**Focus group questions suggest means-testing PIP is back on the Tory agenda**

The Conservative party appears to be considering highly-controversial plans to means-test disability benefits as a way of cutting spending.

Disability News Service (DNS) has been told that participants in focus groups have been asked questions about which people “deserve” various benefits and what they think about the idea of means-testing “extra cost” benefits.

This is likely to mean benefits such as personal independence payment (PIP), disability living allowance (DLA) and attendance allowance (AA).

The introduction of means-testing could mean these benefits eventually being folded into the universal credit system, and payments in future only going to those with less than a certain level of income, savings and investments.

A disabled person who attended one of the focus groups last week told DNS she had been briefed in advance that it would examine the cost-of-living and inflation crisis, but the second half of the session focused on benefits.

Participants were asked to pick which groups, including disabled people, “deserved” the benefits they received, which groups they would remove benefits from “if they had to”, and which benefits were “too high”.

The questions about the “extra cost benefit” ended with a question on whether it should be means-tested on the grounds of “affordability”.

Although DNS has not been able to confirm that it was the Conservative party that paid for and ran the focus groups, there have been concerns about the possibility of a Conservative-led government means-testing PIP since the publication of its [Shaping Future Support green paper](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/shaping-future-support-the-health-and-disability-green-paper), two years ago.

That green paper suggested that ministers could create a “new single benefit” to simplify the disability benefit application and assessment process, which could “provide support for disabled people and people with health conditions on low income and with extra costs”.

The then work and pensions secretary Therese Coffey [then told DNS at a fringe meeting](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/conservative-conference-coffey-says-merging-pip-with-universal-credit-is-on-the-table/) at the party’s annual conference in October 2021 that merging PIP with universal credit was “on the table” as part of a fresh wave of social security reforms.

[Just a month later](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/civil-servant-says-dwp-wants-to-merge-pip-and-universal-credit/), DNS reported how a Department for Work and Pensions civil servant had told a disability charity that the government planned to merge PIP with universal credit, although not for at least six years.

Last year, Tom Pursglove, the minister for disabled people, said [in a written answer](https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-11-07/80882) to a question from disabled Labour MP Marsha De Cordova that there were no plans to means-test DLA and PIP.

A Conservative spokesperson declined to comment on the focus group sessions this week.

Roots Research, which recruited people to take part in the focus groups, said it had no involvement in the sessions other than recruiting participants, and so declined to comment.

Neither the Conservatives nor Roots Research denied that the party had been leading the focus groups.

**29 June 2023**

**Disabled activists promise to fight ‘disastrous’ rail ticket office closure plans**

Disabled campaigners have responded with anger and frustration after evidence emerged that rail companies are set to launch a series of consultations on government-backed plans to close most ticket offices across England.

The Association of British Commuters (ABC) [revealed this week](https://twitter.com/ABCommuters/status/1673246164060086273) that train companies have been “secretly preparing for mass ticket office closures since early June”.

ABC said a series of public consultations on the plans could be launched within days.

The information, released via posts on Twitter on Monday, produced a powerful response, with the story followed up by mainstream media including the Financial Times, the Telegraph and the Guardian.

Although warnings about plans for ticket office closures first emerged last year, ABC’s posts show the industry – and the government – are now ready to push ahead with their proposals and put them out to public consultation.

ABC’s information also suggests the closures could be even more widespread than feared.

Disabled campaigners have this week promised to fight any plans for ticket office closures.

Sarah Leadbetter, national campaigns officer for [The National Federation of the Blind of the UK (NFBUK)](https://www.nfbuk.org/), said her organisation would fiercely oppose the closure plans.

She said: “We will be fighting. We won’t be giving up.”

She said disabled people’s right to travel was “definitely” under threat.

Leadbetter said: “I fought hard for my independence. I will have to go back to the good old days of waiting for family and friends to take me places, or use taxis.

“I won’t be able to go out, I’ll be isolated, excluded. We’ve got the right to travel as much as everybody else… and this is going to totally and utterly stop that.

