



# Final Report

## April 2024

# This-Ability Final Report

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# Executive Summary

## Key Findings

**The challenges** experienced by learners when attempting to move closer to employment, to secure it, and to sustain it were often multiple and complex. A range of disabilities and learning disabilities/differences, including difficulties reading, writing, and concentrating, taking longer to grasp and do tasks impacted learning. Additional health problems, especially poor mental health – severe in many cases – exacerbated the challenges arising from their disabilities and or learning disabilities. Experiences of bullying, issues related to sexuality, low confidence and self-esteem and previous negative experiences of education contributed to mental ill health. Rejection in education, and by employers were also a source of anxiety.

**Socio-economic factors** impacted learner progress. Some were living in poverty, in dire conditions, and had got into debt. The burden of providing unpaid care within families, parents exerting significant influence on their lives not only subdued their aspirations but prevented some learners from taking up job opportunities. Negative perceptions amongst employers about employing people with disabilities, or lack of knowledge on reasonable adjustments created a distance between learners and the labour market – a situation made worse by a lack of entry level jobs and learners having little or no work experience. Parental and learner fear of losing welfare benefits also presented a barrier to employment. Other factors: a lack of routine; poor personal hygiene, instability, and the dysfunctional nature of family life; online gaming during antisocial hours compounded other barriers to employment.

**Personalised support** was provided by highly skilled This-Ability staff to meet the educational, emotional, and social needs of individuals. During stage one, in small groups, learners engaged in fun and creative learning activities, building trust, communication and team building skills. In the classroom, learners gained knowledge of the labour market, whilst the allotment provided a relaxing environment to develop practical skills – as did the Cook with Ability sessions. This-Ability staff worked with learners to help increase their confidence, step outside their comfort zones whilst learning which jobs they were suited to. Stage two focused on provider organisations helping learners to gain employability skills and, in some cases, work experience. Support with interview preparation, CV writing, and job search was provided as well as educating learners about their legal rights under the Disability Discrimination Act. Mentors worked closely with learners who secured work placements – providing **social, practical, and emotional support**.

Comprehensive sessions with the Job Club prepared learners for employment at stage three. The Making Our Business Yours (MOBY) team helped learners to prepare CVs, covering letters and undertake mock interview scenarios. Learners received guidance on researching the values of potential employers, the distance and travel to the workplace. MOBY Mentors engaged with prospective employers to seek work opportunities matching closely with the job aspirations of individual learners. Having secured employment, mentors continued to check in with learners and their employers, providing ongoing support to both parties. Staff delivering This-Ability were understanding, sensitive and approachable. They facilitated access to mental health support, ensuring that learners attended appointments; created a safe learning environment; and opportunities for learners to take up enrichment activities. Both learners and

employers articulated that the benefits they had experienced would not have happened without This-Ability support.

**Core capability skills** laid a vital foundation for learners to build their employability skills and for further progression into work placements or work. The skills proved essential for continued engagement with the programme. Developing skills such as teamwork and communication were necessary for building social skills – priming learners to cope in prospective workplaces. Sessions in core capabilities enabled learners to better understand their own skills and how they related to the workplace. Mentors set clear expectations regarding attendance and punctuality to develop reliability, preparing learners for the reality of the workplace environment.

The **Employability Passport** was conceived as a tool for evidencing and reminding learners of the ten core capabilities and seven Confederation of British Industries (CBI) skills they had gained whilst on This-Ability as well as recording any reasonable adjustments identified. The document went through several iterations since the start of the programme to reduce the administrative burden on providers and mentors. Whilst evidencing the passport was challenging for a few programme staff, the passport was recognised as a useful tool to record learner progress and showcase skills with visual evidence of learner achievements. Evidence suggested that the passport was used as intended in a few cases, however, overall, learners either did not understand how the passport should be used or were reluctant to use it in an interview situation – indicating the need to better embed the tool in prospective programmes.

**Learner views** gained through ongoing evaluation of the This-Ability programme informed and influenced changes. Rather than a formal mechanism such as a co-production group, This-Ability embedded learner views into the programme. Changes were made quickly and discreetly without pursuing formal channels such as meetings, avoiding awkward conversations with learners on sensitive subjects which only a few had the confidence to engage with. A suggestion box, for example, was used to collect the thoughts of learners, anonymously. Staff delivering the This-Ability programme were very tuned into and responsive to learner needs. They were encouraged to complete feedback questionnaires, provide honest verbal feedback, complete online forms and slips at the end of sessions to have their say about provision. Learner views directly fed into and improved aspects of the programme that didn't work or required further attention / resources.

**Changes to the programme**, to better meet the needs of learners, were made through a process of ongoing reflection and learning. The delivery model was changed to allow providers to deliver the core capabilities; core staff were recruited as mentors to be placed with provider organisations, improving communication between providers and core staff; a second Information, Advice, and Guidance (IAG) meeting was introduced after two weeks on the programme to ensure learners were on the right path; and the Employability Passport was condensed to ease the administrative burden on providers. We also found that: Cook with Ability provision was extended using cooking facilities at a provider organisation; and the flexibility and the longevity of National Lottery funding helped This-Ability to respond to the COVID-19 global pandemic and cost-of-living crisis.

No **improvements to the programme** were suggested by learners who all expressed positivity and satisfaction with This-Ability. Improvements to the programme identified by This-Ability managers and providers included the need for doing a more thorough assessment of each young person's suitability to the programme at the point of first meeting them rather than determining their suitability at the formal Information, Advice, and Guidance (IAG) meeting; an electronic version of the Employability Passport to include audio and video and further embedding the passport into all stages of programme delivery. While the funding model was identified by This-Ability managers as potentially problematic, embedding core This-Ability staff within partner organisations was conveyed as being a better option for similar programmes in the future.

Learners recounted a lack of support in **mainstream education** (at school and college) as impacting on them academically and socially. In contrast, This-Ability's individualised and person-centred provision allowed mentors to build relationships and trust with learners and promote independence in safe spaces where learners felt supported. Relationships were built with employers to educate them on reasonable adjustments and how best to support learners in employment. A strong ethos emerged of 'doing what is best for the learner' which extended to an open-door policy for learners and employers to receive support at any time. A commitment to helping learners to stay in work was evidenced – a key difference from other provision where the emphasis may be placed on progressions.

**Impacts** for learners included increased confidence and self-belief, improved communication skills, expanded social circles and improved mental health. In several accounts, the impacts of the This-Ability programme were conveyed as transformative. Two learner interviews revealed that they had started to think more positively about their disabilities, learning disabilities/difficulties since being involved in the programme. Learners shared how involvement in This-Ability had led to the realisation that employment was an achievable goal. We found that learners had gained good knowledge of recruitment processes and employer expectations and a clearer understanding of the adjustments required in the workplace. Paid work – a key objective of This-Ability – was secured by many learners on the programme.

Our research findings firmly substantiated that in addition to learners, **employers working with This-Ability also experienced positive impacts**. We found that where employers had engaged with This-Ability and received support from mentors, their perceptions about employing people with disabilities and or learning disabilities/difficulties were positive.

**Added value** was generated by the network of partner providers, which enabled the This-Ability programme to widen the offer of work experience roles and sectors available to young people. The network provided additional benefits in enabling learners to move between different providers and signposting them to further support. A wide range of enrichment activities enabled learners to develop life skills and increase confidence and communication through sports and social clubs.

## Recommendations

Our findings indicate there is still a need to further embed the Employability Passport into project delivery, to allow learners to feel confident and comfortable using it as intended. While a useful document to record learners' achievements, many did not receive their passport until the end of their programme due to the time taken to compile and print the document. The development of an electronic passport would greatly enhance the This-Ability programme, enabling learners to better understand their progress and take more ownership of their Employability Passports.

The programme should continue to embed core staff (employed by the This-Ability programme) as mentors placed with partner organisations. This embedded model offered clear benefits of shared learning and communication across the programme and is, perhaps, a more feasible option than completely restructuring the payment by results model.

As a result of the lessons learnt by This-Ability, any future provision should focus on ensuring that learners are given a grounding in soft skills, laying a vital foundation to move them closer to employment. Without these basic skills, learner progress is likely to be hampered. Evidently, some learners felt overwhelmed going straight into work experience / employment. A soft introduction to work through bite-sized volunteering placements rather than a full work experience would perhaps help learners to develop key soft skills such as confidence and communication skills, arguably in environments where they were better understood and supported.

We found that there is no similar provision to the This-Ability programme in Hull and the East Riding of Yorkshire. Without This-Ability, there is clear need for this type of service. The MOBY employment support model as a bespoke service helped bridge fundamental gaps in understanding between employers and young people with disabilities, learning disabilities/differences. MOBY sourced work experiences and working interviews to get learners into work rather than pursuing formal channels involving traditional recruitment processes. As an effective alternative to mainstream education/training, public funding should be identified and allocated for such provision.

# Introduction

# 1

This-Ability was a five-year programme funded by the National Lottery Community Fund (extended from a four-year programme due to the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic). Led by Humber Learning Consortium (HLC) – a voluntary and community organisation - the programme aimed to support young people (aged 18-29) with disabilities, learning disabilities/difficulties, long-term health conditions or mental health conditions into sustainable employment lasting at least six months. The programme was open to young people living in Hull and the East Riding of Yorkshire.

The programme was an extension of the National Lottery test-and-learn Talent Match Humber programme (2014-2018) and developed through co-production with young people with learning disabilities. This was the group identified as needing the most support to find and sustain employment during the delivery of the Talent Match Humber programme. A key principle of the This-Ability programme was to change employer perceptions and attitudes towards employing young people with learning disabilities/difficulties etc.

The This-Ability programme was designed around the completion of an Employability Passport, comprising ten soft-skills (or core capabilities) and seven Confederation of British Industries (CBI) employability skills.

The three stages of the programme were:

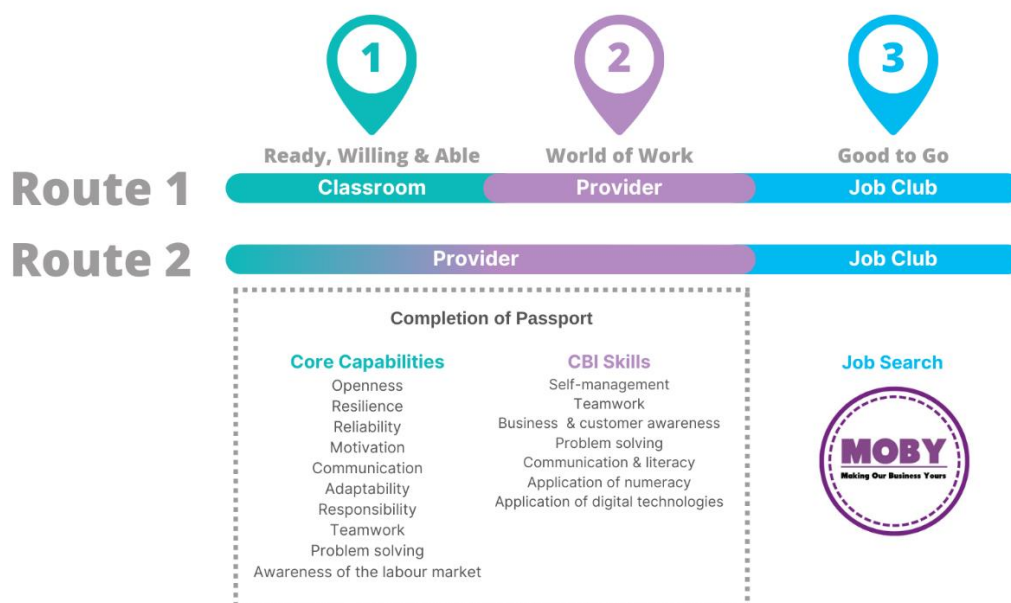
- **Stage One: Ready, Willing and Able.** During this stage of the programme learners developed the ten core capabilities (Figure A). Initially, the programme was set up so that young people would complete these core capabilities in a dedicated This-Ability classroom before moving on to a partner training provider. However, this was later changed (discussed in section 8) to allow partner providers to complete all elements of the passport, embedding the core capabilities into delivery of employability skills.
- **Stage Two: World of Work.** During this stage, learners moved on to a partner provider (of sector specific training) to complete work experience placements as well as classroom activities to develop the seven CBI employability skills (Figure A) in a sector specific setting. The four providers were:
  - **Goodwin Development Trust:** Creative and digital sector, including animation, film, tv, radio, libraries and museums; warehousing and retail.
  - **Hull FC Community Foundation:** The sports sector, including retail, coaching, community engagement and customer service.
  - **Hull Kingston Rovers Community Trust:** Stadium related offer of warehousing, retail, catering and hospitality and stadium management.
  - **Working for Health:** Health sector, including care and support, health services and wider NHS sector jobs, including retail, cleaning, logistics. Young people could undertake up to 15 Care Certificate Standards via this route.



- **Stage Three: Good to Go.** In the final stage, learners moved on to This-Ability's job club for supported job search. This included CV building, application support, interview skills and preparation. This-Ability's partner providers were able to refer learners back to This-Ability's Job Club as well as running their own Job Club sessions. At this stage learners were also able to access the MOBY in-work support offer.

Figure A (below) shows the three stages of the programme, and the different routes participants could take:

**Figure A: the three stages of the This-Ability programme.**



MOBY (Making Our Business Yours) was a bespoke in-work support service for employers that took on young people from the This-Ability programme. Their offer included a dedicated mentor to support both the employer and the young person. Employer support included: making reasonable adjustments; advice on accessible processes (ie. applications and interviews); Disability Awareness Training (online and face-to-face) and Disability Confident Accreditation. Learner support included application support and interview preparation as part of the This-Ability Job Club; travel training; attending interviews and in-work support.

Launched after the COVID-19 pandemic, Cook with Ability was an optional, stand-alone project to teach young people independent living skills. Young people could participate in monthly recipe collections, with pre-measured ingredients and step-by-step instructions to cook at home, or live cooking sessions at a venue provided by a This-Ability partner.

### 1.1. Evaluation aims

Staff from the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University (SHU), the Humber Learning Consortium (HLC) and a Peer Researcher worked together as partners – in line with co-produced principles – to evaluate the This-Ability programme. The following themes were explored:

- The referral routes into This-Ability.
- Reasons for joining the This-Ability programme.

- Learner challenges and needs.
- The different types of support provided through the programme.
- The usefulness of the Employability Passport.
- Learner influence on the delivery of, and changes to, the This-Ability programme.
- How This-Ability evolved to respond to challenges and learning.
- How the programme might be improved for future delivery
- How was provision different to that provided by mainstream services
- The impacts and outcomes of the programme.

## 1.2. Methodology

This report is based on co-produced research undertaken in autumn-winter 2023/24 by researchers from Sheffield Hallam University and This-Ability staff and learners trained by SHU as peer researchers. Training in qualitative research methods was delivered in July 2023, prior to the start of the research. The session content is outlined in the table below.

**Table 1: Content of Peer Researcher training**

<b>Session 1</b>	Introduction to the evaluation; about the peer researcher role; what is qualitative research; key interviewing skills; effective listening skills.
<b>Session 2</b>	Ethical considerations, including gaining informed consent; researcher safety and wellbeing; introducing the interview; the research fieldwork pack; using the topic guide; arranging the interview.

The two learners involved were given opportunities to refresh and practice key interview skills and develop topic guides and research tools throughout summer 2023 before data collection began in autumn.

The following data were collected (using various methods) for this report:

- Focus group discussions with staff and managers of the This-Ability programme. These were conducted over Microsoft Teams to allow for mutually convenient times to be scheduled. The sessions were conducted in three groups:
  - Three mentors involved with the delivery of core capabilities in the This-Ability classroom.
  - Three mentors placed with the partner providers (though employed by Humber Learning Consortium).
  - Four This-Ability managers (overall Contract Manager, MOBY Manager, Management Information Systems (MIS) Officer and Contract Co-ordinator).
- Two one-to-one interviews with This-Ability staff involved in programme delivery at the allotment and the Cook with Ability project.
- Eight learners took part in focus group discussions. These groups were conducted face-to-face, with a researcher from SHU joining over Microsoft Teams.
- Five semi-structured qualitative interviews with This-Ability learners. Given the learners' experiences of multiple challenges it would have been difficult, and / or inappropriate, to explore **sensitive issues** in a focus group setting. Some were conducted face-to-face, and some using a virtual platform, depending on the preference of the learner.

- Four employers involved with the This-Ability programme took part in the research: two employers participated in a focus group, another took part in a semi-structured qualitative interview, with a further one opting to provide a response to specific questions by email.
- Five This-Ability partner provider staff took part in semi-structured interviews or focus group discussions conducted over Microsoft Teams.

A further seven interviews conducted as part of a deep dive study (Bashir & Richards 2024b) into the This-Ability in-work support model were included in this study. These interviews were conducted in Autumn 2023, concurrent with the data collection for this report:

- One interview with a This-Ability MOBY mentor.
- Two interviews with employers that received support from MOBY.
- Three interviews with This-Ability learners.
- One interview with a parent of a This-Ability learner.

The research captured the experiences of 41 participants in total. In accordance with SHU's ethics guidelines all those taking part were given participant information sheets in advance of the research and informed consent (either written or verbal) was taken before starting the research. With prior permission, all the interviews and focus groups were recorded with a password protected digital recorder or securely recorded using the Microsoft Teams virtual platform. Data was shared securely between the HLC and SHU using Microsoft 365. The interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim and the data were analysed using a thematic approach. All learners taking part in either face-to-face interviews or focus groups were given a £20 shopping voucher to show appreciation for giving up their time to talk to us.

The terms young people and learners are used interchangeably in this report referring to those who were enrolled on, and involved in, the This-Ability programme.

### ***Methodological challenges***

As most of the data collection with providers and employers was done in the weeks leading up to Christmas 2023, scheduling times for focus groups and interviews proved challenging. Researchers had originally planned two focus groups to gather the views of the partner providers and employers involved, but finding times when all participants could attend was not possible. To allow participants to have their views/experiences heard, individual interviews were done instead. Several This-Ability staff had already left the programme at the point of data collection to begin jobs elsewhere, notably the MOBY mentors, and it was not possible to include their views.

The multiple and complex barriers of young people participating in the This-Ability programme presented difficulties when attempting to arrange interviews, particularly as the programme drew to a close and they were no longer regularly attending provision. Although researchers were able to gain assistance from the This-Ability mentors who knew participants best, they were unable to conduct as many interviews as planned. Some young people identified as suitable candidates for research interviews were not contactable, while others would agree to a date and time then either cancelled at the last minute or failed to attend. Although all participants were provided incentives and numerous attempts were made to accommodate them by offering interviews online and at different venues, the complexities in some individuals' lives prevented them from being involved.

