**Ticket office closures will cut support for disabled rail passengers, papers show**

A government-backed programme to close most ticket offices across the country will lead to a significant fall in the number of staff available to support disabled passengers, analysis of consultation documents has shown.

Several of the documents published last week by train companies make it impossible to assess the impact of the closure programme on staffing levels at rail stations.

But analysis by Disability News Service (DNS) shows those companies that have released enough information to allow passengers to assess the impact of the proposed closures show clear cuts to support across many of the hundreds of stations affected – mostly in England – despite repeated pledges by government and the rail industry.

One company, [West Midlands Railway (WMR)](https://www.westmidlandsrailway.co.uk/travel-information/at-the-station/proposed-changes-ticket-offices), is set to close a number of ticket offices and replace them with assistance from “mobile teams” covering a group of local stations.

This will mean there will be no permanent staff presence for passenger assistance at these stations.

This will cover stations such as Longbridge, Bournville, Bromsgrove and the tourism centre of Stratford-upon-Avon, which all currently have ticket offices that are open at least 11 hours a day during the week.

WMR refused this week to justify the move to shut these ticket offices and replace them with assistance from mobile teams.

Instead, a spokesperson claimed the company was “committed to providing an accessible railway for all” and that “moving staff out from behind windows and onto concourses and platforms will enable them to provide support and assistance to passengers in a way that they currently cannot”.

Some of the stations run by [East Midlands Railway](https://www.eastmidlandsrailway.co.uk/modernisation-consultation) will see ticket offices that are currently open for up to 11 hours a day during the week shut down and replaced by daily or even weekly visits from members of a mobile team covering a group of local stations.

[Great Western Railway (GWR)](https://www.gwr.com/haveyoursay) plans to cut staffing hours by more than two hours a day during the week at Bristol Temple Meads, the city’s main station.

At GWR’s main station in Reading, where nearly a quarter of all tickets in 2022-23 were sold at the ticket office, the company plans to close that ticket office and cut the availability of staff by nearly three hours a day on weekdays.

[Avanti West Coast’s consultation document](https://www.avantiwestcoast.co.uk/consultation) shows that “ticketing support” at London Euston will end at 10pm on weekdays, rather than midnight at present, once the ticket office has closed.

At Manchester Piccadilly, ticketing support will end at 9pm rather than 10.30pm, every day of the week, while also starting later each day.

[All but 18 ticket offices at stations run by Northern](https://www.northernrailway.co.uk/consultation-2023) will see their ticket offices closed.

Disabled activist Doug Paulley [said his calculations](https://twitter.com/Doug_Paulley/status/1677854663775776769) show Northern’s staffed station hours will decrease by three-fifths under its proposals, from 10,793 to 4,238 hours per week, with nearly all the cuts at weekends and evenings.

Staff support at many Northern stations, including Ulverston and Hexham, will be drastically cut when the ticket offices close, in Ulverston’s case from more than eight hours a day on weekdays to just two, with an end to any support on Sundays when it was previously available for more than nine hours.

Staff support at these two stations is particularly important for many disabled people because they include “barrow crossings”, crossing-points that allow passengers who cannot use steps to cross the tracks to move from one platform to another with the support of staff.

Tony Jennings, a mobility scooter-user whose local station is Ulverston, said it would become “token staffing” at the station if the changes went ahead, and it would “essentially become inaccessible”.

He said there would be “virtually no opportunity” for spontaneous travel (“turn up and go”) for disabled people from their local station under the plans.

He believes Northern will be failing to comply with its accessible travel policy (ATPs) under its proposals, which the Office of Rail and Road is examining this month along with those of all the other train companies proposing ticket office closures.

He said: “Wheelchair- and mobility scooter-users are dependent on staff to escort them across the barrow crossing.

“The station will become inaccessible if the proposed hours are reduced and the nearest accessible station is 10 miles away and wheelchair-accessible taxis are virtually non-existent so disabled people will be excluded from travelling on Northern trains.

“Be under no illusion, closing ticket offices is about cutting staff, and disabled people will suffer the consequences.”

Jennings, a member of Northern's accessibility panel, said later that he had been told by the company that it was prioritising mitigation for the closures.

A Northern spokesperson said: “These are proposals at this point and we welcome feedback from users of the station.”

Northern is among companies that are defending the closure proposals, arguing that only one in six journeys on its services are purchased through a ticket office and that it needs to “modernise to meet the changing needs” of passengers.

The Northern spokesperson said: “These proposals include the creation of a new, more visible customer facing role that will offer a wider range of support across our stations.”

Another company, [Southeastern](https://www.southeasternrailway.co.uk/help-and-contact/get-in-touch/ticket-office-consultation), which wants to close many of its ticket offices in south-east London, has admitted that, when it closes ticket offices at “medium and larger sized” locations, those stations “will have fewer staff”.