“Doing what they are doing is totally disgusting. It’s taking the people out that rely on the trains the most. It will exclude a lot of people.”

She added: “They want to have somebody roaming around the station [instead of in a ticket office].

“That’s inaccessible for a lot of us. I won’t know where they are. I won’t be able to find them.”

NFB UK is also concerned about the accessibility of the consultation process, with the disabled people the proposals will affect the most not being able to take part in the consultations because they will not be made available in accessible formats.

It is feared the consultations will last just 21 days, which Leadbetter said would not be long enough, particularly for many disabled people.

She said: “We are worried that these consultations will just stick a poster on the wall of the station.”

Helen Rowlands, an executive council member of [Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People (GMCDP)](https://gmcdp.com/), promised a summer of activism to save ticket offices.

She said she and colleagues from GMCDP – accompanied by local MP Debbie Abrahams – [had delivered a letter to 10 Downing Street](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/campaigners-converge-on-downing-street-to-warn-of-rail-mass-exclusion/) in February with a “clear message for the prime minister” that “safe and reliable rail for Greater Manchester’s disabled residents includes properly staffed stations and ticket offices”.

She said: “We explained to Rishi Sunak that ticket offices are a vital aspect of ensuring disabled travellers’ safety, information and access needs.

“Access to rail is a key means of creating access to education, training, work, social and wellbeing opportunities for disabled members of society.

“It is with deep concern that we learn this week that he has chosen to disregard our warning.”

She said GMCDP also wanted to remind transport secretary Mark Harper – a former minister for disabled people – that access to an accessible transport system is a right set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

Rowlands added: “We are urging opposition parliamentarians to commit to the incorporation of UNCRPD into domestic law as a matter of the utmost urgency, and to stand with disabled people in the fight for accessible rail for all.”

[Transport for All (TfA)](https://www.transportforall.org.uk/), the disabled-led accessible transport charity, said the ticket office plans “risk locking disabled people out of the rail network entirely” and would have “a disastrous impact, at a time in which we are already grappling with a cost-of-living crisis”.

TfA said ticket offices were often the only way that disabled people could purchase rail tickets, with many having no internet access for online purchases, finding station ticket machines inaccessible, or not having bank cards.

Katie Pennick, TfA’s campaigns and communications manager, said: “Whatever a person’s specific access requirements, it is vital that disabled passengers can trust that staff will be on hand and assistance will be provided.

“Without this assurance, disabled people risk being stranded at stations.

“Changing the roles of ticket staff to multifunctional, ‘roving’ staff who move around the station (or worse – ‘mobile’ staff teams that are split across a cluster of stations and having to drive between each) would not be an adequate solution.

“People with energy-limiting impairments or mobility impairments simply cannot trek around stations to find assistance, and blind and visually impaired people will struggle to find and recognise a staff member.”

Pennick said TfA had been meeting with government and the rail industry to oppose the proposals since they were first leaked to the press in spring 2022 but had yet to see any “concrete plans” to mitigate the impact of ticket office closures on disabled people.

Like NFB UK, Transport for All is also concerned about the accessibility of any consultation process.

Emily Yates, co-founder of ABC, who secured the information on the imminent ticket office closures, said: “Due to industry whistleblowers, Mark Harper’s attempts to avoid public scrutiny have been thwarted.

“This has given campaigners a vital headstart – now every day counts to demand equality and accountability.

“These are rushed and secretive plans signed off by the government, and it appears that accessibility and retail systems are nowhere near ready.

“It is now vital that the Department for Transport publishes equality and risk assessments before putting this out to consultation.

“The onus is on the government to prove it has a lawful, consistent, and long-term approach to accessibility.

“Also, serious questions must be asked about which regulators and stakeholders have had oversight of the plans.

“All such parties should take a public position on this shocking news and do whatever they can to gain transparency in this short window of opportunity.”

She added: “If the closure process does begin, there is no doubt it will be met with huge, nationwide resistance.”

