

Invisible Disabilities in Education and Employment



Overview

More than 1 in 5 UK adults are disabled. Disabilities that are not immediately obvious are known as 'invisible disabilities', such as mental health conditions, neurodivergences and energy-limiting conditions.¹ Evidence on this topic is limited as most research focuses on disability in general, or on a few specific conditions. Those with invisible disabilities may face challenges due to a lack of awareness and difficulty accessing support and services.

Strategies aimed at increasing access and inclusion for adults with invisible disabilities in employment, and in higher and further education, could include: increasing awareness and understanding via training and reciprocal mentoring schemes; introducing 'passports' for transfer of adjustments to avoid repeated disclosure; inclusive design that considers sensory and informational barriers to access; maintaining online access to events and services post-pandemic; updating policy and guidance with examples of less recognised invisible disabilities; and promoting flexible working and learning arrangements.

The 2021 [National Disability Strategy](#) set out the actions the Government would take to improve the lives of disabled people, including making workplaces more inclusive and accessible. However, the High Court ruled in 2022 that the strategy was "unlawful due to inadequate consultation", which the Government has sought permission to appeal. Fourteen policies in the strategy are currently paused.

Background

Disability occurs in many different forms. An invisible disability, or non-visible disability, is an impairment or health condition that is not immediately obvious (**Box 1**).¹ Only a small percentage of disabled people use wheelchairs or have assistance dogs, or have other visible signs of their impairment.^{10,16,17} It is estimated that 70-80% of disabilities are invisible.^{18,19}

Because their disability is not outwardly observable, those with invisible disabilities may experience disregard or disbelief of their disability.^{1,20} They may experience difficulties participating in work and education, and in accessing the services and support they need.^{12,15,21} There are a wide range of impairments or conditions not necessarily visible to others, which are not limited to, but include: mental health conditions; autism ([PN 612](#)) and other neurodivergences, cognitive impairments ([PN 278](#), [PN 226](#)); hearing, vision and speech impairments; and energy-limiting conditions (such as fibromyalgia).²¹⁻³⁰ Disabled people can have both non-visible and visible impairments, or impairments that are only visible in certain circumstances or settings.^{31,32}

Box 1: Terms used to describe invisible disabilities

The term 'invisible disability' is used in this POSTnote, although language in this area continues to evolve. Other terms are used in this context, including 'non-visible disability', 'less visible disability', and 'hidden disability'.^{1,29} The term 'hidden disability' is avoided by some stakeholders as it may imply a person is deliberately hiding their impairment or condition. Not all people will identify with the term disabled, such as some members of the neurodiverse and deaf communities.³³⁻³⁵

The social model of disability

The social model, developed by disabled people in the 1980s, is a way of understanding disability that explains how disability is created by barriers in society.³⁶ In 2014, the Government Equalities Office endorsed this model.³⁷ Research indicates that many disabled people feel that they are still viewed as a 'problem' to be solved.^{12,38-41}

Definition of disability

Under the Equality Act 2010, a person is disabled if they have a physical or mental impairment that has 'substantial' (more than trivial or minor) and 'long term' (12 months or greater) negative effects on their ability to do normal daily activities.^{31,42}

This definition applies to many people with invisible disabilities. Some conditions may not be visible at the time of diagnosis, but may become more visible over time ('progressive'), such as multiple sclerosis. Other conditions are more or less visible at different times or in different settings ('recurrent' or 'fluctuating').⁴³

