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TLDR – Paid employment amongst adults with learning disabilities receiving social care in England:  
Trends over time and geographical variation

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## Abstract

### Purpose

This paper examines trends over time and geographical variation in rates of paid employment amongst working age adults with learning disabilities receiving long-term social care in England.

### Methodology

Data were drawn from NHS Digital adult social care statistics examining paid/self employment for working age (age 18-64 years) adults with learning disabilities known to social care (2008/09 to 2013/14) or receiving long-term social care (2014/15 to 2016/17).

### Findings

In 2016/17, councils reported that 5.7% of working age adults (7,422 people) with learning disabilities receiving long-term social care were in paid/self employment, with higher employment rates for men than women and most people working less than 16 hours per week. Paid employment rates seem to be slightly declining over time, and there is wide variation across councils in reported paid/self employment rates.

### Implications

Despite good evidence for the cost-effectiveness of supported employment support, employment rates for adults with learning disabilities receiving long-term social care remain extremely low.

### Originality

This paper presents in one place statistics concerning the paid employment of working age adults with learning disabilities in England.

## Introduction

As with the general population, being in stable, secure paid employment is associated with better physical and mental health amongst adults with learning disabilities (Emerson et al., 2005, 2014; Jahoda et al., 2008). There is also a growing and substantial body of evidence that supported employment (rather than voluntary work experience) is cost-effective at helping people with learning disabilities get into and maintain paid work (Greig et al., 2014), including evaluations of specific approaches such as Project SEARCH for young adults with learning disabilities.

Despite sustained government attention in England (Blamires, 2015), national statistics concerning employment rates of the whole population of working age adults with learning disabilities in England (i.e. including both those adults known to learning disability services and those who are not known to learning disability services) are lacking. For example, national statistics from the Department for Work and Pensions concerning employment status do not allow the disaggregation of adults with learning disabilities. Irregular large-scale surveys have reported that between 15% and 20% of working age adults with learning disabilities in England (generally weighted towards people who can respond to survey interviews) are in some form of paid employment (Emerson et al., 2005, 2014)

There is one source of national statistics concerning the paid employment of adults with learning disabilities in England which has been collected annually (with some changes) from 2008/09. This is collected by local authorities, and concerns the paid or self employment of working age adults with learning disabilities who receive long-term social care support (NHS Digital 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017 a, b). This paper summarises these statistics in terms of trends over time and geographical variation across councils.

## Datasets

The 152 councils with adult social services responsibilities in England provide data to NHS Digital on working age adults with learning disabilities in paid/self employment. Up to 2013/14, the statistics concerned adults with learning disabilities aged 18 to 64 years known to councils with adult social services responsibilities in paid/self employment and in voluntary employment (NHS Digital, 2014). It is important to note that 2008/09 was the first year these data were collected, and findings from 2008/09 should be regarded as incomplete.

As part of a larger suite of changes to data collection relating to social care, from 2014/15 the statistics concern adults with a primary support need of learning disabilities aged 18 to 64 years who are receiving long-term social care support from councils with social services responsibilities (NHS Digital, 2015, 16, 2017a, 2017b). As such, statistics over the time period 2013/14 to 2014/15 cannot be treated as continuous and this is clearly indicated in the figures.

Standard definitions of the data to be collected are provided by NHS Digital, there is no standardised method that councils need to use to collate or record these statistics (NHS Digital, 2017c).

## Findings

Figure 1 shows the number of working age adults (aged 18 – 64 years) recorded by councils as being in paid/self employment from 2008/09 to 2016/17, noting the discontinuity in data between 2013/14 and 2014/15.

Setting aside the first year of incomplete data collection (2008/09), the number of adults in any form of paid/self employment rose slightly to a peak of 9,905 people in 2011/12, dropping gradually to 9,580 people in 2013/14. Under a different data collection regime from 2014/15 onwards, the number of adults with learning disabilities in any paid/self employment was recorded as 7,472 people in 2014/15 and dropped slightly to 7,422 people in 2016/17.

