



Hampshire
& the Solent
LSIP

Local Skills Improvement Plan
Delivered by Hampshire Chamber of Commerce

LSIP Sector Skills Needs Report

Closing the Disability Employment Gap in Hampshire - What Works

March 2026



Commissioned by the Employer Representative Body (ERB) to inform
the Hampshire and the Solent Local Skills Improvement Plan 2026-2029



LSIP Report: Closing the Disability Employment Gap in Hampshire – What Works

1. Executive Summary

Disability employment is a national issue with local solutions. Closing the Disability Employment Gap (DEG) within Hampshire is a central priority for the regional skills and economic agenda. While Hampshire is a regional leader, boasting a DEG of 24.2%, which sits significantly above the national average, the quantitative data masks a more complex reality: nearly 39,000 disabled residents remain economically inactive. The research presented here shifts the focus from a "deficit model" toward a "What Works" strategy, documenting proven local interventions that bridge the divide between education and industry to solve acute technical skills shortages.

This scoping study was co-produced with employers, stakeholders, and education settings, and most importantly, disabled people, using a methodology that combined desk research with indicative data from lived experience focus groups and interviews. These activities revealed that while Hampshire possesses a sophisticated ecosystem of success across six strategic domains, ranging from Supported Employment and Internships to Disability-Led Consultancy, significant systemic barriers persist. Notably, delays in Access to Work (AtW) funding and a 'Foot in the Door' barrier in recruitment prevent employers from meeting the talent they desperately need.

To transform these findings into lasting change, three strategic priorities are recommended. These include a reform of the Disability Confident scheme to mandate meaningful engagement in proven local domains; the co-design of a unified curriculum for disability employment to provide consistent education for employers and educators; and a commitment to dedicated research into mid-career development. This approach ensures that Hampshire's inclusive economy supports not just entry-level jobs, but long-term professional growth.

Thank you to all those who have given their time, knowledge and expertise to this project.

2. Methodology: A Triangulated Evidence Base

This research undertook 4 key activities. desk based research to further understand the specifics of the disability employment gap in Hampshire. Convening the Co-Production Advisory Group with representatives from Stakeholder Groups, Employers and Education providers. This group responded to the detail from the desk-based research and helped to define and design the survey instruments which were then submitted to employers and lived experience participants.

Desk Research & Literature Review: Local and national employment data. Research review. Engagement with disability employment academics at Southampton and Derby Universities. Data from this review is found throughout this report.

Stakeholder Focus Groups: 28 participants. 8 Employers, 11 Stakeholder Representatives, 9 Education and Training Providers. Held in sessions in person and online. The output of these

meetings were the survey instruments which can be found in appendix 1 and 2. Links to organisations can be found in Appendix 4.

Employer Quantitative Survey: Employer Survey (Appendix 1) Shared with employers. 10 Respondents. There was a lower response rate than hoped which goes some way to support the message from the Co-production group that employers don't know how to get started and are scared to get it wrong. All of the respondents are linked to the co-production group. Data from this survey included throughout the report.

Qualitative Lived Experience Interviews: 1:1 semi structured interviews with Lived experience participants. 8 total interviews conducted. Range of age ranges from 20's-60's. Range of current employment status. In employment, not in employment, volunteering.

Data from these streams was synthesised using a thematic analysis approach. By triangulating quantitative survey data with qualitative lived experience testimony, common systemic barriers were identified. This report is presented as a scoping study intended to provide indicative, rather than statistically representative, data due to overall sample sizes.

3. Sector Overview: Hampshire's Inclusive Economic Landscape

The Southeast currently has the lowest Disability Employment Gap (DEG) in the country, and Hampshire is performing amongst the best in the region, yet still too few disabled people are in employment. Hampshire's DEG is currently 24.2%, a full 4 percentage points better than the national average (Office for National Statistics, 2026). This statistical success must be viewed alongside the qualitative reality of systemic barriers. In Hampshire, disabled people represent the largest economically inactive group, totalling roughly 39,000 people. A figure that has risen by 11,000 since 2019, with significant concentrations in South Hampshire districts such as Havant, Gosport, Rushmoor, and Eastleigh (DWP, 2023).

