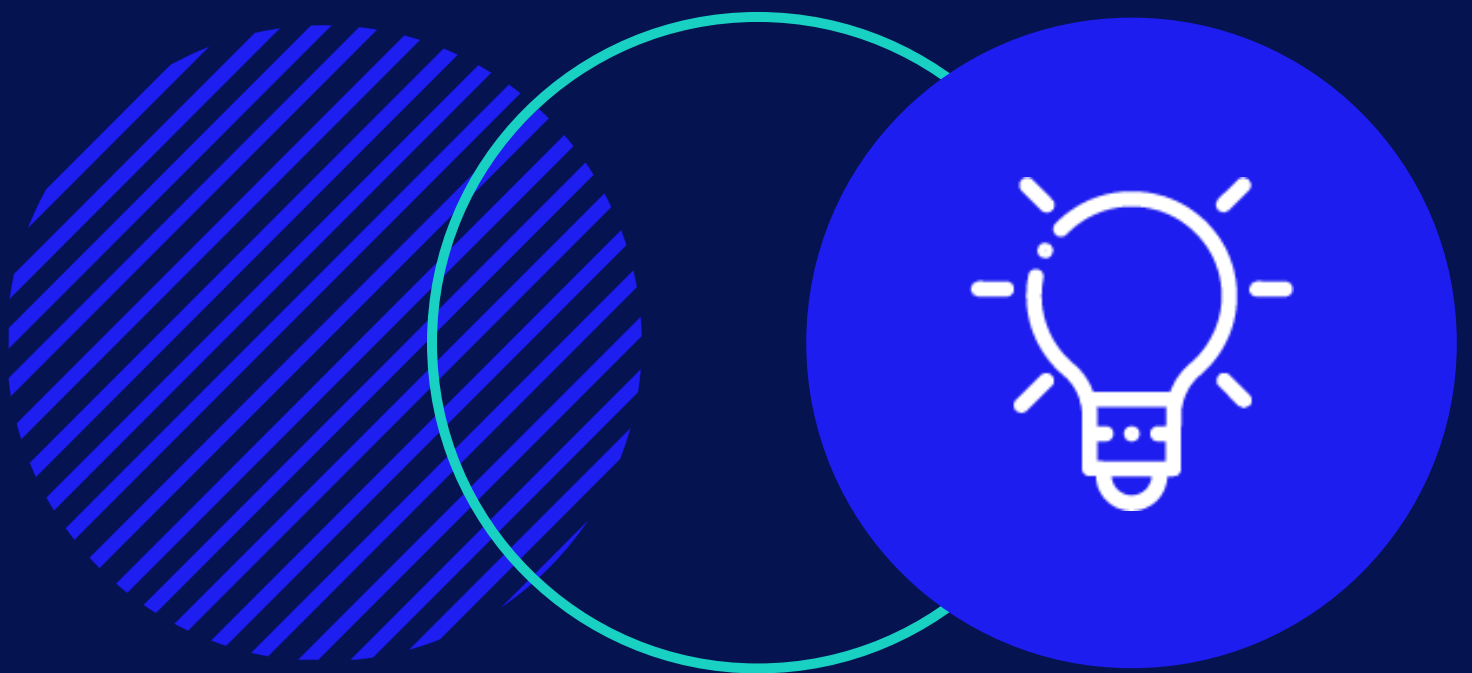


# Reed in Partnership

## The freedom to be there for people: Supporting disabled people, neurodivergent people and those with long-term health conditions into work

Insights on what works in intensive, personalised  
employment support from participants and key  
workers



# Introduction

**This report looks at what a group of experienced employment support key workers and participants have found to be most helpful and impactful in supporting disabled people with complex barriers to work into sustainable employment.**

**Supporting more disabled people, neurodivergent people and those with long-term health conditions into sustainable work is critical to the Government meeting its 80% employment target.** More than one in three (36%) of the working age population now report having a long-term health condition, including one in four (23%) who are disabled. We know from official statistics that at least 600,000 people amongst the 2.8 million strong economically inactive population who are not working because of disability or health want to find work - and recent research in Barnsley<sup>1</sup> has highlighted that this may be a vast underestimate.

A wide and welcome public policy debate is happening about the role of employment support in meeting this challenge and how it should be organised and delivered. Given that these decisions are so fundamental and effect so many people, it is understandable that there is a focus on getting objectives, systems and governance right. At the same time, this is a risky time, with major capacity gaps in the support available for disabled people to find work. Many services have come to an end, while new services, such as the Government's planned Connect to Work service and the further expansion of Individual Placement and Support (IPS), will take time to come on stream.

## Intensive support

There is a particular gap at the more intensive end of support. It is important that we take the opportunity to learn from the experience and expertise of people working in the most personalised and intensive services, and of course people using the services themselves.

One service that has recently closed its doors to new starters is the Intensive Personalised Employment Service (IPES) that was commissioned by the Department of Work and Pensions. This is a highly tailored support service for disabled people with complex barriers to work. Reed in Partnership has been delivering this service, in partnership with Maximus (then Remploy), in the North East since December 2019.

This report is not an impact assessment or evaluation of IPES (the evaluation commissioned by DWP is expected in 2025). Rather, it is an insight-gathering exercise to learn from the key workers who have been delivering a service and the participants they support, before the service closes its doors.

<sup>1</sup> Barnsley Council and South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority, [Pathways to work](#), July 2024

# About this report

## What we did

We held a focus group with key workers on Working Ways, the Intensive Personalised Employment Support (IPES) service that Reed in Partnership delivers for the Department for Work and Pensions. We then carried out a small number of individual interviews with participants, but in the context of support sessions with their adviser so that they would have a trusted key worker to hand.

## What we found

From this research we have compiled ten key features of intensive, personalised employment support for those disabled people, neurodivergent people and those with health conditions who need this level of intensive support to enter sustainable work. We have also featured five case studies of people who have been working with IPES and have shared their views on what has been helpful, what they have learned from the experience and what employers could do to employ more disabled people.

At the end of the report, we have shared some conclusions on these findings that we hope will be useful to policymakers and commissioners in designing services to support many more disabled people into work over the coming years.

