

Connect to Success

Technology and Employment Support for Disabled People

February 2025

This report was written by Robert McLaren, Director of Policy at Policy Connect.

Policy Connect

83 Victoria Street, London, SW1H 0HW

[www.policyconnect.org.uk](http://www.policyconnect.org.uk)

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# Executive Summary and Recommendations

The Government has made increasing economic activity a priority, setting a long-term ambition to achieve an 80% employment rate, with 2.1 million more people in work.[[1]](#footnote-1) Disabled and neurodivergent people are over-represented among the economically inactive. Only 54.4% of working age disabled people are employed compared to 81.9% of non-disabled people.[[2]](#footnote-2) The situation is particularly acute for people within certain impairment groups. For example, estimates of the number of people with a learning disability in employment range from 4.8% to 26.7%, despite surveys that show 36.7% of those with a learning disability without a job would like paid work. [[3]](#footnote-3) That is hundreds of thousands of people with learning disabilities who want to work but have not had the support they need to achieve this.[[4]](#footnote-4) The Government will not meet its ambition without doing more to help disabled people to thrive in employment.

Making employment truly accessible will require action across multiple domains such as employment rights, benefits, and social care. This report focusses on the contribution of employment support services for disabled job seekers, and how these services can become more effective by embedding support for their clients to use assistive and accessible technology (ATech) to overcome barriers to employment.

**In section one** we provide an overview of existing employment support services for disabled people, paying particular attention to an evidenced-based model called ‘supported employment’.

**In section two** we explore why disabled people who are looking for work often lack access to ATech. Some people use ATech in education, but this does not always mean they have access to ATech as they transition to employment. Likewise, the Access to Work scheme plays a vital role in providing people with ATech but not all disabled job seekers are eligible.

**In section three**, we recommend that ATech should be incorporated into employment services, so that everyone can try these tools without requiring a diagnosis or having to make an application to a separate scheme. We argue that the Government's plans for devolved and integrated employment support and adult skills services offer a vital opportunity to implement this change. As such, we recommend that:

1. **ATech should be part of the everyday delivery of the new jobs and careers service and be incorporated into local Get Britain Working Plans, including local Connect to Work schemes. Employment support clients should be helped to explore what ATech is right for them and begin using the technology, gaining skills and confidence with it, even before they secure paid work.**

To enable services to achieve this, we further recommend:

1. **Government should partner with the tech and disability sectors to establish a national Centre for ATech, whose role would include (i) providing strategic guidance to employment support service leaders and (ii) upskilling frontline professionals.**

In addition, so that young disabled people have ATech skills and confidence even before they engage with employment support, we recommend:

1. **Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and post-16 essential skills provision should recognise ATech as a core employability and life skill for disabled people. ATech should be incorporated in all relevant standards and frameworks related to preparation for adulthood (PfA) SEND provision, and within any proposed** **National Standards for Personal, Social and Employability Qualifications.**

# One: Employment support services for disabled people and the role of ATech

## Disability employment support services

A disabled person who is seeking to enter the workforce will likely benefit from a range of different forms of support. Such support could include a training course on using public transport, a consultation with one’s doctor about changing diabetes treatment methods to make it easier to administer at work, sessions with a coach to reflect on career aspirations, coaching to help manage difficult work situations, and so on. An employment support scheme will, therefore, typically include a caseworker who acts as the client’s point of entry into various support offers or, in the best cases, pulls disparate forms of support together, into a single wraparound service.

Despite the necessarily bespoke nature of disability employment support, there are some established, and evidence-based, models for such services.[[5]](#footnote-5) The most prominent of these models are Individual Placement and Support, and Supported Employment, both of which take what might be called a ‘place early’ approach, where a client is helped to find a paid position or unpaid internship early in the support journey and is then provided with support while on the job.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Individual Placement and Support is a model aimed at clients with severe mental illness and is provided through the NHS, while Supported Employment is aimed at disabled people more broadly and is typically delivered by local authorities and charities. Laura Davis, the CEO of the British Association for Supported Employment (BASE) told us that the Supported Employment can be encapsulated by the following:

“Starting from assumption that everyone can work, Supported Employment proactively works within communities to engage and inspire people to consider their employment options. Often focused on those groups more traditionally excluded from the workforce.”