This disparity is most acute for young people; ONS data shows the average employment rate for disabled youth aged 16 to 24 is at best just 34.2%, and for some demographics, this is below 20%. This leads to significantly higher rates of those not in employment, education, or training (NEET). Without targeted intervention, Hampshire's highly skilled disabled young people will continue to be lost to economic inactivity at the 'cliff edge' moment after leaving education (ONS, 2026).

We know that employers across Hampshire want to diversify their workforce but often face two key challenges: the fear of "getting it wrong" for prospective disabled employees, and a lack of clarity on where to find expert support and guidance. This report documents what works in our region and champions the projects, collaborations, and innovative working practices that are driving down the disability employment gap. We aim to connect delivery partners and employers to make it easier for businesses of all sizes to collaborate with education and training providers for the benefit of the disabled workforce in Hampshire.

Before examining the successful models within our region, we must establish the rationale for change. The most immediate and profound impact of employment is felt by disabled people themselves. Our research has shown that securing a job has a powerful positive relationship with wellbeing for disabled people, alongside a marked decrease in anxiety levels (ONS, 2026). The Get Hampshire Working Plan (2023) shows that among 15-49 year-olds, the leading causes of disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) are mental health disorders. It is clear that gaining and sustaining employment is more than just a metric of economic activity for disabled people; it is a fundamental social determinant of health. By closing the disability employment gap, we strengthen the collective

productivity of the Hampshire economy and improve resident health, bridging the gap between regional prosperity and clinical outcomes. Stable, purposeful work can act as a vital non-clinical intervention, reducing the systemic reliance on secondary mental health services. (NHS)

4. Findings: What Works for Disability Employment in Hampshire

Our research shows that while support exists, it is at times fragmented or unknown to potential partners. The following represent the established "Hampshire Way" of connecting employer needs with disabled talent, organised into strategic domains of innovation.

Domain 1: The Supported Employment Standard (BASE Model)

What is the model? British Association of Supported Employment (BASE) based in Hampshire has pioneered a 5 stage values led model which has been used for decades to successfully support disabled people into sustained employment. This evidence-based 'Place, Train, Maintain' approach is proven to work for employers and disabled people.

Evidence Base: "Place-then-Train" models have been shown to outperform traditional approaches (Aksnes & Ulstein, 2024) An approach predicated on the view everyone can work, empowers disabled people and employers to connect.

Who makes this work in Hampshire? Aldershot based BASE provide training in supported employment and connect disabled jobseekers with sustainable roles. www.base-uk.org

Why this works for disabled people? Throughout our lived experience interviews disabled people told us the lack of ongoing support was a barrier to sustaining their employment. Supported employment models ensure ongoing support and guidance to

Why this works for employers? Employers benefit from skilled dependable advice which is evidence based and will see successful employees with significantly higher staff retention rates.

How to get involved? There are many supported employment providers across Hampshire and employers can contact [BASE](#) to find certified Hampshire coaching providers or request a "Work-Match" audit.

Domain 2: Supported Businesses

What is the model? Supported businesses are designed from their heart to employ disabled people. Specific organisations built at Talent Incubators to build disabled talent, confidence and long-term success.

Evidence Base: Literature on inclusive employment identifies social enterprises as "Innovation Hubs" where workplace design is tailored to the individual from the outset (Shaw, Wickenden, Thompson, & Mader, 2022). These environments serve as career anchors, allowing disabled employees to build high-level employment and technical skills in a safe but commercially viable setting.

Who makes this work in Hampshire? [Yateley Industries](#), [Enham Trust](#), and [Minstead Trust](#) all have developed unique and innovative supported businesses which offer sustained and secure employment.

Why this works for disabled people? Disabled people have told us that prospective employees fail to see their strengths and supported businesses are adept at developing disabled talent, providing a launching point for sustained careers. They are a supportive community of peers and with the right support in place from the start.

Why this works for employers? These businesses are proven high-quality supply-chain partners. For larger Hampshire firms, partnering with a supported business provides a low risk route to engaging with disabled talent while gaining access to training and development opportunities.

How to get involved? Integrate supported businesses into your procurement strategy or contact [Yateley Industries](#), [Enham Trust](#), and [Minstead Trust](#) to discuss talent handover partnerships.

