

14th September 2022

Dear Prime Minister,

This is a joint letter from the Disability Poverty Campaign Group, which is disabled people-led, and the Disability Benefits Consortium, a network of over 100 major disability charities and related organisations. We are writing to call your urgent attention to the devastating and intensifying levels of poverty faced by disabled people in the UK. Disability poverty rates are rising.<sup>1</sup> Given this, we have a duty to convey to you in the strongest terms that the pressures created by rising energy and food costs, inadequate social security and rising social care costs must be met with robust, immediate action by your government if we are to avert a humanitarian crisis. Prime Minister, we remind you that in our country, nearly 50% of households in poverty have at least one disabled member.

## **The scale of the crisis**

Disabled people are already rationing how often they use oxygen concentrators and turning off the heating—even in cases where the person is unable to regulate their own body temperature. These forced choices will have catastrophic consequences.

We urge you to consider the reality of disability-related energy costs: these include the need for a well-heated home to maintain health and wellbeing; electricity usage for the charging and operating of powerchairs, scooters, lifts, hoists, electric shower-toilets, and medical equipment such as ventilators, feeding pumps, and dialysis machines.

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<sup>1</sup> ONS: Around 4 in 10 disabled people experiencing rising cost of living cut back on food and essentials; retrieved 8 August 2022 from:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/expenditure/articles/whatactionarepeopletakingbecauseoftherisingcostofliving/2022-08-05> .

Citizens Advice: <https://public.flourish.studio/story/1634399/>

Disabled people are particularly at risk in a cost-of-living crisis, with a disproportionate negative impact falling on disabled women (particularly single mothers), disabled children, disabled people of colour, disabled people with complex needs, disabled people living in rural areas and the elderly.

**Even before April's increase in the Energy Price Cap, disabled people made up 62% of those using Trussell Trust food banks, 60% of those asking Citizens Advice for help with fuel bills, and more than 600,000 disabled people in the UK were recently estimated to have £10 or less per week to pay for food and other costs.<sup>2</sup>**

Many low, and fixed-income, disabled people pay towards their social care and support, including from means-tested benefits, leaving people in dire poverty and mental distress. Levels of social care charge-related debt are rising<sup>3</sup>. The government had to make a recent amendment to the charging statutory guidance to ensure that cost-of-living support payments are not subsequently taken by local authorities in care charges. Every day, disabled people-led organisations are confronted with the poverty created by a system that charges low and fixed-income disabled people for meeting their statutory care needs.

## **Announced measures**

The last Parliament saw a package of support measures to combat the cost-of-living crisis. People who receive disability benefits will get a one-off payment of £150 by the end of September and everyone receiving a means-tested benefit will receive an additional £650.<sup>4</sup> The DPCG and DBC welcome this support. However, those in receipt of disability benefits will lose £150 this Autumn, with the removal of their eligibility for the Warm Home Discount (WHD). Therefore, disabled people not in receipt of means-tested benefits are not set to see any actual gain from the £150 support payment.

We appreciate that you have offered your public support for the business community and employees at this time of crisis—and they of course include disabled workers. However, we need your assurance that you recognise the cost-of-living crisis will create destitution and risk to life for

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<sup>2</sup> Savanta ComRes: <https://comresglobal.com/polls/leonard-cheshire-disabled-adults-polling/>

<sup>3</sup> Disability News Service: <https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/tens-of-thousands-driven-into-debt-by-care-charges-new-figures-show/>; GMB Union: <https://www.gmb.org.uk/news/least-130000-trapped-social-care-debt> Open Democracy: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/cost-of-living-social-care-bills-people-cant-pay-exclusive-england/>

<sup>4</sup> Disabled people who receive both types of benefit will receive both payments.

citizens who face complex structural barriers to earning income. This includes those severely disabled people with limited or no capacity for paid employment.

Further, people receiving Carer's Allowance were not mentioned in the support package, despite the very high rates of poverty seen in this cohort, and the energy use of at-home carers being higher than those working outside the home.

In recent weeks, we have seen media reports that the government is set to increase benefits levels next April, by around 10 percent (i.e., the end of September CPI rate). This is a step in the right direction— but given predicted inflation will not be sufficient to prevent avoidable loss of life. However, we were dismayed to see the Government has rejected a plea from the Work and Pensions Committee that benefits rise Immediately given the scale of the crisis and the widening gap between Income and outcome. We are, as a community feel that without immediate action, the consequences for Disabled people are going to be devastating.

## **Respect and compassion**

Prime Minister, we call on you to govern in a spirit of compassion and respect towards all disabled people, including those with no recourse to public funds, and to pledge to unequivocally strengthen their rights in your policies and legislation.

Further, we urge your government to resist any articulation of stereotyping that risks misleading the public about the diverse lives and complex challenges of disabled people and all in poverty. Any vilification of those in precarity weakens the bonds and resilience of our communities and our collective ability to manage the present crisis.

We call for the creation of conditions in which disabled people can exercise their rights to a dignified, full, and independent life, contribute to their communities and wider society according to their abilities, and raise future generations unscathed by the avoidable, intergenerational harms of deep poverty. Let the eradication of disabled people's destitution be your legacy to this country.

## Immediately required actions

- Benefits must receive an emergency uprating by 1 October 2022 in line with at least Bank of England predictions of inflation, currently 13%.
- The Minimum Income Guarantee (MIG) for social care recipients must receive an emergency uprating at the statutory level—at least in line with the predicted rise in inflation by 1 October 2022. Further, the current legislation must change to require the Secretary of State to uplift the statutory MIG at the annual review.
- Revise the eligibility criteria for the Warm Home Discount (WHD) to reinstate eligibility for the 300,000 disabled benefit claimants whose entitlement to the rebate has been wrongfully removed
- Act to end all arrears-related deductions from benefits.
- Put in place further targeted, non-repayable social security support to low-income disabled people. The sufficiency of benefits levels must be urgently reviewed, including the ‘extra-costs benefits’ (PIP, DLA, and AA) designed to cover the additional costs of living with disability.<sup>5</sup>

## Further actions

- We call on the government to engage with disabled people-led organisations on their calls for the cost of social care provision to be borne by the government, with provision made free at the point of need.
- Commit to communications strategy on a par with the HMRC’s yearly tax return campaign to maximise the number of family carers in receipt of Carers Allowance, which is currently wholly inadequate.
- Reform the benefit system to make the process easier, faster, and far more supportive.

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<sup>5</sup> See: <https://www.scope.org.uk/scope/media/files/campaigns/disability-price-tag-report-2019.pdf>). The average disabled person faces extra costs of £583 a month, while one in five disabled people has additional costs of over £1000 per month. The highest rate of PIP, which is received by only a very small percentage of disabled people, is £350.40 per month.

Thank you for your attention, Prime Minister.

We are ready to meet with you and your Ministers at your earliest convenience to work constructively together to uphold the rights of disabled people at this time of national crisis.

Yours sincerely,

On behalf of The Disability Poverty Campaign Group:

Caroline Collier (Inclusion Barnet)

Julia Modern (Inclusion London)

Helen Rowlands (Cheshire Disabled People's Panel)

Lynne Turnbull (Cheshire Disabled People's Panel)

Dan White (Disability Rights UK)

On behalf of the Disability Benefits Consortium:

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cc. Fazilet Hadi, Head of Policy, Disability Rights UK; Svetlana Kotova, Director of Campaigns and Justice, Inclusion London; Baroness Jane Campbell.