



Helping those with disabilities fight poverty and social isolation

Disabled British people are more likely to be out of work and living on low incomes than their non-disabled counterparts. They also find it more difficult to access the goods and services that most people take for granted. This means that disabled people are at significant risk of poverty and social isolation.¹

With more than 10 million disabled people in the UK, what is being done to help them fight back against the twin spectres of poverty and social exclusion?

The UK Disability Discrimination Act protects disabled people and prevents disability discrimination - providing legal rights for disabled people, but one of the most effective ways of escaping poverty is through finding and retaining work. Unfortunately, participation in the labour market represents a challenge for many disabled people.²

One-sixth of the European Union's working age population is classed as disabled, and are struggling to find jobs. The employment rate for disabled people in the EU is about 50% compared to 68% for the rest of the population. And only around 20% of people with severe disabilities participate in the labour market.

Education is also seen as a key route out of poverty. But here too people with disabilities find the odds stacked against them. They are half as likely to reach tertiary education as non-disabled EU citizens.³

Even disabled people with a higher education are much less likely to be employed in high-level jobs than their non-disabled counterparts.⁴

Unfortunately, social isolation is as much of a danger as economic marginalisation for people with disabilities. For example, one in two disabled people has never participated in leisure or sporting activities.

¹ Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Enduring Economic Exclusion, October 2000

² European Foundation Centre, A Selected Overview of Equal Opportunities Actions, November 2007

³ Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Employment of Disabled Young People, November 2005

⁴ Joseph Rowntree Foundation, November 2005



The EU has been helping disabled people achieve equality and inclusion through the Disability Action Plan (DAP) 2004-2010.

The goal has been to ensure that disabled people can play a full part in society on the same terms as others, and make their own choices. The DAP has therefore been used to improve disabled people's employment and education prospects and boost their access to goods and services.

The plan has helped to ensure that disability issues are integrated – or mainstreamed – within key relevant EU policies. The European Commission is currently consulting on the preparation of a new EU Disability Strategy for 2010-2020.

The EU has also signed and is in the process of concluding the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This is the first Human Rights Convention signed by the EU. The aim of the Convention is to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all people with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity.

Moreover, the Community's European Employment Strategy encourages Member States to develop initiatives that will help disabled people thrive in the jobs market and workplace.

The Employment Equality Directive means employers now have to provide reasonable accommodation to help disabled people in the workplace. This might include adapting buildings to provide wheelchair ramps or providing assistive technology for partially sighted people. There is also scope to change working arrangements to suit a person with disabilities.

Thanks to new EU rules, disabled people now have certain rights when they travel by air. They must be provided with free-of-charge assistance and information at airports and by their carrier. Reservations cannot be refused solely on the grounds of disability.

Passengers with reduced mobility and disabilities are also guaranteed to receive assistance when they travel by rail. Moves are now afoot to develop similar legislation for maritime and coach travel.



More broadly, anti-discrimination legislation has been issued by the Commission which will ensure equal treatment outside the world of work. If adopted by Member States, the new rules will do much to improve access to goods and services such as banking, education, transport and health.

For more information

[Commission Staff Working Document](#)

[The EU and People with Disabilities](#)

[Relevant Legislation](#)

[The EU Disability Action Plan](#)

[The European Disability Forum: Facts and Figures](#)