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**We would like to extend our thanks to IPES key workers and particularly IPES participants for taking the time to share their views for this report.**

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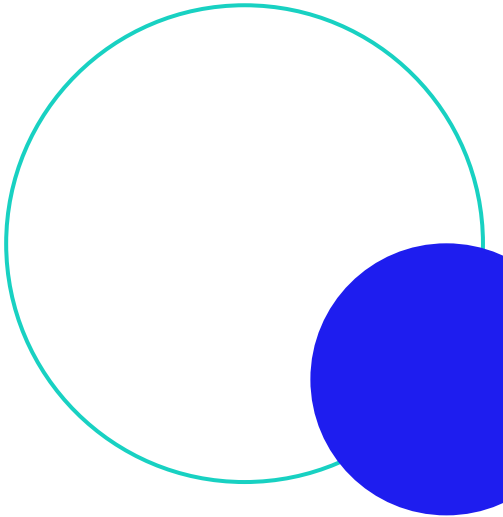
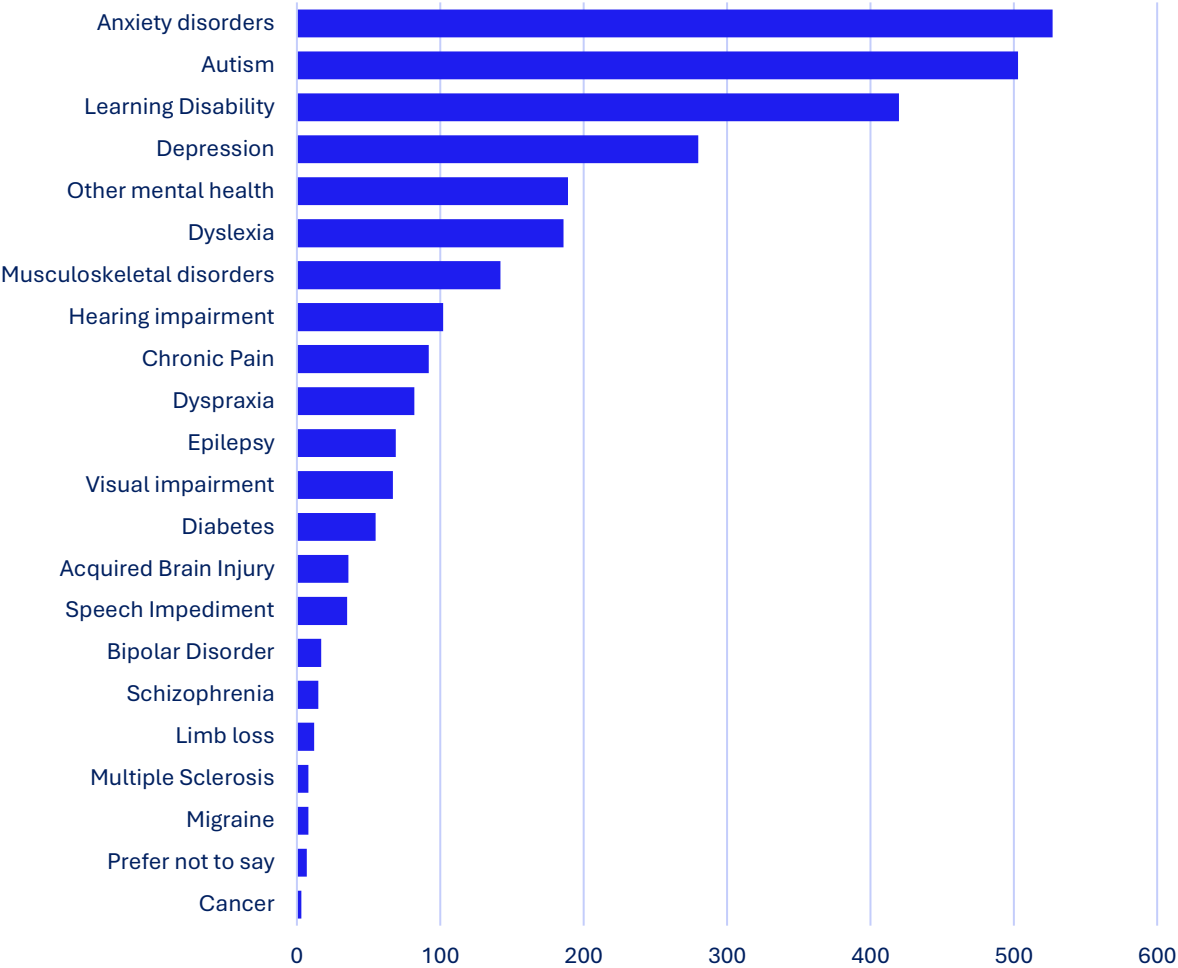
## About IPES

Reed in Partnership launched Working Ways, its name for the Department for Work and Pensions' Intensive Personalised Employment Support (IPES) service, in December 2019 in the North East. At the time, the DWP commissioned IPES to support people in the UK who want to find work but are likely to have complex support needs.

To be eligible for IPES, someone must have a disability or disabilities as defined in the Equality Act 2010, but there are no benefit-related eligibility requirements and people can self-refer to the service or access it via a signposting organisation. However, Jobcentre work coaches must decide whether someone is suitable for the service, primarily whether they want to work and be considered more than a year from employment without intensive support. Participants will likely have a combination of one or more disability or health-related barriers and other barriers such as homelessness, financial support needs, substance misuse or low self-esteem. The service is designed to support them to find sustainable employment or self-employment or develop the skills to do so. Although caseloads have varied over time, the number of participants being supported by each key worker is generally kept to around the 25-person level recommended for supported employment services.

The most common disabilities, learning differences and health conditions amongst IPES participants are shown below. A majority of IPES participants (61%) have more than one condition or learning difference. For example, 88% of participants who report depression also have a second health condition or learning difference, while 87% of participants with dyspraxia do.

**Disabilities, conditions and neurodiversity reported by IPES participants, 2019-2023**



# Key findings

According to the disabled people and key workers we spoke to, these are the key features of effective intensive, personalised employment support:

Highly personalised

1. Support must start from where the participant is and what they want to do, otherwise the changes that they achieve are unlikely to be sustainable. Closely linked to this is taking an asset-based approach, rather than seeing people in terms of their needs or barriers.

