

HTA/ISPA submission to the “Get Britain Working” White Paper

Empowering Workforce Inclusion: Leveraging Technology and Health Innovations to Support People with Long-Term Conditions and Disabilities

Introduction

In today’s fast-evolving world, the intersection of technology and health innovation offers numerous opportunities to help individuals with long-term conditions and disabilities remain active participants in the workforce. The UK’s new Labour Government has stated their commitment to ‘build an NHS fit for the future’ - offering a chance to embed innovative solutions into their Missions and across departments.

This report produced on behalf of the Health Tech Alliance (HTA), the Internet Services’ Providers’ Association (ISPA) and other organisations, explores how technology, including emerging healthcare innovations can empower such individuals to either return to work, or where possible, remain in employment. Drawing insights from industry leaders across sectors, it highlights the transformative potential of technology in driving better health outcomes and fostering workforce inclusion.

The Challenge: Digital Illiteracy & Access to Technology

Digital illiteracy remains a significant challenge. Nearly half of UK adults believe they lack the necessary digital skills to compete in today’s workplace, with 27%¹ believing they lack the skills needed for their specific jobs. Sector experts strongly advocate for a systemic shift, with a particular emphasis placed on the need to embed digital literacy into our education system, and within businesses.

Statistics show that only 1 in 10 individuals with disabilities currently have access to assistive technology², its absence exacerbates both health and workplace inequities. Existing government programs, such as the Access to Work (AtW) scheme, provides crucial support and access to assistive technology for disabled workers.

However, familiarity with such schemes proves low, with 71% of employers reporting³ they were unaware of AtW. Furthermore, applications to these schemes face consistent delays. A cultural shift

¹ Oxford Learning College (2023) *Skills Gap Statistics UK 2023*
<https://www.oxfordcollege.ac/news/skills-gap-statistics-uk/>

² Assistive Technology, Longevity and Ageing Society (2022) *Assistive Tech in the UK 2022*
<https://analytics.dkv.global/AssistiveTech-in-UK-2022.pdf>

³ Gov.UK (2023) *Department for Work and Pensions Employer Survey 2022*
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/department-for-work-and-pensions-employer-survey-2022/department-for-work-and-pensions-employer-survey-2022-research-report#health-and-disability-at-work>

toward “disability confident” practices must be adopted by employers. New and innovative technologies could further support personalised employment plans for individuals.

Finally, despite clear public sector benefits for getting people back to work (e.g, lower benefit bills and higher tax receipts), Integrated Care Systems (ICSs) currently see no financial return for getting people back to work. This means investment in assistive technologies will only be a cost for the NHS at a time when providers and Integrated Care Boards (ICBs) are facing severe pressure from NHS England to balance their books.

The Solutions:

- Enhance digital literacy efforts via a dual approach, beginning in schools and furthering within businesses. Employers must be encouraged to integrate digital inclusion initiatives for both employees and customers.
- Foster collaboration between businesses, NGOs, local authorities, and government to implement effective digital inclusion strategies.
- Improve awareness and outreach for existing schemes like AtW. Clear the back-log and expedite the application process to enhance employment opportunities for disabled individuals.
- Consider incentive payments so that Integrated Care Boards (ICBs) receive a payment tied to the reduction of the joblessness rate in their geographic footprint. In turn, this supports one of the key aims of ICSs: fostering broader social and economic development.

The Challenge: Obesity & Illness

One key contributor to workplace health challenges is obesity. Health Secretary Wes Streeting has noted⁴ that illness related to obesity leads to an average of four additional sick days per year, and often forces individuals out of work altogether. With around 64% of the adult population classified as overweight, and 26% as obese⁵, the societal and economic toll is immense. As obesity often triggers a snowball effect of related health issues such as mental health disorders and musculoskeletal conditions (two of the leading causes of work-related sickness)⁶, widening NHS access to the latest treatments through specialist digital services could act as an upstream

⁴ Ruth Comerford, BBC News (2024) *Unemployed could get weight loss jobs to return to work*
https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cjd54zd0ezjo?at_bbc_team=editorial&at_link_type=web_link&at_link_origin=BBC_News&at_medium=social&at_campaign_type=owned&at_format=image&at_campaign=Social_Flow&at_link_id=B901F6EE-8ACA-11EF-BAF4-B2CE78093F11&at_ptr_name=linked_in_page

⁵ Gov.UK (2024) *Obesity Profile: short statistical commentary May 2024*
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/update-to-the-obesity-profile-on-fingertips/obesity-profile-short-statistical-commentary-may-2024#:~:text=In%202022%20to%202023%2C%2064.0,to%20be%20living%20with%20obesity.>

⁶ The Health Innovation Network. (2024) *‘How innovation can support the government’s ambition for health’*
<https://thehealthinnovationnetwork.co.uk/news/how-innovation-can-support-the-governments-ambition-for-health/>

prevention measure to alleviate the burden on both healthcare resources, and minimise the number of individuals who face workforce issues due to their conditions.

The Solutions:

- Government and NHS policy-makers should adopt a long-term view of the economic and health benefits of early interventions in obesity and chronic illness management.
- A whole-of-government approach that aligns health, economic growth, and workforce productivity goals is essential for sustained improvement in population health outcomes.
- Widening the availability of obesity treatments through digital platforms could yield substantial population health benefits and reduce absenteeism.

Conclusion

Addressing these issues will require coordinated efforts from the government, businesses, and local authorities. By leveraging technology, investing in preventive health measures, and fostering inclusive work environments, the UK can unlock significant economic and social benefits. The integration of digital literacy programs, assistive technology, and innovative healthcare solutions will be crucial for creating a more inclusive and healthier workforce.

List of Contributors:

The contributions presented by the following organisations reflect a shared commitment to breaking down barriers, promoting equality, and ensuring that healthtech advancements will benefit those most in need.

Please note that all comments reflect a collective discussion and do not represent the views of any specific organisations.

- BD
- BT
- Cheshire & Merseyside ICB
- Eucalyptus/Juniper
- Freuds+
- getUBetter
- Glaukos
- ISPA UK
- iRhythm
- NHS Confederation
- Policy Connect
- Royal College of GP's
- Shockwave Medical
- Smith + Nephew
- The Health Foundation
- Thor BPM
- Vodafone

About ISPA:

The Internet Services Providers' Association (ISPA UK) is the UK's Trade Association for providers of Internet services. Promoting collaboration and constructive dialogue between its members and the wider internet community, ISPA is an all-important driving force for the industry and relevant stakeholders. ISPA's main activity is in making representations on behalf of the industry to Government bodies, such as the Home Office, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and Ofcom. Government and political representatives often approach ISPA for its knowledge and expertise.

About HTA:

The Health Tech Alliance is a coalition of health tech companies working to drive up the adoption of health technologies, devices and diagnostics that are proven to benefit patient outcomes and deliver cost savings to the NHS. Chaired by Dame Barbara Hakin, the former Deputy Chief Executive of NHS England, the Alliance's members range from start-ups to multinational companies. They work in partnership with key bodies such as NICE, NHS England, Office for Life Sciences, NHS Improvement, NIHR and the Academic Health Science Networks to find tangible solutions to key healthcare problems.

Work includes workshops, seminars, member-led working groups, lobbying, and profile-raising activities.