In addition, Supported Employment is characterised by five stages. BASE describes these stages, and we reproduce this below.[[7]](#footnote-7)

|  |
| --- |
| **[1] Customer engagement:**  Many potential jobseekers are using traditional day services or receiving support from health and social care agencies. Supported Employment services maintain close links with referring agencies and seek to encourage people to explore employment as a way of improving their quality of life.  **[2] Vocational Profiling:**  The first element of a successful job match is the vocational profiling or “getting to know you” process. Here, services identify the aspirations, learning needs, individual skills, past experiences and job interests of the jobseeker. Working with families and support workers, they gather the information needed to develop a good job match. They look to identify the ideal job for that person based on their skills and preferences. Many people have never worked or not worked for many years and may need support to make informed choices about career opportunities.  **[3] Employer engagement:**  Many employers are anxious about employing someone with a significant disability but there is nothing special about it. Once they have tried it out they often become very committed to helping people overcome traditional recruitment and selection barriers. We know that traditional recruitment techniques can be overly rigid and formal interviews seldom result in offers of employment. Employers are increasingly recognising the value of “working interviews” which allow individuals to demonstrate their skills in the workplace and allow the employer to gather the sort of evidence that a formal interview seeks to capture.  Generally, our aim is to secure ’employment and training’ rather than ‘training then employment’. This means that a participant gets a job from the beginning. We know that most people learn skills better in situ rather than in artificial environments. By doing this we overcome the “job readiness” obstruction where people can get stuck in permanent training. It also increases people’s motivation significantly because they see from the beginning that they are employed.  **[4] Job Matching:**  A job analysis is usually undertaken to checks out any assumptions made in the job description. Although it is common practice for employers to set out the basics of a job for new recruits, it is not common for a detailed analysis of the job and environment to be available. Support services look at all aspects of the job and the workplace, including health and safety, to make sure they have identified the right job for the right candidate.  They can determine whether extra assistance or alterations to working practice or the environment are needed. This helps to produce a better job match. The job analysis might point towards ways of carving together parts of job descriptions that suit the workers’ talents, or creating new job descriptions that suit the worker and are cost effective for the employer. Most adjustments are reasonable and inexpensive.  **[5] In-work Support and Career development:**  It is important to offer appropriate levels of support and encourage the involvement of the employer and co-workers. Supported Employment services can support the person’s induction and provide on-site training support where needed. They may also offer support outside of the workplace if needed. Individual development plans are usually used to plan and monitor the employee’s learning.  Goals should include actions to encourage the social inclusion of the person within the workplace. As with all recruitment, not all workers will reach the productivity, quality, and social standards set by the employer. When all learning strategies have been exhausted and the data shows no further improvement, discussions may be needed to seek a more suitable job match.  Not many people stay in the same job for the whole of their working lives and people with disabilities are no different in having to adapt to changing labour markets and wanting to improve their working lives. Supported Employment should encourage the career development of individuals by promoting training opportunities and seeking options for increased responsibility. |

Some disabled job seekers may not require the Supported Employment approach, while others may benefit from the model but will only take-up in-work support for a limited time. Nonetheless, this model stands out for its broad application and robust evidence base.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Delivery of Supported Employment is funded in part by charities, local government, and indirectly, by some clients’ Access to Work grants. The Government has announced an expansion of provision in England and Wales under the new Connect to Work scheme that is designed to support up to 100,000 people a year.[[9]](#footnote-9)

## The role of ATech in employment support

The value of ATech in breaking down barriers to employment is well established, by academic studies and policy reviews.[[10]](#footnote-10) Furthermore, we know that disabled people across the country are already using ATech everyday as part of their work. The Business Disability Forum found that ATech is among the most common forms of workplace adjustment offered by employers.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Given this, employment support services cannot afford to ignore the role of technology. Indeed, ATech is relevant across all five stages of the Supported Employment model.

