**MPs launch inquiry into DWP safeguarding, after decade of deaths**

MPs are to launch an inquiry into safeguarding arrangements at the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), following countless deaths of disabled benefit claimants linked to its actions and failings over more than a decade.

The Commons work and pensions committee will investigate if DWP has a duty to safeguard “vulnerable people”, and if it does not, whether it should, it will announce tomorrow (Friday).

It is set to take evidence from coroners who have heard inquests into the deaths of claimants, lawyers who have taken legal cases against DWP, and the families of claimants who have died.

Disabled campaigners and allies have been pushing for years for an independent inquiry into deaths linked to DWP’s actions.

Although the committee’s investigation will be a more limited inquiry and will be led by MPs, with a Conservative majority on the committee, it is set to be the first serious public investigation into safeguarding at DWP since reports of deaths first began emerging in the early years of the 2010 Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission promised to carry out an inquiry into links between DWP’s work capability assessment and the deaths of claimants, but [it was heavily criticised after it dropped those plans](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/ehrc-has-become-extension-of-government-after-dropping-probe-into-dwp-deaths/).

Ministers [have repeatedly refused](https://petition.parliament.uk/archived/petitions/243337) to commission any kind of inquiry, [or ignored calls to set one up](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/minister-for-disabled-people-ignores-calls-for-inquiry-into-dwp-deaths/), despite years of evidence that DWP’s actions have led to hundreds, if not thousands, of deaths.

The work and pensions committee agreed to launch an inquiry after pressure from Labour’s Debbie Abrahams and her Conservative colleague Nigel Mills.

Abrahams told Disability News Service (DNS) this morning (Thursday): “After years of pushing the government for an independent inquiry into the deaths of social security claimants, the work and pensions select committee have agreed to an inquiry investigating safeguarding arrangements at the DWP.

“The committee will be inviting coroners and lawyers who have been involved in the inquests and court cases concerning the deaths of people who died while they were in receipt of benefits or shortly afterwards.

“But we will also be inviting families of loved ones who have died to provide us with evidence in writing and in person.

“So I would urge everyone who has a story which may not have been heard [to get in touch](https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/164/work-and-pensions-committee/).”

She added: “I’m very grateful to all members of the committee for agreeing to this inquiry including Nigel Mills MP for helping to draft the terms of reference for this.”

Grassroots groups of disabled people, such as [Black Triangle](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/doctors-union-is-complicit-in-continuing-fitness-for-work-deaths/), [Disabled People Against Cuts](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/paralympics-protest-aims-to-strike-major-blow-against-atos/), [the Mental Health Resistance Network](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/fitness-for-work-test-under-fire-campaigners-seek-judicial-review/), and [the Spartacus network](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/peoples-review-of-wca-finds-its-way-to-frys-five-million-followers/), have spent years highlighting deaths linked to DWP’s actions.

Concerns have also been raised by relatives who have called for action after the deaths of their family members.

Some of them have spent years campaigning for justice.

Among them are the families of [Philippa Day](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/philippa-day-flawed-pip-system-led-to-young-mums-death-says-coroner/), [Jodey Whiting](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/silent-vigil-will-mark-latest-stage-in-fight-for-second-jodey-whiting-inquest/), [David Clapson](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/sister-launches-judicial-review-claim-in-bid-for-sanctions-death-inquest/), [James Oliver](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/months-of-pip-distress-hastened-my-brothers-death/), [Errol Graham](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/errol-graham-family-win-right-to-court-challenge-of-dwp-safeguarding/) and [Mark Wood](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/mother-of-fit-for-work-victim-calls-for-ministers-to-face-criminal-charges/).

Some of the evidence linking DWP with the deaths of benefit claimants has come through prevention of future deaths reports written by coroners, several of which only emerged [years after they were written](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/dwp-dismissed-coroners-concerns-over-wca-suicide-link-document-reveals/).

Other evidence of persistent DWP safeguarding flaws emerged through freedom of information requests to the department which have revealed how [hundreds of recommendations](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/new-inquiry-call-as-dwp-deaths-mount-despite-decade-of-secret-investigations/) for improvements have been made by the department’s own secret reviews into the deaths of claimants.

Some of these reviews showed DWP staff [continuing to make the same fatal errors](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/dwp-staff-repeatedly-failed-to-follow-suicide-threat-guidance-secret-death-reviews-reveal/), year after year.

Evidence collected by DNS and others, stretching back more than a decade, has shown how DWP [repeatedly ignored recommendations](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/the-department-for-work-and-pensions-deaths-cover-up-and-a-toxic-30-year-legacy/) to improve the safety of its disability benefits assessment system, leading to countless avoidable deaths.