Trends

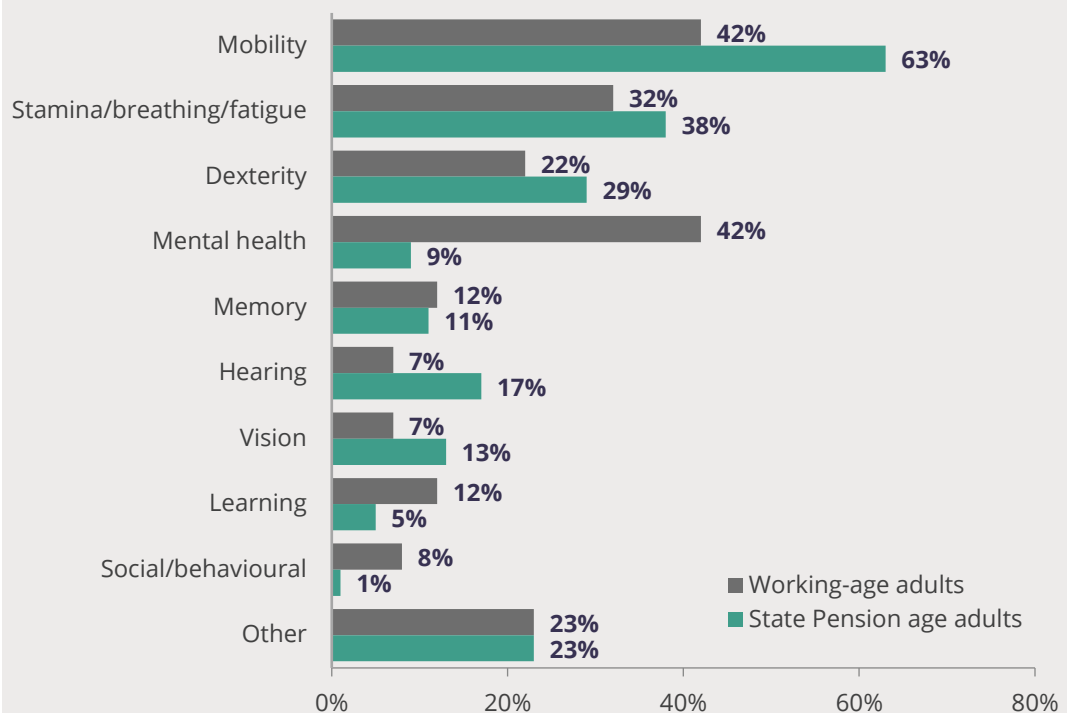
According to the Family Resources Survey 2020-2021, 28% of people in the UK (14.6 million) are disabled (CBP-9602).⁴⁴ Many of the most frequently reported impairments can be invisible (**Figure 1**).

Some invisible disabilities are more common among those with other protected characteristics, such as women and minority ethnic groups.⁴⁵⁻⁴⁸ For example, sickle cell disease, a genetic blood disorder, mainly affects people of African or African-Caribbean descent.²⁶

Research suggests that some invisible impairments are less well-diagnosed by healthcare professionals, and people with invisible disabilities, particularly those who are neurodiverse or have energy-limiting conditions, may be less likely to self-identify or disclose their disability.^{21,33,49,50} Therefore, the number of UK adults with invisible disabilities may be under-estimated.^{39,51,52}

Research is mostly focused on disability overall or on specific conditions, rather than what could be described as invisible disabilities.^{5,53} As a result, there appears to be limited evidence on the most effective strategies to increase awareness, inclusion and support of people with invisible disabilities. However, surveys from disability-led organisations and recently established studies address some of these gaps.^{38,54-57}

Figure 1: Impairment types reported by disabled people
Percentage of disabled people, April 2020 to March 2021



Source: Department for Work and Pensions, Family Resources Survey: Financial year 2020 to 2021.¹ Respondents can report more than one impairment type.

Legislation, guidance and policy

The Equality Act 2010 protects and promotes the rights of people with invisible disabilities, although in many cases this depends on an individual disclosing their disability.^{42,58} The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) was ratified by the UK in 2009.^{43–45} The UN Committee's 2017 review stated there was "insufficient incorporation and uneven implementation" of the Convention in the UK, and the Government has since taken actions based on their recommendations.^{59–61}

Other areas of legislation and policy are relevant to people with invisible disabilities, such as the Mental Capacity Act 2005, Care Act 2015 and Autism Act 2009.^{62–64} Some are UK-wide, such as employment, whereas others differ between devolved nations, such as education, and health and social care services. This POSTnote focuses on policies specific to England for devolved issues.