Such barriers also prevented the participation of the peer researchers recruited and trained in summer 2023. When research began one learner pulled out as family commitments made it difficult for them to attend interviews outside of their usual participation times at This-Ability. Although the second researcher continued participation until Christmas 2023, a period which covered the bulk of the data collection, referral to another employability skills programme as their This-Ability journey ended limited their availability. Issues with organisational skills due to their neurodiversity also presented a challenge. This was again managed with the help of the This-Ability mentors, but there were occasions when they were late for or did not attend scheduled research. During the actual research, peer researchers required additional support to stay on topic and to not overshare their personal experiences. While receptive to feedback, it emerged that more practice sessions would have benefited the researchers and the research process.

### ***Adaption of research tools and resources***

As with previous research conducted on/for the This-Ability programme (Bashir & Richards, 2022), pictorial consent forms and participant information forms were used to present necessary information to young people in a simplified and accessible format. These tools were adapted from CRESR's templates in consultation with CRESR's ethics leads and approved for complying with the university's ethics guidelines.

In addition to this, the topic guide was adapted for use by the learner peer researchers. Feedback given in preparatory sessions showed that they found it difficult to pull out the key points from the original information sheet to relay to participants and incorporate this into the other steps required prior to commencing an interview. Subsequently, a new co-produced instruction sheet was created for the peer researchers to follow that covered all these steps in one document. Through a process of ongoing reflection and gaining feedback, our research tools were adapted to ensure they were fit for purpose i.e., easy to understand and use by our peer researchers.

# Engagement

# 2

In this section of the report, we turn to presenting our research findings drawing on the first-hand experiences and views of a wide range of stakeholders involved in the programme. Importantly, wherever possible, quotes (verbatim) are used in the report to convey the voices of young people with disabilities, learning disabilities/difficulties and or long-term health conditions – a group seldom heard in research.

When exploring their reasons for engagement with the This-Ability programme, learner narratives revealed that they may have previously struggled in mainstream education and had **joined This-Ability as an alternative to continuing at college or university**. Learners reported wanting to increase their skills and confidence to move into employment and recalled experiencing uncertainty about which jobs or roles were suitable for them before joining the programme:

*I did it via college, it was on a careers advice thing, cos I was really struggling with the idea of staying in college again (Bruce).*

*I come on the course to help me find a job and build my confidence (Oscar).*

*I'm here to try and get a job and also try and help me build up them skills (Harper).*

*I also wanted to go at my own pace because I didn't quite know what I wanted yet (Barney).*

Significantly, the narratives highlighted that several young people had joined the This-Ability programme for help with job search, either having requested support from their work coach or, presumably, their work coach having identified a need for further support. While initially recruitment to the This-Ability programme was slow, due to the time needed to build relationships with referral agencies such as Jobcentre Plus (Bashir & Richards 2022), once those relationships had been established, young people revealed the main referral route for the programme was through the Jobcentre when claiming **Universal Credit**:

*I think I was referred cos I asked for some support from Universal Credit (Steven).*

*So, UC recommended about This-Ability and that, so I was like I'll try it and really enjoyed it (Amber).*

Youth Hub (closed in December 2022) was conceived as a one-stop-shop for young people needing extra support to find employment and situated in the same building as This-Ability. Both This-Ability managers and providers relayed it as having been **particularly effective as a referral route into the programme**:

*I think it's cos they've got a youth hub there where they've got an employment agency within the Goodwin centre so there's a natural process that they go onto This-Ability (Provider 1).*

*What started to work well for us was when we had the Youth Hub in cos the guys developed really good relationships with the two guys from the Youth Hub and just having that ability to walk down the corridor to ask questions was really good (This-Ability Manager 1).*

**This-Ability's partner providers** emerged as a further source of referrals to the programme - identifying and moving suitable candidates accessing other provision onto This-Ability. The draw of a couple of providers for learners was wrapped up in them being renowned for their club statuses. The following accounts underscore the importance of familiarity and trust in engaging learners and the special appeal of some providers:

*So, from the club's point of view, we've got the pulling tool that actually you can come to us because we're XXXX [name of club], so if they're... fans and we're going out and trying to recruit that's a bit [of a] pulling tool as well (Provider 1).*

*Well, This-Ability was offered to me by XXXX [name of provider] and I was already involved with [them] so when I was having a meeting with one of the co-founders he was like so and so's doing this programme called This-Ability, I think you'd be wonderful for it so I was like you know what, let's do it and then we went through it (Nash).*

The accounts revealed a variety of other routes for young people to enter the This-Ability programme such as referrals from **college, other youth employability provision** or self-referrals through **word of mouth**. Although useful for initial engagement, means of **direct recruitment** such as floor-walking at the local Jobcentres (to engage with young people there to meet their work coaches), were seen as a **less effective way of getting the right people on the programme**. This was perceived as potentially **detrimental to the good word of mouth** the programme had built up over the previous five years:

*That's worked well in terms of getting people in for the IAGs, I'm not so sure it's worked well in terms of recruitment for the programme because I think we've ended up with a lot of young people, I think they go because they're there in the Jobcentre and they think my work coach can see me, I better say yes and then they're not right or they don't turn up (This-Ability Manager 2).*

*The biggest thing about our programme now is word of mouth that we are excellent at what we do and we do what we say we're going to do. If you've got all these young people that are signing up and dropping off because we're not meeting their expectations, when they go and speak to their friends, when they speak to their work coaches at DWP they're going to give a negative impression of us and that's certainly not what we want (This-Ability Manager 1).*

Additionally, the generalised nature of attending recruitment events to promote This-Ability as a large community organisation offering several different projects was highlighted as a potential barrier to engagement in the following account from a This-Ability partner provider:

*Yeah, cos XXXX [name of provider] delivers a lot of projects we have days where a few staff members would go say to Jobcentre or colleges to recruit but it would be on a basis of all the projects. There was individual recruitment but maybe not enough I'd say (Provider 2).*

The accounts from employers revealed that they had been proactively approached by This-Ability's MOBY mentors looking for work experience and employment opportunities for programme participants. Evidently, initial contact with the MOBY mentors encouraged employers to take up the offer based on the mentors' **commitment to and understanding of the needs of their learners**:

*It wasn't just about knowledge though, he [MOBY Mentor] was very passionate about what he was doing which becomes infectious when you're speaking to people like that (Employer 2).*

*That mentor's initial meeting with the employer is crucial to how that programme lands (Employer 1).*

The relationship between mentors and employers was described as a "two-way street" (Employer 1), with the MOBY mentor acting as a conduit between the employer and young person to help the employer to understand the young person's needs. Partnership working emerged as a strong theme from the narratives. MOBY mentors were described as **working in close partnership with employers to understand the needs of the business** as well as the learner, with reliability being key to building trust between the two parties:

*Yeah, I think that was my biggest take, why we supported This-Ability rather than somebody else. It gave us the confidence that they knew what their learner needed... and how we could work in a partnership rather than just having somebody turn up for two weeks, do a bit of work experience like you would for a 16-year-old from school and drop them in the deep end. This is more in-depth... I think [MOBY mentor] certainly wanted to know more about [the business] and what we could offer to then go and have a look at how that would fit in with the learner (Employer 3).*

*The biggest thing that employers don't want to see is that they get let down at the first hurdle, so if they say the mentor's meeting so and so on Tuesday at 1 o'clock, let's make sure that happens at 1 o'clock, let's make sure that mentor is there, that then builds trust in the relationship (Employer 2).*

Employer 4 expressed that This-Ability's offer came at the right time as they were exploring **new and different ways of recruiting** following a shortfall of staff in hospitality following the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst the employer perceived people with neurodiversity as a potential asset to their business, it was MOBY's facilitation that helped them to achieve their aspiration to recruit neurodiverse people – plugging a gap in labour:

*There has been a massive shortage of staffing in the trade since the pandemic... so we've been looking at different areas where we can help with our recruitment... I'm very keen to try and look at different ways of hiring people for hospitality as a whole and when This- Ability came and spoke with regard to the neurodiverse it was something we were already looking at because I think certain neurodiverse, what other people would class as disabilities we class them as superpowers.*

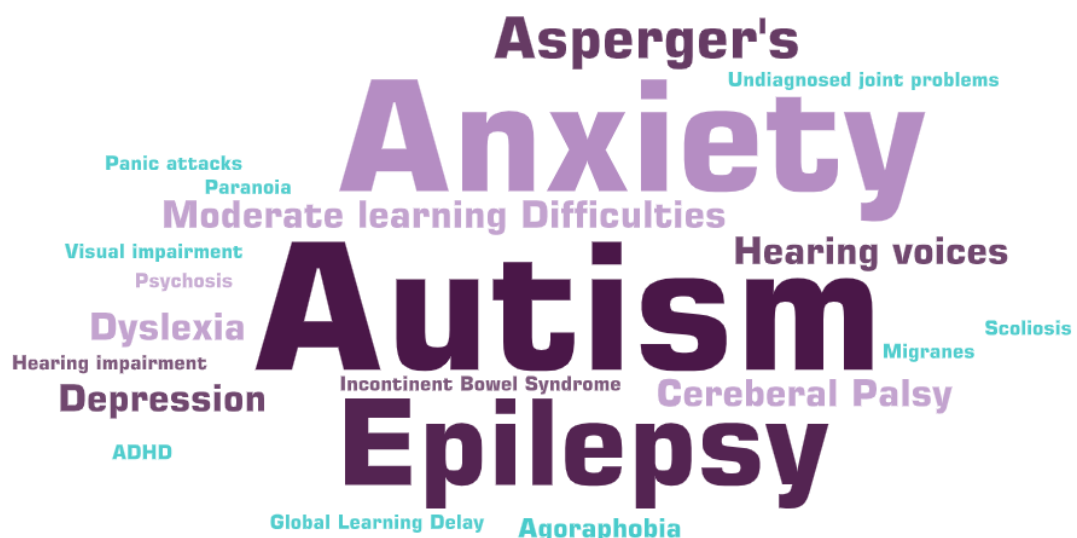
## Learner challenges and needs

*They don't just fit into one tick box as people seem to think people with disabilities do, it doesn't work like that (This-Ability Manager 1).*

This chapter reveals the challenges experienced by learners when attempting to move closer to employment, to secure it, and to sustain it. Some of these are related to their disabilities, learning disabilities/difficulties and or long-term health conditions. Other challenges are associated with external factors that impacted learners' lives. Importantly, the findings from our research indicate that learners on the This-Ability programme rarely experienced one challenge; they experienced multiple and complex challenges.

Our research revealed that a range of disabilities (including non-visible), learning disabilities/difficulties were experienced by young people on the This-Ability programme. Figure B below shows the disabilities and or learning disabilities/difficulties cited by the research participants. It is worth noting, this breadth of disabilities reflects those experienced by a small sample of learners involved in this research and does not provide a full picture of the disabilities of all the learners involved in the programme:

**Figure B: the range of disabilities and health conditions experienced by research participants.**



Learners reported that their disabilities and or learning difficulties / differences impeded memory, and their ability to grasp and or process information. Some learners also cited reading and writing difficulties when describing their barriers to learning. Those with autism, for example, had trouble memorising and focusing on tasks. This



necessitated receiving the same information again and again and doing tasks repeatedly to register how to do them correctly. Generally, learners with autism needed more time to absorb information and longer to complete tasks. The challenges related to memory were conveyed in the narratives of several learners:

*You could give an instruction and if the instruction is complex or tied to multiple tasks, I can forget a task in between (Steven).*

*Well sometimes I forget what to put away, but I do remember to ask again (Peter).*

*I struggle with memorising, like remembering things (Jude).*

In a few cases, learners divulged other health problems that they experienced in addition to their disabilities, learning disabilities/difficulties. These included, dietary and digestion problems, difficulty sleeping, and migraines – conditions attributed predominantly to anxiety and stress. Indeed, experiences of anxiety and depression emerged as a key finding when exploring the challenges experienced by learners on the programme. Steven disclosed that he took medication to relieve anxiety, and Sienna depended on medication for depression. The **severity of mental ill health** experienced by many learners and its manifestation was discussed, ranging from panic attacks, being physically sick, unable to function, difficulty leaving the house, paranoia and suicidal thoughts, hallucinations, staying up late and subsequent tiredness, disorientation, and disconnection from others. Learners shared the severe emotional and behavioural impacts of their mental ill health:

*So, I am diagnosed with psychosis which means I hear voices on a daily basis. When I'm really mentally unwell I end up seeing things (Nash).*

*...a point where I would no longer function at doing basic tasks. Like leaving the house became difficult...cos the feeling I got whenever I would have a panic attack, it felt like I was going to die kind of thing, it felt like there wasn't going to be a moment past the moment where I was panicking (Leo).*

*I'd be anxious, I'd be heavy breathing, feel like I was going to be sick (Steven).*

*I started getting paranoid and didn't feel safe anymore on my own and then it died down for a good year or so. It came back quite bad, and I thought people was going to burn my house down or break through, I just couldn't do anything...it's just come to a point where I'm having too many nightmares, suicidal thoughts... (Sienna).*

Agoraphobia (a mental health condition considered as a disability) was cited by two research participants. Steven described having severe anxiety about going out and similarly, Leo could not set foot outside his home without planning his outing (no matter how short) in advance. Learners suffering with social anxiety (a fear of social situations /interactions) spoke about struggling in social situations and how this acted as a barrier to employment – Barny's explanation was a case in point, "*it was the fear of that. It's kind of like...when you want to meet someone, but you're scared of a terrible interaction*".

Whilst 20 per cent of learners formally recorded being involved with mental health/counselling services before joining This-Ability (Sanderson, 2024), during a focus group discussion, Provider Mentors concurred that most learners they had worked with on This-Ability were likely to have diagnosed or undiagnosed mental health issues in addition to their disabilities and or learning disabilities/difficulties. For example, Provider Mentor 1 commented, "*I think nine times out of ten when I've had learners come through there's often always a mental health element*". In many cases,

they dealt with learners who whilst navigating through their disability and or learning difficulty had also experienced trauma, that had not been addressed through formal support. Whilst not disclosed by the learners themselves, drug and alcohol misuse and criminality – intertwined with mental health difficulties – were identified by This-Ability staff as contributing to learner challenges. A raft of complexities characterised learners’ lives – adding to their challenges when seeking and attempting to secure employment (as highlighted in Figure C).

**Figure C: challenges experienced by learners on This-Ability**



Experiences of bullying due to gender transitioning and sexuality, an inability to form intimate relationships, low confidence and self-esteem resulting from not hearing back from potential employers, and poor past experiences of education, were all sources of anxiety and depression for learners on This-Ability. An employer with considerable experience of working with This-Ability explained that to begin with learners were perhaps less confident due to their learning disabilities/difficulties which were then exacerbated by knockbacks from employers – triggering poor mental health:

*To be knocked back I think would really start to affect your confidence and that's when you can become very anxious and suffer from depression. So, I think sometimes people naturally, because they have a learning disability or difficulty, might actually have less confidence, they might have less confidence because of their experience in trying to gain employment (Employer 5).*

Provider Mentor 2 stressed that learners on the This-Ability programme with retail experience, applying for jobs with good references were “*not getting the jobs*”. This was disheartening for them – leaving them with the impression that “*maybe I'm not good enough*”. The theme of rejection and the many sources of it at various points of learners’ lives was explored by mentors during the focus group discussion. They described how learners felt rejected by society and how this experience was compounded by employers not getting back at all, not providing any feedback on why learner job applications were unsuccessful. Having built up their hopes, waiting to hear back, they were disappointed and left uncertain about why they hadn’t been recruited. The following excerpts from learners’ narratives during a focus group discussion underscore this point:

*If I've had an interview and I'm unsuccessful it does knock my confidence cos I'm thinking what am I doing wrong? (Oscar).*

*That's similar to me, the amount of rejections I've got, before even potentially getting an interview, it's like okay, now what else is there cos there's only so many jobs in the world, let alone here (Harper).*

**Socio-economic factors** were cited as presenting challenges for learners on the programme. Some were **living in poverty, in dire conditions**, struggling to make ends meet and in some cases getting into debt. Bruce, for example, shared that his family were struggling financially due to the cost-of-living crisis, so much so that they were using a local foodbank. He explained, *“things are expensive, things are hard”*, particularly as his sibling (a single parent) and child had moved into the home he shared with his mother and younger sibling. Evidently, the motivation behind securing employment for several learners could partly be attributed to their desire to contribute financially to their households and to ease the burden for parents. Jude stressed this in her account – *“my mum works so if I have a job then I’m another provider”*. In other instances, learners had got into debt taking out contracts which they were unable to manage financially. Provider Mentor 1’s account is a clear case in point:

*Some of our learners are in a lot of debt because they’ve maybe taken out contracts and not necessarily understood the weight of that contract, that’s happened quite a few times and we’ve put them in touch with Citizen’s Advice or debt consolidation and things.*

Professionals involved in the delivery of This-Ability commented on the small social circles of *“so many learners”* with some only having connections with family members (Provider 2). Provider Mentor 3 explained that those learners with significant disabilities led more insular lives – *“I also think depending on the severity of the disabilities they live such insular lives, they’re in their own circle... they’re not aware of it”*. Within their own circles, learners took on considerable responsibility for family members and this had consequences for their ability to work, for example, Provider 1 recalled the circumstances of a learner on This-Ability whose responsibility included picking up five siblings from school and looking after them. This point was echoed by Provider Mentor 3 who remarked, *“there’s a lot of pressure to be unpaid carers - we see a lot in our learners, I can’t do this I’ve got to look after my younger brother, got to look after siblings”*.

Learners’ responsibilities as parents were cited as presenting barriers to employment. The *“sleepless nights”*, for example impacted on their motivation (Provider Mentor 2) whilst on the This-Ability employability programme. Notably, parents of learners were described as exerting a huge influence on their children’s lives: ranging from how This-Ability staff should or shouldn’t support them; in some instances, preventing them from taking up job opportunities secured through the programme; making key decisions about the course of their child’s future rather than allowing them to express their own aspirations – perhaps over-protecting them due to their disabilities, learning disabilities/difficulties. Parental control over learners emerged as a significant finding in the research:

*We’ve tried to support a learner so much, but their parents aren’t happy with the level of support or they’re not happy with the way that we’re trying to support the learner, if we try and push them out of their comfort zone and that’s not okay. Just not being able to answer for themselves, asking them a question about if they want to do something and their answer’s always, I need to speak to my mum about it, I need to speak to my dad about it (Classroom Mentor 1).*

*Sometimes parents have been an issue, even to the point where we’ve gone above and beyond and got someone an interview and then offered a job and then the parent’s intervened and said no because they didn’t want to make certain changes to things (Classroom Mentor 3).*

*We’ve had learners where parents have been heavily involved, so they’ll maybe come in with them for a one to one...maybe also influencing what that learner does in terms of going into a job or education as well. That can be quite difficult*

*for the learner and it can be quite difficult for us as well to say that's great mum, that's what you think and whatever but we need to make sure that it's right for the learner (Provider Mentor 1).*

The accounts revealed that in some cases learners were not allowed to speak up for themselves, to make sense of, and express their own aspirations and needs. This-Ability staff relayed that it made it difficult for them to get to know the real person. Instead, they were *“just getting the version of them that their parents want them to be and doing the things that their parents want them to do”*. (Classroom Mentor 1). In a different account, Provider Mentor 3 related that those parents who were overbearing (due to the challenges of raising a child with complex needs) either overestimated or underestimated their child's ability. Conceivably, the result of extensive parental involvement was increased dependency in learners, preventing their confidence being built. Of note, 62 per cent of all learners involved in the programme were aged between 21 to 30 years old and were therefore young adults. Whilst understanding the reasons behind parents being overprotective of their children, there was no getting away from the fact that in a few cases they were holding them back from achieving their full potential – a point reiterated by Provider Mentor 2 – *“they don't seem to want to push them to see what they're capable of and they'd rather just keep them where they are... they do baby them sometimes as if they like to keep them younger when they're actually 27 and more than capable of getting a job”*.