It also shows [how DWP hid evidence](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/governments-reviewer-tells-mps-how-dwp-kept-vital-deaths-evidence-from-him/) from independent reviews, and how the department failed to keep track of the actions taken in response to recommendations made by its own secret reviews.

Evidence also demonstrates that [the cultural problems within DWP](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/dwp-staff-admit-inflicting-psychological-harm-on-claimants-during-coalition-years/) extend far beyond the assessment system, touching all aspects of its dealings with disabled people in the social security system.

The evidence, compiled over the last decade by DNS and also by other journalists, academics and activists, shows systemic negligence by DWP, a culture of cover-up and denial, and a refusal to accept that the department has a duty of care to those disabled people claiming support through the social security system.

Much of that evidence has been brought together in a detailed timeline, as part of the [Deaths by Welfare](https://twitter.com/DeathsByWelfare) project headed by Dr China Mills and supported by [Healing Justice London](https://healingjusticeldn.org/), which works with marginalised and oppressed communities.

**20 July 2023**

**Pursglove publishes ‘action plan’ of working groups, reviews and awareness-raising**

The minister for disabled people has launched a new “disability action plan” that he claims will “help transform disabled people’s everyday lives for the better”, but which includes no new spending commitments or promised legislation.

Tom Pursglove said his draft [Disability Action Plan](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/disability-action-plan-2023-to-2024) – dismissed today as a “PR exercise” by one disabled people’s organisation – would improve disabled people’s lives and “lay the foundations for longer-term change”.

But a consultation document on the plan asks disabled people to comment on just 12 proposed new policies, all of which are low or zero budget measures.

Pursglove’s Disability Unit says it will launch a review, set up a new webpage, draw up two sets of guidance and two feasibility studies, carry out awareness-raising across several policy areas, hold cross-government discussions, set up a cross-government working group, commission two lots of research, set up two taskforces, and carry out cross-government profile-raising activity.

Pursglove says this is the “immediate action” the government plans to take in 2023 and 2024 to move towards making the country “the most accessible place in the world for disabled people to live, work and thrive”.

Among its actions, the plan pledges to raise awareness of assistive technology; commission a feasibility report on hosting the 2031 Special Olympics; and create a new badge for businesses to give their staff to show they have received approved “disability awareness” training, modelled partly on the [discredited Disability Confident](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/disability-confident-firm-replaces-disabled-staff-with-non-disabled-agency-workers/) disability employment scheme.

It also aims to “explore the merits” of setting up a new fund to support disabled candidates into elected office, [following two previous funds](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/disabled-politicians-face-multitude-of-barriers-says-government-report/) that successive Conservative-led governments set up and then scrapped.

Other proposed actions are to “consider” increasing fines for service-providers that refuse to admit guide dogs; create a webpage of guidance on creating accessible playgrounds; and improve government engagement with disabled people on emergency planning.

One proposal likely to be welcomed by many disabled activists is a plan to host a high-profile conference on how to ensure measures addressing climate change consider and respond to the needs of disabled people.

There will also be two new taskforces, one aimed at maximising disabled children’s “wellbeing and opportunities” and one at improving support for disabled parents.

Pursglove also wants the government to set up a programme to improve evidence and data on disability; and commission research to improve understanding of “emerging issues and evolving priorities” for disabled people in the next five, 10 and 20 years.

Although the action plan consultation mentions other disability-related actions that government departments are already working on, and lists the government’s “achievements” over the last year, it focuses its questions on just the 12 proposed new actions.

Svetlana Kotova, director of campaigns and justice for [Inclusion London](https://www.inclusionlondon.org.uk/), said: “At a time of the cost-of-living crisis, when disabled people experience cuts to support and difficulties in every aspect of their life, the actions proposed are not going to make a tiny difference.

“We need transformative, deliberate and resourced actions, not a PR exercise.”

Pursglove told fellow MPs this week [in a written statement](https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2023-07-18/debates/23071835000024/DisabilityActionPlanConsultationPublication) that the action plan was “another important step” in meeting the Conservative manifesto commitment to “transform the everyday lives of disabled people across the country” and make the country “the most accessible place in the world for disabled people to live, work and thrive”.

Just 24 hours later, it emerged that two separate legal actions were being taken over government-backed plans to close hundreds of rail ticket offices across the country, plans which disabled campaigners have warned would have a “disastrous impact” on disabled passengers and “risk locking disabled people out of the rail network entirely”.

