

# The Impact of Welfare Cuts on Disabled People and Access to Physical Activity

A Get Yourself Active Response To The  
Welfare Reform Green Paper



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# Introduction

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The government department that is responsible for health and disability benefits (The Department for Work and Pensions) has issued a green paper about the entire health and disability benefit system. This is called Pathways to Work: Reforming Benefits and Support to Get Britain Working.

The government says it will take away at least five billion pounds from the pockets of some of the poorest and most disadvantaged Disabled people in the UK. There are 22 changes suggested, but 12 of them will not be open to consultation – these 12 proposals will be voted on in June 2025 and will if approved begin to be rolled out in 2026.

The proposed cuts announced in the Green Paper will restrict eligibility for PIP and out of work disability benefits, as well as freezing and reducing the payment levels for some out of work disability benefits. This is expected to lead to at least 3.8 million Disabled people losing payments, with some set to lose 60% of their income. At least 350,000 Disabled people will be pushed into poverty as a result, and this figure is likely to be an underestimate.

The Disability Policy Centre has suggested that the Green Paper proposals may at best deliver only £100 million in savings – just 2% of the £5 billion the government has announced, because of all the extra knock-on costs felt in other parts of the government.

By following the social model of Disability, it is clear to us that **access to a choice of affordable, accessible, safe and fun activities is a rights issue.**

This briefing sets out the potential knock-on effects of the green paper proposals. It is primarily intended for those who work in the sport and physical activity sector or work with Disabled people to increase physical activity levels. It has been drafted using existing research and leans on assumptions and inference. It should be akin to a non-academic literature review rather than a unique piece of research.

It will cover:

- The Rising Cost of Being Physically Active
- Increased Barriers to Job Access & Retention
- Potential Impacts on the NHS
- Greater Demand for Rehabilitation & Physiotherapy
- Higher Risk of Mental ill-health and distress
- Increased Demand for Home Care & Personal Assistance
- Impact on Carers & Family Members
- Impact on Carers & Family Members
- Reduced Ability to Work Due to Worsening Health

# The Rising Cost of Being Physically Active

Through our research it has become clear that the support afforded to Disabled people by Personal Independence Payment (PIP) and other benefits is crucial in people being active, doing activities that improve their health and mental well-being and being active in the community. Even if they don't specifically pay for activities using benefits, they may pay for transport or equipment for instance.

Disabled people remain among the least active groups, with 41% participating in less than 30 minutes of activity a week.<sup>1</sup> Insight from Sport England 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%).<sup>2</sup>

Disabled people already face significantly higher cost extra costs, with research from Scope highlighting that to have an equal quality of life, households that include a Disabled person need £1,010 more income per month than households with no Disabled people.<sup>3</sup> Couple this with the rising cost of physical activity, for instance leisure centre fee rises by Southwark Council's seeing membership prices rise by over a third<sup>4</sup>, or transport expenses drastically rising for the poorest in society.<sup>5</sup> Or as Sport England has reported: facility providers are reporting concerns regarding increases in utility costs and are responding by reducing sessions and increasing fees.<sup>6</sup> And it becomes obvious how any impact on the financial support Disabled people receive will drive them to be less physically active, against a backdrop of increased economic hardship across the sector and its ancillary services.

# Increased Barriers to Job Access & Retention

Again, we note the green paper's focus on how cutting benefits will lead to increased work opportunities for Disabled people. It is incredibly unclear how the green paper will positively impact the 81% of Disabled people who don't feel they have opportunities to join the physical activity workforce.<sup>7</sup>

The DWP's own figures show that 41% of new successful claims for PIP in 2023 were from people who were in work, and this percentage has been increasing in recent years, from 29% in 2016.<sup>8</sup> In work claimants already face challenges in securing and maintaining employment due to accessibility issues, discrimination, and lack of workplace accommodations.<sup>9</sup> If they become less mobile or experience worsening health, they may struggle to meet job demands as we outlined above, even in roles they were previously able to perform.