Learners **feared losing the security of welfare benefits** having spent some time securing them and were therefore reluctant to gain employment. Equally, in some instances, parents discouraged their children from securing work due to their concerns about losing benefits (and financial security), for example, Provider Mentor 3 reported, *“we've had a couple of examples where we've got learners to the point where they're job ready and then the parents have pulled them back because they don't want to lose funding”*.

We found that **parents were either heavily involved, or not at all, in learners' lives** – their decisions and aspirations. Professionals inferred that some learners were deprived of positive role models, particularly in their parents who might never have worked and or spent their lives supported by welfare benefits. Provider 1 commented, *“maybe their parents have never worked, maybe they've got no-one to look up to, they've got no role model within their lives to say this is actually where you could be and what you could do and what you could achieve. Then you've got the other side of the scale where these parents are maybe living on benefits, and they have done all their lives”*.

**A lack of routine** presented challenges for learners on This-Ability, presumably leading up to their involvement in the programme and this was partly attributed to poor parenting. Bad habits, including routinely sleeping late required This-Ability staff working with learners to change their perceptions and educating them about the consequences of such actions on concentration levels, ability to function and punctuality. Provider Mentor 2 described how deeply ingrained habits were difficult to break – *“that's quite a challenge, getting their routines back to normal if they've never had that parenting or never had that support, they're starting right from the beginning, but they've got all these habits now so it's trying to change and break all that”*.

Classroom mentors surmised that learner **neglect of their personal hygiene** – a deterrent for prospective employers – could also be attributed to a lack of parental guidance but also due to being in the care system or living independently and therefore not having been taught skills in selfcare. The importance of building personal hygiene into daily routines was recognised, yet, many learners had poor routines, if any. Both classroom and provider mentors relayed instances where teaching rooms were filled with unpleasant smells from learners who overlaid their clothes and or wore the same

clothes constantly, with some not using deodorant or knowing how to maintain their oral hygiene:

*We had a massive flux of learners that have come in that overlayer their clothes, they're not conscious of personal hygiene, they either maybe haven't had that influence at home or role model and...they've smelled out the classroom (Classroom Mentor 2).*

Evidently, mentors understood that the issue of learners “wearing the same clothes” was related to poverty (Classroom Mentor 1), and other evidence, such as the use of food banks suggested that poverty affected the lived experiences of many learners on the programme. Whilst learners took up the offer of being bought new clothes through the programme, some learners resisted the offer – comfortable in what they had worn for such a long time. Mentors softly and in a few cases, bluntly, spoke to learners about the need to wear something new and or to tidy themselves up to address their poor hygiene:

*Sometimes they just really, really don't want to wear anything else, even if they had the option to, because that's what they're so used to wearing that it's hard for them to change their mind and try something new, they're just like no, this is what I'm wearing, this is comfortable, this is what I'm used to so I'm not going to change it (Classroom Mentor 1).*

*Hygiene has been an issue but it's about having a nice honest chat with them, usually it's nothing major, maybe you need to cut your nails and let's tie your hair back for an interview, look presentable, how do you think you could be more presentable in an interview rather than we've noticed this about you. So, it's a delicate approach (Provider Mentor 3).*

Learners divulged the instability and dysfunctional nature of their family life when recounting how they had moved between various relatives due to the breakdown of family relationships. For example, Sienna recalled flitting from place to place as her relationship with family members, particularly her father, broke down:

*Cos obviously my dad, he goes drinking, not aggressive but I've had the door shut on my face a few times and the way he speaks to me and obviously before, obviously I moved out, it was because he didn't want anything to do with me.*

Criminality coupled with mental ill health and a learning disability were cited as being key challenges for one learner. His troubled past which was described as following him from place to place meant that he was sporadic – sometimes he would turn up to This-Ability classes and at other times he wouldn't. He would, “disappear for a bit and then come back again,” (This-Ability Manager 2) constantly being drawn into his previous troubled life by the bad crowd he had fell in with.

**Online gaming/communities and the antisocial hours** associated with this pastime emerged as a significant theme in our research. With gaming activity going on into the early hours, it was described as consuming young peoples' social life – in some cases, compounded by the restrictions of the pandemic, which forced people into their homes. The knock-on effects of such habits led to difficulty for learners to establish a routine, to attend provision on time, and or engage with the learning. The following narratives convey the impacts of the late nights and lack of routine:

*We were asking them to come in, we found out they'd been up to like 4, 5, 6 o'clock in the morning gaming and things like that, so they were like nodding off (Provider 1).*

*We deal with it quite a lot, our main problem is that our learners will stay up till 3 or 4am and they're always coming in tired, and they stay up late because it's often a sign of depression...they feel so disconnected from everyone. So, it immediately has an effect on them coming in, they're tired, they're not mentally in the right place and then we've still got to look at job opportunities and they don't care (Provider Mentor 3).*

Whilst the research revealed improved relationships with the Jobcentre resulting in more referrals to the This-Ability programme, a few learners reported mounting pressure from the Jobcentre to secure employment prior to starting on This-Ability. Leo commented, *"they're very insistent about how much you have to apply for jobs and treat searching for a job like a job except they pay you less, so that was just really stressful in general"*. Further, when recounting learner challenges whilst on the programme, a provider (This-Ability partner organisation) explained that the Jobcentre had in recent years begun to apply pressure on learners to find jobs which had not been the case when he first started working on the programme. The pressure to increasingly attend appointments was described as causing learners stress:

*When I first started it seemed like if they were on with us pressure from the Jobcentre wasn't as big, but maybe changes to policy...it did seem like our learners were called in for appointments a lot more and you could definitely see the pressure and stress that that came with (Provider 2).*

When asked if there were any jobs that they would not consider due to the demands of the role or workplace environment being incompatible with their learning disabilities/difficulties, learners provided similar narratives. Jude expressed a preference for working in a retail environment but a smaller shop rather than in a larger store. The bright lights, music, large footfall, and noise associated with larger retailers was portrayed as leading to sensory overload. This was confirmed by an employer who reported that a work placement for a This-Ability learner had not worked out because the area they were placed in was, *"very busy and very noisy"*. However, a placement in an area of the company that was equally busy, but quieter led to a better outcome for the learner (Employer 2). The narratives, below, highlight the key concerns of learners when considering their suitability to jobs:

*I couldn't adapt to fast-paced work environments...my brain was just thinking too much, and I didn't understand (Steven).*

*So, the music [loud] and the more intense environment would probably overwhelm me (Ripley).*

*Any job that's super-fast paced and you have to learn really quickly and if it's too hectic (Ripley).*

Travel to distant locations to get to work using public transport was recognised as problematic for some learners. Classroom Mentor 2 explained that a lot of learners walked to and from This-Ability classes because they preferred not to take buses. In some cases, learners were reliant on family members for lifts to and from This-Ability provision. Such dependency was perceived as restrictive and acted as a barrier to gaining employment as there was no guarantee that family members could provide lifts to and from work on an ongoing basis.

Learners perceived there being **few jobs available locally**, for instance, Provider Mentor 3 explained that when exploring barriers to work with learners, they reported, *"lack of opportunities, lack of entry level jobs now... [jobs] becoming more sourced out so the lack of entry level jobs"*. Where jobs were available, the application process was seen as a barrier. Leo stressed, *"it doesn't work for most people on the [autism]"*

*spectrum at all...the system for job applications and jobs in general is so geared towards getting people that will easily fit into a job and not people that find it difficult".* He described his difficulty completing online job applications following a process that timed out after certain intervals:

*The page would automatically refresh and get rid of all the information I was typing out. As I was doing that, I was about 80% of the way through the application and the page automatically refreshed and got rid of all the stuff I'd spent forever typing out.*

The expense of purchasing acceptable forms of identification – necessary for employment – presented an obstacle for Bruce, who explained, *"I'm also not in the circumstances at the moment where I can get the relevant pieces of paper and ID to get a job. A lot of people in society don't speak about that, having the relevant ID is expensive"*.

Whilst reflecting on the challenges faced by learners when searching for work, Classroom Mentor 2 commented, *"they [learners] can be quite rigid in what they want, so they only want a job for two hours...can't do it in the night... can't do it in the morning, that type of thing"*. She went on to explain that learners' knowledge of what specific jobs involved was often limited and when the roles were explained in detail, they realised they either lacked relevant experience and or did not understand the full remit of the job – consequently, changing their minds. Factory work, for example, was chosen due to learners perceiving the work to be repetitive and all they could do, however they hadn't realised that shift work was usually required and that *"they might have to travel on a nighttime"* (Classroom Mentor 1).

When asked about any **experiences of work prior to starting the programme**, learners involved in the research recounted various experiences. Bruce shared that he had never had a job before and therefore as a starting point, he wanted to do voluntary work. Notably, five learners had volunteering experience, but only one of them was able to hold down their paid job, perhaps due to the soft and nurturing environments of the charities they had worked for versus the demanding nature of businesses in the private sector. Steven, for example, was employed by different companies prior to beginning on This-Ability but did not sustain employment for longer than 11 months – with one job lasting only four months. Jude explained that her job in a fast-food chain had been short-lived due to the demands of the role. The precarious nature of the work secured by individuals emerged as an important finding, ranging from being on temporary or short-term contracts and zero-hour contract for seasonal work. Very few learners, if any, recounted experience of long-term employment.

Our research revealed that in some cases **young people left college uncertain what job they wanted to do, having gained little or no work experience**. Classroom Mentor 3 explained that a fair number of learners accessing the programme were highly qualified, having gained degrees, yet a lack of work experience prevented them from finding work. Conversely, some learners lacked the educational qualifications to go onto apprenticeships or access opportunities where specific qualifications were a prerequisite for entry – a point stressed in the following accounts:

*We have a lot that want to go and do apprenticeships but their level 2, usually maths, is holding them back, they don't have the right qualification and you can't get an apprenticeship and work towards that qualification, they have to get that qualification first, but given a lot of our learners...had a rough time in school, they're reluctant to go back into education (Provider Mentor 3).*

*I think a lot of ours, their GCSE results haven't been fantastic, they've not had the support in school (Provider Mentor 2).*

### 3.1. Employer attitudes and perceptions about employing people with disabilities, learning disabilities/difficulties

When learners on This-Ability were asked about employer attitudes and perceptions about people with disabilities, learning disabilities/difficulties, they provided a range of views – based on their perceptions and experiences. In Steven’s previous work experience employers were dismissive of his support needs and mental health needs. He portrayed some employers as being disingenuous in discussing support needs with him but never offering him a job. Steven reported feeling disheartened that often he wasn’t given a reason as to why he wasn’t selected, and therefore he did not learn anything by going through the interview process. Nash explained that he had held off disclosing his mental ill health to his employer due to the stigma associated with it. He stressed that he didn’t perceive himself as having a disability, despite the classification of severe mental ill health as a disability, and therefore wanted “*to be treated like everyone else*”. Bruce relayed that some employers perceived those with different needs as either not wanting jobs or being incapable of sustaining them. He reported a reluctance to recruit people with disabilities stemmed from a lack of knowledge on how to deal with difference:

*There is an attitude that some, I don’t want to say all but there is an attitude that people with different needs don’t want to, or don’t feel like they could get a job... because when people hear ‘disability’ I think they back off a bit because they don’t know how to approach the situation (Bruce).*

Provider Mentor 2 reiterated the view that sometimes employer ignorance, i.e., a lack of understanding about disabilities, for example, acted as a barrier to them taking on people who were likely to be more than capable of doing the job. Provider Mentor 1 echoed that employers didn’t necessarily understand the mental health needs and or disabilities that they encountered in others which resulted in their difficulty putting reasonable adjustments in place. She went on to describe a situation in a workplace where the employer had failed to understand what reasonable adjustments were:

*She got a paid role and a reasonable adjustment for this learner...would need more time to complete tasks. So that was absolutely fine and she was in the role and then when I went to do an employer visit that was one thing that the employer brought up to me, she’s still quite slow, her speed will improve and I had to explain to the employer that is what that reasonable adjustment is, that this learner’s not going to be as fast as you are, probably never will be, but she can still do the job she just needs some additional time.*

An employer involved in the This-Ability programme emphasised “*a huge lack of understanding*” amongst some employers, nervousness about the unknown and the time implications of accommodating a potential employee with disabilities, learning disabilities/difficulties (Employer 1). They explained that the perceived burden of supporting someone with disabilities into a role deterred employers from taking them on. The view that recruiting people with disabilities would create more work for employers was reiterated by a young person and Provider 2 who stressed that in his view, employers feared taking on someone with a disability and or learning disability because of a false perception that a significant input would be required from them, and they were not equipped to deal with the potential requirements. The following narrative conveys the perceived scale of resource required for making adjustments:

*The level of upheaval that people can start to imagine, when actually first of all the clue’s in the term ‘reasonable adjustments’, it’s got to be reasonable and I don’t think those things are always considered within that, but it’s quite often not the catastrophe you think it’s going to be (Provider 2).*



Further, whilst delivering disability awareness training This-Ability mentors realised that most staff, including managers did not understand that reasonable adjustments were a legal requirement. Employer 5 explained that companies did not intend to discriminate but the fear of doing the wrong thing, not knowing what to do, prevented them from taking on people with disabilities, learning disabilities/differences. Our research revealed that employers required support themselves to responsibly take on learners with different needs.

# 4

## What support did learners receive?

*It's a real testament to This-Ability that she [the learner] has most recently shooed them [This-Ability mentor(s)] away because 'no I'm okay now, I feel confident' and she's grown as a person (Employer 5).*

Support was provided to learners in various ways by highly skilled professionals to ensure the educational, emotional, and social needs of individuals were met. Focus was very much on meeting individual rather than collective needs given the varying challenges experienced by learners due to their disabilities, learning disabilities/difficulties and or long-term health conditions. We found that some learners required focused support on a particular area of development, whereas others required more intensive support throughout all stages of the programme. In response to this fluctuation, the This-Ability model was flexible enough to allow some learners to bypass certain parts of the programme. The different types of support that different learners received is discussed next.

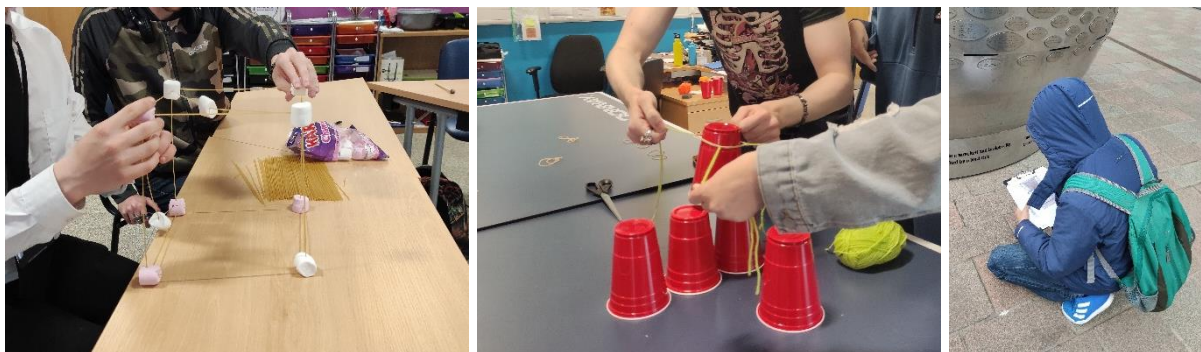
**Beginning at stage one, Ready, Willing and Able**, learners focused on gaining their ten core capabilities (awareness of the labour market, motivation, openness, reliability, communication, adaptability, responsibility, teamwork, problem-solving and resilience) to evidence in their This-Ability Employability Passport. They described **participating in fun sessions and activities that encouraged communication and team building skills** – essential skills, especially for the workplace. As communication improved and learners became more comfortable with each other, they realised that others were in the same boat as them and they were not alone, which was reassuring. Evidence suggests that such **commonalities brought learners closer together**, whilst simultaneously building their confidence and self-esteem. The following accounts convey the creative activities learners engaged in and the outcomes they experienced:

*We were doing the marshmallow towers and things and the spaghetti thing...I did enjoy it cos it was obviously teamwork, and it was to do with things that we need to use inside a work placement, so it definitely helped a lot and especially when you learn stuff that you didn't know (Sienna).*

*Doing a lot of team building activities what we used to do, you get talking to people and you start to feel more comfortable around them, that really helped me personally (Olive).*

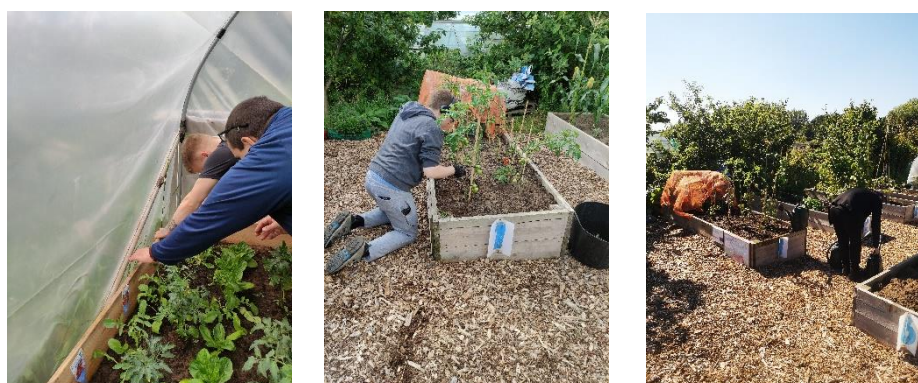
*We do what's called the employability trail that encourages them to work as a group and we stand back a bit, we're there to support them but we want to see how they're working together. The communication particularly because when they start the first thing we say is you're going to have to start talking fairly quickly because you've got six weeks and we need you to be doing these core capabilities. It's nice to see them go out and work together (Classroom Mentor 2).*

**Figure D: Examples of classroom activities**



Whilst the allotment provided a more relaxed environment where learners opened up about their lives, they were nevertheless expected to undertake specific duties whilst developing skills which prepared them for the workplace. For example, getting buses to and from the allotment, working together and being respectful of each other. Back in the classroom, young people on This-Ability **gained knowledge of the labour market, the different sectors and the variety of jobs** – a point reiterated by several learners. Importantly, Bruce stressed that whilst increasing his knowledge of the labour market he had also learnt, *“that there is help out there and it’s okay to ask for it...and there are people that are there to help you and they won’t judge”*.

