**Election 2019: Labour pledges inquiry into seven years of DWP benefit deaths**

A Labour government would set up an independent inquiry into the deaths of disabled benefit claimants linked to the actions of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and its private sector contractors, the party has told Disability News Service.

The party’s pledge meets one of the demands of the [Justice for Jodey Whiting parliamentary petition](https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/243337?fbclid=IwAR2Flmh0wE_Z1N4RelPfWgiMJa8Rqson3hQgwXTwqDNttm-GQ11PPyblzQo), which secured more than 55,000 signatures and called for an independent inquiry into deaths linked to DWP failings.

Disabled activists have spent years highlighting the tragic deaths of disabled people that have been closely linked to the actions of DWP senior civil servants and ministers, their outsourced contractors and disability benefit assessment processes.

The deaths of [Paul Donnachie](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/fit-for-work-suicide-mans-sister-tried-to-take-her-own-life-after-dwp-ordeal/), [Mark Wood](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/mother-of-fit-for-work-victim-calls-for-ministers-to-face-criminal-charges/), [David Barr](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/parents-of-fit-for-work-suicide-man-back-call-for-iain-duncan-smith-prosecution/?fbclid=IwAR3BCjK9MpL0wpwi0qEybfpcby5NDN6GRptKmPipRAbog9BTyOXzxDRJlec), [Lawrence Bond](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/shock-after-inquest-ignores-fitness-for-work-and-jobcentre-concerns/), [David Clapson](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/coroner-asked-to-explain-failure-to-hold-inquest-into-benefit-sanctions-death/), [Susan Roberts](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/pip-claimant-who-took-her-own-life-had-written-about-unfair-assessment-report/), [Alan McArdle](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/disabled-man-died-of-heart-attack-after-being-told-of-esa-sanction-threat/), [James Oliver](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/months-of-pip-distress-hastened-my-brothers-death/) and [Jodey Whiting](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/jodey-whiting-dwp-ignored-five-safeguarding-chances-before-wca-suicide/) – and many others – have all been linked to the failings of DWP and its contractors in the last seven years.

Although the inquiry pledge was not included in [the party’s manifesto](https://labour.org.uk/manifesto/), the party confirmed yesterday (Wednesday) that an independent inquiry would take place if Labour won power, and that it would cover the period from the introduction of universal credit in April 2013 to the end of this year.

Its remit would include examining the causes of deaths linked to DWP assessments.

The call for an inquiry was backed in April by Labour’s shadow minister for disabled people, Marsha de Cordova, who said then that it was “not enough for [DWP] to be its own judge and jury”.

John McArdle, co-founder of the grassroots disabled people’s campaign group [Black Triangle](http://blacktrianglecampaign.org/), who has played a key role in pushing for justice for DWP’s victims, said: “The news that the Labour party has committed to launching an independent public inquiry into these tragic and entirely avoidable deaths proves that they have listened carefully to our campaign and are fully convinced that there is a case to be answered.

“The evidence that we have painstakingly gathered together and submitted to both national and international authorities over the past 10 years is, we submit, conclusive and damning.

“We are confident that this inquiry will, for the first time, lead to government ministers and officials being held to account for their actions at the bar of our criminal justice system and this will prevent these blatant human rights abuses from ever being allowed to occur again under any future UK government.”

Labour’s pledge was also welcomed by Jodey Whiting’s mother, Joy Dove, who has continued to campaign for justice for her daughter.

She said she was “really happy” with the announcement, which she said was “brilliant” and showed that those responsible for the deaths were “not getting away with it”.

She said people were joining the campaign for justice “from all corners”, and she added: “We will get justice in the end.”

Labour’s promise comes as Disability News Service (DNS) prepares to publish a 12,000-word article that will make the case for a criminal investigation into the actions of former DWP ministers and senior civil servants.

The article – to be published on Monday (2 December) – will pull together five years of investigations by DNS into the deaths of five disabled people, each of which was closely linked to the failure to correct flaws in the work capability assessment and decisions made by ministers and senior DWP civil servants.

Labour also told DNS yesterday that it will set up a serious case review panel to look at future deaths linked to benefits processes and cases that have caused claimants serious harm, similar to the serious case reviews already undertaken following deaths or serious harm caused to children or adults at risk of abuse.

The purpose will be to provide solace, redress and apologies for claimants and bereaved families, and ensure that lessons are learned and corrective actions are taken more quickly.

There have been years of criticism of the secrecy of DWP after deaths linked to its failings, with its secret internal process reviews not even made available to the families of those who have died.

The terms of reference for the new panel will be set out following public consultations, which Labour says will include disability rights campaigners and communities of disabled people.

In its manifesto, Labour says the “cruelty and heartlessness of the Tories” has made DWP a “symbol of fear”.

It says: “When people feel the DWP is more about harassment than a helping hand, something has gone seriously wrong.”

It pledges to replace DWP on day one of a new government with a new Department for Social Security, “which will be there to help and support people, not punish and police them”.

Labour also repeats its pledge to scrap universal credit (UC) and replace it with “an alternative system that treats people with dignity and respect”.

While it is developing an alternative system, a Labour government will end the five-week wait for a first payment to a new UC claimant by introducing an interim payment based on half their estimated monthly entitlement.

It also promises to pilot a universal basic income scheme, which would mean an unconditional social security payment made to all residents, and probably a lower sum paid to every child.

A Labour government would “immediately suspend” the Tories’ “vicious sanction regime and ensure that employment support is positive not punitive” – although it is not clear yet if it would scrap all benefit sanctions – as well as scrapping the bedroom tax and increasing local housing allowance.

The manifesto says that successive Conservative-led governments have “created a hostile environment for disabled people”, which Labour would aim to end.

There is also a pledge to scrap the “dehumanising work capability and [personal independence payment] assessments, which repeatedly and falsely find ill or disabled people fit to work” and ensure instead that all assessments are carried out in-house.

A Labour government would also increase employment and support allowance (and the equivalent universal credit payment) by £30 a week for those in the work-related activity group who lost out when the payments for new claimants were slashed by the government in April 2017.

