

United Response's submission to the **Disability Action Plan 2023 – 2024's public consultation**

About United Response

Since 1973, United Response has been supporting people with learning disabilities, mental health, or physical support needs to live their lives to the full. Our staff team of 3,400 people work across 330 locations in England and Wales to support around 2,000 people aged 16 to 65+. We campaign to ensure the people we support have equal access to the same rights and opportunities and challenge the negative attitudes and discrimination they face.

Executive Summary

- United Response supports the Plan's proposal to review past and present funding to support disabled candidates into elected office, intending to see the development and rollout of a long-term statutory fund; we support the establishment of a GOV.UK webpage providing guidance and signposting accessible support and training.
- United Response cautiously welcomes the development of a proposed Disability Enabled Badge; we recognise the potential benefits of such a system from an accessibility, recognition, and improved data collection standpoint; equally, we caution that the Disability Unit move carefully in its rollout and should actively involve disabled stakeholders during its proposed pilot scheme, particularly in its evaluation.
- United Responses supports appointing a senior assistive technology champion to liaise with disabled persons' organisations and Ministerial Disability Champions; providing an 'Assistive Technology Grant' to those receiving welfare to support greater access to broadband and high-tech assistive technology.

Access to Elected Office

Meaningful and equitable opportunities to participate in public life remain elusive for many disabled citizens. We note the progress made in recent years towards tackling ableist discrimination, namely through the Equality Act 2010 and adopting the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Nevertheless, significant

work remains in empowering disabled people to lead in local and national decision-making and policy-making processes.

United Response believes that a core part of independent living is feeling empowered and supported enough to participate in public life – from the ballot box to the soap box. To this end, we've worked closely with people we support to upskill their political literacy and help them register to vote during elections. Our annual Accessible Voting Day campaigns have also engaged elected representatives and Returning Officers across the country; call on them to take our pledge and help make voting accessible for disabled electors¹.

Yet not only do disabled people face systemic barriers to accessible voting, but they are one of the most disengaged and underrepresented groups in politics, despite making up 22% of the national population²; just 16% of elected councillors and less than 2% of current Members of Parliament (MPs) are declared as disabled³. Initiatives such as the Access to Elected Office Fund and subsequent EnAble Fund, as the Plan rightly notes, have provided valuable logistical support to disabled election candidates. Whilst imperfectly run (particularly in terms of data collection and varying levels of working knowledge of disability awareness⁴), these schemes' expiry represents a significant loss in support and opportunity for disabled citizens to participate in public debate actively.

United Response welcomes the Department's renewed focus on this service provision gap. **We support the Plan's proposal to review past and present funding to support disabled candidates into elected office, with our expressed wish to see the development and rollout of a long-term statutory fund.** It is vital, we would stress, that such a review proactively involves disabled candidates, elected and unelected, to ensure lived experiences inform any proposals emerging from the consultation.

Equally, **we support the proposed development and establishment of a GOV.UK webpage providing guidance and signposting support such as training.** The Local Government Association runs a similar programme focused on upskilling and supporting disabled councillors.⁵ We believe **any Government-sponsored initiative focused on improving access to elected office must be multifaceted and intersectional in its**

¹ <https://www.unitedresponse.org.uk/get-involved/campaign/raising-awareness/accessible-voting-day/>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/family-resources-survey-financial-year-2020-to-2021/family-resources-survey-financial-year-2020-to-2021>

³ <https://thedisabilitypolicycentre.org/representation>

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/access-to-elected-office-fund-evaluation-report>

⁵ <https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/councillor-and-officer-development/councillor-development/support-disabled-0>

approach, explicitly offering logistical support and training in an accessible online and in-person format.

Disability Enabled Badge

Disability has enjoyed a significantly greater profile in recent decades, whereby many self-advocates have made significant contributions to improving public awareness and realising meaningful inclusion for disabled citizens.

Of those areas where greater accessibility awareness and visibility of disability are most in need are workplaces and public services. Disabled people, as the Plan rightly highlights, are more likely to experience difficulties accessing products and services than non-disabled people⁶. This is especially challenging for those living with hidden and or co-occurring disabilities, such as autism and learning disabilities, who are at even greater risk of discrimination and misunderstanding of their needs⁷.