**Figure E: This-Ability allotment**



We found that at this initial stage This-Ability staff worked closely and creatively with learners to help them to come out of their shells - their comfort zones – to develop confidence and to realise their strengths and the jobs their skills were best suited to. Staff supported learners to undertake self-assessment activities to better understand themselves, including the limitations of their disabilities, learning disabilities/differences, for example, not being able to lift heavy weight, or avoiding being in a busy and or noisy environment that could lead to sensory overload. Such activities informed learner decisions about the types of workplaces they would feel most comfortable working in – best aligned to their needs.

**During the second stage of This-Ability, The World of Work**, learners moved to a provider organisation in line with their chosen job sector to gain employability skills and, in some instances to undertake work experience. They were supported to develop seven Confederation of British Industries (CBI) skills (outlined earlier) that completed their Employability Passport. Steven described *“advanced preparations”*, focusing on tailoring CVs to different employers. Indeed, most young people interviewed, recalled receiving support writing their CV. Ripley reported receiving *“a lot of support”* from his provider organisation. Several learners stressed that they had received significant support from provider mentors ranging from helping to find suitable jobs, developing

CVs to completing application forms. Nash's experience was a case in point, especially as the support that he received helped him to secure employment:

*XXXX [name of mentor] helped me with the application and then she helped me with a few other things, like when it came to my references...they helped me a lot because I was struggling on what to say because XXXX [name of another mentor] would help me with my personal statements (Nash).*

Provider Mentor 1 highlighted that her role involved delivering taught sessions on the skills that employers were looking for, and Provider Mentor 3 described that whilst working on employability skills, the mentors also focused on building the personal and social development of learners. When asked to explain what those sessions involved, learner Ripley reported – *“we go through things like writing down our own skills and things like confidence and adaptability and what kind of skills we have and how we can put that into work. So, things like if we're good at teamwork how can that help us in work and if we're confident how can that help us”*. Additionally, mentors helped learners understand their own needs in terms of reasonable adjustments and educated them about their right by law (the Equality Act) to reasonable adjustments in the workplace, which offered them protection. The sessions explored what reasonable adjustments might look like – a vital part of the programme as our research revealed that some learners did not understand what reasonable adjustments were before starting on the programme:

*Interviewer (I): What about you [Ripley], did you know reasonable adjustments and things before you started here?*

*Respondent (R): Only in school which would be taking more time in tests.*

*I: Did you realise it was a thing that you could have for work as well?*

*R: No*

*I: So [Jude], back to you, moving onto your provider when you went onto XXXX [name of provider], what sort of things were you doing with them?*

*R: ...it's like what reasonable adjustments are and things like that that you need.*

Following sessions with mentors, This-Ability learners conveyed a good understanding of what reasonable adjustments were, and how they were specific to their different disabilities, learning disabilities/difficulties. These ranged from needing extra time to do a test/task, requiring visual (pictorial prompts), to being given clear instructions to follow. Having explored their own needs during the sessions, learners Jude and Ripley described the reasonable adjustments they were likely to require in an interview situation:

*If there was a test, I had to do it would be extra time or something like that (Jude).*

*Needing things written down for you is something I said I would probably need cos I wouldn't, I can remember things but if I'm at work I don't want to, I'd like to remember it more specifically (Ripley).*

In some cases, **mentors accompanied learners to their work placements** to ensure that employers understood the adjustments required to allow the young person to fulfil their role. Provider Mentor 1 explained, *“we also work with the companies they're going to go to to make sure their reasonable adjustments are met but also make sure they're disability friendly”*. Amber recalled the practical and moral support she had received from a provider mentor when beginning a work placement at a retail store – *“they made sure I knew where I was going and how to get there cos XXXX [name of provider mentor] said he'll wait outside the store for me just to show it's this store, he even rang me to check where I was and if I was alright, just to make sure”*. In her view, this type of support was intended to have a calming effect on learners embarking on something

new, whilst simultaneously increasing their confidence knowing that someone was looking out for them. In cases where young people left their jobs the programme's "open door policy" (Provider Mentor 2) and consistency of support provided ongoing reassurance.

The data revealed that some learners had visited their workplace with their mentor prior to starting their placement to get a feel for the environment, discuss any reasonable adjustments and to understand their role. Jude, for example, reiterated in her interview, that a mentor went to interviews with her to ensure that reasonable adjustments were discussed. **Mentors provided reassurance** by accompanying learners to their placements on the first/early days to help them settle into their roles, letting learners know that they could be called on should there be any uncertainty or problems. They **reassured learners** that they were capable of travelling (independently) to their work placement by offering travel training and **they reassured parents** who were often heavily involved in their child's life (due to their condition(s)), that their placement was going well. Provider mentors recounted the different types of support they had provided learners to minimise any apprehension:

*We've got one of our learners, she had a work experience placement, so we'd make sure, I took her to her work experience placement and I stayed with her for an hour, made sure she was settled in, reported back to her parents and made sure they were aware that everything was okay, just giving them that reassurance (Provider Mentor 2).*

*We can offer travel training, so we'll go and support the learner with travelling on a bus or a train to a work placement... we've set up some work placements for learners and then we'll do employer visits to make sure the learner's happy in that role (Provider Mentor 1).*

*We went for a tour round the cinema with a group...showed us how the place works...Took the learner on the work placement, stayed with her the first day, the second day I hung around in the morning in the café doing my work from there so they knew they could come and find me if there was any issues, third day they were fine and now they've got a permanent job there (Provider Mentor 3).*

We gathered evidence to suggest that learners who had undertaken work placements and demonstrated their ability to do specific roles, were offered paid work. Leo recounted his journey which began as a work placement with a retailer, who worked closely with This-Ability mentors, including MOBY mentors to understand his learning disabilities and the reasonable adjustments that he required. His placement was such a success that the employer offered him a paid position after six weeks.

**Job Club, stage three of the This-Ability programme** provided comprehensive sessions to prepare learners for employment. During our research, a MOBY Mentor explained that preparing for an interview involved much more than thinking about answering specific interview questions. Instead, preparing for an interview involved considering the distance (geographically) between the learner's home and employer location, how the learner might get there, if dependent on public transport, thinking about what transport to take, affordability i.e., travel costs and whether the job opportunity would be cost-effective. Other sessions focused on the importance of researching the values and the morals of potential employers, opportunities for progression, and then looking at job descriptions and how learners might present themselves at interview.

When exploring the **in-work support provided by Making Our Business Yours (MOBY)**, our research revealed that MOBY mentors offered a comprehensive support package to learners on This-Ability. They helped learners to prepare CVs, covering

letters and prepare for interviews by creating mock interview scenarios. Mentors proactively sought and engaged with prospective employers to seek job opportunities and or work placements that matched closely with the job aspirations of individual learners. Ahead of an interview/placing a learner, they carried out employer visits to see and experience the workplace environment whilst learning more about the prospective role. An employer recalled the diligence of two MOBY mentors who had visited his company:

*[MOBY mentors] came in to speak to us, it was good that they came in because they saw the office environment, we could explain about the way everything was set up, cos our team is divided in various roles, they got a really good feel of what the atmosphere was like (Employer 2).*

In this case, mentors were able to gauge the role and skills required for the work placements and the kind of young people who would be suited to the roles. The employer relayed how they were able to show the mentors where one young person would be sitting – valuable information with respect to how busy and noisy the area might be. The mentors then went back to their offices and determined which learners would be best suited to the role and environment – ensuring that the right young people were chosen.

Employers spoke positively about MOBY mentors maintaining regular contact with them, checking to see if an individual had settled in their role, if there were any issues and so on – benefitting both parties; employers and learners (from This-Ability). Employer 1 for example, commented, *“the mentors’ help was offered, the contact was there, they were texting me, ringing me up, how’s he doing, that was brilliant”*. Employer 4 echoed in his interview that MOBY mentors had provided invaluable support, *“the This-Ability guys have been absolutely fantastic...they’ve been on site available for their learners and for us should there be any questions”*. Drawing on a specific example he recounted how with the help of MOBY mentors a work plan was developed with a young person who was moved to another work area when struggling to work in an environment that had become very busy and noisy. Instead of signing him off work, together they determined what the young person was able to do, what the employer wanted him to do, and agreed an arrangement that suited both parties. In this instance, MOBY acted as *“a useful conduit”* between the employer and young person (Employer 4).

When learners were asked during interviews whether This-Ability had provided any in-work support, they too recognised the benefits of MOBY support. Sienna reported, *“[MOBY had] continued with support to make sure I’m settled and everything’s okay...the staff have been helpful and making sure I’m still happy and enjoying it, which I couldn’t have asked for anything else really”*. Another learner explained, a MOBY mentor would *“check every now and then to make sure I was doing okay”* (Barny). A MOBY Mentor summarised the comprehensive support they provided to This-Ability learners whilst undertaking paid work/work placements. This included: travel training; guiding and advocating for learners; accompanying learners to interviews and in some instances reminding them of vital information to mention at the interview stage. Additionally, MOBY offered job training, and established a buddy system between learners and employees in companies – importantly, this intervention led to learners, in many cases, sustaining their employment.

A key function of MOBY was to empower employers and their employees to support young people to settle into their jobs, workplaces, and sustain employment. A MOBY Mentor described many reasonable adjustments as enabling young people to fulfil their roles and responsibilities, including pictorial instructions, task lists with times within which to complete specific duties and time out during particularly stressful episodes at work. When asked whether his employer had understood his learning disabilities and

accommodated them, Leo described, *“there have been a couple of times when I have had anxiety on the job and even been in tears and felt like I’ve needed to separate myself and the few times my manager has noticed that and been very understanding and just let me walk off”*. MOBY was recognised as a valuable resource for employers who might not have encountered a candidate with specific disabilities or challenges before – thus, not knowing how to make reasonable adjustments for them. During our research with employers, they recollected other reasonable adjustments facilitated by MOBY:

*We’ve given them a gentle training programme to get them into speed, we’ve given them a point of contact for one of our mental health awareness people that can keep an eye on them. We also have two people in the office just to keep a visible eye on them just to make sure they’re okay* (Employer 3).

*I think [the learner] bypassed our regular application system...the mentor, XXXX [name] and the young person came into our head office and we had a chat about what sort of experience she was looking to gain, we talked about if there were any adjustments we would need to make to the role or to our training style or anything like that* (Employer 5).

Given the complex and multiple needs of some learners, **mental health support** was fundamental for learners to progress through the programme as smoothly as possible. Classroom Mentor 3 relayed how she was able to pick up on any mental health issues during learners’ first Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) session when ascertaining their needs. If mental health issues came to light, she was able to **refer learners to the Let’s Talk mental health support service, based in the same building** as stage one of This-Ability provision. The importance of having access to this service onsite was stressed by two classroom mentors: firstly, because mentors could make the initial introduction between the learner and mental health support worker, which was reported as being reassuring for learners, and secondly, This-Ability staff could ensure that learners attended their appointments. Further benefits of This-Ability’s close link with the mental health support service were captured in the following account:

*[The mental health support service has] quite a good relationship with This-Ability so we can just nip them [learners] through and go and introduce them and set up an appointment face to face just so that when they actually turn up to the first appointment they’ve seen him, they’ve spoken to him, he’s really friendly, really welcoming and calming so when learners meet him they feel more at ease to go to the next appointment because he’s so lovely* (Classroom Mentor 1).

In instances where learners required therapy and or support from a mental health crisis team i.e., external agencies, staff continued to offer support, checking that learners attended their appointments and received help – *“I do follow it right up to the end to make sure they have had that connection and that they have followed it through”* (Classroom Mentor 3). Notably, learners in such cases were supported to deal with pressing issues first before starting the programme – prioritising learner health and wellbeing. Nash reiterated that whilst therapy had helped massively, staff from a provider organisation (for This-Ability) had also given him reassurance and offered support – *“they helped me when I told them that I was in there [in therapy], they were like if you need anything let us know and when you get out get in contact and we’ll set up a meeting”*. Similarly, Leo relayed the support from a provider mentor following a panic attack and Peter recounted receiving support from Classroom Mentor 2 for his mental wellbeing when he was feeling *“a bit down”*.

Learners’ narratives suggested that **This-Ability staff were understanding and approachable** – having forged good working relationships with them. Familiarity and

trust built due to **various services being under one roof** facilitated this process. When asked whether This-Ability staff possessed any particular skills or qualities that facilitated learning, Ripley explained that although other professionals were perhaps similar elsewhere, in his experience This-Ability staff were “*very understanding and very laid back and very kind*” and he had “*felt a good connection*” with them. Certainly, during focus group discussions, mentors described the concerted effort they made to build trusting relationships with learners, for instance Classroom Mentor 2 recounted her time with learners at the allotment, sitting round and having dinner together as well as partaking in other social activities to get to know learners better and to gain their trust:

*So, we make those relationships, and we have to really quickly. So, we need to be playing darts, playing table tennis, having a coffee with them at breaks and things like that (Classroom Mentor 2).*

Provider Mentor 3 reiterated the importance of understanding learner needs, “*getting on with them personally, becoming a person that they trust*” and Provider 5 echoed this view – “*in the first few weeks we get to know the learners, we build up some form of professional, working trust*”. **Continuity of staff** for ensuring learner engagement and retention on the programme emerged as a significant theme from our interviews and focus group discussions. For example, Provider 5 stressed the importance of learners seeing the same faces every week to build trust and to minimise the disruption resulting from frequent changes in staff members. Provider 3 concurred, continuity of staff secured, “*engagement, they [learners] weren’t dropping off [the programme]*” and despite the programme finishing, six young people from This-Ability were continuing to attend her organisation on a weekly basis. She commented, “*so we’re still continuing that support even though everything’s ended, the funding’s ended, everything*”.

When recounting **what had been most helpful in terms of support**, two learners stressed that it was knowing that **staff would always be there for them**, always willing to listen and letting them know that they were “*being heard*” (Barny). The blend of one-to-one support and group sessions ensured that learners received a standard experience through the group work and a more tailored experience through the one-to-one mentoring. **Support was very much personalised** according to each learner’s needs. Classroom mentors described developing personal plans with each learner, which included short term goals and holistic support, for example, making referrals to other services, attending appointments with them, sorting out benefits with the Jobcentre and so on. Provider 1 also emphasised the personalised nature of provision using the example of employability skills, which some learners could bypass if they had gained them elsewhere.

Having identified **poor personal hygiene** in many learners, classroom mentors described how they approached the issue with sensitivity and supported learners to establish a good personal hygiene routine. Staff used humour during workplace environment sessions to go through different hygiene products, explaining the use of each product. Toiletry bags with deodorants, sponges, shampoo, and shower gel, were distributed to learners – perhaps recognising the deprived backgrounds of some, but rather than singling people out, every learner received a package. Provider Mentor 2 reiterated that the subject of personal hygiene was built into various sessions to hammer home the message about good personal hygiene without being direct with individuals, “*We kind of bring it in in all sorts of sessions, like interview techniques we talk about personal hygiene, we talk about in the world or work we talk about personal hygiene when we’re talking about working in different workplaces. So we do bring it up quite often and hopefully they get the subliminal message*”.

**This-Ability created a safe learning environment** where learners could express themselves. Bruce reported, “*we come here we know we’re in a safe space to be open*”.



*about circumstances or emotions or whatever*". Even on the allotment, having gauged the character of each young person, the Allotment Mentor worked closely with them to build confidence and a trusting relationship. He shared *"when we did get quiet people, they'd open up cos I'd give them a task, like there's three raised beds here, we need to turn them over, get the soil working and then we're going to plant some stuff inside them"*. The Allotment Mentor explained that learners responded well to being given responsibility and, over time, the quieter ones opened up.

**Enrichment activities** enhanced learner experience by giving them the opportunity to participate in an *"optional menu of enrichment activities"* ranging from arts and crafts days, walking for wellbeing sessions, and spending time on the allotment (Provider 4). Learner interests dictated the uptake of activities rather than programme staff. The desire to develop specific skills perhaps influenced which activities individuals engaged with. Enrichment activities offered young people the opportunity to **pursue their interests and develop life skills, including social skills** to become well-rounded individuals – helping to build capacity. Another role provided through This-Ability, **peer mentoring, also helped build the capacity of learners**. Encouraged by Provider 4, Nash played a supportive role to another learner on the programme at his partner provider.

#### 4.1. Would the benefits have happened anyway without This-Ability support?

All the learners that we interviewed were consistent in recognising that they would not have made the progress that they did and experienced the benefits they had, without support from This-Ability. Sienna directly correlated her growth in confidence from being *"really quiet"* to her involvement in This-Ability. Steven articulated that he was in such a depressing and difficult situation that without This-Ability he would not have had the motivation to get out of bed in the morning. Involvement in the programme helped him back on his feet and back into the real world. His narrative conveys that This-Ability was instrumental in helping him to regain his independence:

*I was struggling severely, I had no motivation, I couldn't even get out of bed some days so again this was really helpful for me to help me readjust myself into the real world and try to get my independence back and try to make something of myself in a way, a way to find that employment.*

Nash's account was consistent with that of other learners in that he credited the programme with the progress that he had made towards finding and securing a job. He reported, *"I probably would just...still be on benefits right now. This-Ability has helped me so much, getting that job, getting from applying for the job to recruitment"*. He acknowledged that despite leaving This-Ability, he had **continued to receive support** from programme staff. During a focus group discussion both Ripley and Jude concluded that the benefits they had gained – Jude's growth in confidence and better understanding of herself and Ripley's professional CV – were due to participating in This-Ability. When Leo was asked if he would have secured employment and sustained it without the help of This-Ability staff, he commented, *"without XXXX [name of provider mentor] I probably wouldn't have even got into therapy, I don't know where I would have been"* – expressing the poor state of his mental health prior to starting the programme. Similarly, having reflected on her situation before starting This-Ability, Amber relayed, that she was unlikely to be in employment and would still be looking for work.