Mick Lynch, general secretary of The National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT), [said his union](https://www.rmt.org.uk/news/rmt-statement-on-the-future-of-ticket-offices/) would “vigorously oppose any moves to close ticket offices” and would “not meekly sit by and allow thousands of jobs to be sacrificed or see disabled and vulnerable passengers left unable to use the railways as a result”.

He promised that RMT would “bring into effect the full industrial force of the union to stop any plans to close ticket offices”.

The Department for Transport refused to comment this week.

But a spokesperson for the Rail Delivery Group (RDG), which represents the companies that run Britain’s railways, said it had been negotiating with RMT on the issue of ticket office closures for more than a year.

RDG claims ticket office sales have dropped from 85 per cent of ticket sales in 1995 to 12 per cent today.

The spokesperson said the plans would “include moving staff from ticket offices to concourses where, with extra training, they will be better able to help more customers, not just with buying tickets, but also offering travel advice and helping those with accessibility needs”.

He said talks with RMT had “stalled” and he blamed the union, which he said was “seemingly intent on prolonging the current dispute”.

He said: “While the industry is now looking at how to move forward, any changes would be subject to employee and public consultations.

“Staff always remain front of mind so as you would expect from a responsible employer, if and when the time comes for proposals on ticket offices to be published, they will be the first to know.”

**29 June 2023**

**Disability strategy court case ‘will force government to act on consultations’**

A long-running legal case that reached the Court of Appeal this week will force the government to take its duty to consult with disabled people more seriously, according to one of the three disabled campaigners who have brought the case.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is appealing against last year’s high court ruling that the government’s National Disability Strategy was unlawful because ministers carried out an unlawful consultation before its publication.

Ministers have since sidelined their [discredited strategy](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/government-reveals-national-disability-strategy-offers-just-28p-per-person-in-new-funds/) – criticised at the time by disabled people’s organisations as “tokenistic”, “rehashed” and “not fit for purpose” – and are [set to publish a new “disability action plan” this summer](https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2023-06-19/debates/D6F89590-D6EC-44CB-BF48-455B7E2B8AAF/DisabilityActionPlan).

Their appeal centres on whether [the UK Disability Survey](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/tomlinson-faces-third-angry-letter-from-dpos-over-shambolic-national-disability-survey/), which the government carried out early in 2021, was intended to be a consultation on a national strategy and whether it was an unlawful one.

The government argued this week that the survey was just an information-gathering exercise, not a consultation, and therefore it did not need to provide the information needed for disabled people to respond to it in a meaningful way.

The high court [ruled early last year](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/disability-strategy-is-unlawful-court-confirms-and-denies-dwp-permission-to-appeal/) that the survey was a consultation and that the way it was set up made it impossible for disabled people to provide a proper response.

The government argued yesterday (Wednesday) that the survey was just an information-gathering exercise and so the rules applying to consultations did not apply.

Sir James Eadie, representing work and pensions secretary Mel Stride, told the Court of Appeal yesterday that it was “not a consultation in any proper sense” and was “just engagement and information-gathering”.

He said the work and pensions secretary at the time – Therese Coffey – did not provide any information in the survey about what she proposed to include in the disability strategy, and had not even decided at that point what should be in it.

He said: “How can the proposal be, as the respondents characterise it, a form of the strategy and its content, when no-one was told what that was?”

Sir James said: “That sort of general information-gathering as opposed to specific consultation on proposals is absolutely bog standard across government… it isn’t consultation in any proper sense.

“It’s just engagement and information-gathering.”

But Jenni Richards, representing the three disabled people who are taking the case, told the court that the high court judge’s view last year had been that “the way in which the strategy claimed to be responsive to the survey further demonstrated that it was intended in substance to be a consultation, to be a conversation, a dialogue, rather than just a broad information-gathering exercise”.

She added: “The strategy was a policy intended to make important practical and policy changes, that’s what the government itself says in various documents, in which the views of disabled people were said to be necessary, to be central, and need to be elicited.