Figure 1 also reports the paid/self employment statistics according to the number of hours worked per week. The number of adults with learning disabilities working 16 hours or more per week stayed fairly static from 2009/10 (3,020 people) to 2013/14 (2,940 people). In 2014/15 this figure was 2,185 people and in 2016/17 the figure was 2,165 people.

The number of adults with learning disabilities working less than 16 hours per week peaked in 2012/13 (6,925 people) and dropped to 6,635 people in 2013/14. In 2014/15 there were 5,305 people working less than 16 hours per week, reducing to 5,255 people in 2016/17.

Figure 1 about here

Figure 2 presents information on the percentage of working age adults with learning disabilities (aged 18 to 64 years) who are engaged in any paid/self employment. Figure 2 shows that the overall paid/self employment rate for working age adults with learning disabilities reached a peak at 7.1% in 2011/12, and was at 6.7% in 2013/14. In 2014/15 the employment rate was 6.0%, which had reduced slightly to 5.7% in 2016/17. Figure 2 also shows employment rates broken down by recorded gender, with men with learning disabilities consistently recorded as having higher employment rates higher than women with learning disabilities.

Figure 2 about here

Figure 3 shows the geographical variation in reported employment rates, ordering reported employment rates for each local authority in 2016/17 from lowest to highest. In the middle ranked local authority in England in terms of employment rates, 5.2% of working age adults with learning disabilities were in any form of paid employment, although this varied greatly between local authorities – adults at the top quartile of councils were almost three times more likely than adults at the bottom quartile to be in paid/self employment (first quartile 3.0% vs third quartile 8.55%).

It is important to note the variation in outliers. The ten councils reporting the highest rates of paid/self employment for people with a primary support reason of learning disability reported rates

from 14.4% upwards, whilst the ten councils reporting the lowest employment rates reported rates of 1.3% or lower; both extremes include a range of types of council across different regions.

Figure 3 about here

From 2014/15 onwards, councils also report statistics on the number of working age adults with learning disabilities getting long-term social support who are: in paid/self employment; not in paid employment but actively seeking work; not in paid employment and not actively seeking work; and people for whom their employment status is unknown. These data are presented in Figure 4 for 2014/15 through to 2016/17 and show a generally static pattern over this short time period, with any changes largely due to the employment status of fewer people over time being recorded as unknown.

As Figure 4 shows, in 2016/17 5.7% of working age adults with a primary support reason of learning disability were in paid/self employment, 10.2% were not in employment but actively seeking work; and just over half (51.9%) were not in employment and not actively seeking work. The employment status of just under a third of adults with a primary support reason of learning disability (31.8%) was recorded as unknown.

Figure 4 about here

## Discussion

For those working age adults with learning disabilities receiving long-term social care, paid/self employment rates are extremely low (5.7%) and certainly not increasing over time. Most people are working less than 16 hours per week, and employment rates are higher for men than for women. This overall employment rate is lower (and with more people reported as working part-time) than comparable figures from Emerson et al. (2005).

It has been suggested that this extremely low employment rate is partly a function of the greater support needs of adults with learning disabilities receiving long-term social care compared to the total population of adults with learning disabilities. Indeed, this 5.7% figure is closest to the 3% employment rate for adults with learning disabilities with high support needs reported by Emerson et al. (2005), compared to adults with medium support needs (20% employment rate for men; 13% for women) or adults with low support needs (35% employment rate for men; 24% for women). However, it is important to note that supported employment can be equally effective for adults with learning disabilities across the range of support needs (Greig et al., 2014) so such extremely low employment rates should not be considered inevitable or unchangeable. In addition, this would not explain the consistently higher employment rates for men rather than women with learning disabilities.

A similar issue may arise when considering the high proportion of adults with learning disabilities receiving long-term support who are working for less than 16 hours per week (cf. Emerson et al., 2005). Clearly the operation of the benefits system has a major impact (Blamires, 2015), but there is some evidence (Emerson et al., 2014; Emerson et al., submitted a) that working 16 hours or more per week may be most strongly associated with improved health for UK adults with learning disabilities.