During their focus group discussion Classroom mentors concurred that the benefits and outcomes for learners could be attributed to the This-Ability programme. Classroom Mentor 2 stressed that the learners required significant motivation, calling for an unorthodox ad hoc approach to delivery to engage and maintain their engagement with the programme. Another mentor emphasised that learners had been

on other employment programmes prior to joining This-Ability but had travelled little distance in terms of moving closer to employment at the point they joined This-Ability. She recounted:

*It's pretty clear that we are doing something different considering how many employment programmes they have been on and they're still coming to us with the barriers and now they're finally starting to overcome them slowly but surely (Classroom Mentor 1).*

In a different focus group Provider Mentor 3 deliberated on whether learners would have been able to develop the skills they did on the programme without support from This-Ability staff. He concluded that the warmth and welcoming personalities of This-Ability staff helped foster strong working relationships with learners based on safety and trust. In turn, these strong relationships helped aid and guide young people – bringing the best out of them.

**Employers recognised the vital role of MOBY** in acting as a bridge in understanding between employers and learners. Without this service, it was felt that the benefits would not have been realised for young people with disabilities, learning disabilities/differences and or long-term health conditions, including mental ill health. Employer 3 described MOBY as a “lynchpin” ensuring that learners fit into the workplace and employees understand their needs and adapt to best support them. Indeed, the following excerpt from Employer 2's narrative underscores the gap in provision due to the This-Ability programme ending and the unique contribution of the programme:

*I would have no idea now how to go about recruiting someone who was trying to get back into work who had a disability who wanted to come and do a placement, I don't know how I would go about doing that now.*

# 5

## How did the development of core capability skills support the objectives of This-Ability?

The narratives of This-Ability managers and mentors emphasised why it was necessary for learners to develop their core capabilities as a **foundation for building their employability skills and for further progression**. Quantitative data collected during the programme showed that learners that had attended the core capabilities at the This-Ability classroom before moving onto a partner provider for the employability (CBI) skills, had a 97 per cent completion rate for the second stage of the programme. This compares to 86 per cent completion for learners that solely attended a partner provider. The development of soft skills before progressing to a provider for employability skills and work experience were highlighted as essential for continued engagement with the programme in the stakeholder narratives:

*So, when we go on about employability skills, employability skills are all well and good but unless you've got core foundation to enable you to do the employability skills there is no point... There's lots of employability programmes out there in Hull at the minute... however what's not there and not getting funded now is the soft stuff, what people call the fluffy stuff, but it's that fluffy stuff that is needed to ground people to be able to go on and progress into whatever it is they want to do (This-Ability Manager 1).*

*We personally think that it's [Stage one] a really beneficial part of the programme just because when it comes to the providers and the employability skills it's sort of like serious time, a lot of learners haven't had that work experience or anything yet, so the thought of it can be really scary for them, but just building up to that slowly and building that confidence with those... softer skills, I think without that a lot of the learners would drop off and they wouldn't even attend the first session with the provider I don't think a lot of the time (Classroom Mentor 1).*

During the research, we found that developing skills such as teamwork, communication and confidence were important to **building social skills that would help learners to cope in a workplace**. Interacting with staff and other learners, as well as groups outside of the programme, such as local veterans, enabled learners to get used to meeting and interacting with new people – an essential skill in any job role:

*So, we do classroom work... and we do use the gym and they do cooking, they interact with the veterans that we have on another programme and that helps with their communication skills and confidence (Provider Mentor 2).*

*That's where the social aspect comes into it where if we get them out of their comfort zone a little bit and get them socialising then that can have a positive impact on their work life as well (Provider 1).*

*It felt less like a bureaucratic system of trying to adapt to work but more of a way to help cope with work instead, like trying to socialise with people (Steven).*

*But we also did team building exercises and obviously that's good in terms of the social aspect because the social aspect, whether people like to admit it or not, is a big part of the job (Bruce).*

The accounts from learners and mentors revealed that core capabilities sessions enabled learners to better understand their own skills and how they related to the workplace. Mentors set clear expectations regarding attendance and punctuality to develop reliability and allow learners to **prepare for the reality of the workplace environment**:

*We did quizzes regarding the history of Hull, like retaining information which I found difficult before because I've got a really bad short-term memory, it might sound like a little thing but little activities like that helped me to retain more information, but also made you realise how much those little skills that you misinterpret sometimes, just little things can be massive to a job (Bruce).*

*The sessions where we talk about what kind of hard skills and soft skills, we have to help us understand how we would do in work, that helps cos I didn't know I had some of them (Ripley).*

*Like reliability, getting them into the habit of ringing us or texting us if they're running late cos when they go to work an employer won't accept them to rock up an hour late and it be acceptable. So, we're trying to train them and educate them into what is expected from them to help them work towards work (Classroom Mentor 2).*

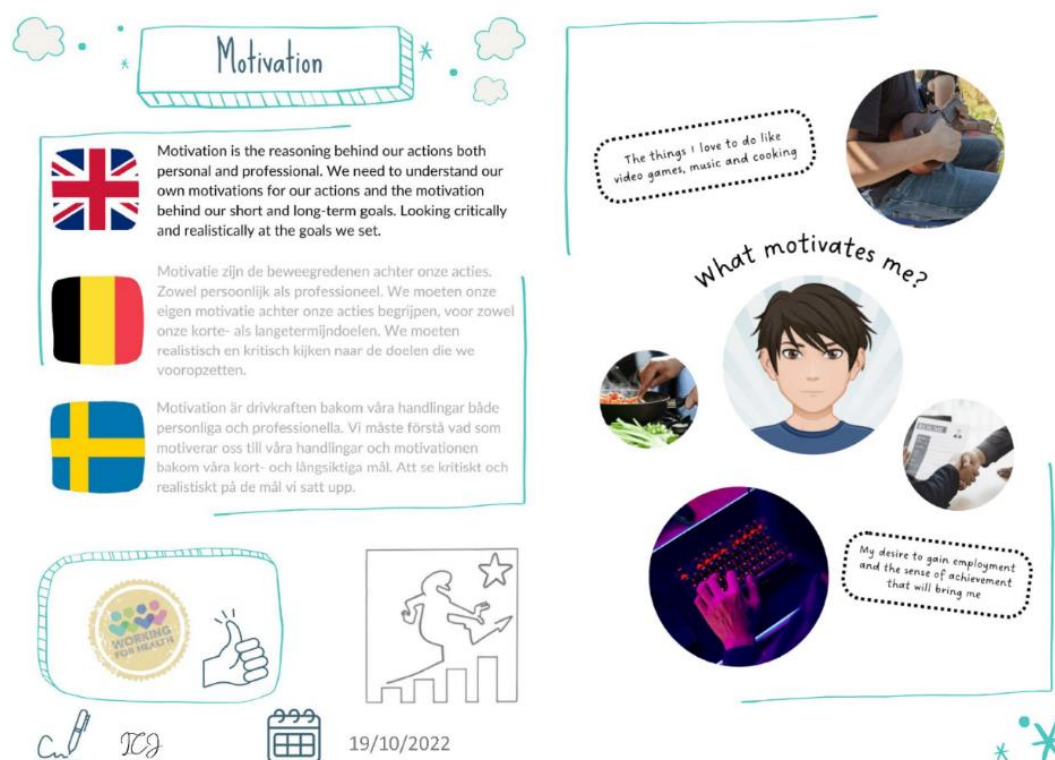
Sessions to develop **awareness of the labour market** emerged as a theme in the data, supporting findings from longitudinal case studies produced earlier in the programme (Bashir & Richards, 2024a). While some learners were uncertain about the job roles they would be suited to, others had very set ideas about what they wanted to do and needed encouragement to explore their interests and any transferable skills they had to broaden their aspirations. Provider 1 related how opportunities to try different roles and sectors, and **learn from mistakes in a safe and supported environment** were instrumental in developing confidence and setting goals:

*I think the main thing from them is they've got this fear of getting it wrong, a lot of them, they don't want to get it wrong, and it seems to be quite a big, they'd sooner not do something in case they get it wrong cos they might have never done it before. So, I said the only way you're going to get it right is by doing it wrong in the first place and learn by your mistakes and they were oh right, I didn't see it like that. So, it's more of a case of giving them the opportunity and pushing them a little bit as well I suppose (Provider 1).*

## How useful, if at all, was the Employability Passport?

The This-Ability Employability Passport was envisaged as being at the heart of the programme as learners worked towards evidencing the ten core capabilities and seven CBI skills. The passport was conceived as a tool for learners to use when applying for jobs or attending interviews, to act as a reminder of how they had demonstrated these essential skills and enabling them to evidence them where required.

Figure F: Sample page from the latest Employability Passport



For those learners on route one of the programme, the core capabilities were covered in the This-Ability classroom during the six weeks of stage one, while the CBI skills were delivered by the partner provider at stage two. For learners that engaged directly with a partner provider on route two through the programme, the provider delivered the entire Employability Passport. The core capabilities could be delivered on their own

or embedded into activities designed to develop and showcase the CBI skills, depending on the needs of the learner. Each skill could be evidenced in the passport by a mix of graphics, images, and narrative text. An accompanying skills framework clearly set out the assessment criteria for each skill. In addition, the passport could contain information about the young person's skills, interests, and reasonable adjustments. The passport had been through several iterations since the start of the This-Ability programme (discussed in detail later) with the aim of reducing the administrative burden on providers and mentors.

Provider 3 had joined the programme in the last year of delivery and recalled that, initially, she found it difficult to understand how the passport should be evidenced "*what would constitute to this soft skill or this CBI skill in the beginning and I thought I'm never going to get my head round it*". However, the narratives from This-Ability providers revealed the passport was a **useful tool to record learner progress and showcase skills**, complementing a traditional CV with **visual evidence of a learner's achievements**:

*It's been a nice way of them understanding what they can do and us making sure we're following and allowing them to learn and show to us the skills they need (Provider 4).*

*I think the passport gives you the evidence that the CV perhaps doesn't, you can write anything on a CV and you can put the most amazing CV together but where's your evidence you've actually done that? (Provider 5).*

Providers recalled the passport was a **useful framework** for structuring programme delivery, and the content (i.e. the ten core capabilities and seven CBI skills) were important in **helping learners to understand the skills employers are looking for**:

*Obviously, it's about these are the skills employers want and we made sure the learners know that these are the ones that businesses that have been surveyed think are the most important and built our sessions around them (Provider 2).*

Provider Mentor 1 recalled a particular strength of the passport was that "*it **talks about the reasonable adjustments in a positive way***", showcasing what participants can do. In the following account from Steven, he conveyed that his passport had been a useful tool in **helping to communicate his disabilities to employers**:

*Which is again something that really helped me for employers as well if I were... to say I've done this course, I do have these situational barriers that I do have, I do have certain barriers and I'm willing to work even with these (Steven).*

Additional benefits of the passport emerged from the data as Provider 5 reported how the passport enabled learners to demonstrate what they had been doing on the programme and their capabilities to parents, as well showcasing skills to potential employers:

*I find a lot of parents, if you've got a child with learning difficulties you tend to wrap them up that little bit more in cotton wool, I was guilty of it myself, my son can't do this, my son can't do that, and then all of a sudden you see all the things that they actually can do and you're like wow, they can do it. So, I think that's a big, important factor as well of the passport, the fact that it wasn't just for employers, but it built up more in the home as well (Provider 3).*

It would appear that efforts to further embed the passport into delivery when face-to-face delivery resumed after lockdown (Bashir & Richards, 2022) either did not happen or had little effect as there was **little evidence in the narratives from learners that**

**the passport was actually used in practice.** This may, in part, be due to researchers not asking direct questions regarding the passport in some interviews (particularly those used from the deep dive data).

Provider 2 did recall having supported one learner at interview in which they used their passport, and the intended use of the passport as a tool for young people to use when preparing for and attending job interviews was recognised in the accounts from providers. However, the following accounts show that learners conveyed their passports as a souvenir of their time on programme, or did not recall having seen their passport at all:

*R: Erm I didn't like myself in the pictures but that's fine, I liked it, it was a good round up of everything I've done.*

*I: Does it help you in any way having that passport?*

*R: For memory's sake and also me knowing exactly what kind of skills and everything I've built up from being here and my experiences I've had (Ripley).*

*I still have it cos I never, I just put it to one side, and it just stayed there but it's still there, it's got all the work I did in XXXX [name of provider] (Barney).*

*I don't think I've seen it (Jude).*

Testimony from Providers reinforced the disparity between how the passport was viewed by programme delivery staff, and how it was viewed by learners. The narratives revealed **that learners either did not understand how the passport should be used or were reluctant to use it in an interview situation** due to fears that it would be perceived as unprofessional or single them out as having a disability:

*But the passport itself... is absolutely invaluable. Where my concern is whether or not employers see it as invaluable, I don't know how many learners actually take the passport along to interviews (Provider 5).*

*I think the main one I heard from learners was they didn't really, I don't know if they liked the idea of showing it in an interview setting, I think they felt they might have had a negative kind of response from the interviewers, they might have seen it as, I don't know, maybe because based on whether they had a disability they might have saw it... well one learner said it looked quite secondary school type thing which they might not have thought would be took as serious in an interview (Provider 2).*

In contrast to these perceptions, Employer 2 recalled having seen a passport when introduced to a young person for work experience. They conveyed a positive impression of the passport and how it showcased what the learner was able to do:

*He showed it and said this is what I have and then [MOBY Mentor] was explaining it to us, what everything meant. ... I think it's really, really important because that's their entry really, that's them saying this is what I've achieved, this is what I can do, this is where I can go.*

## Did learners have their say about provision?

We found that the People's Awareness of Disability Discrimination (PADD) group set up during the Talent Match programme played an important role placing the ideas and interests of young people with disabilities, learning disabilities/difficulties at the heart of the programme. Co-production with young people was a defining feature of that programme. Classroom Mentor 1 described the significant level of influence that learners had in shaping different aspects of both employability programmes through co-produced activities:

*I co-produced the [This-Ability] programme with them, all of the session plans, all the scheme of work, the passport, all of it was co-produced with PADD, even the MOBY programme, obviously the research was done with them as well.*

This-Ability managers reiterated that PADD were no longer as heavily involved in This-Ability due to group members being older and therefore outside the programme's age range and commitments such as employment preventing them from participation at the same level as previously. Instead, learner perspectives gained through ongoing evaluation during the course of This-Ability informed and influenced the changes. Rather than a formal mechanism such as a co-production group, This-Ability embedded learner views into the programme – “we pull things out of the learners that we've got in front of us and we work with them that way and it's more effective” (This-Ability Manager 3). Managers stressed the importance of responding to learner viewpoints and those things impacting them quickly and discreetly without pursuing formal channels such as meetings, which not all learners had the confidence to engage with:

*It's about truly listening to young people and then adapting your programme to meet their needs as and when they're saying it, not having to take something from a meeting to have another meeting (This-Ability Manager 1).*

Additionally, a suggestion box was reported as being an effective way of collecting the thoughts of learners, anonymously. This-Ability Manager 2 recalled that with the cost-of-living crisis, some learners unable to afford breakfast suggested that This-Ability provide food. Programme staff 'heard' and acted upon this suggestion quickly – providing a food option. Awareness of poverty through observations and hearing the news informed This-Ability approaches to meeting the holistic needs of learners whilst avoiding awkward conversations with learners on sensitive subjects. The research revealed that This-Ability staff were very tuned into and responsive to learner needs. In another example, having learnt that young people required hygiene products, learners were initially given access to a cupboard where they could help themselves to products. However, this provision was underutilised due to embarrassment of being seen and therefore everybody was given a box and the content of the boxes evolved according to what learners asked for – “all sorts that go in these boxes but that's because XXXX [name of mentor] listened to what the young people have said in the



*class*” (This-Ability Manager 1). Provider 4 shared that learners were encouraged to complete feedback questionnaires, online forms, and slips at the end of sessions to have their say about provision. She also recounted inviting learners to provide feedback on some presentations that she had redesigned as part of This-Ability provision. Critique was provided through the lens of young people with learning differences and therefore valuable information was received on how well the presentations read, whether the colours and layout worked in addition to the content. A different provider reported that they sought *“feedback at the end of every lesson...that could have been [on] how they thought the lesson went or things they wanted to improve on so we tried to incorporate that into future sessions”* (Provider 2). Learners were encouraged to complete an anonymous feedback sheet and encouraged to provide honest verbal feedback to allow the provider organisation to improve what didn’t work.

## How did the programme evolve to respond to challenges and learning?

Data from our research highlighted that **ongoing reflection and learning led to changes** in the programme **to better meet the needs of learners**. As they progressed through This-Ability, managers realised that the initial three stage model (with learners beginning at This-Ability, moving onto a provider, and then returning to This-Ability) did not suit all learners. Some young people, particularly the vulnerable, felt more comfortable beginning and continuing their This-Ability journey with a provider organisation – a change which was accommodated by ensuring that providers were able to deliver the core capabilities themselves. Rather than continuing to take the lion’s share of programme delivery, This-Ability managers flexed their model – **putting learner needs at the forefront** of decisions about programme provision.

We found that during the penultimate year of programme delivery, another adjustment was made – two This-Ability staff were recruited as dedicated MOBY mentors specifically to be placed with provider organisations. These members of staff were solely dedicated to the This-Ability programme and acted as a channel of communication between the provider organisations and This-Ability staff. Fortnightly meetings between This-Ability’s MOBY team and the two new employees focused on talking through learner’s short-term goals, their work experience, and their chosen sectors so that MOBY could explore work opportunities for those learners. Subsequently, when MOBY engaged businesses with the programme, they already had learners in mind who would be suited to specific environments and roles. The benefits of this dedicated resource are detailed in a recent deep dive report by Bashir and Richards (2024).

**Figure G: Learners cooking at the Cook with Ability Live! Sessions**



During her interview, Cook with Ability Mentor explained how **This-Ability responded to learner demand for more Cook with Ability (CwA) sessions by extending provision** using cooking facilities at a provider organisation. In addition to learning how to cook, learners were given the opportunity to gain some experience and insights into working in a kitchen as a potential job. CwA Mentor reported the educational benefits for learners of taking up further sessions - *“the importance of keeping things tidy, they learnt about cross contamination, how to use a washer, because some didn’t even know how to use that. So, it wasn’t just cooking there was a lot of other things to it that they’ve benefited from”* (CwA Mentor).

Having identified that some young people joined This-Ability under the impression that it was a mandated programme and or they had no choice but to attend due to being referred by the Jobcentre or by their parents, some of them demonstrated a lack of interest and motivation once on This-Ability. This-Ability Manager 2 commented, *“they might turn up for one session, they might not turn up at all”*, explaining that learners were dropping off the programme at the core capabilities stage (one). It was for this reason that the programme introduced a second Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) session – an IAG two weeks into the programme to assess whether the young person was suitable for This-Ability and if it was the right programme for them:

*That second IAG at the two-week point is to make sure is it what you thought, is it right for you, do you still want to be here and sometimes we find things out in those first two weeks about additional barriers as well that they don’t disclose at first* (This-Ability Manager 2).

