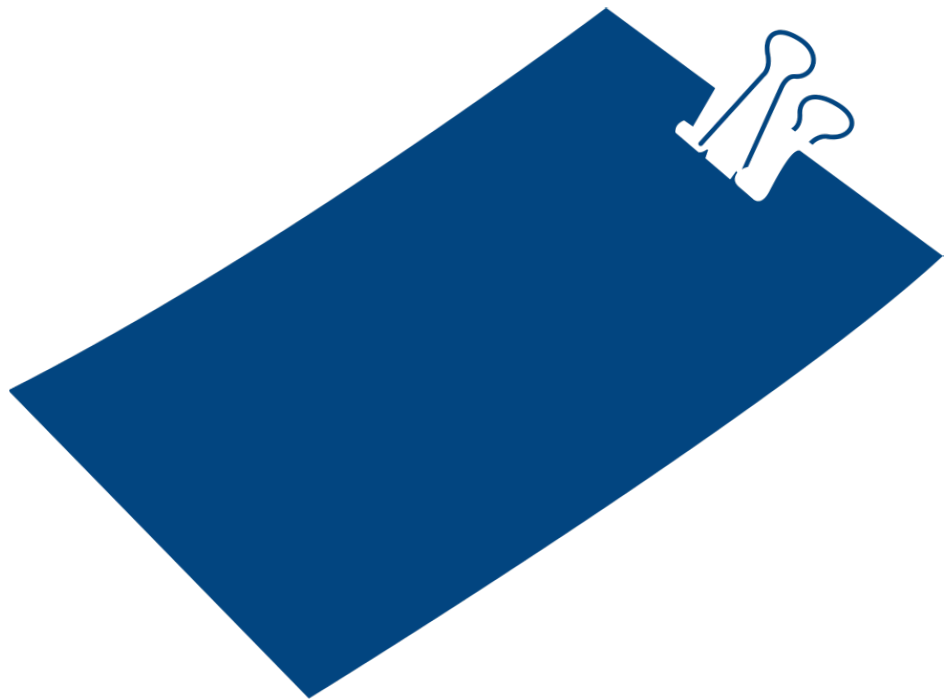


# Shut out of Work

How workplaces are excluding  
disabled people



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# Executive Summary

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Many of the disabled people we support are excluded from the labour market because workplaces remain inaccessible and unsupportive. Despite the Equality Act intending to protect disabled people from facing disadvantage at work, we helped 5,393 people with health-related employment discrimination in 2025. On average, this means every 1.5 hours our advisers help someone who has faced workplace discrimination due to their health.

What's more, health-related discrimination was the leading issue in our employment discrimination cases last year, making up more than half of cases.

As we outline in this report, the disabled people we help face barriers to work at every stage of the employment journey:

- When **searching** for jobs, they can struggle to find suitable roles that accommodate their health condition or disability.
- When **applying** for jobs, they are routinely met with bias and discrimination, which can lead to repeated rejections.
- When **in work**, getting the required flexibility and reasonable adjustments can be a big challenge and many report encountering stigmatising, misguided, and offensive attitudes about disability in the workplace.
- And when **trying to enforce their rights**, the current resolution process can be inaccessible and an ineffective way to support disabled people to stay in work.

Our frontline evidence exposes the current reality of the labour market for many disabled people, who are routinely shut out of employment. Our research also offers early indications of where interventions could help address these issues:

- **Greater support for disabled jobseekers.** Too often, disabled people are left trying to secure the workplace support and adjustments they need alone. We therefore urge the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to consider how it can make better use of the tools at its disposal to support disabled workers in accessing what they need. For example, by investing in Access to Work, and better utilising Disability Employment Advisers and Pathways to Work advisers so they liaise with employers and help disabled people secure workplace support and adjustments. We also

encourage exploration of how the Health Adjustment Passport could be expanded so that workers can take their existing passport to new employers, helping them to request the adjustments they need.

- **Greater support for employers.** In recognition of the fact that employers can face fiscal and capacity constraints to hiring disabled people, the Keep Britain Working review is right to acknowledge that targeted incentives such as employer tax relief and sick pay rebates will be needed to support employers in hiring disabled people. However, consideration should be given as to how these can be delivered as a more urgent priority.
- **Earlier resolution.** It's also essential that when disabled workers don't receive the support or adjustments they need and are entitled to at work, there are effective mechanisms so this can be resolved quickly. Key areas for consideration include how to deliver more proactive enforcement of the Equality Act; embed greater health and disability expertise within the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS); and speed up access to employment tribunals for people who want to stay in work.

# Introduction

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The barriers to work that disabled people<sup>1</sup> face are multiple and often overlapping. In many instances, people's health means work is not suitable or appropriate.<sup>2</sup> Other barriers can include caring responsibilities<sup>3</sup> - carers are more likely than non-carers to be disabled<sup>4</sup> - as well as their own care needs not being met,<sup>5</sup> a lack of effective training opportunities and employment support,<sup>6</sup> and work not providing adequate financial returns.<sup>7</sup> These barriers rarely exist in isolation from each other, and often interact in complex ways.

This paper will focus on the disabled people we help who want to move into work, but who face barriers to doing so because of inaccessible and unsupportive workplaces. As our frontline insights make clear, employers are still not doing enough to make workplaces accessible, inclusive, and supportive, while the government has failed to provide the structures and incentives needed to drive meaningful change.

*"We've dealt with clients whose employers have refused reasonable adjustments. We've had clients who have been refused flexible working. We've had clients whose employers display the 'absolutely positive about disability' slogan but don't live up to it and are institutionally discriminatory."* Citizens Advice adviser

Too often, research fails to capture how these workplace barriers play out at an individual level, how they overlap and compound one another, and how they ultimately lead to disabled people feeling shut out of work.

This report fills that gap by drawing on our client data and evidence from our network of frontline advisers, as well as interview data from people supported by Citizens Advice Somerset, to show that many disabled people remain

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<sup>1</sup> In this report, we use the term disabled people to refer to those who are disabled, have long-term health conditions, and impairments that affect their day-to-day life.

<sup>2</sup> Department for Work and Pensions (2025) [Work aspirations and support needs of health and disability customers: Final findings report](#).

<sup>3</sup> Slaughter H, Stone I (2025) [Don't forget about us: How disabilities and caring responsibilities affect low-to-middle income Britain](#), Resolution Foundation.

<sup>4</sup> Carers UK (2025) Facts about carers (last updated March 2025).

<sup>5</sup> Ian Porter (2024) [Unlocking benefits: Tackling barriers for disabled people wanting to work](#), Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

<sup>6</sup> Ian Porter (2024) [Unlocking benefits: Tackling barriers for disabled people wanting to work](#), Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

<sup>7</sup> Becca Stacey (2025) [Making Work Pay for Disabled People](#), Citizens Advice.

excluded from work because of poor employer practices. It also provides initial insights into where interventions could help address this.

# Barriers applying for jobs

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The disabled people we support face a range of barriers to applying for jobs compared to their non-disabled counterparts. From a lack of suitable roles, to bias and discrimination at the recruitment stage, many can feel shut out of work.