Domain 3: Supported Internships and supported work placements

What is the model? Supported internships are a structured, work-based study programme for young disabled people supported by specialised staff and a trained job coach.

Evidence Base: Department for Education (DFE, 2020) research confirms that Supported Internships significantly increase the probability of paid work compared to traditional college-based learning. Recent interim findings from the *Internships Work* project (CooperGibson, 2024) highlight that high-quality, BASE-standard job coaching is the single greatest factor in ensuring transition success. We see that internships act as a 'skills accelerator,' allowing students to prove technical competence through output.

Who makes this work in Hampshire? Hampshire has several supported internship providers [Treloar College](#) working with physically disabled young people, [Sparsholt & Andover College](#) and [HSDC](#) working with young people with a range of learning needs.

Why this works for disabled people? Supported Internships prevent the transition cliff edge by bridging the gap from education to work within a supported environment.

Supported interns prove their capability in the workplace and translate their placements into longer term work.

Why this works for employers? It is a zero-cost, 12-month working interview. The employer gains an employee already receiving technical training while a Job Coach manages onboarding, safety inductions, and specific workplace adjustments, removing the administrative burden from the firm.

How to get involved? Contact the Careers Lead at your local Hampshire FE college to offer a Supported Internship placement. Contact the employment teams at [Treloar College](#), [Sparsholt](#) and [HSDC](#) to learn more.

Domain 4: Higher Education & University Support (The Graduate Pipeline)

What is the model? Specialised transition support addressing the gap between high academic achievement and graduate employment. This includes specialised career coaching, Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) navigation, and dedicated Inclusive Careers advisors who bridge the gap between degree completion and professional graduate employment.

Evidence Base: We have seen a significant increase of disabled people in higher education creating an "absent presence" where disabled students are physically present but professionally invisible in graduate outcomes (Koutsouris, Stentiford, Dimetrello, Pujaningsih, & Azizah, 2026). Lived experience evidence highlights that academic success does not automatically translate to workplace navigation, requiring specialist mentoring to bridge the gap after leaving education.

Who makes this work in Hampshire? [Southampton Solent University](#), [University of Winchester](#), and [University of Portsmouth](#).

Why this works for disabled people? Specialist mentoring and career coaching help students their high-level degree skills into the workplace and navigate professional disclosure.

Why this works for employers? It provides a pipeline of high-level, degree-qualified talent whose support needs are already well-mapped and supported.

How to get involved? Connect with the Inclusive Careers or Disability Services teams at Hampshire's universities to partner on graduate placement schemes.

Domain 5: National Employment Programmes: Localised Delivery & Integration

What is the model? The local delivery of national employment frameworks through local Hampshire partnerships. This includes the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) model and the Connect to Work programme. These schemes are funded nationally but integrated locally through the County Councils and the NHS to ensure they meet the specific needs of the Hampshire labour market.

Evidence Base: IPS is globally recognised as the gold-standard evidence-based model for vocational rehabilitation. Systematic reviews IPS participants are over twice as likely to secure competitive employment compared to traditional vocational services (Modini, et al., 2016). Hampshire is at the forefront of connect to work practices (DWP, 2025).

Who makes this work in Hampshire? [Hampshire County Council \(Connect to Work\)](#), [Shaw Trust \(IPS delivery\)](#).

Why this works for disabled people? It provides high-intensity, expert support that is rapid and tailored. Lived experience evidence highlights that local integration prevents the reliance on generalist advisors—described as "ordinary people without a clue"—who may lack specialist knowledge of specific barriers like complex equipment or transport anxiety. By ensuring the advisor has specialist expertise, employment acts as a fundamental source of psychological wellbeing.

Why this works for employers? It provides direct support from specialists who understand the local landscape. Managers receive professional advice on supporting staff with specific conditions, ensuring talent is retained rather than lost.

How to get involved? Refer employees through internal Occupational Health routes or partner with the Connect to Work team to identify work-ready candidates within Hampshire.

Domain 6: Disability Led Innovation and Support.