“That is a consultation.”

[Doug Paulley](https://twitter.com/Doug_Paulley), one of the three disabled campaigners who are fighting the appeal, said he believed the government was likely to win the court battle.

But he said the case had become more about the technicalities of the law on public consultations, rather than the vital challenge to the National Disability Strategy it had originally been.

He told Disability News Service that, even if the government wins the appeal, ministers will be forced to take their duties to consult with disabled people more seriously in the future.

He said: “I do believe it does make organisations think twice in the future… even if we do lose, I do think it will make the government treat us with not quite such obvious, blatant contempt next time.”

He said that both the National Disability Strategy and the UK Disability Survey had not been “worth the paper they were written on” and “completely sidelined disabled people”, and that he was glad to have taken the case.

He said: “The consultation just was ridiculous. It was the most inadequate and degrading and ridiculous thing, and the resultant strategy was just not fit for purpose and of course it was important to fight it.

“They didn’t involve disabled people, they didn’t make any commitments, and that’s why everybody hated it and why we took the case.”

The three Court of Appeal judges – Lady Justice Macur, Lord Justice Bean and Lady Justice Elisabeth Laing – reserved their decision on the appeal until a future date.

**29 June 2023**

**DWP admits: We’re too slow, too inaccurate, too costly, and claimants don’t trust us**

Then Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has admitted to the public spending watchdog that its system of disability benefits assessments is too slow, too expensive and too inaccurate, and too many claimants do not trust how it makes decisions.

The admissions are contained in a National Audit Office (NAO) report which provides the most detailed analysis yet of “ambitious” DWP plans to simplify the application and assessment system, which currently provides disability benefits to an estimated 3.9 million working-age people.

The report says DWP’s billion-pound Health Transformation Programme represents “an opportunity to substantially improve the cost, timeliness, and accuracy” of benefit assessments “while improving the experience for claimants and increasing the trust they have in the system”.

The NAO report, [Transforming Health Assessments for Disability Benefits](https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/transforming-health-assessments-for-disability-benefits/), concludes: “While the programme is ambitious and has the potential to make savings and improve the experience of those being assessed, the scale and complexity of the transformation leaves it at high risk of delay, cost overruns, and of not achieving the intended benefits.”

In the report, NAO says DWP wants to improve the current service and believes it can improve the cost of assessments, the speed and accuracy of initial decisions, and the level of trust among claimants in how it makes its decisions.

The Health Transformation Programme was launched five years ago and is expected to run until 2029, costing more than one billion pounds.

As part of plans to create a single “integrated” service, [it is awarding contracts](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/dwp-hands-hundreds-of-millions-more-to-firms-linked-to-claimant-deaths-but-not-atos/) to provide both personal independence payment (PIP) assessments and work capability assessments to a single contractor in each of four areas of England, Scotland and Wales.

It also wants to create a single digital system for the department and its providers to use, which will reduce the need for claimants to provide information multiple times; allow online PIP applications; and use a “triage system” to reach a decision more quickly on straightforward claims.

DWP says it aims to make the assessment process “simpler, more user-friendly, easier to navigate, and more joined-up for claimants, whilst delivering better value for money for taxpayers”.

NAO says the Health Transformation Programme is the “primary means by which DWP hopes to implement further reform of disability benefits, [including removing the Work Capability Assessment](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/work-coaches-with-no-gcses-could-decide-on-fit-for-work-activity-dwp-admits/)”.

But it warns that there “remain risks to value for money” which will need to be “carefully managed”.

Disability News Service (DNS) is also reporting this week that DWP may be planning to further “transform” the disability benefits system by merging personal independence payment (PIP) and other extra costs benefits with universal credit (*see separate story*).

One of the advantages for welfare rights activists of the NAO report is that it provides the first detailed description of DWP’s reform plans, and includes admissions from the department about its current failings.

The report says that 12 per cent of decisions about PIP claims between 2018 and 2022 were overturned by a mandatory reconsideration or on appeal.