Reasonable adjustments are changes made by organisations in their approach or provision to ensure they are accessible to disabled people, and education providers and those providing services and public functions have an anticipatory duty to provide these adjustments.^{42,65,66}

Several Government schemes provide disabled people with support for adjustments in work and education, such as Access to Work (AtW), and the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA).^{67,68}

The National Disability Strategy 2021

In July 2021, the National Disability Strategy set out the actions the Government said it would take to improve the lives of disabled people.⁶⁹ Key actions include: making workplaces more inclusive and accessible; ensuring young people fulfil their potential; and, improving access to public services.⁷⁰

In January 2022, the High Court ruled the strategy was "unlawful due to inadequate consultation", which the Government sought permission to appeal.^{70,71} Meanwhile, 14 policies in the strategy are paused ([CBP-9599](#)). The strategy was informed by the 2021 UK National Disability Survey, which had around 15,000 responses from disabled people, carers and members of the public. Respondents suggested the survey should have asked about the experiences of people with invisible disabilities.⁷²

Assessment processes

Assessments are required for disabled people to access financial support under Government schemes.^{67,68,73}

People with conditions that fluctuate or do not have an objective diagnostic test, such as myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME), report that their impairments are less recognised in assessment processes.^{25,74–76}

Concerns raised by stakeholders about the current assessment process include: impairments being assessed in isolation from each other; failure to assess impacts of cognitive fatigue and dysfunction; and, variability between different assessors.^{77–80}

Attitudes and awareness

According to the 2021 National Disability Survey, lack of understanding and stigma from others creates consistent barriers in the lives of people with invisible disabilities.⁷²

Research has found self-reported discrimination is higher among people with intellectual and sensory impairments than people with physical impairments.⁸¹ People with invisible disabilities also report facing criticism when trying to access facilities designed for disabled people, and faced worse discrimination during the Covid-19 pandemic for not wearing a mask in public.^{72,82,83} The intersection of disability with other characteristics, such as race, can multiply experiences of discrimination.^{84–87}

Those with invisible disabilities may also experience attitudes of disregard and disbelief because they defy stereotypes of what people perceive disability to look like.^{1,20} In a 2021 survey of people with energy-limiting conditions, 85% reported a lack of understanding and 65% reported disbelief of their impairment.²¹

These experiences may negatively affect individuals' identity and self-esteem.^{49,81,88–90} Those with invisible disabilities have dilemmas over whether to disclose their disability, due to concerns about disbelief, stigma, or confidentiality.^{21,91,92} They may need to balance the potential risks of disclosure with the need for support.^{21,81,91–93}

Several existing campaigns have aimed to improve public awareness of invisible disabilities (**Box 2**). As of 2020, the Cabinet Office Disability Unit has been working with the British Standards Institute to support their development of an Invisible Disability sign.⁹⁴

Box 2: Raising awareness of invisible disabilities

Examples of campaigns raising awareness of invisible disabilities include:

- The 'Sunflower Lanyard' scheme for people with invisible disabilities to discreetly indicate they may require additional support.⁹⁵
- Crohn's & Colitis UK campaigned for businesses and organisations to install 'Not Every Disability is Visible' signs in their facilities.⁹⁶
- A series of comics highlighting lived experiences of invisible disabilities was developed in a collaboration between Maltese and Scottish organisations.⁹⁷
- ITV has launched an on-air campaign in partnership with disability equality charity Scope to highlight invisible disabilities.⁹⁸
- Disability advocates and ambassadors have worked to increase awareness and representation by sharing their lived experience online.^{99,100}

Access and inclusion

Many people with invisible disabilities report unequal opportunities.^{21,49,81,101,102} They have reported particular challenges in access and inclusion in employment and in higher education (HE) and further education (FE), which are the main focus areas of

this briefing. Difficulties accessing other public services and infrastructure, such as transport and health and social care, can also impact disabled people’s ability to participate in work and education.^{39,103–106}