PIP support in particular is being cut in the green paper, as from November 2026, the government says you will need to score at least 4 points from a single descriptor to qualify for the daily living component of PIP, as well as scoring a total of at least 8 points to get support from the Daily Living component. The OBR estimates that the estimated number of people who will lose the PIP daily living component is 800,000. This amounts to a minimum of £4,200 per year.

The negative effect on people leaving work if they lose out on PIP support will have serious negative consequences for the sport and physical activity sector where activity alliance's Annual Disability and Activity Survey 2023-24 found that just 17% of disabled people said they 'see people like me working in sport and physical activity.'<sup>10</sup>

We will likely see a reduction in the number of Disabled people working in the sector, as in the last time these cuts were attempted the OBR found that Conservative proposals on changing the work capability assessment would result in over 420,000 people being pushed into deeper poverty, whilst only 10,000 would find employment – the OBR has been unable to score positive impacts from the government's proposed changes.<sup>11</sup>

It is crucial to remember that the world of work consistently fails Disabled people. We face substantial barriers, especially in sectors such as sport and physical activity, because employers fail to provide accessible workplaces in which we could thrive. Research from the UK's largest union - Unison's research showed that '74% of disabled workers reported being refused some or all of the adjustments they need to do their job'.<sup>12</sup>

The Trade Union Congress equality audit in 2024 showed that the number of cases brought to local branches for disability discrimination of local branch discrimination has more than doubled since 2016 and now stands at over 50% of all cases.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, when considered the barriers that Disabled people face entering the physical activity sector and workforce – there is a lack of evidence that the £1 billion the government wants to bring in by the end of parliament (2029/30) will tangibly lead to Disabled people's employment levels.

Government programmes aimed at supporting Disabled people who access social security support into work remain ineffective at best – and there is little research that suggests the sport and physical activity sector would stand out as having better results.

The current gold standard employment support methodology for Disabled people, Individual Placement and Support (IPS) has, at best, only achieved 20% of people working for 13 weeks or more over 12 months. This was only 3.8 percentage points higher than the control group, which did not receive IPS. Worse still, this gold standard support had no significant impact on any group's overall earnings. Long-term IPS studies are few but do not indicate that IPS recipients permanently return to the workforce.<sup>14</sup>

There is nothing stopping Government from supporting Disabled people to work. This could be done with no changes to social security payments. But the Green Paper proposals also do not provide any additional funding for Access to Work, the flagship government programme providing funding for workplace adjustments (beyond what is required of employers), despite the expectation that the changes to the benefits system would lead to an increase in Disabled people moving into work.

Every Disabled person could be guaranteed support to get a job or stay in work. The Equality Act could be made tougher, with the Government challenging employers who do not comply with it. Pushing Disabled people into poverty does not incentivise work.





## Potential Impacts on the NHS

In 2019, the UK's chief medical officers reviewed the evidence base 2019 on physical activity and the general benefits of it for Disabled adults.<sup>15</sup> Their review found that concerning safety, no evidence exists that suggests appropriate physical activity is a risk for Disabled adults and that the health benefits for Disabled adults of engaging in physical activity were comparable with those for the rest of the adult population.

Nonetheless inequalities in physical activity participation are well documented, with a difference of more than 10 percentage points in the probability of being physically active between the most and the least deprived quartile of areas in England.<sup>16</sup> Research from 2025 by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has highlighted that more people receive social security for health issues and disability in these same areas<sup>17</sup> - highlighting how the green paper could impose further geographical disparities in activity levels for Disabled people, entrenching existing health inequalities.<sup>18</sup>

A key concern for GYA is that physical inactivity among Disabled people can lead to secondary health issues such as obesity, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and musculoskeletal problems. We know that musculoskeletal problems (MSK), many of which are worsened by a lack of access to physical activity, have been predicted by the OBR 2024 Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) to reach £100.7 billion by 2029/30<sup>19</sup>. Adding more barriers to Disabled people being physically active by removing their social security support will likely lead to a rise in the number of people who require support to manage these secondary health issues.<sup>20</sup>