[TransPennine Express](https://www.tpexpress.co.uk/ticket-offices-update) will be closing 14 of its 16 ticket offices, with station staffing reducing at the majority of those 14 stations.

Limehouse station in east London, [run by rail company C2C](https://www.c2c-online.co.uk/consultation/), currently has a ticket station open more than six hours a day on weekdays, but the provision of ticketing advice at the station will drop to zero after it closes.

[Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR)](https://www.thameslinkrailway.com/about-us/our-commitments/public-consultation), which runs Southern, Gatwick Express, Thameslink and Great Northern*,* refused to explain how its programme of closures would affect overall staffing numbers at its stations.

DNS asked GTR how passengers could assess the impact of the closures without the necessary information in its consultation documents – when online reports suggest there will be more than 260 fewer staff under its plans – but it refused to answer the question.

Instead, Jenny Saunders, its customer service director, claimed the closures were a “real opportunity to modernise and improve the experience of our customers” and that “no station that is staffed today would become unstaffed and we would continue to provide accessibility support and assistance”.

[Chiltern](https://www.chilternrailways.co.uk/ticketofficeproposals) – which reports suggest will lose 19 staff due to the planned closures – also refused to explain how passengers could assess the impact of the closures without the necessary information in its consultation document.

A Chiltern\* spokesperson claimed instead that “Chiltern colleagues will be available to help customers at similar, if not the same times, as they currently do today with ticketing and accessibility queries in all of our staffed stations” and that “the proposed change amounts to moving colleagues from behind the glass as opposed to any reduction in provision of ticketing or accessibility services – including hours of operation”.

There are also growing concerns at the failure of the train companies to provide their consultation documents in accessible formats such as easy read, British Sign Language and large print, in addition to a consultation process that will only last three weeks.

The government has claimed that the “industry-led consultations are about enhancing the role of station workers and getting staff out from behind ticket office screens and into more active, customer-facing roles that will allow them to better support all passengers”.

But Katie Pennick, campaigns manager for Transport for All (TfA), said: “The line coming from government and industry is that staffing levels will remain broadly the same, but there’s a reason we are so sceptical about this argument.

“We know these plans are ultimately about cutting costs, which tells us staff will be reduced.

“The process of closing ticket offices requires public consultation – but if/when they close, there’s absolutely nothing stopping train operating companies from de-staffing entirely.

“This could result in train operators destaffing stations by stealth.

“Moreover, upon closer analysis of the proposals, it seems staffing levels are indeed set to reduce, with some operators proposing replacing assistance staff with ‘mobile teams’ covering a number of local stations. This is unacceptable.

“It is difficult enough for disabled people to get staff’s attention and arrange assistance currently, even when staff are located at the ticket office/assistance point.

“Imagine how much more difficult this will be if staff are ‘roaming’ and could be anywhere in the station or on any platform, or indeed at another station entirely?

“Disabled people should not be (and are not) required to book assistance in advance.

“The proposals must be scrapped.”

To respond to the consultations launched by individual train companies, passengers should contact the independent transport user watchdog [Transport Focus](https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/train-station-ticket-office-consultation/), or [London TravelWatch](https://www.londontravelwatch.org.uk/ticket-offices-have-your-say/) in London. The consultation period lasts just 21 days (until 26 July).

TfA has advice [on how to write a letter of objection](https://www.transportforall.org.uk/campaign/ticket-office-closures/take-action/) to the consultations.

*\*The other train companies consulting on ticket office closures are* [*Greater Anglia*](https://www.greateranglia.co.uk/consult)*,* [*LNER*](https://www.lner.co.uk/station-changes) *and* [*South Western*](https://www.southwesternrailway.com/station-change-proposal)

**13 July 2023**

**Minister misleads MPs over impact of ticket office closures**

The rail minister has refused to apologise after misleading MPs about the impact of government-backed plans to close hundreds of ticket offices.

Huw Merriman [twice told the Commons](https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2023-07-06/debates/22E13B85-0B30-4166-8C79-ABCBDF891090/RailTicketOffices) last week that “no currently staffed stations will be unstaffed” as a result of the closures, which are focused on England.

But public consultation documents issued by all 13 train companies planning closures show that is not true.

Analysis by Disability News Service of the consultation documents (*see separate story*) shows that at least three train companies will move some stations from being staffed part-time to relying on mobile teams that cover a group of local stations.

Disabled activist Doug Paulley said comments that the closures were simply about redeploying staff – made by Merriman and the rail industry – were “just so disingenuous”.

He said: “They say it’s about being more customer-focused. No, it’s not.”

He said this week that legal action over the closures was increasingly likely.

Paulley’s own calculations show Northern’s staffed station hours will decrease by three-fifths under its proposals, from 10,793 to 4,238 staffed station hours per week, with nearly all the cuts at weekends and evenings.

Some stations run by East Midlands Railway will in future have to rely on “mobile staff” when their ticket offices close.