Labour would also increase payments for disabled children, and for people with high support needs but no formal carer, and it would increase carer’s allowance to the same level as jobseeker’s allowance.

There would also be a review of support for disabled people at work, including through the Access to Work scheme, as well as the introduction of a government-backed Reasonable Adjustments Passport scheme.

This scheme, building on the work of the TUC, would support people and their trade union representatives to work with their employers to ensure that up-to-date, appropriate, practical and correct reasonable adjustments were in place, the party has told DNS.

Such a system would mean that disabled people who move roles – or if their line manager changes – would not have to re-explain or re-negotiate their workplace reasonable adjustments.

**28 November 2019**

**Election 2019: Tories ‘offer just five new disability policies’**

The Conservative party appears to have announced just five new policy pledges – across its 62-page general election manifesto – that would specifically address the poverty, barriers and breaches of rights faced by disabled people.

[The party’s manifesto](https://vote.conservatives.com/our-plan) is silent on a range of issues of importance to disabled people, with no mention of disability rights or how a Boris Johnson-led government would meet its obligations to implement the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

Successive Tory-led government have been repeatedly criticised by UN experts for their breaches of the rights of disabled people under UN treaties, particularly UNCRPD.

Two years ago, the UN’s committee on the rights of persons with disabilities told the UK government to make more than 80 improvements to the ways its laws and policies affect disabled people’s human rights.

The committee raised concerns and made recommendations on all but three [of the 33 UNCRPD articles](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/CRPD/Pages/ConventionRightsPersonsWithDisabilities.aspx#48) it could have breached.

But there is no mention of UNCRPD in the manifesto or of the government’s duty to achieve progressive implementation of the treaty, although the government [has previously insisted](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/governments-response-to-human-catastrophe-un-report-is-deeply-unsatisfying/) that it has made “significant progress” on rights and was “committed to building a society which is fully inclusive of disabled people”.

The UN committee also accused the UK of “going backwards on independent living” in 2017 but the party has failed again to suggest a long-term plan to solve the social care funding crisis (*see separate story*).

Instead of detailing a series of policies to address the barriers faced by disabled people, the Conservative party promises instead a new National Strategy for Disabled People, to be published by the end of next year.

This strategy would “look at ways to improve the benefits system, opportunities and access for disabled people in terms of housing, education, transport and jobs”.

The government [has issued no updates or progress reports](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/government-refuses-to-say-what-has-happened-to-its-disability-strategy/) on its existing, discredited Fulfilling Potential disability strategy since November 2015.

The party has told Disability News Service (DNS) that the new strategy would take a broad approach to the barriers disabled people face and would be rooted in their lived experience, and developed with disabled people, disabled people’s organisations and charities.

In addition to the strategy, there are just four other clear policies which focus on disabled people.

The first is to abolish hospital parking charges for disabled people, although this will also apply to “frequent outpatient attenders, parents of sick children staying overnight and staff working night shifts”.

The second, on social care, is an extra £1 billion a year to fund the system in England, for 2021-22, 2022-23 and 2023-24 (an extra £1 billion for 2020-21 had already been announced).

The King’s Fund [has already said](https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/press/press-releases/conservative-party-manifesto-2019) that this extra funding “is not enough to meet rising demand for care while maintaining the current quality and accessibility of services”.

The manifesto also offers an extra £74 million over three years to fund further capacity in community settings for autistic people and people with learning difficulties who are currently in long-term hospital settings.

DNS [revealed earlier this month](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/anger-as-hancock-offers-string-of-seven-year-old-policies-on-institutional-care/) that new measures introduced by health and social care secretary Matt Hancock to address the scandalous treatment of autistic people and people with learning difficulties in mental health hospitals were strikingly similar to failed government measures announced seven years ago.

Hancock’s announcement had come just four days after [a report by parliament’s joint committee on human rights](https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/joint-select/human-rights-committee/inquiries/parliament-2017/detention-children-learning-disabilities-autism-inquiry-17-19/) condemned the “horrific reality” of life for young people with learning difficulties and autistic people detained in mental health hospitals.

The final disability policy in the Tory manifesto is to double the minimum personal independence payment (PIP) award length from nine to 18 months, at a cost of about £310 million over four years, which should reduce the number of repeat assessments claimants are forced to undergo.

PIP has been plagued by concerns about its unfairness since its introduction in 2013, with the stated objective of the Tory-led coalition in 2010 to use it to cut spending on extra costs disability benefits by 20 per cent.

DNS [spent months investigating allegations of dishonesty](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/pip-investigation-200-cases-of-dishonesty-and-still-dwp-atos-and-capita-refuse-to-act/) by PIP assessors in late 2016 and throughout 2017, hearing eventually from more than 250 disabled people in less than a year about how they had been unfairly deprived of their benefits.

And in September, [DNS revealed](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/the-shocking-truth-about-disability-benefits-successful-appeals-double-in-a-decade/) that PIP claimants are now almost twice as likely to win their tribunal appeal than claimants of disability living allowance – which is being replaced by PIP for working-age claimants – were almost a decade ago.

Only this week, DNS secured new figures (*see separate story*) which show that more than 100,000 Motability customers have had to return their Motability vehicles after being reassessed for PIP and losing eligibility for the scheme.

The party also pledges in the manifesto to “continue the roll-out of Universal Credit”, which it says builds “a clearer pathway from welfare into work”.

On accessible housing, the party has told DNS that it has not dropped plans to consult on tightening minimum accessibility standards on new housing, [as announced by the previous prime minister](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-launches-new-drive-to-tackle-barriers-faced-by-disabled-people), Theresa May, in June, shortly before she left office, even though it is not mentioned in the manifesto.

Instead, the manifesto says only that a Conservative government would “encourage innovative design and technology to make housing more affordable, accessible, and suitable for disabled people and an ageing population”.

Housing secretary Robert Jenrick [still faces the possibility of legal action](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/government-faces-legal-action-threat-over-accessible-housing-failure/) over his failure to take action to tackle the crisis in accessible housing.