## Lack of accessible roles and opportunities

We frequently hear from people who struggle to find suitable employment in their local area that accommodates their health condition or disability. Disabled people disproportionately work in lower paid, insecure roles such as hospitality, caring or retail work.<sup>8</sup> These kinds of roles tend to be more physically demanding and are less likely to offer workplace adjustments. Unlike office work, they can't usually be done from home.

One reason disabled people are overrepresented in lower-paid roles is because they have lower level qualifications, on average, than non-disabled people. Only a quarter (27.1%) have a degree or equivalent qualification, compared to 42.2% of non-disabled people.<sup>9</sup> As in the workplace, disabled people face barriers to succeeding in school and education settings.<sup>10</sup> They may also struggle to access opportunities such as work experience or internships which can be crucial for securing professional or managerial positions. This can limit their career options.

Regional factors are also at play. Disabled people living in rural areas may be less able to access office-based roles. In some areas there's a higher concentration of jobs in sectors such as manufacturing, care work, and hospitality: industries where people face particular difficulty getting the workplace adjustments they need. The DWP's own work coaches have said they're struggling to find employers who can accommodate disabled people and get them into work.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Department for Work and Pensions (2025) [The employment of disabled people 2025](#).

<sup>9</sup> Department for Work and Pensions (2025) [The employment of disabled people 2025](#).

<sup>10</sup> Office for Students (2025) [One size doesn't fit all: Equality of opportunity for disabled students](#).

<sup>11</sup> Phil Leake and Munaza Rafiq (2025) [Stretched job centre staff struggling to get disabled people into work](#), BBC News.

## Zaria's\* Story

Zaria is unemployed and homeless. Zaria's physical health condition means she struggles to do physical work, but the majority of the jobs available in her area are physically demanding roles in factories. Zaria is registered with different employment agencies, but many factories have refused her work due to her health condition. She's also not had any useful help from the jobcentre in finding more suitable work. Zaria came to us for help accessing the Household Support Fund because she's struggling to survive on her limited income.

\*All names have been changed

Our advisers also tell us that there aren't enough jobs that offer the flexibility many disabled people need. The majority of those who are currently in receipt of health and disability benefits who want to work, are looking for part-time roles with the option of working from home.<sup>12</sup> These types of roles can better support people to manage their health condition or disability alongside work. For example, part-time and flexible working arrangements can allow individuals to pace themselves, take breaks when needed, and work during times of the day when they feel most able to. Remote work also reduces barriers such as travel, physical accessibility challenges, and the stress that can come from demanding environments.

While all employees have the legal right to request flexible working, and a request can be made from someone's first day in a job, the disabled people we support can often face barriers to applying to roles because it's not explicitly clear whether there's scope for flexible working in the job adverts.

*"I would really like a part-time job [...] but most of the jobs I look at are full-time and I don't know whether people are willing to adapt as in doing a job share or a part time version of the job [...] it would make it a lot easier for me [if I could have] flexible hours, part-time hours, hybrid working or work from home."* - Citizens Advice client

Research also shows how challenging it can be getting flexible working arrangements in place at the start of a role, even where this should be possible.

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<sup>12</sup> Department for Work and Pensions (2025) [Work aspirations and support needs of health and disability customers: Final findings report](#).



Employers can be less willing to implement these until someone has already been in the role and proven their abilities. For example, 9.4% of new starters in a job are able to work with flexi-time, but this rises to 12.9% of those who have been in their job for two years or more.<sup>13</sup>

The challenges of finding flexible work is made clear when using the government's own job search system. Of the 113,487 jobs posted on the platform in September 2025, only 4% were listed as hybrid or remote (3,990), and 1% as fully remote (729).<sup>14</sup> It can be very hard, therefore, for disabled people to find a role that can be flexed to suit their required working arrangements.

## **Discrimination at the recruitment stage**

The Equality Act protects disabled people from discrimination by making it unlawful to treat them less favorably because of their disability, including in employment. According to the Act, employers generally can't refuse a role to someone on the basis of their disability. An employer can only reject a disabled candidate if their disability prevents them from performing the essential functions of the job, even after all reasonable adjustments have been made, and they can objectively justify why the decision was made.<sup>15</sup> However, we support people like Jena, who receive no justification for the withdrawal of a job offer.

### **Jena's\* Story**

Jena applied for a job in September and received an offer to start in January. However, they were hospitalised in December due to a deterioration in their mental health. After being discharged in January, they underwent an occupational health assessment with their new employer to determine their fitness to work. Although this process took several months, they were eventually deemed fit to work. Despite this, HR informed Jena that additional medical information was needed before proceeding, and they were asked to provide reports from both their GP and mental health specialist at their Community Hospital. There was a delay in obtaining the required medical

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<sup>13</sup> Ben Baumberg Geiger and Louise Murphy (2025) [Opening doors: How to incentivise employers to create more opportunities for disabled workers](#), Resolution Foundation.

<sup>14</sup> <https://findajob.dwp.gov.uk/search> - search conducted 01/10/2025, and 'jobs posted in the last 30 days' was selected.

<sup>15</sup> Citizens Advice, [What counts as disability discrimination](#).

information from the hospital, and Jena was informed that the employer was withdrawing the job offer.

\*All names have been changed

## Repeated rejections

We also support many people who feel that their disability was the underlying reason they were refused a role, but can struggle to prove this because an alternate reason was given by their employer or no reason at all.

*"They had a preference for someone else. I wasn't sure whether there was a genuine thing there or whether there was a sort of an unconscious bias. They did say in the telephone conversation when they called me back, that they know I've had a career break. So that just unconsciously knocks me back a couple of points."*- Citizens Advice client

It's important to recognise that it's not just bias and discrimination that mean disabled people are rejected from roles. Employers can also face fiscal and capacity constraints to hiring disabled people, which can lead to them rejecting such applicants. For example, employers who face barriers in supporting disabled employees cite a lack of capital to invest in support (46%) and a lack of time or staff resource (39%) as the most significant barriers.<sup>16</sup> This can be particularly true in small and medium-sized enterprises, who account for 60% of the UK workforce.<sup>17</sup>

One scheme designed to help employers cover the extra costs they may face when hiring a disabled person is Access to Work.<sup>18</sup> Disabled employees can apply for this government grant, which can provide specialist equipment, support with transport, and other help such as paying for specialist support workers. However, the scheme has long waiting lists and the focus of the questions in the Pathways to Work green paper suggests the DWP are looking to

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<sup>16</sup> Department for Work and Pensions (2025) [DWP Employer Survey 2024](#).

<sup>17</sup> Department for Business & Trade (2024) [Business population estimates for the UK and regions 2024: statistical release](#).

<sup>18</sup> We are producing an upcoming briefing which will provide more detail on how and why the Access to Work system must be improved.

reduce the amount of support available, rather than expand the impact of the scheme.<sup>19</sup>

We agree with the DWP that too few disabled workers receive Access to Work support. As it stands, the scheme supports around 1% of working disabled people.<sup>20</sup> However, we disagree that the way to maximise its impact and reach is to, as the green paper implies, reduce the support Access to Work provides to workers. Stripping back a vital scheme that enables many disabled people to access work is directly at odds with the government's intention of getting more disabled people into work. Instead, we suggest the government focuses on how it can invest in and better utilise this scheme to ensure more disabled people and their employers can access timely and sufficient support to cover the cost of reasonable adjustments employers themselves can't afford.