Alfreton currently has a ticket office open more than eight hours a day every day of the week, but in future it will have to rely on “daily visits from mobile staff”.

Two other East Midlands stations, Mansfield and Narborough, currently have ticket offices open six days a week for more than six hours a day, but in future will have to rely on “weekly visits from mobile staff”.

Closures to ticket offices in stations run by Greater Anglia will see similar changes to some stations, with Braintree and Rochford currently having a ticket office open one day a week, but both in future having to rely on “regular visits by our mobile team”.

And some stations run by West Midlands Railway – including Bournville, Longbridge and Stratford-upon-Avon – will move from having ticket offices open at least 11 hours a day during the week to relying in future on staff from its “new mobile teams” being deployed “on a flexible basis to undertake customer service, passenger assistance, safety and general upkeep duties”.

A Department for Transport spokesperson refused to comment on the minister misleading MPs about the closures.

Instead, he claimed the “industry-led consultations are about enhancing the role of station workers and getting staff out from behind ticket office screens and into more active, customer-facing roles that will allow them to better support all passengers”.

He also claimed that DfT had been “consistently honest” about “the need for our railways to modernise if they are going to survive”.

To respond to the consultations launched by individual train companies, passengers should contact the independent transport user watchdog [Transport Focus](https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/train-station-ticket-office-consultation/), or [London TravelWatch](https://www.londontravelwatch.org.uk/ticket-offices-have-your-say/) in London. The consultation period lasts just 21 days (until 26 July).

**13 July 2023**

**Telegraph articles ‘legitimise’ hate speech, disabled activists tell TUC conference**

Union activists have called for action over discriminatory articles in a national newspaper that “legitimise” hate speech by attacking disabled benefit claimants.

Disabled journalists – backed overwhelmingly by fellow union activists – called this week for the press regulator to strengthen its code of practice, following news stories published by the Daily Telegraph.

They said the “distorted narratives” contained in the Telegraph articles legitimise disability hate speech and “demonise” disabled people who are unable to work.

The emergency motion submitted by the National Union of Journalists (NUJ)\* to the TUC Disabled Workers Conference in Bournemouth yesterday (Wednesday) called on the TUC to support a campaign that demands action by the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO).

IPSO is supposed to regulate the Telegraph but it has made it clear that it cannot investigate such news stories because they attack a group of people rather than named individuals, despite receiving more than 600 complaints about one of the Telegraph stories.

But [Natasha Hirst](https://twitter.com/HirstPhotos), the first disabled activist to become NUJ president, said this leaves disabled people “open to being targeted”.

She told the conference that the kind of narratives contained in the Telegraph articles “legitimise hate speech”.

[In May](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/broadcasters-silence-over-rabblerouser-tweet-on-disability-benefits/), Jeremy Vine’s Channel 5 television show published a social media post that asked if it was wrong for “taxpayers” to pay “indefinitely” for the benefits of those “deemed too sick to work”.

Last month, the Telegraph [sparked hundreds of complaints](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/watchdog-receives-hundreds-of-complaints-over-telegraphs-toxic-benefits-article/) to IPSO over a “toxic” article which asked its readers to calculate how much disabled people on out-of-work benefits were contributing to the country’s “tax burden”, and claiming that millions were claiming benefits “without ever having to look for work”.

It produced an automatic calculator that allowed readers to discover “just how much of our hard-won salaries are spent on the benefits of those who do not work”.

Last week, the Telegraph [ran another news story](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/07/07/benefits-mobility-scheme-mental-health-cars-worth-40k/) (*paywall*) that accused the government of “wasting taxpayers’ money” on a “profligate” benefits system by funding people with mental distress to “claim £40,000 cars on benefits” through the Motability scheme.

Hirst told fellow delegates: “This sort of reporting is a dog whistle for the far-right.

“It is too easy for the owners of corporations like the Telegraph to get away with unethical journalism because we have a regulator [IPSO] that cannot grasp and doesn’t care how damaging this kind of reporting is.”

She warned of the lessons from history that show the consequences of the dehumanisation of disabled people, with [the Aktion T4 programme](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/cathedral-theft-ends-gloucesters-resistance/) in Nazi Germany leading to the systematic murder of at least a quarter of a million disabled people.

Hirst said: “We must remember our history.

“The drip-drip-drip of inhumane and degrading rhetoric meant it was acceptable for disabled lives to be extinguished, lives like yours and mine.”

Nicky Fitzsimmons, from USDAW, seconding the NUJ motion, told delegates: “We know from bitter experience that the portrayal of benefit claimants as scroungers, as lazy and workshy has very real and damaging consequences for disabled people.”

She said the articles were designed to portray disabled people as a group apart and “something other, a group that doesn’t pay its way and one that is getting away with something for nothing”.