A trust-based key worker/participant partnership

2. At the heart of intensive, personalised support is the key worker/participant relationship, of which the most important aspect is trust. Consistency of one adviser throughout the process of pre- and in-work support is highly valued by participants.

Support in the right place

3. IPES key workers are out and about most of the time, meeting participants where they physically want to meet and accompany them where they need to go when needed, whether that is to a job interview, housing office, café or park. This makes the service accessible and tailored to personal (and employer) need.

Delivered in partnership in the community

4. Building or strengthening an individual's support networks, both by helping that person to put in place the health and wellbeing support they might need, but also ensuring that the support service is embedded and working in partnership with community, health service and social networks.

Intensive, personalised employer engagement

5. It's not just individual support for disabled people with complex needs that needs to be personalised and intensive - employer engagement work on their behalf needs to be too. IPES key workers find that it is most effective to meet employers face to face.

**Continuous support pre/post job entry**

**Diverse teams with life experience**

**Peer and wellbeing support for teams**

**Employers with an open mind**

**A focus on sustainment**

6. On IPES, in-work support is treated as just as important (or sometimes more important) as help with preparing for work. While it is unavoidable that sometimes there will be a staff change, the principle on IPES is that the participant has the same adviser during both pre-work and in-work support, with that key worker also managing the employer relationship.
7. Diversity and lived experience of adviser teams can play a really important role in effective specialist support for disabled people. This is a role for local people who can understand where a participant is coming from and can relate to their perspective and challenges.
8. Being a key worker (or employment adviser) is a satisfying but demanding job requiring a high level of resilience. Structured peer support practices and wellbeing support for advisers are important. Effective safeguarding practices are critical to this work to ensure that participants and key workers are safe when they are out and about.
9. The key ask of employers from key workers and participants is simply being open to recruiting disabled people, as well as being willing to flex recruitment processes to create a level playing field for someone. If an employer is willing and open-minded, then they can get the help they need to make it work. The key worker can bring in the specialist support on how the employer can put in place the right adjustments and organise Access to Work where needed.
10. The goal is to support someone into sustainable work, but also to sustain the impact of any other changes that the participant has made. For example, participants can find it hard when their key worker relationship ends, so it is important to plan for this and work with someone on their routines, social networks, money management and the tools and strategies they can use themselves.

## I. Highly personalised support

Every individual supported on IPES not only has a very different life story and circumstances, but usually has one or more health conditions or disabilities, of which their experience of is specific to them. For that reason, a personalised approach is essential to every aspect of support. This includes:

- Working towards a job goal that is based on an **individual's work preferences**. As IPES participant Emma says: "It's got to be what they want to do, not what someone's prescribing that they need to do."
- **Completely bespoke support** tailored to the individual, whether that is meeting someone in an environment where they feel comfortable and able to focus (see point 3), or tailoring specialist support to their individual circumstance (see point 4). As key worker Denise describes it, key workers have "the freedom to be there for people." This theme of key worker freedom to tailor support came up repeatedly in the key worker focus group.
- **Spending time resolving life issues and support with everyday tasks**. Key workers gave examples of accompanying people to meet with council officers to resolve a council tax issue or housing problem or talking at length about a bereavement.
- **"Personalised" employer engagement**: engaging individual employers to talk about a specific role for a specific person (see point 5) and working with that employer to put in place the conditions to make it sustainable.

A key feature of personalised support is respect for an individual and challenging the ableism they encounter. "You've got to understand that a lot of the people we work with have been told what to do", key worker Jeana says. She gives the example of individuals that have had years of volunteering work, saying: "Well if you can take on someone volunteering for ten years then I'm sure they must be good enough to pay them to do a job. We've all seen it - the person being pushed around being told "Go on, you do this, you do that" - how does that make them feel? I've had participants say: "They don't want me because I've got a learning disability."

Another point that comes across from key worker insights is the importance of not making assumptions based on a specific health condition, or other characteristics such as age, for example. Asked whether they could identify any common themes in support needs based on age, key workers felt that generalisations about older or younger workers were particularly irrelevant to most of the people they work with, with communication preferences or digital awareness not particularly related to age. For people with learning disabilities who may present as learning in a different way to someone of their age without a learning disability, this personalised approach is particularly important.

"If you take a person with autism for whom it is noted in their learning plan that they can only have six people in the room, seven tips them over. How are you going to sit someone with autism in a room with 20 people? That person couldn't do it, whereas our service is individual - it's about them, and their time. That person-centred approach is important, it's really important."

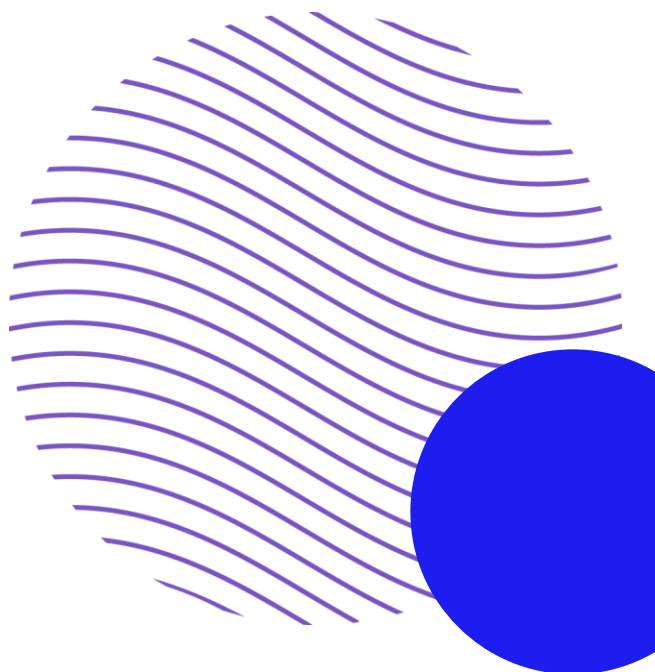
Key worker Kayleigh Bates

## The right job, not any job

As the case studies in this report illustrate, the core aim of the service is to help someone to find a job that they want to do. Jeana gives an example of someone she was working with who at first never spoke, with a previous support worker acting as "his mouth." She says:

"I came up to his area and took him into the job centre, where I used to see participants. It took him a while to start talking. We did different activities, and one day he said to me: "Jeana, I don't want to work in the shop or in the garage and I don't want to do cleaning." And I said: "You don't have to - that's what we're here for!" He did a level two qualification in food hygiene; he was interested in cookery and that's what he went in to."