The government's main argument hinges on the idea that rising social security costs are unmanageable for the UK economy. Ignoring the inaccuracy of this claim<sup>21</sup>, it is clear to us at GYA that we will see rising NHS costs that remove any fiscal "success" resulting from the benefit cuts. Likely, the increased hospital admissions and GP visits resulting from a rising prevalence of these preventable conditions would increase NHS costs, which are not factored into any of the green paper impact assessments. The think tank Demos has previously warned that physical inactivity of older people will cost the NHS more than £1.3bn by 2030.<sup>22</sup> Work by PDLR makes the NHS cost of rising inactivity clear: attributing 30 additional hospital admissions per 100,000 people attributable to physical inactivity.<sup>23</sup>

It is deeply concerning that the academic evidence suggests that Disabled people's health will get worse, increasing their reliance on an already under-resourced NHS – which will only compound the barriers our community experiences regarding getting appropriate health care.<sup>24</sup> We note that the Learning Disability Mortality Review (LeDeR), published in November 2023, found the median age of death was 62.9 years for people with a learning disability and 55 years for autistic people with a learning disability compared to the general population, where the median age at death was 86.1 years for females and 82.6 years for males.<sup>25</sup>

In this instance, previous research has found that avoidable deaths for people with a learning disability were often the result of poor healthcare, driven in part by overwhelming service demand rather than due to a lack of preventative measures.<sup>26</sup> The proposed green paper cuts will potentially drive a similar spike in demand.

# Greater Demand for Rehabilitation & Physiotherapy

Activity Alliance have previously noted that Disabled people who took part in our own research were less able to be active because of changes to their physical health<sup>27</sup>. And we know that for some people, a reduction in their physical activity can cause muscle weakness, joint stiffness, and loss of mobility,<sup>28</sup> this in turn can lead to greater reliance on physiotherapy and rehabilitation services.

Waiting lists for these services are already long, and increased demand could worsen delays. And it should be noted that waiting lists for treatment of MSK issues, such as back, neck, and knee pain, have grown by 27% since January 2024.<sup>29</sup> The DWP research highlights that 100,000s with back pain, arthritis and other MKSK conditions will lose PIP support.<sup>30</sup>

Recent NHS community health service figures reveal that 323,965 people were waiting for MSK treatment in March, a year-on-year increase of 33,257 or 11%, and 27% higher than the 254,521 people waiting in January 2023.<sup>31</sup> The active lives survey 2023 also notes an increasing correlation between inactivity levels and geographic location – with areas of the west-midlands showing the largest increases in activity levels.<sup>32</sup>

New research by Inclusion London which shows the areas of the country most affected by the proposed cuts, can be used to cross-reference that these geographic areas of growing inactivity are some of those that will be worst hit by the Green paper.<sup>33</sup> There is a serious concern that inactivity levels will increase, and the subsequent service quality will drastically differ across geographies, worsening geographic health inequalities.

# Higher Risk of Mental Ill-health and Distress

Almost half (45%) of UK adults feel that their mental health and wellbeing can be improved through physical activity<sup>34</sup>. Physical activity is often important for improved mental well-being. With the green paper reducing activity levels, we could see rates of mental ill-health, such as depression and anxiety rise, leading to increased demand for already overstretched NHS mental health services, where nearly 40,000 children experiencing waits of at least two years for support.<sup>35</sup>

Research shows that people severely affected by mental illness spend more of their time being inactive during the day in comparison to the general population.<sup>36</sup>

Social isolation due to reduced mobility can also further exacerbate loneliness, which is linked to higher risks of dementia and other cognitive decline. Research also suggests that greater social isolation in older men and women is related to reduced everyday objective physical activity and greater sedentary time - another worrying consequence of the green paper changes.<sup>37</sup>



## Increased Demand for Home Care & Personal Assistance

The National Care Forum say that many Disabled people use PIP to help pay for adult social care support and charges for care from local authorities.<sup>38</sup> Without the ability to stay active, more Disabled people may require personal care support for everyday tasks, such as dressing, bathing, and meal preparation.

