Worse still, the employment gap is at its widest point since 2018, standing at 28.9%¹. For those with hidden disabilities like autism, this is especially concerning when it is well-documented that many autistic people struggle with employment, face systemic misunderstanding of their needs during recruitment, and are often left unaware of their basic rights and entitlements to in-work supports as employees².

United Response works with thousands of autistic working-aged adults across the country to help them lead independent lives. Preparing for work and sustaining meaningful, long-term, fairly waged employment is a key component of the supports we provide people with. Our submission to the Buckland Review of Autism Employment is wholly grounded in this principal, as we set out the key challenges and opportunities towards recognising and harnessing neurodivergent talent in the workplace.

Crucial to achieving this goal is a fundamental recognition that significant progress has yet to be made with a renewed urgency. A shared responsibility exists between colleagues, employers, and the Government in supporting autistic jobseekers and employees. The progress made around better data collection and instituting better autism awareness education through the Disability Confident Scheme are positive developments – more nevertheless needs to be done.

United Response welcomes the opportunity to engage with the Review and contribute towards its stated efforts to “recruit and retain autistic people and reap [the] benefits of a neurodiverse

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-employment-of-disabled-people-2022/employment-of-disabled-people-2022>

² According to the Office of National Statistics, just 22% of autistic people – or over 1 in 5 – are in any kind of employment (2021). This is believed to be among one of the worst employment rates amongst disabled people. The National Autistic Society has reported many reasons for this, but chief among them is a lack of accessible employment supports: <https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/news/new-data-on-the-autism-employment-gap>

workforce.”³ Our response is directly informed by the people whom we support; we consulted extensively with autistic people taking part in our supported employment programmes, and have directly included in their lived experiences.

What more could be done to prepare autistic people effectively for beginning or returning to a career?

“When I first got a job back in 2017 through the job centre, I was in a position where I felt like my voice wasn’t heard and that management had no interest in listening.

“While my situation was likely a worst-case scenario (I only remained there for 2 weeks due to no promise of pay), I do feel like not all autistic people – specifically with any form of social anxiety or even just not being aware of the power they have as an employee – are able to speak up in such situations and end up left on the sidelines, or feeling their only recourse is to leave like I did.

“Long story short, I feel in-work support and the ability to have a direct line . . . to the manager to address certain issues, would be very important.”

The Department of Work and Pensions should . . .

- Develop advice and guidance for autistic people of their rights under the Equality Act 2010 and entitlements in accessible formats and work with employers, supported employment provider, charities and others to raise awareness.
- Engage with self-employed autistic people to devise and deliver a pilot scheme in collaboration with the Department for Business and Trade to train autistic and neurodivergent entrepreneurs wanting to start their own businesses.

Job coaches, educationalists, and employment advisers should . . .

- Spend time identifying their autistic clients’ individual strengths and focus on careers that align with them.
- Devise better transition plans with autistic school-leavers and graduates for entering the workforce.
- Clearly and concisely explain to autistic jobseekers what is expected in the workplace in terms of decorum and dress and how best to negotiate any potentially needed reasonable adjustments.

The Department for Education should . . .

- Integrate the teaching of self-care and resilience-building skills within the citizenship subject curriculum, specifically on how to manage one’s physical and mental health during job searches.

Employers and managers should . . .

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-review-to-boost-employment-prospects-of-autistic-people>

“Be supportive, be understanding, and be fully aware of the benefits trap so that an employee doesn’t end up worse off, both financially and health-wise.”

- Institute clear and direct communication pathways between autistic employees and their supervisors.

How can recruitment practices can be adjusted to meet the needs of autistic applicants?

“I feel a lot of recruitment agencies and other bodies out there only cover the bare minimum when it comes to being job-ready. Things like interview prep and CVs are the main thing touched on in my experience. This issue, however, is sometimes you have a well-written presentable CV and know how to talk to people, but you aren’t being considered over someone with more experience than you.

I feel there needs to be a way to make job seekers (not just for autistic people) aware of the potential requirements that various jobs have, and to ready them to meet those requirements. For example, I think educational bodies should partner with organizations to offer volunteer opportunities . . . so that school leavers can quickly transition into a job as they have real, tangible, work experience from a less stressful environment.”

Job coaches, educationalists, and employment advisers should . . .

Employers and recruiters should . . .