It's important to recognise, however, that Access to Work can't cover all extra costs an employer may face - such as higher than average levels of sick leave for employees with certain health conditions.

*"If you're a very small organisation and you're basically working on a skeleton crew, if that person's [off sick] then how are you going to afford, for example, agency fees of another worker? So there needs to be some kind of incentive where if you're a small employer there's a pot or fund that you can tap into."* - Citizens Advice adviser

In recognition of this, we support the Keep Britain Working review's acknowledgement that targeted incentives such as employer tax relief and sick pay rebates will be needed to support employers in hiring disabled people.<sup>21</sup> Our concern, however, is that these incentives are being introduced with unnecessary delay.

There are three stages of the Keep Britain Working review: a three-year Vanguard Phase for testing new ideas, an Expansion phase for rolling out changes and incentives, and a final General Adoption phase where the new standards become the norm. In the first phase, self-selected employer vanguards will work with the government to trial and refine new practices, building the evidence base for broader implementation. It's not until the

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<sup>19</sup> Department for Work and Pensions (2025) [Pathways to Work: Reforming Benefits and Support to Get Britain Working Green Paper](#).

<sup>20</sup> Department for Work and Pensions (2025) [Pathways to Work: Reforming Benefits and Support to Get Britain Working Green Paper](#).

<sup>21</sup> Keep Britain Working Review (2025) [Final Report](#).

expansion phase kicks in that incentives will be introduced to encourage more employers to adopt new standards. Given the significant challenges that many of the disabled people we support already face with employers, we believe this should be treated as a more immediate priority.

And with any incentive, the key will be to make sure they are adequately targeted at the organisations who actually need this support. Funds should be provided to organisations who want to do better, but genuinely aren't able to afford to. Other measures, such as financial penalties, may also be needed to encourage larger companies who fail to hire and support disabled workers, despite having the means to.

# Barriers getting flexibility and reasonable adjustments

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For the disabled people we support, a lack of accessible jobs combined with repeated rejections, can make applying for work very challenging. Even once a job offer is secured, however, people can face further barriers to getting the flexibility and reasonable adjustments they need.

Flexible working arrangements are policies that give employees more control over when, where, and how they work to better suit their needs. Common examples include flexitime, which adjusts start and finish times; compressed hours, where people work their total contracted hours over fewer days; remote or hybrid working, which involves working from home or a combination of home and office; and part-time work. An employer must accept a flexible working request unless there is a legitimate reason not to.

While all employees can request flexible working arrangements, disabled people also have the right to reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act.

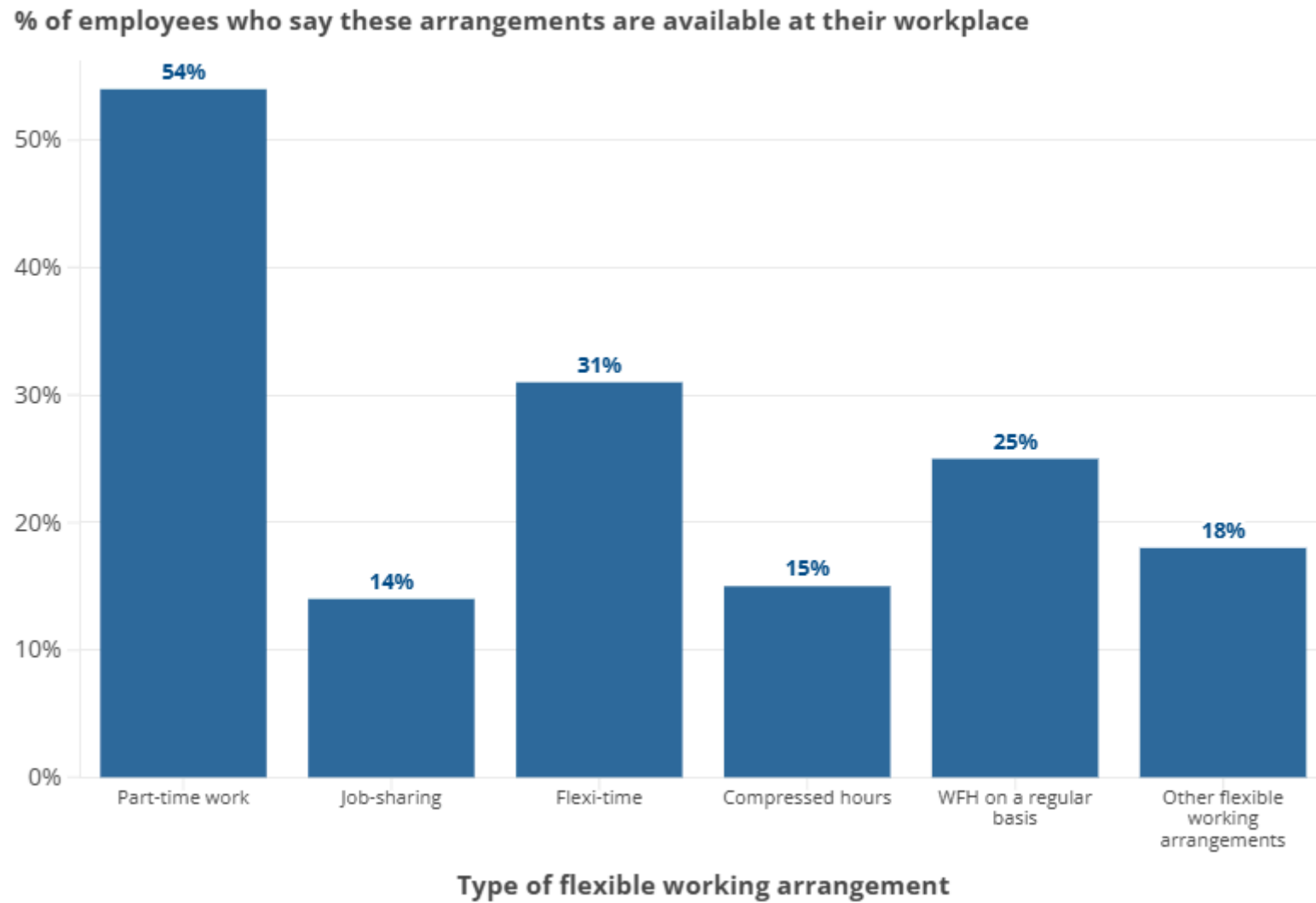
Reasonable adjustments are changes an employer makes to remove or reduce a disadvantage related to someone's disability. Certain flexible working arrangements can also be reasonable adjustments - for example adjusting someone's working hours so a disabled person can better manage their condition alongside work. Other reasonable adjustments can include things like providing technology to support someone with their dyslexia, or changing the layout of an office to make it wheelchair accessible. Different people, even with the same disability or health condition, may need different kinds of adjustments. An employer can only refuse a reasonable adjustment if implementing it would have a negative impact on a business or it's not feasible for an employer to do so.

