

Enhancing Welfare and Reducing Food Insecurity Among the Disabled Population in the United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

The United Kingdom, despite its strong economy and global influence, faces significant challenges in addressing poverty and food insecurity, particularly among its disabled population. Disabled individuals face severe financial hardships, higher living costs, lower employment rates, and significant income disparities compared to non-disabled individuals. These disparities lead to prevalent food insecurity - 40% of disabled households compared to 10% of non-disabled ones, which have only been exacerbated by rising inflation and living costs. The UK's welfare system is also inadequate and inconvenient, with reduced benefits from austerity measures and complex application processes, preventing many from meeting basic needs. Significant delays and stress in navigating the benefits system prevent disabled individuals from claiming essential benefits. Beyond systematic complexities, societal stigmatization, driven by government rhetoric and media portrayals, also often deters disabled individuals from seeking support, leading to discrimination and mistreatment, which deepens their isolation and hardship. Thus, comprehensive reforms are essential to address these issues. Increasing welfare support, expanding the definition of disability, simplifying the application process, and enhancing public awareness are critical steps, and implementing these changes can help the UK better support its disabled citizens, reduce food insecurity, and promote a more inclusive society.

Introduction

The United Kingdom is a wealthy, developed country in the northwest region of Europe consisting of England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland home to 68,138,484 (CIA, 2024). The UK is a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary system and is well-known for its influence on global politics and economics as a major financial hub. The typical family structure in the UK is a nuclear family with two parents and one or two children, typically living in suburban houses or urban apartments (Evason, 2016). Currently, in terms of real GDP, the UK is number nine globally with an annual real GDP of \$3.187 trillion in 2022 (CIA, 2024). Despite its wealth, many people in the UK still live in poverty and are food insecure, with vulnerable groups such as the disabled populations being at a higher risk.

Over the last ten years, there has been an increase in the proportion of the UK population reporting disabilities. The Family Resources Survey (FRS) indicates that in 2010/2011, 19% of the total population had a disability, which rose to 22% by 2020/2021, totaling 14.6 million people (Department for Work and Pensions, 2022). This growth is largely driven by the rising prevalence of mental health conditions, as evidenced by the FRS reporting that 29% of disabled individuals experienced mental health-related illnesses in 2020/2021, compared to 16% in 2012/2013. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) also notes that four-fifths of the increase in disability benefit recipients over the past two decades can be attributed to those with psychiatric conditions.

Despite this, physical impairments remain the most prevalent form of disability, with 46% of disabled individuals experiencing mobility-related impairments (Weston, 2022).

Problems

Financial Disparity and Food Insecurity Among the Disabled

Disabled individuals in the UK have consistently faced severe financial burdens that have only worsened in recent times. In the late 1990s, the poverty rate among disabled households, defined as a household with at least one disabled individual, was around 20% to 44% higher than households without disabled individuals after equalizing for disability. In more recent studies, it has been estimated that extra costs of disabilities range from 11% to 69% of one's income. These costs, which can average around £1000 per month, are attributed to assistive equipment, caretakers, medical coverage, and accessible transportation (Alexiou, 2023). Nearly half of the individuals in poverty live in disabled households and these households face a specific financial burden that significantly exceeds that of non-disabled households, requiring an extra £975 monthly in 2019 to achieve the same standard of living, which increases to £1122 when taking into account the inflation of 2022/2023 (Biggs et al., 2023). Furthermore, a 2022 study by the IFS showed that 55% of disabled adults had trouble affording energy bills, and 36% had difficulty with rent or mortgage payments. In contrast, 40% of non-disabled adults found energy bills challenging, and 27% struggled with housing payments (Biggs et al., 2023).

One of the main drivers of these heavy financial burdens for disabled households is the significant economic disparity between disabled and non-disabled workers. About 54% of disabled individuals of working age are engaged in paid employment, compared to 80% of their non-disabled counterparts. Additionally, disabled workers earn on average 30% less than non-disabled workers (Weston, 2022). These disparities contribute to the economic challenges and increased risk of food insecurity for disabled individuals.

This financial vulnerability is reflected in the rates of food insecurity among disabled communities. Currently, 40% of disabled households are food insecure, in stark contrast to just 10% of non-disabled households (Alexiou, 2023). Among individuals with disabilities, having multiple disabilities significantly increases the likelihood of experiencing food insecurity, with each additional disability raising the odds by 19% (Hadfield-Spoor et al., 2022). From 2004 to 2016, the rate of food insecurity in disabled households doubled, from 27.9% to 53.5%, most likely due to the 2008 recession and rising living costs (Loopstra et al., 2019). Among working-age individuals referred to food banks, 69% have a disability as per the Equality Act 2010, contrasting with 26% in the general population (Biggs et al., 2023).