[A report by the accessible housing provider Habinteg in June](https://www.habinteg.org.uk/news/housing-plans-risk-accessible-homes-crisis-for-england-says-new-research-1285) said that under a quarter (23 per cent) of new homes due to be built by 2030 outside London were planned to be accessible, and just one per cent of new homes outside London were set to be suitable for wheelchair-users.

The party also insisted that it had not dropped its target to get one million more disabled people into employment over the 10 years from 2017 to 2027, even though it does not appear in the manifesto.

Instead, the manifesto says only that a Conservative government would “reduce the disability employment gap”.

The party told DNS that 1.3 million more disabled people had found work over the last six years, reaching 4.2 million in the third quarter of 2019, and that it was still its intention to reach the goal of one million more disabled people in jobs but wanted a renewed focus on the disability employment gap which had not fallen as significantly as ministers had hoped.

The disability employment gap – the difference between the proportion of disabled people and non-disabled people in employment – [is still about 29 per cent](https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-7540#fullreport).

[In 2015](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/first-disability-confident-city-sets-out-bold-employment-ambition), the Tories said they wanted to halve the gap from about 33 per cent to about 16 or 17 per cent by 2020, a target date [they later denied setting](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/mordaunt-misleads-mps-over-tory-disability-employment-gap-target/) and which was abandoned in 2016.

**28 November 2019**

**Election 2019: Lib Dems copied disability policies from 2017 manifesto**

The Liberal Democrats have been unable to explain why several of their general election policies on disability were copied word-for-word from their 2017 manifesto.

Last week, Disability News Service (DNS) reported that the party had refused to explain why it had omitted disabled people from key measures in its [equalities manifesto](https://www.libdems.org.uk/plan-equalities), and had failed to provide any detail on other measures.

Now, nearly two weeks after the equalities manifesto was published, the party has tried to provide further clarity, but has only succeeded in revealing that it has copied several of its disability policies word-for-word from its 2017 manifesto.

One of those measures is “banning discrimination by private hire vehicles and taxis”.

The party explained this week that this referred to a pledge to bring into force section 165 of the Equality Act 2010, which ensures that drivers of taxis and minicabs can be prosecuted for discriminating against wheelchair-users.

But this measure came into force more than two years ago, even if its implementation [was subsequently heavily-criticised](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/a-year-on-from-new-taxi-discrimination-laws-and-not-a-single-prosecution/).

It emerged yesterday (Wednesday) that the policy has simply been copied from the party’s 2017 manifesto, albeit with slightly different wording.

This appears to be the reason for the out-of-date policy, with the wording of a section of the 2017 manifesto replicated almost word for word in this year’s manifesto.

[The 2017 manifesto](https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/themes/5909d4366ad575794c000000/attachments/original/1495020157/Manifesto-Final.pdf?1495020157) (PDF) made the following disability-related pledges: “Increase accessibility to public places and transport by making more stations wheelchair accessible, improving the legislative framework governing blue badges, setting up a benchmarking standard for accessible cities, and bringing into effect the provisions of the 2010 Equality Act on discrimination by private hire vehicles and taxis.”

The 2019 manifesto says almost exactly the same: “Increase accessibility to public places and transport by making more stations wheelchair accessible, improving the legislative framework governing blue badges, setting up a benchmarking standard for accessible cities, and banning discrimination by private hire vehicles and taxis.”

There is further confusion over the “benchmarking” policy, with the party suggesting this week that the measure would ensure that 80 per cent of the bus routes a local council has responsibility for would have to include at least one that was wheelchair-accessible.

The party has been unable so far to explain why this measure would be necessary when all buses now have to be wheelchair-accessible under the Equality Act.

Meanwhile, the party said that it wanted to ensure that all major rail stations with step-free access are staffed from first to last train to ensure there is always assistance on hand for passengers who need it.

In smaller stations, where it is too expensive to provide permanent staffing, the party has told DNS that there should always be guards on the trains that stop at those stations to ensure that help is available.

The party also says that all rail staff should be trained to use the ramps that allow wheelchair-users onto trains.

It is not yet clear, though, whether these staffing measures would be mandatory.

The party has told DNS that it would also ensure that new developments near stations include planning conditions that provide funding for an upgrade to the station’s accessibility, and that local authorities should be provided with increased capital funding to improve the accessibility of railway stations.

The party has also clarified that disability hate crimes are included in its manifesto pledge to make all hate crimes aggravated offences.

It also says that disability would be included in measures to force all large companies with more than 250 employees to monitor and publish data on gender, BAME and LGBT+ employment levels and pay gaps.

The party has blamed a “typo” for the failure to include disability in its original manifesto pledge, and it said this was now being amended in the online versions of the manifesto.

The party also admitted that it should have included disabled children and young people in its plans to address bullying in schools, in addition to bullying on the basis of “gender, sexuality, gender identity, or gender expression”, which it said had been “an illustrative rather than an exhaustive list”.

It also appears to have admitted that it should have added people with mental health conditions and learning difficulties to measures to address over-representation of people from BAME in the criminal justice system.

The party said it recognised the over-representation of people with learning difficulties and mental health conditions in the system and said that to reduce this it would “invest substantially” in mental health services, “improve the way in which the police handle mental health crises” and improve mental health support in the criminal justice system.

It would also invest in education to help people with learning difficulties, and bring in measures to minimise school exclusions.

**28 November 2019**

**Election 2019: Johnson backtracks on promised social care plan**

Boris Johnson has refused to offer any long-term solution to the social care crisis in his party’s [general election manifesto](https://vote.conservatives.com/our-plan), despite insisting when he became prime minister that he had a “clear plan” for doing so.

Instead, the party has offered only future discussions with other parties to build a “cross-party consensus” on reform, following years of disagreement among politicians on how to fund the social care system.

It said this “consensus” would “bring forward an answer that solves the problem, commands the widest possible support, and stands the test of time”.