## Limited access to flexible working arrangements

Flexible working arrangements help ensure that people with short-term health conditions, or conditions that do not meet the Equality Act definition of disability (and therefore do not qualify them for reasonable adjustments), can still access the arrangements they need to work effectively.

However, our analysis of Understanding Society - a multi-topic household survey - demonstrates that too few workers have access to flexible working arrangements. For example, as of 2023, only 54% of working age people were in roles where part-time work was available. 14% were in roles where job-sharing - when two or more people split one full-time position - was available. 31% were in roles where flexi-time was available. 15% were in roles where compressed hours were available. And 25% were in roles where work from home was available on a regular basis.

**Figure 1: Many workers still don't have access to flexible working arrangements**



*Citizens Advice analysis of Wave 14 (Jan 2022 - Dec 2023) of Understanding Society.*

It's clear that we are still some way from ensuring that workers have consistent, routine access to flexible working arrangements - arrangements that could make work more accessible and easier to manage for people with shorter-term conditions or conditions that do not meet the Equality Act's definition of disability.

## **Requesting reasonable adjustments**

While people who qualify as disabled under the Equality Act are able to request flexible working arrangements as a reasonable adjustment, it can be difficult for the disabled people we help to know they have this right, feel able to utilise it, and to know what adjustments to ask for when flexibility is not routinely offered in their workplace.

6 in 10 disabled workers (59%) have not requested a reasonable adjustment at work. Among those who haven't, only just over half (53%) said this was because they didn't need one.<sup>22</sup> This shows that many disabled people are missing out on the adjustments they need to fully access and participate in work.

The disabled people we support can fear the repercussions of asking for a reasonable adjustment. For example, one of our clients - who has mobility issues due to having had polio - was worried he might be fired if he requested regular breaks to prevent him from needing to stand for long periods of time. Trades Union Congress (TUC) research shows that 17% of disabled workers who haven't made a request for reasonable adjustments haven't done so because they felt uncomfortable making a request, and 14% didn't because they didn't think their employer would accept it.<sup>23</sup>

There are a number of tools at the DWP's disposal that they could better utilise to support more disabled people to request and secure the adjustments that they need.

For example, we believe the DWP could better utilise Disability Employment Advisers - who are specialist advisers at jobcentres who help people with disabilities or health conditions find and stay in employment, and the new Pathways to Work advisers - existing jobcentre staff who have been redeployed

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<sup>22</sup> Quinn Roache (2025) [Keep Britain working: an independent review into the role of employers in health and disability](#), Trades Union Congress.

<sup>23</sup> Quinn Roache (2025) [Keep Britain working: an independent review into the role of employers in health and disability](#), Trades Union Congress.



to act as specialist advisers for people with Limited Capability for Work and Work Related Activity. These roles should play a more proactive role in liaising with employers and advocating for disabled jobseekers, to ensure more disabled people get the adjustments they need. Suggestions on the steps they could take include:

- supporting employers to job-carve roles<sup>24</sup> for disabled applicants;
- supporting individuals to identify the reasonable adjustments they might need, and helping them to request these;
- supporting individuals to apply for Access to Work where the required adjustments are not reasonable;
- and continuing to routinely check-in with disabled people who have moved into work, to ensure support is in place to keep them in employment.

Another tool the DWP could better utilise is the existing Health Adjustment Passport. As it stands, a Health Adjustment Passport is a live document that records agreed-upon support and changes for a disabled employee to help them at work. It serves as a guide for consistent communication and implementation of adjustments, ensuring an employee can function to their full potential and reducing the need to repeatedly discuss needs when a manager changes. The passport is a confidential tool that the employee controls and can share with relevant parties, such as a manager or HR. We believe that as well as it being used internally by a worker and their employer, there is also scope for exploring how this could be expanded so that workers can take their existing passport to new employers, helping them to request and access the adjustments they need.

## **Securing reasonable adjustments**

Many disabled workers also find that their employer is unwilling to implement reasonable adjustments. The concept of what is a 'reasonable' adjustment will look different for different employers and this flexibility enables some employers to push back against requests. One of the most common health-related employment discrimination issues we support on, is a failure to make reasonable adjustments. And this is not just isolated to those we help - a TUC survey found that over one in ten (11%) of disabled workers have had their

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<sup>24</sup> This can include redesigning an existing job around the needs of an individual employee with a specific disability.

reasonable adjustment requests refused,<sup>25</sup> and less than half of disabled workers who request a reasonable adjustment have this granted in full.<sup>26</sup>

Many reasonable adjustment requests don't come with a cost, and are as much about employers adapting a worker's hours, working patterns, or location. Despite this, we regularly see employers refuse such reasonable adjustment requests, as was the case with Maksim and Alwin's employers. In the case of Alwin, their reasonable adjustment request was conflated with a flexible working request, despite being classed as disabled under the Equality Act.

### **Maksim's\* Story**

Maksim has a range of health conditions. This meant Maksim struggled to do his usual working pattern of 9-5. Maksim put in a reasonable adjustment request to work from 6-2 instead, in line with advice from an occupational health practitioner, but his manager refused this. They said he would need to keep working 9-5, or reduce his work to 20 hours a week. Maksim's manager also made a lot of cruel and inappropriate comments, such as 'you should be grateful I am keeping you in a job' and 'if you want to go down the medical dismissal route, you can do that'.

\*All names have been changed

### **Alwin's\* Story**

Alwin needs to work morning shifts due to their health condition. Their current hours are 5pm to 9pm, but they wanted to change this to 9am to 1pm. Their GP provided a supporting letter for this reasonable adjustment request, but their employer treated this request as a standard flexible working request. Alwin was called to a flexible working meeting, during which their health needs were barely addressed. Their employer said the change is not possible and also asked Alwin to work on Saturdays, despite Alwin having said they're not

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<sup>25</sup> Quinn Roache (2025) [Keep Britain working: an independent review into the role of employers in health and disability](#), Trades Union Congress.

<sup>26</sup> Ben Baumberg Geiger and Louise Murphy (2025) [Opening doors: How to incentivise employers to create more opportunities for disabled workers](#), Resolution Foundation.

able to work weekends. Citizens Advice sent a letter to Alwin's employer outlining their legal responsibilities, but this was ignored.

\*All names have been changed

We also see instances where employers have said they'll provide a reasonable adjustment, but then never do, as Aran experienced.

### **Aran's\* Story**

Aran experiences seizures as a result of his epilepsy and cerebral palsy. He has worked for his employer for 10 years, and in 2023 took on a new role. His employer said they would make reasonable adjustments so that Aran could carry out this new role. These included an SOS bracelet, an assessment for a desk, text to speak software and a chair with arms. But his employer never provided these adjustments. What's more, his workload became very stressful after 2 colleagues left and his employer didn't replace them. The pressure caused him to have more frequent seizures, and occupational health had to sign him off as sick.

\*All names have been changed

One reason for this failure to provide reasonable adjustments may be a misunderstanding by employers, or managers within organisations, around their obligations to disabled people. Our advisers tell us that disabled workers are often told they can't be given 'special treatment' as this would be unfair towards other workers. This suggests a fundamental misunderstanding of what fair treatment for disabled people should look like, as given in the Equality Act.