Flaws in the Benefits System

Insufficient support from the benefits system, either due to low overall benefit amounts or obstacles to accessing these benefits, has been widely identified as the most significant driver of food insecurity among disabled individuals in the UK. Around 1.6 million people in the UK receive both incapacity and disability benefits, yet struggle to meet basic needs (Biggs et al., 2023). The insufficient support has only been exacerbated by systematic reductions in funding and realignment of welfare policies over the past decade. The trajectory of UK welfare policy in recent decades, especially after the 2008 financial crisis, has been heavily shaped by broader economic policies and the shift towards austerity measures to reduce public spending. These measures reduced spending across various sectors, ranging from the school system to prisons, with central government funding for city councils falling by more than 40% in certain instances (Helm et al., 2023). One of the areas most affected has been welfare benefits, including those for disabled individuals. The rationale behind these cuts is

often budgetary control incentivizing employment, even among those whose capacity to work is severely limited by physical or mental health challenges. The system is compliance-based, with high conditionality and minimal support for disabled individuals to find or return to work, which often worsens their challenges instead of alleviating them. The recent surge in the cost of living has exacerbated this issue, increasing food insecurity by 50% (Biggs et al., 2023).

Since 2010, there has been a notable decline in the real value of benefits provided to disabled individuals. Reports indicate that some disabled households have experienced more than a 30% reduction in net income due to these cuts as their benefits have been frozen or not increased. In contrast, non-disabled households saw an average reduction of around £300 annually compared to the £1200 for disabled households (Biggs et al., 2023). The standard allowance provided by Universal Credit, for instance, amounts to only a third of what is necessary for a minimum socially acceptable standard of living. This disparity is critical and has substantial effects on the ability of disabled individuals to purchase sufficient and healthy food.

Navigating the UK's disability benefits system is notoriously complex, slow, and often degrading. These hurdles discourage disabled individuals from claiming benefits, worsening their hardships and often leading to food insecurity. The Personal Independence Payment (PIP) application, starting with a challenging form, poses difficulties for those with low literacy, non-native English speakers, or disabilities affecting form completion. Its intrusive nature forces claimants to divulge deeply personal details, causing distress, especially for those with mental health conditions. The digital-centric system further isolates those lacking digital skills or access. Delays in processing leave applicants without vital income support, deepening poverty and food insecurity. Assessments for PIP, criticized for being rushed and lacking compassion, are prone to errors, with little accountability. Appeals are common but daunting, leading many eligible individuals to forgo them out of fear or process confidence issues. Unlike Disability Living Allowance (DLA), PIP awards are typically time-limited, necessitating stressful reassessments (Biggs et al., 2023).

In the realm of social security, the classification of disability often shifts as government policies evolve. How society views disability significantly influences the financial stability of disabled individuals. Individuals whose conditions don't perfectly match official disability definitions or societal expectations are especially susceptible to food insecurity. They often don't qualify for benefits meant to help with disability-related costs. For instance, a considerable number of Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and PIP recipients have mental health conditions, yet the PIP process may not treat them fairly compared to physical conditions. Many mental health issues and non-visible disabilities are inadequately addressed or misunderstood in assessments. Similarly, fluctuating conditions like MS or fibromyalgia face difficulties under current assessment rules, which require symptoms to affect the individual most of the time.

Societal Stigma

The stigmatization of benefit claimants, particularly those with disabilities, further creates a significant barrier that can deter them from seeking the support they need, exacerbating their struggles. Government rhetoric claiming that the current system inadvertently fosters dependency rather than promoting independence, perpetuates disadvantage instead of transforming lives, and spends public funds without producing tangible outcomes or societal change, alongside headlines such as “Lazy Britain uncovered: How FOUR MILLION adults have never worked in their lives,” all contribute to a public perception that unfairly portrays disabled individuals as either deceitful or unwilling to work. This stigmatizing portrayal labels them derogatorily as “scroungers” or “shirkers” (Davies, 2013). Disability Rights UK states that the current system “sanctions and demonises” disabled people by basing policy on the “assumption that [they] don’t work when [they] could.” This stereotype is deeply stigmatizing, with terms such as “benefit scum” being used to dehumanize and demean them and “scapegoat” them for being part of a failing economy (Disability Rights UK, 2024). This depiction leads to unfair, rude, disrespectful, patronizing, and even threatening treatment from the general public, causing many disabled

individuals to feel ostracized and misunderstood by the public and the system meant to support them (Saffer et al., 2018).

Solutions

Given the complex challenges and disparities faced by disabled individuals in the UK targeted reforms and strategic initiatives are essential to create a more equitable and supportive society. Addressing the financial burdens, accessibility issues, and societal stigmas that compound the difficulties faced by this community requires a multifaceted approach. This includes increased benefits, improving the current benefits system and definitions, and increasing education and awareness.

