



House of Commons  
Women and Equalities  
Committee

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# The National Disability Strategy: Government Response to the Committee's First Report

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Second Special Report of Session  
2023–24

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## Women and Equalities Committee

The Women and Equalities Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Government Equalities Office (GEO).

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### Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Hasan Al-Habib (Committee Specialist), Lizzie Arnold (Senior Media and Communications Officer), James Clarke (Committee Specialist), Chloë Cockett (Senior Committee Specialist), Mark Earl (Safeguarding and Witness Support Officer), Matthew Eaton (Committee Specialist), Michelle Garratty (Committee Operations Manager), Roberta Guerrina (Parliamentary Academic Fellow), Phil Jones (Clerk), Jack Smith (Committee Operations Officer), Charlotte Swift (Second Clerk) and Hennie Ward (Media and Communications Officer).

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You can follow the Committee on X (formerly Twitter) using [@Commonswomequ](https://twitter.com/Commonswomequ).

## Second Special Report

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The Committee published its First Report of Session 2023–24, *The National Disability Strategy* (HC 34) on 6 December 2023. The Government response was received on 6 February and is appended below.

## Appendix: Government Response

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The Government is grateful to the Committee for their inquiry into the National Disability Strategy (the Strategy). The report highlights the Committee's views on:

- how far disabled people influenced the development of the Strategy.
- the Government's engagement with stakeholders on disability policy-making
- the Government's commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)

The Strategy sets out the Government's long-term commitment to transform the everyday lives of disabled people. It is a cross-government effort to ensure disabled people are able to thrive and participate in our society, aiming to make a real difference in all areas of life. The actions set out in the Strategy demonstrate the Government's commitment to implementing the UNCRPD through its legislation, policies and services.

We remain committed to fulfilling the commitments made in the Strategy. This work sits alongside and complements the proposals for 2024 in the Disability Action Plan, showing the Government's commitment to improving disabled people's lives in the short, medium and long term.

Our response to the Committee's recommendations is below:

### Strategic approach:

**Recommendation: Disabled people and their representative organisations told us they have had little to no influence over the National Disability Strategy. The result is a disability strategy in name only: a list consisting mainly of pre-existing departmental actions with minimal strategic thinking behind how those actions interact. Only a strategy which integrates different policy areas—such as education, health, social care, employment and transport—will have a truly transformational effect on the lives of disabled people.** (Paragraph 7).

The Strategy was developed with significant engagement of disabled people, their organisations and disability charities. This engagement included:

- meetings with our strategic disability stakeholder forums:
  - 42 meetings of the 9 Regional Stakeholder Networks, involving disabled people, their organisations, parents and carers, totalling 225 members

- 10 meetings with the Disability Charities Consortium, a coalition of the UK's largest disability charities: Leonard Cheshire Disability, Mencap, Mind, RNIB, RNID, National Autistic Society, Scope, Sense and Business Disability Forum
- 4 meetings with the Disabled People's Organisation (DPO) Forum, which represented 14 DPOs across England
- 11 roundtable discussions with a total of 98 disabled people about their experiences in daily life
- 6 roundtable discussions on specific themes with a total of 130 attendees including disabled people, DPOs, charities, academia and think tanks

This extensive engagement was supplemented by thorough analysis of the evidence base on disability, with a particular focus on the barriers faced by disabled people, alongside the UK Disability Survey (one of the largest ever evidence-gathering exercises of its kind, with input from over 14,000 disabled people), and qualitative research commissioned by the Disability Unit (DU). The qualitative research helped us develop better insight into the daily lives of a sample of disabled people—before and during the Covid-19 lockdown. Both reports are published.<sup>1 2</sup>

The Strategy is key to delivering the Government's long-term vision to transform disabled people's lives. With contributions from every corner of government, it amounts to one of the broadest packages of practical actions so far put together. As set out below, the Government is monitoring and reporting on progress to demonstrate that the Strategy is being delivered.

#### **A longer-term approach:**

**Recommendation: The Government should develop the National Disability Strategy beyond the short-term actions already in progress. To support this approach, it should work with disabled people to develop a ten-year strategy with an action plan for the first five years outlining clear targets and timescales for delivery. The Disability Unit should have the final say on all disability policy sitting in or originating from other Government Departments to ensure that the whole of Government works towards the same long-term strategic objectives. It should also have the power to challenge relevant Ministers.** (Paragraph 13).