Finally, there is clearly extreme variation in the employment rates reported across local authorities. Understanding these variations may be helpful in developing successful local policies for supported adults with learning disabilities into paid employment. However, this variation (particularly when set alongside the large number of adults for whom councils report their employment status as unknown) may also raise some questions about the quality of the data collected by local authorities concerning people's employment status. There is no standard methodology that councils are required to use to collect these data, and in their 2016/17 returns, eight councils reported issues with collecting and collating the statistics on the employment of adults with learning disabilities (NHS Digital, 2017c), such as changes to and limitations within local information systems, and employment data not always being collected.

Improving the quality of data on the paid/self employment of adults with learning disabilities, and expanding the population of adults with learning disabilities for whom employment statistics are available, are urgent priorities to underpin any attempts to improve employment rates. Although national statistics are not available on this, it is also vital to understand the extent to which local investment in supported employment support maps on to higher rates of paid employment.

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Figure 1: The number of working age adults with learning disabilities known to councils (up to 2013/14) or receiving long-term social care (from 2014/15) reported by councils to be in paid or self employment, by hours worked per week

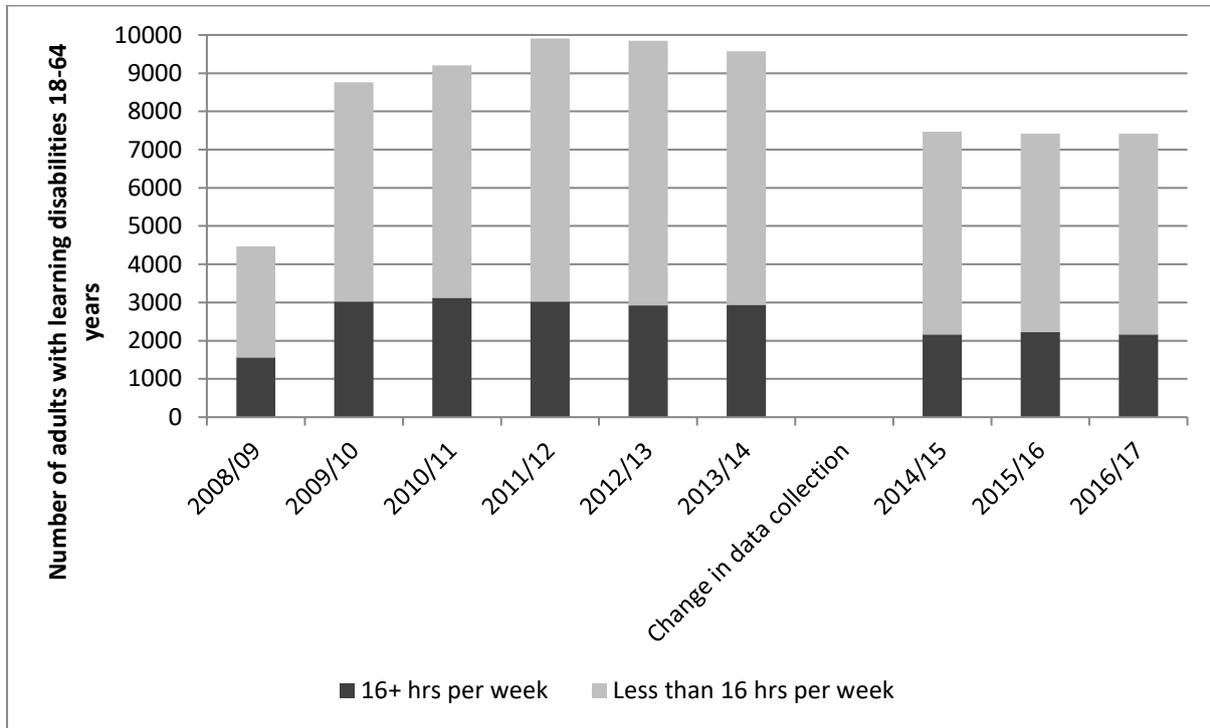


Figure 2: The percentage of working age adults with learning disabilities known to councils (up to 2013/14) or receiving long-term social care (from 2014/15) reported by councils to be in paid or self employment, by recorded gender

