

DISABILITY IN WALES 2025

One in five people in Wales is disabled – a higher proportion than the UK average.

1 / 5

25%

25% of disabled people in Wales live in poverty.

The disability employment gap is 31% in Wales – up to 50% in some areas.

31%

£1.75

The disability pay gap was £1.75 per hour in 2023.

Disabled people need an additional £1010 per month on average.

£1010

68%

68% of COVID-19 deaths in Wales were disabled people.

Disabled people are twice as likely to be physically inactive.

2 x

27%

Over a quarter of disabled people in Wales have no formal qualifications.

The Social Model of Disability
recognises how the label of a 'disability' is imposed on people by society. From this, barriers are created through attitudes, policy and procedures and facilities, resources and environments can become socially excluding for disabled people as they are shaped by those without impairments.

Nothing About Us Without Us
is a core principle meaning that disabled people with lived experience of these systemic barriers must be fully involved in every level of evidence gathering and decision making, from the start.

Diverse Experiences of Disability

The experiences of disabled people differ significantly. Differences to consider include:

- Impairments from birth, childhood, or acquired later in life
- Visible or invisible impairments
- Multiple or single impairments
- Socioeconomic circumstances and other intersectional characteristics.

Policy Overview: Welsh Government
The Welsh Government formally committed to the Social Model of Disability in 2002, but the continued reliance on the medical model became clear during the COVID-19 pandemic. Devolved powers:

- The Disability Rights Action Plan for Wales
- NHS Wales
- The Well-being of Future Generations Act.

Policy Overview: UK Government

The UK Government has not adopted the model, but encourages its use in ad-hoc documents. Reserved powers:

- The Equality Act and Equality and Human Rights Committee (EHRC)
- The Department for Work and Pensions, and Benefits
- The Economy and Cost of Living Crisis.



Disability in Wales

This report presents the outcomes of the Learned Society of Wales Early Career Researcher Expert Forum on the theme Disability in Wales, February 2025. The forum brought together a diverse group of contributors—including academics, healthcare professionals, social and third sector representatives, and policymakers—many also shared their own lived experiences. Together, they explored the barriers that disabled people face throughout their lives in Wales and developed a series of recommendations to support individuals, policymakers and researchers to dismantle these barriers for disabled people.

The discussion was shaped by the social model of disability, which recognises how the label of a 'disability' is imposed on people by society. From this, barriers are created through attitudes, policy and procedures and facilities, resources and environments can become socially excluding for disabled people as they are shaped by those without impairments. This model allows us to understand how different factors impact disabled people, and shape our advocacy for more inclusive environments.

Policymakers, health professionals, and academics have traditionally viewed disability through the medical model, which is focused on rehabilitation and views conditions as problems to be solved. This model is now viewed as outdated, and contributes to internalised negative messages and subconscious micro-aggressions.

The Disability Landscape in Wales 2021–2025

- **One in every five people** in Wales is disabled, representing a higher proportion than most areas of the UK.
- **High rate of poverty:** 25% of disabled people in Wales live in poverty.
- **Employment gap:** The disability employment gap is 31% in Wales, and is as high as 50% in some areas.
- **Pay gap:** The disability pay gap in Wales was £1.75 per hour in 2023.
- **Additional costs:** On average, disabled households need an additional £1010 a month to have the same standard of living as non-disabled households. This extra costs is around 67% of household income after housing costs.
- **Health:** 68% of COVID-19 deaths in Wales were disabled people.
- **Physical activity:** Disabled people are twice as likely to be physically inactive as non-disabled people. In regards to those who are able, it has been estimated that doing light activity has a social value of £4400 per person per year, which rises to £6200 if 30 minutes of activity is carried out every day (CMO guidelines).
- **Qualifications gap:** Over a quarter (27.5%) of disabled people have no formal qualifications, compared to 16.7% of non-disabled people.

[Wellbeing of Wales 2024, Welsh Government, 2024](#) | [Disability Price Tag 2024, Disability charity Scope UK, 2024](#) | [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) and the impact on disabled people, Welsh Government, 2021](#) | [Social value of disabled people's physical activity, Activity Alliance, 2024](#) | [Disabled people's outcomes in health, housing, education, and economic status \(Census 2021\), Welsh Government, 2023.](#)



Systems thinking

In line with the social model, we considered numerous factors which influence disabled people, but also how disabled people interact with each layer and how layers interact with one another (e.g. health and social care organisations). We note the following factors:

The individual: The person at the centre has agency, and is not defined solely by their disability. They shape and respond to their environment, actively navigating and challenging the systems that affect their health, identity, and wellbeing.

The microsystem: Close relationships with family, friends, carers, social support, and healthcare providers. This is where close interactions take place.