The Government is fully committed to delivering the long-term vision in the Strategy. In addition, the new Disability Action Plan sets out the immediate actions we will take in 2024 to improve disabled people's lives and lay the foundations for longer term change. One of the ambitions behind the development of the plan is to ensure the Government continues to deliver improvements to disabled people's lives until the end of this Parliament.

Every government department has a responsibility to consider the needs of disabled people in their policies and work to make improvements, as set out in the public sector

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1 [Exploring the Everyday Lives of Disabled People. Published 28 July 2021](#)

2 [The Lived Experience of Disabled People during the Covid-19 Pandemic. Published 28 July 2021](#)

equality duty. We have taken steps to embed this approach in government. This is a shared responsibility and it would not be appropriate for the DU to have the final say on all disability policy sitting in or originating from other government departments.

The DU already works with officials across Government to raise awareness of issues relating to disability and to strengthen Government's engagement with disability stakeholders.

To support this, the Prime Minister has appointed Ministerial Disability Champions in every government department, all listed on GOV.UK. They provide a personal commitment to championing accessibility and opportunity for disabled people within their departments' policies. The Ministerial Disability Champions meet regularly chaired by the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work. Past meetings have focused on:

- Planning and priorities for the Disability Action Plan
- Stakeholder views on the impact of cost of living on disabled people
- Areas of policy where Departments can strengthen joint working.

Ministerial Disability Champions have also attended stakeholder meetings to discuss issues including housing provision and transport accessibility

#### **Engagement with disabled people:**

**Recommendation: The Government should immediately establish a national advisory group bringing together the DPO Forum England and the chairs of Regional Stakeholder Networks. The advisory group's remit should include reviewing all government policy proposals targeted towards people with disabilities; advising ministers on issues facing disabled people; and working closely with the Disability Unit and the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work on the further development, implementation and evaluation of the National Disability Strategy.** (Paragraph 28).

This recommendation would effectively replicate the DU's existing stakeholder engagement framework. The framework has been designed to ensure that voices across the disability sector (disabled people and their communities and organisations, charities, business leaders) are meaningfully considered throughout the development, implementation and evaluation of the DU's work, from the earliest opportunity.

The framework centres on the DU's relationship with four major stakeholder groups:

- **Disabled People's Organisation (DPO) Forum England** - Since spring 2022, representatives from DPO Forum England have met DU officials monthly, and the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work quarterly, to discuss the Forum's views, questions, or concerns about specific government policies and their impact on disabled people. The DU also connects the Forum to colleagues in other departments. Recent examples of this include the development of the Retained EU Law Act, DWP's consultation on Workplace Capability Assessments, the government's #AskDontAssume disability perceptions campaign, and DHSC's Care And Support statutory guidance.
- **Regional Stakeholder Network (RSN)** - Each RSN Chair meets one-to-one with a DU official every six weeks. The entire Chair cohort meets the DU monthly

to discuss and compare issues within their regions and to hear information to cascade to the wider RSN membership. The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work meets RSN Chairs quarterly to understand regional issues facing disabled people across England. The DU also connects RSN Chairs to colleagues in other departments. Recent examples of this include an accessibility assessment of King Charles III's Coronation, our #AskDontAssume disability perceptions campaign, the Disabled Persons' Transport Advisory Committee (DPTAC), and DWP's Autism Employment Review.

- **The Disability Charities Consortium (DCC)** - DCC organisations provide advice to Government officials on developing policy, either on an individual basis or through other fora. The DU meets senior officials from the DCC monthly, and supports the CEOs of its membership organisations to meet the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work quarterly.
- **Disability and Access Ambassadors (DAAs)** - DAAs are senior business leaders who encourage improvements in the accessibility and quality of services and facilities in their sector for disabled people. There are currently ambassadors in 19 different sectors, with one post being recruited. The group meets the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work quarterly.