[Only last month](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/cabinet-minister-admits-no-consensus-on-social-care-despite-johnsons-pledge/), a Tory cabinet minister admitted there was not even consensus within the government on how to solve the adult social care funding crisis, despite Johnson’s announcement in Downing Street in July.

Johnson had said: “… and so I am announcing now – on the steps of Downing Street – that we will fix the crisis in social care once and for all with a clear plan we have prepared.”

But instead of a clear plan, the manifesto offers only £1 billion a year extra to fund the system in England, for 2021-22, 2022-23 and 2023-24 (an extra £1 billion for 2020-21 had already been announced).

The King’s Fund [has said](https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/press/press-releases/conservative-party-manifesto-2019) that this extra funding “is not enough to meet rising demand for care while maintaining the current quality and accessibility of services”.

The Tory manifesto also says that any long-term plan will have to ensure that “nobody needing care should be forced to sell their home to pay for it”.

When asked how the party justified further delays to social care reform; what had happened to Johnson’s “clear plan”; and whether the manifesto was a breach of Johnson’s promise when he became prime minister, the party repeated the policies laid out in the manifesto and said that putting social care on a sustainable footing was crucial.

The party told DNS that it had outlined a clear three-point plan to resolve the social care issue in the long term.

The government originally promised that a social care green paper would be published by the end of 2017, and then July last year, before delaying it to the autumn and then the end of 2018.

[After missing the December 2018 deadline](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/anger-over-latest-delay-to-social-care-green-paper/), it was delayed until “the earliest opportunity” in 2019, before health and social care secretary Matt Hancock told MPs it would be published by April.

Hancock then said he could only promise that it was “coming in due course”.

The green paper has yet to be published.

**28 November 2019**

**Election 2019: Labour offers new rights and a UN convention pledge**

Labour has guaranteed a string of new rights for disabled people if it wins power at next month’s general election, and it has reaffirmed the promise it made two years ago to incorporate the UN disability convention into UK law.

[The party’s manifesto](https://labour.org.uk/manifesto/) includes a pledge to “give effect” to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which it confirmed yesterday (Wednesday) meant that it would work with disabled people to incorporate the treaty into UK law.

The manifesto includes many policies around disabled people’s rights, including across employment, transport, housing and public life.

They include action to force employers to report on their disability pay gaps and act to eradicate them, or face fines.

And – just days after [the union Unison raised the issue](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/tens-of-thousands-of-disabled-workers-let-down-by-equality-law-enforcement-failure/) in a new report – the manifesto says a Labour government would update the Equality Act by introducing new rights to disability-related leave.

It will also ask the Equality and Human Rights Commission to draw up a new code of practice on the right to reasonable adjustments in the workplace, including timescales for how quickly they should be implemented “to end the long and distressing delays experienced by disabled workers”.

The Access to Elected Office Fund will be reopened, giving disabled parliamentary candidates the right to financial support with their disability-related costs of running for office.

The fund was frozen by the government in 2015 after just three years and a new temporary fund to support disabled candidates – the EnAble Fund for Elected Office, which [went live in January](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/un-day-of-disabled-people-temporary-election-access-fund-must-be-just-a-first-step/) – is [not open to parliamentary candidates](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/failure-to-fund-access-costs-of-general-election-candidates-is-denial-of-democracy/).

There will be a new Department for Women and Equalities, with a full-time secretary of state, which will ensure that all policies and laws are assessed for their impact on groups including disabled people.

There is also a promise to “champion” the social model of disability – and its emphasis on the barriers faced by disabled people – throughout government.

And Labour says it would introduce a British Sign Language (BSL) act, giving BSL “full legal recognition in law”, and that it would work with employers, trade unions and public services to “improve awareness of neurodiversity in the workplace and in society”.

On mental health, Labour pledges to implement in full the recommendations made in last year’s Wessely review of the Mental Health Act, [which was criticised](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/mental-health-act-review-falls-significantly-short-on-human-rights/) by user-led organisations for falling “significantly short of giving people with mental health diagnoses full human rights”, as set out in UNCRPD.

The party has told DNS that it does not believe that its proposals would breach UNCRPD and confirmed that its plans would be subject to consultation and parliamentary scrutiny.

It said that not taking action to end unnecessary detentions would be a squandered opportunity to address the woeful record of service to people in or at risk of detention, where it said a third of specialist services were rated as unsafe.

[The National Survivor User Network (NSUN)](https://www.nsun.org.uk/) said this week that, as with the Liberal Democrat and Conservative manifestos, Labour’s plans do not comply with UNCRPD because they fail to promise laws which would end substitute decision-making, detention in psychiatric hospitals and forced treatment.

NSUN said Labour did not seem to recognise that the human rights in UNCRPD “go much further” than the Mental Health Act review recommendations and the Human Rights Act.

But the manifesto does pledge to take action to address the over-representation of people with experience of mental distress in the criminal justice system.

It pledges to develop closer relationships between criminal justice agencies and education authorities, health services and other bodies by “establishing violence-reduction units and ensuring vulnerable people get the support they need by boosting public health, mental health and early years services”.

The manifesto adds: “Prison is not the best place to address the drug addictions, mental illnesses and debts that lead many people into crime.”

There is no explicit mention of inclusive education in the manifesto, other than a promise to recruit more early years special educational needs co-ordinators and address the underfunding of support for disabled children.

But the party said this week that it would provide the necessary funding to support children and young people with education, health and care plans.

And it said it would deliver a strategy for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) based on inclusivity, and embed SEND more substantially into training for teachers and non-teaching staff at all levels of education.

There is also a pledge to end the practice of off-rolling, by making schools accountable for the outcomes of pupils who leave their rolls.

Survey evidence in 2019 suggested that pupils with SEND were more likely to experience off-rolling – in which mainstream schools force pupils off their books to boost their academic results – than other children.

**28 November 2019**

**Election 2019: 100,000 people have lost Motability vehicles through Tory PIP reforms**

More than 100,000 disabled people have lost their Motability vehicles after being reassessed as part of the Conservatives’ disability benefit reforms, Disability News Service (DNS) can reveal.