For that reason, the training provision that key workers identify for participants is very individualised and diverse, with the format often tailored to an individual's health needs (e.g. on a one-to-one basis or with an adviser supporting the learning). Provision has included training in animation development, stand-up comedy (with the participant, who has cerebral palsy, doing their own show at the Edinburgh Festival this year), barbering, motorbike mechanics, youth work, accountancy, online marketing and a wide variety of other courses. This is true of digital inclusion support for participants too, with the specialist support fund enabling the purchasing of laptops, mobile phones, data and training, although much of the digital inclusion skills support is done one-to-one by the key workers.





## **Iain and Andrew – finding employers who are positive about employing disabled people**

Andrew first met his key worker Iain at Leeds Autism Services, a close working partner of IPES, and Andrew asked if he could join the programme. Previously, Andrew was employed at a pizza delivery business in Leeds but was let go during the pandemic and had not worked since.

Andrew's key worker Iain describes him as friendly, kind and keen to learn as well as tenacious and determined in trying to find work. Andrew is autistic and finds communicating with people in a work environment difficult. Iain and Andrew have developed a great partnership over the 18 months they have been working together, meeting face to face most weeks.

Andrew has a passion for food preparation. He is interested in learning about ingredients, safe preparation and particularly enjoys carrying out the work to a high standard. "It's something I wanted to do from an early age, I always enjoyed it", Andrew says. He also initially wanted to earn the money to get a dog to keep him company.

As well as research and emailing employers, Andrew and Iain went out on the road together visiting local food outlets and hotels, as Andrew wanted to be involved in the employer engagement process. Iain supported Andrew to take his food hygiene certificates (levels one and two). Andrew was there to support and talk Iain through the ups and downs of looking for the right job, including when Andrew was promised a job by a hotel in Leeds but failed to deliver on it; Andrew had been disappointed and annoyed. Iain says: "In his mind he was already working at the hotel and was excited by the prospect".

Given Andrew's considerable work experience and skills, Iain was very focused on ensuring that he was being considered for a sustainable job in the specific role he wanted, not unnecessary stints of work experience or volunteering. There were other job interviews that didn't work out, then it was Bianco Lounge in Leeds that gave him the chance to try out with them for two days and see how he got on.

Andrew now works at Bianco Lounge in food preparation and is extremely happy and motivated in his new role.

Thinking about what he has learned and how he has changed, Andrew says that his confidence has increased, he is more independent, and he is able to work much more effectively as part of a team. Andrew says: "I've started a new life, a new career. I'm making my way up, got boosted confidence now."

He has also made many small changes that give him greater independence, from operating his phone more effectively to knowing how to get his bus back and forth, as well as having more financial independence. He would like to be a sous chef and is confident that his new employer will help him on this path.

Crucially, both Iain and Andrew feel that he has the support in place that he needs to sustain the changes he has made. Iain says of his employer: "The guys at work know how to support him – they are brilliant, they've been so helpful."

### **Sustaining change**

Andrew is very concerned that he is going to really miss Iain once the support from IPES shortly ends. Therefore, Iain and Andrew have spent a lot of time discussing how his week will look and putting in place arrangements. As Andrew works Friday to Sunday, he still plans to attend Leeds

Autism Service for a day or two in the week, but Iain has also arranged for Andrew to start volunteering one day a week at Middleton Light Railway. Iain has arranged for a mentor at the railway to continue to support Andrew and help him with online training, which he finds difficult. He also looks forward to popping into Leeds Autism Service on a Friday and prepping some lunch, which he has been doing for some time now.

### **What can employers do?**

Asked about what employers can do to employ more autistic people and remove some of the barriers in their way, Andrew says that more employers should be open-minded, "and take on board that just because someone has Aspergers, doesn't mean they can't do a job. They can be a success like I am. I think every employer should be giving people a chance to get back into work."

He says: "It's a complicated thing, Aspergers, and it can be hard for employers to understand us. People are more aware of it now than they used to be - there's a lot more autism awareness. Sometimes, though, people only seem to focus on the disability rather than on the positives."

Iain adds that it is important for employers to meet people face to face, while there can be fear from employers about what they don't know, particularly around cost.

Andrew says of his employer: "Wish everyone was like that - it's been the best thing ever."



## 2. A strong key worker/participant partnership

A strong partnership between key worker and participant, with regular, unrushed conversations means that the key worker can really understand what an individual would like to do and what might help them to achieve it.

Both key workers and participants talk about the importance of continuing, wherever possible, to keep the same key worker supporting someone once they start work. As key worker Ellie says: "So when they've been working with an employment advisor for ages, they've built up that trust and they go into work, they've got that familiar face in the new environment." As Karl's story highlights, on any service there will sometimes be adviser changes, which need to be managed carefully as this can be difficult for the participant.

"If you get that bond, anything is possible."

Ian Kettleborough, IPES  
Business Manager

Once the key worker and participant have got to know each other better, the key worker is able to better understand what the participant wants to do and what they enjoy, then plan activities and support to help them achieve this. Alongside coaching, confidence-building, brokerage, challenge and troubleshooting, there is a lot of advocacy in the work that key workers do, accompanying people to all sorts of situations and finding "ways through" barriers that are holding them back.

### Communication

Communication skills come out as particularly important for IPES participants as a barrier to or enabler of sustainable employment - and key workers argue that one-to-one support is the most effective way of supporting people to communicate more confidently and be able to talk about themselves. Many participants on IPES find communication challenging for a variety of reasons, whether that is about learning difference or neurodiversity, a hearing impairment, a mental health condition, confidence or inexperience doing so. Many have spent a lot of time relatively isolated, particularly since the lockdowns of the pandemic.

Key worker Kayleigh talks about someone she worked with who had been seen as "too complex" by others and had been written off primarily because "they couldn't make eye contact or have that first initial conversation. Turns out this person was capable of coding," she says, "They wanted to go into computing or software development."