She said that a member of her delegation, who is visually-impaired and uses a white cane, had recently thanked someone for holding a hotel door open for them in Blackpool, only for that person to hurl abuse at her, saying she was only using the cane to get personal independence payment (PIP), even though she does not currently receive PIP.

Hannah David, from the PCS union, read out a comment from a member who works for the Department for Work and Pensions.

They said the government and right-wing press “continue to feed the narrative” of disabled people “languishing” at home and living off the state, to try to push sick and disabled people off benefits and into “inappropriate low-paid work”.

They added: “Language is important and it’s important that we work to change this rhetoric, both from government and the press.”

Dan Edge, from Equity, who works in the arts, theatre, cinema and television, said he had spent years working to develop “positive narratives around disability” and that he was tired of seeing his work “undone” by articles such as those in the Telegraph.

He said the press “needs to be held to account”.

Paulette Ennever, from NASUWT, said such demonisation of disabled benefit claimants had “plagued our society for too long”, with the media portraying disabled people as “burdens on society”.

The motion was unanimously passed by delegates.

Earlier, the TUC’s general secretary, Paul Nowak, told the conference that media organisations like the Telegraph were “very clear that the problem isn’t the systemic barriers that you face, it’s that disabled people are scroungers leaching off the taxes of the so-called strivers.

“That’s utter tosh. It’s utter bullshit. It’s an insult to disabled people, it’s an insult to tax-payers, and it’s an insult to journalists.”

He praised the NUJ for exposing the Telegraph’s “nasty, inaccurate, right-wing drivel”.

The NUJ wants the IPSO code of practice to be extended to allow complaints to be made about discrimination against groups of people.

It also wants IPSO to use its powers to monitor coverage of disability issues in national newspapers so it can act against “systemic negative framing” of disabled people.

And it wants IPSO to work with the NUJ and disabled people’s organisations to produce guidelines on disability reporting.

*\*DNS editor John Pring is an NUJ member*

**13 July 2023**

**Disabled people in Wales ‘systematically’ let down during cost-of-living crisis**

Disabled people in Wales have been “systematically” let down by the UK and Welsh governments during the “devastating” cost-of-living crisis, a new report has found.

[The Barely Surviving report](https://www.disabilitywales.org/report-launch-barely-surviving-the-impact-of-the-cost-of-living-crisis-on-disabled-people-in-wales/), launched this week by Disability Wales, says many disabled people in Wales have been caused “significant harm” by the cost-of-living crisis, with “insufficient” measures taken by government.

The report warns of evidence suggesting that disabled people were “slipping through the cracks and struggling on their own” because of a lack of “joined up support” between the NHS, local authorities and the Welsh government.

It says this must become a “national priority” for the Welsh Senedd.

Disability Wales said the UK and Welsh governments “must act urgently and meaningfully” in response to the “harrowing lived experiences of disabled people” exposed by the research.

The report warns of an “ongoing crisis” in disabled people’s mental health, which is not being addressed.

Multiple respondents to a survey for the report said they had experienced suicidal ideation, with one reporting that a disabled friend had taken their own life “after feeling like a financial burden on their family”.

One respondent reported worsening asthma and anxiety attacks because they were not able to keep their home heated.

Of the 74 survey respondents, 52 said their physical health had been impacted by the cost-of-living crisis, while 58 respondents said their mental health had been affected.

The report says many disabled people are unable to afford three meals a day or pay for the impairment-related diets they need.

Others are experiencing increasing levels of social isolation because of the lack of access to transport.

About 100 disabled people, as well as disabled people’s organisations, contributed to the research by Disability Wales.

One disabled person who took part in the research said: “What’s worse is not knowing what to expect next, how much more costs will increase.”

Some respondents reported having to sell possessions to pay their bills.

Of those who took part in the survey, 53 of 74 respondents said they had had to cut back on their spending on transport, which left many “increasingly isolated”.

A similar number said they had cut back on their spending on food, with even more having to cut back on clothing and leisure.

Among the report’s recommendations is a call for personal independence payment to be devolved to the Welsh government – as it has been in Scotland, which has designed its own replacement benefit – which would allow a “coproduced approach to the design and assessment process in line with the social model of disability”.

It also calls for regulators such as Ofgem and Ofcom to “make sure that disabled people don’t overpay for everyday essential services”, and for an urgent review of the Welsh government’s policy on social care charges.

And it calls for resources and capacity-building measures to ensure the creation and sustainability of at least one disabled people’s organisation in every local authority area in Wales.

Rhian Davies, chief executive of Disability Wales, told an online event held to launch the report: “Although there has been a lot of universal support with payments for energy bills and that sort of thing, there’s been very little targeted at disabled people, despite the fact that disabled people face higher costs in terms of… disability-related expenditure.

“Also, disabled people are more likely to live in poverty. That combination of factors we feel is being completely overlooked by the UK and… Welsh governments.