A recent example of how these stakeholders input into government policy development was during the Disability Action Plan consultation. Over that 12-week period, the DU held or co-hosted 25 events to which over 140 stakeholders were invited. DPO Forum England and RSN Chairs, alongside DU's other stakeholders, were invited to attend roundtables focused on specific policy proposals within the Disability Action Plan, as well as discussion forums to discuss the plan as a whole.

In addition, Ministers and officials regularly undertake visits and engage with disabled individuals and groups. Using the expertise from operational colleagues such as Work Coaches, Disability Employment Advisors and other experts on the ground, this ensures that our understanding of the issues affecting disabled people is both broad and deep.

The DU regularly seeks additional opportunities to work with stakeholders - for example, the Disability Action Plan includes a commitment for the DU to create disabled people's experience panels in specific areas to contribute views and support policy development. These panels will include stakeholders both in and beyond our strategic framework.

#### **Progress on remaining actions:**

**Recommendation: The Disability Unit, in its response to this Report, should provide specific details on the steps it is taking to improve the evidence base on disability, including on disabled people's lived experiences and the intersection with other protected characteristics.** (Paragraph 32).

The Government is working hard to improve the evidence base on disability. DU's own research has shown significant gaps in the data and evidence on disabled people in the UK. This is also reflected in the 2018 ONS audit<sup>3</sup> (still largely reflective of the picture today).

Our assessment is that these issues with data quality and coverage are more pronounced and widespread in relation to disability than other protected characteristic areas.

DU has a small team of specialist disability researchers and analysts focusing on improving the data and evidence on disabled people, including:

- (1) Conducting or commissioning research to address specific data and evidence gaps, with a particular emphasis on those that are cross-cutting.
- (2) Working with partners across government to support improvements in data quality in existing datasets held by other government departments. This includes encouraging data collection on disability status and impairment, and the use of harmonised standards.<sup>4</sup> This allows for cross-comparison across datasets, enabling a broad view which looks beyond isolated outcomes.
- (3) Building a case for a new national disability survey to fill significant data gaps that would provide crucial data on the personal experiences, needs and aspirations of disabled people, and how this intersects with other protected characteristics. This kind of data is vital for understanding the drivers of disparities (e.g. the disability employment gap).

Due to the cross-cutting nature of this work the disability data and evidence team plays a central role in providing the tools, impetus and oversight required to work on data quality. It is paramount that other government departments buy-in to this work too, for example supporting funding requirements and sharing data sources.

#### Status of the strategy:

**Recommendation: The act of appealing the High Court's judgment on the lawfulness of the National Disability Strategy created many months of uncertainty and frustration for disabled people and their representative organisations. It was unclear why the Government chose to pause 14 policies in the strategy while allowing a hundred others to continue. Failure to update disabled people on those actions that remained ongoing only served to exacerbate confusion and anxiety. The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work—who is charged with oversight of implementing the strategy—should have had a system in place to monitor the actions still in progress and to update disabled people's organisations and other relevant stakeholders accordingly. (Paragraph 38).**

In January 2022, the High Court declared the Strategy was unlawful because the UK Disability Survey, which was used to inform it, was held to be a voluntary consultation that failed to comply with the legal requirements on public consultations. The judgment led to significant uncertainty as to when stakeholder engagement became a formal public consultation to which those requirements apply. It was necessary to appeal it.

In July 2023, the Court of Appeal overturned the High Court declaration and agreed that the UK Disability Survey was an insight and information gathering exercise that did not amount to voluntary consultation. This means that both the Strategy and the UK Disability Survey are lawful, and the Government is able to continue with the important

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4 [Impairment Harmonised Standard. Published May 2020](#)

work of implementing this long-term strategy to transform disabled people's everyday lives for the better. In winning the appeal we were able to revive the Strategy rather than withdrawing it.

During the appeal process the DWP Secretary of State wanted to minimise the risk of acting inconsistently with the Court's declaration, without compromising on the ambitious agenda we are delivering for disabled people. The Government therefore paused a limited number of policies (14) which were referred to in the Strategy or are directly connected with it.

The vast majority of departmental commitments outlined in the Strategy were not impacted by the High Court's initial judgment, and were therefore largely unaffected. The Government progressed well on delivering these and other commitments, as can be seen by the Government's achievements set out in the then MfDP's letter<sup>5</sup> to the Chair of the Committee, placed in the House Library in July 2023.