"Communication is such a big issue", key worker Jeana says. For that reason, Jeana has used her lived experience of being bipolar and her experience working in social care to create resources to support participants to talk about themselves, "keeping it short, sweet and concise". "Then we start to look at what some of the questions might be, competencies and so on", she says. "Its really coaching people so they don't have to prove that they are better [than a non-disabled person]. They have to prove that they can do the job."

## Jeana and Emma: Exploring self-employment

IPES key worker Jeana is supporting Emma, who wants to set up her own business. They usually meet in Emma's local shopping centre.

Emma says that she likes the fact that she can meet Jeana at her local shopping centre, as her health problems make it difficult to meet more centrally, which would involve a lot of time and preparation and cause her to worry. "I'd spend more time being anxious about getting somewhere than what I would get out of the session."

One of the things Emma likes about working with Jeana is that they work on all sorts of things, not just direct employability skills like CV writing. She has some advice for people designing services to help disabled people: "Before helping people into work, you need to think, is this person even in a place to even look at work, before they throw in applications and other things like that?"

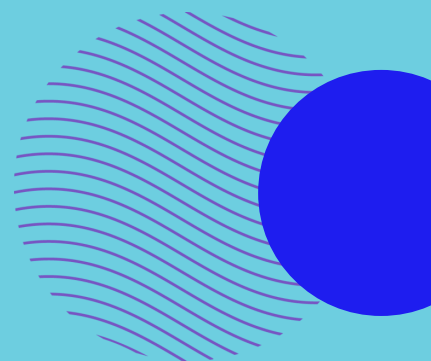
She says: "Jeana's helped me with a lot of things not just work. She's helped me sort out my care, my health stuff and some other problems that mean I can focus on starting up my business now. She's done it holistically, looked at everything in my life. It's just made a massive difference in my life including my confidence."

Emma is very motivated to set up her own business as a spiritual development coach and is currently undertaking an accredited course. From her work with Jeana, she knows that this will not be easy. Jeana is determined that Emma should be fully prepared before taking this decision, particularly when it comes to financial security and sustainability, which Jeana describes as "of the utmost importance."

She is working on a business plan and considering the unique selling point of what she has to offer, considering how she would find customers and researching what her competition would be. "It will take time", says Jeana. "By the time Emma is ready to take that decision, she will have her business plan, know what she has to do for HMRC and for her benefit administration, be able to keep her books and have the support she needs in place." Jeana will also support by putting in place some training for Emma's personal assistants, to ensure that they can support her to keep financial records, for example.

Emma believes that it is the person-centred nature of the support she has received that is what is enabling her to make changes, compared with other instances where she has not felt listened to. She says:

"I've learned that with the right support, anyone can start to improve things. It's got to be what they want to do, not what someone's prescribing that they need to do. I've learned that it needs to start with meeting the person and learning all about their situation and where they actually are, not where someone thinks they need to be."



### 3. Support in the right place

IPES is primarily an "out of the office" service, with "the flexibility to go out and meet people in their environment rather than drag them to you." Most of the work takes place out and about in the community. Business Manager Ian explains: "We can see people in their own area, we can see people at a coffee shop, in an office or walking in the park. We can make the participant feel at ease, by seeing them where they feel comfortable, which then helps with the journey." Talking about how they work, key workers gave examples of:

- Going with someone to the council to help them sort out a housing problem.
- Taking people to job interviews and being there to assist with completing forms or support other needs.
- Accompanying people on their bus journeys, to build their confidence in getting around and getting used to a journey to work. One person, for example, was accompanied by their key worker to travel one bus stop the first week, two the second, three the third and so on. Using public transport confidently was a key barrier to their employment.
- Taking someone to a GP appointment they may not otherwise make it to, or to the bank to open a bank account.
- Meeting people in their own home, in the park while walking, in a shopping centre or at the library.

Some of the benefits of this include:

- **Enabling people to take part:** Many people would be unable or unwilling to attend meetings in a busy office, or meetings far from where they live, for reasons of physical or hidden disability, for example. Key workers feel that if the service was office-based, many people would simply not be able to take part.
- **Tailoring the environment:** For example, one key worker says: I've had a couple of participants with schizophrenia – being a busy room with different people, with voices in their head – there's too much going on for them to be concentrating on what they are there for." She also gives the example of people who benefit from particular adaptations which are best used in a quiet situation such as a library. She says: "Coming from my background, I've got a lot of visual supports I can use. I've got my sign language I can use, which is more effective in a quiet, one-to-one situation than being in a busy office."
- **Building trust:** Meeting someone where they are most comfortable meeting is important in creating a positive key worker/ participant relationship. One key worker says: "I certainly found my early success in building that relationship with individuals was made easier because they trusted me, partly because I wasn't based in an office."

### 4. Delivered in partnership in the community

IPES works closely with a wide range of community and voluntary organisations, specialist disability support and the NHS. A mix of national and highly local organisations help support IPES participants, such as Working Minds, Genius Within, Clarion, Anxious Minds and Autism Plus as well as local sign language interpreters, counselling services, animal therapy centres, training providers and further education colleges.

The join-up with health services is particularly important – with community connectors and social prescribers highlighted as particularly valuable by key workers. Not only do these provide a link between clinical and social issues for people, but key workers say that they can also prove helpful relationships in cutting through the "admin" that can prevent a disadvantaged person getting the health support they need.

## 5. Intensive, personalised employer engagement

Employer engagement needs to be highly personalised to the individual employer in order to create the right opportunity for both the employer and the participant.

In line with supported employment good practice, key workers engage with employers themselves, working to help carve out specific opportunities for the participant they are supporting. As with other aspects of the programme, key workers highlight their freedom to be out of the office – knocking on employer's doors and taking participants to meet them face-to-face – as the most important difference when seeking to carve out individual job opportunities.

"We might make a contact with an employer and they say, "What about today?" So you can quickly go and pick your participant up and take them to meet them."

Melanie Holman, IPES key worker

Key workers see online recruitment processes as one of the biggest challenges in supporting people with complex needs into work. Key worker Iain explains:

"The biggest barrier is making people that may have literacy problems, sight problems, hearing problems – whatever the challenges are – complete an online process that for them is literally a barrier to work. The reasonable adjustment is to allow us and the participant to speak one-to-one with the employer – that is where we have the greatest success."