What is the model? Hampshire is home to many disability led organisations which demonstrate innovative approaches to closing the disability employment gap. As with this report co-production is the key to success in successful employment, ensuring disabled people are at the centre of their own decision making.

Evidence Base: Success requires support embedded within the community. Lived experience respondents report a lack of disability-specific expertise in mainstream Job Centres; specialist hubs and peer networks solve this by grounding support in lived experience and technical authority (Simplican, Leader, Kosciulek, & Leahy, 2016)

Who makes this work in Hampshire? [Let Me In](#) is a disability led business which breaks down barriers to access and self-advocacy. [Inclusion EB8](#) Co-Locates DWP support services with quality education and training towards employment. [Link2](#) Provides social support and practical advice to succeed in local employment.

Why this works for disabled people? It shifts the power dynamic from "service user" to "expert professional." Peer networks like Link2 build the social capital and professional resilience needed to sustain a career and prevent the isolation that leads to burnout. Let Me In builds the agency and self-advocacy disabled young people need to navigate the barriers they face

Why this works for employers? These innovations offer an easy way to get involved without the burden of getting it wrong. These organisations will guide and support employers early in their journey and have strong links with disabled talent.

How to get involved? Book an accessibility audit through the [Let Me In](#) team or join the [Inclusion EB8](#) network to attend specialised hiring clinics or speak to [Link2](#) about their community of disabled talent.

5. Persistent Gaps and Priorities

While Hampshire stands as a regional leader in inclusive innovation, our evidence-based research confirms that persistent systemic and navigational barriers still prevent both employers and disabled job seekers from closing the employment gap.

Employer perspective

Access to Work (AtW) Delays: A primary barrier for 90% of aware organisations. Several respondents noted "challenging delays" in processing adjustments, which often leads to placements failing before they begin.

SME Supervision and Capacity Gaps: Small and micro companies (30% of survey base) are least likely to use accessible recruitment adjustments. The primary request for help is for more "staff time to supervise or mentor" and practical "human resource" support to manage adjustments.

The Knowledge Gap (Fear of "Getting it Wrong"): Many Hampshire firms feel they lack the specific expertise to manage neurodivergent needs. There is a strong interest in "Hampshire-based training" that moves beyond general awareness to practical, day-to-day management of specific conditions.

The Lived Experience Perspective

The Foot in the Door Barrier : Lived experience case studies highlight that traditional recruitment remains biased toward academic or experiential history, creating a fundamental "Let Me In" barrier. Candidates are often defined by what they "can't do" on paper rather than their potential. Until employers move beyond CV-sifting to meeting disabled talent first-hand, they will continue to miss out on the proven benefits these individuals bring to the workplace.

The Financial Disincentive Trap: Generalist advisors have been reported to create benefit traps. Our participants have been told they would be *"better off not working"* financially, ignoring the psychological and social value of professional contribution.

The "Lip Service" Accessibility Gap: A 'disabled friendly' badge often fails to reflect physical reality. Lived experience reports highlight bathrooms too narrow for wheelchairs and "accessible" spaces that only cater to minor impairments, creating high levels of travel anxiety.

The Transition Cliff Edge: Support for young people often disappears at age 25. Without persistent, specialised advocacy, young people with childhood-diagnosed conditions are lost to economic inactivity during the "battle" for care packages and independent living equipment.

6. Recommendations

1. Engagement in the What Works Domains. We recommend that all Hampshire employers engage in at least one of the six domains of "What Works" identified in this report in a meaningful way. We call for the reforms of disability confidence to include the necessity to engage in successful local initiatives (e.g., hosting a Supported Internship, providing a work trial, or booking a 'Let Me In' audit). This moves the region from symbolic accreditation to a practical mandate for cultural change

2. Co-Design Unified Curricula for Disability Employment. We want to see a strategic link established between Hampshire's successful assets (BASE, Inclusion EB8, Educators) and JCP and AtW leads to co-design a unified curriculum for disability employment. This will provide consistent education on successful practices for employers, disabled people, and educators, ensuring that the technical expertise found in our "pockets of excellence" is standardized and delivered as a universal educational pathway across the region.