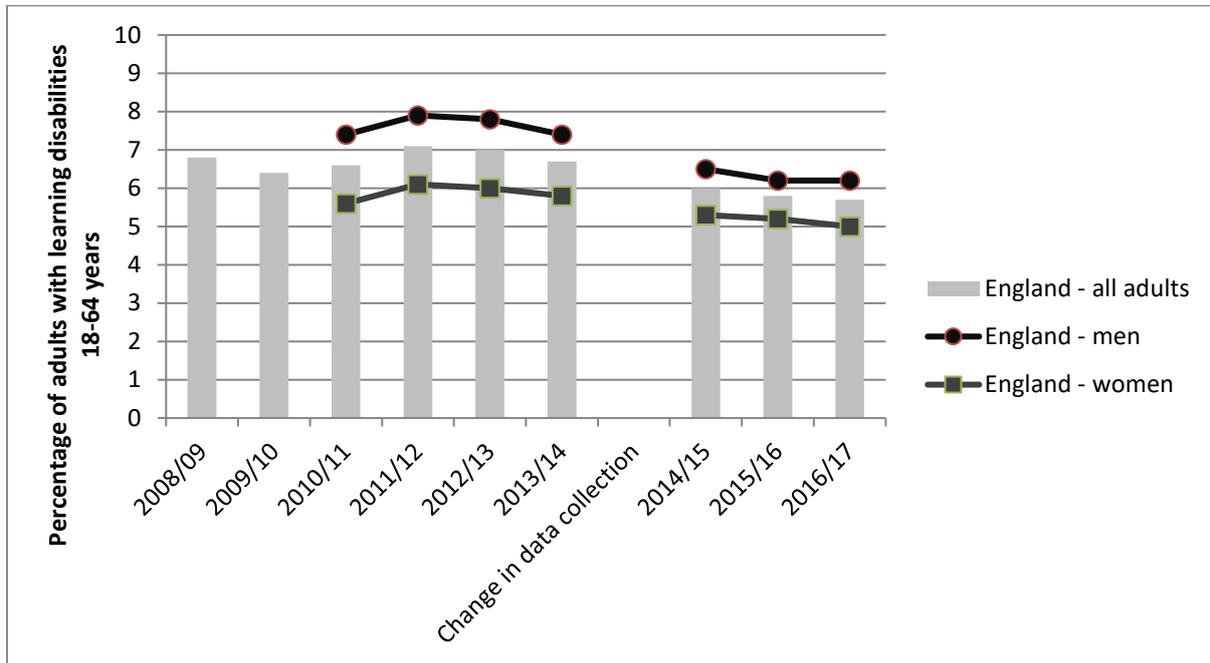


Figure 3: The percentage of working age adults with learning disabilities receiving long-term social care in 2016/17 reported by councils to be in paid or self employment in each local authority, ordered from lowest to highest reported employment rates

