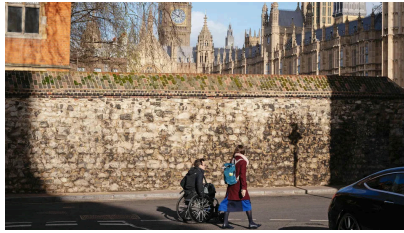


A much-praised British scheme to help disabled workers is failing them



It lavishes spending on some, and unfairly deprives others

RACHEL REEVES, Britain's chancellor, loves "working people". She mentioned them 13 times in her budget speech in October. But like her Conservative predecessors, Ms Reeves is rather less keen on benefit recipients. The welfare bill for those on sickness and disability is expected to increase by about half in the next five years, exceeding £100bn (\$123bn), or 3% of GDP, by 2030. Some suspect the generous terms are contributing to Britain's high levels of economic inactivity.

Against this backdrop, Access to Work, a government initiative to help people with a disability or a health condition back into work, seems like a godsend. Recipients can receive grants of up to £69,260 a year to pay for things like equipment, sign-language interpreters, coaching and counselling. Spending has jumped by 72% in the past two years, but at £258m it is still but a snip of the overall benefits budget. To supporters, it is world-leading and a rare example of something that is right with the benefits system. Instead, it may embody everything that is wrong with it.

The scheme seeks to tackle a real problem: only 53% of disabled Britons are in work, compared with 82% of non-disabled. Some 2.6m more working-age people identify as disabled than did so a decade ago.

For years spending on the scheme remained stable (and was mainly on support for the deaf). Yet since 2022 the number of claimants has doubled. Most of those now applying cite poor mental health, learning disabilities and neurodivergent conditions such as autism and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

The trouble is that generous terms intended to empower disabled people may have left the scheme open to gimmicks. No formal diagnosis is necessary to apply, the grant is not means-tested and no assessment is needed "if a customer knows their support requirements". One website lists fidget tools and wobble boards as "practical" equipment that can be reimbursed. On Reddit, a client talks up the "Apple watch" they were awarded for time management.

Word spreads on social media. Maddy Alexander-Grout, an influencer who helps other entrepreneurs "become more visible by telling their story", coaches 40 people with ADHD, a service paid for by Access to Work. In one YouTube video, Ms Alexander-Grout helps a friend fill in the application form for ADHD and "possible dyspraxia" ("she's sometimes a bit clumsy...she does hurt herself a lot").

There is no reason to suggest that Ms Alexander-Grout has done anything improper. But quietly the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has cracked down on the budding coaching industry, reducing the hourly costs of coaching that can be reimbursed under the scheme from £450 to £205, and restricting the number of sessions. Demand is growing far faster than the scheme is able to absorb. In October the backlog for applications stood at 55,000, more than the entirety of those who received support in 2022-23. In another video on TikTok Ms Alexander-Grout complains about not being reimbursed for hiring an administration assistant, joking that the department is punishing her for the "huge waiting lists that I caused them".

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