* **Customer engagement.** Services must ensure that their communications with potential clients are accessible. This could include, for example, using auto-captions an outreach meeting a local self-advocacy learning disability group.
* **Vocational Profiling and Job Matching.** ATech has unlocked new possible career options for many disabled people and so must be factored into discussions about career aspirations: otherwise, a client and coach may mistakenly rule out one career as unsuitable because they are not aware of how ATech could improve the accessibility of that field. For example, working as a police officer requires filling out forms; a task that some neurodivergent people find difficult. But AI-powered chat bots offer an alternative way for users to record information.[[12]](#footnote-12)
* **Employer engagement.** Just as clients need to know about ATech to know which roles are suitable, employers will feel more confident to take positive decisions once they are aware that there are tools available to help make roles in their organisation accessible. For example, a role that includes carrying out tasks alone might not appear suitable for a person who often needs reminding of how to do a task – but use of QR codes linked to instructional videos could unlock the opportunity.[[13]](#footnote-13)
* **Job Matching**. As we saw above, job matching involves assessing what adjustments need to be made so that a job can be accessible. As ATech is a common and important workplace adjustment this assessment must include things like whether an office needs to add a quiet space for dictating text, or what ATech will be compatible with the employer’s cyber security rules.[[14]](#footnote-14)
* **In-work Support and Career Development**. If a client is going to use ATech in their role, they need the opportunity to explore what tech works for them, and gain skills and confidence in using those tools. This process that can begin before the role starts but will continue as an element of ongoing support.

# Two: What’s not working?

## ‘Why don’t disabled people who use employment support services already have access to ATech?’

Some disabled people already have access to ATech and the skills to use it before they engage with an employment support service. However, we heard from experts that this remains the exception rather than the rule. First, while ATech is becoming more mainstream – with widespread adoption of features like captions on videos and calls – awareness of ATech remains low.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Second, while some ATech is built into technology that people already have access to, such as web browsers and smartphone operating systems, other tools are only available as an additional purchase: e.g. as a software subscription or as specialist hardware. The price of specialist ATech, while falling, can be a barrier for disabled people, who on average already face a higher cost of living and lower income than their peers.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Third, while some disabled people begin using ATech during their educational career and come to an employment support service already having skills, confidence, and access to ATech, this experience is far from the norm. One reason for this is that most disabled people acquire an impairment later in life and so may not have needed additional support at school, college, or university.[[17]](#footnote-17) Another issue is that some disabled people do not have their needs identified while they are in education. Even when people do receive SEND support as learners, this often does not include ATech. A Department for Education (DfE) survey of mainstream school leaders found that less than half of schools’ digital technology strategies included ATech.[[18]](#footnote-18) As a consequence, many schools have not made technology a feature of SEND teaching or preparing learners for adulthood. Lastly, while the Disabled Students Allowance enables many learners to gain access to ATech and training to use it, only learners in Higher Education are eligible.

Even where disabled people gain experience of using ATech in education, this may not translate into having access to the technology later in life. One reason for this is that the products a person has used in education – e.g. a mind-mapping software subscription or a reading pen – may belong to the educational setting and so access is withdrawn when the learner graduates. Another issue is that a disabled person may have been supported to use ATech for education-specific tasks but may not have been helped to develop ATech skills and confidence as a life-skill. ATech is sometimes treated as something that helps a learner gain qualifications and skills, rather than also as a life skill itself.

## ‘Why is ATech not already available to disabled people during their engagement with an employment support service?’

### Access to Work

The Access to Work grant scheme is currently the main route by which disabled people gain access to ATech and related support in the context of employment. Yet, many disabled employment support clients are not eligible for the scheme. Only those with an Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plan, who are undertaking supported internships or similar schemes, can receive an Access to Work grant before they secure paid work. It is unclear how many people per year take up Access to Work on this basis. However, all persons with an EHC Plan will be 25 and under and data shows that fewer than 7500 people aged 16-24 apply for the grant each year.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Furthermore, even those who receive an Access to Work grant before entering paid employment may face barriers to accessing ATech. In some cases, it can take a long time for the ATech recommended by an Access to Work assessment to be purchased, received, and set up.[[20]](#footnote-20) For someone on a 6-month supported internship, such delays are critical and could negate the value of getting the tech at all.

