



Disability Rights UK

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# UK government's disability benefit cuts are cruel and unfair

We must unite against harmful cuts and work towards a society that values Disabled people as equal citizens, writes **Fazilet Hadi**

Fazilet Hadi *head of policy*

I have been a Disabled person since losing my sight in my teenage years. I wanted to hide my impairment at first. I felt anxious and uncomfortable and viewed it as a deficit. It took time for me to realise that I had internalised the ableist attitudes that surrounded me and that I had as much right as everyone else to exist and be accepted for who I am.

Ableism is powerful: it leads us to view Disabled people as “other” and “lesser.” We are neither; we make up 25% of the UK population and should be treated as equal citizens.<sup>1</sup> Society needs to redesign itself with us in mind. Successive governments frame our existence as a problem and have failed to ensure our inclusion. The current Labour government's blaming of disabled people for the country's economic failings and its proposed benefit cuts continue this pattern of framing us as the problem.

Disabled people have only recently been acknowledged as equal citizens. The first legislation upholding our right not to be discriminated against was passed just 30 years ago in 1995.<sup>2</sup> Not long ago we were routinely institutionalised, barred from education and employment, and denied access to information, transport, and the built environment. Progress has been made, but we continue to face barriers to inclusion.

The Disabled people's movement drove this progress. The movement fought for disability equality laws, the right to receive care and support in the community, the right to mainstream education and for additional support to enable work, and for benefits to help with the extra costs of disability. These advances have been life changing for millions of Disabled people.

However, the past 15 years have seen a systematic rolling back of the progress made in the 1990s and early 2000s. We have seen equality legislation being ignored, cuts to social security, inadequate health and social care services, the erosion of inclusive education, and persistent gaps in employment and pay between Disabled people and non-disabled people.<sup>3</sup> These inequalities have been exacerbated by the disproportionate effect of the covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing cost of living crisis.<sup>4,5</sup> Millions of Disabled people are living in poverty and struggling to meet living costs without sufficient money for food, energy, or medication.<sup>6</sup>

Within this grim context the UK government recently announced deep and broad cuts to disability benefits, totalling £5bn. The negative impact will be massive for Disabled people today and in the future. The government intends to cut the top-up health element of Universal Credit by almost £50 a week.<sup>7</sup> It also

plans to remove access to benefits that contribute towards the extra costs of disability from around 800 000 Disabled people and stop young Disabled people from claiming the health element of Universal Credit until they are 22.<sup>7</sup> These cuts will hit the poorest Disabled people hardest, reducing their incomes by thousands of pounds a year.

These government cuts are ruthless and heartless, pushing millions deeper into poverty. The cuts have no other purpose than to make the government's books balance. But it is unlikely that the cuts will even save the government money as costs will shift to health services, social care, and homelessness services. The government claims it is trying to fix a “broken benefits system,” but it is the hostile and discriminatory culture and systems that need to be fixed.

The cuts will not enable more Disabled people into employment. For Disabled people who want to work, accessible and flexible jobs often don't exist. We continue to experience negative and discriminatory attitudes from employers. Supporting Disabled people into work requires personalised employment support, improved strategies for retention, and more accessible and flexible jobs.

Instead of attacking Disabled people receiving social security payments, the government should be coproducing a strategy with Disabled people to tackle systemic inequalities, similar to the Disabled people's manifesto.<sup>8</sup> A disability strategy would tackle the root causes of discrimination through engagement and co-production with Disabled people, improving equality rights, increasing support for independence through benefits, education, and social care, and expanding inclusion through accessible housing, transport, information, and environments. The underlying reasons why many Disabled people live in poverty should be the focus of government action.

Disabled activists will protest these cruel benefit proposals. Every citizen should join us in opposing these cuts. Surely nobody wants to live in a society where we don't support Disabled people to live with dignity. Anyone can become a Disabled person or have a Disabled family member. It is in all our interests to build a society that embraces Disabled people as equal citizens.

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