[Tony Jennings](https://twitter.com/LordOrk), co-chair of a rail accessibility panel and co-founder of the [Campaign for Level Boarding](https://www.levelboarding.org.uk/), questioned how a proposal to explore the feasibility of hosting the Special Olympics would improve disabled people’s lives, when the London 2012 Paralympics failed to do so.

He said the irony of the government launching the consultation at a time when it wants to close nearly 1,000 ticket offices, which will have a drastic impact on disabled people’s confidence to travel by train, “isn’t lost on the disabled community”.

He also contrasted the insignificance of the measures in the action plan [with the continued failure of the Department for Transport](https://twitter.com/LordOrk/status/1681594472348499968) to force train companies to buy low-floored trains, and invest in a rolling programme of platform adjustments, which would enable level boarding and independent travel for disabled people with mobility impairments.

There are also concerns that the next Conservative government [wants to means-test disability benefits](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/focus-group-questions-suggest-means-testing-pip-is-back-on-the-tory-agenda/) as a way of cutting spending, while its [plans to scrap the work capability assessment](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/heartless-reforms-to-disability-benefits-defy-logic/) and give new powers to work coaches with no healthcare qualifications have been described as “callous” and “punitive”.

Meanwhile, tens of thousands of disabled people across the country [are having debt collection action taken against them](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/mps-fail-to-question-minister-on-care-charges-national-scandal/) every year by their local authorities over unpaid care charges.

Disability News Service also reports this week (*see separate story*) that key digital services used by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to run the disability benefits system are still branded “high risk” on accessibility, a year after secret DWP reports found scores of its websites and other services were failing to comply with public sector regulations.

The Disability Action Plan will sit alongside the government’s National Disability Strategy, which Pursglove said sets out its “longer-term vision to improve disabled people’s lives for the better”.

The government learned last week that the Court of Appeal had overturned a high court ruling that the strategy was unlawful.

When it was published in the summer of 2021, the strategy was described by one disabled people’s organisation (DPO) as “a cynical re-packaging of current polices and current budgets”, while the DPO Forum England said it ignored bold action on increasing benefit levels, supporting inclusive education, combating the disability employment gap, increasing accessible housing, and reforming social care.

The action plan consultation will last for 12 weeks, and ends on 6 October.

**20 July 2023**

**Pressure mounts on ministers and rail companies over ticket office closures**

Pressure is mounting on Conservative ministers and train companies over their plans to close nearly 1,000 rail ticket offices, after the Scottish government’s advisers on accessible transport described the proposals as “entirely unacceptable”.

The equality and human rights watchdog is also facing increasing pressure to speak out, after it refused to express any concern about the impact of the proposals on disabled passengers.

And the rail minister is now claiming that stations can still be described as “staffed” if in future they rely on mobile teams of rail staff covering groups of local stations, even if they visit them [as infrequently as once a week](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/minister-misleads-mps-over-impact-of-ticket-office-closures/).

More than 100,000 people have already responded to a series of consultations on the planned closures, which ends on Wednesday.

The [Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland (MACS)](https://www.transport.gov.scot/our-approach/accessible-transport/mobility-and-access-committee-for-scotland-macs/) has told one of the train companies, LNER, that the proposals are “entirely unacceptable” and that all ticket office closures should be halted until all online sales and station ticket machines are accessible “for all disabled passengers”.

Disability News Service has seen the MACS response to LNER’s consultation, in which the committee objects to proposals to close most of the ticket offices on its Edinburgh to London route.

Simon Watkins, rail lead for MACS, told LNER its plan should be withdrawn until it has “fully assessed the level of usage of ticket offices by disabled passengers”.

He said the concerns apply equally to the consultations published by other train operating companies planning ticket office closures, including those that do not operate in Scotland.

MACS said there was “significant evidence to show that disabled passengers are more reliant on ticket offices than other passengers”.

The UK government’s equivalent body, the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee, has yet to comment on the closures.

Meanwhile, the Equality and Human Rights Commission has refused to express any concern over the proposals, despite being passed figures compiled by the Association of British Commuters that show the number of staffed stations, across just three Midlands railway companies, will fall from 116 to 22 if the closures go ahead.

It has also failed to comment on concerns about the accessibility of the consultation process.

Asked to comment by Disability News Service (DNS), it produced the same statement it issued on the day the consultations were launched, which failed to even mention the consultations.

Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC) and ABC have each written to the commission to ask it to speak publicly about the closures.