While this is not so much of an issue with smaller employers, it does mean that with larger organisations there is often a need to work with the employer to effectively bypass their own recruitment system. For example, Key worker Denise gives the example of some work she did with the NHS in Barnsley, where they were able to get round the challenging NHS application system by the employer coming to them and meet the participants first to explore their skills and suitability for the jobs available.

The objective of meeting the employer face-to-face with the participants is often true of early conversations about reasonable adjustments also. Key worker Melanie says: "It can be more difficult to do over the phone. It's better to go and make that impression face-to-face, describe what the programme does, and then you can start talking about reasonable adjustments and disability confidence and engage them with that. It makes a massive difference doing things face-to-face – not just with the participants but with the employers."

## Iain and Hussain – Breaking down societal barriers through communication and rapport

Hussain has great mathematical skills and a passion for numbers. He is also deaf and his first language is BSL, English his second. He lost his job in the lockdown of March 2020 and had been unable to get back into work.

Iain, Hussain's key worker, describes his previous role working for a parking fines company: "His role was to check over 250 registration plates a day, match them to digital images of cars and adjust spreadsheets accordingly to ensure accuracy in issuing fines. He was the only person in the small team who was deaf; no one spoke to him as he didn't have any support from Access to Work for an interpreter, as no-one in his work knew about it (and neither did he). His only form of communication was by email. For Hussain, work was functional and quite lonely, and then once made redundant, this left him with very little."

Hussain joined IPES in March 2023 He met with Iain and his BSL interpreter (John for six months then Rosie since November 2023) for two hours each week. As Iain says: "I kept consistency of the same translator each week so we could work together as a team and this way Hussain could be in control of what we were doing and he didn't have to re-explain himself each week and we all got to know each other's sense of humour and mannerisms, so we could build on what we had done each week and not have to restart."

Hussain was clear that he wanted support to find a role working in finance. As Iain says: "Once he made it clear to me that working with numbers in finance was his only goal, I had to help him achieve that. He had a great vision of what he wanted to do." He worked hard to pass his AAT exams, and Iain supported him to pass his Sage and Xero accounting exams, by translating words he didn't understand and rewriting them from jargon into plain English so Hussain could answer in BSL to his interpreter.

Iain found an opportunity for an apprenticeship scheme with HSBC which was not quite the right role for him but resulted in the bank referring Hussain on to their finance and HR team. The bank was not satisfied that they had given Hussain the right approach in his initial interview, so they restructured it, making reasonable adjustments so that it was BSL-friendly. Iain describes the resulting interview as more like a four-way conversation between Hussain, Iain, the hiring manager and the BSL interpreter. The recruitment process was lengthy, with weekly conference calls with the recruitment team so that nothing got left out, with Iain meanwhile making Hussain's application for an Access to Work grant to ensure that the right support would be in place.

Since Hussain started his new career working as a cost analyst for the call centre team he has been enjoying the role immensely. Iain continues to meet up with him and his interpreter monthly and says he has learned a great deal from working with Hussain, not least the sheer challenges and complications facing deaf people. He recalls: "We had many weeks entertaining each other over the year, Hussain, Rosie and John teaching me BSL and us all learning about each other, what we liked, disliked and we have become good colleagues through the process. Hussain is now a key finance officer working in a leading global bank, I am proud to have helped him to do that and Hussain should be incredibly proud of what he has achieved."

## 6. In-work support

"There's never any sense of work entry being "that's the job done", says key worker Ellie. The programme allows for six months' in-work support, usually with the same key worker supporting the participant once in work.

Compared to less-intensive services where in-work support will usually be done over the phone, in-work support on IPES is often much more intensive given the need to bed-in reasonable adjustments and resolve any issues that emerge, to support someone to both sustain and enjoy their work, often with the help accessed through Access to Work. Adjustments for health and disability are just one aspect of that person's transition though - often settling in with patterns of transport, childcare, financial issues and most of all, establishing relationships and communication at work, are some of the issues likely to be covered. Learning points include:

- Employment support is there for the employer as well as the participant. It is a three-way conversation to check that the placement is working for both, support it and make any adjustments.
- The necessary in-work support can be intensive and often involves key worker visits to the employer to see how things are going. It might involve going into work and helping someone go over their work routines, for example, or supporting them to undertake training.
- Often people will be working part-time, so have the flexibility to meet an adviser face-to-face, usually monthly, to catch up. This time can be very important to have a proper conversation about how someone feels in their new role.

"I've just got a lady into work. I've worked really closely with her manager to help make this happen and he's given me her full probation meetings breakdown for the next 12 weeks for me to attend, and which obviously is important to establish that relationship and just to make sure that she is sustaining work – and I can get involved if there are any issues. It might just be something simple like a little bit more e-learning that the manager might not have time to help her to do, but it's those sort of things that we can dedicate time to that help someone get settled in."

Nikki Yarwood, IPES key worker

## 7. Diverse teams with life experience

Having a team made up from people with a diverse range of skills, cultural backgrounds, knowledge specialisms and lived experiences is particularly important on a holistic, pan-disability employment support service. From a professional point of view, this enables key workers to benefit from their colleagues' knowledge and experience, whether that is knowledge of particular conditions, the benefits system or speaking different languages such as BSL. But in a highly relational service, lived

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experience also helps key workers in establishing relationships with participants and understanding where they are coming from.

Key worker Adam explains: "One of the key things is identifying the different skill sets that everyone's got and kind of leaning on each other. I've got to use the fact that I can speak Polish to support participants who are Polish and struggled with understanding certain paperwork and processes within the job centre and what was expected of them."

The team also has regular visits from expert external organisations, such as the Autistic Society or Andy's Man Club. While they build up their professional knowledge of different conditions, ultimately every individual will be different, so there are a lot of caseload discussions to share advice on what may have worked well with someone with a similar condition in the past.

"Resilience [for key workers] is a massive thing, also lived experience as well. Because you've got to relate to some people that have been in some bad places and may still be in a bad place. So sometimes it's that empathy that matters".