Firstly, increasing the benefits and support from the UK's welfare system is imperative, and the only real way to fix the issue of food insecurity. Enhanced welfare support will provide a more stable financial foundation for these populations, reducing the risk of food insecurity and improving overall quality of life. There needs to be a significant reversal of all the welfare reductions of recent years and regular adjustments to benefit levels to keep pace with inflation and the rising cost of living are crucial to ensure that welfare support remains adequate over time (Disabled People's Manifesto, 2024). Looking at countries with robust welfare systems, such as those in Scandinavia, provides insights into effective strategies (Tøssebro, 2016). These nations have generous welfare systems with principles of universalism and equality – ranking them among the top countries in terms of disability spending and thereby allocate a significant portion of their GDP to support everything from childcare to elderly care, effectively reducing poverty and food insecurity risks (OECD, 2024). Sweden, for example, bases its disability policy on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Sweden, 2024). This entails that individuals with disabilities have access to housing grants for necessary modifications, government-provided car allowances for transportation, subsidized employment opportunities for those with limited work capacities, and taxpayer-funded support for personal assistance services (Sveriges Riksdag, 1993). The assumption of these laws is to make disabled people equal to others through assistance, rather than treating them as objects of charity (UN, 2016). By adopting similar approaches that ensure welfare benefits meet the actual cost of living and facilitate consistent employment, the UK could more effectively tackle food insecurity (United Nations, 2024; Rost and Lundälv, 2021).

There are also many issues with the benefits system and a crucial solution is to expand the definition of disability to make it more flexible, nuanced, and considerate of special circumstances. The existing definition under the Equality Act 2010, which identifies disability as a physical or mental impairment with a “substantial” and “long-term” effect on daily activities, often excludes those with fluctuating or less visible conditions such as mental health issues and chronic pain disorders. Expanding the definition of disabilities to encompass a wider range, including varying intensities and invisible conditions, would enable the system to cater to all in need of support. This inclusive approach ensures that individuals with diverse disabilities can access necessary benefits and support, aligning better with the realities of living with a disability.

To truly improve the disability benefits system, it's crucial to streamline the application process. This includes simplifying assessments like PIP and minimizing the need for compulsory health evaluations when clear medical evidence exists. Assessments should be conducted by specialists knowledgeable about specific impairments to ensure accuracy and sensitivity. Application forms should be redesigned to be concise, clear, and accessible in different formats. With 48% of disabled people disagreeing with PIP assessments, it's evident that changes are necessary (Disability Rights UK, 2023). Additionally, offering flexible payment schedules would allow individuals to manage their benefits in a way that best suits their financial circumstances (ACCESS, 2023).

Additionally, comprehensive and ongoing empathy training for assessors is crucial. Assessors must conduct evaluations with patience, sensitivity, and a deep understanding of the diverse spectrum of disabilities.

Rushing through the process can make applicants feel detached and stressed, akin to being “put on trial” (Disability Rights UK, 2023). Moreover, improving the questioning guidelines to eliminate demeaning or irrelevant questions can help create a more respectful interaction. Assessors should be trained to ask clear, purposeful questions related to the applicants’ conditions and their day-to-day challenges. These changes should all be designed and implemented with the involvement and consultation of disabled individuals, ensuring that they will fully support and benefit the people who will be using the system (Furber, 2023).

There must also be more education and public awareness about disabled individuals and their conditions for both the general public and prospective disability benefit claimants. For disabled individuals, this is to ensure they can access the benefits they're entitled to. Many people don't claim disability benefits simply because they're not aware they qualify, and they fear public scrutiny. To fix this, information about disability benefits must be shared widely through various networks including TV advertisements and social media, mail, and pamphlets in common public places like doctor's offices, post offices, and libraries. Healthcare providers could also play a crucial role in informing their patients about what benefits they can claim. Increasing education about various health conditions and impairments can reduce the stigma around disabilities and benefit claims. Government-sponsored education can counteract negative propaganda portraying benefit claimants as “lazy” or “stealing taxpayer money.” This increased awareness fosters empathy in the public, reducing stigma and societal pressure on disabled individuals. This education is also important in workplaces to help employers understand and support their disabled employees better promoting inclusivity and accessibility in public spaces.

Conclusion

Despite its development and influence, the UK must address significant shortcomings in its disability benefits system. The current design places hardship on disabled individuals, leading to higher poverty and food insecurity rates. By enhancing financial support, broadening disability definitions, simplifying the application process, increasing public awareness, and reducing stigma through education, the UK can offer better support to its disabled citizens, build a more inclusive society, and reduce localized food insecurity amongst the disabled population.

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