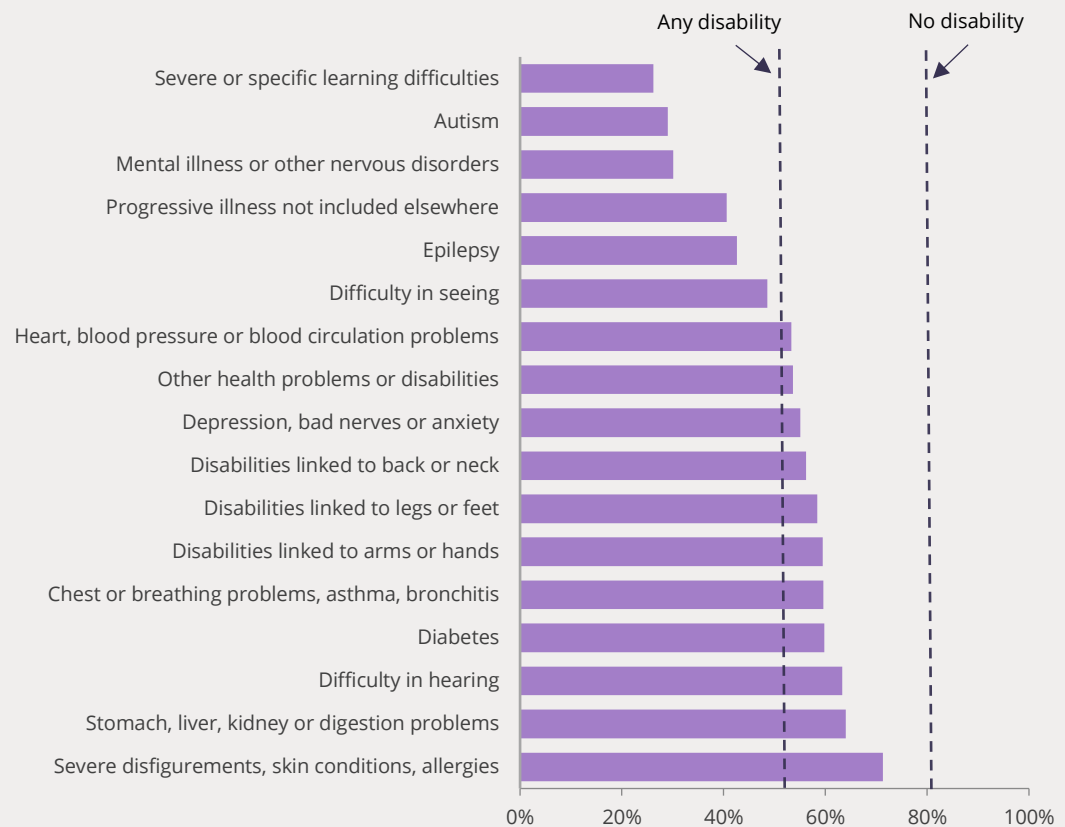
During the Covid-19 pandemic, many people with long-term conditions experienced difficulty accessing public services (CDP-0053), such as NHS appointments, and deterioration in their condition.^{107–110} The Government’s instruction to work (PB 49) and study (PN 639) remotely increased access and opportunities for some, but not all, disabled people.^{56,111–113}

Employment

The employment rate for disabled people is lower than for non-disabled people, with lower rates observed for people with certain invisible disabilities (**Figure 2**).^{114–116} Disabled workers are likely to be paid less, and are more likely to be employed part-time, self-employed or employed in the public sector.^{114,117}

Several UK schemes are available to support disabled people in employment, including those with invisible disabilities (CBP-7540).⁶⁷ The main scheme is AtW, which provides practical and financial support to disabled people in work. Studies have found low awareness of AtW among employers, particularly in private sector small- and medium-size enterprises (SMEs).^{11,118–121}

Figure 2: Employment of disabled people by main impairment
Percentage adults (16-64), July to September 2021



Source: Office for National Statistics, A08: Labour market status of disabled people.¹¹⁵

Recruitment, promotion, and progression

Research has found job applicants who disclose a disability have lower call-back rates.^{121–123} Employers report barriers to hiring disabled people, including: cost and practicalities of making adjustments; impact on other staff; lack of applications from disabled people; risk to health and safety; inaccessible application processes; low employer capability; and potential for mistreatment from co-workers.^{7,11,121} Disabled people are underrepresented among employees responsible for making hiring decisions, with only 6% of such employees being disabled.^{7,10}

Recruitment processes may be inaccessible or inadvertently discourage prospective disabled applicants, including generic essential job criteria (such as 'excellent communication skills' for people who stammer).^{124,125} Workers with invisible disabilities report bias in performance management policies, which may affect promotion opportunities.¹⁴ In a 2021 NHS staff survey of pandemic experiences, disabled workers reported missing out on training and learning opportunities while shielding.¹²⁶

Communication and disclosure

A 2015 survey found that 40% of disabled workers felt uncomfortable discussing their disability at work.¹²⁷ Reasons for non-disclosure included concerns about career progression and stigma, with two thirds of workers reporting there was more stigma associated with disabilities others cannot see.^{49,127–129} A 2022 survey among workers with mental health conditions found stigma a key reason for employees attending work when unwell, which incurs greater financial costs than taking leave from work to recover.¹³⁰