Whilst the first IAG delved into their skills or gaps in them, what they wanted to do, intention to work and their barriers and disabilities, the second was very much about determining whether This-Ability was the right programme for them. Having built some familiarity with This-Ability staff after two weeks, learners felt more confident expressing their motivations (or lack of them), their aspirations and barriers and whether they wanted to continue on This-Ability.

Despite the challenges of **the unprecedented world-wide pandemic**, our research revealed that the This-Ability responded well, evolving its focus and provision to meet the imminent needs of learners followed by their longer-term needs (also see Deep dive by Bashir & Richards, 2024). Recognising the drastic changes in the labour market due to both hospitality and retail sectors being worst hit by COVID-19, the programme adjusted its focus to the manufacturing sector where there was demand for labour – explaining the benefits of gaining experience in this sector, which was different to where many learners had intended to work pre-COVID. Flexibility and the longevity of National Lottery funding helped This-Ability to navigate the difficulties stemming from the pandemic. This-Ability Manager 3 stressed the responsiveness of the programme during a state of flux:

*...the importance of being reactive to the labour market. I think Covid taught us that. When we went into lockdown the labour market in our area looked very different to way it did when we came out of lockdown.*

Provider 1 reported that COVID-19 had significantly impacted the mental health of learners who in turn became socially withdrawn and isolated. He explained, *“from our point of view it’s more about that confidence because of the effects of Covid, to try and tackle that loneliness and isolation. Once we managed that and we didn’t really talk about it anymore then that’s when we started looking at the employability stuff”*. His testimony reinforced how This-Ability adapted to the pandemic.

## 8.1. Changes to the passport

The original version of the passport had bronze (demonstrate), silver (evidence) and gold (reflect) levels for each skill and three sub-skills underneath, totalling 117 pages to be completed by learners and staff over the course of the programme. Provider 5 recalled their first impressions of this original version of the passport:

*This is so bureaucratic... there was so much to fill in for the passport and the way it was formatted, the way it was laid out, a superb piece of documentation for the learner to take with them, but far, far too detailed.*

**Figure H: Example of the original passport**

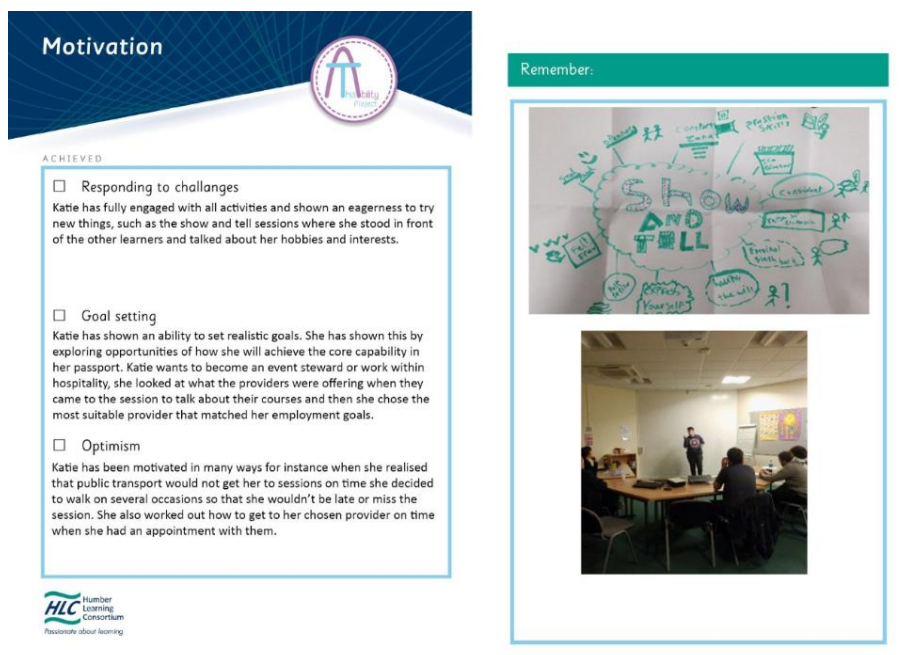
The image shows a sample of the original passport form. On the left, there is a section titled 'BRONZE' with a gold medal icon. Below this, there are two large empty rectangular boxes labeled 'STANDARD' and 'PARTICIPANT'. At the bottom left of this section is the logo for 'HLC Humber Learning Consortium' and the text 'VERIFICATION'. On the right, there is a section titled 'Feedback from mentor:' with a large empty rectangular box for writing.

The This-Ability team quickly realised this original passport was onerous to complete and removed the gold, silver and bronze levels, instead requiring a short paragraph detailing how the learner had achieved each subskill and some images to illustrate how the skill had been achieved. Providers recalled this was more “user friendly” (Provider 5), but still required too much time to complete, detracting from programme delivery:

*When I first joined... the passport was not at a good state I thought because of how much work you had to put into it which did take away from sessions, there was a lot of admin time and I think it was too wordy (Provider 2).*

*It was better however the provider’s speciality was not necessarily writing so I think they paid lip service to the narrative and tended to duplicate to save time... I also felt the narrative wasn’t comprehensive enough and didn’t reflect the activities the learner has completed (This-Ability Manager 4).*

Figure I: Example of second Employability Passport



From 2020-2022, HLC and the This-Ability team were involved in Independent People, an Erasmus+ project that aimed to develop a 'soft skills' passport to be used by youth workers across Europe. Working with partner organisations in Sweden and Belgium, eight soft skills were chosen by the partner organisations and young people they worked with as being essential for success in all areas of life – communication, motivation, reliability, teamwork, responsibility, adaptability, problem solving and resilience. This soft skills passport was tested by the This-Ability team with a partner provider:

*It was deemed to be far easier, and they had the option of whether they wanted to write and put narrative in, or they wanted to do it pictorial, or a combination of both. It was entirely up to the provider what they put in there, and the young person obviously, whatever suited that individual (This-Ability Manager 1).*

In response to this feedback and previous comments from providers, the Independent People passport was adopted by the This-Ability programme in June 2022. The CBI skills were added to it, and two of the previous core capabilities – openness and awareness of the labour market. Problem solving and Teamwork remained in both the new set of core capabilities and the CBI skills “because... those young people from Belgium and Sweden and the workers across there wanted that as a core capability and not just an employability skill” (This-Ability Manager 1). This-Ability Manager 1 related that the duplication enabled learners to demonstrate these skills in different contexts:

*When it's under employability skills, it's we can give examples of problem solving in a workplace. As when it's in core capabilities it is what it says its problem solving within life... it's almost a softer version of teamwork because it's getting to know people, it's getting to work with others what you've never done things like this before. By time you get to provider hopefully, your confidence would increase so your teamwork skills would become slightly different.*

Providers recalled the change was a positive step that **condensed** the passport and reduced the administrative burden. The new, less narrative heavy format was reported as better for both staff and the learners by Provider 2:

*When they did go and change it I think it did improve a lot because it was mainly photo evidence which was a lot better for us as staff, but also the learners, I think it's a bit more user friendly for them when they got it instead of loads of words written about it and the pictures are there, it's much better seeing a picture for you to remember the work you did than just a bunch of writing.*

In a contrasting account, Provider 4 conveyed that the removal of the detailed narrative regarding the subskills underlying each element of the passport had removed details and information that would be useful for learners in their future job search:

*One of the things I would probably feedback from that is that the version that I first started working with, it was about myself as a mentor writing I think 62 word paragraphs for three different sub-sections of each skill, so the learner would end up with a document that... would be useful for them in terms of these are examples of what you've demonstrated to us... that information and what we've observed about them and those quality examples, that for me is what they need to retain to take forward to help them in the future, build that picture of their skills.*

Conceivably, as a mental health specialist service that directly recruited a majority of learners to their This-Ability programme, rather than referrals from the This-Ability classroom, fewer participants at Provider 4 would have had learning difficulties/differences. This may account for the perceived need for more textual, and less pictorial, information. Clearly, whilst most staff expressed satisfaction with the most recent iteration of the passport, not all staff shared the same view.

# Continuity and flexibility of staff

# 9

*“We can react, we can change, we can respond, we can be creative” (This-Ability Manager 3).*

During our focus group discussion with This-Ability managers, when asked about their continuous (ten year) involvement in This-Ability and earlier employability programme, they stressed the benefits of having a core team committed to developing, driving forward, and achieving the programme objectives. This-Ability Manager 2 reiterated that accumulating *“ten years of learning”* reinforced why they did what they did (in a particular way) and why they knew it was going to work or not work. The following narrative from This-Ability Manager 1 underscored the deep understanding they had gained by remaining a constant on the programme and their resolve to make it a success:

*You can only make it work if you’ve got the right staff team behind it and I think that’s for us what’s worked, having the four-core staff team. If you’ve got good staff that understand things and have understood them from the beginning and have stuck to our guns all the way through and the reason why we’re doing what we’re doing, has made us why we’re still here today (This-Ability Manager 1).*

Further, we learnt that other members of staff, and especially those with a long history of involvement with both employability programmes were given the *“opportunity to grow”* (This-Ability Manager 1) alongside the programme, moving into different and more challenging roles. This-Ability Manager 2, for example recounted how her involvement in the evaluation of This-Ability had equipped her with research and evaluation skills enabling the Humber Learning Consortium (organisation leading This-Ability) to independently secure funding to deliver a research contract as well as building the research capacity of staff in-house.

Notably, **the flexibility of This-Ability staff** emerged as a significant theme during focus group discussion. As the programme evolved, staff roles were changed (multiple times in some cases) to respond to differing programme needs, yet staff narratives about these changes were positive. The narratives conveyed that **staff worked in a close and supportive manner** to prevent any individual from shouldering the burden of too much work. In particular, evidence suggested that as the programme was drawing to a close, and the turnover of staff increased, those remaining had to step into various roles to fill any gaps in provision – a point emphasised in the following account:

*So I was working under XXXX [name of colleague] and I had to come down to support with mentoring in the classroom but then on top of that because both of our MOBY mentors left,... [name of MOBY manager] was left with no MOBY mentors so she asked me and XXXX [name of colleague] to dip in and step up into their roles as well (Classroom Mentor 1).*

The programme's Allotment Mentor described how his role had changed to improve aspects of the programme. By visiting learners during stage two when they went to provider organisations, he was able to review how learners were getting on – *“if they had any problems, if they were sure that they were still happy with the provider that they'd picked and if they maybe wanted to change”*. In a few instances where learners did not want to remain with the provider, he facilitated their move to a different organisation. When This-Ability acquired an allotment approximately two years ago, his role changed from visiting providers to preparing and then running the allotment as a *“working environment”* for learners to develop their skills in a peaceful open space – receiving regular visits from two to three groups of learners weekly.



## How might the programme have been improved?

All the learners interviewed expressed positivity and satisfaction with This-Ability and did not suggest any improvements. Provider mentors were largely positive about the programme too, however, Provider Mentor 3 commented, *“I would say going forward... I think if we had a focus on training on mental health a bit more, I think mentors could really benefit from”*. When This-Ability managers were asked how the programme might have been improved, This-Ability Manager 1 expressed the need for doing a **more thorough assessment of each young person’s suitability to the programme** at the point of first meeting them rather than determining their suitability at the formal Information, Advice, and Guidance (IAG) meeting. She related that some young people referred to This-Ability by the Jobcentre felt they had little choice but to attend despite their unsuitability. This-Ability Manager 1 explained:

*At the recruitment stage I think if we was to do this again it’s about having that ability, the minute you meet somebody to have a bit more of an in-depth conversation, not just sign up and I’ll ring you and give you an appointment, I think we need to do a bit more before we start getting people in to do IAGs, we need to start getting a bit more information, we need to start being a bit more clever with the questions we ask.*

Evidently, This-Ability managers had deliberated extensively on the programme’s funding model. Problematising their *payment by results model* and the alternative model of upfront payments to provider organisations, This-Ability Manager 1 explained that providers could not afford to employ and sustain full time staff if there was no guarantee of payment and therefore a compromise with providers would be required if a similar employability programme were to be run again. In contrast, This-Ability Manager 3 reported a recent change (over a year ago) in how they worked with providers that had created a closer working relationship and addressed some of the challenges presented by the payment by results funding model. This-Ability had directly employed staff, as their core team, to go out and work with providers which had *“been quite beneficial because we’ve been able to have that ongoing dialogue of what the learners are doing, what the businesses are doing, how’s things going”* (This-Ability Manager 3). This model was conveyed as being a better option for future work with provider organisations.

With the programme model involving different stages and different organisations, the introduction of a rolling programme, and learners joining at different stages, a question was raised about learners potentially being confused about where and how they fitted in the This-Ability programme. Whilst evidence suggested that programme delivery was very much based on a *joined up* approach in an attempt to make the journey a seamless one for learners, Provider 4 reiterated an important point, *“if you took the time to make sure you explained that to each person and they had that clear idea of this is where I fit, there will be other people coming in, I will still get the same quality of support although my pathway looks different”*.

The research highlighted that before deciding which provider (of work experience) to move onto after completion of stage one, learners were given the opportunity to hear about the 'offer' from each provider, but this ceased during lockdown. Provider 4 expressed that the previous arrangement allowed them to sell their provision and for learners to make their own decision. However, they could no longer be certain how well their offering was being presented by This-Ability, commenting, *"at one stage there was a bit of uncertainty as to how we were being pitched, how much information the person got. I know they used to bring people for visits to the office to come and meet us and have a look round, to hear what we're all about in that sense, but I think sometimes, I guess my concern would be - has the learner made the choice from the off or have sometimes they said we think you might like [it] there?"*. Clearly this change was felt to disadvantage the provider who expressed that the programme would be improved by reverting to the initial format.

Provider 2 articulated potential improvements to the programme by sharing that although the various provider organisations were aware of each other, and each other's offer he would have liked to work together a lot more. He commented, *"I know learners did get referred to other providers, but I would have liked to have done more events or days visiting different providers with our learners, that would have been a good thing"*. Provider 2 recalled a visit from a new member of staff from a different provider to observe their lessons, learn and provide feedback. This event was conveyed as a mutually beneficial experience where resources and expertise were shared. Provider 2 summed up, *"that was really positive. I think if we did that a bit more that would be something for future projects"*.

An anomaly emerged during our research, which only reflected the experience of one employer of all the employers that we had spoken to. Whilst Employer 2 and 3 relayed very positive experiences of working with programme mentors, they highlighted one area for improvement and that was to gain a better understanding of how learners' disabilities, learning disabilities/difficulties impacted them. Employer 3 commented, *"it would have made things easier if we'd have known what people's trigger points had been"*. It was suggested that this information need only be shared with one/two key people at the induction stage to foster a better understanding of learner support needs. Although this was an important point, other employers had not raised similar experiences. On the contrary, they reported receiving considerable support in this area.

### 10.1. How could the passport be improved?

During our research with learners, This-Ability staff and programme providers we uncovered various perspectives on the Employability Passport. However, most views on how the passport might be improved were garnered from staff working for provider organisations i.e., those delivering CBI skills and providing work experience opportunities for learners. Provider 3, for example, relayed frustrations with the duplication of certain skills in the passport:

*To me was pointless because you were constantly trying to think of something different to do... it can be quite annoying to the learner as well because you've got such a short window with people with learning difficulties to actually capture their imagination, engage them in something.*

This-Ability Manager 1 concurred that perhaps the difference between the duplicated skills in the core capabilities and CBI skills sections of the passport was not so clear for providers delivering the entire passport (a departure from the initial This-Ability model) as opposed to delivery where learners first attended the This-Ability classroom:

*It was very clear when they came here, and when they went to a provider. Maybe we should have done a bit more work around the differentiation what we expected from the two (This-Ability Manager 1).*

Provider 4 explained that due to the removal of the narrative sections in the revised version of the passport, she was adding some information as “*separate pieces of paper*” that could easily be lost. She stressed how the Employability Passport represented an educational report, a validation of what the learner had achieved, acting as a reference point for them in future interviews and therefore the importance of all information being “*nicely packaged and bound and plastic covered*” to preserve it. As an improvement, provider 4 suggested incorporating additional information perhaps as an appendix at the end of the passport by printing it to the same scale.

A different option – an electronic version of the passport – was highlighted during our research as conceivably addressing some of the issues raised about the passports. During an interview with This-Ability Manager 2, she recalled that although the skills did not exist within the team to build an app from scratch, various options to create an online passport had been explored over the course of the programme. Ultimately technical difficulties with integrating different systems, limited resources in administrating such systems and concerns around data protection and GDPR had prevented any of the explored options being implemented. Multiple benefits of an electronic Employability Passport were identified:

*They could access on their phone it's always with them. So if we could get over that issue that we had with the printing and writing up and it's just you've finished that session today, the next day it gets written up and then it pops up on little Johnny's phone, hey you've got your confidence done, they have more ownership of it, they can see the progress that they're making which was what was missing (This-Ability Manager 2).*

Certainly, evidence suggested that a great deal of exploratory work had already been undertaken by This-Ability managers into how the Employability Passport might transition from a paper version to an electronic version – “*we absolutely definitely would want to try and get [an electronic version] into the next programme*” (This-Ability Manager 2). Additionally, recognising that the passport had not been used as it had been intended to be by many learners, This-Ability staff expressed a commitment to embedding the passport in all stages of a similar programme in future delivery.

## How was provision different to that provided by mainstream services?

Interviews with the This-Ability management team revealed a **gap in provision** locally for specific employment support for young people with disabilities, learning disabilities/disabilities, and long-term health conditions because two leading employment organisations supporting people with such issues had withdrawn their services from the area. Notably, a gap in services was evident in relation to support for employers to take on young people with disabilities – a function of the MOBY element of the This-Ability programme:

*I think when we look round especially Hull and East Riding there was nobody doing anything really specific with people with disabilities. You had almost little niche groups that dealt with autistic people... you had XXXX [name of organisation] that deal with people, but that was more for the social side of things, nobody dealing with people that needed to move on and wanted to progress into employment (This-Ability Manager 1).*

*Not a lot of organisations that directly supported businesses like we do. The MOBY element of it, we did a pilot drive in Talent Match, really focused on the needs and wants of the business and that's something that we've seen really valuable over this programme because you'll get an employer that takes on a young person and initially it's all well and good but then they start to see the challenges that young person has a bit further down the line and they've got somebody to come back to (This-Ability Manager 3).*

Further, **what provision did exist was not seen to be effective in moving participants into employment** as participants that were expected to progress into employment from supported internships were, in fact, being progressed onto This-Ability. Given that a supported internship is a twelve-month work experience programme this didn't "*make sense*" (This-Ability Manager 1). This was corroborated by a learner, Ian, in a previous case study, who recalled his experiences on a supported internship as a "*safe hold*" that failed to challenge students or push them outside their comfort zones (Bashir & Richards 2024a).