The figures show the number of Motability customers who have had to return their vehicles after being assessed for the new personal independence payment (PIP) has now passed 100,000.

The figures were revealed after the former minister for disabled people, Maria Miller, was accused of lying about the government’s introduction of PIP when she was taking part in a local election hustings event in Basingstoke (*see separate story*).

Miller was a Conservative minister for disabled people between May 2010 and September 2012 and steered through the early stages of the unpopular and controversial replacement of working-age disability living allowance (DLA) with PIP, which was eventually introduced in April 2013.

The PIP reassessment process has been blamed for causing years of distress to disabled people, and making it harder for many to access work, leisure and other independent living opportunities since Tory chancellor George Osborne announced in 2010 that the government planned to cut the 1.8 million working-age people claiming DLA by 20 per cent.

Disabled campaigners repeatedly warned in the years after it was introduced in 2013 that the decision to tighten a key eligibility criterion for the enhanced mobility rate from being able to walk less than 50 metres under DLA to 20 metres under PIP was having a significant and serious impact on disabled people’s independence.

[Among them was a disabled man](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/pip-man-cannot-reach-hospital-for-cancer-x-rays-after-loss-of-motability-car/) who lost a leg to bone cancer and was left unable to travel to hospital for vital x-rays after he had to hand his Motability car back and was left virtually housebound.

DNS later [spent months investigating allegations of dishonesty](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/pip-investigation-200-cases-of-dishonesty-and-still-dwp-atos-and-capita-refuse-to-act/) by PIP assessors in late 2016 and throughout 2017, hearing eventually from more than 250 disabled people in less than a year about how they had been unfairly deprived of their benefits, with such cases continuing to come in two years later.

And in September, [DNS revealed](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/the-shocking-truth-about-disability-benefits-successful-appeals-double-in-a-decade/) that PIP claimants are now almost twice as likely to win their tribunal appeal than DLA claimants were almost a decade ago.

Miller told her Labour opponent on Monday that the higher mobility component of DLA “was actually designed for people who couldn’t walk”.

[In fact](https://www.gov.uk/dla-disability-living-allowance-benefit/DLA-rates), the higher mobility component was for people who had severe walking difficulties and for those who could only walk a short distance – less than 50 metres – without severe discomfort, as well as those who could not walk at all.

Kerena Marchant, Miller’s Labour opponent, who is a Deaf user of British Sign Language, had told the former minister that 80,000 disabled people had lost their Motability vehicles because of the government’s reforms, restricting their ability to leave their homes.

DNS has now secured updated figures from Motability, with a spokesperson for the charity saying today (Thursday): “As of 1 November 2019, some 101,000 customers have lost their eligibility to the scheme meaning they would have had to return their vehicle after a DLA-PIP reassessment.”

Marchant said: “The current criteria for the enhanced mobility of PIP fails disabled people who are virtually unable to walk.

“It is a scandal that one of the richest countries in the world has made 101,000 disabled people prisoners in their own homes due to a barbaric PIP descriptor for enhanced mobility.

“I pledge that if I am elected I will campaign to change the enhanced mobility descriptor of PIP, which no parties have addressed in their manifestos.”

Marchant said this was another reason why there needed to be more than the one per cent [approximately] of MPs who are disabled people in the last parliament.

**28 November 2019**

**Election 2019: Miller ‘lies twice to voters’ on Tory DLA reforms**

A former Tory minister for disabled people appears to have lied twice about the government’s disability living allowance reforms, in response to concerns raised by her Labour opponent in an election hustings event.

Maria Miller was minister for disabled people between May 2010 and September 2012, and steered through the early stages of the controversial replacement of working-age disability living allowance (DLA) with personal independence payment (PIP). PIP was eventually introduced in April 2013.

On Monday evening, Miller came up against her Labour opponent, Kerena Marchant, in a hustings event organised by the Basingstoke Gazette.

Marchant [told the audience](https://www.facebook.com/basingstokegazette/videos/648273062372097/) (*after about 44 minutes*) that the government’s introduction of PIP had led to tighter eligibility, so that disabled people who could walk more than 20 metres were no longer eligible for the upper rate of the mobility part of the benefit, compared with the limit of 50 metres under DLA.

Marchant, who had been answering a question about the revitalisation of local shopping centres, spoke of how Miller was one of the ministers responsible for introducing PIP.

Marchant said: “Maria Miller was one of the ministers for disabled people who changed DLA to PIP, and when you transfer to PIP if you can walk more than 20 metres you lose your Motability vehicle.

“And now 80,000 disabled people have lost their Motability vehicle\* and now no longer can go to places like the top of town [a local shopping area in the centre of Basingstoke].”

But Miller claimed in response that Marchant was wrong and that the higher rate of mobility for DLA “was actually designed for people who couldn’t walk”.

She then repeated the line, saying: “You use the example of people who could walk, that was never designed for people who were able to walk, it was designed for people who didn’t have the capacity.”

This is not correct.

Disabled people could be eligible for the DLA upper mobility rate if they could only walk a short distance – less than 50 metres – without severe discomfort. It was not only for those who could not walk at all.

But Miller then also claimed that DLA had been the “biggest benefit in the department” when she was minister for disabled people.

This also is not correct.

The biggest Department for Work and Pensions benefit at the time was housing benefit, for which spending was nearly twice as high as for DLA.

Miller, who told the audience that she was “really proud” to have been minister for disabled people, also claimed that it had been civil servants who asked ministers to reform DLA, a claim that does not appear to have been made publicly before.

In her introduction to [the government’s consultation on DLA reform in 2010](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/181633/dla-reform-consultation.pdf) (PDF), Miller made no mention of civil servants asking for the benefit to be reformed, stressing instead that she believed herself that “the time is right to reform DLA”.

Earlier that year, chancellor George Osborne had announced that the government would cut the 1.8 million working-age people claiming DLA – as well as spending on working-age DLA claimants – by 20 per cent by 2016.

After the hustings event, Marchant told Disability News Service: “I was really shocked by Maria Miller’s response about DLA and her erroneous understanding that the higher mobility component of DLA was awarded for people who couldn’t walk at all.