“The report is an important way for us to highlight that and use as a springboard to work with governments and other stakeholders to get these issues addressed.”

She said the Welsh government must use its Disability Rights Taskforce\* and Disability Rights Action Plan – due for publication next year – to “make a radical change”.

She said: “I think we are all a bit tired of having promises made and then things not following through.”

*\*The taskforce was set up to address the inequalities exposed by the* [*Locked Out report*](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/pandemic-exclusion-led-to-confusion-and-fear-says-ground-breaking-welsh-report/) *into the impact of the pandemic on disabled people in Wales*

**13 July 2023**

**Union key workers demand urgent action on rights for those with long Covid**

Teachers, train drivers and other union activists have called for urgent action to secure the rights of disabled workers with long Covid.

Among their demands, they are calling for statutory recognition of long Covid to ensure disabled employees are protected under the Equality Act.

Other demands, backed overwhelmingly by this week’s TUC Disabled Workers Conference in Bournemouth, include a call to reform the Access to Work scheme to make it easier for disabled workers to work from home.

They also want to see a new right to a phased return to work for those with long Covid.

Kim Knappett, from the National Education Union (NEU), said education workers had been disproportionately exposed to Covid during the pandemic because they were seen as key workers.

She said: “The consequence of this is that we have a large number of members with a whole range of after-effects of their infection.

“The NEU, like many other unions, are struggling to get employers to admit that often the infection was caused during their employment.

“This often leads to financial issues for those members as they reach the limit of their paid sick leave and are forced into even greater poverty.

“We do need to stand together to strengthen the campaign for statutory recognition of long Covid as a disability and to get better treatment for those who were failed by the government during and post the pandemic.”

Pat Roche, from the University and College Union (UCU), told delegates that classrooms “are probably one of the most dangerous places in the world in a Covid pandemic”.

She highlighted the death of “inspirational” teacher Donna Coleman, a longstanding UCU member, who worked at Burnley College and died in January 2021 after contracting Covid.

[An investigation](https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/12289/Damning-investigation-into-Covid-death-finds-Burnley-College-broke-health-and-safety-laws) by the Health and Safety Executive found the college had broken health and safety laws because of its failure to protect staff from the virus.

[Coleman had been working at the college](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/apr/27/donna-coleman-died-after-covid-ran-riot-at-burnley-college-should-it-have-been-open) and before her death UCU had rejected the college’s risk assessments in her working area because of inadequate Covid controls.

Philip Blundell, from Unite, a long Covid survivor, moved a motion – passed almost unanimously – that recognised the extent of long Covid and called for action to support workers with the condition.

He said he believed the impact of long Covid would “hit us like a train” over the next couple of years.

He told fellow delegates: “When I talked to my line manager one day about long Covid, I was told that I was very lucky and I was told not to rock the boat because I was a high-functioning disabled person and I was lucky to still be in a job, so be careful and don’t rock the boat.

“Well, members of this conference, I am going to rock this boat and I ask everybody to join me.”

Ciorstaidh Reichle, from GMB, reminded the conference that six out of 10 deaths during the pandemic had been of disabled people.

She said: “We should be looking at ways to promote a safe working environment, especially for workers at higher risk, shielding being one of the optimum protections.

“The safest option would be to work from home.

“We call on the TUC to support reform of the Access to Work fund to make it financially manageable for disabled workers to work from home.”

She also called for the promotion of flexible working for disabled workers.

Ian Penovich, an ASLEF train driver, said members of his union and others “kept the country moving” at the height of the pandemic, so that other workers could do their vital jobs.

He said: “In the face of a national and global crisis, our unions did what we were best at, we pulled together and organised and did what needed to be done, for many of us putting ourselves at great personal risk.

“Now there are many among us who are suffering from long Covid as a result, and they deserve to be looked after in the same way that they looked after the country.”

Cecily Blyther, from the University and College Union, said: “During the pandemic, we learnt a great deal more about… working from home, cleanliness, hygiene, hybrid working and a great variety of working conditions.

“It should now be more possible than ever to enable everyone to do their job by setting up appropriate reasonable adjustments.”

A second motion, proposed by the NASUWT, and passed unanimously, raised concerns that the legacy of the government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic had “left disabled workers more exposed to discrimination and unfair employer practices, including through the misuse of sickness absence and capability procedures, and with reduced access to jobs, promotion and career development”.

The union also warned that the high rate of long COVID among them was “driving teachers out of the profession”.

It called on the TUC to strengthen the campaign for statutory recognition of long Covid within the definition of disability in the Equality Act and to hold the government to account for its failure to protect disabled workers during the pandemic.

Kathryn Downs, from the NASUWT, said the government and employers “hung disabled workers out to dry” during the pandemic.

She said: “Those who were shielding found themselves isolated and others who were classed as key workers under the loosest of terms found themselves having to choose between employment or their health.