- Provide specific information to candidates about roles in job descriptions, as well as clear rules around diagnosis disclosure and their respective company policies around disability inclusion and available reasonable adjustments.
- Promote the use of alternative assessments during recruitment processes via the Disability Confident Scheme, such as workplace trails, portfolio assessments, or job shadowing, rather than or complementary to the traditional interview format.
- Devise their application forms and information about vacancies on a Plain Language formatting, explaining terms clearly and avoiding verbose jargon.
- Institute Easy Read training for human resources and recruitment professionals as part of their respective accessibility policy.

How can employers identify and support people already in their workforce?

“. . . Understand what the individual is capable of doing and what they are not capable of doing. Work with them to get the best out of them, not set them up to fail and [damage] their self-worth.”

The Department of Work and Pensions should . . .

- Invest in a pilot scheme administered through the Access to Work support programme to help employers subsidise the cost of in-work assessments for autism and other neurodiverse conditions.

Employers and colleagues should . . .

- Network with autism charities and advocacy groups to provide bespoke supports to autistic employees, as well as information about autism, diagnostic services and post-diagnosis aids to employees seeking a diagnosis for themselves or a family member.
- Continue to engage with the Disability Confident Scheme to achieve a holistic in-work culture change that affirms diversity and offers full support for disabled employees.
- Establish regional hubs through private and public sector organisations, such as the Federation of Small Businesses and trade unions, on building autism awareness and knowledge-sharing.
- Provide options for flexible and or remote working for all employees, with preference given to autistic and other neurodivergent staff.

How can autistic staff be encouraged and supported to develop and progress their career?

“Help them focus on what they are good at, encourage learning and trying different things, but don’t impose it.”

The Department for Education should . . .

- Reform the national curricula across the UK’s respective regions to integrate technical and vocational skills, with special attention towards providing further education opportunities to autistic and neurodivergent school-leavers.

Employers and managers should . . .

- Provide job carving opportunities for autistic and neurodivergent employees as part of a wider effort to institute a more flexible working environment.
- Devise career-orientated Intensive Personalised Employment Supports with their autistic employees, identifying areas to improve on as well as opportunities for upskilling.
- Invest in meaningful Continuing Professional Development opportunities for autistic employees; actively listen to what their professional goals and help signpost them to courses and or resources which can help them meet these targets.
- Recognise the contributions made to businesses and workplaces by autistic staff and provide ample and clear pathways for promotion.

What working practices or initiatives can help to reduce stigma and improve the productivity of autistic employees?

“Education of all staff of what autism is from the perspective of autistic people, how it is different for each person. There is a lot of ‘training’ that still pushes the stereotypes - not everyone fits the stereotypes, and this is not helping.”

The Department of Work and Pensions should . . .

- In close collaboration with the Department for Business and Trade, invest in the delivery of a public awareness campaign amongst public and private sector employers about the benefits of recruiting a neurodiverse workforce through an apprenticeship route.
- Continue to develop a robust data collection system that monitors employment barriers for autistic job seekers, the experiences of autistic employees and their employers, and the impact of evolving support provisions.
- Continue to proactively involve autistic and neurodiverse voices during consultation processes, with particular attention directed to communicating information and facilitating participation via accessible formats.

Employers should . . .

- Collaborate with autism charities, advocacy groups, and local disabled persons’ organisations to develop autism-centred training for all staff members, focused on the social model of disability and away from more medicalised interpretations.
- Structure Supported Internships and Supported Employment schemes to specifically target hiring autistic people to expose workplaces to neurodiversity and reach neurodiverse employees’ talents.⁴

“Equity is a phrase that comes to mind, specifically being both fair and impartial. If an autistic person can work and thrive the same way as other people, without necessarily detracting from neurotypicals, or drawing attention to autistic people, then I personally feel there will be little stigma to worry about.

“People differ, and as such what I said can be easier said than done in some cases. However, I feel a workplace will likely be at its best so long as all employees are enabled to work as effectively as everyone else. Doing so will require that reasonable adjustments are made for certain people.”

⁴ Whilst United Response sought to centre lived experiences as much as possible within our submission, many autistic people whom we support found the Review’s survey inaccessible. This was reportedly down to difficulties with the language used and the lack of available alternative communication formats, such as Easy Read or visual aids. As such, we were limited with whom we could fully engage with during the consultation period to illicit suitable insights. If the survey was available in such modes, we believe that significantly richer data could have been gleaned from a wider pool of respondents. Going forward, United Response would therefore urge the Department of Work and Pensions to focus efforts on making future consultations readily accessible for participants with a range of needs.

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