When excluding claims that were initially awarded the maximum daily living and mobility components of PIP, this rises as high as 15 per cent.

These are similar to figures reported by DNS following a freedom of information request in 2019, which found that of all PIP claims completely rejected by DWP in the year to June 2018, 14 per cent were eventually overturned because the decisions were found to have been wrong.

[At the time](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/one-in-seven-rejected-pip-claims-is-overturned-dwp-figures-show/), DWP refused to accept that the figures provided a more accurate picture of how well the PIP assessment process was working than those usually quoted by ministers, which look only at the proportion of PIP decisions eventually overturned at appeal.

**29 June 2023**

**Campaigners pledge to fight to ensure ministers stick to new air travel promises**

Campaigners have warned ministers that they will fight to ensure the government keeps its promise to introduce laws aimed at improving the protection offered to disabled air passengers.

In its long-awaited response to a consultation on protecting air passengers – which closed in March 2022 – the government said this week that it would introduce laws to remove the limit on compensation paid by airlines that damage wheelchairs or other mobility aids on domestic UK flights.

Airlines will also be “encouraged” to remove this cap voluntarily on international flights, and within the UK in the period before legislation can be passed.

The government also promised to boost the powers of the industry regulator, the Civil Aviation Authority, allowing it to impose fines for the first time.

But these measures will only happen “when parliamentary time allows”, and there were [repeated warnings on social media](https://twitter.com/trolliebobs/status/1673604132412829699) this week that the government’s promises will mean nothing until legislation is introduced and passed.

This means disabled campaigners and allies will need to keep pressing the government to view the legislation as a priority, with the likelihood of a general election within the next 15 months.

[Disabled TV presenter Sophie Morgan](https://twitter.com/sophmorgTV), who has played a key role in campaigning for government action through the [Rights on Flights campaign](https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/news/rights-flights-dr-uk-and-sophie-morgan-launch-new-campaign) – after having a wheelchair broken twice in six months on flights – welcomed the government’s announcement this week.

She told Disability News Service: “They are going to look at the caps on compensation – that’s good, but when is it actually going to happen, and will this government actually see it through? We don’t know.”

Wheelchairs and scooters are usually carried in the hold of a plane, but the compensation for damage is limited by the 1999 Montreal Convention because they are treated as “baggage”.

These limits do not apply if the passenger has made a “special declaration of interest” as to the value of the equipment, but this often requires payment of a fee, while airlines may still set their own limits on compensation.

The government’s consultation response says: “Disabled and less mobile passengers should be able to travel without worrying about their wheelchairs or mobility equipment being damaged.

“It should be an industry priority to ensure that damage does not happen.

“We will be working with industry on ways to ensure that this kind of equipment is handled appropriately in order to minimise that risk.”

Morgan said it was “ridiculous” that it had taken the government so long to respond to its consultation.

But she said: “What this does is it sends a message that the government hears what’s happening, is listening to what’s happening, and is going to respond and react to protect us.

“We need the powers that be to understand that we are having problems and we need their support, and we don’t get that from the government very often.”

She added: “It’s a commitment, but… we don’t have a date, we don’t have a timeline, we don’t have any of that concrete evidence that this is going to be what it says it is, so we need to keep the pressure on, we need to hold them to account. We cannot let this go.

“We are not going to stop. They know that.”

The [Rights On Flights](https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/rights-flights) campaign was launched earlier this year, although disabled people have been campaigning for years for successive governments to take action, dating back more than 20 years to Disability Now magazine’s Flight Rights campaign.

Morgan said that Rights on Flights seemed to have helped persuade the government to take action.

She launched the campaign, alongside the SNP MP Marion Fellows – who Morgan said has been “pivotal” to the campaign – and Disability Rights UK (DR UK), with [a letter to the prime minister](https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/rights-flights) in February.