3. Further Research for Long-Term Career Progression. Our research has shown barriers remain for disabled people after they get a job most notably in progression and career development. We want to see Hampshire lead the way in understanding what happens *after* the initial hire. We would like to see further research into the long term prospects of disability employment and the specific needs they have to navigate long term careers to ensure regional strategy supports long-term prospects not just entry-level jobs.

7. Conclusion

The evidence gathered through this co-produced scoping study confirms that Hampshire does not lack innovation, it lacks connection. We have identified 6 domains that are already successful projects in Hampshire that are ready for employers to engage with, although the low engagement from employers during this research reflects the very disconnect we seek to solve. By empowering employers across Hampshire to take direct actionable steps which are proven to work will not only fill vacancies but develop talent. If just 1 in 20 Hampshire employers engaged in a single domain of 'what works' we would see an additional 3000 disabled job seekers in meaningful employment per year. This would mean by the end of the decade there would be a further 5% decrease in the disability employment gap in the region taking Hampshire's DEG to world class levels. This achievement will be driven by the active, sustained engagement of local employers, transforming Hampshire into a national beacon for inclusive economic growth. Closing the disability employment gap is not only a social imperative; it is the fundamental route to a resilient, high-performing regional economy that supports disabled talent from the first day of an internship to the peak of a professional career.

8. Appendices

Appendix 1 Employer Survey

1. Name of respondent: [OPEN]
2. Contact email: [OPEN]
3. Business name: [OPEN] (Your business name will be used for monitoring only, to collate responses if more than one respondent from a single business).
4. Are you happy to be contacted for further information/ case study/ or to be featured in the final report? [Y/N]
5. Industry Sector: [OPEN]
6. Organisation Size: [Micro (less than 10) / Small 10-49 / Medium 50-249 / Large over 249]
7. Has your organisation successfully employed anyone who identifies as having a disability? (defined in [section 6 of the Equality Act 2010](#) or the [Social Model of Disability](#))
 - Yes, and we would like to share our success story.
 - Yes, and it is a standard part of our culture.
 - Not yet, but we are eager to learn from other Hampshire success stories.
 - Other

8. If yes what has made that successful? [OPEN]
9. Which accessible recruitment practices do you currently use to attract disabled talent? (Select all that apply)
- Inclusive Language: Using specific terminology in job packs/ads that explicitly welcomes disabled applicants.
 - Accessible Formats: Providing job descriptions in Large Print, Easy Read, or as video/audio files.
 - Alternative Applications: Allowing candidates to submit video applications or "Portfolios of Work" instead of a traditional CV or application form.
 - Guaranteed Interview Scheme: Committing to interview any disabled applicant who meets the minimum criteria for the role.
 - Work Trials: Offering "Working Interviews" or short trials as an alternative to formal panel interviews.
 - Explicit Adjustments: Automatically asking every candidate what adjustments they need for the interview stage.
 - Other [OPEN]
10. Which "Inclusion Enablers" have worked best for your business? (Select all that apply)
- Job Coaching
 - Partnerships with local providers (e.g., Minstead Trust, Yateley Industries, Treloar's, Inclusion EB8)
 - Student-led assessments (e.g., 'Let Me In' accessibility reviews)
 - [Disability Employment Advisors](#)
 - In-house mentoring or peer support
 - [Use of Access to Work funding](#)
 - Other Local Authorities Schemes- Connect to work etc
 - Other
11. What training or development has your organisation engaged with or delivered regarding inclusive disability employment? (Select all that apply)
- Disability Awareness Training.
 - Neurodiversity & Neuro-inclusion
 - Inclusive Leadership
 - Accessible Recruitment & Interviewing: Training for HR and hiring managers.
 - Mental Health First Aid: Training to support staff wellbeing and retention.
 - Expert-Led Workshops: Engaging with external Hampshire providers (e.g., BASE, Inclusion Education, Treloar's) for specialist knowledge.
 - None currently, but we would value recommendations for Hampshire-based training opportunities.
12. What is your organisation's level of awareness or experience with the following employment support mechanisms?
- Access to Work: (Government grant to pay for practical support in the workplace)
 - Supported Employment: (The 'Place, Train and Maintain' model of intensive support)
 - Professional Job Coaching: (One-to-one on-site support from a specialist)
 - Disability Confident Scheme: (The government's accreditation for inclusive employers)
 - 'Connect to Work' Initiatives: (Hampshire County Council's specific support routes)
 - Other
13. Hampshire is home to pioneering disability employment models. Which of these are you aware of or have you worked with?

