**A joint DPO response to “Department of Health and Social Care: Major conditions strategy: call for evidence”**

[Disability Rights UK](https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org) is a national organisation led by Disabled people. Our vision is a world where Disabled people have equal rights, opportunities, and access to power. Our work is rooted in the lived experience of Disabled people. We are a membership organisation and work closely with organisations led by Disabled people across the UK.

The following organisations co-sign this response:

* [Disability North](https://www.disabilitynorth.org.uk/) – a user-led charity which promotes inclusion, independence and choice for Disabled people and their families.
* [Colostomy UK](https://www.colostomyuk.org/) - a charity that supports and empowers people living with a stoma.
* [Wiltshire Centre for Independent Living](https://www.wiltshirecil.org.uk/) – a user-led organisation supporting Disabled people living in Wiltshire to have choice and control to live independent lives.
* [Pulp Friction](https://www.pulpfrictioncic.org.uk/) – a CIC which supports people with Learning Disabilities and Autism.
* [Disability Peterborough](https://www.disabilitypeterborough.org/) – a Disabled People’s Organisation that has been supporting local, physically disabled people for over 30 years.
* [Leicestershire Centre for Integrated Living](https://www.facebook.com/LeicesterCIL) - a user-led organisation based in Leicester City that works innovatively based on the social model of disability to support Disabled people.

**Key recommendation: Health issues must be understood through the social model lens to allow sport and physical activity to be seen as a health intervention.**

The Social Model of Disability was developed by Disabled people and describes people as being disabled by societal barriers, not by our impairment or difference. If modern life were set up in a way accessible for Disabled people, then we would not be excluded or restricted.

Generally, there is recognition in the health and social care sector of the health (both physical and mental) benefits of sports and physical activity. However, co-produced research by Disability Research Institute into Independent Living has argued that physical activity should be recognised as “a core responsibility of health and social care”.[[1]](#footnote-2) Applying a social model lens to major conditions responses would allow this recognition to occur widely and create more accessible, equitable and effective services.

Disabled people are one of the most inactive groups in the UK, with the evidence showing that activity is less common for Disabled people or those with long-term health conditions (45%) than those without (66%)[[2]](#footnote-3). Applying a social model lens would allow the sector to see activity for what it is: a health intervention with great and wide-ranging benefits for our lives.

A social model lens forces decision-makers to address the barriers that lead to negative health outcomes, especially for those with major conditions. Applying this view would change how the system views Disabled people.

The social model clarifies the barriers to inclusion and participation, showing how the social care system is inadequate compared to our needs and a punitive and restrictive social security system that prevents us from being more active.

Any major conditions strategy will only deliver is if there is an understanding amongst decision makers that health improvement is not a short-term activity that is matched up against political and financial cycles but instead a complementary plan of short-and long-term commitments.

We propose focusing on prevention and health creation, shaped and informed by genuine public and professional co-production. Disabled people's voices need to be valued and prioritised in the planning and delivery of health and care services they access.

**Recommendation 2 – Disabled people receive the quality care and support they need to be active.**

There is a huge gulf between the proportion of Disabled people and the proportion of non-disabled people who get active. A key barrier is that Disabled people are not receiving the care and support they need to be active.

Sport England research has found that 16.2% of disabled people strongly agree that ‘I feel I have the opportunity to be physically active’, compared to 38.3% of non-disabled people.[[3]](#footnote-4) At Disability Rights UK, we are acutely aware of the current conditions of social care and support, meaning that few Disabled people can be as active as they would like.

In essence, the time-intensive nature of care work means that when local authorities are trying to cut budgets to save on cost, this involves restricting the time a carer has with everyone they care for. These restrictive conditions do not allow Disabled people to receive the support they need to be active.