United Response **cautiously welcomes the Plan's proposals to develop a Disability Enabled Badge to encourage businesses and services to train their staff in disability awareness**. We recognise the need for a streamlined and concise approach that enables front-facing staff to recognise disabled customers and meet their needs as broadly as possible. Similarly, we appreciate the logistical benefits issuing such a Badge would mean for better data collection of disability to inform future policy decisions, as well as the symbolic value of a Badge signifying an official recognition of the government's duty to validate disabled people's rights and needs, and its utility as an advocacy lever for improving and expanding the rights and services attached to the Badge⁸.

We would, nevertheless, be remiss if we did not express some reservations from individuals we support and potential obstacles involved with the Badge's conception and practical rollout. For many disabled people, their disability is an intensely personal aspect of their identities and is often linked to additional medical conditions. As such, they may feel uncomfortable about surrendering sensitive information to persons besides their trusted care providers. There needs to be clarity about which government department would be responsible for the Badge's administration and what details applicants must submit. We recognise that the Badge will be issued on an optional basis and that it does not seek to compete with existing training

⁶ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/disability/articles/disabled-peoplesaccesstoproductsandservicesgreatbritain/februarytomarch2022>

⁷ <https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/article/1822122/half-workers-invisible-disabilities-say-difficulty-getting-support-work-makes-not-worth-it-research-shows>

⁸ <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/epidemiology-health-care/sites/epidemiology-health-care/files/wp-29.pdf>

programmes; United Response echoes concerns that moving towards implementing *any* disability ID system before clearly clarifying the Badge's purpose and establishing a universally agreed definition of "disability" could create long term structural problems that increase the costs and reduce the efficiency of disability-related programs and policies.⁹

In sum, United Response recognises the potential benefits a Disability Enabled Badge could bring to upskilling businesses and services' working knowledge of disability and improving disabled people's accessibility to crucial goods and services in other areas (such as acceptable photo ID during elections). Nevertheless, **we would caution the Department to move cautiously in developing this initiative and closely involve disabled stakeholders to evaluate the proposed pilot programme.**

Assistive Technology

United Response believes technology is vital in improving disabled people's quality of life – especially those with hidden disabilities like autism and learning disabilities. With 'high-tech' assistive technology, there is significant potential to empower individuals we support in the workplace and independent living.

We **support appointing a senior assistive technology champion to liaise with disabled persons' organisations and Ministerial Disability Champions.** We further support the Plan's proposed feasibility study to explore assistive technology training for civil servants and other public sector service delivery staff. There is significant collaborative scope here, particularly with criminal justice and policing professionals¹⁰; we have found, through our anti-disability hate crime campaign, that there are significant communication barriers for victims when attempting to report an incident¹¹. Providing police with tools such as alternative communication devices, screen readers, or word prediction software would be invaluable for police and impacted persons.

We **caution against overreliance or disproportionate focus on enhancing digital services at the expense of other communication means.** Many people United Response supports living with complex needs need to be digitally literate and often struggle when engaging with public services online. It is not solely down to a question of capacity; the associated costs of securing assistive technology and reliable broadband place significant

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ A [University of Portsmouth study \(2022\)](#) found that more immersive police training is needed for police officers interviewing people with learning disabilities. High-tech assistive technology could be a significant tool in facilitating this, in close collaboration with the Disability Unit, Home Office, and DPOs.

¹¹ <https://s33156.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/Disability-Hate-Crime-Report-2022-FINAL-digital.pdf>

barriers before individuals and social care providers. Therefore, we recommend that any proposed assistive technology champion work to upgrade services' digital accessibility in close collaboration with Ministerial Disability Champions and the DU assistive technology officials group.

Going further, we would also propose that the Department maintain the present social internet tariff, introduce an energy social tariff, and **provide an 'Assistive Technology Grant' to those in receipt of Personal Independent Payments and VAT exemption certificate so that they can buy and access more and better 'high-tech' assistive technology.**

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