Because of legal constraints on implementation of the paused policies, the Government was unable to centrally monitor the Strategy's actions which were still in progress and was also unable to update DPOs and other stakeholders accordingly.

#### **Updating Parliament:**

**Recommendation: The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work should immediately update Parliament and disability stakeholders with specific timescales for delivery on all outstanding actions in the National Disability Strategy.** (Paragraph 39).

The then Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work gave a full update to Parliament on 18 September 2023 outlining progress on the Strategy,<sup>6 7</sup> including:

- how the Government proposed to take forward the 14 commitments that were paused to comply with the High Court's declaration.
- all other commitments in the Strategy, including whether the individual commitments have been delivered or are in progress: 47 commitments had been completed, 54 commitments were in progress, 1 is currently paused and 2 are no longer being taken forward.

We will publish further updates on progress to deliver the Strategy's commitments alongside our planned report on progress made on the Disability Action Plan, to provide a clear update across the Government's disability agenda.

#### **Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**

**Recommendation: The Government, in response to this report, should set out:**

**a) its reasons for failing to attend the August 2023 meeting with the UN Committee;**

5 [Letter dated 4 July 2023 from Tom Pursglove MP to Caroline Nokes MP regarding an update on the National Disability Strategy](#)

6 [Update on the National Disability Strategy 18 September 2023](#)

7 [Accompanying note on the National Disability Strategy 18 September 2023](#)



**b) Why it has not yet adequately addressed the UN Committee's 2016 recommendations, the steps it is taking to progress that work and by when those recommendations will be met; and**

**c) The specific steps it is taking to ensure that the whole of Government understands and follows the principles of the CRPD in policymaking. (Paragraph 43).**

**Government response to recommendation a)**

The UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities informed the UK Government of the option to attend the non-compulsory public session which was held on 28 August 2023. It was arranged in relation to the Committee's review of the UK Government's follow-up reports to the 2016 inquiry under the Optional Protocol to the UNCRPD.

We take our engagement with the Committee very seriously and this Government has followed all of the Committee's rules and procedures related to the inquiry follow-up process. Due to competing pressures and commitments, by the time we received the date of the dialogue we would have been unable to adequately prepare. We therefore agreed with the Committee that we would participate in the non-compulsory dialogue in March 2024. This agreement was mutually reached and is within existing protocols. At this dialogue, Government representatives will provide further information on the UK's progress in addition to the UK's previous follow-up reports and we look forward to attending.

**Government response to recommendation b)**

The Government remains committed to the UNCRPD and to improving the lives of disabled people. To tackle the barriers faced by disabled people, we have implemented numerous policies and programmes including investing in employment support initiatives, improving the health and disability benefits system and social care support, and improving the accessibility of homes and transport.

We recognise that more needs to be done so we have consulted on and published the Disability Action Plan, setting out the immediate action the Government will take in 2024 to improve disabled people's lives, laying the foundations for longer term change, and complementing the long-term vision set out in the Strategy.

The UK's timely follow-up reports to the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities' 2016 inquiry (published on GOV.UK with accessible versions) demonstrate our ongoing commitment across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to supporting disabled people through legislation, policies and programmes that tackle the barriers faced by disabled people to realise their full participation and inclusion in society.

We look forward to outlining the UK's further progress to the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities at their session in March, as agreed with the Committee.

**Government response to recommendation c)**

As set out in the Disability Action Plan, the DU will work to improve understanding of the UNCRPD across government, aiming to increase knowledge of the Convention and what it means for public policy across government. This work complements the Strategy's commitment to implement 5 elements in policy making and delivery.

## **Conclusion**

The Government appreciates the recommendations raised in the Committee's report and thanks the Committee for their time.

We believe the combined commitments in the National Disability Strategy and the Disability Action Plan show the Government is ambitious, forward-thinking and strategic in bringing Departments together to improve disabled people's lives both in the short and long-term. We continue to be committed to listening to, and working with, disabled people to ensure they have meaningful input into Government policy development and output.

*February 2024*