In another example Laurence reported having previously been on a different employability programme during which he had completed several work experience placements for which there was actually no role available at the end:

*R: Really just doing the same thing what we're doing here, they were putting me on work experiences and they wasn't really interested in applying or, and then they suggested me to come here.*

*I: When you say they wasn't really interested in applying, what do you mean?*

*R: Job roles.*

*I: So were they putting you on placements that you just didn't want to do?*

*R: Well I didn't mind it, it was just they didn't, weren't really hiring people at the [time]. (Laurence).*

This was in contrast to the This-Ability in-work support model where **placements functioned as a working interview**, and there was a strong expectation of employment for the learners should they do well in the role (Bashir & Richards 2024b). Barney recalled how knowing there was the possibility of a permanent role motivated him to do well in his placement:

*I: So you've been there for maybe 12 weeks, is that about right?... At what point then, having started in the placement, did you find out that there would be a paid role for you?*

*R: I knew from the get-go. They put me on placement just to see how I could handle it.*

*I: So you knew starting then that if you did well there's a job for you at the end of it?*

*R: Yeah*

*I: Was that helpful?*

*R: I mean it's a big motive. If you do something knowing that there's going to be something later down the line, I think it generally helps a lot.*

A strong theme of **individualised and person-centred provision** emerged from the narratives, as delivery was adapted to suit the needs of the learners, rather than expecting the learners to fit in with a set style of delivery. The accounts revealed that unlike mainstream provision, there was flexibility and adaptability in how the programme was implemented and when the various elements were introduced to learners, dependent on what an individual had already achieved:

*What you will find is that with employability they've already done an employability course somewhere before, they've done the employability skills. We can offer it different or we can do it as a refresher but then it's just the main focus is you are ready to find work so we'll look at your CV then we'll go to job club. So, we'll try and implement the job club and job search right at the beginning now (Provider 1).*

*So, we'll judge the group based on who we've got coming through the door and just adapt it according to the people we've got in. Some groups are really loud, and we need to adapt it so that they are acting more professionally, and some groups are really quiet, and we've got to adapt it so we're giving them the opportunity to come out of their shells and put them out of their comfort zone (Classroom Mentor 1).*

Classroom Mentor 2 recalled learners who in some instances had had previous **bad experiences of mainstream education** found it difficult to be in a classroom environment. This was reiterated by participants who recalled **struggling both academically and socially** at school or college. In previous case studies conducted during the This-Ability programme, participants revealed not fitting in at college, **traumatising instances of bullying** due to their neurodivergence, and **stigma around coming out as trans** (Bashir & Richards 2024a).

Young people conveyed a sense of frustration due to not being supported and not having their needs met in mainstream education. In the excerpts below (taken from

learner interviews) issues of bullying, mental ill health, and **not fitting in** surfaced. The word struggle was mentioned five times, arguably emphasising that learner needs were far from being understood and met by mainstream provision:

*I get misgendered a lot and when I first came out, I was bullied a lot (Bruce).*

*Well, I spent, after school period I spent eight years in college education doing various things... but it got too much on my mental health and I just wanted to explore other options (Bruce).*

*I struggle focusing which didn't help in school because I was put with a lot of naughty kids, I was put in the lowest set so me not being able to focus and then not being able to focus merged together so they assumed I was just misbehaving (Ripley).*

*I struggled with writing in school (Oscar).*

*I was raised in a special school for basically most of my school year because they caught my autism very early on...I had a much smaller school I wasn't really exposed to a lot of how mainstream schools were consistently throughout a lot of my years so when it came time to do college I was a bit wary at first and I really struggled. I really struggled the first couple of years socially and I was also struggled a couple of other years academically (Barney).*

The accounts emphasised how mentors built relationships and trust with learners though a mix of fun classroom and outdoor learning, utilising hands-on activities to keep learners engaged. Discussion around each learners' disabilities and support needs was encouraged, within small class sizes, in order to **create a safe space where learners felt supported** and were able to *flourish* (Bashir & Richards 2024a).

*They get to know us, they get to know the expectations and they feel safe, it's down to how they feel with us and if you feel safe, you're more likely to get engaged and buy into it (Classroom Mentor 2).*

*Sometimes when the lessons ended I can tell them if I'm not really feeling that well, they're very real, authentic people so I feel like I can open up to them (Ripley).*

Further, the narratives revealed that the This-Ability programme sought to **enable learners and promote independence by recognising their status as adults** and treating them accordingly. Jez's mother recalled the support he had received during his two years at college "*was maybe a little bit childish*", to a point where the college refused to support him with his visual impairment unless he was prepared to be "*guided around at all times*". In contrast, staff delivering the This-Ability programme were very conscious of learners' ages and this informed their approach to supporting them – a finding corroborated in the following accounts:

*It's a more adult to adult support. So, it sort of feels like it's, they're there to support him... as a grown-up and as somebody that is sort of looking to employment, and somebody that's sort of looking to progress with life... It's just a completely different sort of support that he's had here (Jez's mother).*

*At the end of the day these guys are coming to us and some of us are 20s, 30s, so I didn't want to belittle them, I wanted them to see me as their friend and I think that was one of the main ways we could gain their respect and understand them and they could understand us and they could feel comfortable coming to us with their problems (Provider 1).*

*It doesn't feel like you're speaking to a teacher, it's like speaking to a friend... they won't shout at people for say like talking or having opinions. You just feel significantly more comfortable around them personally (Harper).*

A strong ethos emerged from the accounts of '**doing what is best for the learner**' and being a responsible service provider, to the extent that in some instances learners had remained with partner providers despite their particular situations and challenges meaning they were not ready for employment. In the following example, the routine and relationship the learner had developed with the partner provider was judged to be a stabilising influence on the young person's situation. The provider continued to work with the learner despite having no other suitable funded provision to move him onto:

*I: And it's about not losing that person because that person could go off and actually their situation could get much worse?...*

*R: Well knowing the situation he was in you couldn't just say you're not going to get a job so we're just going to send you off, it would be irresponsible, unethical.*

*I: But that's different isn't it, that approach is different to maybe say another employment organisation out there because if you don't meet the criteria they can't necessarily continue to work with you or continue supporting you?*

*R: I think if we'd known a lot more about his background and his lifestyle when he first came to us arguably we wouldn't have took him on, but we did take him on and it emerged down the line. Once you've taken someone on you can't just then cut the strings (This-Ability Manager 2).*

The narratives revealed this ethos extended to an **open-door policy** for learners to return for further support having moved into employment, or for employers experiencing difficulty having taken on a This-Ability learner. This-Ability Manager 3 related several examples of learners that had returned to the programme for support even beyond the six month point where they had successfully sustained their employment. The support included help settling in and negotiating reasonable adjustments with a new employer, or coping with change in an existing role – “*We haven't said box ticked, outcome sustained, see you later... we've gone and done it and we've done that for a few learners.*” (This-Ability Manager 3). A **commitment to helping participants to stay in work** was evidenced in the interviews with This-Ability staff members – a key difference from other provision where the emphasis may be placed on progressions:

*So, because we go that extra mile and it's having a team that understands these young people and actually want to work with these young people and go above and beyond makes a massive difference in comparison to other providers (Classroom Mentor 3).*

*It was really sad going there for the last time knowing that in two or three weeks we aren't going to be able to do that anymore and who's going to be able to go and help people stay in work, not just get a job, but keep a job (This-Ability Manager 3).*

Looking across our data we found that This-Ability provision was tailored to individual needs – enabled by small class sizes and high ratio of staff to learners. Gaps were addressed, helped by the flexibility of the funder, to create an inclusive, safe environment for learners – meeting their holistic needs not only within the learning environment but in their personal lives as well. Clearly, This-Ability staff had an in-depth understanding of learner needs and went the extra mile to ensure that learners' more complex and multiple needs were met.

## What were the impacts and outcomes of the programme?

The impacts and outcomes of the This-Ability programme should be seen within the context of the challenges outlined by learners in the earlier chapter, which places learners as a group furthest away from the labour market. Learners' disabilities, learning disabilities/difficulties, and or long-term health conditions, coupled with experiences of bullying/rejection by society, poor schooling, feelings of exclusion and not fitting in, parental control and influence amongst other factors, all serve to impede progress towards employment. Within this context significant distance was travelled by learners, which is set out next.

The impacts and outcomes of the This-Ability programme were largely positive. This-Ability staff, provider organisations and employers, all reported an **increase in learners' confidence**, including learners themselves – indicating that it was a major impact of the programme. An increase in confidence represented **significant distance travelled in terms of each learners' journey towards employment**, particularly as softer outcomes such as a growth in confidence were necessary for laying the foundations for moving through subsequent stages of the programme.

Notably, learners who began This-Ability extremely timid and clearly lacking social skills **improved their communication skills significantly**. Confidence was built in the classroom – an environment that facilitated conversations between learners, including staff. Sensing the unease of some learners, they were gently nurtured “*out of their shells*” (Classroom Mentor 1), focusing more on the personal development of learners with employment being more a long-term goal. Various narratives gained during the research reiterated that learners had become more confident in communicating with others as they progressed through the programme:

*One thing I know it's helped me out with a lot with is my confidence, it's helped me communicating with people a lot better (Harper).*

*They've gone from not talking and shaking like a leaf every time somebody approaches them to just being able to sit and have a conversation with somebody and be able to enter a room and not just sit in a corner (Classroom Mentor 1).*

*They might have been really unconfident and not really wanted to communicate or engage [in group sessions] and then as time's gone on they've started to engage, they've wanted to give an input, share their knowledge and experiences from their life with other learners (Provider Mentor 1).*

Employers echoed that they saw learners develop in confidence in the workplace – a transformative process beginning with timid young people who through training and ongoing support grew into more sociable and enthusiastic work colleagues. Employer



3 summed up the personal development journey of a learner his company had first taken on as a work placement and later employed – “*it’s a massive celebration, it’s a great opportunity to see that young person flourish from when they came in as a timid individual on the back of a real mental disability, you’ve seen that person grow and be a lot more confident that they’re coming in, talking*”. In several accounts, **the impacts of the This-Ability programme were conveyed as transformative** suggesting that the confidence and resulting independence of some learners reflected a marked change from when they first began This-Ability and or commenced a work placement/paid employment through the programme:

*[I] wouldn’t recognise her from the first day I met her to where she is now, she’s so confident, she used to come and see me when she started work for what she has to do, she hasn’t come to see me today, she hasn’t come to see me last week, she’s more confident (Employer 1).*

*Unbelievable now from standing staring at his shoes and at the point at the moment where he’s taking on more shifts and is looking to actually move out on his own away from parents. So it’s making this person a real member of society, nothing else matters for them, they’re a productive member of society, it’s great (Employer 4).*

*Now I walk past him every day...and every day he talks to me. He went from not talking...to now he’s got his dream job and he’s living a great life. It’s stuff like that, every day I walk past I feel a bit prideful about it (Provider Mentor 3).*

The impact of a growth in confidence on **self-belief** emerged as a strong theme amongst the learners interviewed for the research. They shared how involvement in This-Ability had led to the realisation that employment was an achievable goal. Morale was boosted through staff reiterating to learners that they were capable of work, but in environments and or roles that suit their disabilities, learning disabilities/difficulties – underscoring that their conditions did not limit their abilities to enter and sustain employment. Bruce, for example, realised that with time, training and patience he would be able to do most jobs that non-disabled people could. Both learner and staff comments highlighted the empowering impacts of the programme:

*So having that opportunity and somebody saying that...I am capable to work in certain environments has definitely done me good in terms of a morale boost to say the least (Bruce).*

*Probably realisation that they can get a job with the right support, they are worthy of getting a job, where they come sometimes thinking that there’s no hope for them (Classroom Mentor 2).*

Having repeatedly heard throughout their lives that they wouldn’t be able to do certain things and believing that their disabilities/differences were limiting, learners and This-Ability mentors described how involvement with the programme replaced **can’t do narratives with can do narratives**, resulting in positive attitudes and outcomes, including gaining employment. The following accounts demonstrate how the growth in learners’ confidence whilst on the programme led to the realisation that they could achieve outcomes that they had never anticipated as being within their reach:

*One learner has said I’ve been told all of my life through education I can’t do, I can’t do, you’ve allowed me to prove I can do. So people’s self-esteem, people’s confidence, people’s belief in themselves has absolutely soared (MOBY Mentor).*

*So I guess his issues were more anxiety and confidence but when he first came he was, ‘I can’t, I can’t’ but then he come back in after he got it [an apprenticeship] and he was like ‘wow I’ve done it’ so that was a good outcome (Provider Mentor 2).*

The theme of 'hope' was interwoven in several accounts when exploring the impacts of This-Ability on learners. Initially, young people had begun the programme believing that there was little hope for them but having progressed through the stages of learning about the labour market, moving on to providers (of work experience) and having gained some skills, they were reported as having more hope for gaining employment – a point relayed by a classroom mentor (amongst others) – *“I think the impact has been... they're [learners] saying things like confidence and inclusion and hope for the future and employment”*.

Our research found that the impact of increased confidence should not be underestimated as this was a stimulus for learners to get out of their beds, their homes, and embark on a learning programme which helped them integrate with others in similar situations but also in wider society. For some learners, this represented a huge change in how they lived their day-to-day lives – a point stressed by Provider Mentor 1 in her account – *“I think the biggest impact is building that confidence and self-esteem in the learners and it's the small things, they're able to then leave the house which they struggled with before”*. Drawing on a specific case, This-Ability Manager 1 recounted how a This-Ability learner working with a provider organisation had built significant confidence that in turn allowed him to go back into an educational environment to achieve a qualification and gain experience whilst working with different sections of society – underscoring that the impacts of the programme far exceeded the goal of simply securing employment.

Evidence from our research revealed that **the social circles of young people had grown** due to participating in the employability programme. Having been reluctant to speak to others at the beginning of the programme, as time went on, they developed friendships in the classroom and in some cases, in the workplace. Provider Mentor 3 described it as, *“it's like a light switch gone on, they're vibrant, they're chatty, they've made friends”*. He relayed how one group had set up a group chat on WhatsApp, and were having a great time, going out bowling together and finally living their lives to the full. Similarly, Employer 4 recounted the **social development** of a learner from This-Ability who was *“getting out there and meeting a new bunch of people and making some new friends”*.

Two learner interviews highlighted that they had **started to think differently about their disabilities, learning disabilities/difficulties** since being involved in the programme. Steven commented, *“I've begun to accept them, previously I always thought they were more curses than they were physical traits of me, but now I've just decided that it's a situation that everyone can deal with”*. He recognised that with reasonable adjustments to accommodate his differences he could adapt to situations he previously thought he would be unable to adapt to. This-Ability had changed his mind set to a positive one – *“it's just my mind previously...was just overthinking it and considering that I couldn't adapt to the situation before”*. Bruce expressed that the programme had allowed him to *‘find himself’*, to discover his capabilities, what he wanted to do, and how through the relevant training and adjustments he could realise his aspirations. He stressed the following:

*If people give you the right time, the right training and patience then I could just be as capable as someone else, I might do things a little bit differently than the way that's seen as the norm, but it doesn't mean that I'm not capable of gaining experience that will eventually help me to gain a full paid job.*

In several interviews, learners disclosed the wider (mental health) impacts of the This-Ability programme, reflecting that **the programme met the holistic needs of learners** – reaching beyond the programme's employment related goals. Steven commented, *“it's helped me with my mental problems”*, whereas Nash's involvement in the programme had helped him to manage his anxiety and depression. Further, Bruce

reported that his anxiety was not constant anymore – “*since starting here my anxiety’s gone down a lot*”. Access to spaces such as **the allotment provided peace and sanctuary** for learners who in some cases lived chaotic lives. The Allotment Mentor described the calming benefits of the allotment:

*[learners] had never been into like a green area such as an allotment, they didn’t realise that there was them kind of places about. A lot of them took to it straight away where they really enjoyed it, it was like a calming atmosphere there...and they was outside in the fresh air, even when it rained some of them wasn’t bothered.*

In instances where the mental health of some learners was so severe that they were deemed unfit to continue on the programme, This-Ability staff signposted them to support services to help them manage their mental health. Having recovered, a few learners did want to return to This-Ability, but most importantly, their health needs and reaching a sound state of wellbeing were put ahead of employability targets – learners got the support that they needed most.

Evidently, This-Ability helped **learners to understand their limitations and to set realistic goals**. Whilst progressing through the programme, they arrived at decisions about whether they were ready for employment, what kind of job(s) they could or couldn’t do within the parameters of their disabilities, learning disabilities/differences and at what pace. Bruce shared that he had realised that he wasn’t ready for work due to a lack of experience in the workplace, and therefore he intended to volunteer to gain some experience. He emphasised an important lesson that he had learnt on the programme – “*it’s okay to take things a little bit slower*”. Having gained work experience in a care home that didn’t work out, Jude had realised that she needed something slower paced. She also had a clearer **understanding of the adjustments she required in the workplace**, consequently helping her to feel more work ready. Similarly, Harper expressed confidence in requesting reasonable adjustments from prospective employers and ensuring that her needs were met.

When exploring the impacts of the programme, we found that learners had gained **good knowledge of recruitment processes and employer expectations**. Several learners recalled writing CVs, learning how to dress for interviews, and how to conduct themselves in interviews. Ripley detailed this experience and explained the importance of asking employers questions at the end of an interview to express interest. He commented, “*it has moved me closer [to employment] because I know more, and I have things like a CV and I’m working on a cover letter and that all helps*”. Provider Mentor 2 recounted the This-Ability journey of, and positive outcome for, a young person suffering with anxiety who was provided encouragement and practical support through the programme:

*He was more than capable but he just needed that reassurance that he can do it, he needed the help with writing his CV and he needed the help of the interview techniques because he would look at an interview and go I can’t do it, so it was guiding him through that. He spent a couple of months with us, and he landed himself an apprenticeship with XXXX [name of company] so he’s doing amazing now and that’s set him up for life. He’s going to go on to complete his apprenticeship and be in the area of work that he wanted to be in.*

**Paid work - a key objective of This-Ability - was secured by many learners** on the programme. All stakeholders (learners, mentors, managers, providers and employers) involved in the programme reported successful employment outcomes. Sienna found work, as a senior team member, in retail, which she described as “*amazing*” and Amber secured a part-time job as a retail assistant following a work placement undertaken as part of the This-Ability programme. She conveyed a sense of pride at having achieved

her objective of getting work. In another example, Classroom Mentor 3 recounted, *“we’ve been successful and got one into employment who was offered two jobs in one day which was really amazing, so that’s for me absolutely rewarding”*. Provider 5 spoke positively about learners from This-Ability who had found employment within their organisation following their placements – *“they were so trusted and so... efficient and good”*. Despite some learners being *“far away from the world of work”* Provider Mentor 1 relayed that their significant transition during the programme had led to employment.