“Some were furloughed, and others lost their employment altogether… as teachers we were OK apparently. We were told we were not at risk if schools were open.”

She only received her shielding letter halfway through the second lockdown.

NASUWT figures show the education sector has had the highest rate of long Covid.

The union has been campaigning for statutory recognition of long Covid as a disability under the Equality Act, which would provide workers with statutory protection such as the right to reasonable adjustments and protection against discrimination.

It has also been challenging employers to ensure teachers with long Covid are supported and not treated unfairly, by ensuring they have access to decent sickness absence provision, and reasonable adjustments including the right to time off, extended phased returns and access to flexible working.

Downs said many teachers had been forced to leave their classroom jobs because of the failure of such support.

She pointed to Office for National Statistics figures which found [six in 10 Covid-related deaths](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/government-and-nhs-discrimination-linked-to-covid-deaths-of-disabled-people/) were of disabled people.

But she said: “There was very little concern about holding the government and employers to account for the actions which put our lives at a lower cost to other workers.”

NASUWT evidence has shown an increase in disability hate crime in the classroom, with almost three-fifths of disabled members reporting disablist attitudes had worsened in the last year.

Paul Nowak, the TUC’s general secretary, told the conference yesterday (Wednesday) that the TUC had published [ground-breaking research](https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/workers-experience-long-covid) into long Covid which found that one in seven workers with long Covid said they had lost their jobs for reasons linked to the condition.

He said the TUC was campaigning for long Covid to be treated as a disability under the Equality Act.

He said TUC research had shown “that it was cuts to public services, it was austerity, that left us woefully unprepared when the virus struck”.

And he said austerity had killed “hundreds of thousands” of people, regardless of claims made by former Tory cabinet ministers George Osborne and Matt Hancock, and former prime minister David Cameron.

**13 July 2023**

**Disabled activists set to fight on in strategy court battle, despite appeal defeat**

Activists are set to fight on in the battle to force the government to listen to disabled people in drawing up a proper national disability strategy, despite the government winning its appeal in a long-running court case.

The Court of Appeal [ruled this week](https://caselaw.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ewca/civ/2023/810) that the government’s National Disability Strategy was not unlawful, over-turning last year’s ruling by the high court.

The high court had found that ministers carried out an unlawful consultation – through a national survey – before the strategy’s publication.

The appeal centred on whether the UK 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 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.

Despite that claim, the Disability Unit’s own website had listed the survey as an “Open Consultation”, while it was [hosted on the unit’s “Consultation Hub”](https://disabilityunit.citizenspace.com/), with the promise that responses would inform the strategy’s development.

But the Court of Appeal has now ruled that the survey was not unlawful because it was not a consultation that was subject to certain legal principles – known as the Gunning criteria.

Lady Justice Elisabeth Laing, one of the three Court of Appeal judges who heard the appeal, said in this week’s ruling that the strategy “had not reached a stage at which it could conceivably have been the subject of a ‘consultation’ complying with the Gunningcriteria”.

She said the purpose of the survey “was not to enable respondents to respond to proposals (there were none) but to give the respondents to the Survey the opportunity to influence the future content of the Strategy with information and their views”.

Disabled campaigners who took the case now hope to secure permission to appeal to the Supreme Court.

Because of the high court ruling, ministers had been forced to sideline much of their discredited strategy – criticised at the time of its publication in July 2021 by disabled people’s organisations as “tokenistic”, “rehashed” and “not fit for purpose”.

They are now set to publish a new “disability action plan” in the next few weeks, which will sit alongside the strategy.

[Doug Paulley](https://twitter.com/Doug_Paulley), one of the claimants, told Disability News Service that he believed the appeal court’s ruling was wrong and “ridiculous”, when the government had itself described it as an “open consultation”.

But he also said it was “sad” that the serious problems with the National Disability Strategy and the survey had now been relegated to arguments about a “technicality”.

He said the National Disability Strategy and the consultation had been “a travesty”.

He said: “It comes down to a technicality, whether something is a consultation or just an information-gathering exercise.

“It is 18 months of fighting in court, all the money and energy on both sides, with the government fighting it when it was transparent that the whole thing was unfair… and then they win on a technicality.”

Asked for his message to the government, Paulley said: “They should deal with the core issue, which is that they should genuinely consult and involve and co-produce with disabled people and produce a National Disability Strategy that is fit for purpose and will make a positive difference to disabled people’s lives.”

Kamran Mallick, chief executive of [Disability Rights UK, said](https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/news/court-overturns-unlawful-ruling-national-disability-strategy): “Whilst the court ruling is surprising, as the disability survey was not an appropriate consultation, the government should now act to take significant and meaningful action to address the poverty and systemic inequalities faced by millions of disabled people.

“We definitely don’t need both a National Disability Strategy and a Disability Action Plan.

“We need a single ambitious and transformational plan to make society inclusive and put in place the incomes and support disabled people need to be equal citizens.”

