

Sunak's lies about UK disability benefits system are to justify cutting access to them

A benefits advice worker
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The following comments were sent to the WSWS by a benefits advice worker.

The speech made by Prime Minister Rishi Sunak at the Centre for Social Justice is a warning to all those working with benefit claimants that the welfare benefits system and even the semblance of a “safety net” to protect the most vulnerable is at risk of being completely removed.

I have spent the majority of my working life working with people who have struggled with mental and physical health problems, who have had to depend on the benefits system to be able to live day to day.

Many of those I have assisted to claim benefits and appeal poor decisions made by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) have found the benefits system not only difficult to navigate, but also downright punitive in its approach to the difficulties claimants face, as they try to comply with conditionality and what they have been asked to do by the DWP.

This has led to claimants having their benefits substantially reduced, leading to insurmountable financial hardship, left struggling to make ends meet, having to turn to food banks, or at times go without the basics to be able to live.

The proposals laid out in Sunak's speech will make this situation a lot worse. They have nothing to do with fairness or accountability to the taxpayer but are an attack on the sick and disabled.

Sunak's speech covers areas including both sets of claimants to Universal Credit (UC), job seekers and those claiming with a health condition within UC, and claimants to Personal Independence Payment (PIP).

Sunak's remarks describing the growing numbers of those who have become “economically inactive since the pandemic” provides no honest explanation as to the causes of the rising numbers of those now dependent on the pittance that is handed out in benefits to live on each week, because they can no longer work, because they are

sick.

The claims by Sunak that there has been an explosion in those claiming sickness due to mental health problems under the heading of a “sick note culture”, specifically aimed at the young, is misleading and untrue.

Sunak describes these young people as “over-medicalising” everyday anxieties, with the solution being that they are being offered cash benefits when really they should be offered therapy instead. Why not both?

The official data does not bear out what this billionaire prime minister is saying. The idea that people are “over-medicalising” everyday strains within their lives to obtain benefits has little evidence to back this up.

Louise Murphy, an economist at the Resolution Foundation think-tank, notes that the majority of claims by 16-25 year-olds relate to autism, ADHD and learning disabilities.

Helen Barnard, director of policy at the Trussell Trust, said that many older people have both physical and mental health conditions and were not off work because they were depressed, but were ill and off work struggling to access support, and were facing real financial hardship, which can be a major causative factor in someone becoming depressed.

Analysts have pointed to a number of factors leading to worsening health among the population including a link to longer waiting lists in the National Health Service (NHS).

The ongoing problems people experience with not being able to access help and support sooner when experiencing a mental health crisis is leading to a deterioration in their mental health as they wait to be seen by mental health services.

Dr. Sarah Hughes, CEO of mental health charity Mind, said, “The truth is that mental health services are at breaking point following years of underinvestment, with many people getting increasingly unwell while they wait to receive support.”

The British Medical Association said the prime minister should focus on getting people access to the medical help they needed to get back to work, rather than “pushing a hostile rhetoric on ‘sicknote culture’”.

Data published by the NHS shows that the number of sick notes issued by GPs fluctuated during the COVID pandemic but was no higher at the end of last year than in 2019.

The fact is only one in 10 sick notes is caused by mental health conditions.

On average workers in Britain take off fewer days sick than in any major economy. One of the main reasons for this is the paltry low rates of statutory sick pay workers can claim, which is currently paid at just £116.75p a week, far below most wage packets, even the minimum wage

The proposals Sunak made about the unemployed and those out of work and the numbers of job vacancies are chilling. He said that if a claimant does not accept a job that a work coach has found for them to take up, then after 12 months their benefits will be stopped altogether.

Sunak’s comment that “unemployment support should be a safety-net never a lifestyle choice,” is a mandate to force claimants off benefits and into low paid work.

He launches a wholesale attack on claimants to the Personal Independence Payment, benefit with his “worry” “that it is being misused”.

He talks about those with mental health problems stating, “it is not clear they have the same degree of increased living costs as those with physical conditions”. This is dismissive of the very real everyday problems and the incurred costs that people face with mental health problems, who also face the possible double whammy of not having basic mental health services there to support them.

Sunak openly raises questions about claimants honesty in claiming a benefit, saying, “and the whole system is undermined by the way people are asked to make subjective and unverifiable claims about their capability”. Unverifiable by whom?

He proposes this issue will be resolved by, “being more precise about the type and severity of mental health conditions that should be eligible for PIP”, “and requiring greater medical evidence to substantiate a claim”.

Speaking to the media, Work and Pensions secretary Mel Stride commented that people with mental health problems could lose access to sickness benefits entirely under the new reforms.

Disability Rights UK said of Sunak’s speech, “Today

the government have yet again gone on the attack by singling out disabled people as a burden on the benefits system”.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation commented that “almost two thirds of people in destitution have a chronic health condition or disability”, adding that PIP is a benefit to help people with additional costs of having a long term physical or mental health condition or disability. This income is big share of many claimant’s income.

Doctors responded to Stride’s threat to cut PIP.

Consultant Dr. Jay Watts wrote on X, “PIP has nothing to do with employment. PIP is for moderate to severe disability and is v difficult to qualify for. No one gets PIP ‘for’ depression or anxiety. It is based on a functional analysis. Stop playing smoke and mirrors with people’s lives.”

Dr. Rachael Clarke, a palliative care doctor writing on X commented, “Mel Stride is no doctor, and nor is Rishi Sunak. They have no idea how crippling severe depression or anxiety can be. They’re simply smearing the vulnerable for cheap, populist, electoral gain. It’s unforgivable stuff”.

The worry and distress these comments are causing people, who must be sat at home wondering when their financial lifeline is to be cut, possibly thrown off benefits and forced to try and look for work, is criminal.

And while we are talking about criminal, let’s not forget that there are now around 2 million people suffering with Long COVID, due to the policy of mass infection of the population that the Johnson/Sunak government inflicted on the population. As chancellor, Sunak launched the Eat Out to Help Out scheme which only helped to spread the deadly disease.

And while Sunak announces huge cuts to welfare spending, he has announced an extra £75 billion in defence spending. Any amount of money is available to carry out war and mass murder.



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