Ian Kettleworth, Business Manager

## 8. Wellbeing and safeguarding support for teams

The team are supporting many people with depression and other mental health conditions, and key workers speak about how this can affect the key workers themselves. Senior key worker Melanie says: "It can really affect you. It can bring you down and you need to give your all to every participant." For that reason, she says, key workers: "need to feel they have somebody behind them. They need to be able to talk amongst each other." The team has a morning kick-off meeting every morning and an evening review meeting each day, partly to make sure that they are always able to discuss any difficult issues, and also feel that it is essential doing this work to always feel that you can speak to a manager individually too. The team have all done Mental Health First Aid training. As Melanie says: "There's got to be that support within the team where someone can go "I've got to take a bit of time" because we've all been there, an appointment where you just don't know what to say, and the conversations with participants that can be really upsetting."

Because team members are meeting participants, employers and others out and about, they stress the importance of safeguarding practices too. A shared diary, key workers calling in when they have got to an appointment (and when they are about to leave) and panic alarms are some of the practices that support the safety of key workers when out and about.

## **Kayleigh and Karl - Finding a supportive employer and an enjoyable job**

Karl had spent a lot of time looking for a job but needed to find something that would work for him because of some quite specific criteria around his health condition and medication. He had been applying for a lot of jobs, finding it both frustrating and soul destroying not to hear back from employers. He said: "I was getting to a point where I was in a really dark place because, you know, just with all the medical conditions and because I wasn't going anywhere in a job and didn't have money, life was looking pretty gloomy."

That is where he found the IPES service made a difference, in the "brokerage" role that Kayleigh could play in working out how a role could work for both Karl and a potential employer, rather than just "apply, apply, apply, and keep up numbers for whoever" as Karl puts it.

He describes the most positive thing about IPES as "I actually got a job at the end of it, so that was the most enjoyable." He successfully found a role as a cleaner in the hospitality sector earlier this year and says that this has changed his life dramatically.

Karl says: "My life's changed massively, because that little bit of financial help has just completely turned my life around. Just that little bit, even though it's not a lot. And it [finding work] has helped me with my depression and my anxiety as well. Because...it's the fact that you're back in society, feel like you are doing something again. You feel like you have actually got a purpose, because when you haven't got a purpose, things aren't good."

The one thing he would modify about the service is that Karl experienced changes of key worker, due to staff leaving. He explains why it is so important to have one consistent key worker on this sort of support: "People like me need that continuity, but also to deal with someone that knows my background and not having to keep repeating myself, because it's really difficult to talk about."

The job is going well for Karl, who has already been promoted to a team leader position with a pay rise. "I love the job, I love the people", Karl says. Instead of: "I've got to get up for work" I'm like: "I'll see all the guys tomorrow". There are two main things that he likes about it – the people, and the fact that he is trusted with autonomy to get on with the work that needs doing. He feels that his employer trusts him to do a great job and finds this motivating.

Ongoing in-work support is there to enable him to check in with Kayleigh, but he says that "the company that I'm with are really accommodating to people" and has not had any problems so far. He feels that his employer is positive about meeting employee needs and would act quickly to help should any issues arise.

## 9. Finding open-minded employers

The key ask of employers from key workers and participants is simply being open to recruiting disabled people and those with health conditions or different learning styles, as well as being willing to flex recruitment processes to create a level playing field for someone. This is the main point made by participants in the interviews when asked about what more employers could do. As IPES participant Andrew says of his own condition: "[Employers should] take on board that just because someone has Aspergers, doesn't mean they can't do a job. They can be a success like I am. I think every employer should be giving people a chance to get back into work."

As one key worker explains, it is not about trying to find roles for people who do not have the skills. It is about employers often failing to understand that the person does have the skills - but they do not see this as they are preoccupied with a person's disability. If an employer is willing to give people a chance, then key workers can work with them to make it work. The key worker can bring their specialist knowledge and support to help the employer put in place the right adjustments and organise Access to Work where needed.

## 10. Always focusing on sustainment

In the workshop with key workers, the word "sustain" crops up in numerous different contexts. It is not just supporting someone to achieve sustainable employment, but so that they can better manage setbacks or changes in the future. A lot of time is spent by key workers planning with a participant (and their employer) for when the IPES support comes to an end. Some of the main themes include:

- **Independence and support:** Through one-to-one sessions, the key worker is often trying to gradually support an individual to live more independently of some sources of support that may be restricting their potential, especially where this may include assumptions about what they can and cannot do. However, it also means making sure that the participant has access to sources of future support, both social and community.
- **Routines:** Key workers spend a lot of time with participants going over their routines, both in the working day and outside of it. Some people need a lot of help with this at work, while for others it is having regular things that they do outside of work. For example, key worker Iain has worked with Andrew to plan out his week and worked out sources of support and activities, including a volunteering session that will replace their current in-work support session.
- **Tools:** Whether finding ways to manage a particular condition more effectively, or supporting someone to recognise what cheers them up, key workers support someone to identify and articulate these so that they can call on them in the future. Daniel, for example, talks about the techniques he has used in therapy sessions to "control anxiety and get my mind focused" but also the tools to search for a job the next time he should need to do this. He says: "If I had to job search again, the thought of doing it again on my own doesn't feel so daunting, as I have the tools and knowledge to cope with it if I need to."



## **Kayleigh and Daniel – Gaining the tools to help in the future**

Daniel started a new job recently as a dog walker and pet sitter, having received support from IPES to manage his health condition and to find work. Speaking to his key worker Kayleigh about how his new job is going, Daniel has been learning the ropes in his new role and had completed his employer's induction.

He found the biggest barrier to work was having the paid work experience in his chosen role on his CV, although he had gained plenty of experience through volunteering and IPES had supported him to gain an accredited level three qualification in animal care and complete a canine first aid course. He also found it challenging to not get discouraged in the process of searching for work.

Daniel says that one of the things he has gained from his time on IPES is "learning the techniques to control anxiety and keep my mind focused, so I'm not overthinking and going down a rabbit hole of 'what ifs'". This has helped greatly with job interviews: "Having the techniques to be able to feel a little bit of natural anxiety about something like a job interview, but not have it escalate. That's probably been the most helpful thing." He continues:

"I just feel like I've got more of the tools to help me. It's nice to have that access to someone to support you, meet up, just talk things through, and if I had to job search again, the thought of doing this again on my own doesn't feel so daunting, as I have the tools and knowledge to cope with it if I need to. And it's not like I'd get stuck in a situation now – I always know I can talk to someone."