“It’s worrying that she was the minister for disabled people who was responsible for changing the benefit to another, but didn’t understand the benefit.”

She added: “People’s lives have been ruined due to this decision, they have lost their independence and their ability to go out of their homes to work, to visit town centres for leisure. They have become prisoners in their own home.”

Linda Burnip, co-founder of [Disabled People Against Cuts](https://dpac.uk.net/), went further and said Miller had lied.

She said: “I can remember challenging Miller about the scrapping of DLA and her glib response was that people were always frightened of change.

“She made it quite clear that the aim of the changes was to remove 20 per cent of claimants from entitlement to PIP and at the time was saying that disabled people didn’t need to bathe every day.

“To now make these totally inaccurate statements and try to blame civil servants for her cruel actions simply shows what an outright liar she is.”

Neither Miller nor the Conservative party had responded to requests for a comment by noon today (Thursday).

*\*The latest figures, obtained by Disability News Service this week (see separate story), show there are now more than 100,000 Motability customers who have had to return their vehicles as a result of the PIP reassessment process since 2013*

**28 November 2019**

**Election 2019: Labour pledges to ‘make independent living a reality’**

Labour has pledged to make independent living a reality through a string of measures, including billions of pounds of extra funding for care and support packages, although it has stopped short of offering a free, England-wide, independent living service.

The party has also promised to incorporate the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) into UK law, including article 19, which guarantees disabled people the legal right to live independently in the community.

The commitment to [article 19](https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-19-living-independently-and-being-included-in-the-community.html) means that a Labour government would usher in a new era of equality, inclusion and citizenship and ensure that “nothing about us without us” was at the heart of government, the party told Disability News Service (DNS) yesterday (Wednesday).

It says this would be done through measures such as reforms to social security, improving the accessibility of public transport and measures to ensure disabled people can secure reasonable adjustments at work, the party said.

[The Labour manifesto](https://labour.org.uk/manifesto/) does not promise to introduce [a National Independent Living Support Service (NILSS)](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/labour-conference-activists-set-for-fight-to-persuade-leadership-on-independent-living/) for England if it wins the election, despite the policy – designed by the disabled people’s movement – receiving overwhelming support from party members at its annual conference.

Instead, Labour is promising to provide free personal care for people over 65, with only an “ambition to extend this provision to all working-age adults”.

But it does promise that its investment in social care would enable a Labour government to more than double the number of older and working-age people receiving publicly-funded care packages, improve the standard of this care and “remove the distinction between health and care needs”.

[Its costings document](https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Funding-Real-Change-1.pdf) (PDF) estimates its social care plans would cost about £10.8 billion a year extra by 2023-24, although it is not clear whether this includes free personal care for working-age disabled people, or just older people.

The party is also promising to support autistic people and people with learning difficulties to move out from “inappropriate inpatient hospital settings” and receive support in their own homes.

The party said that these measures, as well as pledges to improve the accessibility of public transport, represented significant steps towards better state support for independent living.

And the party also told DNS that if it won power it would publish a green paper that would consider the merits of an overarching independent living service that would combine all of these and other measures, including possible changes to independent living benefit payments following a review.

The party told DNS that its reforms would respect the human rights of disabled people, and that its National Care Service for England would provide community-based, person-centred support that was underpinned by the principles of ethical care and independent living.

**28 November 2019**

**Election 2019: Labour wins praise for ‘driver-only operation’ train ban**

Labour has been praised by accessible transport campaigners for pledging to ban the practice of running train services without an on-board member of staff who can assist disabled passengers.

The party [promises in its manifesto](https://labour.org.uk/manifesto/) – as part of its policy of gradually bringing the railway back into public ownership – to “end driver-only operation” of trains, where the driver has responsibility for opening and closing the doors, and instead will guarantee a guard on every train.

[Transport for All (TfA)](https://www.transportforall.org.uk/), the user-led charity which campaigns on accessible transport in London, welcomed the pledge and said it was “a step in the right direction”.

Kirsty Hoyle, TfA’s chief executive, said: “We have spoken directly with the team who have developed this policy and are proud to see how closely it responds to the years of campaigning we have been doing in this area.

“Our sustained campaigning for a Turn Up and Go system on the rail network, reflecting the London Underground model, has kept this high on the agenda and we are pleased to see a commitment to access in such a tangible and effective way.”

But she warned this would be “only one step in the progress needed to reduce the barriers for disabled people”, and she called for compulsory disability equality training for all rail staff, increased investment in step-free access and “a commitment to level boarding across the UK”.

She added: “Disabled passengers are regularly left on trains or given incorrect assistance, putting their safety at risk.

“This proposed service will give disabled passengers, indeed all passengers, the confidence to travel independently knowing that support is available on board, increasing their well-being and supporting the development of a safer, fairer travelling experience.”

[Earlier this year](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/ministers-plans-on-toxic-impact-of-driver-only-trains-fall-way-short-says-dptac/), the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee (DPTAC) wrote to Conservative transport ministers to warn of the “toxic” impact on disabled people of running driver-only trains through unstaffed stations.

DPTAC warned in the letter that the “availability of staff to provide assistance is crucial to the ability of many disabled passengers (and indeed older passengers more generally) to make rail journeys”.

It also warned DfT that it should take legal advice on whether forcing disabled passengers to travel on driver-only operated trains to unstaffed stations would breach the Equality Act and other laws and regulations.

**28 November 2019**

**Election 2019: Brexit Party ignores disabled people in manifesto ‘contract’**

The Brexit party has almost completely ignored disability issues in its election manifesto, with not a single mention of disabled people.

The party’s [general election offer to voters](https://www.thebrexitparty.org/contract/), which it insists is a “contract” rather than a manifesto, provides almost no detail on any of its policies.

Despite that lack of detail, its housing policy appears to be designed to aggravate the accessible housing crisis.

The manifesto says the party would “simplify the planning and development processes” and introduce “more flexibility on the size and type of units as part of a development”.

This would appear to be a call to make it easier for developers to build more homes that are not accessible for disabled people.