Tom Pursglove, the minister for disabled people, welcomed the ruling in [a written statement](https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2023-07-12/hcws930) and said it meant both the UK Disability Survey and the National Disability Strategy had now been found to be lawful.

He said ministers now “need to take stock of what this decision means for individual National Disability Strategy commitments and evaluate how best to move forward”.

He said he would update parliament in September to “set out our next steps in more detail”.

He added: “The Government will also continue to move forward with our planned consultation on the Disability Action Plan over the summer.

“The Disability Action Plan and the National Disability Strategy were always intended to be complementary, with the former focusing on concrete, short-term actions deliverable in 2023/24 to improve disabled people’s lives, and the latter setting out our longer-term vision, and I am delighted that we are now able to make progress on both of them.”

**13 July 2023**

**Disabled union activists vow to fight ticket office closures**

Disabled union activists have pledged to fight the closure of hundreds of rail ticket offices, with just two weeks left for passengers to respond to a series of consultations.

An emergency motion opposing the closures – proposed by the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union – drew overwhelming support from disabled delegates at the TUC Disabled Workers Conference in Bournemouth this week, and was passed unanimously.

It was the first in-person Disabled Workers Conference since the start of the pandemic in 2020.

Delegates lined up to attack the proposed closures of nearly 1,000 ticket offices, announced last week by train companies, and to highlight the impact that would have on disabled passengers.

Natalie Amber, an Equity delegate, pointed to the impact of the closures on disabled freelance workers, including many Equity members, who rely on rail travel to “go from job to job”.

She told delegates that she had to rely on a train driver to help her off the train on the way to the conference because of a failure of booked assistance, and then needed to have her ticket validated in a ticket office so she did not have to buy a new ticket.

She said: “It is this kind of thing that will stop people from being able to take work [if ticket offices close].”

Amber said that many people needed to be able to speak to someone in a ticket office because ticket machines are not accessible to them.

She said her industry and union would lose “extremely talented people” because of the closures.

Kathryn Downs, from the NASUWT teachers’ union, a wheelchair-user, told the conference: “I cannot believe we are here with another battle for our access needs.”

She said many of the ticket machines at her local station were not accessible to wheelchair-users.

Like Amber, she highlighted how ticket offices can help disabled passengers who have been delayed by a failure of assistance.

She said: “It’s the ticket office that ensures we can… validate our ticket to make sure we can get to our destination.”

Downs said she relied on ticket offices for support as a neurodivergent person because of the barriers she experiences, and that she would not have capacity to search the station for a member of staff to support her.

She said: “I do not trust rail bosses when they say [there will be] no cuts to staffing.”

Graeme Ellis, another wheelchair-user and a UNISON delegate, said the closures would have an impact “in our work lives and our social lives”.

He said ticket machines were not accessible to him, and he added: “We are going to be severely impacted by the withdrawal of ticket offices.”

Ellis warned that many disabled ticket office workers were likely to lose their jobs in the closure programme because new positions in which they would have to roam around the station would not be accessible to them.

Kevin Daws, from the University and College Union, said many tickets sold in ticket offices are sold to disabled people who have no other way to buy them.

He told delegates: “When we are at these stations, many of us need a lot of support and advice and that will not be there if all these ticket offices are not there.”

Proposing a motion on accessible public transport, which was also passed unanimously, Nigel Braithwaite, from the Musicians’ Union, praised RMT ticket office staff at Birmingham New Street station who enabled him to find the right train to the conference after his initial train was cancelled.

He said: “The closure of the ticket offices… is the latest escalation in the attack on public transport.

“It’s the latest move to make rail travel less safe and less accessible, while shareholders line their pockets.

“The closure of ticket offices is not about modernisation, it is a euphemism for ruthless cuts.”

Paul Miles, from the train drivers’ union ASLEF, said the closures would have “devastating consequences for jobs and accessibility”.

He said: “We know these closures will be used as an opportunity to reduce staffing levels.”

He said his union believed the closures would “impact heavily” on the ability of disabled passengers to “turn up and go” without booking assistance in advance, and that the closures would breach companies’ accessible travel policies.

Speaking at a packed fringe meeting organised by the RMT transport union on Tuesday, RMT’s equal opportunities officer Jess Webb told activists to “mobilise everyone in your union” against the closures.

GMB delegate Dawn Lovatt described how a member of ticket office staff had printed out an alternative route for her to get to Bournemouth for the conference.

She said: “I wouldn’t have got here without it. Computers can’t replace people.”

Andrew Coley, from USDAW, said he uses ticket offices to find the easiest routes to take to a destination with the least inconvenience.

Tracy Cannard, also from USDAW, said the closures were a “health and safety issue”.

She described how she arrived on a train in Warrington in the early evening, and there were no staff at the station, even though she had booked assistance on the passenger assistance app.