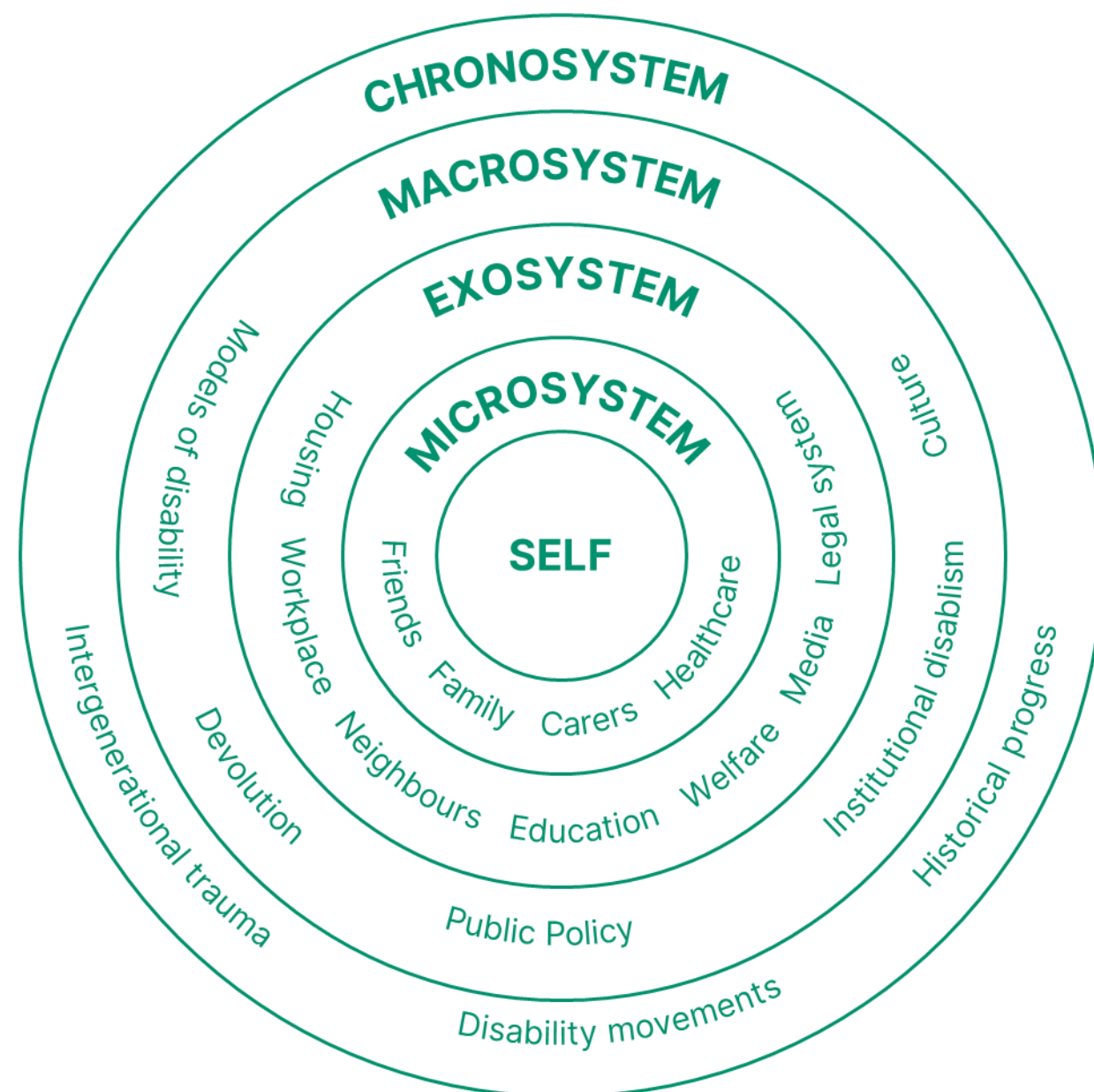
The exosystem: Workplaces, schools, neighbours, community services, housing, welfare, justice, and health systems. These structures shape the environment around the individual.

The macrosystem: Wider societal attitudes, public policies, cultural norms, and institutional disablism. These influence how disability is understood and supported— or negatively shaped —by society.

The chronosystem: Historical shifts, such as intergenerational trauma, and the progress driven by disability rights movements.

The barriers faced by disabled people in Wales are interconnected, and any changes must take an integrative approach to address these barriers as a whole.

Inspired by the work of Jessica Stern, and Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model: [Working toward anti-racist perspectives in attachment theory, research, and practice | Attachment & Human Development, 2021.](#)



Policy overview

Disability is impacted by policies at multiple levels – not just UK and Welsh Governments, but local authorities and individual organisations such as employers.

Welsh Government Devolved Powers

The Welsh Government has a number of legislative powers which have been devolved from wider UK Government legislation, including areas such as health, education and local government.