### **An enjoyable job**

Talking about how his job was going, Daniel says that most of all he loves working with dogs and enjoys the variety of the role:

"It's not like every day's the same. Most people's jobs, often there's only slight differences with every day they are there. My job, every dog's different. It's never a dull day. I'm not getting stuck in a routine and negative sense of "is this all that there is, is it worth it?" Every day, even if it's just for an hour, it feels worth it and it feels meaningful. That's what I like about it – it feels like I have a purpose in life."

For his next step, he wants to further his interest in dog training. "I've spoken to my employer and they're more than happy to help with more experience so I can hopefully host my own classes and so on", Daniel says.

### **Advice for employers**

Daniel's advice for employers on employing more disabled people and those with health conditions is to be open-minded. He also thinks it is important that employers value relevant experience that may not be gained through paid work, recalling "I made the effort to get experience by other means, such as by volunteering at dog rescue centres. I think employers should put a bit more value on that. Because you are going out and doing it yourself, off your own bat, and learning."

# Discussion points

## 1. Intensive support is not for everyone, but personalisation should be

It is very important not to generalise about disabled people and those with health conditions, a group that numbers in the millions and makes up one in four of the working age population. Some people need very intensive support, while other people will not need or benefit from this, leaving aside the higher cost of support that needs much lower ratios of advisers to participants. Having a range of employment support options that vary in both intensity and personalisation – and getting referrals right – is key. Within these options, however, there must be investment in services that afford the kind of one-to-one, mostly face-to-face, entirely personalised support covered here – especially in supporting people with learning disabilities. It remains a national scandal that only around 5% of adults with a learning disability known to their local authority in England are in paid work.

Personalisation, however, particularly the process of establishing a participant's job goals and supporting them to achieve them, is a common feature of all effective employment support. A recent review from the Learning and Work Institute<sup>2</sup> states: "In a number of national evaluations, a key driver of quality was the ability for advisers to tailor support to each individual." Finding innovative ways to increase even further the level of personalisation across all mainstream and lighter-touch employment support will help support many more people into work.

## 2. Neurodiversity should be front and centre of future employment support design

IPES provides specialist support for many autistic people, those with dyslexia or dyspraxia and other learning differences. They face huge barriers in having their skills and potential taken seriously by employers, with only around three in ten autistic people in any kind of paid employment. The Buckland Review of Autism Employment<sup>3</sup> highlighted the poor outcomes autistic people tend to experience when they tell an employer about their autism – something that the support of an in-work employment support adviser can really assist with. Given the rapid pace of learning about neurodiversity in recent years, it is not surprising that the labour market has a lot of catching up to do on this issue.

Adapting support, training and, crucially, recruitment practices, to reflect the different ways people learn and work needs to happen in a much more widespread way, given the fast-growing proportion of both the current working age population and the school-age population who are neurodivergent. Employers have much to gain from recruiting in a way that can be flexible to reflect the different ways people think and learn.

<sup>2</sup> Learning & Work Institute, [What support helps disabled people and people with health conditions move into sustainable work?](#) October 2024.

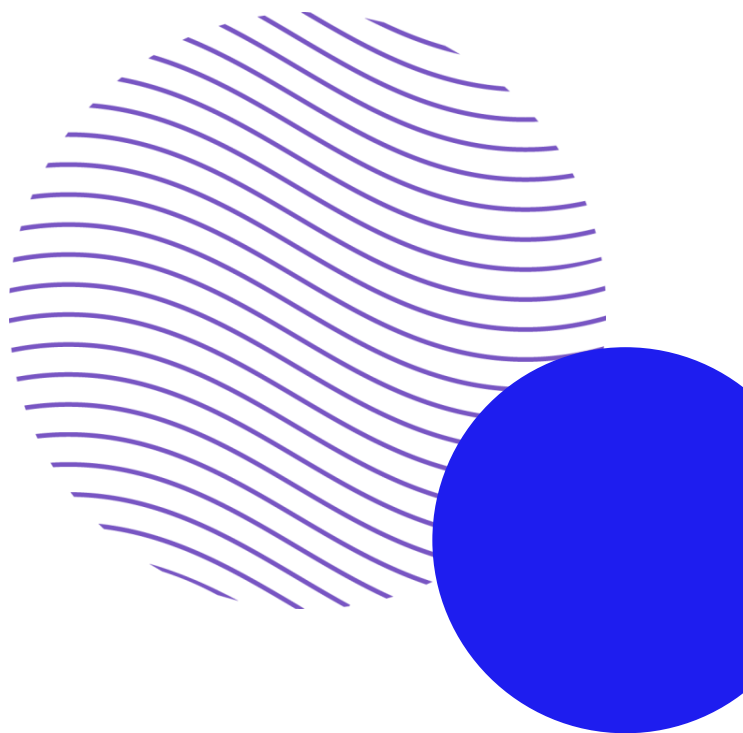
<sup>3</sup> [The Buckland Review of Autism Employment: report and recommendations](#), February 2024.

### 3. Supported employment good practice and community support

The IPES service was not commissioned in a way that required fidelity to either of the recognised supported employment networks, those of Individual Placement and Support (IPS) and the Supported Employment Quality Framework (SEQF). The main difference between IPES and the IPS model is that IPS teams integrate their work within mental health services, which is not the case on IPES. While a majority of IPES participants have more than one disability or health issue, they do not all have mental health conditions; many have a sensory or physical disability.

The other main difference is the speed at which both the IPS and SEQF supported employment approaches focus on job search and employer engagement. The IPES service tends to take more of a lead from the individual participant in terms of moving into directly engaging employers. In some cases this will be very swift; whereas for other individuals they may prefer to focus on making progress on a key barrier, such as homelessness, first. For others, skills to enter their preferred job may need to be enhanced with training before they start applying.

However, IPES very closely mirrors other core requirements of the IPS and SEQF approaches, particularly the emphasis on personalisation, competitive employment, tailored, face-to-face employer engagement and lengthy (although finite) in-work support. The IPS fidelity framework's emphasis on providing a high proportion of employment support to the participant in natural community settings is also a strong feature of IPES. We hope that the findings in this report on personalisation and employer engagement, in particular, will be of interest to practitioners working to these models of supported employment.



# Reed in Partnership