### Employment support services

Employment support services could work with clients to develop skills and confidence with ATech. Yet, here again we have learned from experts in the sector that this practice is far from the norm. Some services appear to regard their role, with respect to ATech, as simply to signpost clients to the Access to Work scheme, rather than incorporate ATech into their own offer (even though, as we have seen, employment support clients are often not eligible for Access to Work because they have not secured a job offer). Several assumptions might underpin this practice.

First, it may be assumed that a client can only benefit from ATech once they are in a role. According to this thinking, ATech is an ‘adjustment’ to a working environment, and any package used at work will be bespoke to that role, so ATech is irrelevant to pre-employment support. As we have seen, this is mistaken. To restate the point briefly: disabled people benefit from ATech skills and confidence when exploring their employment options and applying for a role. When disabled job seekers are aware of what technology they find helpful it makes it quicker and easier to start using ATech when on the job.

Second, some employment services may be guided by the assumption that supporting someone to use ATech always involves procuring an expensive package of products, for which the service does not have a budget. However, in many or even most cases, someone can gain familiarity with ATech by using freely available products and built-in features and then subsequently upgrade to a paid-for product. For example, someone might use the magnification setting built into the computer in their local library, Job Centre Plus, or college and then go on to use specialised digital magnification software when they have secured a paid role – at which point the product can be paid for by their employer and/or an Access to Work grant. It is also the case that employment support services could reserve some budget for procuring ATech (see Section Three below).

In short, employment support services often fail to make ATech part of their offer because of mistaken assumptions about the nature of the technology.

# Three: How to make ATech part of the everyday delivery of employment support

## The role of Access to Work

We have seen that ATech is falling through the cracks: too many disabled people looking for work are not getting support with ATech – either from Access to Work or from their employment support service. It may be tempting to address this gap by expanding the Access to Work scheme so that *all* disabled job seekers are eligible (i.e. not just those with EHC Plans). We should indeed look for ways to improve the Access to Work scheme, but several features of the basic design of the grant may make it ill-suited to becoming the primary means for delivering access to ATech for job seekers. First, the grant pays for ATech and related support by refunding the employer who first pays for the products. This is clearly not an option in cases where a disabled person is not yet in work (nor undertaking an internship) and so Access to Work would have to change to a direct payment or direct procurement model. Second, and more significantly, even if Access to Work eligibility was expanded in the case of ATech to include all disabled employment support clients, this would make ATech an add-on to the employment service – provided for by a separate bureaucracy – rather than being an integrated element of employment support. For these reasons, we propose that access to ATech should be expanded by enhancing the capacity of employment support services themselves (see Recommendation One below), while Access to Work should remain as a vital programme servicing disabled people who are already in employment.

## Employment support services

The Government’s Get Britain Working White Paper sets out an ambitious overhaul of employment.[[21]](#footnote-21) The Government will create a new “jobs and careers service” by reforming Job Centre Plus and combining it with the national Careers Service. Second, local areas will develop their strategies for reducing economic inactivity among their populations – “Get Britain Working Plans”. National government will support these Plans, including with a Get Britain Working Fund – which will provide £115m in 2025/26 for delivery of local Supported Employment programs (Connect to Work).[[22]](#footnote-22)

These reforms offer a once-in-a generation opportunity to redesign employment support services so that they enable people to take advantage of technology to break down barriers and succeed in the modern workplace. The jobs and careers service promises to be “digital, universal and fully inclusive”, which only strengthens the imperative for clients to be able to use ATech while engaging with the service (not waiting until they have a job).[[23]](#footnote-23) And the expansion of Supported Employment under the Connect to Work scheme will, as we have seen, make its greatest impact if it incorporates technology across all phases of support.

**Recommendation One:** ATech should be part of the everyday delivery of the new jobs and careers service and be incorporated into local Get Britain Working Plans, including local Connect to Work schemes. Employment support clients should be helped to explore what ATech is right for them and begin using the technology, gaining skills and confidence with it, even before they secure paid work.