The Welsh Government formally committed to the Social Model of Disability in 2002. The UK Government has not adopted the model, but encourages its use in ad-hoc documents. In Wales, the continued reliance on the medical model became clear during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Locked Out report shows that 68% of COVID-related deaths in Wales were disabled people, and that this figure was exacerbated by social factors. The Welsh Government acknowledged these errors in the Locked Out report, reaffirmed their commitment to the Social Model in 2022, and are now launching a [Disabled People's Rights Action Plan](#).

The Disability Rights Action Plan for Wales: Welsh Government is currently developing a Disability Rights Action Plan for Wales, with the draft plan currently out for consultation. The premise is largely viewed by the community as a positive sign of progress.

NHS Wales: The Health Service remains a significant source of barriers for disabled people in Wales, due to waiting lists and budget cuts. In particular, the 'one condition per appointment' policy does not reflect the complex and intersectional nature of many disabled peoples' healthcare needs.

The Well-being of Future Generations Act: [The Act](#) highlights the need for structural changes to support disabled individuals in Wales, and promotes inclusion to tackle socio-economic challenges, ensuring all voices are heard. However, the Act contains vague language, such as references to "prosperity" and "resilience", without indication of how these can be achieved. This Act has potential to help, but lacks measurability.

UK Government Reserved Powers

The UK Government has retained some legislative powers over Wales, including responsibility for the Equality and Human Rights Committee,

the Equality Act, and the Department of Work and Pensions, all of which have significant impacts for the lives of disabled people.

The Equality Act: The Equality Act is a UK Law introduced in 2010. While offering some protections, the Act and the Equality and Human Rights Committee (EHRC) do not offer robust accountability for companies and organisations that fail to include disabled people, and make their facilities and services accessible. Moreover, some elements of the Act are unhelpfully vague. For example, the term 'reasonable adjustments' in relation to working conditions allows for non-inclusive practice due to the subjective nature of what an employer can claim to be 'reasonable'.

Benefits: Benefits are overseen by the UK Government's Department for Work and Pensions. The manner in which disability benefits, such as Personal independence Payment (PIP) are assessed often creates tremendous stress and inadequate provision for disabled people. There is considerable concern over new changes to the criteria and process for receiving PIP which have been announced by the current government.

Cost of living: The cost-of-living crisis is having a disproportionate impact on disabled people in Wales, particularly when considered in parallel with disability benefits cuts. The Disability Wales report '[Barely Surviving](#)' is a key resource for understanding the current economic inequalities faced by disabled people.

Diverse Experiences of Disability

The experiences of disabled people differ significantly, and there are therefore diverse implications from policies and legal frameworks.

Differences to consider include:

- Impairments from birth, childhood, or acquired later in life
- Visible or invisible impairments
- Multiple or single impairments
- Socioeconomic circumstances and other intersectional characteristics.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an increase in people living with invisible disabilities. There is a need for public education and awareness about how some conditions' symptoms can fluctuate in severity and frequency to avoid harmful rhetoric and microaggressions - this is often referred to as dynamic disability.

There are a number of examples where blanket assumptions have negative consequences for disabled people. For example, many disabled people were uniformly classed as clinically vulnerable during lockdown, despite the nuances of different conditions, and the highly medical nature of this terminology. This blanket labelling also creates issues in research, where it can be difficult for researchers to obtain permission from ethics boards to include disabled voices in important studies. Blanket assumptions are also applied in schools, where disabled students are often assumed to not benefit from a challenging education, and blocked from taking exams.

Nothing about us without us

Disabled people must be actively involved in shaping policy and practice. “Nothing about us without us” is a core principle meaning that disabled people with lived experience of these systemic barriers must be fully involved in every level of evidence gathering and decision making, from the start. Co-production of research, legislation, planning and design can lead to Wales beginning to tackle existing barriers and preventing future ones. Crucially, this principle applies to all public services, not just those specifically targeted towards disabled people.

Businesses also need to be informed about how including disabled people in the early stages of planning a project or creating products benefit them. As well as their civic, ethical duty, companies have a financial incentive in including disabled voices and perspectives at every stage and level of planning and production. For example, within public transport and infrastructure, making additions or alterations (such as disabled toilets and ramps) belatedly is more expensive and disruptive than consulting, including, and considering disabled people in the initial planning stages.

The same principles apply to research, which is crucial for evidence-based policymaking. In research, the social model is insufficiently well-known, and disabled people are rarely included in studies on topics other than disability itself – in part due to standardised ethics forms using a medicalised and risk-based approach. Future policy needs to be informed by evidence from inclusive Welsh research, co-produced with disabled people. Inclusive and co-produced research takes time, which relies on a healthy research and innovation system.