[The DPAC letter](https://dpac.uk.net/2023/07/an-update-on-our-work-on-ticket-office-closures/) asks the commission to explain why it is “failing so miserably in even attempting to enforce adherence to the Equality Act”.

Linda Burnip, DPAC’s co-founder, says in the letter that the ability to travel by rail “will seriously deteriorate for disabled, older people and lone women travellers and that all of these groups need face-to-face assistance located in one accessible place”.

The [ABC figures](https://abcommuters.com/2023/07/15/ministers-exposed-94-stations-in-the-midlands-to-become-completely-unstaffed/) show there will be “mass discrimination” across Midlands train stations if the closures go ahead.

Its research provides further evidence that rail minister Huw Merriman misled MPs when [he claimed earlier this month](https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2023-07-06/debates/22E13B85-0B30-4166-8C79-ABCBDF891090/RailTicketOffices) that “no currently staffed stations will be unstaffed” as a result of the ticket office closures.

The ABC figures show that the number of staffed stations across West Midlands Railway, London Northwestern Railway and East Midlands Railway will fall from 116 to just 22.

DNS showed last week that at least three train companies would move some stations from being staffed part-time to relying on mobile teams that cover a group of local stations.

But the Department for Transport suggested yesterday (Wednesday) that the minister had not misled MPs because having mobile teams covering several otherwise unstaffed stations meant those stations could still be described as “staffed”, even if they are only visited once a week.

The Rail Delivery Group (RDG), which represents the companies that run Britain’s railways, refused to comment on the ABC figures, saying it could not “pre-judge the consultation”, even though the figures for proposed closures were published by its member companies.

Asked why RDG had not released figures showing the impact on total staffing hours across the country, and on opening hours for heated waiting rooms and toilets, a spokesperson said the documents released by the train companies were “just proposals and any information on those areas would not be accurate until final decisions are made on individual offices and facilities”.

Transport Focus and London TravelWatch said today (Thursday) that they have already received more than 100,000 responses [to the consultations](https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/train-station-ticket-office-consultation/), which end on Wednesday (26 July).

Meanwhile, train companies are facing at least two legal actions over the planned closures (*see separate story*).

In one of them, disabled activists Doug Paulley and Sarah Leadbetter are calling for a new consultation process, and a halt to any decisions on ticket office closures, in a legal action they are taking against transport secretary Mark Harper and four train companies.

They believe the consultations are “a smokescreen” and that the government has already decided to close ticket offices.

Greater Manchester mayor Andy Burnham, and four other Labour mayors, are preparing their own legal action against seven train companies over the closures.

**20 July 2023**

**Activists launch legal action over ‘woefully inadequate’ ticket office consultations**

Disabled activists have launched a legal action against four train companies and a government minister over a series of “woefully inadequate” public consultations that will lead to the closure of nearly 1,000 rail ticket offices.

[Doug Paulley](https://twitter.com/Doug_Paulley) and [Sarah Leadbetter](https://twitter.com/newdawn75), both of whom are leading disabled campaigners on accessible transport and regular rail travellers, say they believe the consultations are “a smokescreen” and the government has already decided to close the ticket offices.

They have called for a new consultation process, and a halt to any decisions on closures until their legal action is resolved.

Through their solicitors, Leigh Day, they have sent urgent legal letters to four publicly-owned train companies – LNER, Southeastern, Northern and TransPennine – and transport secretary Mark Harper.

In their pre-action protocol letter, they say the rights of disabled rail passengers are already being “widely undermined” by policies that will cut the number of staff available to assist them at stations.

The letter highlights how campaigners including the [Association of British Commuters](https://abcommuters.com/) have been raising concerns for months about government plans to cut staff on the railways and the impact that would have on disabled passengers.

Paulley and Leadbetter say the new proposals will see the closure of 974 ticket offices, and that it is clear the decision to close them “has been made and advanced by government”.

They also say that the 21-day consultation process will exclude many disabled people, because of its “extraordinarily short timescale” and its inaccessibility, and that the process has “multiple, serious flaws”.

And they say that information about the consultations is only available online or via standard print notices in stations, while parts of many of the online documents are inaccessible to screen-reading software, among other access concerns.

The four train operating companies have made no attempts to engage face-to-face with disabled people, while people with learning difficulties “are very unlikely to be able to understand the consultation documents available online”, the letter says.

And it says there is no clear information in the consultation documents on how the proposals will affect disabled people.

The letter also says that the statement of rail minister Huw Merriman that no currently staffed station would become unstaffed as a result of the closures was “simply not true”, as [reported by Disability News Service](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/minister-misleads-mps-over-impact-of-ticket-office-closures/) last week.