The letter asked for powers for the Civil Aviation Authority to impose fines on airlines and other organisations responsible for damaging wheelchairs and other mobility equipment, for leaving disabled passengers on flights for “prolonged periods” once they have landed, and for failing to provide adequate assistance.

They said then that the situation had reached “crisis point”.

[This week’s consultation response](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/reforming-aviation-consumer-policy-protecting-air-passenger-rights/outcome/response-to-the-aviation-consumer-policy-reform-consultation) also says that the government will promote new training, so that those who handle mobility equipment can do so without damaging it.

It will introduce new laws to force all airlines operating in the UK to join a scheme that provides a way for passengers to settle their air travel disputes without the need to go to court, by using an alternative dispute resolution body.

And it says the government will continue to work with the industry on improving accessible information and training for staff who assist disabled passengers.

Anna Morell, media and communications manager for DR UK, said of the government’s announcement: “This is good news, and has been a long time coming.

“Airlines now need to act swiftly to implement the gold standard practices outlined in the consultation and government needs to ensure that it does indeed make time to ensure that new legislation is passed.

“We will be watching to ensure that the pledges made today become action to enable parity for disabled air travel passengers.”

Tanvi Vyas, who leads on air travel for the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee, which advises the government on accessible transport, said: “Providing compensation for damaged mobility equipment is certainly a move in the right direction to increase consumer confidence.

“Understanding the international element to this and encouraging waiving [the cap on compensation] for international flights is crucial for disabled travellers to travel with assurance and consistency.”

She said she hoped the measures on training “raises the bar, enhances existing knowledge and sharpens minds to understand the gravity of the situation when damage occurs”.

Announcing the measures, transport secretary Mark Harper said: “I recognise the work airlines do around the clock in order to provide a good service to customers and today’s proposals set out how we can go even further for travellers.

“I’ve heard really concerning examples of passengers’ wheelchairs getting damaged and being left without full and fair compensation; it’s important that everyone can travel with confidence.”

**29 June 2023**

**Survey suggests tens of thousands of disabled people failed to vote due to ID rules**

Tens of thousands of disabled people may have been deprived of their vote at May’s local elections in England because of the government’s new rules\* on providing voter identification, a new report suggests.

Data from polling stations shows that at least 0.25 per cent of voters who turned up to polling stations – at least 14,000 – were not issued with a ballot paper because of the requirement to show photo identification (ID) to vote in person.

But [the interim report](https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/our-views-and-research/our-research/voter-id-may-2023-local-elections-england-interim-analysis) from the Electoral Commission says this is an under-estimate of the number affected, because of the quality of the data that was collected.

And the commission also found – through a survey – that four per cent of people who said they did not vote in the elections gave an unprompted reason related to the ID rules, with three per cent of them saying they did not have the necessary ID and one per cent saying they disagreed with the need to show ID.

The proportion of non-voters giving an ID-related reason rose from four per cent to seven per cent when survey respondents were selecting from a list of reasons.

The report says the survey evidence suggests that disabled and unemployed people were more likely than other groups to give a reason related to ID for not voting.

The commission will now carry out further research to “establish a clearer picture”.

The local elections took place in 230 areas in England in May, and about 27 million people were eligible to vote.

This suggests that hundreds of thousands of people – and tens of thousands of disabled people – may have had an ID-related reason for not voting.

The research also showed that 92 per cent of people in areas with elections were aware that they needed to show identification at a polling station, while the commission told Disability News Service (DNS) that 93 per cent of disabled people were aware of the ID requirement.

The report is based on evidence from public opinion research carried out before and after the elections, and polling station figures collected from most councils that held polls this year.

Anna Morell, media and communications manager for [Disability Rights UK](https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/), said: “For those who struggled to obtain ID, a fundamental right afforded to all other eligible citizens was effectively removed from them.

“It is imperative that the Electoral Commission uses robust methodology to look at the impacts of the use of voter ID on minority groups and takes action to ensure that disabled people are not adversely affected in future elections.”