### Devolution and capacity

Different local areas will rightly take different approaches to embedding ATech in their employment services. But the opportunity to access vital technology and digital skills cannot become subject to a postcode lottery.[[24]](#footnote-24) That is why national government must support local areas, and the local delivery of the jobs and careers service, to develop the needed capacity around ATech.

**Recommendation Two:** Government should partner with the tech and disability sectors to establish a national Centre for ATech, whose role would include (i) providing strategic guidance to employment support service leaders and (ii) upskilling frontline professionals.

For example, the Centre could partner with the ATech sector to develop up-to-date training on ATech for employment support staff, develop a community of practice for employment support professionals around ATech, and develop guidance for services leaders on ATech and procurement to ensure value for money. [[25]](#footnote-25) The Centre would also play a role in driving ATech awareness and capacity among employers and stimulating the UK’s ATech research and innovation ecosystem.

### SEND education and preparation for adulthood

The topic of harnessing ATech to improve *educational* attainment is outside the scope of this report. Nonetheless, as we saw when reviewing the current barriers to job seekers using ATech, education has a vital role to play. People who begin working with an employment support service will gain more from the ATech support they are provided if they have prior experience and awareness about the technology – and that should start in school.

**Recommendation Three:** Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and post-16 essential skills provision should recognise ATech as a core employability and life skill for disabled people. ATech should be incorporated in all relevant standards and frameworks related to preparation for adulthood (PfA) SEND provision, and within any proposed National Standards for Personal, Social and Employability Qualifications.

Preparation for adulthood (PfA), including preparation for employment where appropriate, is an established aspect of SEND provision. However, it is unclear if ATech as a life and employability skill is mentioned in any national guidance on policy on PfA.[[26]](#footnote-26) Ofsted and the CQC’s recent thematic review of PfA arrangements in local areas recommended that DfE and the Department for Health and Social Care co-author a “national set of standards that outlines clear roles and responsibilities across education, health and social care regarding transitions to adulthood”: those standards should by informed by the role that technology now plays in the lives of and careers of disabled people.[[27]](#footnote-27)

ATech should be included as one of the content areas for Employability Qualifications under the proposals for new National Standards.[[28]](#footnote-28) The proposals, put forward by the last government currently include ATech as part of the curriculum for independent living, but not for employability. The Essential Digital Skills framework already includes accessibility. However,guidance should be offered to providers to ensure that those who take Essential Digital Skills courses are receiving up-to-date information.[[29]](#footnote-29)

# Methodology and Acknowledgements

Research for this report was conducted by Shamima Aktar (formally Policy Manager at Policy Connect), though a roundtable evidence session held by the APPG for Assistive and Accessible Technology and interviews with expert stakeholders. The report was authored by Robert Mclaren (Director of Policy, Policy Connect).  We would like to thank Victoria Zeybrandt (Director of Communications and Operations) and James Taylor (Communications and Events Coordinator) for their work in editing and producing the finished report, and Clive Gilbert (Senior Research and Policy Manager, ATech) for supporting the project.  Special thanks to Dawn Green (Karten Network) and Laura Davis (British Association for Supported Employment) for their expert advice over the course the project.

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## About Policy Connect

Policy Connect is a cross-party think tank. We specialise in supporting parliamentary groups, forums and commissions, delivering impactful policy research and event programmes and bringing together parliamentarians and government in collaboration with academia, business and civil society to help shape public policy in Westminster and Whitehall, so as to improve people’s lives. Our work focusses on five key policy areas which are: Education & Skills; Industry, Technology & Innovation; Sustainability; Health; and Accessibility. We provide the secretariat for the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Assistive and Accessible Technology (APPGAT). We are a social enterprise and are funded by a combination of regular annual membership subscriptions and time-limited sponsorships. We are proud to be a Disability Confident and London Living Wage employer, and a member of Social Enterprise UK.

## About the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Assistive and Accessible Technology (APPGAT)

The APPGAT aims to disseminate knowledge, generate debate and facilitate engagement on assistive technology amongst Members of both Houses of Parliament. The group is chaired by Josh Fenton-Glynn MP (Labour), with parliamentary Officers Lord Shinkwin (Conservative), Sadik Al-Hassan MP (Labour), and Lord Low (Crossbench), and Members including Steve Darling MP (Lib Dem), Rt Hon. Lord Blunkett (Labour), and Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson (Crossbench).

