

MINUTES
Accessible Workplaces

Women and Work APPG Meeting, Monday 29 April 2019
2-3pm, Committee Room 8, House of Commons

Chair: Jess Phillips MP, Co-Chair of the Women and Work APPG

Parliamentarians in attendance:

- Baroness Garden of Frognal
- Baroness Thomas of Winchester
- Baroness Uddin

Minutes

Jess Phillips MP convened the meeting and introduced the panellists. She stated that the meeting would focus on not only physical disabilities but making workplaces accessible in every regard.

The first speaker, **Placida Ojinnaka, Lawyer, Social Worker and Activist** stated that her disability had never been an issue as she had learnt to accept the situation and maximise the opportunities that her disability has brought her. She said she works to encourage ethnic women with disabilities to get into sectors such as social care and law and has found that the best way to open doors for other people is through engagement.

She stated that disabled people want to be independent and it is not about being assisted. She said people want to be able to bring their whole selves to work and therefore not being able to access certain opportunities or places because of a disability can make people feel unworthy. She highlighted that if you cannot go somewhere because you cannot get up the stairs then you start to question if you even belong there and that you are not being valued or heard. She stated that by excluding disabled people from the workplace, employers were missing out on valuable employees and what they can contribute. She argued that due to the difficulties that many disabled people face in everyday life, they are inherently good problem solvers which is a valuable skill in any workplace.

Placida said that disabled people make up the largest minority group globally, including non-visible disabilities. However, she stated that despite this, disabilities are often left out of mainstream discourse. She said that there was more to be done to mainstream disabled people and stopping people from automatically compartmentalising. She stated that requesting adjustments in the workplace shouldn't be expensive but the idea of having to make adjustments can put employers off. She highlighted that society tends to view disabled people as objects of pity and that many of them are labelled as "inspirations" yet employers don't want to hire them because they don't want to spend money adjusting the workplace.

She said that the best way to make workplaces accessible was through changing views by building bridges and reaching out to people to challenge them on what is possible and in this regard, if more employers are challenged on hiring disabled people, then a cultural change will take place.

Jess Phillips MP thanked Placida and reiterated that if someone is unable to access the workplace, then they can very easily feel forgotten about which can compound a feeling of worthlessness.

Stephen Lismore, Head of Employer Engagement, Disability, Employment and Support Directorate, Department for Work and Pensions said that for disabled women in particular, there is an added challenge as women are more likely to be in lower paid occupations where it is harder to request adjustments. Furthermore, the addition of caring responsibilities makes it even harder to balance. He outlined that he would touch on four areas of work: Disability Confident, Access to work, cultural changes and universal design.

He said Disability Confident was a scheme co-developed with disabled people and was designed to tread the balance between a scheme that was easy for employers, so they would sign up, but also had enough rigour so that disabled people felt that it was improving the workplace for them. So far, he said, 12,000 employers have signed up which is more than four times the number that were signed up to the previous scheme. He stated that Disability Confident is a voluntary scheme and that it was useful to think of it as a tool kit as employers can choose to use it or not.

He said that when encouraging employers to sign up, they need high quality staff and by not hiring disabled staff, they are missing out on a huge pool of talent which could ultimately affect their business.

Moving on to Access to Work, he said that this scheme has been long-standing, having been around since the early 1990s. It offers financial support for workplace adjustments that go beyond the legal responsibility of the employers. It can pay for a range of adjustments including software. He highlighted that Access to Work was having a disproportionately positive effect on women because women are concentrated in lower paid jobs and it is these employers who require more support on making workplaces accessible.

On culture change, he said that the Disability Confident scheme is all about changing the underlying workplace culture so that employers and employees stop talking about making adjustments for disabled people and instead, it becomes the norm to make adjustments to suit a range of people. He highlighted that it is hoped that all employers will eventually sign up to Disability Confident. However, he said that the real challenge has been embedding cultural change in larger organisations and importantly, throughout a whole organisation so that all members of staff understand how accessible workplaces benefit them and their workplaces.

On universal design, he stipulated that this was related to culture change. At the moment, he said that disabled people need to declare a disability to get support but these adjustments should be embedded into new buildings so people don't have to ask for them to be made. He highlighted that only 20% of the disabled working age population declare their disability and this raises issues as some disabilities are visible but some are not. He highlighted that mental health issues are particularly difficult for employees to declare because of the ongoing stigma and that this is an issue that the government is concerned about. Related to cultural change, he highlighted that disabled people were often wary about declaring their disabilities as they were concerned about discrimination and do not see any benefits from declaring.

Stephen stated that the ethos behind universal design was that in building and designing a building, it is being built for everyone. He highlighted that some examples were making sure doors were wide enough for wheelchairs, carpets were clearly marketed for people with visual impairments and there were adjustable desks in offices. He said that embedding such design into buildings helps all employers as it gives everyone equal opportunity which in turn drives increases in productivity.

Jess Phillips MP thanked Stephen for his contribution.