The party has refused to clarify whether this means that it wants to make it harder for local authorities to insist on how many new homes would have to be accessible to disabled people.

It also refused to say how it would address the accessible housing crisis.

On social care, the party says only that it would “keep investing” in the “essential and treasured” public service, without offering any suggestion for how much investment it would provide or how it would reform the system.

There is also a pledge to introduce “a new nursing qualification in social care”.

Again, the party has refused to answer any questions on its social care policy.

On social security, the party says universal credit (UC) has “not achieved what was intended and needs to be revisited”.

It claims it wants to see “accelerated payment processes” but then says this would be a “five week maximum”, which appears to be identical to the existing, much-criticised government policy that has been blamed for causing destitution, debt and mental distress, and even the deaths of some claimants.

The party says it would carry out a 12-month review of UC and “bring in reforms within two years”, without suggesting what elements of the system it was concerned about.

And it says it would support “those who have paid into the system” but fails to explain if this means there are other claimants that it would not support.

It refused to clarify this point or to say if it was concerned about the impact of universal credit on disabled people.

**28 November 2019**

**Ministers give councils and schools go-ahead to breach bus discrimination law**

Transport ministers have quietly given permission to councils, schools and colleges to breach a key anti-discrimination law for at least two years, and possibly up to four… in the middle of the general election campaign.

The decision by ministers to allow providers of home-to-school services for students to continue running inaccessible vehicles has been done while parliament is not in session.

It means that MPs and peers have not been given a chance to question the decision in parliament.

DfT says the decision was made by ministers before parliament ended on 6 November, but the letter was not sent until late last week (21 November).

In the letter, education providers are told they will be allowed a temporary exemption to the Public Service Vehicle Accessibility Regulations (PSVAR), even though they have had 20 years to prepare for those regulations coming into force in January.

The regulations require vehicles to have a wheelchair space and boarding facilities, priority seating, colour-contrasting step edges and other features “to enable disabled passengers to travel in comfort and safety”.

Coaches built from 2005 onwards have until January 2020 – just five weeks away – to comply with PSVAR, but many providers have failed to prepare for the change and are continuing to use inaccessible coaches that segregate disabled and non-disabled students on their school journeys.

Now, with the 1 January deadline just weeks away, ministers have sent an urgent letter to councils, schools and colleges offering them a temporary exemption.

Vehicles that provide only free school transport do not have to meet PSVAR, but many education providers run paid-for services, or mixed services that provide some free seats but charge other students to use the service.

This means that, under the law, they should stop charging all students from 1 January, only allow students entitled to free school transport to use the service, or ensure they only use accessible vehicles.

The issue first became public in February, when accessible transport campaigner Doug Paulley began legal action against North Yorkshire County Council for continuing to use inaccessible buses for home-to-school transport, while still charging some pupils to use spare seats on the vehicles.

But the government left it until last week – while parliament was not in session and former MPs were fighting re-election campaigns – to write to schools, councils and sixth form colleges to offer the exemption.

The Department for Transport (DfT) letter says: “We have recently become aware many providers of fully paid-for and mixed home-to-school services are not in a position to provide compliant services currently, or from January 2020 onwards and that many providers will cease to provide mixed services, rather than secure appropriate vehicles.

“DfT Ministers concluded that in these circumstances, the right solution was to offer operators of home-to-school services a temporary exemption from PSVAR to allow them to become compliant.”

The exemption means providers will have to apply to DfT for an exemption certificate for every inaccessible vehicle they want to use.

The letter adds: “In making this decision, Ministers took account of the implications of these services ceasing for both pupils and local authorities, as well as the importance Ministers place on ensuring that transport services are accessible to both disabled and non-disabled people.

“Given the short timescale before the 1st January 2020 deadline, we have decided to communicate this decision at this stage, despite the pre-election period.”

It also warns local authorities that they are “bound by pre-election rules” – the process of “purdah” – if they want to make statements about the DfT letter.

The initial exemption will last for two years, with the possibility of a further two-year extension.

Paulley said the government’s decision to mass exempt school buses from the regulations was “a disgrace” as it would mean transport providers could continue to segregate disabled children, while the education sector could continue to use inaccessible vehicles.

He said ministers were abusing the exemption process to “avoid having to go before parliament” and “because of purdah they aren’t telling anybody about it”.

He said: “To me, their actions are undermining the clearly expressed intent of parliament.”

Paulley said the councils and schools involved should secure accessible buses in line with parliament’s intention in bringing in the regulations in 2000, but if they are unable to do that they should stop charging all students using their vehicles, as North Yorkshire council has done.

He said the decision by ministers to offer the exemption from PSVAR was “an insult” to those bus and coach companies, local education authorities, schools and sixth form colleges that have invested in providing accessible bus services.

He added: “Some have been in contact with me and are really pissed off that other providers are failing to make such provision yet are being let off the hook.

“I think the whole thing is a shambles and a disgrace.”

The failure by many councils, schools and colleges to plan ahead and ensure they have a supply of accessible buses also means many of them currently use accessible taxis to transport their disabled students, making it even more difficult for disabled people to book one themselves at the start and end of the school day.

DfT was not able to answer some questions about the ministerial decision, because of purdah, including how the exemption was justified when providers have had 20 years to plan for the January 2020 deadline; how DfT justified allowing them to continue to segregate disabled children for two, or even four, years; and whether the decision was fair on those transport and education providers that have invested in accessible vehicles.

But DfT told Disability News Service that some local education authorities said they had “mistakenly believed PSVAR was not applicable to ‘home-to-school’ transport”.

The department said the decision by ministers had followed consultation with stakeholders, including the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee, and was being taken using powers provided by section 178 of the Equality Act 2010.

It said the decision was taken by ministers before the pre-election period, but “given the urgency the department has communicated this at this time to enable applicants to request exemptions for individual vehicles ahead of the 1st January 2020 deadline”.

Dft said it expected local authorities to “act to use compliant vehicles as soon as possible”.