Flexible working

Research indicates flexibility in time and location of work, including remote and hybrid arrangements ([PB 49](#)) and annualised hours, are highly valued by disabled workers.^{11,56,131,132}

Workplace inflexibility (such as rigid working hours or patterns) is a key driver of the disability employment gap.^{56,131} A 2022 study found disabled workers with impairments in memory (62%), stamina (68%) and dexterity (66%) are more likely to view remote work as essential.^{56,131}

Research indicates SME employers are willing to offer flexible working, but often on an informal or temporary basis.¹¹

Disabled workers are less likely to be in senior or managerial roles, where remote working is more widely available.¹³³

Flexible working may benefit employers (such as staff retention and lower sickness absence) and employees (such as attending medical appointments), and can be a reasonable adjustment for workers.^{5,21,134–136}

Provision of support and services

According to a 2018 Government review of the AtW scheme, disabled workers' experience of obtaining non-physical adjustments has improved since 2011, though a

2019 survey found 65% of disabled workers still felt they required additional support (**Table 1**).^{137–139}

Employees also report that employers are less willing to provide non-physical adjustments, or adjustments that help address fluctuations in their condition, as well as difficulty transferring adjustments between roles and employers.^{12,140,141}

Research suggests employers have low confidence interpreting what is 'reasonable' for adjustments and a low awareness of the Disability Confident scheme.^{11,120,121}

Table 1: Workplace adjustments that disabled employees report they still need, 2019

Flexible working or adjusted hours	17%
Working from home	17%
Ergonomic equipment	16%
Time off to attend appointments or therapies	14%
Adjusted breaks	12%
Adjusted duties	11%
Adjusted targets	9%
Assistive IT technology	9%
Travel to work	7%
Adjustments to built environment	6%
Phased return following absence	4%
Communications support	3%

Source: Business Disability Forum, The Great Big Workplace Adjustments Survey.¹³⁷

