



Neurodivergent People: Employment

Volume 772: debated on Tuesday 9 September 2025

See the full transcript [here](#)

Introduction and Framing

This Westminster Hall debate, secured by Charlotte Cane (Liberal Democrat, Ely and East Cambridgeshire), examined how to better support neurodivergent people into employment. Cane opened by stressing that “neurodiversity has a huge range of impacts. Many neurodivergent people need no support with employment, while those with certain learning disabilities need significant support.” The debate united MPs across parties around the principle **that neurodivergent people want to work, have valuable skills, but face systemic barriers that deny them fair access to the labour market.**

Education and Early Intervention

A recurring theme was the need to start support in schools. Adam Dance (LD, Yeovil) called for “**universal screening for neurodivergence, alongside proper teacher training,**” arguing that challenges often begin before adulthood. Cane agreed: early recognition and support were “incredibly important.” Vikki Slade (LD, Mid Dorset and North Poole) pointed out that teacher training currently includes “only half a day of autism-specific education,” calling this “bordering on negligent” given the scale of need. She argued that at least one annual inset day should be dedicated to neurodiversity.

Specialist schools were praised for nurturing ambition, while MPs highlighted gaps in the SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) system. Sarah Dyke (LD, Glastonbury and Somerton) described it as “broken, underfunded and adversarial,” warning that without fixing education support, “we will fail them in employment.”

Barriers to Employment and Statistics

The scale of exclusion was underlined by stark statistics. Cane noted that **under 30% of people with severe or specific learning difficulties were in employment in 2023-24, compared with 82% of non-disabled people.** Afzal Khan (Lab, Manchester Rusholme) pointed out that “having 30% of autistic people in employment compared with 82% is a huge gap,” arguing for a national campaign to raise awareness among employers. Josh Newbury (Lab, Cannock Chase) reinforced that the gap is not due to lack of ability but because “too many decision makers simply do not believe in non-visible impairments, or resist making adjustments.”

MPs also stressed pay disparities. Cane highlighted raw pay gaps of **28% for autistic people and 20% for those with severe learning difficulties.** She warned: “Even if they are among the lucky ones who find employment, they might not make it past their first year anniversary in work and they will be paid less than their colleagues.”

The Role of Employers and Business Initiatives

Examples of good practice were celebrated. In Tiverton, Foxes Hotel was described as “the Oxbridge of training” for young people with learning disabilities, using structured on-the-job training. In Ely, Prospects Trust Farm provides placements leading to jobs, while Harry Specters chocolate company was praised for hiring autistic staff at every stage of production. Cane told of one employee who, after years of bullying and isolation, “has thrived ever since,” moving into their own flat and building an independent life.

Other businesses, such as Switch Now in St Neots, demonstrated the value of personalised support and community partnerships, boasting an **83% success rate in moving participants into work or volunteering**. MPs repeatedly stressed that small adjustments, even “as simple as swapping from analogue to digital clocks”, can make workplaces inclusive.

Yet bureaucracy remains a problem. Cane relayed businesses describing the system as “like a game of bureaucratic hopscotch,” weighed down by assessments and paperwork. Peter Prinsley (Lab, Bury St Edmunds) argued that “**most adjustments cost less than £75**,” but without guidance and a national framework, employers “do not know where to start.”

Access to Work and Systemic Failures

The **Access to Work scheme** was singled out as a major obstacle. MPs gave multiple examples of delays and dysfunction: one case took six months to approve, another over a year. Cane quoted a constituent who told: “*The message seems to be stop getting the help you need, wait months for a decision, and then maybe we’ll support you.*” Claire Young (LD, Thornbury and Yate) noted the irony that applicants often need strong executive functioning skills — precisely the area where many neurodivergent people struggle. Daisy Cooper (LD, St Albans) branded it “anything but access to work,” highlighting a case of a **393-day wait**.

Small organisations also suffer, as cash flow is undermined by slow reimbursements. Cane pressed the government to clear backlogs and redesign the system so it supports, rather than obstructs, inclusion.

Specialist Apprenticeships and Supported Internships

A significant focus was on pathways into work. Cane called for specialist apprenticeships with tailored work plans, while others stressed supported internships. Newbury highlighted that access is often limited to those with an **EHCP (Education, Health and Care Plan)**, which many families struggle to secure. The **Buckland Review** recommended dropping this requirement, but the Government has yet to act.

Internships run by the NHS, DHL, and logistics firms were praised by **Minister Stephen Timms**, who said they not only helped neurodivergent employees thrive but also enriched staff teams: “**NHS staff find it extremely rewarding to support the interns and they enjoy that part of the job.**”

Rural Barriers and Transport

Joe Morris (Lab, Hexham) warned that support regimes are too focused on urban Britain. In rural Northumberland, poor public transport and precarious work make access much harder. Vikki Slade also urged MPs to back amendments to the Bus Services Bill, pointing out that disabled people should not have to wait until after 9:30 a.m. to use concessionary passes if they are to access employment.

Government Response - Minister Stephen Timms

The Minister for Social Security and Disability acknowledged the severity of the challenge: “Only **31% of autistic people are in any sort of employment, compared with 55% of disabled people overall.**” He pledged to reduce the “**gap within the disability employment gap**” and outlined reforms:

- An **independent panel of academics and experts**, led by Professor Amanda Kirby, is reviewing neurodiversity in the workplace.
- The new **Connect to Work scheme** will provide locally commissioned, personalised support with specialist advisers.
- The **Pathway to Work Green Paper** proposes reforms to Access to Work, aiming to cut delays and increase capacity.
- The **Disability Confident scheme** will be tightened to make accreditation criteria more robust.
- The government aims to achieve an **80% overall employment rate**, requiring higher participation from disabled and neurodivergent people.

Timms praised local examples, from farms to logistics firms, and encouraged “job carving”, redesigning roles to fit individuals’ strengths. He promised transparency by publishing outcomes from the **47 local Connect to Work programmes.**

Conclusion

This debate revealed **cross-party consensus** on the need for urgent reform. MPs highlighted failings in the SEND system, stark gaps in employment and pay, and systemic barriers like Access to Work delays. They also showcased inspiring businesses proving that with support, neurodivergent people can thrive.

The Minister recognised both the moral and economic case: raising employment rates for autistic people alone could deliver £1.5 billion in annual benefits. The message was clear: **with the right adjustments, training, and systemic reform, neurodivergent people can contribute fully to the economy and society.** The challenge is moving from rhetoric to delivery.



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