## About the Ian Karten Charitable Trust

The Trust is named for its founder, Ian Karten MBE (1920-2011), who escaped Nazi occupied Europe, served in the Royal Air Force, and went on to establish a successful technology company. The Trust funds a number of initiatives related to education and inclusion, among which is its support for the charity The Karten Network, that runs over 100 technology centres for disabled people in the UK and Israel.

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18. Department for Education: [Technology in schools survey report: 2022 to 2023](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/technology-in-schools-survey-report-2022-to-2023) (November 2023) [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. UK Government: [Access to Work statistics: April 2007 to March 2024](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/access-to-work-statistics-april-2007-to-march-2024) (October 2024) [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Business Disability Forum has made recommendations for employers to reduce such delays – [Technology and adjustments](https://businessdisabilityforum.org.uk/resource/technology-toolkit/technology-and-adjustments/) (September 2024). Note that this issue is separate and in addition to any delays in processing Access to Work applications, so even when the backlog of applications is cleared (see [UIN 6749, tabled on 4 October 2024](https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2024-10-04/6749)) some delays in accessing ATech via Access to Work will remain. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. UK Government: [Get Britain Working White Paper](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/get-britain-working-white-paper/get-britain-working-white-paper) (November 2024) [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Cf. Commission on the Future of Employment Support: [Working for the Future](https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/system/files/resources/files/Working%20for%20the%20Future%20Final%20Report.pdf) (September 2024) on a “Charter for Employment Support” to “enable clear standards and expectations to be set across national, local and wider employment services”; and Work and Pensions Select Committee: [Plan for Jobs and employment support](https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/40930/documents/200444/default/?_gl=1*5b5cpi*_up*MQ..*_ga*MjIzMDgyODYzLjE3MjQyNDUxNDU.*_ga_9684J19FT4*MTcyNDI0NTE0NC4xLjAuMTcyNDI0NTE0OS4wLjAuMA..) (July 2023) on a “National Framework where DWP maintains oversight of programmes to ensure that delivery is of a high and consistent standard.” [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Policy Connect: [Frontline Accessibility](https://www.policyconnect.org.uk/research/frontline-accessibility-building-atech-awareness-and-confidence-among-public-service) (June 2023) showed the outsized impact of providing awareness-level ATech training, reinforced by a community of practice, to the frontline professionals with whom disabled people already engage – including job coaches. Note also that the ATech training developed by the Centre could be embedded in the recently announced Coaching Academy for work coaches (UK Government: [Get Britain Working White Paper](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/get-britain-working-white-paper/get-britain-working-white-paper) (November 2024)) [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. For example, ATech is mentioned in the [SEND Code of Practice](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7dcb85ed915d2ac884d995/SEND_Code_of_Practice_January_2015.pdf) (January 2015) but not explicitly in relation to PfA, and the same is true for the Ofsted and CQC [Area SEND inspections: framework and handbook](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/area-send-framework-and-handbook/area-send-inspections-framework-and-handbook) (April 2024); technology was not mentioned at all in the Ofsted and CQC [Preparation for adulthood arrangements in local areas: a thematic review](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/preparation-for-adulthood-arrangements-in-local-areas-a-thematic-review/preparation-for-adulthood-arrangements-in-local-areas-a-thematic-review) (December 2024). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ofsted and CQC: [Preparation for adulthood arrangements in local areas: a thematic review](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/preparation-for-adulthood-arrangements-in-local-areas-a-thematic-review/preparation-for-adulthood-arrangements-in-local-areas-a-thematic-review) (December 2024) [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Department for Education: [National Standards for Personal, Social and Employability Qualifications Government consultation](https://consult.education.gov.uk/post-16-qualifications-reform-at-level-2-and-below/pseqs/supporting_documents/National_standards_for_PSE_qualifications_government_consultation.pdf) (March 2024). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. A role that could be performed by the Centre for ATech. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)