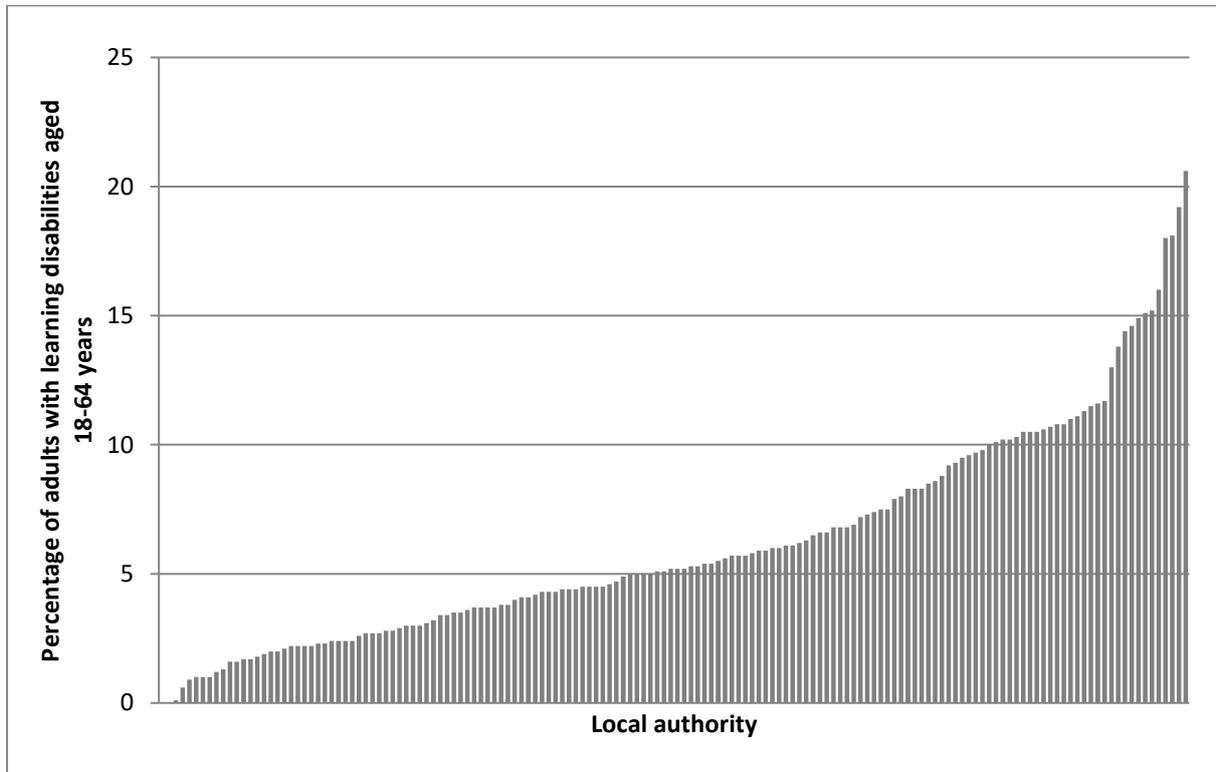
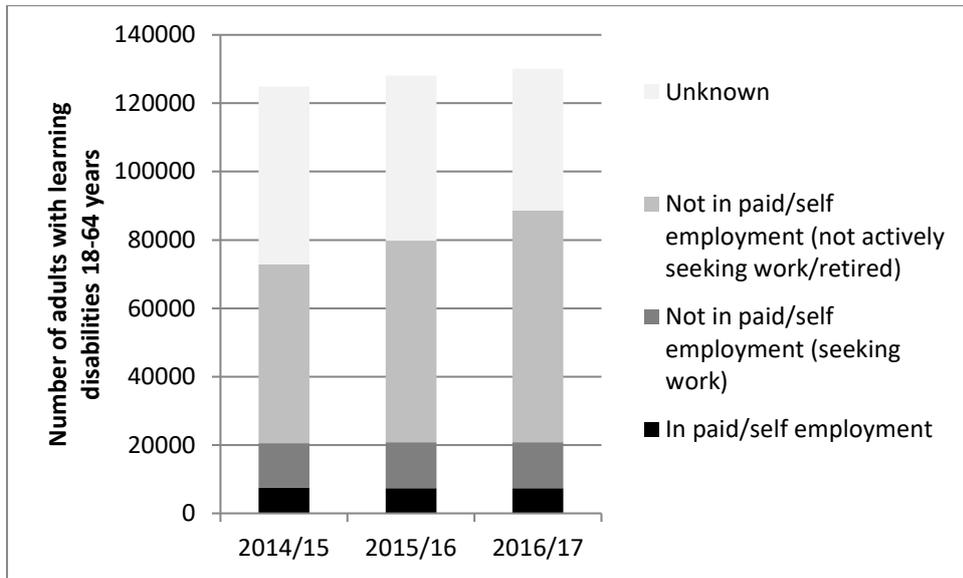


Figure 4: Reported employment status of working age adults with learning disabilities receiving long-term social care: 2014/15 to 2016/17



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