She had to be helped off by a fellow passenger, and when she arrived at the taxi rank, she was threatened by a man with a knife.

But because of a lack of staff there was no-one at the station from whom she could seek help, which meant she was unable to shelter in the ticket office.

She said: “I wouldn’t be able to travel without them.”

RMT delegate Christine Willett, who chaired the fringe meeting, said: “A railway is a part of the community and we have seen so much taken away from local communities that has destroyed them.

“We have to fight for everything now.”

*To respond to the consultations launched by individual train companies, passengers should contact the independent transport user watchdog* [*Transport Focus*](https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/train-station-ticket-office-consultation/)*, or* [*London TravelWatch*](https://www.londontravelwatch.org.uk/ticket-offices-have-your-say/) *in London. The consultation period lasts just 21 days (until 26 July).*

**13 July 2023**

**Unions call for government action on ‘criminal’ disability pay gap**

Unions have called for government action to address the “absolutely criminal” pay gap between disabled and non-disabled employees.

New TUC figures were released this week ahead of the first in-person TUC Disabled Workers Conference since the start of the pandemic.

Dave Allan, co-chair of the TUC disabled workers’ committee, told the conference in Bournemouth that the figures showed a 17.2 per cent gap between how much disabled and non-disabled people earn in a year – which was £3,700 less a year, or £2.05 less an hour – which he said was “absolutely criminal”.

Disabled women earn more than £7,000 a year less than non-disabled men.

Allan said: “It is time for employers to be forced to do better. They must face a legal duty to publish their disability pay gap.

“They must face fines for failure to implement reasonable adjustments.

“This Tory government has failed us time and time again. They have shown us that they have no respect for the lives of disabled people.

“We have more to do than ever to fight for justice for disabled people.”

About seven in 10 (69 per cent) disabled employees earn less than £15 an hour, according to the figures.

The TUC analysis finds that disabled people are much more likely than non-disabled peers to be paid less than £15 per hour, with half of non-disabled employees (50 per cent) earning less than £15 per hour, compared to seven in 10 (69 per cent) disabled employees.

In some parts of the country, the figures are even worse.

In the north-east (92 per cent) and Wales (94 per cent), more than nine in 10 disabled employees earn less than £15 an hour, compared to around two in five non-disabled workers (37 per cent in the north-east and 42 per cent in Wales).

The TUC has called on ministers to introduce a legal requirement for employers to report regularly on their disability pay gaps, and fines for employers that fail to deliver disabled workers’ legal right to reasonable adjustments.

Paul Nowak, the TUC’s general secretary, told the conference yesterday (Wednesday): “As trade unionists, we are clear that fighting for disability equality cannot be left to disabled workers alone.

“It’s the responsibility of all of us in the trade union movement.”

He said earlier in the week: “Disabled workers are struggling to make ends meet in this cost-of-living crisis, with rocketing bills and soaring inflation.

“Every worker deserves a decent job on decent pay. Being disabled should not mean you’re paid any less or are stuck on worse terms and conditions.

“The government has done very little so far to support disabled workers.

“It’s time for ministers to increase the minimum wage to £15 per hour as soon as possible and put an end to insecure work by banning zero hours contracts.

“And they must also introduce mandatory disability pay gap reporting to shine a light on inequality at work.

“Without this, millions of disabled people face a future of lower pay and in-work poverty.”

**13 July 2023**

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

The government has widened its use of artificial intelligence (AI) to uncover welfare fraud, despite warnings of algorithmic bias against groups of vulnerable claimants. In a £70 million investment applying “advanced analytics” to requests for universal credit, the Department for Work and Pensions has extended the use of machine learning as it attempts to save more than £1 billion from the £8 billion-plus lost to fraud and error last year. The project does not appear to have been formally announced by the government, which has been accused of being secretive about AI in the welfare system: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/jul/11/use-of-artificial-intelligence-widened-to-assess-universal-credit-applications-and-tackle>

Labour would use artificial intelligence to help those looking for work prepare their CVs, find jobs and receive payments faster, according to its shadow work and pensions secretary. Jonathan Ashworth told the Guardian he thought the Department for Work and Pensions was wasting millions of pounds by not using cutting-edge technology, even as the party also says AI could cause massive disruption to the jobs market. It will also use AI to a greater extent to help identify fraud and error in the system: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/jul/10/labour-would-use-ai-to-help-people-find-jobs-says-jonathan-ashworth>

Almost 900,000 older people are admitted to hospital every year as an emergency because the NHS is failing to keep them healthy at home, Age UK has warned. A major lack of services outside hospitals means elderly people are also suffering avoidable harm, such as falls and urinary tract infections, the charity said. In a new report it urges NHS bosses to push through huge changes to how the “hospital-oriented” service operates and establish “home first” as the principle of where care is provided: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/jul/11/900000-older-people-ae-lack-of-nhs-care-at-home>

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