The Electoral Commission – the independent body which oversees UK elections and regulates political finance – will publish a full report in September on the elections with recommendations and further analysis, including an assessment of feedback from charities, candidates, returning officers, polling station staff, election observers and police.

Craig Westwood, the commission’s director of communications, policy and research, said: “It is too soon to draw conclusions about the impact of voter ID on specific groups of people, but some of the emerging evidence is concerning.

“Elections should be accessible to everyone, so we are working to build a better understanding of the specific experiences of voters at these elections.

“This includes consultation with those voters we know are most at risk of facing barriers to participation.”

A spokesperson for the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) said: “It’s vital we keep our democracy secure, prevent the potential for voter fraud, and bring the rest of the UK in line with Northern Ireland which has had photo identification to vote in elections since 2003.

“We welcome the Electoral Commission’s interim report on May’s local elections which shows that the vast majority of voters – 99.75 per cent – were able to cast their vote successfully and adapted well to the rollout of voter identification in Great Britain.

“Our reforms put in place measures to ensure disabled voters can participate fully in our democracy, including improvements to equipment made available in polling stations and making it easier to get help to vote from a companion.”

DNS challenged the accuracy of the DLUHC statement, and suggested that the Electoral Commission survey results meant hundreds of thousands of voters may not have voted for ID-related reasons, while the commission also made it clear that the polling station data was an under-estimate.

But the DLUHC spokesperson said: “We stand by our statement as the data showed that the vast majority of voters who tried to vote were able to successfully cast their ballots.”

The government will carry out its own evaluation of the impact of the voter ID measures, which should be published by the end of November.

*\*From October, photo ID will be needed at UK parliamentary general elections, but it will not be required at local elections in Scotland or Wales, or elections to the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Senedd. It is already a requirement in Northern Ireland*

**29 June 2023**

**Other disability-related stories covered by mainstream media this week**

The health secretary has launched an investigation into mental health scandals across the country – prompted by The Independent’s reporting on deaths and abuse of patients. Steve Barclay said the Health and Safety Investigation Branch would look into the care of young people, examine staffing levels, and scrutinise the quality of care within units. He also said an investigation into 2,000 mental health deaths in Essex would be converted into a full public inquiry: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/steve-barclay-essex-mental-health-b2365615.html>

One in seven people in the UK are going hungry because they can’t afford spiralling food costs, new research suggests. Disabled people, single parents and those living alone are the worst affected, food bank charity Trussell Trust has warned, and people are distancing themselves from family and friends because of the costs of meeting up: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/food-prices-hunger-food-bank-benefits-b2364928.html>

Thousands of disabled people in their fourth year of shielding from Covid say they are being “completely failed” by ministers – with support being cut further this week. From Tuesday the NHS will stop automatically contacting immunosuppressed patients who test positive – a move alarmed MPs say will cost more lives. Campaigners warn the pandemic isn’t over for severely immunosuppressed patients, with many still cancelling medical appointments and surgery for fear of contracting the virus: <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/thousands-still-shielding-covid-failed-30305367>

The Home Office has been accused of abandoning 55 disabled asylum-seekers at a former care home in an Essex seaside town. The asylum-seekers, who fled various conflict zones including Sudan and Afghanistan, have a range of health conditions they have had since childhood or life-changing injuries acquired in war zones:

[https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/jun/23/asylum-seekers-with-disabilities-abandoned-in-former-essex-care-home](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/jun/23/asylum-seekers-with-disabilities-abandoned-in-former-essex-care-home%20)

There were 1,484 thefts of blue parking badges in the year to March 2022, up 41 per cent from 1,055 the previous year, according to BBC analysis of the latest available figures from the Department for Transport: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/disability-65986564>

A mental health trust lost track of figures for patient deaths, a review found. It said numbers on public documents such as board reports did not match internal figures at the Norfolk and Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust. Of 11,379 deaths of people in contact with the trust over the past five years, the exact number that could have been deemed avoidable was unknown: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-norfolk-65962463>

**29 June 2023**

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