- BASE (British Association for Supported Employment)
 - Connect to Work (Hampshire County Council's dedicated employment support service)
 - Enham Trust
 - Inclusion Education
 - Let Me In
 - Minstead Trust
 - Shaw Trust
 - Treloar's
 - Yateley Industries
 - Other local disability support group or charity (Please specify)
14. We want to connect employers with talent earlier. Which "Connection Point" would be most rewarding for your business?
- Hosting an "Industry Insight" day for local SEND students.
 - Becoming a mentor for a young disabled person transitioning into work.
 - Offering a "Supported Internship" alongside a professional Job Coach.
 - Reviewing curriculum content to ensure students are learning "market-ready" skills.
 - Guest Speaking: Sharing career insights or conducting mock interviews.
15. Would you be willing or able to provide work opportunities in your workplace? (Select all that apply)
- Work Experience (short term ½ week in the workplace)
 - Work Placement (longer term placement, up to one day a week for 6 weeks)
 - Supported internship (structured 6–12-month placement with an external job coach)
 - Need more information
 - Already offering (caveat to no expectation offer)
 - Currently not able to support
16. If you selected 'Currently not able', what are the primary reasons for this? (Select all that apply)
- Capacity: Lack of staff time or resources to supervise/mentor
 - Training Need: We feel we lack the internal knowledge/training to support disabled students.
 - Physical Environment: Constraints with our current premises or site accessibility
 - Strategic: It is not a current priority for the business
 - Other (please detail)
17. If you could connect with one specialised Hampshire support group today to improve your inclusion journey, which would it be? [OPEN]
18. What would help you most in taking your next step to employ disabled people. [OPEN]
19. Do you currently collect data on the number of employees who identify as having a disability? (as defined in section 6 of the Equality Act 2010 or the Social Model of Disability)
- Yes, systematically (via HR system)
 - Yes, informally (via occasional surveys)
 - No
20. If yes, what is your current estimated disability employment rate (%)?
21. Do you currently track or report on your Disability Pay Gap?
- Yes
 - No, but we plan to in the next 12 months
 - No, and no current plans

Appendix 2 Lived Experience Interview Structure

Prompt: Could you tell me about your disability and how it impacts your employment?

Question Examples:

- At what age was your disability or condition first diagnosed?
- How visible was your disability within your school environment, and did you feel 'seen' by your teachers?

Probe/Development: Can you describe a moment in your early education where you felt your potential was either truly recognised or limited because of your disability?

Prompt: Thinking back to your time in school or college, how did the system prepare you for life after education.

Question Examples:

- How often was paid employment discussed as a realistic and primary goal during your EHCP or transition meetings?
- How well did the careers advice you received support your aspirations?

Probe/Development: Did you experience a 'Cliff Edge'? What specific support disappeared when you finished your education?

Prompt: What was your experience of looking for work opportunities in your area?

Question Examples:

- What has been the most significant barrier to securing an interview (e.g., transport, the online application process, or lack of local opportunities)?
- Before today, were you aware of your legal right to request 'Reasonable Adjustments' for an interview under the Equality Act?

Probe/Development: If you chose not to disclose your disability during an application, what were the primary fears or concerns that influenced that decision?

Prompt: I want to understand what helps or hinders you staying in a role?

Question Examples:

- What specific technical or social skills do you wish had been taught in college to make your first month in a job easier?
- If you had a Job Coach to support you and your employer on-site, how would that have changed your confidence?

Probe/Development: If you have ever left a job, was there a specific barrier or a lack of adjustment that served as the 'breaking point' for you?

What is the one thing you want employers to know about the talent and value you bring to a business?