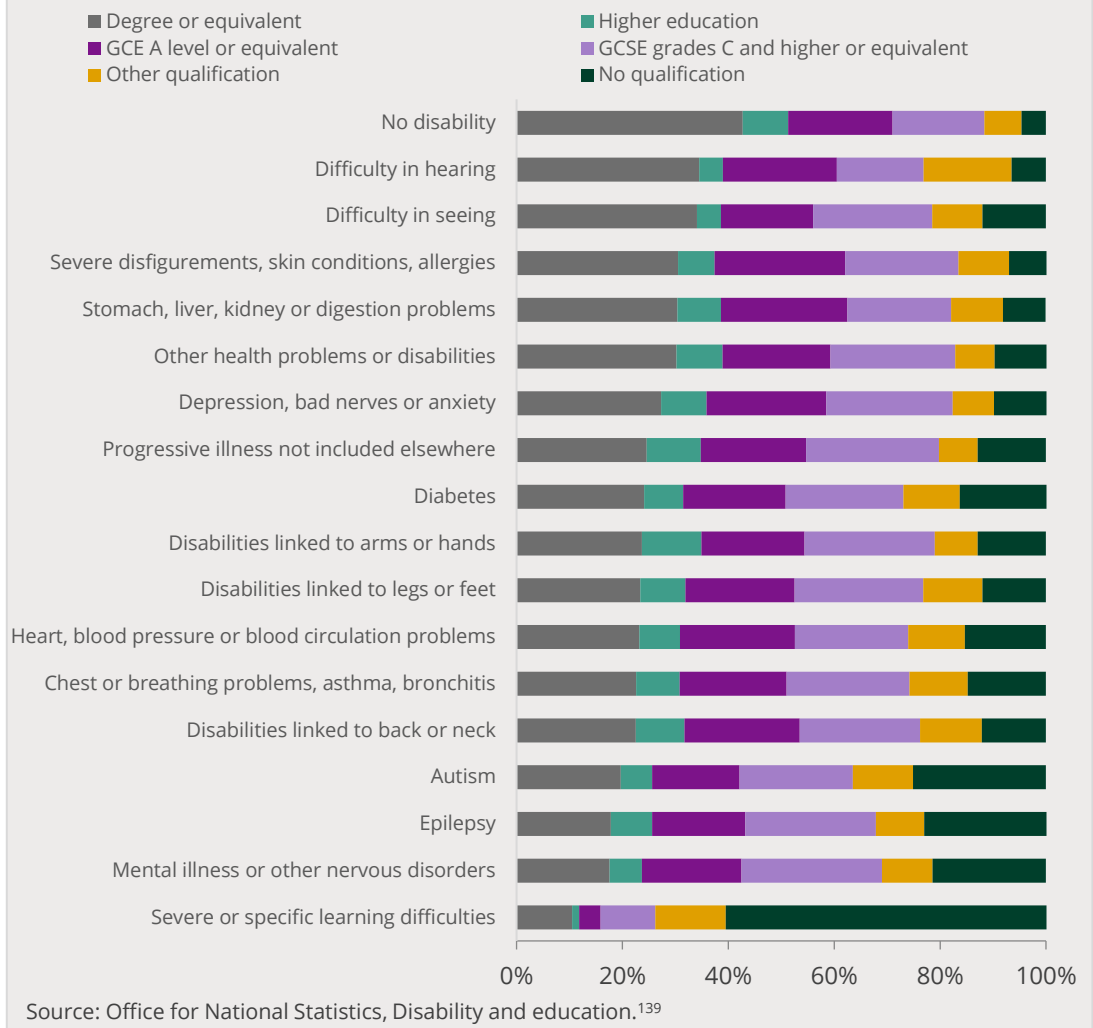
Higher and further education

Disabled people are less likely to attain qualifications in FE or HE, with lower attainment observed for some people with invisible disabilities (**Figure 3**).¹⁴² In 2021, the most common impairments reported by disabled students in FE and HE were cognitive or learning difficulties, particularly dyslexia, and mental health conditions.^{142,143} Disabled students are less likely to progress to postgraduate education or highly skilled employment.^{68,144}

HE and FE providers have a duty to support disabled students, though data shows this support varies across institutions.^{15,145,146} In England, support for HE students is partly funded through the Disabled Students Premium (DSP) and the DSA ([CBP-8716](#)), while the Education and Skills Funding Agency (EFSA) provides for FE students ([CBP-9194](#)).^{68,144,147–150}

Primary and secondary (pre-16) school education are not addressed in this briefing, though it is important to recognise barriers to early education can impact attainment of further qualifications.^{151–153}

Figure 3: Proportion of disabled people by impairment type and highest qualification
 Percentage of students, July 2020 - June 2021



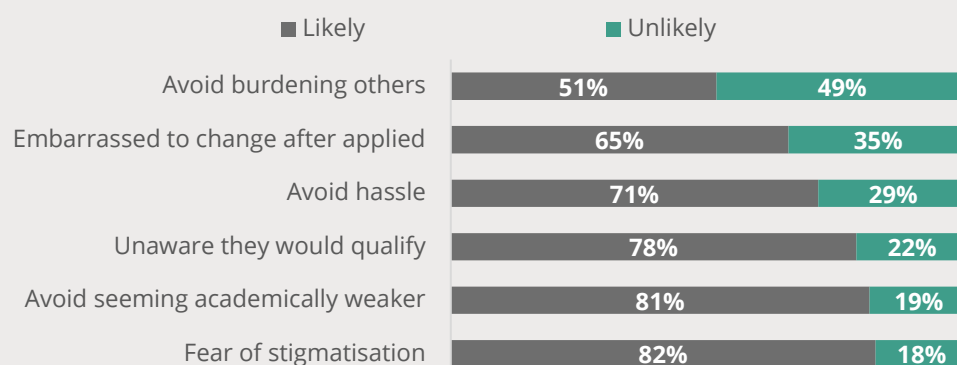
Transitions

Disabled students, particularly those with learning difficulties, are more likely to defer entry into HE than non-disabled students.¹⁵ Students with mental health conditions are more likely to drop out from a course.^{15,154} Studies also indicate that transition to less structured self-directed learning, and living away from home, may trigger or worsen a disabled person’s condition or impairment, making it more apparent.^{155,156}