*"It's just that unwillingness to implement flexibility, because you'll have a manager who says 'it's not fair that you'd like to work from home when everyone else has to be in the office at least two times a week' [...] And when you point out 'yes, but this person has a disability and under the law, you can make reasonable adjustments. You can't line them up with everybody else'. Generally, you'll still find that [...] they'd rather get rid of them and give them compensation than try and adjust the situation or even make any kind of adjustments." - Citizens Advice adviser*

Another barrier to disabled people getting required adjustments, is limited access to good-quality occupational health services. Occupational health advisers can help people identify and get the reasonable adjustments they need, but only 45% of workers had access to occupational health through their work in 2023, and many of the employers who do invest are still underspending. One in 10 large employers spend no more than £1,000 per year on occupational health – and so average, at most, £4 per employee.<sup>27</sup>

What's more, those working for smaller companies have lower access to occupational health. A 2024 DWP survey<sup>28</sup> found that, while 90% of large employers (those with 250+ staff) offered occupational health services to employees, just 23% of small and medium-sized enterprises - which employ 60% of the UK workforce<sup>29</sup> - did the same.

A key part of disabled people getting the reasonable adjustments they need, therefore, is improving access to good-quality occupational health.<sup>30</sup>

However, our advisers also tell us that even where recommendations are made by occupational health practitioners, employers sometimes “cherry pick” which recommendations they implement.

*“The employer will say ‘Okay, let's have an occupational report.’ They'll do that first and then when it comes back and it's not to their liking, they don't go, ‘Okay, I'll implement this recommendation’. [Instead] they'll make some excuse. They'll delay it. They won't respond to it. And what we find is that it's kind of like a tickbox exercise because their policy says that they have to go through it. [...] it gets to the point where our clients get so stressed that to them their options are like, ‘what? Is there even any point in me being here?’ They're getting signed off sick because they just can't deal with the stresses of the workplace anymore.” - Citizens Advice adviser*

We therefore believe there'd be merit in the government exploring how it could put greater requirements on employers to conduct an occupational health

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<sup>27</sup> Sasjkia Otto (2025) [Nye's Lost Legacy: Towards a National Occupational Health Service to Keep People Well in Work](#), Fabian Society.

<sup>28</sup> Sasjkia Otto (2025) [Nye's Lost Legacy: Towards a National Occupational Health Service to Keep People Well in Work](#), Fabian Society.

<sup>29</sup> Department for Business & Trade (2024) [Business population estimates for the UK and regions 2024: statistical release](#).

<sup>30</sup> Sasjkia Otto (2025) [Nye's Lost Legacy: Towards a National Occupational Health Service to Keep People Well in Work](#), Fabian Society.

report if requested by a worker, and to accept and implement what's written in an occupational health report.

# Persistently poor attitudes about disability

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Difficulty getting the flexibility and adjustments they need isn't the only barrier disabled people face at work. Many of the disabled people we help still report encountering stigmatising, misguided, and offensive attitudes about disability in the workplace. These experiences can make it much harder for someone to talk about or disclose their disability, and therefore to access the support they need. They can also lead to lower levels of job satisfaction among disabled employees.

## Disability stigma

Too many of the disabled people we help still struggle with employers who lack adequate understanding about different disabilities and health conditions, and how to support workers with these. In some instances, this can manifest in stigma, judgement, and discrimination.

*"I don't think a lot of the employers actually realise how many people have got a disability. Like my partner's got a mental disability, but we've sort of got that under control with tablets from the doctor...but the jobs that they had, I don't think the people that they've worked for really understand their problem."* - Citizens Advice client

*"As you're going up the ladder into the area manager, the regional manager, I think they need more training on disability and discrimination because they do discriminate quite a lot against disabled and ill people."* - Citizens Advice client

These fears are unsurprising when you look at the experiences of the disabled people we support whose employers have made judgements about their capacity. In the case of Mariela, this led to her employer discriminating against her, by refusing her access to certain tasks and working hours. This decision was founded in misconceptions about Mariela's capacity, as opposed to her actual ability to undertake the role.

### **Mariela's\* Story**

Mariela is currently employed full-time stacking shelves. She has limited mobility following an accident, but despite this, feels able and has continued to work full-time in her current role. Mariela is now facing formal action from her employer, who claims she's no longer capable of performing her duties competently due to her reduced mobility. As a result, they've proposed moving her to a part-time role as a till operator. Mariela was given only three days' notice to consider this offer and was told that if she didn't accept the new arrangement, she may lose her job. If she accepted the reduced hours, her take-home pay would drop significantly, leaving her with a substantial shortfall. Mariela's employer also made comments implying that, with the increase in the National Minimum Wage, employees are now expected to work more efficiently. Mariela believes these remarks reflect a lack of understanding of how her disability affects her, and Mariela is keen to continue working in her current role full-time.

\*All names have been changed

We have also supported people where disability stigma, and misconceptions around someone's capacity, has led to them being unfairly dismissed from work. Under the Equality Act, an employer must not make someone redundant, dismiss them or discipline them just because they're disabled. Nor should they force someone to retire or resign because of their disability. The only time a dismissal might be justified, is if the person cannot do their job after an employer has tried everything to remove all the barriers they face, there are no other suitable roles the employer can offer as a reasonable adjustment, and there is no other way the work can be done. Despite this, we still support people like Irene, who lose their jobs because of inaccurate perceptions about disability.

### **Irene's\* Story**

Irene worked as a childcare assistant through an agency. Irene has an amputated limb. The agency posted a job which Irene accepted. Irene arrived early and dropped their things in the staff room. They were then told to get their belongings again, and that the agency would call them. The agency told them they were concerned about their health at the work placement. The nursery staff had called the agency to say they did not want them there. The agency then blocked their account so that they cannot book any more shifts. Irene was not paid for that shift.

\*All names have been changed

We also support disabled people who have been subject to harassment at work because of their disability. It is especially concerning when employers either carry out the harassment themselves, or are aware of it happening, yet take no action - as was the case for Leni.

### **Leni's\* Story**

Leni is autistic, and experienced ongoing harassment in the workplace due to his co-workers knowing he is autistic. His co-workers verbally and physically assaulted him on multiple occasions. They agreed to meet with Leni at specific times but deliberately failed to show up, hid Leni's personal belongings, and regularly excluded Leni from important project communications and developments. This created a hostile and unsafe working environment for Leni. Leni made his employer aware of the issues, and his former supervisor encouraged him to formally report the incidents. Although his employer initially stated that they would provide support, no meaningful action was taken to address the concerns or prevent further incidents. These experiences led to Leni feeling like he had no choice but to resign. Leni has since started legal action.

\*All names have been changed



## Challenges disclosing a disability

It's unsurprising in light of this that some disabled people choose not to disclose their disability to their employer. A TUC survey shows that one in five (20%) disabled workers haven't told their employer or supervisor about their disability, impairment, or long-term health condition. Almost six in 10 (56%) didn't tell their employer because they were worried about the repercussions, including concern that their employer would think they could not do their job, they might lose their job, they would be treated unfairly, and their employer might tell their colleagues.<sup>31</sup>

To have grounds to claim disability discrimination, an employer generally needs to know or could reasonably be expected to know about someone's disability. However, disabled people face significant barriers when considering whether to disclose their disability to an employer, including fear of discrimination, stigma, prejudice, and negative impacts on career progression and job security, as well as concerns about privacy and potential resentment from colleagues.<sup>32</sup>

The people we help can therefore face a double-edged sword: risk facing a negative response from their employer if they disclose their disability, or risk not being legally protected from disability discrimination if they don't.

## Job satisfaction

Considering these challenges disabled people face in work, it's hardly surprising that, as our analysis of Understanding Society shows, working-age disabled people are 7 percentage points less likely to be satisfied with their job compared to their non-disabled counterparts (54% vs. 61% respectively).<sup>33</sup>

A similar pattern occurs when we look at how disabled workers vs. non disabled workers compare across a range of negative emotions relating to work. In all instances, disabled people are more likely to feel negatively towards their job most or all of the time, than non-disabled workers.

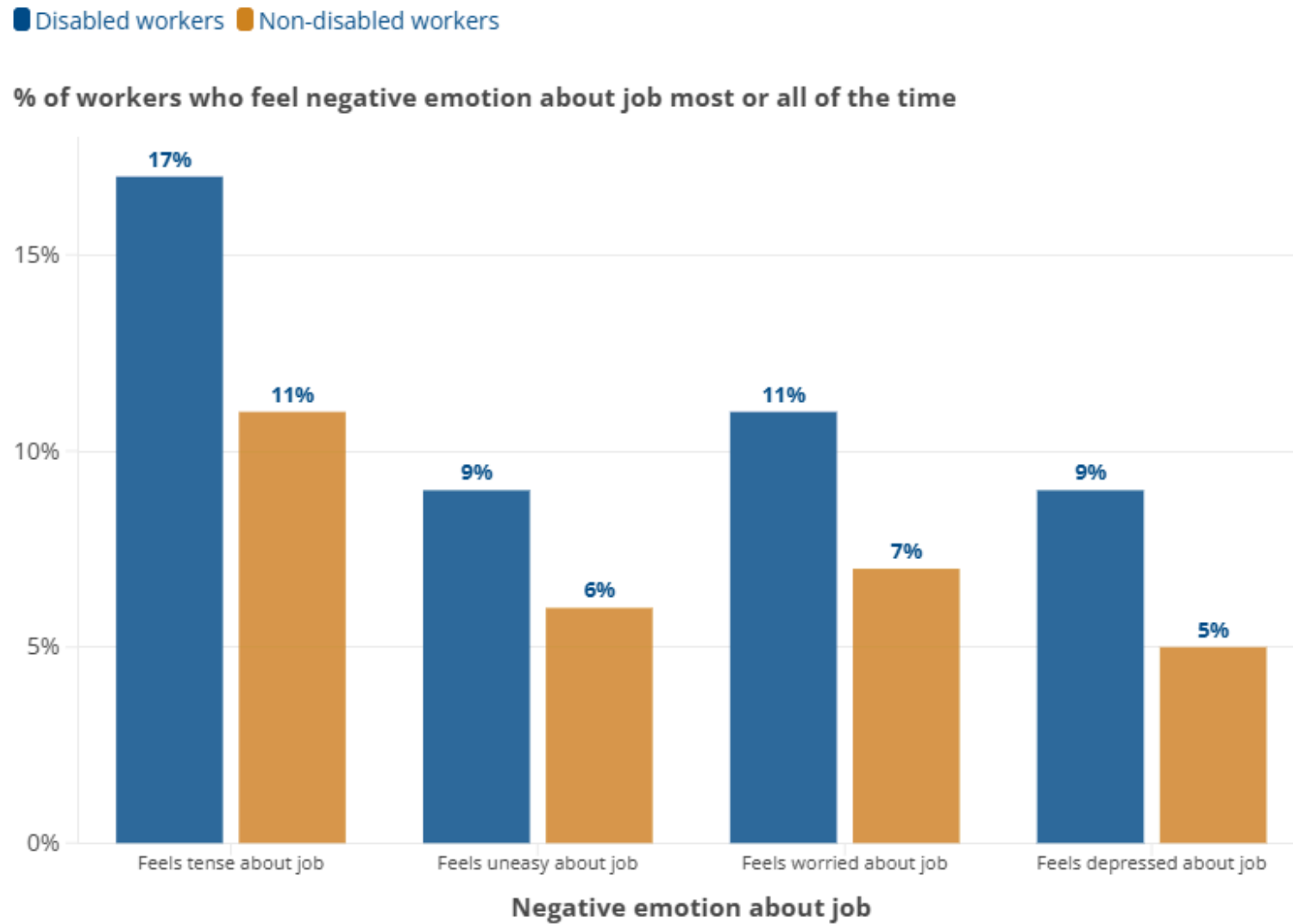
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<sup>31</sup> Quinn Roache (2025) [Keep Britain working: an independent review into the role of employers in health and disability](#), Trades Union Congress.

<sup>32</sup> Amy Worgan (2025) [Supporting Employees to Disclose a Disability in the Workplace](#), Celebrating Disability.

<sup>33</sup> Citizens Advice analysis of wave 14 of Understanding Society. Combines completely or mostly satisfied.

**Figure 3: Disabled workers are more likely to have negative feelings towards their job**



*Citizens Advice analysis of Wave 14 (Jan 2022 - Dec 2023) of Understanding Society.*

There will be a variety of different reasons why someone feels negatively about their work. But for many of the disabled people we help, it's clear that the inability to have the flexibility and adjustments they need, while feeling unable to talk more openly about and get the support they require with their disability, has a significant impact on their experience at work and the way they feel towards it.

Given the toll that poor work can take on people's health,<sup>34</sup> and the increased likelihood that disabled people are working in roles that they feel negatively towards, it's unsurprising that 26% of disabled people have had a job that has made their disability or illness worse.<sup>35</sup>

Not only are these negative experiences at work more likely to push disabled people out of the labour market, but they can also deepen the barriers they then face to re-entering it. We regularly support people who, having had previous negative experiences in the workplace, have lost the confidence to return to work.

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<sup>34</sup> Edward Pemberton and Emily Lynn E (2025) [Economic activity and health inequalities: how labour market experiences sustain health inequalities](#), Citizens Advice.

<sup>35</sup> Citizens Advice analysis of wave 14 of Understanding Society.

# Challenges getting timely resolution

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Despite the Equality Act being there to protect people against disability discrimination, we still support a concerning number of people with health-related employment discrimination. In 2025, 5,393 people came to us for help with health-related employment discrimination. On average, this means every 1.5 hours our advisers help someone who has faced workplace discrimination due to their health.

What's more, health-related discrimination was the leading issue in our employment discrimination cases last year, making up more than half of cases.

More widely, discrimination also remains a pressing issue, with 15% of disabled people reporting workplace discrimination relating to their disability in 2022.<sup>36</sup>

Currently, when things go wrong at work and discrimination occurs, too many disabled people struggle to get an effective resolution and are left with no other option but to take their employer to an employment tribunal. Litigation should not be the primary way to resolve workplace problems. To help disabled people remain in employment, it is vital that earlier methods of resolution are more accessible and impactful.

## Issues with the current formal resolution process

Currently, less than 1% of those experiencing disability discrimination take the first step towards raising a disability discrimination claim.<sup>37</sup> Barriers to challenging discrimination in the workplace include: the complexity of the process, the time limits for raising a claim, limited access to advice and support, the potential costs, and the fear of impacting future employment.

### The process for challenging an employer

The process for challenging an employer is long and convoluted:

- It is good practice to first lodge a formal grievance with the employer, allowing them the opportunity to respond to the issue.

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<sup>36</sup> Ben Baumberg Geiger and Louise Murphy (2025) [Opening doors: How to incentivise employers to create more opportunities for disabled workers](#), Resolution Foundation.

<sup>37</sup> Ben Baumberg Geiger and Louise Murphy (2025) [Opening doors: How to incentivise employers to create more opportunities for disabled workers](#), Resolution Foundation.

- You have to contact ACAS before you can submit a claim to the employment tribunal. ACAS helps resolve disputes between employers and employees by supporting the parties to attempt to reach a settlement before proceeding to tribunal. You don't have to enter into conciliation, though. If you don't want to try to resolve the situation or can't because your employer isn't engaging in the process, ACAS will issue an early conciliation certificate and a tribunal claim can be made.
- After you have contacted ACAS, you can then submit a claim to the employment tribunal.

Not only is the process for challenging an employer complex, it can also be lengthy. The average time between someone receiving their employment tribunal claim and their first hearing can be nearly a year.<sup>38</sup> Discrimination claims can often take a lot longer by the time the final hearing and judgement is provided. For some, taking a case all the way to tribunal isn't worth the prolonged strain it can place on their lives. Especially for disabled people who have already been mistreated or bullied, and who are too worn down as a result to cope with an employment tribunal.

### The barrier time limits present

For an individual to challenge their employer under the Equality Act, the act in question must have occurred within three months of someone commencing ACAS early conciliation. Many of the people we help, like Divya, face a lot of financial and emotional strain immediately after leaving a job, which in turn can take a toll on their health. Managing this, alongside trying to challenge an ex-employer, can feel impossible.

#### **Divya's\* Story**

Divya lost her job shortly after she began using crutches due to a health condition. Divya believes her health and mobility issues were the underlying reasons for her job being terminated. Following this dismissal, Divya remained out of work for approximately six months and experienced significant financial and emotional strain. Due to her poor health and the difficult circumstances

<sup>38</sup> [The government no longer publishes average waiting times for employment tribunals.](#) The latest data we have is from January to March 2021, [when the average time between a claimant receiving their employment tribunal claim and the first hearing was 49 weeks.](#)

she faced immediately after losing her job, Divya wasn't in a position to take immediate legal action. By the time she had recovered enough to challenge the dismissal, the deadline to bring a claim for unfair or wrongful dismissal had passed.

\*All names have been changed

There are options if someone misses the time limit on challenging their employer. But to have an exception to this time limit granted, the individual must show that it was not reasonably practical to present the claim in time. And then the tribunal needs to be satisfied that the time in which the claim was actually presented was reasonable.

We therefore welcome the Employment Rights Bill extending the time limit for making a claim to an employment tribunal to 6 months from October 2026.

#### Access to advice and support

Charitable organisations, trade unions, ACAS, the Equality Advisory Support Service and others can provide advice and support to people challenging their employers. However, all too often we help people like Caren, who - until she came to us for help - didn't know she could challenge her employer or get assistance with doing so.

#### **Caren's\* Story**

Caren worked as a health and safety steward, with the support of a carer at work. She has multiple disabilities and she uses a wheelchair. Her employer required her to do first aid training, but the training provider said they couldn't accommodate Caren because she wouldn't be able to use the defibrillator and do CPR, despite Caren having previously done so using a table. Caren was told by her employer that the training provider would need to make reasonable adjustments for her to access the course, but this didn't happen. Caren was subsequently dismissed. Caren hasn't taken any action - informal or formal - to resolve this issue, as she didn't realise she could challenge it until someone raised it with her.

\*All names have been changed

## The cost of challenging an employer

Disabled people can also face financial barriers to challenging an employer. While legal aid is available for representation in certain types of discrimination cases, it doesn't cover representation at an employment tribunal. This means that individuals must either pay privately for representation or represent themselves, often against an opponent with more resources and professional legal representation.<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, since the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act was passed in 2012, legal aid funding has reduced by £950m a year in real terms, causing an alarming rise in the number of people who are having to prepare for a tribunal themselves without any advice.<sup>40</sup> Where legal aid is available, it is subject to strict financial eligibility requirements, the thresholds for which have not been updated since 2010. Not keeping pace with inflation has meant that, in real terms, more and more people are being excluded from legal aid despite being unable to afford to fund their case themselves.<sup>41</sup>

Tribunal cases are complex and can take a long time to be heard. During this time, the disabled worker is likely to have lost their job and is usually not being paid. They may also struggle to take up a new job while the legal process is ongoing, leading to an extended period of time without an income. This creates a huge financial strain, alongside a toll on the person's physical and mental health.

There's also not a guarantee that if a worker wins their challenge against an employer, they will actually see the money they are owed. An investigation by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism has found that three quarters of workers who have turned to the employment tribunal penalty enforcement scheme - a scheme that is meant to ensure employers pay workers what they owe if they lose a case against them at an employment tribunal - have not received the money they're owed.<sup>42</sup> This risks pricing disabled people out of challenging their employers.

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<sup>39</sup> Equality and Human Rights Commission (2019) [Access to legal aid for discrimination cases](#).

<sup>40</sup> Owen Bowcott (2019) [Legal aid cuts harming discrimination victims, says equality watchdog](#), The Guardian.

<sup>41</sup> Equality and Human Rights Commission (2019) [Access to legal aid for discrimination cases](#).

<sup>42</sup> Emiliano Mellino and Lucy McKay (2025) [Thousands of Rogue Bosses Have Failed to Pay Tribunal Awards](#), The Bureau of Investigative Journalism.

### Fear of the impact on future job prospects

We have also supported people who, like Nina, have not challenged their employers because they're afraid of the potential impact on future job opportunities.

#### **Nina's\* Story**

Nina has a disability that causes chronic pain. Nina got a part-time job, but had to resign due to the lack of accommodation for their health conditions. They filed a formal complaint about how their employers treated them, but there were other problems that Nina did not file a complaint for: loss of earnings, withholding sick pay, failure to provide a P45 form, and failure to provide adjustments to the workplace despite submitting health assessments. Nina didn't want to pursue challenging these other problems, because they were concerned their previous employer wouldn't provide an appropriate recommendation for future jobs and that this might jeopardise their career.

\*All names have been changed

### Challenges meeting the disability threshold

People can also face barriers meeting the disability threshold that enables them to challenge an employer under the Equality Act. A condition must have a substantial and adverse effect that has lasted for at least 12 months or is likely to last for at least 12 months in total. This can exclude people who are disabled or face significant barriers in work due to poor health, but have experienced these challenges for shorter periods of time.