Dr Nancy Doyle, Founder of Genius Within stated that she was an occupational psychologist and that her organisation worked with people with a range of conditions which affected cognition including ADHD and dyspraxia. Genius Within works to support businesses to make reasonable adjustments for people with neurodiverse conditions and also works to support adults who have been incarcerated as a high percentage of the prison population are neurodiverse.

She stipulated that in the workplace, people were beginning to talk about how to attract the best talent and make the workplace suitable for everyone. However, she said there were still issues with getting the business as a whole on board with the idea of inclusion as some people have the preconception that if they hire someone with a disability, they might be difficult to work with or may be difficult to give feedback to. She highlighted that Microsoft had recognised that people with autism tend to make good coders but that this still involves 'othering'. Instead, she argued, there needed to be systemic inclusion.

She said that we still don't know enough about how to improve recruitment and management for people with neurodiverse conditions. However, she highlighted how important research was in this area as 51% of the prison population have dyslexia and only 16% of people with autism have a job.

She argued that society has created a set of norms and that we live in an age where to be successful, you need to be literate, numerate and able to concentrate for 8 hours. She highlighted that other smaller aspects like being able to make and hold eye contact were seen as successful traits. However, she argued that society needs to redress these conceptions of success. She also added that 10% of the population have dyslexia and questioned at what point does this still count as a disability when it is so mainstream.

She highlighted her work on the TV show, 'Employable Me' and gave the example of one autistic man who had a special interest and expertise in politics. However, one of the requirements of the job was that he had to wear a tie. She stated that the man found it very difficult to put the tie on every morning which wasted time and left him feeling frustrated and he also found the tie very constricting. She said that we need to start matching the demands of the job to what is being recruited for and if this does not happen, it leads to a decrease in productivity. She argued that employers should design the advert around the actual job, rather than outdated conceptions.

Jess Phillips MP agreed that there should be an emphasis on skills-based job interviews.

Shani Dhanda, Events Manager and Founder of the Diversability Card said that she worked for Virgin Media helping them to improve employer and customer support for disabled people. She said that due to her condition, she felt she lived in a world that was not designed for her, but she that she has managed to turn that into a talent. She highlighted that because of the challenges she had faced in her own life, she was naturally good at problem solving and project design.

She said she had a lot of experience in applying for jobs and consistently being rejected or not hearing anything back. She said that this was confusing for her as she was more than qualified. To rectify this, she took the sentence out of her CV which specified that she had a condition and found that she was then being invited to job interviews.

She discussed the Diversability card which provides discounts for disabled people to brands, service, and entertainment providers. She highlighted that there were many additional costs faced by disabled people such as charging your electric wheelchair and that disabled consumers were often overlooked by retailers. She highlighted the success of the card with 10,000 on the waiting list and retailers were keen to sign up because they recognised that disabled customers had spending potential that was not being capitalised on.

Q&A

Jess Phillips MP then opened the floor to questions.

Baroness Thomas of Winchester stated that "Access to Work" should be attached to a person so when they go to an interview, they can say they are part of access to work and therefore do not need to explain their situation every time they change jobs. She also discussed hidden disabilities and asked if people with such disabilities should be encouraged to tell employers or not.

Nancy Doyle said that there had been lots of research on the benefits and risks of disclosure. However, she said that ultimately, the main question was whether someone wanted to work for an organisation that would discriminate against them if they did raise a hidden disability.

She said that as a Disability Confident employer herself, one of the benefits was that employers no longer had to ask what the applicant's condition was, they could simply ask whether they required any reasonable adjustments. She highlighted that her organisation, when recruiting had also discussed the adjustments they had already offered to other people. She said that this showed the employer was willing and that many people do not know what reasonable adjustments they may need or are available to them, for example, the use of assistive technology.

Stephen Lismore said that this was something they were hearing more and more companies doing as instead of asking people if they were disabled or needed adjustments, they were simply asking everyone if they required any adjustments to do the job properly. He highlighted that this was important in creating cultural change. On Access to Work, he said that the government was looking at the disability passport as it can be disheartening for disabled people to have to tell their story over and over again. Instead, with a disability passport, employers and employees could save time and identify what changes they need and this information would follow them so they would not have to repeat their needs.

Deidre Costigan from Unison said she liked the concept of universal design but that it was very focused on physical and technological elements. She asked how to focus policy and the adjustments that are needed in this regard. She said that quite a lot of the procedures that disabled people face are detrimental to their work. She argued that universal design was predicated on new buildings and that members of Unison had found that they asked for reasonable adjustments but the majority of members work in old buildings. She asked how these people get the adjustments that they need.

Stephen Lismore highlighted that there were many examples of old buildings being retrofitted and that in the long term, these buildings were actually saving money. He said that the government was working to incorporate Disability Confident into procedures so that it was embedded in how employers designed their workplace, designed their job adverts and how they provide a more inclusive workplace.

Deidre Costigan from Unison said there had been resistance from employers in accepting that disability leave should be included in an employer's employment rights. She said that one of the issues when interacting with the government was that it was not clear which department this would come under as it was an issue to do with safety at work.