Communication and disclosure

Students with invisible disabilities are less likely to disclose their disability than those with physical disabilities (particularly on admission), or identify as disabled (**Figure 4**).^{38,157,158} Staff in HE are also less likely to disclose, particularly if they are later in their career.^{38,41} Students and staff in HE report needing to repeat their issues and needs more frequently than those with a physical or visible disability.^{41,159}

Figure 4: Reasons for never disclosing disability in HE
Percentage of students, 2020



Source: Swanke, How does asking about disability at application stage affect those with hidden disabilities?¹⁵⁶

Provision of support and services

Students usually receive support from student disability services, which arrange adjustments based on Learning Support Plans (LSPs) in HE, or Education, Health and Care plans in FE (up to age 25).^{68,160–162} Student disability services in HE are broadly viewed as a positive resource.^{40,163}

A 2022 survey of nearly 5,000 disabled students found those with invisible impairments felt less supported by their school or college than those with physical impairments.¹⁵

Research has found some students with invisible disabilities perceive academic staff as reluctant or hesitant to make adjustments, including inflexibility in teaching styles, curriculum and mode of assessment.^{40,164–168} Some students also report feeling singled out by individual adjustments compared to with more universal strategies, such as 'lecture capture' (lecture recordings).^{40,159,169} A 2020-2021 survey of HE provider lecture capture policies, found that 33% were opt-in, 66% were opt-out, and 5% were compulsory (no opt-out).¹⁷⁰

Around 29% of students with a known disability access the DSA, with the Lord Holmes Review identifying administrative burden of assessments as a major barrier.^{13,68} Compared to students with physical or sensory impairments, students with mental health conditions, learning difficulties, or long-term health conditions are less satisfied with the support and adjustments they received from the DSA.¹⁷¹ Research also suggests disabled staff face additional labour organising their own supports and adjustments.^{38,41,172}

Coordination

Disabled students and staff report poor coordination and communication between disability services and academic staff, as well as between different university departments.^{38,40,167,173} Research suggests university teaching staff have mostly positive attitudes towards inclusive teaching,^{164,174} but these may not translate into practice, with students reporting difficulty implementing their LSPs in classrooms.^{38,169,174}

Public services

The design of public services, such as transport, may prevent people with invisible disabilities from accessing these services and impact their participation in work and education.^{105,106,175,176}

Those with invisible disabilities may face sensory (such as lights), informational (such as understanding of signage), and social (such as unplanned social interactions) barriers in the built environment of public service facilities, which may be less well-recognised than physical barriers (such as stairs).^{33,177–183}

Certain assistive devices and technologies may not work well in some environments, such as text-to-speech software in loud open-plan spaces.¹⁸⁴

Inaccessible digital applications and websites may prevent people from using online public services (such as telehealth, [PN 456](#)).^{185–187} Similarly, a lack of online service provision, or inaccessible technology, may be a barrier for those who cannot attend in-person appointments or services.^{109,188}

Future challenges and opportunities

Removing societal barriers for people with invisible disabilities enables them to participate in civil life, including work and education, which would have social and economic benefits.^{81,189} Stakeholders advocate for a cross-governmental approach to broadly address ableist practices and structural inequalities in UK society.^{190,191} They emphasise that the development and delivery of policy and services should involve people with invisible disabilities.^{14,190,192}

Attitudes and values

Improving awareness and understanding of invisible disabilities may reduce stigma and exclusionary practices, and support self-identification and disclosure.⁷²

Stakeholder suggestions include:

- **Reframing on talents and skills:** Developing recruitment, induction and onboarding, and retention processes that focus on individual strengths, talents and abilities, and challenge entrenched ideals about what constitutes employability.^{5,6,193}
- **Representation:** Positive representation of people with invisible disabilities in media, as well as in senior management and hiring roles, may challenge negative stereotypes and improve understanding.^{7,8,98,194–196} Forums for disabled employees or students could encourage students to have a powerful, collective voice in organisations.³⁸
- **Training and mentoring schemes:** Training programmes could increase awareness of less-recognised disabilities, and challenge misconceptions of invisible disabilities.^{7,8} Reciprocal mentoring schemes, where disabled colleagues mentor senior colleagues, could help to develop more inclusive teaching and working practices.^{2–4} The Department of Health and Social Care committed to improving understanding of learning disability and autism among health and social care staff in the National Disability Strategy.⁶⁹