**28 November 2019**

**Lottery funding will help young disabled people dig into city’s activist past**

A new lottery award is set to help young disabled people research and record the history of the disabled people’s movement in one of England’s biggest cities.

The Forging Our Future project will see younger disabled people – aged between 16 and 25 – provided with training so they can research the origins and history of the disabled people’s movement in Bristol from the early 1970s.

They will also record the stories of some of the disabled activists who played a role in the development of the movement.

Deaf young people will have the option of researching key moments in the city’s Deaf history.

Among the milestones in the city’s history of disability activism are protests and lobbying by disabled activists that resulted in significant access improvements to public buildings, heritage centres, and public transport in the city; campaigns to secure a centre for independent living in the city; and the early adoption of direct payments.

[More recently](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/kamil-ahmad-campaigners-demand-fundamental-change-to-systems-that-led-to-murders/), disabled asylum-seekers and activists came together two summers ago to seek fundamental changes to the systems and agencies that were blamed for the brutal murders of two disabled refugees – Kamil Ahmad and Bijan Ebrahimi – in Bristol.

A group of older disabled people will support the young researchers, and will also receive training in how to assess the accessibility of heritage locations.

The disabled young people will produce a disability history resource for schools based on their research, and the older group of disabled people will develop guidelines for good practice in access to heritage organisations.

The project will be launched on Saturday (30 November), as part of this year’s [Disability History Month](https://ukdhm.org/).

The project is being run by the disabled-led charity [Bristol Disability Equality Forum (BDEF)](http://bristoldef.org.uk/contact/), which has secured a grant of nearly £90,000 from the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF), and is supported by Bristol Museums and consultants Rowan Associates.

The forum hopes the project will connect young disabled people to their own history and inspire the next generation of disabled activists.

Laura Welti, BDEF’s manager, said: “We are delighted to have been given funding for this project.

“Deaf and disabled people’s experiences and achievements have been largely ignored when it comes to recorded history. Now we can begin to redress this.

“We believe access can only be got right when it reflects the diversity of Deaf and disabled people and involves them from first thoughts to post-implementation review.

“The project will therefore create a reference group that can be used in this way (for a reasonable cost) by any heritage destination seeking to be more accessible.”

She also praised NLHF, and said it was “amazing to have a funder who wasn’t expecting us to compromise on being accessible to all Deaf and disabled people, regardless of their access needs”.

*The event will be held on Saturday (30 November), from 2pm-4pm, at the city’s M Shed museum of Bristol’s history*

**28 November 2019**

**Universities still struggle with idea of co-produced research, says study**

Many universities are still struggling with the idea of working closely with disabled people to co-produce disability research projects, according to a new study.

The report, the latest to come from the user-led [Disability Research on Independent Living and Learning](http://www.drilluk.org.uk/) (DRILL) programme, says the culture of universities and financial constraints mean that the full value of involving disabled people in the design and delivery of projects as “peer researchers” was not being realised.

The Developing Future Strategies study calls on academics to “relinquish some of their power”, take more risks and experiment with new ways of working.

It found that universities often pay peer researchers at minimum wage rates, on the assumption that they are “unskilled and easily replaced”, which could “undermine the ethos of co-production”.

But the report concludes that co-production in disability studies research is “crucial to including the contributions of disabled people”, with peer researchers playing a “particularly important role in recruitment, fieldwork and research dissemination”.

The study also found that many disabled people involved as peer researchers refused to be paid for their work, because of fear of losing their benefits when the project ends, and sometimes request anonymity through fear that the Department for Work and Pensions will see their involvement as evidence that they are able to hold down full-time jobs.

Researchers on the project carried out interviews and focus groups with peer and academic researchers involved in six other DRILL projects.

The study found that most peer researchers were involved in all aspects of the research process, although only to a limited extent at the funding application stage, partly because of a lack of resources.

All the peer reviewers interviewed had received in-depth training and support, and in one project they had gained a formal qualification in research methods, which opened up new career prospects.

Of the 15 peer researchers interviewed for the project, at least five have found paid employment as a direct result of their research work.

Many of the peer researchers also described how their confidence had increased through the research, with one saying: “There is such a sense of feeling valued and feeling heard being able to be part of research like this.”

But the peer researchers who were interviewed also said they believed their contribution was under-valued by universities, and some believed that the title of “peer researcher” reinforced traditional “unequal hierarchies” that prevented genuine co-production.

The report says that providing training and support for peer researchers can increase the cost of research projects.

It also warns that academics believe co-produced projects involved greater risks to their own reputations and those of their institutions.

Jody Mellor, DRILL programme officer for Wales said: “The DRILL programme has been characterised by user leadership and involvement to develop genuinely co-produced reports that should shape disability policy for years to come.

“This project highlights how such an approach improves the quality of research projects and benefits the disabled people who work on them.

“We’ve worked closely with many universities as part of the programme. It’s sometimes been a struggle to get them to engage with the idea of co-production.”

The study recommends that work is done to define exactly what is meant by “co-production”, to build the capacity of disabled people’s organisations to carry out research, and to create a culture in which peer researchers have “equal roles” in research projects.

It also calls on funders to make co-production an “essential requirement” for all disability research projects, and for universities to review policies and practices that can obstruct disabled people’s involvement.

The study also concludes that funders that wish to support “genuine co-production” should provide funding that allows peer researchers to be involved in the planning and study design stages of a project.

The study was carried out by Disability Wales, members of Wales School for Social Care Research, HOLI Coproduction Research in Wales and the Wales DRILL national advisory group.

The report is the latest piece of research to come out of the five-year, £5 million DRILL research programme, which is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, and delivered by [DR UK](http://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/), [Disability Action](http://www.disabilityaction.org/) (in Northern Ireland), [Inclusion Scotland](http://inclusionscotland.org/) and [Disability Wales](http://www.disabilitywales.org/).

It is believed to be the world’s first major research programme led by disabled people, and it should eventually fund about 40 pieces of research and pilot projects across the UK.

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**News provided by John Pring at** [www.disabilitynewsservice.com](http://www.disabilitynewsservice.com)