Some learners who went into work placements to build their skills and confidence were offered jobs subsequently. For example, Employer 3 shared that his company had turned a work placement into a job – *“for the other individual it’s turned into a paid job, so we’ve actually taken the young lady on a zero-hour contract to start with to help her continue that growth pattern that she needs from returning to work, work experience to actual become paid...employment”*. Further, Employer 2 provided a job reference for another learner who gained employed with a different company after doing his work placement with them. In another example, Employer 4 reported a positive job outcome for a This-Ability learner - *“we have two people who came through for This-Ability work experience at the time I was dealing with them, one of those has progressed to a part-time contract with us”*.

During their one-to-one interviews, learners spoke positively about the **skills and knowledge they had developed** through their involvement in This-Ability. Steven referred to the interview skills and CV tips that he had gained and Barny explained how the skills and knowledge acquired from the workplace were helping him to do things more intuitively outside of the workplace. Learners involved in the focus groups also concurred that they had developed new skills and increased their knowledge, for example, on the labour market. Jude commented that she had *“learnt new things”*, and Harper shared, *“It’s helped me build up my skills and helped me feel more comfortable being able to apply for jobs and to know what is out there for me, whereas Olive had improved her knowledge on “what to expect in the job” through her work experience as part of This-Ability.*

Consistent with This-Ability’s holistic approach to meeting the needs of learners, the programme delivered **Cook with Ability lessons** (enrichment activity thus not core provision) to help learners develop a key life skill to gain more independence in their day-to-day lives. The programme recognised that the skill to cook played a vital part in money management and sustaining work. Alongside cooking skills, young people learnt about the importance of not wasting food and stretching ingredients to more than one meal. The CwA Mentor described how in one case a young person from This-Ability benefited from learning different ways to cook, for example, using the oven rather than relying entirely on microwaving food. In addition to benefiting from a potentially healthier and varied diet, wider impacts were experienced by her child who previously had a limited unhealthy diet. The following excerpt from an interview conveys the benefits of the lessons:

*She learnt how to cook for her own child. And now she’s using the recipe cards day in day out. Yes, she’s repeating them but she’s putting her own spin on them so it’s different every time. And now her child eats more vegetables in her diet, she feels a bit better about that, because before she just said she used to eat chicken nuggets and chips because that was her staple food. And now she’s eating like cheese and broccoli quiche, jacket potato (CwA Mentor).*

In one or two cases, where learners had found jobs, there was evidence to suggest that they were moving towards becoming more **financially independent**. Employer 4’s account about recruiting a learner from the This-Ability programme was a case in point – *“when I gave him the job he punched the air in happiness, which was absolutely awesome, he’s earning a couple of hundred quid a month...so he’s happy in terms of*

*where he is at the moment and he's bought his first set of Christmas presents that had been completely sorted by himself".*

Our research findings firmly substantiated that in addition to learners, **employers working with This-Ability also experienced positive impacts**. Given that the impacts are detailed in our recent Deep dive report (see Bashir and Richards, 2024) on *the effectiveness and outcomes of the This-Ability in-work support model* the key impacts are summarised here. Employers, including managers and team leaders were provided with disability awareness training that changed the way they recruited and trained people. One company for example, demonstrated a commitment to allowing learners to do a month's trial period before deciding whether to take them on as employees – the majority were recruited. In another example, a business adapted online e-learning training into a visual and in-person format for an employee with learning disabilities. Through training This-Ability staff also educated employers on how to make recruitment processes simpler and more inclusive, particularly for people with learning disabilities. They imparted knowledge to employers that helped dispel some of the misconceptions about employing people with disabilities, learning disabilities/differences – a point stressed in the following account:

*I do believe that a lot of employers' fear doing the wrong thing inadvertently but having that support from the mentors actually gives them confidence...Having that disability awareness, having the support from an organisation like This-Ability, it's all about education I think (Employer 5).*

We found that where employers had engaged with This-Ability and received support from mentors, their perceptions about employing people with disabilities and or learning disabilities/difficulties were positive. For example, Employer 4 reported that the attitude of large-scale retailers was perhaps *"it's too much hassle [taking on someone with a disability], it's I don't want to risk...I don't know if that person's going to be able to cope with it"*. In his experience, people with disabilities and learning differences were just as good, if not better, than co-workers at their jobs, explaining, *"so catering it's all about process, it's all about repeating the same thing over and over again...they can do that sometimes far better than university students that are coming to me"*. Provider 2 relayed the multiple benefits of recruiting people with disabilities, including improving workforce diversity; being more representative of customers; bringing different perspectives to the business; and educating the rest of the workforce about disabilities, learning disabilities/differences and how best to support people with them – in the process, perhaps changing perceptions of people with disabilities.

Whilst in an earlier chapter, we highlighted the negative impacts on learners when failing to secure employment, we also learnt that following their involvement in This-Ability, **in some instances learners had become more accepting of unsuccessful outcomes** – minimising the impact on their wellbeing – consequently reducing stress levels. Steven used to be anxious about interviews but since his involvement in This-Ability he learnt to adapt to the interview situation and give it his best shot, accepting that he might not get the job to avoid impacting his mental health. He explained, *"Well I've been for so many interviews over the last couple of years...what I now do to adapt myself to that would be to obviously be enthusiastic about the job, learn about the company, show as much confidence in body language as well...not being too quiet when speaking but not being over-bellowing either, obviously treating it as a conversation. Having the expectation of failure but not aiming for it, just having the understanding that something bad could happen but you do your best to make sure it doesn't happen"*. Similarly, Jackson reported that his difficulty finding a job did not affect his confidence and or wellbeing anymore – instead, he accepted it as *"normality"*.

## 12.1. Added value

The network of partner providers enabled the This-Ability programme to widen the offer of work experience roles and sectors available to young people, beyond what the programme and HLC could provide on its own. This-Ability Manager 1 explained that this was essential because “*we can’t do everything, we need that variety within the programme to keep young people interested.*” The network provided additional benefits in **enabling young people to move between different providers** if they found the one they had initially chosen was not right for them. The provider accounts conveyed a strong desire to **ensure learners were on the right path**, even though the payment by outcomes funding model meant they could potentially lose money by transferring learners to another provider:

*It’s been really important not to be possessive and precious about this is our learner, if genuinely they’re better placed with somebody else or even if we suspect that’s the case it’s been about finding out and let’s help you understand and then they can make that decision whether to transfer across or not (Provider 4).*

*Sometimes we weren’t the right provider for a learner, we weren’t meeting the need... we wanted to make sure the experience the learner needed was with the correct provider (Provider 5).*

Both HLC and the partner providers brought to the programme their own **wider network of provision** which enabled them to **signpost learners to further support**; for example, food banks, wellbeing support and further training opportunities, including **additional qualifications** such as functional skills and coaching badges. Nash recalled how he was able to **access mental health support** through his This-Ability provider, due to their specialism as a mental health service, rather than waiting for NHS support:

*I was able to talk to any staff member about my mental health. I used to have meetings with XXXX [name of staff] say once a month or so, I don’t know why that stopped, I think it was just life got in the way or I got busy... Yeah, I received wonderful support regarding my mental health.*

Additionally, providers were able to use their contacts to source employer visits, motivational speakers, volunteering opportunities and work experience placements which further expanded the offer to This-Ability learners. Provider Mentor 3 related that these “*outside resources*” could offer learners “*something completely different that they’d never experienced.*” The following account from learners on the programme revealed the **importance of voluntary roles in preparing learners for the work placements**, which might otherwise be overwhelming for those with no previous work experience (Bashir & Richards, 2024b):

*So, I started to get experience in customer service by volunteering at FareShare community pantry which would do regular customer service and stocking stuff, so you put the food out, you’d stock it on the shelves, you would run a till, you would deal with people’s membership on entry etc (Leo).*

*It was interesting to know that we could be successful even if it was just getting us into a voluntary role, at least we’d get our foot in the door... So even getting a voluntary role would be successful to me at least because then it proves that as a community, we are capable (Bruce).*

Bruce, who had severe mental and physical health issues conveyed that volunteering had enabled him to redefine success for himself. While not a hard outcome for the programme, volunteering in a role that fit with the young person and was rewarding was a **positive step to independence** for learners that were not quite ready for work.

Although not one of the ten core capabilities, developing independence in learners emerged as a theme in the accounts from mentors and providers – recognising that support from the This-Ability project could not continue indefinitely, mentors strove to “*be setting them up with the right skills to be able to independently do those things [job search] and not just rely on the support to be able to do it*” (Classroom Mentor 1). Provider Mentor 1 reiterated this point, and emphasised the benefits of increased independence to the learners:

*Absolutely, it opens up a lot of doors for them, they then realise actually I can do it and then their confidence starts to grow and they start becoming more invested in themselves and go actually I'm going to do this because I know that I can now where I didn't realise I could* (Provider Mentor 1).

Developing friendships with other learners on the programme and strengthening ties within the local community **reduced social isolation** (as discussed earlier). The accounts from mentors and providers highlighted a **wide range of enrichment activities** offered in addition to the This-Ability programme which enabled learners to develop life skills and increase confidence and communication through sports and social clubs:

*So, our learners can come and get involved in things like the allotment or we have tea and talk groups so they can come and meet people from the community. It's all designed to build confidence and self-esteem and it focuses on wellbeing as well* (Provider Mentor 1).

*We found especially towards the end, they're all in WhatsApp groups together, they all keep continuation, so it's building on the isolation, the fact is now they have got friends that maybe they wouldn't have had* (Provider 3).

*Some of our learners come on and then they go onto the learning disability rugby team so they've opened a new door, a new sport that they can do, so they do that in their own time and they're building up their new friendship groups and new routine with doing that. So, there are doors that we open... introduced them into other things within the community as well, things that they can do, things like arts and crafts and things like that, again it's just opening their awareness, a lot of them didn't know that things were available* (Provider 1).

The following account from the Allotment Mentor highlighted the **wellbeing benefits** of enrichment activities in outdoor spaces such as the This-Ability allotment - describing the difference in observed behaviour in learners between the classroom and allotment environments:

*What I was getting of the other staff members is that they're a totally different person here than what they are in the classroom and here they seem a bit more engaged... out in the fresh air, we all know that it's good for the body and the mind and the soul really sometimes just to be out there doing stuff.*

As highlighted earlier, the optional Cook with Ability element of the programme was developed to promote independence and key life skills, such as cooking and functional skills. This had an additional benefit of allowing the mentors to **maintain contact** with any learners who had left the programme and offer support where required “*if something popped up... and they need help with an interview then we could always*

*just pull them in and pull them to a side and say, we arrange a day.”* (CwA Mentor). Indeed, added value in various forms was demonstrated across different parts of the This-Ability programme – enhancing learner experiences, wellbeing, skills, and outcomes.



## Conclusions: Key findings and recommendations

1. Our evidence suggested that learners began the project with a ‘*can’t do*’ mindset, however, as they progressed through This-Ability, their narratives had changed, reflecting self-belief and a ‘*can do*’ attitude. Learners expressed greater confidence in their abilities having become aware of their own limitations and strengths, and suitability to specific environments and jobs. They developed their personal and professional skills and explored and understood their rights to reasonable adjustments in the workplace. Notably, learners stressed that the knowledge and benefits they had gained would not have happened without This-Ability support.
2. Given that This-Ability was born from a programme (Talent Match) underpinned by ‘test and learn’ principles, continually evolving during its lifetime to reflect the lessons learnt to improve provision, This-Ability continued in the same vein. As challenges emerged, and provision responded through changes, staff were redeployed to different roles. We found that staff demonstrated a willingness to change roles, to step up and get stuck into their new roles – responding to the challenges and evolving with the programme. In a few cases, This-Ability staff recognised that they had developed valuable transferable skills and gained significant knowledge.
3. The challenges experienced by learners enrolled on the programme were multiple and complex. A range of disabilities and learning disabilities/differences impacted reading, writing, and concentrating, resulting in learners taking longer to grasp and do tasks – increasing the distance between them and the labour market. Additional health problems and poor mental health compounded the challenges arising from their disabilities and or learning disabilities. Experiences of bullying, previous negative experiences of education and low confidence and self-esteem contributed to mental ill health. Socio-economic factors such as poverty, debt, low levels of education and lack of work experience impacted learner progress towards employment. Other factors: a lack of routine; poor personal hygiene, the dysfunctional nature of family life; and online gaming during antisocial were barriers to employment.
4. Our research revealed negative employer perceptions about employing people with disabilities, learning disabilities/difficulties coupled with a lack of knowledge on reasonable adjustments. Such perceptions disadvantaged learners on This-Ability. However, an intervention – Making Our Business Yours (MOBY) an arm of the programme – provided bespoke support, acting as a conduit between employers and learners to improve understanding. Employers received Disability Awareness Training, advice on reasonable adjustments, resolving matters related to discipline, and developing accessible recruitment processes. Learners were supported to travel to their workplace, step-by-step guidance on doing tasks, and help settling into the workplace.

5. When contrasting learners' experiences of mainstream education with This-Ability's individualised and person-centred provision we found that mentors built meaningful relationships with learners, building confidence and trust in small groups. Learners were stretched and challenged to promote independence in safe spaces where they felt supported. Relationships were established with employers to educate them on reasonable adjustments and how best to support learners in employment. A strong ethos emerged of 'doing what is best for the learner' which extended to an open-door policy for learners and employers to receive support at any time. A commitment to helping learners to stay in work was evidenced— a key difference from other provision where the emphasis may be placed on progressions.
6. When exploring the impacts of the programme, the greatest impact cited was the development of softer skills (core capabilities) such as confidence and communication. Learner narratives conveyed that involvement in This-Ability had led to significant increases in confidence and this was substantiated in staff accounts. Developing skills such as teamwork and communication was necessary for building social skills – preparing learners for prospective workplaces. Core capability skills were reported as being essential for continued engagement with the programme and for laying a vital foundation for learners to build their employability skills to progress into work placements or work.
7. The impacts of the This-Ability programme were conveyed as transformative. Besides developing core capabilities and employability skills, learners reported growing social circles and improved mental health. Learners shared how involvement in This-Ability had led to the realisation that employment was an achievable goal. We found that learners had gained good knowledge of recruitment processes and employer expectations and a clearer understanding of the adjustments required in the workplace. Paid work – a key objective of This-Ability – was secured by many learners on the programme.
8. Our research findings firmly substantiated that in addition to learners, **employers working with This-Ability also experienced positive impacts**. We learnt that those employers who had engaged with This-Ability and received support from mentors had positive perceptions about employing people with disabilities and or learning disabilities/difficulties. The multiple benefits of recruiting people with disabilities emerged during our research, including improving workforce diversity; being more representative of customers; bringing different perspectives to the business; and educating the rest of the workforce about disabilities, learning disabilities/differences and how best to support people with them.
9. Observations and research during the evaluation uncovered that highly skilled staff delivered the programme. Given the complex and multiple needs of many learners, staff were reported as being approachable and understanding. They addressed issues of poor personal hygiene, and sensitively provided access to clothes and food through This-Ability in response to the cost-of-living crisis. At times they gave learners with unrealistic career aspirations a reality check and where necessary, referred learners to mental health support, ensuring they attended their appointments.
10. We found the This-Ability programme's person-centred approach put the learners at the heart of programme delivery and decision making. This-Ability mentors and partner providers sensitively dealt with a range of issues, while negotiating with participants to set and achieve realistic goals. In some instances, this meant reframing what a successful outcome might look like for those learners who were not ready for work, moving learners into volunteering or education rather than paid employment.

11. The Employability Passport was conceived as a tool for learners to use at job interviews, or for applications, to evidence and remind them of how they had achieved the ten core capabilities and seven CBI skills, as well as any reasonable adjustments identified. The passport was recognised as a useful tool to record learner progress and showcase skills with visual evidence of learner achievements, however evidence suggested that learners either did not understand how the passport should be used or were reluctant to use it in an interview situation – indicating the need to better embed the tool in prospective programmes.
12. The views of learners were garnered through ongoing evaluation of the programme, informing and influencing changes. Rather than a formal mechanism such as a co-production group, This-Ability embedded learner views into the programme. Changes were made quickly and discreetly without the need for formal meetings (which learners rarely engaged with), avoiding awkward conversations on sensitive subjects. A suggestion box was used to collect the thoughts of learners, anonymously. Staff delivering the This-Ability programme were very tuned into and responsive to learner needs. They were encouraged to complete feedback questionnaires, provide honest verbal feedback, complete online forms and slips at the end of sessions to have their say about provision. Learner views directly fed into and improved aspects of the programme that did not work or required further attention/resources.
13. Ongoing reflection and learning led to changes to the programme to better meet the needs of learners. The delivery model was changed to allow providers to deliver the core capabilities; core staff, employed by the This-Ability programme but placed with provider organisations, were recruited as mentors to improve communication between both parties; a second IAG was introduced after two weeks on the programme to ensure learners were on the right path; and the Employability Passport was condensed to ease the administrative burden on providers. We also found that: Cook with Ability provision was extended; and the flexibility and the longevity of National Lottery funding helped This-Ability to respond to the COVID-19 global pandemic and cost-of-living crisis.
14. Continuity of core This-Ability staff who had a thorough understanding of the programme contributed to its success. At least four members of staff who had been involved in the first employability programme (Talent Match) continued their involvement into the second programme, This-Ability. Not only did they demonstrate a strong commitment to fulfilling programme objectives, but they had accumulated considerable knowledge on what worked and what didn't - knowing that some ideas had been attempted before and the intricacies of why they hadn't worked - hence, diverting resources elsewhere.
15. Our findings indicate there is still a need to further embed the Employability Passport into project delivery, to allow learners to feel confident and comfortable using it as intended. While a useful document to record learners' achievements, many did not receive their passport until the end of their programme due to the time taken to compile and print the document. The development of an electronic passport would greatly enhance the This-Ability programme, enabling learners to better understand their progress and take more ownership of their Employability Passports.
16. The programme should continue to embed core staff (employed by the This-Ability programme) as mentors placed with partner organisations. This embedded model offered clear benefits to shared learning and communication across the programme and is, perhaps, a more feasible option than completely restructuring the payment by results model.

17. As a result of the lessons learnt by This-Ability, any future provision should focus on ensuring that learners are given a grounding in soft skills, laying a vital foundation to move them closer to employment. Without these basic skills, learner progress is likely to be hampered. Evidently, some learners felt overwhelmed going straight into work experience/employment. A soft introduction to work through bite-sized volunteering placements rather than a full work experience would perhaps help learners to develop key soft skills such as confidence and communication skills, arguably in environments where they were better understood and supported.
18. We found that there is no similar provision to the This-Ability programme in Hull and the East Riding of Yorkshire. Without This-Ability, there is clear need for this type of service. The MOBY employment support model as a bespoke service helped bridge fundamental gaps in understanding between employers and young people with disabilities, learning disabilities/differences. They sourced work experiences and working interviews to get learners into work rather than pursuing formal channels involving traditional recruitment processes. As an effective alternative to mainstream education/training public funding should be identified and allocated for such provision.

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