

Labour plans to force disabled people into work, as government pledges to slash UK benefits bill

Dennis Moore
12 December 2024

The White Paper “Get Britain Working” by work and pensions secretary Liz Kendall outlines plans by the UK Labour government to force millions of disabled people into looking for work.

White papers are policy documents produced by governments setting out their proposals for future legislation, and underpinning Kendall’s is the drive to slash the welfare bill. The government estimates that the cost of the welfare bill is set to rise from £60 billion to in excess of £100 billion by 2030.

There are 4.2 million people nationwide in receipt of health-related benefits, two thirds of them receiving long-term support. A quarter of people aged between 16-64 suffer with a long-term health condition placing limitations on what they are able to do on a daily basis. Disabled people are three times more likely to be out of work than those considered not to have a disability.

Labour have repeatedly referred to this group of people—many with longstanding health conditions—in terms of their economic inactivity and worklessness. “Get Britain Working” refers to “economic activity” 89 times throughout the document and reaffirms the ambition to achieve an 80 percent employment rate. The figures the government have used to calculate economic activity are provided by the Office for National Statistics.

Research published by the Resolution Foundation (RF) think tank casts doubt on these figures, however, suggesting that since the first COVID lockdown in 2020 there has been a gross under estimation of those who are economically active by approaching a million workers (930,000). Its report, “Get Britain’s Stats Working”, warns that efforts to reach this target are marred by poor quality data about the true state of the labour market.

The government’s white paper has met criticism from disability rights groups for its lack of any clarity as to how

disabled people receiving out-of-work benefits will be treated by the Department for Work and Pensions. Proposals for reforms are not being published till next spring.

Linda Burnip, co-founder of Disabled People Against Cuts, was concerned by the emphasis on increasing the engagement between disabled people on out-of-work benefits and employment support services—particularly those disabled claimants who do not have any current contact with the government agency Jobcentre Plus. It tears up the approach that engagement with the DWP should be voluntary and initiated by disabled people themselves choosing to want to look for work, rather than being pressured to do so.

Fazlilet Hadi, head of policy at Disability Rights UK, criticised, “Given that disabled people are the subject of the white paper, it is disappointing that we weren’t engaged with prior to publication.” The situation leaves many disabled people worrying what will happen and concerned their paltry benefits will be sanctioned or stopped if they are unable to engage with the DWP and attend appointments.

Labour’s paper places particular emphasis on getting people with health conditions, and specifically long-term health conditions, back into work. It skates over the fact that many of these people are too unfit to work and cannot access the appropriate medical treatment or help that they need.

The National Health Service (NHS) is already under immense strain and without the capacity to deliver the quality health care needed for those with long-term conditions, requiring substantial resources over a long period of time.

A survey carried out by mental health charity Rethink in June this year showed the impact of NHS waiting times:

- 80 percent of those surveyed reported that their mental health had deteriorated whilst waiting for support, with some waiting up to 727 days before they were seen.

- Of those whose mental health had deteriorated, 64 percent had experienced a mental health crisis, with 25 percent attempting suicide.

- 42 percent had to seek urgent emergency care, with 22 percent having contact with the police due to their distress.

- 34 percent of people had to take time off work, and some had lost their jobs.

The overall NHS waiting list for treatment is at 7.5 million, with over 230,000 people waiting more than a year. Long COVID continues to drag on the population's health, with an official study in April estimating that two million people had the condition in England and Scotland. Nearly 20 percent of participants reported that it seriously impacted daily life.

Government plans to invest an additional £22.6 billion in the Department of Health and Social Care in England by 2025-6 will barely scratch the sides of the problem. Moreover, it is being coupled with a productivity drive which will run a still under-resourced NHS ragged, pressed for an extra 40,000 appointments a week.

The same can be said of promises—even assuming they are kept—of an additional 8,500 mental health staff and increased access to Individual Placement and Support, targeting those with severe mental illness and reaching an extra 140,000 people by 2028/29.

“Get Britain Working” also promises support for young people in the form of a Youth Guarantee, supposedly enabling every young person aged 18-21 to be able to access “further learning,” help to get a job or an apprenticeship. Unpublished comments made in October this year by Kendall in an interview with the BBC's economics editor Faisal Islam revealed that youth would face harsh sanctions if they did not comply.

A Freedom of Information request revealed Kendall's statement: “There'll be no option, no option of not earning or learning.” This was “an absolute part of our Youth Guarantee.” Compulsion always means cut-price jobs and courses, aimed at creating a heavily exploitable new layer of workers.

The foreword to the white paper, by Chancellor Rachel Reeves, Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson, and Health Secretary Wes Streeting, makes clear the overall goal of “transforming a department for welfare into a genuine department for work through a new national jobs and careers service, focused on people's

skills and careers not only monitoring and managing benefit claims.” Streeting has made clear how his plans to cut waiting lists are driven by economic goals and the foreword notes that this “means fixing the NHS, cutting waiting lists so people can get back to health and back to work...”

Behind all the empty rhetoric about supporting disabled people back into work, Starmer is pledged to slash the benefits bill, with hundreds of thousands forced back into work, the majority into dead-end low-paid jobs.

Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer recently wrote a column for the *Mail on Sunday*, which specialises in demonising welfare recipients whether disabled or not. Starmer pledged to “get to grips with the bulging benefits bill blighting our society” and to “crack down hard on anyone who tries to game the system.” His comments were fully in line with the sentiments of the right-wing rag which ran a front page story, “Starmer declares war on benefits Britain: Sir Keir vows to crack down on £137 billion welfare ‘blight’.”

The Labour government is continuing and deepening Tory austerity. Already in her October budget, Reeves committed to delivering £3 billion worth of savings from health and benefits—with policies to be announced in the spring—the same amount as pledged by the Sunak government.

The attacks on welfare and the pushing of the sick and disabled into work are being brought in by a Labour government pledged to a pro-corporate agenda and rearmament at vast cost, which it is planning to fund with a war on the working class at home. Last Saturday, Reeves was also treated to a front-page splash by the *Mail*, telling the paper of the need to increase military spending: “If you spend money on one thing, you can't spend it elsewhere. There's not a magic money tree.” Other departments had to learn to “live within their means.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact