

Disability Employment: from pandemic to recovery

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The
Black Stork
Charity

Transforming rehabilitation -
changing lives

Learning and Work Institute

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About Learning and Work Institute

Learning and Work Institute is an independent policy, research and development organisation dedicated to lifelong learning, full employment and inclusion.

We research what works, develop new ways of thinking and implement new approaches. Working with partners, we transform people's experiences of learning and employment. What we do benefits individuals, families, communities and the wider economy.

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About the Black Stork Charity

The Black Stork Charity promotes excellence in rehabilitation through research, innovation, and best practice. Its first project entailed building the new state-of-the-art rehabilitation centre for the Armed Forces at the Stanford Hall Rehabilitation Estate which is now fully operational. It is now enabling the establishment of the National Rehabilitation Centre (the NRC) on the same site to treat NHS patients and provide an academic hub for research, innovation, education, and training.

The charity works to identify gaps in the rehabilitation model and find new ways to fill them – its programmes to date include promoting improved vocational rehabilitation and psychological approaches to recovery. Our vocational rehabilitation programme firstly addressed what focused support trauma patients and people with acquired disabilities need to return to accessible employment. The second stage is exploring the employment policies and practices that ensure meaningful and accessible work opportunities are available for disabled people.



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Foreword

The Black Stork Charity was set up to deliver a step change in rehabilitation at the Stanford Hall Rehabilitation Estate owned by the charity. The state-of-the-art Defence & Medical Rehabilitation Centre is now fully operational, and the charity is now enabling plans for the National Rehabilitation Centre - an NHS facility and academic centre for excellence to be constructed on the same site.

But excellent rehabilitation is not just about brilliant buildings and a skilled workforce: it is also about holistic pathways of care which deal with peoples' physical and mental health and goals that support the key ingredients of their real lives - family, community, work, and independence. One of the most significant current gaps in care is vocational rehabilitation - supporting people with acquired disabilities from an early stage to return to, and retain, accessible and flexible employment. The first leg of our work in this area explored the opportunities for tailored vocational rehab in health settings. The second leg, represented by this project, is to explore the demand side - the availability of suitable employment opportunities for disabled people, including those returning to work after major trauma, illness (including long covid) and those with long-term conditions.

In 2020, much was said about the increasing numbers of people working from home during the pandemic and we speculated whether this might result in more beneficial working practices for disabled people. So, the charity decided to work with Learning and Work Institute to explore the impact of the pandemic more widely on disabled people and the disability employment gap.

Our initial findings show that the pandemic has had a greater impact on the employment of disabled people and particularly those with mental health and learning disabilities - which means that the gap has widened. However, the impact of the furlough scheme and rising inactivity rates amongst disabled people means that the true impact on unemployment now and in the future is not yet known. Research shows that disabled people are more vulnerable to discrimination in work and to redundancy, and are less well represented in well paid, quality work and more senior positions. Whilst many disabled people may have needed to shield there is a risk that employers' perceptions of disabled candidates as more vulnerable and difficult to support will reinforce barriers to their entry and retention in employment.

It will of course take time to see how the economy recovers, which sectors of the labour market bounce back fastest and how more competition for jobs impacts on diversity and equality. What's clear is that if the Government is serious about its targets - despite Covid- it will need to actively enhance its employment programmes, the quality of support given to disabled job seekers, the routes back to work for people with acquired disabilities and the quality of work opportunities and employers' practices that enable an inclusive workforce. If we are to build back better and level up, disability employment is a prime opportunity to change the face of employment equality in the UK. It should not be missed.

Janet Morrison OBE, Chief Executive, The Black Stork Charity

Executive summary

The coronavirus pandemic has disproportionately affected disabled people. Six out of ten people who have died due to Covid-19 were disabled.¹ Alongside facing more severe health consequences, disabled people have been disproportionately affected by the economic impacts of the pandemic. Millions of disabled people have been furloughed, while many unemployed disabled people stopped looking for work.

The pandemic has seen a reversal of the progress made in getting more disabled people into employment in recent years. Pre-pandemic trends suggested the Government was on track to meet its target for one million more disabled people to be in employment by 2027. While this was in part because of an increase in people in work reporting disabilities and record increases in the overall employment rate, it also reflects a decrease in the disability employment rate gap. As disabled people have been among those hit hardest during the pandemic, the gap has increased.

To understand the impact of the pandemic on disability employment and disabled people's lives, L&W, in partnership with the Black Stork Charity, conducted a detailed literature review, labour market analysis and in-depth interviews with 20 disabled people.

Key findings

Disabled people have long faced significant labour market challenges.

Disabled people are far less likely to be employed compared to non-disabled people. While the employment rate for disabled people had been steadily increasing prior to the pandemic, the disability employment rate gap has remained stubbornly high and was 28.1 percentage points in 2019. Disabled people who are in work are less likely to be employed in the three highest-skilled occupations (managers, directors, and senior officials) and disabled graduates are more likely to be in non-graduate roles compared to non-disabled graduates. Disabled workers also earn around one fifth less than non-disabled workers and are twice as likely to move out of employment – highlighting the importance of supporting disabled people to find and stay in good quality jobs.

The pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on disabled people.

Employment fell sharply among disabled people during 2020, and the disability employment rate gap widened from 28.1 percentage points to 29 percentage points between Q4 2019 and Q4 2020. Disabled people were more likely to be **temporarily away from paid work** than their non-disabled counterparts – a large proportion presumed to have been furloughed. Some disabled people will have been furloughed because they are clinically vulnerable to the virus, but it raises concerns that disabled workers may be more vulnerable to redundancy when furlough ends. Longitudinal data suggests disabled people were more likely to move out of employment and those out of work were far less likely to move into employment during the pandemic compared to their non-disabled counterparts.

¹ The Health Foundation. 6 out of 10 people who have died from COVID-19 are disabled. 11 February 2021. Available at: <https://www.health.org.uk/news-and-comment/news/6-out-of-10-people-who-have-died-from-covid-19-are-disabled>. Accessed 26/04/2021

Unemployment rates for disabled people (those not working but still looking and available for work) increased in line with rates of non-disabled people in 2020, albeit from a higher starting point, while rates of **economic inactivity** (those not working but also not looking for a job or unable to work) increased much more sharply, as more disabled people stopped looking for work. Disabled people were more than twice as likely to be long-term unemployed compared to non-disabled people by the end of 2020. Disabled people were also likely to be paid less than their non-disabled counterparts – and the **pay gap** between disabled and non-disabled people increased during the pandemic. Our qualitative research also found that for many disabled people day-to-day spending on food and utilities have increased during the pandemic, as they were not able to look for cheaper options or had to spend more time at home.

Our research also found that the pandemic harmed disabled people's **health and well-being**. Many disabled people who participated in our research said their physical and mental health deteriorated due to the pandemic. Additionally, many reported that they could not attend their medical consultations during the pandemic which might also have a long-term impact on their health.

The Government needs to act to improve disabled people's employment prospects.

There are three main areas where the Government needs to act to address the adverse economic impacts of the pandemic on disabled people's lives:

1. limit further job losses due to the pandemic's impact on the economy,
2. reduce the disability employment gap by equipping disabled people with timely and effective support and
3. improve the working conditions of disabled people including by introducing measures to support high quality, flexible jobs and working from home opportunities.

We recommend the government focus on the following to support disabled people during the economic recovery, and ensure it meets and where possible exceeds its targets by 2027:

- Minimise job losses by extending the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme if further restrictions are required, and ensure there is timely support available when the scheme ends
- Ensure that existing employment support programmes meet the needs of disabled people
- Expand eligibility for Kickstart to better support long-term unemployed disabled people
- Enhance access to vocational rehabilitation for those who acquire a disability during their working life
- Encourage employers to make more high quality flexible and part-time jobs available
- Ensure disabled workers have fair access to increased opportunities to work from home
- Review ways to promote transparency around disability employment at workplaces
- Make the £20 uplift to Universal Credit permanent

Chapter 1. Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has had an unequal impact on society with disabled people among the hardest hit. Many disabled people have been clinically vulnerable to the virus due to underlying medical conditions and needed to take extra measures to protect themselves. This has placed an additional burden on their health, well-being, and finances, and impacted on their jobs and employment prospects.

This research, commissioned by the Black Stork Charity, aims to explore the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on disabled people's lives with a focus on employment opportunities and working conditions for disabled people.

The true impact of the pandemic on disability employment cannot be measured yet. The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) which has been extended until September 2021 has helped to protect millions of jobs, including many held by disabled people. But it is not clear how many of these will be viable over the longer term. For those out of work, having a disability is among the most significant factors affecting a person's chances of returning to work.²

Disabled people already had worse labour market outcomes before the pandemic. They were less likely to be in employment, more likely to work in part-time jobs,³ two times as likely to move out of work⁴ and to live in poverty.⁵ The disability employment rate gap widened in the 2008-09 recession as disabled people were more likely to be made redundant or to remain unemployed for longer.⁶

To improve employment outcomes for disabled people, the Government announced a target to increase employment of disabled people by one million by 2027 in 2017. This would require 4.5 million to be in employment by 2027, although the target is arguably less ambitious than the 2015 Conservative party manifesto pledge to halve the disability employment rate gap.

² ONS. Which groups find it hardest to find a job following a period out of work? 30 March 2021. Available at: [Which groups find it hardest to find a job following a period out of work? - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://ons.gov.uk/which-groups-find-it-hardest-to-find-a-job-following-a-period-out-of-work) Accessed 08/04/2021

³ Office for National Statistics. Disability and Employment, UK 2019. 2 December 2019. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/disability/bulletins/disabilityandemploymentuk/2019> Accessed 6/04/2021

⁴ Laura Gardiner and Declan Gaffney. Retention deficit A new approach to boosting employment for people with health problems and disabilities. Resolution Foundation. 2016. Available at: <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2016/06/Retention-deficit.pdf> Accessed 26/01/2021. p.8

⁵ Disability Rights UK. Nearly half of everyone in poverty is either disabled person or lives with a disabled person. 7 January 2020. Available at: <https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/news/2020/february/nearly-half-everyone-poverty-either-disabled-person-or-lives-disabled-person#:~:text=In%202017%2F18%2C%2031%25,poverty%20%E2%80%93%20around%204%20million%20people.&text=If%20there%20is%20also%20a,face%20barriers%20to%20paid%20work>. Accessed 6/04/2021

⁶ Sarah Cassidy. Disabled workers 'worst hit by cuts in recession'. Independent. 28 December 2009. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/disabled-workers-worst-hit-cuts-recession-1851588.html>. Accessed 26/01/2021

In this report, we explore the trends in employment of disabled people. **Chapter 2** focuses on disability employment prior to the pandemic. **Chapter 3** explores how the pandemic affected employment, finances, and the physical and mental health of disabled people with evidence drawn from interviews and quantitative analysis and **Chapter 4** identifies policy recommendations to improve employment opportunities for disabled people as we recover from the pandemic.

Box 1: Methodology

This research has been informed by four main research pillars:

- **Literature review** examining academic and grey area work since 2007 to understand the state of disability employment before the pandemic.
- **In-depth interviews with 20 disabled people** roughly representing the demographics of the UK to explore the impact of the pandemic on their employment, health and finances.
- **Statistical analysis of the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and Understanding Society Survey** undertaken in March 2021.
 - In our quantitative analysis, we used the GSS Harmonised Standard definition of disability. The GSS Harmonised Standards focus on a 'core' definition of people whose condition currently limits their activity. In summary the core definition covers people who report: (current) physical or mental health condition(s) or illnesses lasting or expected to last 12 months or more; and
 - the condition(s) or illness(es) reduce their ability to carry out day-to-day activities.
- **Stakeholder roundtable** where the preliminary findings of the research were presented to experts. The policy recommendations were developed based on the feedback from stakeholders working in this field for decades.

Chapter 2. Disability employment prior to the pandemic

Key findings

- The employment rate for disabled people had been increasing steadily up until the pandemic: it increased by 9.9 percentage points from 44.2% in 2013 to 54.1% in 2019.
- Disabled people were still less likely to be employed in 2019 compared to non-disabled people, as the disability employment rate gap was 28.1 percentage points.
- Across all age groups, the disability employment rate gap in 2019 was highest among those aged 50-64.
- Disabled workers were less likely to be employed in the three highest-skilled occupations (managers, directors, and senior officials) than their non-disabled counterparts in 2019, and disabled graduates were also more likely to be in non-graduate roles.
- Across the UK in 2018, median gross weekly pay among those with a disability was 21% lower than for those without a disability.

Trends in disability employment before the coronavirus pandemic

The employment rate for disabled people increased markedly prior to the pandemic. As Figure 1 shows, the **employment rate for disabled people increased by 9.9 percentage points, from 44.2% in 2013 to 54.1% in 2019 – an increase of 1.4 million disabled people in employment.**

While this change indicates progress, several factors explain the change in the number of disabled people in employment alongside improvements in disabled people's employment outcomes:⁷

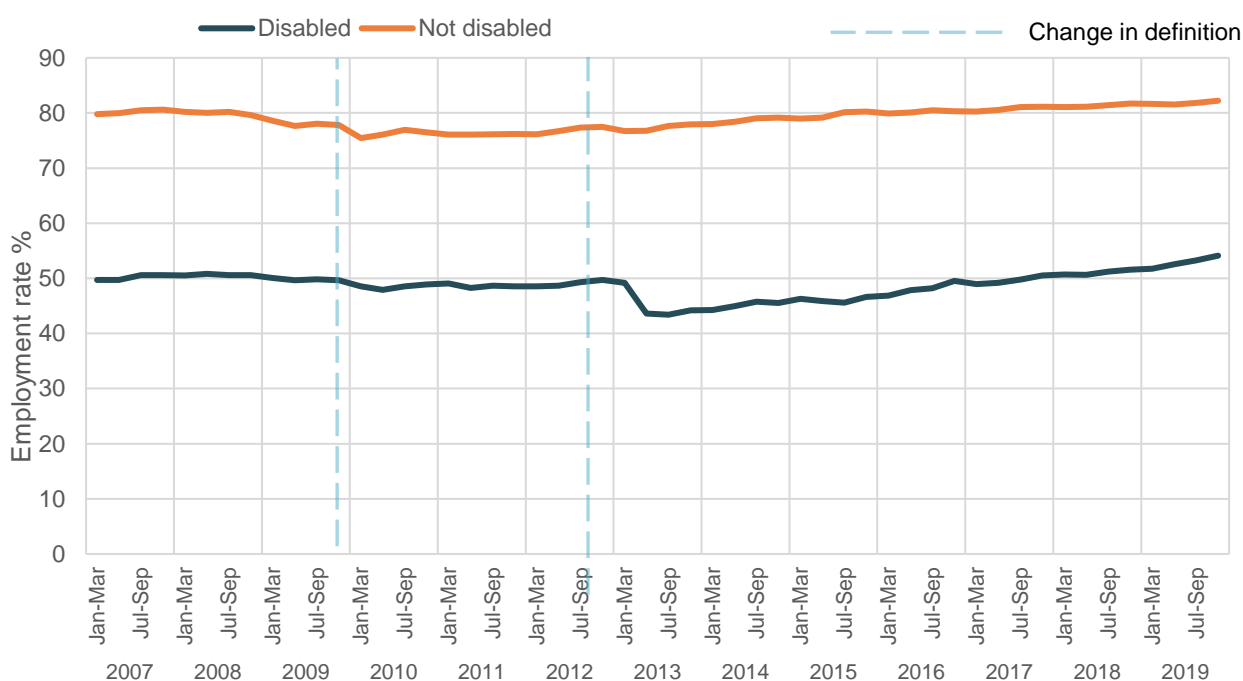
- **The main factor is the increase in the number of people stating they have a disability among the working-age population** –The disability prevalence rate – the number of people reporting a disability expressed as a percentage of the population of working age – has increased since 2013. This is driven by several factors including changes in health, and awareness and attitudes towards disability. As people have become better educated on disability, the stigma around disability, particularly mental health conditions, decreased. More people are reporting mental health conditions as a disability. According to the Family Resources Survey, the number of disabled people with a mental health condition increased from 3.4 million in 2017/18 to 4.1 million in 2019/20. Estimates suggest that disability prevalence

⁷ Department of Work and Pensions and Department of Health and Social Care. The Employment of Disabled People. March 2020. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/875199/employment-of-disabled-people-2019.pdf Accessed 7/04/2021

accounts for a third of the increase in employment of disabled people between 2014 and 2019. This may have also had an impact on the employment rate for disabled people if disability prevalence has increased among those already in employment – or in other words people are reporting disabilities that do not impact on their access to employment.

- **The UK employment rate had been increasing since 2013** – The economic recovery following the 2008-09 recession saw the overall employment rate reach a record high. The employment rate of disabled people showed a similar trend to the employment of non-disabled people – the latter accounting for around 25% of the increase in employment levels among disabled people according to estimates.
- **There has been a steady increase in the working-age population since 1998** – The increase in the working-age population means that there are more disabled people which partly explains the increase in the number of disabled people in employment. Estimates state that this is a less important factor, accounting for less than 10% in the total increase in the number of disabled people in employment.

Figure 1: Employment rates for disabled and non-disabled people, 2007-2019, UK ⁸



Source: L&W analysis of Labour Force Survey March 2021

⁸ Figure 1 should be used with caution as rates from 2013 onwards are not directly comparable with those from earlier years. This is because there was a change in the reporting behaviour of survey respondents at the start of 2013 related to a change in the wording of the survey questionnaire – which explains the large dip in rates for disabled people in that year. There was also a change in the reporting behaviour of survey respondents at the start of 2010 related to a change in the wording of the survey questionnaire. It is believed that the change resulted in more accurate estimates of the numbers of people either with or without a disability/long-term health problem.

While the number of disabled people in employment increased, disabled people were still less likely to be employed in 2019 compared to non-disabled people. Close to half of disabled people (53.2%) were in employment in 2019 compared to four out of five non-disabled people (81.8%) who were in employment.

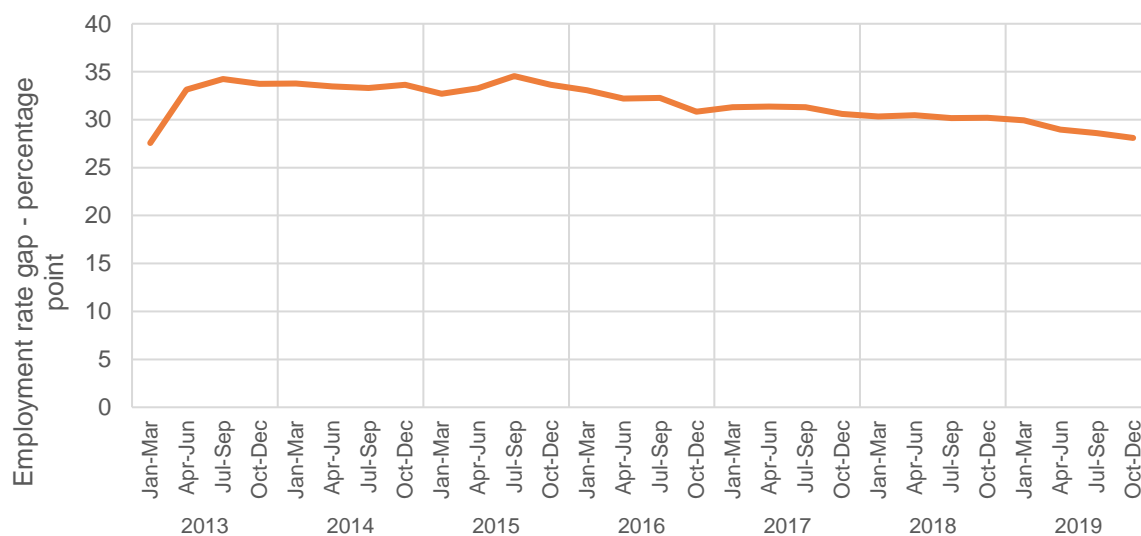
Disabled people were also twice as likely to move out of employment. Estimates based on the Longitudinal Annual Population Survey (APS), 2016-2018, suggest that disabled workers moved out of employment at around twice the rate (9%) of non-disabled workers (5%).⁹ Disabled people moved into work at around one-third of the rate (10%) of workless non-disabled people (27%). This highlights the importance of supporting disabled people to find and stay in employment.

Disability employment rate gap in 2019

There has been a steady fall in the disability employment rate gap – the difference in the rate of employment for disabled and non-disabled people – since 2013 (Figure 2). **The disability employment rate gap decreased from 33.7% in the last quarter of 2013 to 28.1% in the last quarter of 2019.**

The UK performs less well than other European countries, where the disability employment rate gap tends to be around 20%. According to Eurostat 2011 data, the UK is a below-average performer and does not compare well with other developed economies such as Finland, France and Sweden which have gaps around 10%.¹⁰

Figure 2: Disability employment rate gap, 2013-2019, UK



Source: L&W analysis of Labour Force Survey March 2021

⁹ Department of Work and Pensions and Department of Health and Social Care (2020) The Employment of Disabled People

¹⁰ Warwick Knowledge Centre. 2 May 2019. Available at:

<https://warwick.ac.uk/newsandevents/knowledgecentre/business/work/disabilityemployment/>

The disability employment rate varies based on different characteristics such as age, impairment type, gender, region, and sector of employment.

Age

Across all age groups, the disability employment rate gap in 2019 was highest among those aged 50-64. The gap was 24.6% for 20–24-year-olds, which increased to 33.4% for 50–54-year-olds and 44.8% for 55–59-year-olds. This increase can be explained by a greater proportion of 50–64-year-olds having more profound and work-limiting disabilities.¹¹ The gap reduced to 28.8% for those aged over 60. This may be due to the employment rate being lower for non-disabled people over 60 years old.

Impairment type

Anxiety and depression were the most commonly reported disability causes in 2019.¹² More than half of disabled people in employment had either musculoskeletal or mental health conditions as their main impairment.¹³ The people with severe or specific learning difficulties had the lowest rate of employment (17.6 %) among any impairment group.¹⁴ Disabled people with mental illnesses or other nervous disorders had the second-lowest employment rate (28.5 %).¹⁵

Gender

Since 2013, employment rates for disabled men and women have been similar (Figure 4). In 2019, the employment rate for disabled men was 54.3% whereas the employment rate for disabled women was 52.4%.¹⁶ The largest disability employment rate gap has been between disabled and non-disabled men over the years due to higher employment rates among non-disabled men versus non-disabled women. The gap between disabled and non-disabled men in employment decreased from 37.5% in 2013 to 31.7% in 2019.

¹¹ Webber, A. Health is main barrier to employment for 50-64 years olds". Personnel Today. 4 Jan 2019. Available at: <https://www.personneltoday.com/hr/health-is-main-barrier-to-employment-for-50-64-year-olds/> Accessed at 29/04/2021

¹² Office for National Statistics. Disability and Employment, UK 2019. 2 December 2019. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/disability/bulletins/disabilityandemploymentuk/2019> Accessed 26/01/2021.

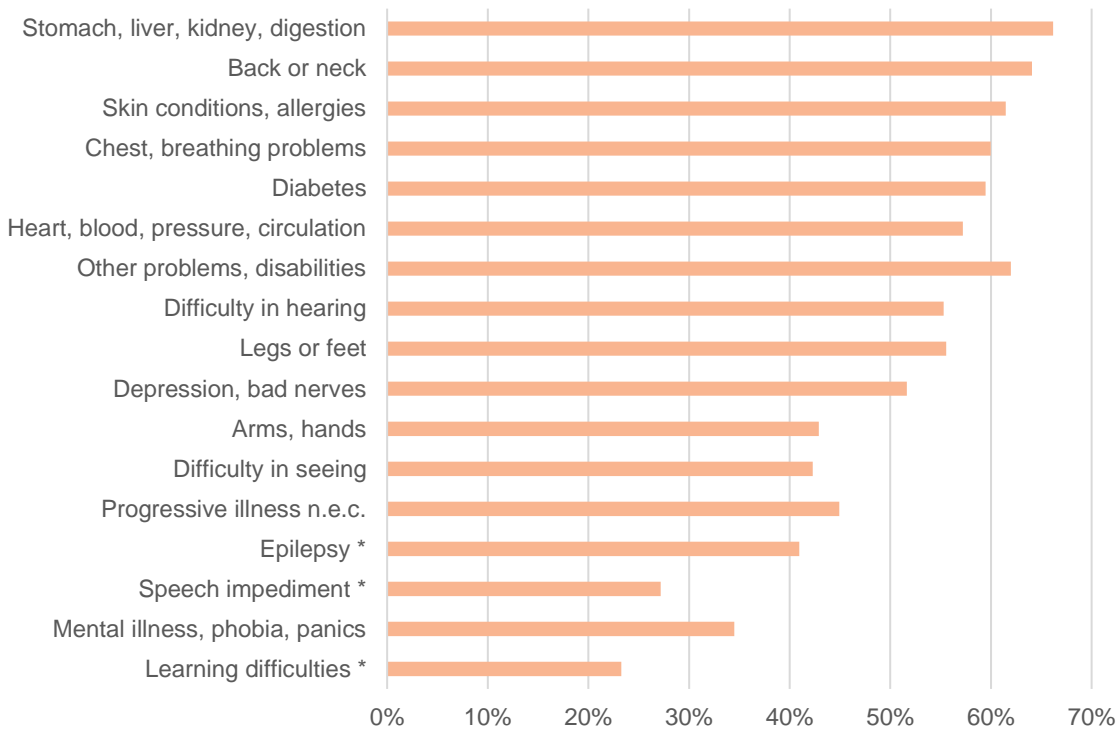
¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

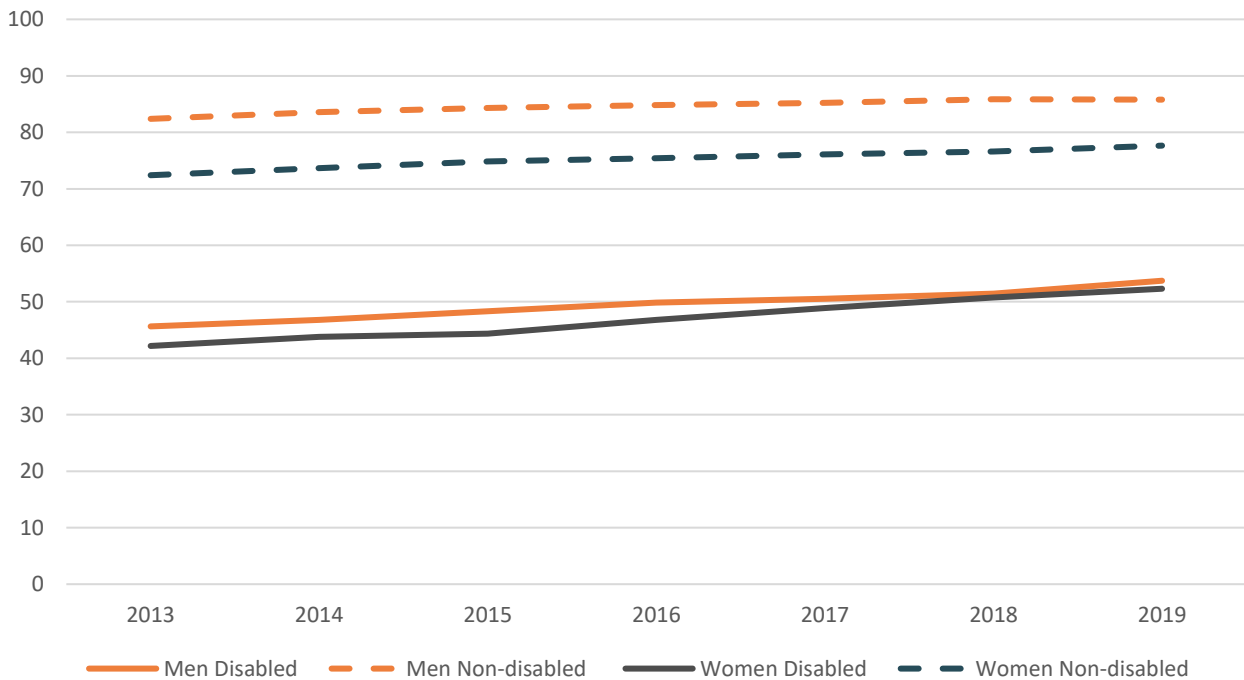
¹⁶ Office for National Statistics. Disability and Employment, UK 2019. 2 December 2019. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/disability/bulletins/disabilityandemploymentuk/2019> Accessed 26/01/2021

Figure 3: Employment rates for disabled people by main impairment, 2019, UK



Source: L&W Analysis of Annual Population Survey 2021
 * = Based on small sample

Figure 4: Employment rates for disabled and non-disabled people by gender, 2013-2019, UK

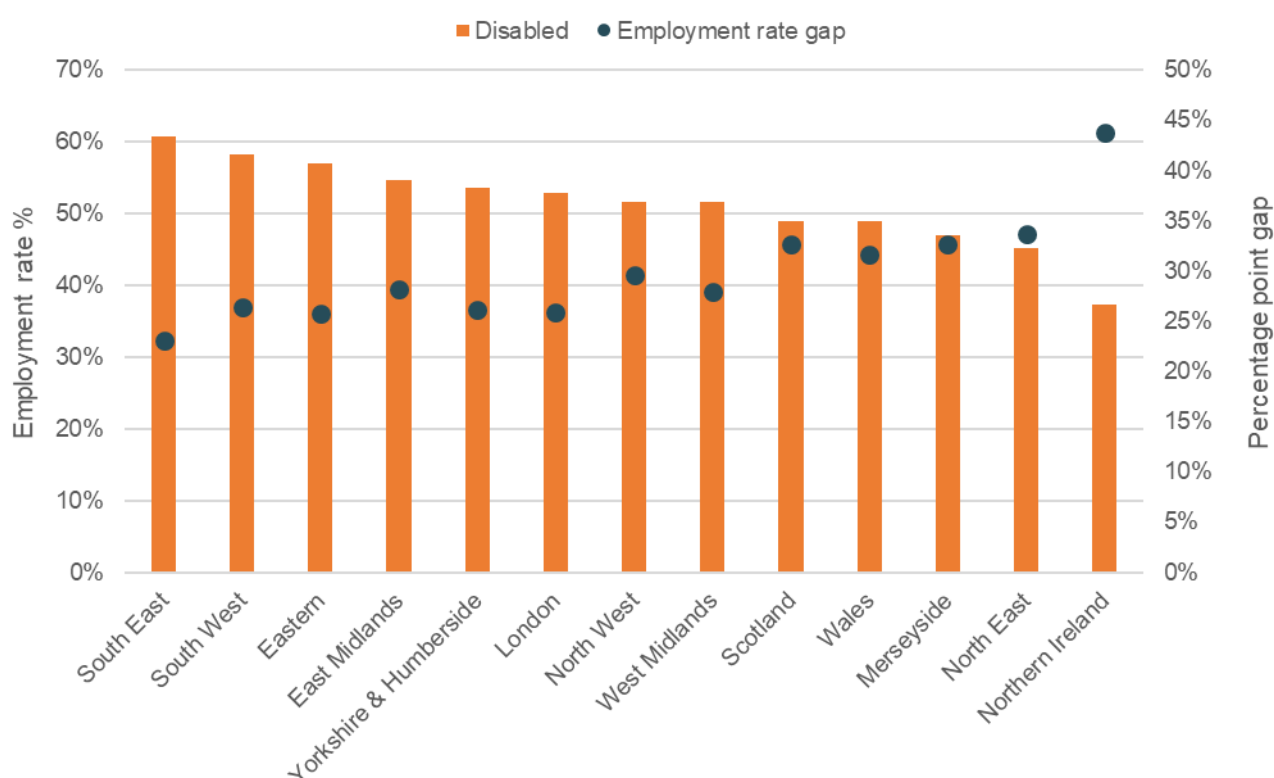


Source: L&W analysis of Labour Force Survey March 2021

Region

Employment rates for disabled people tend to vary between regions and follow the wider regional employment trends (Figure 5). The South East, South West and East of England have the highest employment rates (between 55% and 60%) among disabled people. Disabled people in Northern Ireland had the lowest employment rate at 37.1%. Northern Ireland also had the largest employment rate gap between disabled and non-disabled people, 44 percentage points – 10 percentage points higher than the North East with the second largest gap. The South West had the lowest employment rate gap at 23 percentage points.

Figure 5: Disability employment rates and employment rate gaps by region, 2019, UK



Source: L&W Analysis of Annual Population Survey 2021

Types of employment / sector

Disabled people who were in employment were more likely to be in part-time jobs and do lower skilled jobs than non-disabled people in 2019. Disabled workers were less likely to be employed in the three highest-skilled occupations (managers, directors, and senior officials) than their non-disabled counterparts. Disabled graduates were also more likely to be in non-graduate roles: 41% of disabled graduates were in non-graduate roles compared

to 35% of non-disabled graduates in 2019.¹⁷ This suggests that employer attitudes may still be a significant factor in terms of barriers to employment.

Discrimination in the workplace

Disabled people face numerous obstacles to entering and staying in work. Some disabled people have to take long periods of time off work due to their disability which decreases their likelihood of being employed or sustaining their employment. Some disabled people prefer part-time or more flexible roles which might be more difficult to find. People who acquire their disability during their employment through trauma or major illness may require flexible attitudes and policies from their employers to retain their work. And while it is against the law to discriminate against people because of their disability, disabled people are significantly more likely to experience unfair treatment at work than non-disabled people.

Interviews with disabled people highlighted that discrimination is still taking place in different forms in the workplace.

A female participant in her 50s with a disability that limits her mobility said she couldn't go into her preferred profession when she graduated because the places she applied to work did not have accessible buildings:

'When I graduated I wanted to go into research, but I couldn't get a research post, and we're talking quite a long time ago, more than 30 years, so things weren't as enlightened as they are now, a lot of the labs that I applied to wouldn't take me because they felt that I wouldn't be able to move around the lab safely or deal with experimental equipment, so in the end I got a job with the local council where I was living at the time, a disability information officer, basically just giving information to local disabled people on benefits.'

She also noted that 'things have changed enormously since then'. But our interviews suggest that disabled people are still discriminated against at different stages in the labour market. It is difficult to know how often and why discrimination happens as it is illegal. Some participants said employers associate disabled employees with additional costs and might be reluctant to hire disabled people. For instance, another participant said she applied for a job recently and the employer openly told her that their decision might be impacted by her disability.

'I once said to an employer, 'Just because it's a disability, it's not going to impact your decision, is it?' And he said, 'Well, yes. It might do.'

¹⁷ Researchers at the University of Warwick and the University of the West of England have defined a non-graduate role as one which is associated with tasks that do not normally require knowledge and skills developed through higher education to enable them to perform these tasks in a competent manner.

Disability pay gap in 2019

Disabled people were not only less likely to be in employment but were also more likely to be paid less than non-disabled people. Across the UK in 2018, median gross weekly pay among those with a disability was 21% lower than for those without a disability. The difference between the average hourly pay of a disabled person and a non-disabled person is known as the **disability pay gap**. A report by the TUC found that non-disabled workers earned £1.65 (15.5%) more per hour than disabled workers in 2019 which increased to £2.10 (19.6%) in 2020.¹⁸ The differences are partly explained by a higher proportion of disabled people working part-time than non-disabled people, and disabled people being more likely to be employed in low-paid jobs.¹⁹

The disability employment and pay gaps have a huge impact on disabled people's finances. According to The Joseph Rowntree Foundation, **almost one third of people with disabilities (31%) lived in poverty compared to 20% of the non-disabled population in 2017-18.**²⁰ Nearly half (48%) of people in poverty have a family member who is disabled.²¹

¹⁸ TUC. Recession Report July 2009 - The recession and disabled people. 20 July 2009. Available at: <https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/recession-report-july-2009-recession-and-disabled-people>. Accessed 26/01/2021

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Disability Rights UK. Nearly half of everyone in poverty is either disabled person or lives with a disabled person. 7 January 2020. Available at: <https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/news/2020/february/nearly-half-everyone-poverty-either-disabled-person-or-lives-disabled-person#:~:text=In%202017%2F18%2C%2031%25,poverty%20%E2%80%93%20around%204%20million%20people.&text=If%20there%20is%20also%20a,face%20barriers%20to%20paid%20work>. Accessed 26/01/2021

²¹ Social Metrics Commission. Measuring Poverty 2019. Social Metrics Commission. Available at: https://socialmetricscommission.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/SMC_measuring-poverty-201908_full-report.pdf Accessed 26/01/2021

Box 3: Policies designed to reduce the disability employment gap

A range of policies have been implemented to support disabled people into work and improve conditions and rights of disabled workers.

- **Access to Work** (1994) is a publicly funded employment support scheme that aims to help disabled people to start or stay in work. The scheme provides practical and financial support for disabled people or people with long-term physical or mental health conditions.²² To support disabled workers during the pandemic, the Access to Work scheme has been extended to cover special equipment, travel costs and help for mental health services for those working from home.
- **The Disability Discrimination Act** (1996) made discrimination against disabled people in the workplace against the law and came into effect in 1996.²³ **The Equality Act 2010** replaced the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA).²⁴ The Equality Act 2010 requires employers to make 'reasonable adjustments' such as adjusting working hours or supporting disabled employees with special equipment to help them with their work to prevent any disadvantage in the workplace.²⁵
- **New Deal for Disabled People (NDDP)** (1998) supported people who received disability and health-related benefits to move into paid employment. This programme ended on 31 March 2011.²⁶
- **Pathways to Work** (2005) aimed to help people with health conditions and disabled people to manage the process of coming off benefits and returning to work.²⁷
- **Work Programme** (2011) was the flagship welfare to work programme of the Coalition government. The Programme aimed to support people who were at risk of long-term unemployment and offered support to a wide variety of people out of

²² Department for Work and Pensions. Guidance Access to Work factsheet for employers. Updated 29 September 2020. Available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/access-to-work-guide-for-employers/access-to-work-factsheet-for-employers>. Accessed 26/01/2021

²³ The Disability Discrimination Act. Available at:

<https://www.nhsemployers.org/~media/Employers/Publications/The%20Disability%20Discrimination%20Act.pdf>. Accessed 26/01/2021

²⁴ Gov.uk. Definition of disability under the Equality Act 2010. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/definition-of-disability-under-equality-act-2010>. Accessed 26/01/2021

²⁵ Gov.uk. Disability Rights. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/rights-disabled-person/employment>. Accessed 26/01/2021

²⁶ Genevieve Knight, Sergio Salis, Francesca Francavilla, Dragos Radu, Debra Hevenstone, Elisabetta Mocca and Brittainy Tousley. Working Paper. Provider-led Pathways to Work. Available at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/221223/WP113.pdf. Accessed 26/01/2021

²⁷Ibid.

work. Towards the end of the programme, Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) claimants – people with a disability or a health condition affecting their ability to work – accounted for around a third of monthly intakes.²⁸ Although the programme was successful in many ways, it was less effective when it came to supporting ESA claimants.²⁹

- **The Disability Confident Scheme** (2016), which is ongoing, aims to “encourage employers to recruit and retain disabled people and those with health conditions”.³⁰ This is a voluntary scheme which was developed by employers and representatives of disabled people.
- **Work and Health Programme** (2017) was introduced mainly to support disabled people to enter and stay in work. The programme was implemented in England and Wales between November 2017 and April 2018.³¹
- **Kickstart Scheme** (2020) is an employment programme introduced to support young people aged 16 to 24 years old who are currently on Universal Credit and at risk of long-term unemployment.³² The Kickstart Scheme is not designed to reduce the disability employment gap, but young disabled people can receive employment support through the scheme.
- **A National Strategy for Disabled People** (2021) is being prepared by the Cabinet Office’s Disability Unit. The Strategy proposes to make practical changes to support “disabled people’s ability to participate fully in society”.³³

²⁸ Department for Work & Pensions, 2020. The Work Programme: Impact assessment. Available at: [The Work Programme: impact assessment - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/830085/disability-confident-welcome-guide-new-members.pdf) Accessed 05/05/2021

²⁹ Department for Work & Pensions, 2020. The Work Programme: Impact assessment. Available at: [The Work Programme: impact assessment - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/830085/disability-confident-welcome-guide-new-members.pdf) Accessed 05/05/2021

³⁰ Disability Confident. Welcome to Disability Confident. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/830085/disability-confident-welcome-guide-new-members.pdf. Accessed 26/01/2021

³¹ Department for Work & Pensions. Work and Programme statistics: background information and methodology. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/work-and-health-programme-statistics-background-information-and-methodology> Accessed 21/04/2021

³² Go.uk. Kickstart Scheme. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/kickstart-scheme> Accessed 11/02/2021

³³ Gov. uk. National Strategy for Disabled People survey. 15 January 2021. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/citizen-space-survey-national-strategy-for-disabled-people#:~:text=The%20Disability%20Unit%20in%20the,the%20Strategy%20in%20Spring%202021.> Accessed 26/01/2021

Chapter 3. How has the pandemic impacted on disabled people?

Key findings

- Employment fell sharply among disabled people during 2020, and the disability employment rate gap widened from 28.1 percentage points to 29 percentage points.
- Disabled people were more likely to be temporally away from paid work – a proxy measure for furloughed workers. This means that disabled workers may be more vulnerable to redundancy when furlough ends.
- Unemployment rates (those not working but still looking and available for work) have increased in line with non-disabled people, albeit from a higher starting point, while rates of economic inactivity (those not working but also not looking for job or unable to work) have increased much more sharply.
- Disabled people were nearly twice as likely to be long term unemployed compared to non-disabled by the end of 2020.
- Longitudinal data suggests that disabled people were more than one and a half times more likely to move out of employment during 2020 compared to non-disabled people. Those out of work prior to the pandemic were three times more likely to be workless by the end of 2020 compared to non-disabled people.
- Estimates suggest that the disability pay gap has also grown during 2020.

Employment rates

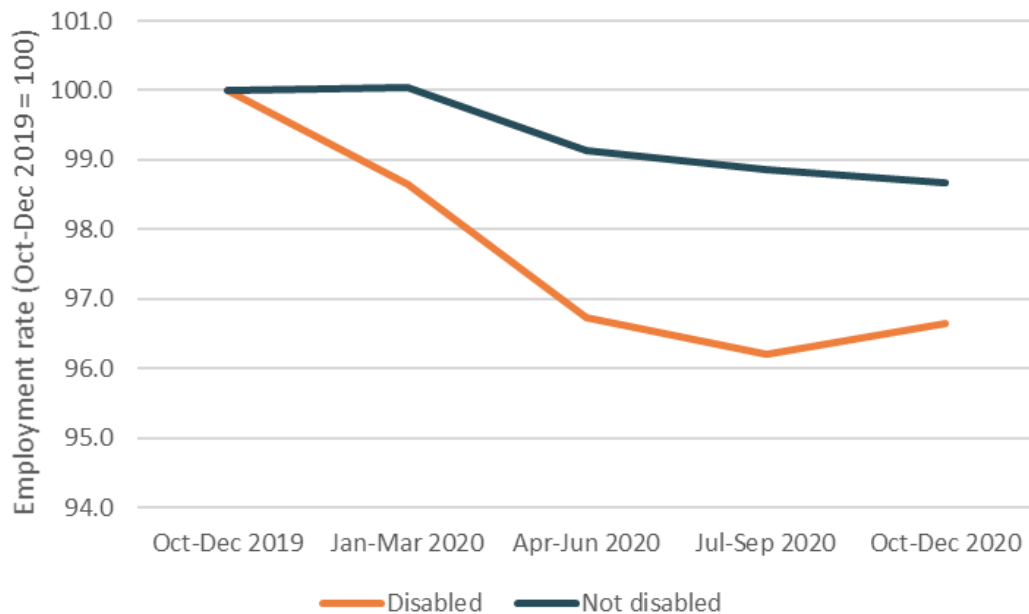
The pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on disabled people's employment compared to non-disabled people. While current data on employment levels needs to be treated with caution, estimates suggest that disabled people accounted for 65% of the fall in employment during the first and second quarters of 2020, despite only accounting for 13% of those in employment.³⁴

The employment rate for disabled people has fallen more sharply over the last year compared to the rate for non-disabled people (Figure 5). The disability employment rate decreased from 54.1% at the end of 2019 to 52.3% in the last quarter of 2020 – a fall of 1.8 percentage points compared with a 1.1 percentage point decrease among non-disabled people.

³⁴ Labour Force Survey (LFS) responses are weighted to official population projections. As the current projections are 2018-based they are based on demographic trends that pre-date the COVID-19 pandemic. LFS are analysing the population totals used in the weighting process and may make adjustments if appropriate. Rates published from the LFS remain robust; however, levels and changes in levels should be used with caution. This will particularly affect estimates for country of birth, nationality, ethnicity and disability.

This means that the disability employment rate gap widened in 2020. The disability employment rate gap increased from 28.1 percentage points in 2019 to 29 percentage points in 2020.

Figure 6: Employment rates for disabled and non-disabled people, Q4 2019- Q4 2020



Source: L&W analysis of the Labour Force Survey March 2021

The impact of the pandemic on disabled people varied by impairment type, age, gender, region and education level which can be seen below:

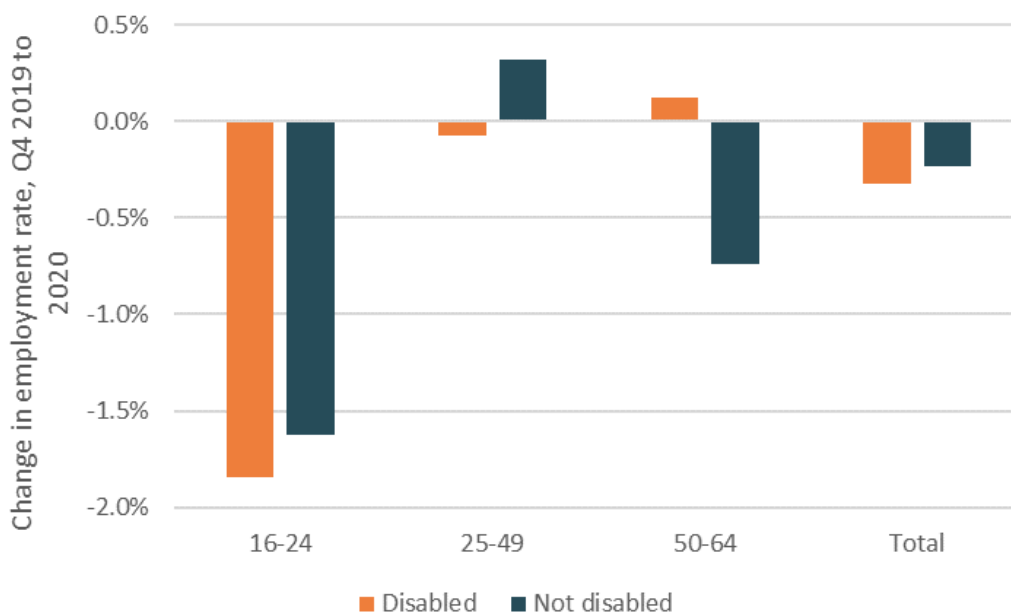
Age

Young disabled people were most likely to have been affected by job losses. The employment rate for young disabled people (16-24 year olds) fell by 1.8 percentage points between 2019 and 2020 (Figure 7). This reflects the broader economic impacts on young people, who overall have accounted for more than half of the fall in employment during 2020.³⁵

While the employment rate for non-disabled 25-49 year olds increased slightly, the employment rate for non-disabled for the same age group decreased slightly. The inverse was true for 50-64 year olds, although the employment rate gap between disabled and non-disabled people in this group continued to be the largest of all age groups, at 33 percentage points.

³⁵ Learning and Work Institute (2021) One year on: The labour market impacts of coronavirus and priorities for the years ahead

Figure 7: Changes in employment rate by age and disability status, Q4 2019-Q4 2020, UK



Source: L&W analysis of the Labour Force Survey March 2021

Impairment type

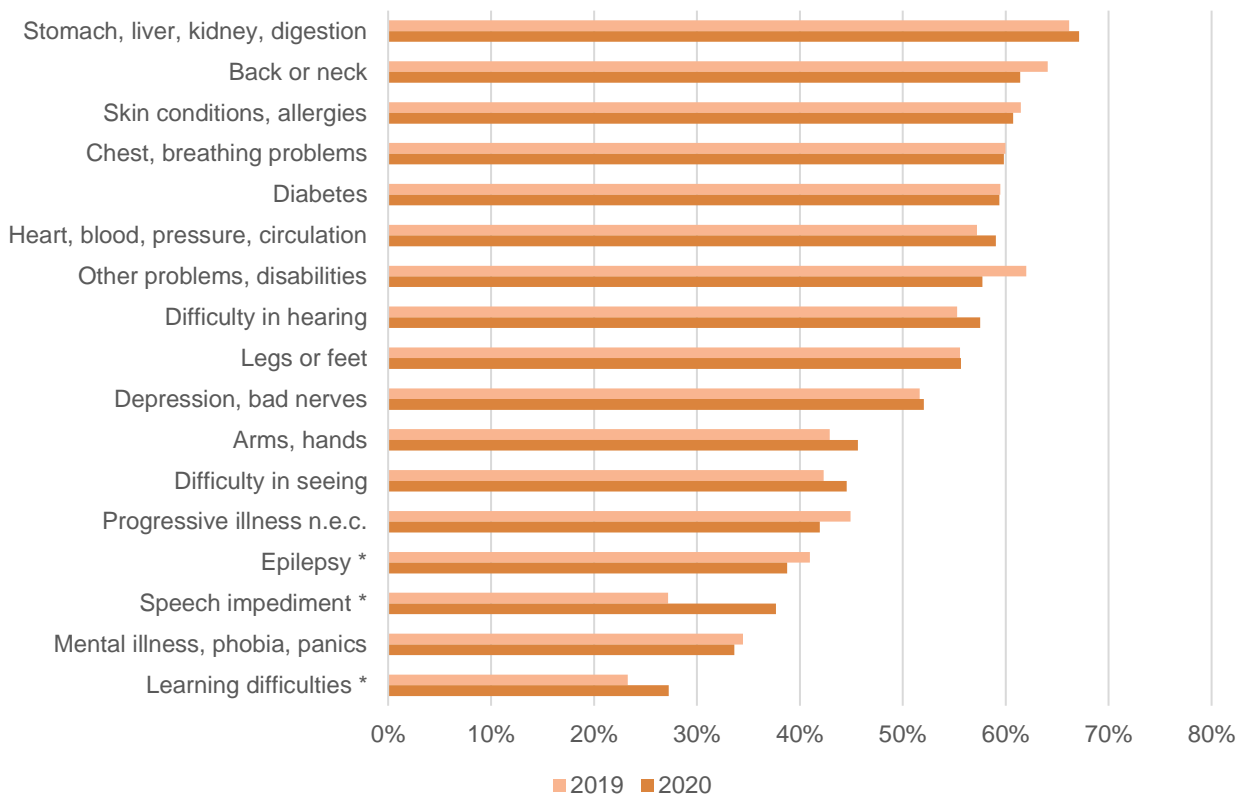
Employment rates continue to vary considerably based on impairment types of disabled people but remain significantly lower across all health conditions/disabilities compared to non-disabled people (Figure 8). The highest employment rate for any health condition group was still 14 percentage points below the equivalent figure for non-disabled working age adults. While sample sizes are small, the data suggests that those with mental health issues saw employment rates rise during 2019 but these fell throughout 2020. This may relate to more people in work reporting mental health issues.

Gender

The pandemic has had a particularly significant effect on disabled men’s employment (Figure 9). The employment rate for disabled men decreased by almost 4 percentage points from 55% in Q4 2019 to 51.3% in Q4 2020. The employment rate for disabled women fell slightly, from 53.5% to 53.1% over the same period.

The disability employment rate gap increased slightly for both men and women in 2020. The employment rate for disabled women was 25 percentage points lower than that for non-disabled women, whereas the gap was 33 percentage points for men by the end of 2020.

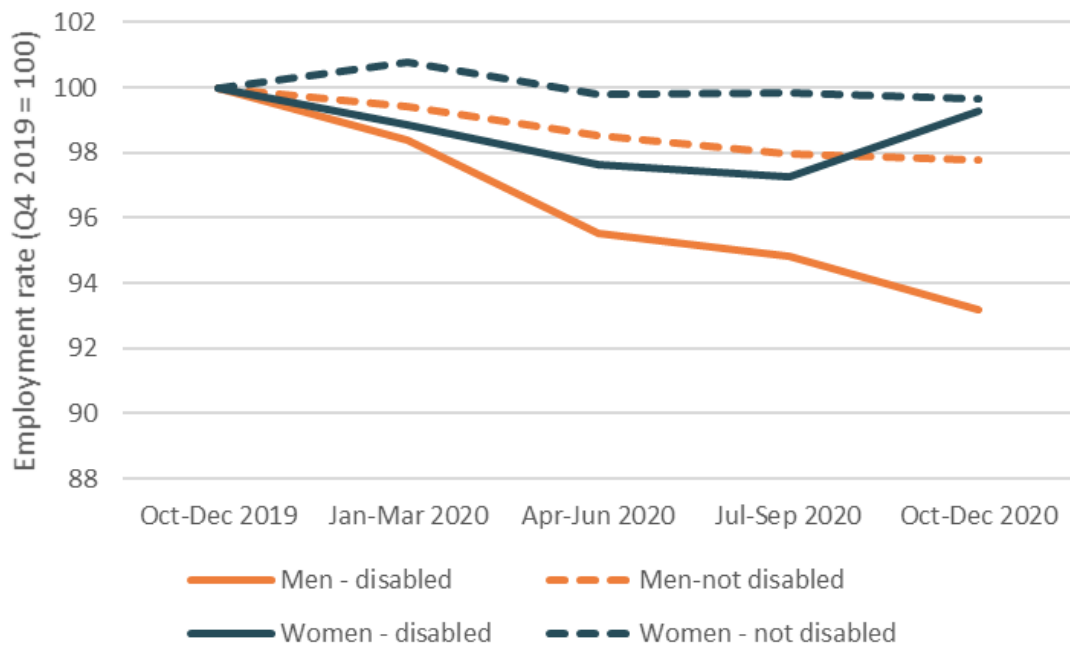
Figure 8: Change in employment rates by condition/disability, 2019- 2020, UK



Source: L&W analysis of the Labour Force Survey March 2021

* = Based on small sample

Figure 9: Change in employment rate by gender and disability status, Q4 2019-Q4 2020, UK

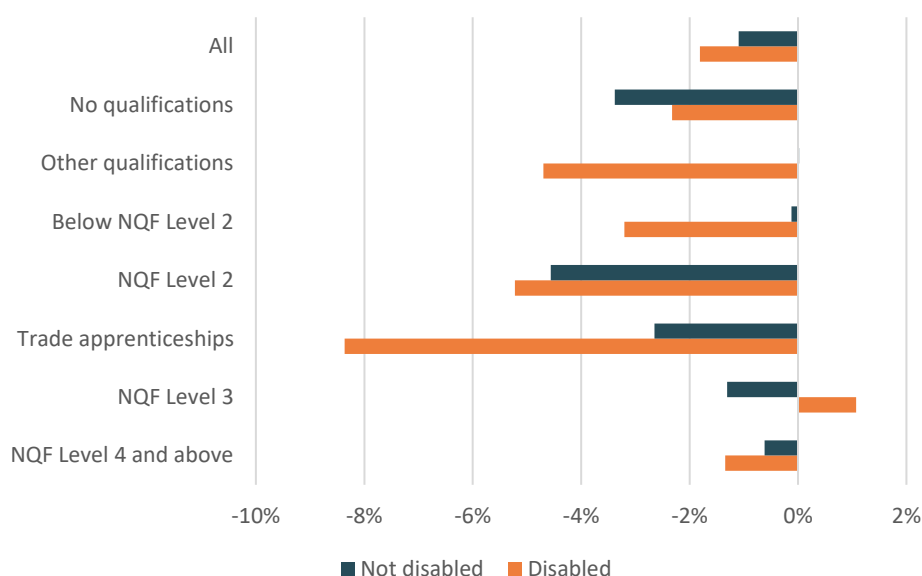


Source: L&W analysis of the Labour Force Survey March 2021

Qualifications

Employment rates for disabled people fell more sharply compared to non-disabled people across most qualification groups, except for those with no qualifications or A-levels or equivalent qualifications. The employment level of disabled people with trade apprenticeships decreased the most, by more than 8 percentage points, from 60% in Q4 2019 to 52% in Q4 2020 (Figure 10). The employment level was lowest for disabled people with no qualifications, and it decreased further in 2020 from 22% in Q4 2019 to 19% in the same period of 2020.

Figure 10: Change in employment rate by qualification and disability status, Q4 2019-Q4 2020, UK

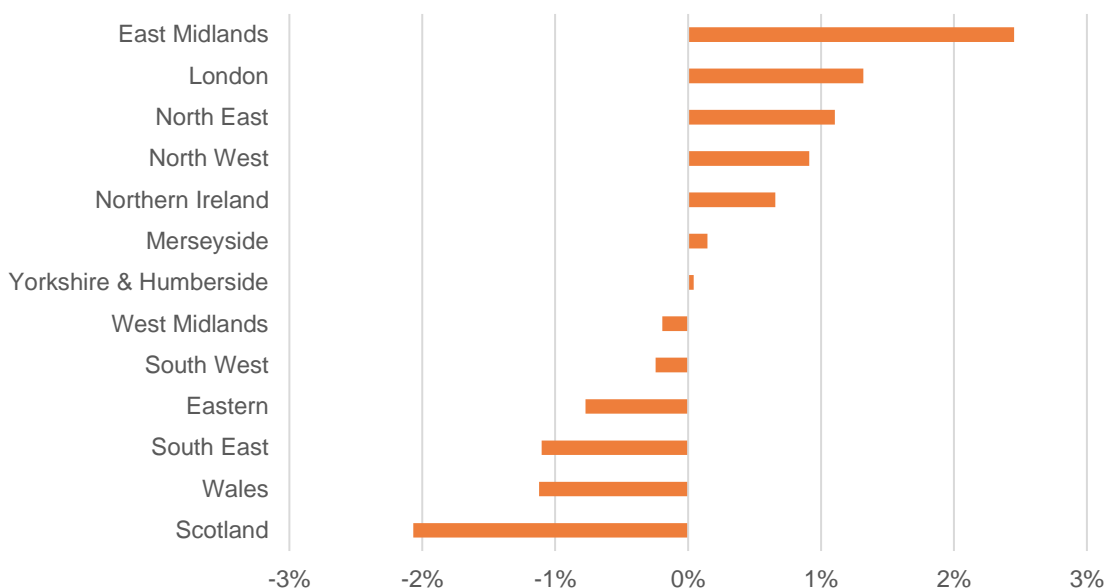


Source: L&W analysis of the Labour Force Survey March 2021

Regional employment data

The employment rate for disabled people fell most significantly in Scotland and Wales (Figure 11). It increased in several regions, including the East Midlands. The disability employment rate gap remains largest in Northern Ireland, as employment rates for disabled people more than half that for non-disabled people, 38% and 80% respectively.

Figure 11: Change in employment rate of disabled people by region, 2019-2020, UK



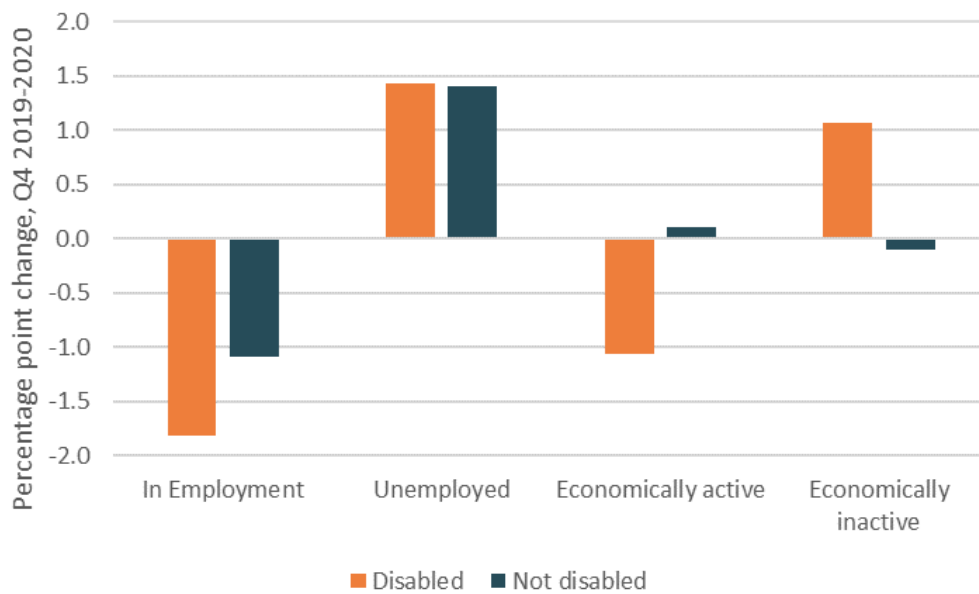
Source: L&W analysis of the Annual Population Survey March 2021

Unemployment during the pandemic

Disabled people and non-disabled people saw similar increases in unemployment rates in 2020. Both groups saw an increase of 1.4 percentage points in unemployment rates from Q4 2019 to Q4 2020 (Figure 12). Yet, the unemployment rate remains far higher for disabled people (8.4%) compared to non-disabled people (4.6%) at in Q4 2020.

However, disabled people were far more likely to become economically inactive compared to non-disabled people during the pandemic. Inactivity rates for disabled people were highest during the first lockdown period (Apr-Jun 2020). The inactivity rate for disabled people increased from 41.9% in Q4 2019 to 43.9% in Q2 2020, followed by a decrease to 42.9% in Q4 2020 (when lockdown restrictions had eased). Overall, during the pandemic, economic inactivity rates among disabled people increased by 1.1 percentage points, compared to a slight decrease (-0.1%) among non-disabled people. Disabled people were almost three times more likely to be economically inactive compared to non-disabled people at the end of 2020.

Figure 12: Changes in economic activity by disability status, Q4 2019-Q4 2020, UK

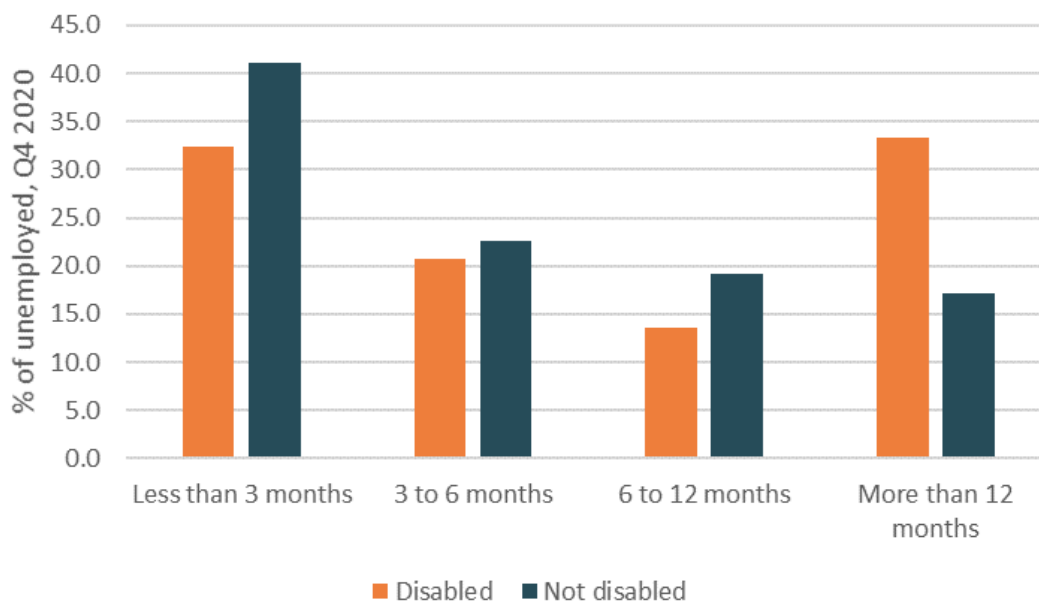


Source: L&W analysis of the Labour Force Survey March 2021

Disabled people also continue to face higher risk of being long-term unemployed.

Figure 13 below shows that almost one in three unemployed disabled people (33%) were unemployed for more than 12 months compared to less than one in five non-disabled unemployed people (17.2%) in Q4 2020.

Figure 13: Duration of unemployment, Q4 2020, UK



Source: L&W analysis of the Labour Force Survey March 2021

Looking for work during the pandemic

Looking for work has been difficult for many people. The competition for jobs available has also increased as job vacancies have decreased. Even in normal times, disabled people often face additional barriers to entering the labour market. However, factors such as being unemployed for a long time and perceptions that disabled people require special arrangements, which might have been exacerbated during the pandemic, made it more difficult for disabled people to compete for jobs. The main factors influencing people's experience of looking for work were identified as follows:

- **The duration of unemployment:** Long-term unemployment reduces the employability of people as it impacts on their knowledge and skills. Moreover, people who were unemployed before the pandemic might have lost their confidence to apply for jobs, ask for suitable adjustments to be made and stopped looking for work.

A female participant from Scotland said she had been unemployed since 2018. She stopped looking for work during the pandemic:

'Absolutely horrendous. I had been looking for work right back until that quarter of 2018. It was very difficult then, but even from very early last year, and the tail end of 2019, it got beyond a joke. There was literally hardly anything appropriate that I could work for or apply for.'

Another male participant who had been unemployed for six years prior to the pandemic had a similar experience:

'Basically, there is nothing out there anyway, at the minute. People are being laid off, never mind people being taken on. The things that I would be able to do, basically, they're managing without, I think.'

- **Confidence in the future and self-esteem:** The psychology of applying for work is often overlooked. But self-esteem can play a vital role in finding work. During times of economic downturn with increasing levels of unemployment, disabled people, like the examples above, can easily lose their confidence and assume that they will be at the end of the queue for jobs.

A study published by the Leonard Cheshire Charity in 2020 also highlighted a 'crisis of confidence' among young disabled people who are pessimistic about their futures. More than half (57%) of 18-24-year-olds reported that the pandemic had affected their ability to work, with a further 56% declaring that it had reduced their future earnings potential.³⁶

³⁶ Leonard Cheshire. Disabled people plunged into crisis by COVID employment landscape. Available at: <https://www.leonardcheshire.org/about-us/our-news/press-releases/disabled-people-plunged-crisis-covid-employment-landscape>. Accessed 26/01/2021

- **Perception of employers:** Prejudice against disabled people also came up in our interviews. Some of the participants said the employers can be less open to the idea of hiring someone with a disability and less willing to make suitable adjustments to support their employment. Employers might also have assumed that disability directly equates to needing to shield and that people with disabilities were therefore unsuitable for employment during the pandemic. Since discrimination is illegal, it is difficult to know how often it occurs. But people's testimonies suggest that it is still happening at different stages of the employment process.

The Leonard Cheshire Charity's study involved a survey with over 500 employers and provides crucial insight into the barriers faced by disabled people to entering the job market during the pandemic. The study found that more than 2 in 5 employers (42%) were discouraged from hiring disabled job applicants due to concerns around supporting them properly during the pandemic.³⁷ Moreover, 1 in 5 employers (20%) said they would be less likely to hire someone if they were disabled.

A female participant from Scotland described her experience of looking for jobs during the pandemic as follows:

'I think sometimes I found a lot of discrimination. I know things have improved over the years, but I have went for a few jobs and obviously I can't prove it, it's a very hard thing to prove but I felt that either I'm there just to make up the numbers because of my disability or my disability has come up in the interview, I've been asked about it and I've felt it's been a barrier to me getting the job at the end.'

- **Health concerns:** Many disabled people were extremely concerned about their health as some were clinically vulnerable to the virus. This situation also worsened many disabled people's prospects of finding work during the pandemic, especially if they were searching for jobs that require being at a workplace or using public transport to get to work.

A male participant with severe asthma said he couldn't find a job because all the jobs he applied for asked him to travel during the pandemic:

'It limits me to a geographical location, and even within that geographical location, I'm not permitted-, some types of work that's going out there now, they still require you to come in one day a week, maybe two days a week. I can't even afford that because of the asthma. So again, that diminishes the opportunities to almost non-existent, for myself.'

³⁷ Leonard Cheshire. Disabled people plunged into crisis by COVID employment landscape. Available at: <https://www.leonardcheshire.org/about-us/our-news/press-releases/disabled-people-plunged-crisis-covid-employment-landscape>. Accessed 26/01/2021

- **Other factors:** Other factors, such as age, gender, education level, ethnicity or employment sector, can also impact on people's ability to find work and these factors are often intertwined with disability. On some occasions, other factors may play a more significant role than disability in the likelihood of someone finding a job.

A male participant aged over 60 who lost his job due to the pandemic said he was more worried about his age rather than his disability:

'If an employer has a specific job that he requires doing then he will always employ a 40-year-old younger person who is fitter, active rather than a 62-year-old or older person.'

Similarly, another participant said that he doesn't have access to digital devices which hampered his job search more so than his disability:

'I've had a lot of people ask about Zoom but I haven't got a laptop or anything like that, so that makes it a bit difficult. So, I haven't got the right equipment for stuff like that...I've had an interview over the phone but I find in the past when I've had interviews you can come across a little bit better face-to-face rather than on the phone. I think it's harder that way because you're not showing your true self over the phone, do you know what I mean?'

It is important to understand that the barriers to gaining and sustaining employment are often complex and intertwined. Policies aiming to improve the working conditions or employment of disabled people should take into account these complex barriers.

Prospects of finding a job

When asked about their prospects of finding a job when the pandemic is over, many research participants were pessimistic. Various concerns were raised, from the increasing competitiveness of the job market and ability to work remotely. A male participant in his 50s said:

'What's worrying me just now is, obviously, once the furlough scheme ends, there are going to be a lot of other folk in the same position as me that are going to be out of work. It is a worry, in a sense, that there are going to be a lot of folk looking for the same sorts of jobs, basically.'

Another participant said it would be easier for disabled people to find work if there were more opportunities to work remotely:

'That could be, if they wanted it to be, that could be normal, working from home for certain jobs is no different from going into an office, so if it makes disabled people's lives easier, but means the work still

gets done, working from home could become much more normal, I think, that would be useful for a lot of people, means they could then exert less energy trying to physically get to work and all that sort of stuff, when if they can do their job perfectly fine from home it would be much more useful if employers were flexible on that and more accommodating.

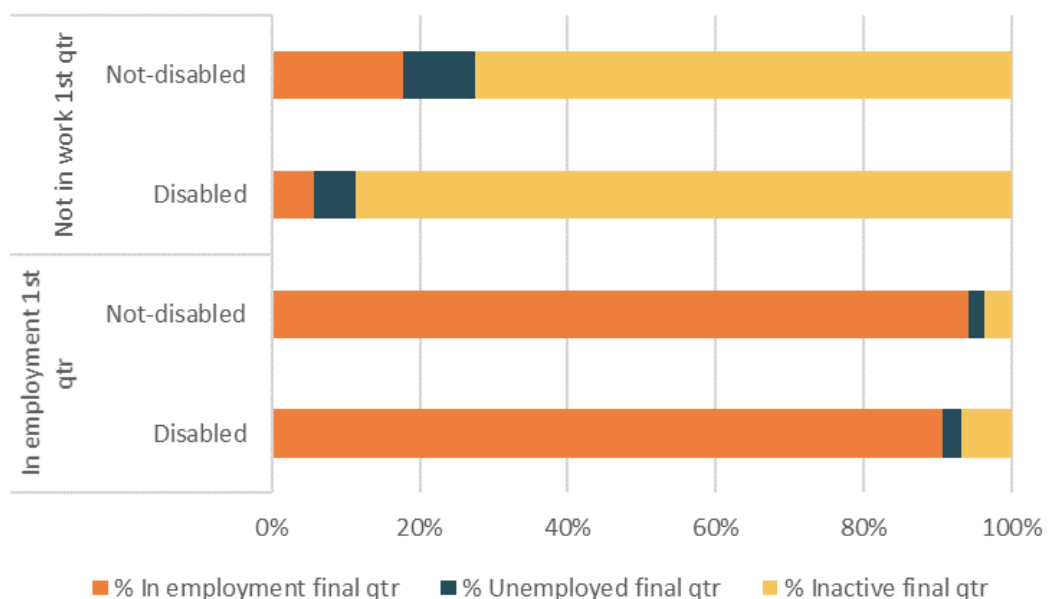
Going forward, we will need to think more about how we can support people who have been unemployed for a long period of time to get back to work or to retrain and ensure disabled people have access to opportunities to work remotely.

Employment flows

Disabled people were more than one and a half times more likely to move out of employment during 2020 compared to non-disabled people. Longitudinal LFS data allows us to track the people’s movement in and out of employment (Figure 14). 1 in 10 disabled people (9.3%) who were employed in Q4 2019 were no longer in work by Q4 2020. This compares to 1 in 17 non-disabled people (5.8%).

Non-disabled people who were out of work prior to the pandemic were three times more likely than disabled people to be in work by the end of 2020. By Q4 2020, 95% of disabled people who were out of work in Q4 2019 were either unemployment or economically inactive. This compares to 82% of non-disabled people who were out of work prior to the pandemic. Just 5.8% of disabled people out of work at the end of 2019 had moved into employment by the end of 2020, compared to 17.8% of their non-disabled counterparts.

Figure 14: Employment flows for disabled and non-disabled people, Q4 2019-Q4 2020, UK



Working conditions of disabled people

The experience of looking for work has been difficult for many. But we also see that lockdown has disproportionately impacted disabled people who remained employed compared to their non-disabled counterparts.

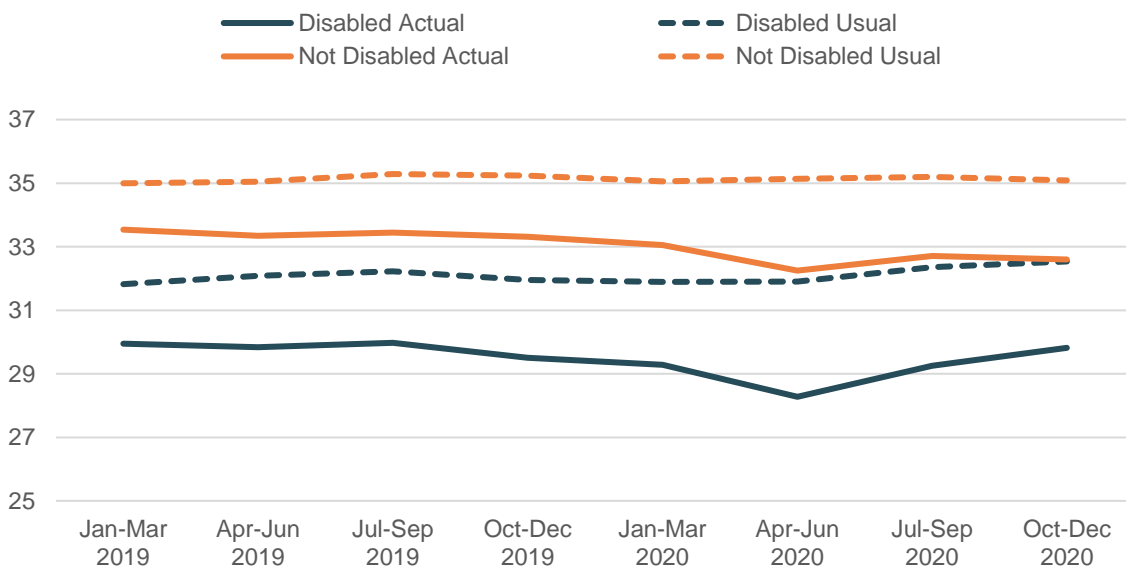
The Furlough scheme and disabled people

Many employers have had to put some or all of their employees on furlough during the coronavirus pandemic. This meant that millions of people stopped working temporarily or worked reduced hours and were furloughed for the remainder.

While official CJRS statistics are not broken down by disability status, changes in the working patterns of those still in employment allow us to estimate the relative likelihood of disabled workers being furloughed.

Disabled people saw a larger reduction in average hours worked compared to non-disabled people (Figure 15). During the first lockdown, average actual hours worked by disabled people were 11% lower than average usual hours, compared to 8% among non-disabled people. While average actual hours increased towards the end of 2020, the gap between average actual and usual hours worked by disabled people was still larger in Q4 2020 than for non-disabled people.

Figure 15: Actual vs. usual hours worked by disability status, Q4 2019-Q4 2020, UK



Source: L&W analysis of the Labour Force Survey March 2021

Disabled workers were also more likely to be temporarily away from work. In April-June 2020, 29.5% of disabled workers were temporarily away from paid work, an increase of

18.9 percentage points on the previous year. This compares to 21.1% of those not disabled, a smaller increase of 14.9 percentage points on the year.

Taken together, this suggests that disabled people were more likely to be furloughed – either full or part-time – compared to non-disabled people.

Experience of being furloughed

Many disabled people had to be furloughed for health reasons. The furlough scheme allowed them to keep their jobs which would not have been possible otherwise.

A female participant, for instance, was furloughed from March until September 2020. Although she looked for work while she was furloughed, she was happy to be furloughed as she was able to go back to her role at the end:

'It actually worked out really well. It was fine. I had my job to go back to at the end of everything, so yes, it was great having that time off while my son was off school, and the weather was great. Yes, it was brilliant. I wish I was furloughed this time, but unfortunately not.'

A male participant who is a key worker, on the other hand, was not able to be furloughed even though he wanted to. He said he was furloughed during the first lockdown but did not receive the letter indicating that he is clinically vulnerable:

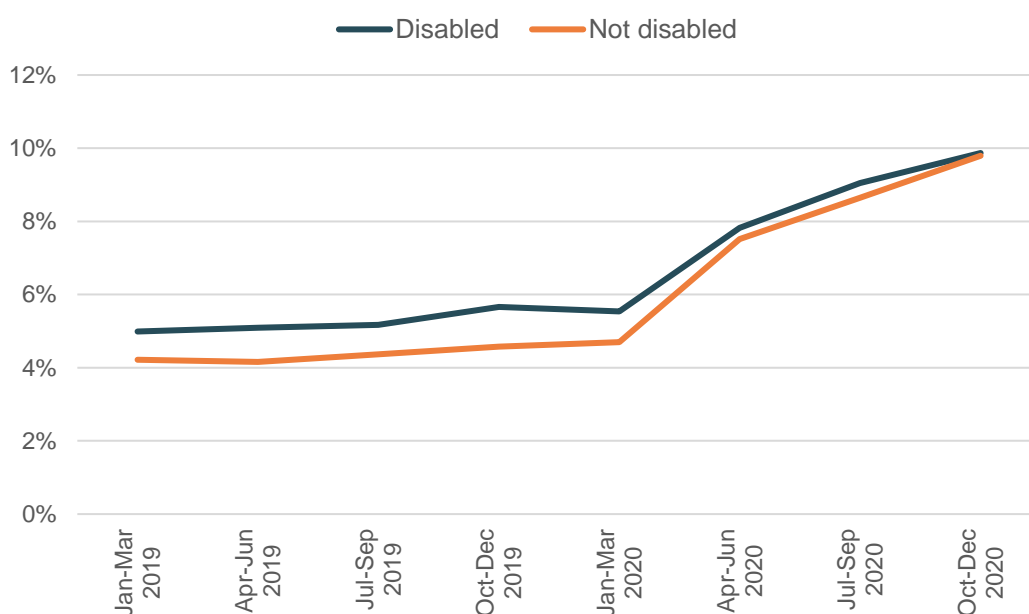
'In the first lockdown I spoke to NHS 111 and they said that yes, 'You need to shield because of your heart condition,' so I did, and my employer allowed me to work from home for a little while and then they decided to furlough me. [In the second lockdown] I asked to be put on furlough but they [employer] said no. They said that I needed to be clinically extremely vulnerable... The second time 'round I didn't receive a letter from the government, well I never received a letter from the government at all.'

As he continued to work as regular during the second and third lockdown, he got sick in January with Covid-19. Not being able to be furloughed exposed him to the virus and put his life at risk.

Working from home

Some disabled workers were able to make changes to their working conditions during the pandemic, including working from home. Disabled people were more likely to work from home compared to those without disabilities prior to the pandemic. Figure 16 shows significant increases in both disabled and non-disabled people working from home during the first lockdown (April-June 2020) and further increases through the rest of the year. The gap had almost closed by the end of 2020 when around 1 in 10 disabled and non-disabled people were working from home.

Figure 16: Proportion of working age population 'mainly' working at home, Q4 2019-Q4 2020, UK



Source: L&W analysis of the Labour Force Survey March 2021

Some disabled people reported a change in their working patterns and hours during the first lockdown. Many participants who were able to switch to working from home during the lockdown said their working hours and workload increased in the beginning.

Most of the interviewees said they enjoyed and benefitted from working from home.

Working from home helped disabled people to arrange their days around their health or care needs, and most research participants wanted to continue working from home at least a day a week if not more. A female participant who has been working from home said:

'I'm really hoping that a lot of the companies will see that they can manage with people working from home and will keep that going. It's like the parents' evenings at my son's school. The last few years I've had to miss parent's evenings because I wasn't well enough to go into school and walk about the school for two hours but this year parent's

evening was online so I was sat up in bed with a laptop and talking to the teachers so I could join in with parent's evening.'

Some employers were hesitant to allow people to work from home and turned down requests. A male participant said his employer was not keen for them to start working from home even though he has been working in the same organisation for more than 4 years:

'I could work from home and they weren't initially happy with it because they just felt it'd be an opportunity to do less work and be less efficient but in terms of actual work requirements, I've got a laptop from the office which I had in the office anyway. Brought it home and they were actually quite good but then they saw that my broadband was of sufficient speed.'

A research report by the charity Scope shows that many disabled people's requests to work from home during the pandemic were not accepted by their employers. The research found that 22% of disabled workers faced having to choose between going to their place of work and quitting their job.³⁸

³⁸ Personnel today. A fifth of disabled workers had work from home requests turned down during the pandemic. Available at: <https://www.personneltoday.com/hr/a-fifth-of-disabled-workers-had-covid-work-from-home-requests-turned-down/> Accessed 8/04/2021

Impact of the pandemic on disabled people's physical and mental health

The coronavirus pandemic had a detrimental impact on disabled people's physical and mental health. Many disabled people interviewed were also not able to attend their regular GP consultations or receive regular treatment for long term conditions during the pandemic. Many health workers were diverted from ongoing out-patient treatment and rehabilitation into frontline services for people with Covid-19 and some facilities within hospitals were re-assigned for treatment of Covid-19 patients. Research conducted by the Health Foundation also found that disabled people were more likely to report their treatment had been disrupted during the pandemic – 21.8% of disabled people stated that their treatment was cancelled or never started before the lockdown compared to 11.3% of non-disabled people.³⁹ This might have a long-term impact on disabled people's health.

Many disabled people said the pandemic increased their stress and anxiety levels.

According to ONS, almost two thirds of disabled people (65%) said their wellbeing has been affected by the pandemic compared to 50% of non-disabled people.⁴⁰ Moreover, approximately one quarter of disabled people (24%) reported low levels of life satisfaction, whereas only 11% of non-disabled people did so.⁴¹

People with mental health disabilities were particularly affected. They were two times more likely to report high levels of anxiety compared to non-disabled people – 65% of people with mental health disabilities said they had high levels of anxiety compared to 30% of non-disabled people.⁴² Many people we talked to said they felt that their mental health deteriorated during the pandemic.

A participant who has depression and anxiety among other health conditions said she has become afraid of going out due to the pandemic:

'I was pretty much agoraphobic about 6 months when it first started, because I was terrified of being near people. I remember the first time I went to the supermarket, I broke down in tears, I was on the phone to my mum the entire time because I was just having panic attack after panic attack, and I just couldn't believe how close people were getting to me, how they were picking stuff up and touching their faces, and I just couldn't cope with it at all.'

Increasing levels of stress due to the pandemic has worsened some disabled people's physical health. Mental health and physical health are closely linked. Some of the research participants said that self-isolation, lack of exercise and increasing levels of stress had a negative impact on their overall health:

³⁹ Liz Sayce. The forgotten crisis: exploring the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on disabled people. The Health Foundation. 21 February 2021. Available at: <https://www.health.org.uk/news-and-comment/blogs/the-forgotten-crisis-exploring-the-disproportionate-impact-of-the-pandemic>. Accessed 29/04/2021

⁴⁰ ONS. Coronavirus and the social impacts on disabled people in Great Britain. Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (Covid-19 module), 3 to 28 February 2021.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

`If I get stressed I immediately feel physically immediately worse normally. In that sense I can feel that it's had quite a big negative impact. On the other hand where I've been home or I haven't had to do the school run in a way I've been able to rest more. From that point of view it has benefited me, that being able to stay home and not go out and have more rest.`

A number of people reported missing health appointments. Fears of catching the virus impacted on people's decisions to visit their GP and others were not able to get appointments due to the capacity issues in the NHS. Online and phone consultations were not always able to replace the face-to-face consultations where people are able to explain themselves more clearly.

Some research participants said they were able to receive online consultations but couldn't make their tests because of the capacity issues at NHS:

`I'm supposed to see my Graves' consultant every 6 months, and I haven't seen him from I think October 2019. I had a telephone consultation with him a couple of weeks ago, but it's pointless having a consultation over the phone, and then as well, trying to get my blood tests booked in, because it's really hard to get an appointment with the GP or an appointment with the nurse, so I'm not getting my blood tests done as often, so honestly, I don't know what my levels are sitting at right now.`

A few participants mentioned that they had not been able to book appointments for over a year:

`I haven't been able to have routine appointments, I haven't been able to have chiropodist at all. I have had virtual appointments later for hand physio and these kinds of things, but podiatry which I should've had a routine appointment a year ago, I'm still waiting for an appointment for.`

Some participants said they avoided their GP because they did not want to put extra burden on NHS who already had capacity issues:

`I have to go to the GP for my diabetes and whilst I'm there we speak about the low mood and depression. I must say, my GP wants me to go in for blood tests, but I have refused on 4 occasions and told him that I thank him for working on the front-line of this war and that everything is okay with me and that his time is better spent with people who are ill because I'm not ill, either mentally or physically. I've pointed out that I thank him for his concern but there are people worse off than me. They've contacted me a few times, but I avoid it.`

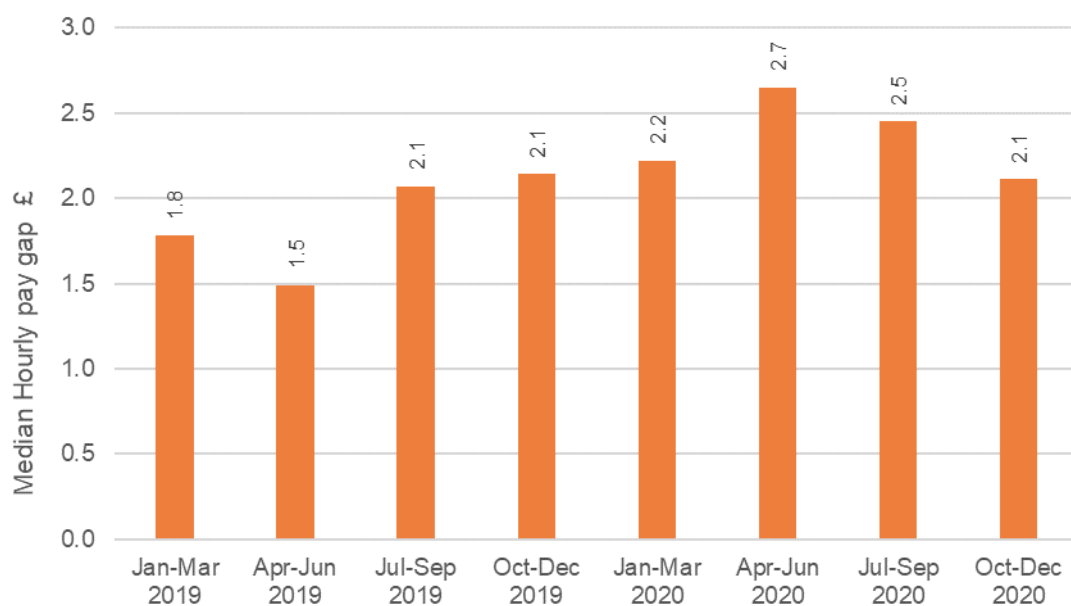
Not being able to see their GP affected many disabled people's health negatively and may have long-term health effects.

Impact of the pandemic on the disabled people's finances

The pandemic is likely to exacerbate poverty among disabled people and might make them more reliant on the benefits system. In 2019, Scope calculated the extra costs disabled people and their families need to spend “in order to enjoy the same standard of living as non-disabled people.”⁴³ They found that disabled people have to spend an extra £583 per month, making it more difficult for them to save.

Our analysis showed that during the pandemic in 2020, the pay gap between disabled and non-disabled people increased (Figure 17). **The pay gap peaked at £2.70 per hour during Apr-June 2020, during the first lockdown.** Disabled people's pay may have been affected if they were furloughed and only received 80% of their usual salary covered through the CJRS scheme. Although our findings show the disability pay gap seems to be growing, the results should be approached with caution as the disability pay gap – based on this data – is a volatile measure.

Figure 17: Median gross hourly pay, pay gap between disabled and not disabled, working age, UK



Source: L&W analysis of the Labour Force Survey March 2021

The pandemic has increased day-to-day spending on food, gas and electricity for many disabled people. According to ONS data, almost 3 in 10 (26%) disabled people said they had to use their savings to cover living costs due to the pandemic's effect on their finances compared to 22% of non-disabled people.⁴⁴

⁴³ Evan John, Greg Thomas and Anel Touchet. *Disability Price Tag*. Scope. February 2019.

⁴⁴ ONS. Coronavirus and the social impacts on disabled people in Great Britain. Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (Covid-19 module), 3 to 28 February 2021.

Almost one third (27%) of disabled people said the pandemic affected their access to groceries, medication and essentials compared to only 12% of non-disabled people. Similarly, some people reported not being able to shop physically and noted that relying on online deliveries increased their spending. A female participant with mental health conditions said that she used to go to the near supermarket for her grocery shop to access foods for more affordable prices. As her mental health deteriorated during the lockdown, she couldn't travel to the cheapest store and ended up spending more on her grocery shopping:

‘With food though there was an increase because normally I would go to Aldi, which is a bit further away from us, but because I wasn't able to go out on the bus and everything and I didn't really want to be getting taxis, we've been shopping more at Asda and Iceland, which is quite a bit more expensive, so it worked out we were spending about £60 more each month, which obviously isn't great when you're on a reduced income. ‘

Spending more time at home meant an increase in utility bills which put an additional burden on some households' finances – 23% of disabled people said they struggled to pay bills compared to 12% of non-disabled people.⁴⁵ Another male participant who was unemployed on benefits added that his spending has increased:

‘Obviously, outgoings are costing a wee bit more. Obviously, the community charge and all of that, that went up. Gas and electricity, because everyone's more at home, you're using more gas and electricity, so obviously that's gone up in price and stuff like that. Plus, what I've found as well, because of the pandemic, insurance has seemed to have gone up as well. A lot of things, it's got dearer. ‘

The pandemic had worse impacts on households with reduced income due to loss of work. A male participant in his 40s who was self-employed had to self-furlough himself due to the adverse effect of the pandemic on his business. When asked about the impact of the pandemic on his finances, he said:

‘For example, my grandmother died on the 1st of February. Normally, I'd have travelled back home for something like that, I couldn't afford to do that. Normally I'd have gone home, I'm the first grandchild in my family, we have all this traditional stuff, where I'm from. ‘

It is important to note that financial experiences of disabled people varied based on their socio-economic background. Disabled people who were in employment and did not

⁴⁵ ONS. Coronavirus and the social impacts on disabled people in Great Britain. Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (Covid-19 module), 3 to 28 February 2021.

experience cuts in their income said they were able to save more money than usual as they started cooking at home and no longer had to commute to work. A male participant who was working as a high-level manager in a company also stated that their savings increased as their expenses decreased during the pandemic:

‘To be honest, part of it is because we weren’t able to go out, so we had two families planned which got cancelled. That saved us loads of money and because we can’t go out and spend anything, I did some house renovations or whatever, so we’ve saved a lot more money.’

Future employment trends for disabled people

It is difficult to predict the future trajectory of employment for disabled people, given the many uncertainties ahead. Our research shows that there was progress in increasing the number of disabled people in employment before 2020, but the pandemic may have curtailed this. We know that the employment of disabled people was disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and there has been a slowdown in the number of disabled people getting into employment. Moreover, our research showed that disabled people may be more vulnerable to redundancy and to be among the long-term unemployed after the pandemic.

The future path of the employment rate of disabled people and gap with non-disabled people depends on a number of factors, including:

- how many disabled people retain their jobs after the furlough scheme comes to an end;
- how long it takes for recruitment levels to get back to pre-covid levels for both disabled and non-disabled people;
- and employer behaviour, including the degree of awareness and focus on inclusive recruitment and adjustments for disabled people in work to maintain employment.

Chapter 4. Improving employment outcomes for disabled people

The government's target is for one million more disabled people to be in employment by 2027. Achieving this, and narrowing the disability employment rate gap, will require action to increase the number of disabled people finding work and to support employment retention for those in work. In addition, we need to continue focusing on improving living standards, the quality of work and progression opportunities for disabled people.

Our policy recommendations have three main aims:

- 1) Preventing further job losses due to the pandemic's ongoing impact on the economy
- 2) Closing the disability employment gap by equipping disabled people with timely and effective support including those who acquire disabilities during their working life
- 3) Improving the working conditions of disabled people by introducing measures to support high quality, flexible jobs and working from home opportunities.

Recommendation 1: Minimise job losses by extending CJRS if further restrictions are required, and ensure timely support is available when the scheme ends

Our research shows that disabled people are more likely to have been furloughed, and hundreds of thousands of disabled people are still currently furloughed. The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) has helped to protect millions of jobs. The Scheme was initially due to end at the end of April 2021, though has now been extended until September 2021. This extension is welcome and the revised timing fits with the expected ending of the majority of restrictions.

Many disabled people on the furlough scheme have not worked for many months. We need to make sure that disabled people benefit fully from employment support, including Job Entry Targeted Support (JETS) and specialist Work Coaches, where needed. We also need to ensure that those who have been furloughed and not worked over the last year are able to access support designed for long-term unemployed people through Restart.

If significant economic restrictions are required beyond September, the CJRS should be extended to protect jobs and incomes as long as economic restrictions are continued. The Government should also count time on furlough toward eligibility for the Restart programme and other employment support, and make disabled people a priority for early entry onto Restart.

Recommendation 2: Ensure that existing employment support programmes meet the needs of disabled people

Previous welfare to work programmes have been less supportive and less effective for disabled people. Disabled people on the Work Programme which was rolled out after the last recession were less likely to be satisfied with the support they received, less likely to find work, and less likely to stay in work.⁴⁶ DWP also has limited evidence on what works in helping disabled people to find and stay in work.⁴⁷

The Government should ensure that employment support is tailored to meet the needs of disabled people. This includes ensuring that there is a sufficient number of new Disability Employment Advisors (DEAs), providing targeted training for JobCentre Plus (JCP) and Restart work coaches and ensuring employment support is effectively integrated into health and mental health support.

The Government should also improve evidence on the impacts of policy and practice designed to improve disabled people's employment outcomes, rather than focusing on a target that cannot be directly linked to any specific interventions.

Recommendation 3: Expand eligibility for Kickstart to support long-term unemployed disabled people

Kickstart has been developed to create temporary job opportunities for young people at risk of long-term unemployment. However, we also need to support disabled people who are older than 25 but who are still disadvantaged in the labour market.

The Government should extend Kickstart so that disabled people who are 25 or older and long-term unemployed can access the jobs it creates. It should also be extended a year beyond its planned end in December 2021 to allow employers to deliver placements and offer employment opportunities.

Recommendation 4: Enhance access to vocational rehabilitation for those who acquire disability during their working life

The majority of disabled people acquire their disabilities throughout life - only 17% of disabled people were born with their disabilities.⁴⁸ Acquiring a disability can be traumatising for many people.

The Government should improve vocational rehabilitation for those who acquire disabilities through trauma, major illness (including Covid-19) and long-term conditions to ensure they can retain their current employment or find new suitable and accessible work opportunities.

⁴⁶ Gov.uk. The Work Programme: impact assessment. Available at: The Work Programme: impact assessment - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk) Accessed: 8/04/2021

⁴⁷ National Audit Office (2019) Supporting disabled people to work

⁴⁸ St. Andrews University. Facts on Disability. Available at: <https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/hr/edi/disability/facts/#:~:text=Over%207%20million%20people%20or,article%20Work%20for%20disabled%20people>). Accessed 20/04/2021

Employment goals should be included in peoples' recovery goals and rehabilitation prescriptions where appropriate. They should also be part of long-term care plans and include early personalised support from an employment specialist and practical support, for example accounting for transport, mobility, technology, and adaptations that remove the barriers to work.

Supporting people recovering from a major illness or living independently with long-term conditions to return to work, family, and community life should be seen by health workers and allied professionals as key milestones in recovery. Employment support should also be included in plans for long Covid rehabilitation.

Recommendation 5: Encourage employers to make more high quality flexible and part-time jobs available

Flexible working arrangements improve the work-life balance of not only disabled people but all employees. However, for some disabled people flexible or part-time work opportunities might be a necessity as their health might not allow them to work full-time or may require them to take breaks, attend GP visits or have caring responsibilities. Research shows that offering flexible working not only benefits employees but also the employers as it decreases absenteeism and increases productivity.⁴⁹

Disabled people who are in work are much more likely to work part-time than those who do not have disabilities. Lack of high quality flexible and part-time roles contributes to the disability pay gap, and limits opportunities for progression.

The government should use the upcoming employment bill to promote the availability of more high quality flexible and part-time jobs.

Recommendation 6: Ensure disabled workers have fair access to increased opportunities to work from home

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) recommends encouraging more flexibility and working from home practices when applicable to support disabled workers and to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on their lives. Some disabled workers were able to make changes to their working conditions during the pandemic. However, as the research by the Scope showed us, many disabled people's requests to work from home during the pandemic were not accepted by their employers.

The Access to Work scheme has been extended to support those disabled workers who switched to working from home during the pandemic. UNISON argues that the scheme has not been effective in supporting disabled workers' needs during the lockdown. A survey conducted by UNISON in June 2020 showed that only 5% of participants had received help from the scheme and 41% did not know about the scheme at the time of the research.⁵⁰ Research conducted by the Business Disability Forum also criticised the length of time between individuals first contacting the scheme and those people being provided

⁴⁹ CIPD, Flexible Working: the business case. Available at: https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/flexible-working-business-case_tcm18-52768.pdf. November 2018. Accessed 29/04/2021

⁵⁰ UNISON, Covid-19 and disabled workers: Time for a homeworking revolution? June 2020

with support.⁵¹ The research found that it often takes between 3 to 6 months for support to be received.

We need to find ways to increase access to flexible working and working from home arrangements for disabled workers. As part of this, the Government needs to raise awareness of the support available through Access to Work.

Recommendation 7: Review ways to promote transparency around disability employment in the workplace

Since 2017, employers with more than 250 employees have been required to report the gender pay gap in their organisation. A recent study by the London School of Economics (LSE) found that gender pay gap reporting in the UK led to an increase in the wages of women employees.⁵²

Gender pay gap transparency practices show the power of mandatory reporting versus voluntary reporting.⁵³ The Government should consult on whether and how to introduce a requirement to report pay gaps for disabled people, or to report on the measures companies are taking to reduce any gaps and promote equal opportunities.

Recommendation 8: Make the £20 uplift to Universal Credit permanent

Disabled people are more likely to be in receipt of Universal Credit, both because they are more likely to be out of work, and because those who are in work are more likely to be low paid. The £20 increase was introduced in March 2020 as a measure to support people whose income had been hit by the pandemic. The increase in Universal Credit is currently due to expire in September 2021. Ending the uplift would lead to a decrease in income for hundreds of thousands of people with disabilities both in and out of work.

The £20 increase should be made permanent, and extended to legacy benefits, to protect the incomes of disabled people.

⁵¹ Angela Matthews. Missed opportunities: Imagining a disability inclusive Kickstart scheme that joins up with a fit for purpose Access to Work. 3 December 2020. ERSA. Available at:

<http://ersa.org.uk/media/blog/kickstartaccesstowork>. Accessed 29/04/2021

⁵² Jack Blundell. Wage Responses to gender pay gap reporting requirements. Centre for Economic Performance. No: 1750 March 2021. Available at: <https://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp1750.pdf> Accessed 4/04/2021

⁵³ Liz Sayce, Professor Nick Bacon, Professor Kim Hoque, Professor Victoria Wass, Professor Melanie Jones. Improving disabled people's employment and pay. LSE and Disability Work. Available at:

<https://www.disabilityatwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Proposal-for-transparent-reporting.pdf>.

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