Amid a deepening cost of living crisis, these factors will continue to play a huge role in people’s well-being, and the need for access to the right support has never been greater. Joint research between DR UK and Durham University identified social workers and carers as key messengers in promoting physical activity.[[4]](#footnote-5)

Yet, Disabled people are bearing the human cost of a grossly underfunded care system. Half a million people are waiting for care, thousands can’t afford care charges that are deducted from benefits, thousands are having care stripped back to the minimum, and thousands of Disabled people that receive direct payments can’t recruit personal assistants as payments are low and uncompetitive.

In these circumstances, a strategy to support major conditions thus must focus on how the social care system can be reshaped to provide the conditions for activity and involvement to flourish. This sort of system requires a major financial investment of at least and should be free at the point of us.

In the short term, this means increasing funding by at least £8 billion per year, and an immediate end to social care charging. Over the long term, this would not just raise the current conditions of all those involved in the sector but also create the breathing space needed for quality care to occur. Transformative investment would free up resources and capacity within the system for those key messengers of activity to support Disabled people to be as active as they would like.

**Recommendation 3 – The benefits system enables Disabled people to be active.**

The need to tackle the social determinants of health disparities is crucial to tackling systemic and entrenched healthcare and outcome inequalities. If the strategy is to make a real difference to Disabled people and fulfil its potential and be truly sustainable, it will require involvement from local government, voluntary and community sectors, communities and businesses working together as an ecosystem of health creation.

[Insight from Sport England](https://www.activityalliance.org.uk/assets/000/003/493/Supporting_disabled_people_from_low-income_households_to_be_active_original.pdf?1594111189) showed that Disabled people from lower socioeconomic groups are less likely to be physically active than Disabled people from higher socioeconomic groups (43% vs 29%). Crucially, two-thirds (65%) of people in an Activity Alliance study said they rely on benefits to be active. This support is vital, so that we can afford the travel to venues or paid-for exercise and specialist equipment we need to be active. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, in 2020-21, 29.1% of all individuals in the UK were living in households with incomes below the Minimum Income Standard, compared to 26.7% in 2008-09.

This huge shortfall and the clear inadequacy of current benefit levels prevent us from getting active and experiencing the health benefits of physical activity. Therefore, any serious strategy must engage with how the benefits system enables or prevents health interventions.

Activity Alliance’s research has also identified that the punitive nature of our social security system has long-term negative health impacts. that the benefits system is preventing Disabled people from being active. More than a third (34%) of Disabled people that Activity Alliance spoke to for their research have had or know someone who has had benefits sanctioned or removed as a result of being physically active. This climate of fear led to more than half of respondents (55%) saying they were likely to be more active if benefits weren’t at risk of being taken away.

We need a better social security system co-produced with Disabled people to remove these health inequality barriers. The new system should address the barriers that Disabled people face and consider the extra costs that Disabled people have so that we can lead the healthy, active and independent lives we want.

This new system must not be punitive, and we support The [Commission on Social Security](https://www.commissiononsocialsecurity.org/) who argue for a system with no sanctions, no benefit cap, no five-week wait and no two-child limit, only when our social security system works can Disabled people feel confident to be active in our communities.

Like other strategies and programmes of reform, the Major Conditions Strategy will require an adequate workforce in place to be implemented successfully. As such, it is vital that the Government urgently publishes the NHS Workforce Plan and Care workforce pathway for adult social care as previously promised.

Finally, the scrapping of the cross-government mental health and wellbeing plan in favour of this strategy only highlights the lack of parity between mental and physical health and that individuals will continue to experience unequal mental health support across the country. We wish to see cross-governmental strategies, co-produced with Disabled people and those with long-term health conditions.

1. https://getyourselfactive.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/drill-empowering-people-through-physical-activity\_0.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. https://getyourselfactive.org/active-lives-report-2022/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. <https://www.activityalliance.org.uk/news/8045-our-response-to-sport-englands-active-lives-202122-report> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. https://getyourselfactive.org/resource/promoting-physical-activity-to-disabled-people-messengers-messages-guidelines-and-communication-formats-report/ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)