

The Westminster  
AchieveAbility

Commission for Dyslexia  
and Neurodivergence

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# WAC Media Release

# Westminster AchieveAbility Commission (WAC) on recruitment and neurodivergence

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**Many neurodivergent (ND) people are ready and willing to work but find themselves faced by insurmountable barriers; this is the focus of our report.**

An extensive call for evidence has enabled us to learn more about the experiences of living with neurodivergence and seeking employment. Examples of good practice and the talents, skills and abilities of neurodivergent adults have encouraged the Commission. Our Commission on Recruitment has come at a time when the government has committed itself to increasing the number of people with disabilities in employment.

The Westminster AchieveAbility Commission (WAC) on recruitment, is user-led and focuses on dyslexia and neurodivergent adults in the UK. It has been formed from a collaboration of AchieveAbility, the Dyslexia Adult Network, Westminster Commission on Autism and the Dyspraxia Foundation. Barry Sheerman MP is our chair and Lord Addington, our adviser.

Our task is to investigate the barriers to employment in order to identify which recruitment processes disadvantage neurodivergent people (ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, autism and asperger syndrome).

Since this population represents the highest percentage of adults who are disabled, the Commission is vital in order to represent the issues for this community, as well as revealing their value and strengths within the workplace. The work will provide much needed evidence and build on the research of recent reports such as 'Neurodiversity at Work' (ACAS) and Ahead of the Arc (Disability Rights UK).

Without dyslexia/ neurodivergent-friendly approaches to recruitment, the government is unlikely to meet its revised target of getting a million people with disabilities into employment over the next ten years.

# Key questions considered by the Commission included the following:

- 1. What studies have examined the issue of unemployment and dyslexic/ND people?
- 2. What are the barriers they encounter when seeking to take up employment, and how do they deal with disclosure?
- 3. What are the recruitment processes that disadvantage dyslexic/neurodivergent people and what might be done to improve these?
- 4. What can we learn from case-studies which demonstrate good practice?
- 5. What should government be doing to facilitate dyslexic/neurodivergent people both in job recruitment and job retention?

The evidence gathering included expert witnesses from a variety of professional backgrounds, some of whom were also neurodivergent.

In addition there were written submissions. The 'Neurodivergent Voice' session enabled 30 invitees to share their experiences and celebrate achievements. Case studies of good practice were also sought. Our final session was an opportunity to meet with the Department for Work & Pensions armed with feedback to the question 'What should government do? The four evidence sessions and two surveys brought together over 700 experts, employers and neurodivergent people to provide the Commission with the following key findings:

## Key Findings

- 1
**Lack of Awareness at all levels**

Despite its critical importance, there is little awareness, or understanding, among employers and managers about the nature of overlapping neurodiversity, compounded by many neurodivergent people not knowing their own strengths and difficulties and how to operate effectively in the workplace. Often employers and neurodivergent workers are not aware of the support that can be available such as Access to Work. All the evidence sessions were clear that there needed to be management training on what disclosure means and how to support the neurodivergent worker. Effective support and training can reduce the stigma that has grown around disclosure.
- 2
**The Consequences of Disclosure**

Disclosure can lead to discrimination and this in turn leads to a spiral of stress, and in some cases bullying, related to the workplace. In the workplace this stress can be around issues and concerns over performance, contract concerns and line management concerns; if the neurodivergent person has to cope with a wide range of tasks. This spiral of stress will include the neurodivergent individual feeling they have to consistently justify their ability to achieve the tasks associated with their post.

## Key Findings

3

### Government Measures are inadequate

Government schemes such as Access to Work and Disability Confident are under-resourced, inadequately organised, inconsistent, poorly advertised and under-used by the neurodivergent community. This is compounded by Job Centers taking no account of neurodivergence with the system of sanctions.

4

### Reasonable Adjustments are often poorly conceived and focus on the individual rather than on the systematic barriers presented by the organization

Policy based on the social model of disability would logically focus on removing social barriers rather than 'remediation' of perceived 'deficit'. Consequently, the current anomalous approach gives the impression that the law remains linked to a medical model where the problem is located within the individual, rather than recognise difficulties experienced as a consequence of systemic barriers.