Nancy Doyle said that there needed to be greater investment in Access to Work as all assessments are sub-contracted and there is limited oversight in terms of quality control.

A member of the audience said that employers often did not support women who want to work but cannot work a full week, instead they can only work 2-3 days because of a disability. She stated

that there should be some kind of assessment and inspection process for employers who are Disability Confident.

Jess Phillips MP said that flexibility is needed to make the workplace better for everyone and that the ability to secure good and stable part time work was essential for disabled people but also a preferred option for many other people.

A member of the audience noted that it was essentially a question about culture change and that this could be done through coaching and education. She asked how this could be done across a diverse set of people?

Shani Dhanda said that the business disability forum was a good forum for this kind of activity and that Virgin Media had recently used it as a way to hold itself to account. However, she stated that one issue was that whilst Disability Confident was free, the business disability forum was more expensive.

Stephen Lismore said there had been debate about whether a self-assessment system or externally administered system was better. He said that the best systems come from people who want to take part, rather than being forced to.

Jess Phillips MP questioned how the Disability Confident scheme could be incentivised.

Stephen Lismore said that they were trying to move every government department towards it and trying to extend it further in the private sector. He highlighted that for example, Sainsbury's was a disability confident scheme but they were trying to extend this to its full supply chain.

Nancy Doyle said that another issue was that to inspire people to want to be disability confident, the system needed to prove that it worked.

Jess Phillips MP agreed that it was better to allow voluntary signing up, especially at the beginning. However, she highlighted that with issues like the gender pay gap, there was no mandatory way of enforcing it.

Placida Ojinnaka raised the issue of the disability pay gap. She stated that one of the first steps in addressing this would be to start a conversation around it and for employers to speak to disabled employees about this.

A member of the audience said that part of the issue with changing work culture was the way that businesses viewed the ideal work culture as full-time work as this is what works for businesses. However, she said that a disability and fulltime work can often not work and the lack of this kind of employment makes it hard to find good employment. She asked how we can make people aware that productivity is more than just being in an office for 7 hours a day, 5 days a week?

Placida agreed that there was a huge issue with presenteeism in the workplace.

Jess Phillips MP asked the panellists for their closing remarks.

Nancy Doyle argued that there is a need for more evidence but that things were changing in the workplace. She highlighted that 20 years ago, no one had heard of neurodiversity but that flexibility in the workplace was coming and the more research was done and the more that senior people in companies role modelled flexible working, the quicker and easier it will be to break out of the compliance model.

Placida Ojinnaka stated that the law needs to be enforced properly and that if reasonable adjustments are not enshrined in the protected characteristics, they will be dismissed. On

disclosure, she said it was up to the individual as some people cannot choose not to disclose their disability as it is visible. She stated that things in the workplace had changed but it was important to keep the momentum going.

Shani Dhanda said that disability leave should be made mandatory in every business as this would help everyone with impairments and employers by ensuring that they do not get away with it. She said that overall, research has shown that disabled people take less sick days, are loyal to their employers and are hard-working because of the extra costs they have to pay. She stated that there had to be flexibility for disabled people embedded in the system as a disability could happen to anyone at any time.

Stephen Lismore said that disabled people were exercising their power. He said that talk of the purple pound was important as disabled people are a consumer group that have been overlooked and will become increasingly unwilling to spend it on organisations that they do not agree with. He said that in a world of employment where talent is in high demand, disabled people were exercising their power by saying that they only want to work for a firm that supports their needs. He recommended that employers advertise themselves as Disability Confident on job adverts as to attract more talent.

Jess Phillips MP ended the meeting by stating that a change in workplace mentality was needed and that the current norm of Monday to Friday 9 to 5 needed to change. She highlighted that the economy will look radically different in 30 years' time and workplaces need to adapt for this by designing for the future.

Non-Parliamentarian Attendees

Name	Organisation
Clare Gray	The Shaw Trust
Imogen Tyndale	City of London Corporation
Ffion Meagher	CIPD
Ruth Finlayson	Skanska
Bethan Phillips	The Return Hub
Keith Jones	Institution of Civil Engineers
Sue Terpilowski	Maritime UK Women's Group
Emily Cleaton	Department for Work and Pensions
Michelle Lowe	Shaw Trust
Laura Fullstone	Deloitte
Joshua Farnham	REC
Delphine Leveneur	Business Disability Forum
Debbie Petford	BESA
Sophie Stratton	
Fiona Alfred	Women in Property
Janique Bullen	Enterprise Holdings
Jenna Norman	Women's Budget Group
Balvinder Ahluwalia	Gard UK
Phil Hall	AAT
Cinzia Priola	Open University
Sarah Whitehead	University of Sussex
Kamala MacKpwcinnon	Vodafone
Michelle Moon Lim	Screen Skills
Sophie Bonnel	AXA
Teresa Peacock	Spinnaker Global

Debbie Atkinson	PwC
Mark Gale	Young Women's Trust