The letter argues that the train companies, and the government, are breaching their duty to consult fairly, and breaching their duties under the Equality Act.

They say campaigners are “under the clear impression” that the ticket office closures are “a foregone conclusion” and that the train companies are “simply going through the motions of consulting”, with the government “steaming ahead with the proposals in the face of significant opposition”.

Paulley, a wheelchair-user, said: “The cuts are a fait accompli being pushed through the motions of this sham consultation, with its disingenuous claims and failure to give disabled people the information we need to respond properly.

“It is appalling that such an important topic is being handled in this manner and the process must be stopped.”

Leadbetter said: “People like me, with visual impairments, rely on ticket offices and their staff to help us when we’re travelling and their closure will be a huge blow.

“To hold a consultation that fails to properly hear the views of those who need assistance the most is woefully inadequate.”

Kate Egerton, senior associate at Leigh Day, said the consultations were “clearly unlawful and not fit for purpose”.

She said: “Not only does it fail to provide adequate time for people to respond to one of the biggest changes to our railway network in a generation, it denies a voice to disabled people who rely on ticket office staff for assistance when they travel.”

Meanwhile, Greater Manchester mayor Andy Burnham, and four other Labour mayors, are [preparing their own legal action](https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/im-preparing-take-legal-action-30489105) against [seven train companies](https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/train-firms-face-legal-action-30489002) over the planned ticket office closures.

**20 July 2023**

**Urgent evidence needed to help UN ‘see behind government smoke and mirrors’**

Disabled people’s organisations are searching behind the government’s “smoke and mirrors” for evidence to show how disability rights have continued to regress since a UN committee’s ground-breaking report seven years ago.

The UK government is set to be examined in public in Geneva next month on how it has responded since being found guilty of “[grave and systematic” violations](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/un-confirms-that-uk-governments-treaty-violations-were-both-grave-and-systematic/) of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in November 2016.

The UK and devolved governments had been due to be examined on their overall progress in implementing the convention, but that process has now been delayed by the pandemic until 2026.

Instead, the UN committee on the rights of persons with disabilities will examine the UK government on its actions since being found responsible for grave and systematic breaches of the convention in the areas of independent living, work and employment, and the right to an adequate standard of living and social protection.

Most of those breaches were caused by policies introduced by Conservative ministers at the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) between 2010 and 2015.

The 2016 findings were the result of the first high-level inquiry ever carried out by the committee, which followed years of research and lobbying by [Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC)](https://dpac.uk.net/).

The committee has decided to put aside a day in August to examine the government’s progress in implementing the [recommendations made in 2016](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/uns-conclusion-that-uk-violated-disability-rights-is-vindication-for-activists/).

Linda Burnip, co-founder of DPAC, played a key role in persuading the UN committee to carry out the inquiry, alongside the late Debbie Jolly, another DPAC co-founder.

Burnip told an online meeting of disabled activists this week that such an investigation “had never been done before and the [committee] had to be persuaded to implement this unprecedented procedure”.

She said activists had found 42 different government cuts that had breached the UN convention.

A coalition of UK disabled people’s organisations (DPOs), including DPAC, is now putting the finishing touches to a “shadow” report that shows how the UK government has responded to the 2016 recommendations, which they will submit to the committee.

Ellen Clifford, from DPAC and the coalition, told this week’s meeting: “They wanted to make sure that the UK government knew that our special inquiry hadn’t been forgotten about and that they are still keeping an eye on us.”

Representatives of some DPOs, including DPAC, are also likely to give evidence in person when the UK government is examined on its progress in Geneva on 28 August.

The coalition of UK DPOs is still looking for [last minute evidence](https://dpac.uk.net/2023/07/please-help-us-with-our-report-to-the-un-disability-committee/) from disabled people with personal experience of breaches of rights in areas such as care charges, employment discrimination, benefit sanctions and the Access to Work scheme.

Their report has to be submitted to the UN committee by 1 August.

Last week, speaking at the TUC Disabled Workers Conference in Bournemouth, Clifford said: “We need to help the committee see behind the smoke and mirrors that the government tries to put up and give them a true picture of what’s happening.”

The coalition of UK DPOs includes DPAC, Inclusion Scotland, Disability Wales, Disability Action Northern Ireland, DPO Forum England, Reclaiming Our Futures Alliance, Disability Rights UK, and Inclusion London.