Horizon Scanning: Threats

- Increasing prioritisation of economic growth above all other policy considerations may inhibit progress in policies promoting equity, and contribute to a regression towards the medical model of disability for reasons of cost saving. This has manifested in reforms to disability benefits that will impact disabled people’s access to employment.
- Increasing anti-woke rhetoric may damage rights and increase everyday discrimination against disabled people.
- US companies with UK offices cancelling DEI policies could impact working lives for disabled people.
- It is possible that there will be a slowing or even censoring of research into disability from the US, which has been an important source for evidence-based change.
- A lack of awareness within companies and organisations that disabled workers can contribute talent, skills and a valuable perspective.
- A lack of awareness among policy makers that disabled people contribute economically and culturally to society, using PIP benefits to access employment (and therefore pay income tax and national insurance).
- A lack of protection through existing policy and legislation such as The Equality Act 2010, where wording such as “equality” (rather than “equity”) and “reasonable adjustments” prioritise the employer.
- A lack of robust accountability for companies who do not enact existing policy and legislation, failing to make their work culture and infrastructure accessible.



Horizon Scanning: Opportunities

- In Wales, disabled people are increasingly involved in policymaking including consultations on how COVID-19 has impacted disabled people, and how these challenges can be approached effectively.
- The Disability Rights Taskforce and the resulting Disability Rights Action Plan for Wales has potential to prompt some positive change.
- The Social Model of Disability is becoming more widely known and understood.
- The Well-being of Future Generations Act offers opportunities to demand long-term thinking.
- Projects to support disabled people and promote equality continue to be developed from organisations such as Disability Wales (e.g. 'Access to Elected Office Fund Wales' and 'Shaping Our Lives & Communities, Planning Together') and Disability Arts Cymru (e.g. 'Crip Equip' and 'Ni Chawn Ein Dileu').
- Current research includes the University of South Wales' study on end-of-life care for those with learning disabilities, ongoing research on sport and disability at Disability Sport Wales, a study from the National Centre for Social Research on accessibility within research projects, and research on accessibility and the arts at Wrexham University.

Recommendations

For researchers:

1. Ensure disabled people are involved in setting the research agenda.
2. Work in partnership with disabled people to plan and undertake research.
3. Offer rigorous accountability where formal systems fail.
4. Advocate for and help to design an appropriately challenging education for diverse educational needs.
5. Advocate for dedicated funding for disability research.
6. Apply the Social Model of Disability, with meaningful co-production and an emancipatory approach in all research projects, not just within research on the topic of disability.
7. Gather and synthesise research to inform policymaking, rather than only producing novel research.

For policymakers:

1. Involve disabled people in consultations regarding local infrastructure, policy making, and cultural initiatives.
2. Demand robust accountability for inadequate application of The Equality Act 2010.
3. Raise awareness of the Social Model of Disability and its integration into all areas within society.

For the public:

1. Raise awareness of the Social Model of Disability and the day-to-day challenges faced by disabled people.
2. Learn about the lived experience of disability such as microaggressions and the varied forms of inaccessibility.
3. Raise awareness within companies and organisations of the financial benefits and the contributions disabled people make within employment.
4. Increase pressure for companies and organisations to follow and enact DEI legislation and policies such as The Equality Act 2010, with robust accountability if failing to do so.
5. Call for changes to the infrastructure and work culture within companies and organisations to increase accessibility.
6. Increase accountability when inequity and harmful rhetoric happens.

Authors

Chair

Ruth Northway FLSW, University of South Wales

Lead Authors

Rebecca Day, Bangor University

Emily Lowthian, Swansea University

Grace Thomas, Wrexham University

Expert Contributors

Louise Bosanquet, Wrexham University

James Patrick Cox, Swansea University and National Library of Wales

Hadar Elraz, Swansea University

Miranda Evans, Disability Wales

Bethan Hier, Swansea University

Alexandra Hird, Aberystwyth University and Surrey Coalition of Disabled People

Willow Holloway, Disability Wales and Autistic UK CIC

William Kay, Cardiff University

Wahida Kent, Swansea University

Catherine Knight, University of Bristol

Rachel Knight, Betsi Cadwalader University NHS Trust

Beth Pickard, University of South Wales

Shubha Sreenivas, Wrexham University

Marjorie Thomas, Cardiff Metropolitan University

Foteini Tseliou, Cardiff University

Rebecca Ward, University of South Wales

Kathryn Williams, Cardiff University

Samatha Williams, Learning Disability Wales

Timothy Wynn, Outside In

About us

The Learned Society of Wales

The Learned Society of Wales is Wales's national academy for arts and sciences. Its Fellowship brings together experts from across all academic fields and beyond. The Society uses this collective knowledge to promote research, inspire learning, and provide independent policy advice.

Early Career Researcher Network

The Early Career Researcher Network is an interdisciplinary network of researchers working across Wales who are in the early stages of their careers. The Network supports researchers to grow their research networks, engage in collaborative and interdisciplinary opportunities, receive training, and discover new ways of creating impact with research.