- **Open communication:** Encouraging positive conversations about disability may support individuals to disclose and maintain open communication regarding their needs.^{10,11} Supportive line management is a key factor influencing disability disclosure in the workplace.^{5,11,12} The Trade Union Congress toolkit outlines steps employers can take to encourage positive conversations at work,¹⁰ and the University College Union has published guidance on disclosure for disabled employees and students.¹⁹⁷

Built and online environments

Accessibility standards that address barriers in built and online environments may improve inclusion. Considerations from stakeholders include:

- **Inclusive design:** Ensuring architecture and design considers less recognised sensory and informational barriers experienced by disabled people could improve accessibility.^{198–200} The University of Warwick's creation of accessible sensory study rooms is an example of best practice highlighted by the Office for Students.¹⁵⁴
- **Online access:** Including online access to events and services as a standard in accessibility guidelines has been suggested, as well as considering digital accessibility standards when designing all online content.^{21,185,201}

Structural

The structure of organisations, programmes, and policies can make it difficult for people with invisible disabilities to access the right support and services. Stakeholder suggestions include:

- **Updated policies and guidance:** Providing examples of less-recognised invisible disabilities in all relevant legislation, policy and guidance may improve awareness and remove barriers to accessing services and support.^{25,202} For instance, in 2019 the Department for Transport extended Blue Badge eligibility to people with invisible disabilities.²⁰³
- **Flexible working and learning:** Making flexible working the default, unless employers have a good reason not to, was widely supported in recent Government consultations.^{14,112,204,205} The Employment Relations (Flexible Working) Bill 2022-2023 would give employees the right to request flexible working from day one, but does not make flexible working the 'default' ([CBP-9648](#)).^{206,207} Stakeholders and academics indicate that making many different ways of learning and assessment available in FE and HE, such as compulsory lecture capture, could support the wider inclusion and wellbeing of all students ([PN 639](#)).^{38,40,169,208–210}
- **Non-physical adjustments:** Including clear and detailed examples of non-physical adjustments, such as additional work breaks, as well as temporary or periodic adjustments for fluctuating conditions, in guidance for assessors, educators and employers.^{10,77,211}
- **Adjustment passports:** Stakeholders, including the Disability Employment Charter, widely support the introduction of 'adjustment passports', which record an individual's impairments and/or adjustments, to make transitions smoother

and reduce the burden of repeated disclosure.^{13,14,78,212,213} The Department for Work and Pensions' passport trial to transfer adjustments from university to employment settings is ongoing, as well as a passport trial for those on supported internships, apprenticeships or traineeships.⁹ The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service recommends extending passports across the whole spectrum of education.¹⁵

Wider impacts

Several wider factors influence the opportunities and challenges faced by people with invisible disabilities in the UK:

- **Post-Covid-19:** The backlog of care and workforce shortages following the pandemic may impact ongoing access to care.^{104,109,112,214–216} Long Covid now affects approximately 1.4 million UK adults, and rates of mental illness increased during the pandemic ([PN 648](#)), which could contribute to the prevalence of invisible disabilities in the UK.^{217–224} Stakeholders suggest maintaining options for remote access post-pandemic are important to ensuring disabled people can fully participate in work, education, and leisure or civic activities, while recognising the potential risks of home working and learning (such as career progression, social isolation).^{21,56,131,134,204,225}
- **Labour market:** Economic inactivity due to ill health following the pandemic is a major driver of the UK labour supply shortage.^{226–228} Stakeholders suggest employers consider the potential of disabled employees to occupy more roles, given surveys indicate one million unemployed disabled people want to work.^{229,230} Some stakeholders suggest introducing employer incentives, such as mandatory disability workforce reporting for large employers.^{14,231}
- **Cost of living:** Disabled people already face additional monthly costs of £583 on average, and those with invisible disabilities report difficulties accessing financial support.⁶⁹ Rising costs of living are an additional financial burden ([CBP-9428](#)), with the Government outlining additional support.^{111,232–235}
- **Technology innovations:** Assistive and accessible technologies could remove barriers to participation for disabled people, with cross-party think tanks investigating potential innovations.^{236–238} The National Disability Strategy outlined investment in a Centre for Assistive and Accessible Technology, and plans to challenge researchers to accelerate these innovations.⁶⁹

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