Local authorities already struggle to fund social care, and increased demand could worsen the crisis in care provision. According to a BBC investigation, the average UK council faces a £33m deficit by 2025-26, a rise of 60% from £20m two years ago. Unison, the country's largest union, has warned that local authorities might be unable to offer Disabled people the "legal minimum of care"<sup>39</sup>. Increased demand on social care, resulting from the health implication of increased physical inactivity as previously discussed could worsen the crisis in care provision. The Centre for Welfare Reform has estimated that for every £1 cut from disability benefits, local authorities have to spend an additional £1.50 to make up the funding for services and support such as social care.<sup>40</sup>

There is a major concern that this unsustainable demand growth driven by the green paper could lead to more councils trying to prop up their social care provision by moving older and Disabled people, who currently live at home with care and support packages above a certain cost into residential settings. As Bristol City Council attempted last year preference for residential settings demonstrated a clear ignorance of the 2014 Care Act and established a worrying trend amongst councils, prioritising cost over our rights.

Even if we ignore this emerging area of troubling human rights violations, increased placements in residential care to meet someone's care needs will lead to further physical inactivity.

In fact, research shows that mobility loss can be imposed on care home residents against their will either explicitly through policies or as an outcome of poor staff practices and knowledge about the importance of physical activity.<sup>41</sup> This is another example of how ill-thought out the wider consequences of the green paper are.



## Impact on Carers & Family Members

If Disabled people become less independent due to increased physical inactivity, unpaid carers (often family members) may face increased responsibilities, leading to burnout and additional pressure on carer support services. Furthermore, over half of Carer's Allowance awards are tied to PIP as it is a gateway benefit for claiming carers allowance.<sup>42</sup>

The DWP's own impact assessment estimates that 150,000 unpaid carers will lose access to their carer benefits by 2029/30 as a result of the tightening of eligibility criteria in PIP.<sup>43</sup> Carers UK analysis shows that shows that families which lose eligibility to PIP and Carer's Allowance will stand to lose over £8,000 a year.<sup>44</sup>

As already explained, these cuts to people's support will also lower physical activity levels. This is not just a personal issue it has wider consequences for carers. The barriers to being physically active are already leaving carers in poorer health than the general population and Carers UK research found that unpaid carers over 55 face significant challenges being physically active despite wanting to be fitter.<sup>45</sup>

Their study, which focused on the experiences of people over 55 with unpaid caring responsibilities, found that this group is less active than other adults over 55. Nearly half (46%) of carers are inactive, compared with 33% of adults in this age bracket. And cost was found in 67% time to be a barrier. All of these issues will likely be exacerbated by the green paper measures.<sup>46</sup>

# Reduced Ability to Work Due to Worsening Health

The primary focus of the green paper has been stressing how cutting benefits will push more Disabled people into work. From a GYA perspective, we reject the implication that working is therapeutic or is a “cure” for impairment or ill-health. We are very worried that a reduction of physical activity, as a result of cuts, will lead to deteriorating health, increased pain, fatigue, and mobility issues, making it harder for Disabled people to work consistently. Around 300,000 people aged 16 to 64 who report having a work-limiting health condition leave the workforce each year, an interim report by the Commission for Healthier Working Lives, established by the Health Foundation. We are very concerned this number will increase as more people – especially those in work receiving PIP see their support being cut.<sup>47</sup>

Research shows that physical activity can have positive effects on mental well-being and could play a crucial role in mitigating burnout and improving job satisfaction, especially in high-stress jobs.<sup>48</sup> This correlates with the new research by the Health Foundation mentioned above – which found worsening mental health was a key driver of people leaving the workforce. A reduction in physical activity levels – driven by benefit cuts could lead to higher sickness absence rates, reduced productivity, and, in some cases, forced early retirement or job loss.





# What You Can Do



**Respond to the green paper** and voice your concern on how these changes will affect the activities you provide or groups you support.



**Write to your local MP** and make clear that these charges will affect the local community negatively.



**Review your charging policies** and ensure low-cost options are available for Disabled people to attend low-cost activities.



## Contact Us

If you wish to speak to us about the green paper, or learn more about how the proposals will affect your Disabled constituents please email: **[Michael.Erhardt@disabilityrightsuk.org](mailto:Michael.Erhardt@disabilityrightsuk.org)**

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# Footnotes

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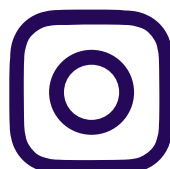
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