

DWP puts disabled people first: Thousands of health staff complete landmark autism and learning disabilities training

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Training tackles harmful assumptions about disability and ensures staff make practical, meaningful adjustments for the people they serve.

- Thousands of DWP healthcare professionals completed Oliver McGowan training to better support autistic people and those with learning disabilities as they navigate the benefits system.
- Marking Autism Awareness Month, the milestone forms part of the Government's broader commitment to putting disabled people at its heart.

Over 4,000 DWP healthcare professionals have completed part of training designed to transform how the government supports autistic people and those with learning disabilities, as Autism Awareness Month draws to a close.

The training is named after Oliver McGowan, a young man with autism and a learning disability who died in 2016 after being given antipsychotic medication against his and his family's wishes. It was established following a campaign by his family to ensure that staff working with autistic people and those with learning disabilities have the knowledge and skills to support them safely.

The accomplishment is a clear demonstration of the government's commitment to putting disabled people at the heart of everything it does.

The training tackles "diagnostic overshadowing" - where symptoms are wrongly attributed to a person's disability rather than investigated properly - ensuring people receive the right support at the right time.

It also gives staff practical tools to make meaningful reasonable adjustments for people with learning disabilities and autism as they navigate the benefits system. These include:

- More time in assessments, reducing anxiety and allowing people to communicate clearly and confidently.
- Simpler, clearer communications from Jobcentres, making information accessible to people who may find complex language difficult to process.
- Sensory-aware Jobcentre environments, ensuring spaces feel safe and manageable for people who may find busy or loud environments overwhelming.

Minister for Social Security and Disability, Sir Stephen Timms, said:

Oliver McGowan's story is a powerful reminder of why services must understand the people they serve.

This training is part of how we achieve that, equipping our staff to treat every autistic person and everyone with a learning disability as an individual, and to provide support

that genuinely works for them.

We're determined to break down barriers for disabled people, and to put autistic people and those with learning disabilities at the very heart of our decisions and direction.

I pay tribute to the hard and brave work of the McGowan family in Oliver's memory.

This milestone is part of the Government's wider commitment to ensuring disabled people's voices and lived experience shape policy.

The Independent Disability Advisory Panel - ten experts with lived experience of disability and long-term health conditions - have been appointed to advise on the design and delivery of health and disability policy.

Clinical Author at DWP:

Hearing directly from people with lived experience made this training memorable and practical. It reinforced that autism and learning disability affect people in very different ways, and that taking time to listen- to the individual, and to those who know them best - makes a real difference.

These principles are now reflected in the guidance I develop for health professionals carrying out assessments on behalf of across DWP.

I believe this training helps support safer, more person-centred assessments and helps us get it right for autistic people and people with a learning disability.

The training is one part of wider support the Department is investing into better support people with autism.

Earlier this year, DWP funded Acas to deliver free neurodivergence masterclasses for small and medium-sized employers - with more than 1,800 employer representatives attended, building the knowledge and confidence to recruit and support neurodivergent staff effectively.

Alongside this, the Government also legislated to give benefit claimants the legal right to try work without the immediate risk of losing their benefits - a significant and practical change for neurodivergent people navigating the employment system.

Separately, an expert academic panel has examined the specific barriers neurodivergent people face in the workplace, with its recommendations under active consideration.

Autism Awareness Month serves as an important moment to reflect on progress, and to reaffirm this Government's determination to ensure autistic people and those with learning disabilities are supported, heard, and treated with the respect they deserve.

Jon Sparkes, OBE, Chief Executive of learning disability Mencap, said:

Increasing benefit assessors' understanding of learning disability is an important step towards a more accessible and inclusive benefits system. The training they've received has the potential to make a real difference in helping them to communicate more clearly,

recognise individual needs and make reasonable adjustments.

People with a learning disability need to be properly understood and receive the level of support that's right for them to navigate the benefits assessment process.

This training is already making a difference in health and social care teams, and we hope it will now make another public service more accessible to people with a learning disability so that they can live their lives to the full.

Further Information

- The Oliver McGowan Training is named after Oliver McGowan, whose death in 2016 was found to be potentially avoidable. His mother Paula McGowan OBE campaigned for it to become law under the Health and Care Act 2022.
- 231 active internal DWP healthcare professionals have completed part of the training. 4,168 active external provider healthcare professionals have completed part of the training.
- "Active" is defined as having an active employment status, excluding those on long-term sickness, parental leave or similar absences.
- Some HCPs included in the figures are currently in their onboarding phase with supplier organisations and are not yet undertaking assessments.
- All healthcare professionals independently undertaking health assessments are expected to have completed all mandatory training modules, including Oliver McGowan.
- The Connect to Work programme will provide tailored support for 300,000 disabled people and those facing complex barriers into work over the next five years. The Government is investing £1 billion a year in employment support for disabled people by the end of the decade.
- About Mencap: There are 1.5 million people with a learning disability in the UK and they deserve to live their life to the full. So Mencap supports people with a learning disability to succeed in the things that matter to them. To ensure that people with a learning disability are not left behind at any stage of their life, they campaign for a fairer society; work with families and partners to build inclusive communities; and deliver person-centred services.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/dwp-puts-disabled-people-first-thousands-of-health-staff-complete-landmark-autism-and-learning-disabilities-training>