**20 July 2023**

**DWP websites and IT systems still ‘high risk’ on accessibility, a year after secret reports**

Key digital services used to run the disability benefits system are still being branded “high risk” on accessibility, a year after secret Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) reports found scores of its services were failing to comply with regulations.

DWP’s latest Digital Accessibility Compliance report, produced last month and obtained by Disability News Service (DNS), shows that less than half of its websites and other digital services (59 of 124) comply with public sector regulations on accessibility.

Once the report takes account of digital services that are due to be decommissioned, the figures are even worse, with only 59 of 150 compliant with the regulations.

Of these, 10 are seen as “very high” risk and another 28 described as “high risk”.

The report shows that – 14 months on from a previous report, [also seen by DNS](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/dwp-finally-admits-nearly-all-its-websites-were-rated-very-high-risk-on-access/) – there are still serious accessibility issues with two key digital services used to run the department’s personal independence payment (PIP) assessment system.

The PIP assessment tool (known as PIPAT) is still described in the latest report as “critical” and “high risk”.

PIPAT is used by DWP’s private sector assessment providers, Capita and Atos, to record all the information they need to know about disabled claimants for their assessments.

The PIP computer system – due to be replaced, but potentially not until 2025 – is also still described as “critical” and “high risk”.

Just as with the April 2022 report, DWP says this system has been “badged as high risk due to incidents with staff being unable to work due to the system not working for them”.

Among DWP websites seen as “very high risk” on accessibility are its [Understanding Universal Credit](https://www.understandinguniversalcredit.gov.uk/), [Become a Work Coach](https://www.dwpjobs-workcoach-microsite.co.uk/), and [Job Help](https://jobhelp.campaign.gov.uk/) sites.

The report warns again – just as it did last year – that the accessibility problems with the work coach site could lead to a disability discrimination case being taken against the department under the Equality Act, as it is a recruitment website.

The Job Help website had previously been accessible but is now “non-compliant again” after being completely redesigned.

The [Public Sector Bodies Accessibility Regulations 2018](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/accessibility-requirements-for-public-sector-websites-and-apps) came into force in September 2018, and Cabinet Office guidance warns that public sector bodies like DWP that do not ensure their websites or other digital services meet accessibility requirements “may be breaking the law”.

In its Freedom of Information Act response to DNS, the department said the report was “a snapshot in time” and there were “unknown pieces of information which makes it… inaccurate as a source of up-to-date compliance”.

A DWP spokesperson said this week: “We are prioritising our customer-facing digital services and replacing ageing IT systems to make our services accessible.

“But we know there is more to do and are improving services including upskilling our workforce and establishing a culture that prioritises accessibility across the Department.”

**20 July 2023**

**Minister made ‘political’ decision to rule out safe evacuation for disabled people**

The government made a secret political decision that it would be too expensive and impractical to ensure that disabled people can safely evacuate from high-rise blocks of flats in emergencies, the high court has concluded.

A minister decided not to make the decision public because it would be “politically difficult to justify” and he feared “political fallout”, the court has found.

But despite these findings, the high court has dismissed an application by disabled campaigners for a judicial review and has found that the government’s decision was not unlawful.

The case was taken by Sarah Rennie, Georgie Hulme, and [CLADDAG](https://claddag.org/), the organisation they founded to campaign for disabled leaseholders and tenants in residential buildings impacted by the building safety crisis.

They brought the case after the government [rejected the Grenfell Tower Inquiry’s recommendation](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/disabled-grenfell-residents-were-repeatedly-failed-in-years-before-fire-inquiry-finds/) that owners and managers of high-rise residential buildings should prepare a personal emergency evacuation plan (PEEP) for all residents who might find it difficult to “self-evacuate”.

[The rejection of the PEEPs recommendation](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/grenfell-campaigners-horrified-and-sickened-by-ministers-evacuation-excuses/) came even though those who responded to a consultation on the proposal overwhelmingly supported their introduction.

[The Home Office consulted instead on](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/emergency-evacuation-information-sharing/eeis-consultation-document) its own “alternative package” of measures, which it calls Emergency Evacuation Information Sharing Plus, which does not go as far as PEEPs and will only apply to the minority of buildings that have been assessed as being “at higher risk”.

The high court has now found that fire minister Lord Greenhalgh had decided by September 2021 “not to implement the PEEPs recommendations”, but also concluded that it would be too dangerous politically to make that decision public.

Instead, ministers continued to insist that the PEEPs recommendation would be implemented.

Earlier this month, housing secretary Michael Gove said in a letter to London mayor Sadiq Khan that the PEEPs recommendations remained a “key priority”.