To add: what has the impact been on your physical/ mental health of having been/ not been in employment

Appendix 3 References

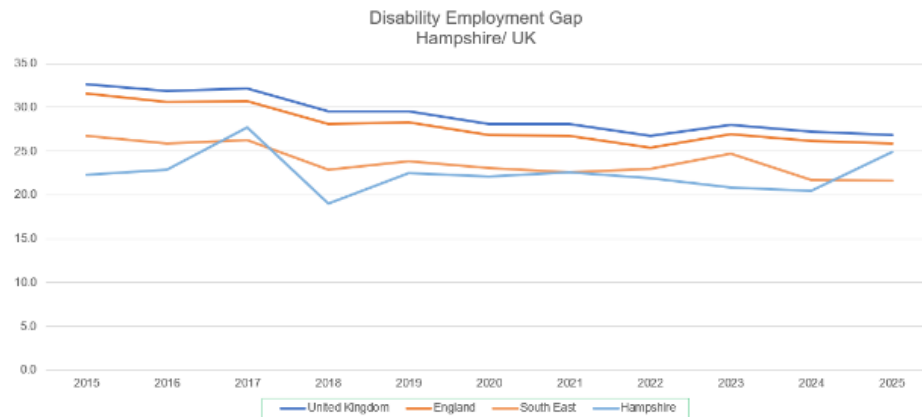
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Appendix 4 Organisations involved

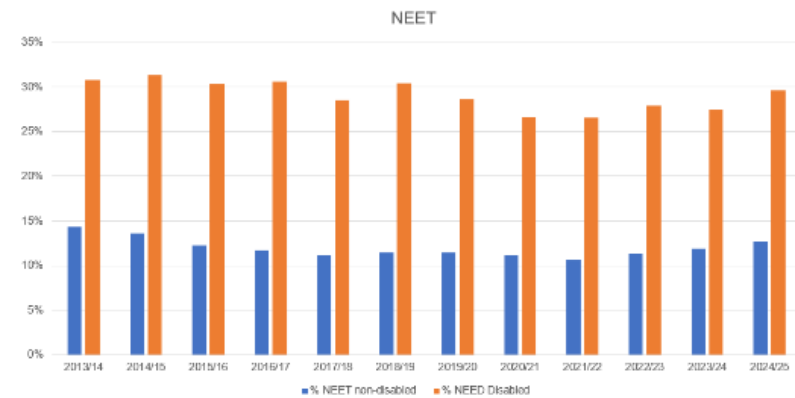
The British Association of Supported Employment	Northgate Vehicle Hire
Department for Work and Pensions - GOV.UK	Portsmouth City Council
Enham Trust	University of Portsmouth
Hampshire County Council	Shaw Trust
HSDC Havant & South Downs College	Southampton City Council
Inclusion Education	Southampton Airport
Integrated Care Board NHS Hampshire and Isle of Wight	Southampton Solent University
Let Me In	Sparsholt College and University Centre
Link2	Treloar's
Minstead Trust	University of Winchester
National Trust	Yateley Industries

Appendix 5 Charts

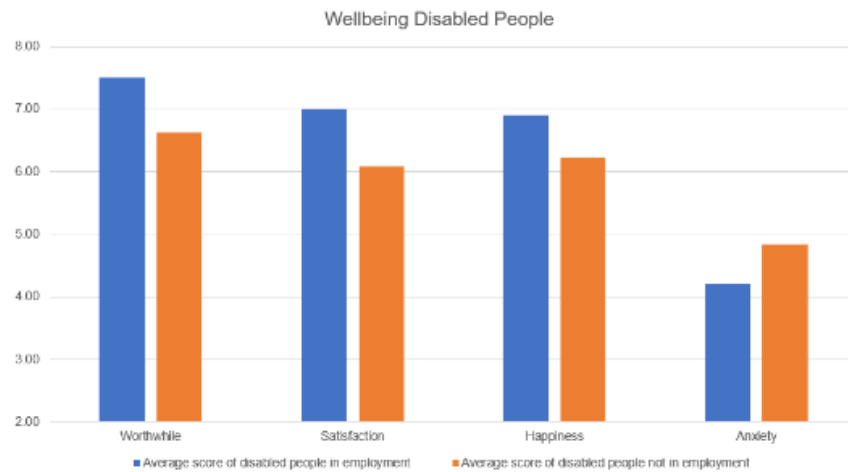
DEG Hampshire VS National



NEET (16-24 UK)



Wellbeing



Anxiety