5

### The Equality Act is not being implemented adequately

The Equality Act provides legal protections that are difficult to secure in practice, since it requires taking employers to court. This is always stressful, expensive and can provide no safeguards unless the case is won. Often it is difficult to win because the barriers to success are similar to those imposed in the workplace, this makes the individual vulnerable to further discrimination.

6

### Psychometric tests disable Neurodivergent applicants

Psychometric tests are inaccessible, overly complex, too literacy-based, and intrinsically unreliable measures of neurodivergent skills and abilities. In short, psychometric tests often disable neurodivergent people in recruitment processes and ultimately the workplace. Neurodivergent people often advocate practical assessment of relevant work skills rather than abstract standardised tests.

7

### Recruitment and Selection Procedures are too language-based resulting in working memory overload in interviews

Expecting applicants to understand the full inferences of questions, and respond appropriately by describing what they know or can do, disadvantages neurodivergent applicants who are generally better at showing what they know and can do, than telling someone about it. Attempting to hold on to the threads of the arguments while anxious to do well frequently overloads working memory incapacitating the applicant. These language requirements are usually experienced as more difficult than the normal demands of the job.

## Key Findings

8

### Recruitment and Selection Procedures are too literacy-based resulting in working memory overload in paper-based applications

A wide range of literacy demands are built into most application and selection procedures, including selecting relevant written information, handwritten tasks sprung on applicants, dealing with spelling (particularly with online forms without spellchecks), a lack of assistive technology working with online forms, and application forms that duplicate CVs. Navigating these challenges can be more stressful and challenging than the demands of the job.

9

### Selection and Progression depends on being Neurotypical

Neurodivergent applicants and employees hoping for in-work progression frequently find themselves disadvantaged by being different from expected employee characteristics, which is misinterpreted as inability, incompetence, or 'your face not fitting'. Despite having many strengths that could be ideal for the job, neurodivergent applicants and workers frequently experience exclusion based on assumptions about 'neurotypical superiority'.

10

### Performance Management that is not applicable for the Neurodivergent

A lack of awareness and understanding among managers often leads to treating neurodivergent employees as the problem, rather than recognising the barriers presented by the work systems and culture. This in turn leads to individual competency and disciplinary procedures, rather than a solution-focused approach, which starts by looking at strengths and how to circumnavigate any difficulties by removing barriers. However WAC case studies have shown some good practice from which lessons can be learnt.

## Case Studies

“

The guaranteed interview scheme is brilliant and really helps to enable me. It also means that I'm able to get more interview practice and a chance to present myself to the employer.

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Autistic

”

“

Any company I have interviewed with and I have made aware of my Dyslexia and interview adjustments, they have been happy to put these in place. These adjustments have usually been extra time in an assessment situation and/or interview questions written and verbally given.

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Dyslexic

”

“

Adjustments were made when applying for Civil Service Fast Stream (e.g. additional time to complete written assessment).

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Dyslexic, AD(H)D

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# Voices from the WAC survey

“Adjusted work environment and access to work claim have been made due to an amazing manager willing to do battle on my behalf.”

“I am only very recently diagnosed as autistic ( July 2016, aged 36). I have therefore had years of experience of stress, overload and confusion because of being unaware of the reasons behind my difficulties with certain work situations.”

“Employers do not take it seriously, they just want to cut down the number of candidates and dyslexic people are often collateral damage.”

“The company weren’t prepared to make adjustments although I was getting outcomes they concentrated on the way I presented rather than my outcomes.”

“Interviewers should focus on what I can do and my achievements. I am disappointed with no progress over 7 years working for while working, while my managers kept telling me that I am ready for my promotions every year. Why could I never get a promotion by a recruitment process?”

“Inflexible office culture, forced me out.”

“Only recently diagnose.”

“They can’t/won’t see how someone who is not a clone of themselves can be any good.”

“I left a software development job when the stress of trying to fit in made me very ill.”

“There are so many people who do not have a diagnosis and how can this help them tell a potential employer anything?”

“For non-Disabled applicants, it’s all about what can you do. For Disabled applicants, it’s all about what you can’t do.”

“Did not fit in. Bullying.”

**The full report with recommendations will be launched in January 2018**

Our overall aims are to draw attention to discriminatory practices and highlight positive initiatives in order to formulate clear recommendations.

We shall therefore be able to inform the government’s stated aim of increasing numbers of people with disabilities in employment by 1 million over the next ten years by presenting an evidence-based report.