

NUJ submission to Timms Review of Personal Independence Payment: call for evidence

About the NUJ

The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) is the voice for journalism and journalists in the UK and Ireland. It was founded in 1907 and has 21,000 members working in broadcasting, newspapers, news agencies, magazines, book publishing, public relations, photography, videography and digital media.

The NUJ represents numerous disabled workers who are contracted, freelancers and self-employed as well as some disabled people who are unemployed or on long-term sick leave. The union has a Disabled Members' Council (DMC) that meets regularly, engaging with issues such as lack of disability representation in the media and discrimination in employment practices.

The NUJ is affiliated to the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and promotes the social model of disability, which recognises that people are disabled by societal barriers – such as inaccessible working practices, environments, and attitudes. The NUJ is not affiliated to any political party.

The role and purpose of PIP

Personal Independence Payment (PIP) exists to support disabled people with the extra costs of living they experience. These extra costs arise due to the lack of access and inclusion for disabled people in day-to-day life and services that do not meet needs.

The conclusions and recommendations of the UN Committee on the Rights of Disabled People in 2024 reiterated the UK government's "grave and systemic violation" of disabled people's human rights.

Disabled people still do not have equal access to accessible and inclusive education, employment, housing, transport, leisure and other services.

Healthcare services are frequently not fit for purpose, resulting in delays with diagnosis and treatment, negatively impacting on health and wellbeing.

PIP is vital for covering extra costs of living, including supplementing medical care, social care, paying for assistive aids and providing accessible transport options. It is often a qualifying factor or gateway to access other forms of support and services, including Carers' Allowance.

PIP is not a work-related benefit. Although PIP can support those in employment by removing barriers outside the working environment, it is concerning to witness narratives that conflate PIP with work.

Experiences of claiming PIP

NUJ members have used PIP and personal funds to pay for specialist wheelchairs not provided by the NHS or Access to Work. PIP is also used to cover the costs of assistive technologies used within the home, that are not provided for by other grants or services.

Members have also reported using PIP to pay for BSL interpreters to access volunteering opportunities or community events, not covered by Access to Work and not funded by organisers of events.

PIP is often necessary to cover additional costs of food, electricity, heating and travel as required to protect health and wellbeing.

Self-employed members whose health fluctuates may find themselves without income during periods of ill health. Universal Credit is frequently not flexible enough to address significant fluctuations. Universal Credit and other forms of means-tested support may deny disabled people vital support and independence if household income is too high, and essential outgoings are not considered.

Feedback from NUJ members consistently highlighted acute concerns over the potential loss of PIP. For example a community radio journalist who uses PIP to cover mobility aids, transport costs, and health and wellbeing support said that losing the payments would force them to choose between their work and their health: “I would have to sacrifice some of my diet or assistance to stay mobile and continue doing what I love.” Similarly, a senior editor who needs PIP to manage chronic pain said that losing payments could force them to become housebound and leave full-time employment. “It is vital for me because it helps with some of the extra costs of being disabled and helps me maintain my independence”, said another member.

Eligibility, fairness and equity in the award of PIP

NUJ disabled members frequently highlighted onerous and “soul-destroying” PIP application processes that drain time when they could be working, recuperating or relaxing. Some said that they were initially refused PIP payments only for this decision to be overturned following a lengthy mandatory reconsideration process.

Others said that the application process itself is inaccessible with the Department for Work and Pensions giving unreasonable deadlines to return forms and only allowing hand-written or printed documentation. The welfare system is complex and hard to navigate. Anyone who needs support should be informed of their entitlements and be able to access them without an arduous application process.

Changing context and the impact on PIP

Changes to the criteria, purpose and processes relating to PIP should recognise the multiple systemic barriers that continue to exclude disabled people and remove the level of choice and control they have over their lives.

The NUJ opposes any changes that remove autonomy for disabled people. We call for any changes to PIP to be rights-based and rooted in the principles of independent living and the social model of disability. The application and assessment system should be accessible, treat disabled people with dignity and reflect additional costs based on actual needs.

Using narrowly defined activity descriptors is reductive, humiliating and fails to take a holistic view of the barriers disabled people experience relating to housing, transport, healthcare, community participation, discrimination or abuse.

Any changes to the Work Capability Assessment or the health element of Universal Credit, should not involve merging this with PIP since both serve a fundamentally different purpose.

Disabled people are the experts in their own lives and support must be tailored to individual need, with a recognition that needs can fluctuate and may not always be predictable. Disability is not age-limited and appropriate support needs to be available to disabled people throughout their lives.

The NUJ calls on the Timms Review to recognise the multiple ways that disabled people's rights, access and inclusion are being diminished. It is impossible to review PIP without considering the wider environment impacting on disabled people:

- Over fifteen years of cuts to the services that mitigate or prevent ill health or impairment.
- Cuts to budgets resulting in loss of access.
- Significant cuts and delays to Access to Work support risk pushing disabled people out of suitable employment and into poverty.

- Changes to the Motability Scheme will increase costs and reduce access to vital activities including attending hospital appointments, work, leisure and wellbeing opportunities.
- Lack of advocacy services creating a severe detriment to disabled people both when applying for PIP or other forms of support, and when challenging discrimination and exclusion by service providers.
- Increased negative, misleading rhetoric about disabled people and social security claimants contributing to a hostile environment that exacerbates exclusion, mental distress and trauma.

The NUJ supports the view outlined in the Disability Rights UK submission to the call for evidence:

“It is the duty of any government to remove the social, economic and environmental barriers that prevent Disabled people from living with dignity, equality and independence. A cash payment, which is not subject to employment status or a means test, is therefore vital in both reducing inequality, preventing more Disabled people living in poverty and in turn often experiencing a worsening of their health condition or impairment.”

Without PIP, many disabled journalists and media workers would not be able to afford to live and therefore would not be able to work. The NUJ joins disabled organisations and the wider trade union movement in calling adequate social security support that is rooted in the experiences of disabled people and the social model of disability.