Hulme and Rennie, wheelchair-users who live in high- and medium-rise buildings, had asked the court last December to rule that the government’s rejection of PEEPs was unlawful.

Among their arguments was that the failure to introduce the PEEPs recommendations was a breach of disabled people’s right to life under the European Convention on Human Rights.

But the high court has now ruled in favour of the Home Office.

Mrs Justice Stacey said ministers were entitled to make a “political judgment” that the PEEPs recommendations should not be implemented, after balancing “risk and safety” against “practicability, deliverability, complexity and cost”.

She also said the home secretary had “established a framework of laws and guidance sufficient to satisfy a reasonable minimum protection of the right to life”.

And she found that the disability discrimination demonstrated by the failure to implement the PEEPs recommendation was justified in law, despite the government’s earlier public pledges that it would introduce the new measures.

Mrs Justice Stacey said it was “essentially a political decision for the defendant to take” and not unlawful.

Rennie and Hulme, who were represented by Bhatt Murphy solicitors and barrister Raj Desai, of Matrix Chambers, said: “The court’s judgment makes clearer than ever to us and our community that a political decision has been made by this government to leave disabled and older people living in high rise buildings without means of escape.

“It is a decision to prioritise money over disabled persons’ lives. And it is a decision not to learn the lessons of the disproportionate deaths of disabled persons in the Grenfell Tower fire as identified by the chair of the public inquiry.”

But they said the legal case had started a national conversation and led to a “significant shift in thinking” within the housing sector and fire safety industry.

This week, the Home Office refused to say if it now accepted that ministers would not implement PEEPs; that the decision not to implement PEEPs was a political decision; and that that decision showed ministers had prioritised money over disabled people’s lives.

But a government spokesperson said: “We are pleased with the court’s decision as it allows us to get on with delivering proposals that enhance the safety of residents whose ability to self-evacuate in an emergency may be compromised.

“We are currently analysing responses to our public consultation on Emergency Evacuation Information Sharing Plus, which is an alternative to Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans, to understand how best to achieve this.”

The Grenfell fire led to 72 people losing their lives, including 19 of Grenfell’s 46 disabled residents (41 per cent of them) who were present on the night of 14 June 2017, and 28 of the 157 residents with no impairments (18 per cent).

The subsequent inquiry found that, with every disabled resident who died, there had been no plan in place to help them evacuate, or to ensure their information was available for the fire and rescue service to help them evacuate.

**20 July 2023**

**DWP makes tiny dent in Access to Work queue, 12 months on**

Ministers have only made a tiny dent in the number of disabled people waiting for a decision on their Access to Work claim in the last year, new figures have revealed.

Unpublished figures released to Disability News Service (DNS) show there are still more than 23,000 disabled people waiting for their claim to be dealt with by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

The queue has been cut by just 46 in 12 months, from 23,335 at the end of May 2022 to 23,289 at the end of May 2023.

The average waiting-time had even risen, from 49.1 days to 50.1 days, although DWP said this week that June’s figures showed it had now fallen to 41 days, having risen as high as 63 days last October.

The length of the queue had risen as high as 25,000 by the end of October 2022.

In May 2022, DWP blamed the lengthening AtW queue on the number of disabled people who were starting new jobs.

It claimed it was “working hard” to make sure applications were “progressed as soon as possible”, through recruiting new staff and introducing overtime working.

Tom Pursglove, the new minister for disabled people, [delivered a similar defence](https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-11-22/93541) last November, when he told Labour’s shadow work and pensions secretary, Jon Ashworth, that there had been “a significant increase in applications over the last year” and that DWP had “recruited new staff to meet the increased demand and reduce the time it takes to make decisions”.

He also claimed the department was “transforming the Access to Work service through increased digitalisation, that will make the service more efficient, will make the application process easier, and improve the time taken from application through to decision”.

This week, DWP again blamed a significant increase in applications and again claimed it had recruited new staff to meet the increased demand and reduce the time it takes to make decisions.

A DWP spokesperson said: “We have hired extra staff and are testing a new digital claims system to make sure everyone entitled to Access to Work support receives timely help.

“Anyone starting work within four weeks is fast-tracked, while our improvements have seen processing times fall in the last year.”

The concerns over Access to Work inefficiency are long-standing.

A report commissioned by Inclusion London [found in 2017](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/access-to-work-schemes-future-in-jeopardy-through-cuts-and-incompetence/) that the scheme was “a cornerstone of the movement for equality and civil rights for Deaf and disabled people in the UK” but had been “beset with so much bureaucratic incompetence and obstructionism in recent years that, in many respects, Access to Work is no longer fit for purpose”.