It can also be hard to prove an illness will last for 12 months, or to prove that this applied at the point of the issue someone is disputing.



## Saba's\* Story

Saba is a driver who suffered a heart attack five months ago. Following a three-month rehabilitation period, she's in recovery. As a result of her heart condition, the DVLA suspended Saba's driving licence pending a specific medical test, which can only be conducted through the NHS. Saba had an appointment for the test, but it was cancelled on the day due to the doctor being unwell. Despite Saba making enquiries, the test is not available privately. A new test date was issued, but it falls after the date Saba was expected to return to work. Saba has already received Stage 1 and Stage 2 disciplinary warnings, which her employer stated were issued in line with company policy. Saba has now been invited to a Stage 3 disciplinary hearing, with dismissal identified as a possible outcome. Although Saba's condition is serious, it hasn't lasted 12 months and, given the speed of recovery, is unlikely to. It's therefore not a given that disability discrimination protections will apply. However, concerns arise regarding the fairness of disciplinary action given the medical circumstances and Saba's limited control over the DVLA suspension and NHS test delays.

\*All names have been changed

Key to ensuring those with shorter-term conditions are better supported in work, is employers more proactively providing flexible and supportive workplaces, so workers don't have to use the Equality Act to get the working arrangements they need.

### Unresolved issues are pushing disabled people out of work

When workplace issues remain unresolved, they can create increasing stress, frustration, and a sense of exclusion, often forcing people to leave their jobs. This is the situation Jen faces - she feels she has no choice but to consider leaving because the necessary accommodations are not being provided.

## **Jen's\* Story**

Jen has a medical condition that her employer has been aware of throughout her employment. Earlier this year, she commenced treatment involving immunosuppressants. Jen informed her employer about this treatment and placed trust in them to provide a safe and supportive working environment. However, another individual attended the workplace while potentially carrying a contagious condition. Jen was not made aware of this at the time, despite her compromised immune system. She believes this exposed her to unnecessary health risks. Jen raised a formal grievance. Since raising concerns, Jen feels their employer has bullied her. She describes a significant decline in her mental and physical wellbeing, to the extent that she now feels unable to continue working in her current role. She is also now being told her work performance is poor, which she believes is being used as a means to push her out of the company. She's currently considering handing in her notice and is seeking advice on whether she may have grounds for a claim of constructive dismissal. Jen is now on sick leave and has recently become aware that her role may have been advertised under a different job title, without any formal communication from her employer.

\*All names have been changed

## **The need for earlier resolution**

There's a clear need for disabled workers to get the adjustments and support they need when they request them, so fewer disabled workers have to use legal routes to challenge why these were never provided. Any issues relating to disability at work need to be resolved much earlier in the process, while someone is still in their role, so that it doesn't lead to them falling out of work. We have identified three key areas where interventions could be developed to help achieve this.

### More proactive enforcement of the Equality Act

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) is the primary body responsible for enforcing the Equality Act. In theory, the EHRC can run inquiries, investigations and assessments where there is evidence of discrimination towards disabled workers. However, its budget was cut by four-fifths from

2008-9 to 2021-22,<sup>43</sup> meaning its capacity to carry out enforcement activity is very limited. It also can't issue fines directly when employers aren't complying with the Act.<sup>44</sup>

One key area for consideration is how the EHRC can be better equipped to enforce the Equality Act and ensure instances of disability discrimination are proactively identified and addressed.

However, we don't believe the EHRC should be the only body involved in more proactive enforcement of the Equality Act. There would be value in greater joint working with frontline organisations that support people affected by disability discrimination - including Citizens Advice - to help identify instances of discrimination, and enable the delivery of more intelligence-led enforcement. We have also previously called for the Fair Work Agency - a body being introduced as part of the Employment Rights Bill to protect and enforce workers' rights - to share some of the work of enforcing equalities legislation.<sup>45</sup>

#### Improving access to discrimination advice

ACAS deals with a wide range of workplace relations and rights issues. While it can handle matters involving discrimination, it does not specialise in discrimination advice. That is the role of the Equality Advisory Support Service (EASS), which focuses specifically on helping people resolve discrimination issues informally.

Because of the tight timelines for commencing ACAS early conciliation, some people may decide to go straight to ACAS. But this can mean they miss out on more tailored support, for instance on disability discrimination. It's worth noting that people can still contact EASS before, during, or even after early conciliation with ACAS if they need discrimination-specific advice - the two services aren't mutually exclusive. It's just that the time pressure often leads people to prioritise ACAS first.

In light of this, we believe there is scope for exploring whether ACAS could be resourced to develop more health-specific expertise, so it can better meet the

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<sup>43</sup> Ben Baumberg Geiger and Louise Murphy (2025) [Opening doors: How to incentivise employers to create more opportunities for disabled workers](#), Resolution Foundation.

<sup>44</sup> Hannah Slaughter (2022) [Policing prejudice: Enforcing anti-discrimination laws in the workplace](#), Resolution Foundation.

<sup>45</sup> Citizens Advice (2024) [From rights to reality: Designing a Fair Work Agency that delivers for the most vulnerable workers](#).

needs of disabled people accessing its services. This would mean that disabled people who want to challenge their employer have a more streamlined source of being able to get disability discrimination advice, which can be especially important given the time pressures they are under.

### Speeding up access to employment tribunal hearings

As it stands, too many cases end up in an employment tribunal, when earlier resolution would have been more appropriate. Better access to informal resolution and mediation, and more proactive enforcement of the Equality Act, is key to speeding up access to employment tribunals. This would help reduce the number of cases going to them and ensure this route is just for the most complex or serious cases.

However, in the meantime, it's still important that when disabled people do go down the employment tribunal route, they are able to access one quickly. Especially if they want to stay in employment. Therefore, if a claim does end up proceeding to a tribunal, and the person is still employed and would like to keep their job, we believe there would be value in considering how hearings could be expedited to enable a timely resolution and reduce the risk of the individual falling out of work.

# Conclusion

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Too many of the disabled people we help are being excluded from the world of work - not because of a lack of talent or ambition, but because workplaces and policies continue to fall short. Accessibility cannot be treated as an afterthought or a box-ticking exercise. It must be embedded into the culture, design, and leadership of every organisation.

So far, much of the government's focus has been on improving employment support to help more disabled people into work. While this is important, it doesn't address the full picture. Without meaningful action to make workplaces more accessible and inclusive, there simply won't be enough suitable jobs for disabled people to move into.

The Keep Britain Working review is an important step in the right direction, and we encourage the review team to not delay work to change the behaviour of employers who are failing to support disabled workers. This is vital if flexible, accessible and supportive practices are to become the norm in workplaces, ensuring more disabled people can access employment.

This report also highlights several additional areas where action should be considered to make workplaces more accessible and supportive for disabled people. To ensure any interventions are well-designed and genuinely effective, it is essential to draw on the experiences of those who face these workplace barriers every day. We look forward to bringing our frontline insights into future discussions about how the government and employers can better address the barriers that continue to exclude disabled people from work.

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