The new figures came as [a report from the Commons work and pensions committee](https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/164/work-and-pensions-committee/news/196542/work-and-pensions-committee-calls-for-more-employment-support-to-address-economic-inactivity/) criticised the Access to Work scheme for being “highly bureaucratic in terms of the evidence and administration of paperwork required to apply for, renew or claim back costs”.

The committee’s report on the government’s employment programmes says the system is “outdated and often unable to accept online document submission or e-signatures”.

The committee concluded: “A system that requires applications and claims must be sent in by hand acts as a practical barrier to support.”

The report calls for DWP to update its Access to Work document submission process by the end of this year so all documentation can be submitted online.

**20 July 2023**

**Wimbledon apologises after disabled tennis fan is forced to use service lift**

A disabled tennis-lover and his wife were shocked to find they had to use a service lift used by staff to take out the rubbish when they wanted to access their sought-after seats on one of Wimbledon’s show courts.

Bob and Shawn Cozens, from Swindon, found out earlier this year that they had secured prized No 1 court seats in the Wimbledon ticket ballot, after 10 years of trying.

But when they arrived on the penultimate day of the tennis championships in south-west London last Saturday, they could find no-one able to direct them to the entrance for visitors with tickets for the wheelchair-accessible section of the stadium.

Their tickets had included no information on how to access their seats.

They spent three-quarters of an hour seeking directions from a string of members of staff being finally being told to enter through a staff entrance.

They were accompanied by a young member of staff and taken to a service lift, where they had to wait several minutes as it was being used to transport wheelie-bins full of rubbish.

They eventually made it into the lift and found their way to their seats, where they watched the first set of the men’s wheelchair doubles final, featuring Britain’s Alfie Hewett and Gordon Reid.

But they said the experience ruined their enjoyment of a day they had been looking forward to for months.

Bob Cozens, who uses a mobility-scooter and has a communication impairment, told Disability News Service (DNS) that the access was “rubbish”.

His wife said: “The poor lad taking us to the lift was very apologetic. He said to us that a lot of people had complained.

“We had waited 10 years for tickets. It’s an international venue and it’s putting disabled people in a service lift.

“This is not what you would expect. We were shocked.”

She said they were highlighting the issue “so that the problem is sorted out for next year’s disabled guests because it is a wonderful experience that disabled people can and should enjoy”.

No 1 court only has 40 spaces for wheelchair-users out of a capacity of 12,345, a proportion of just over 0.3 per cent.

A spokesperson for the All England Lawn Tennis Club said they had apologised to Bob and Shawn Cozens after learning of their experience through DNS.

She said their seats should not have required a lift to access “so it is very disappointing to hear that they did not receive clear direction when trying to make their way there.

“We will endeavour to find out more information about who they spoke to, but regardless, it is clear that we will need to enhance our briefings and signage ahead of next year.

“We are very committed to trying to improve our accessibility services for guests every year.

“We have a dedicated accessibility team based at the south-west corner of centre court who are available to answer questions and provide any support our guests might need.

“We also offer a pre-booking service for those who wish to arrange additional support for when they arrive at the grounds.”

She said the club would be “making the appropriate improvements ahead of next year’s championships”.

**20 July 2023**

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

The wife and care worker of a disabled man have been jailed for 11 years for enslaving him while they had an affair, in a case believed to be the first of its kind in the UK. Tom Somerset-How was “treated like property” by Sarah Somerset-How, 49, and George Webb, 50, who were having trysts behind his back. Webb and Sarah Somerset-How have both been jailed for 11 years: <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/cheating-wife-carer-who-kept-30465316>

Heathrow Airport failed to meet the minimum accessibility standards for disabled passengers in the year to March, the sector’s regulator has said. The airport was the only one in the UK to be rated as “poor” and “needs improvement” by the Civil Aviation Authority over all four quarters in the period, according to the report. For the 12 months covered, 18 airports received good or very good ratings and seven airports improved from poor to good. Heathrow was an outlier, however, not having met the criteria for a good rating over the period: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/jul/20/heathrow-failed-to-meet-minimum-accessibility-standards-caa-report-finds>

Plans to cut school transport for some children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) will go to consultation. Shropshire Council says the cuts will save £350,000 annually and the authority’s cabinet has agreed the proposals should be considered. Tory council leader Lezley Picton said cuts were not an easy decision, but leader of the opposition Labour group Julia Buckley said the plan was an “absolute disgrace”: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-shropshire-66254080>

**20 July 2023**

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