



Which parts of the UK are best and worst for employment outcomes for people with disabilities?

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Background

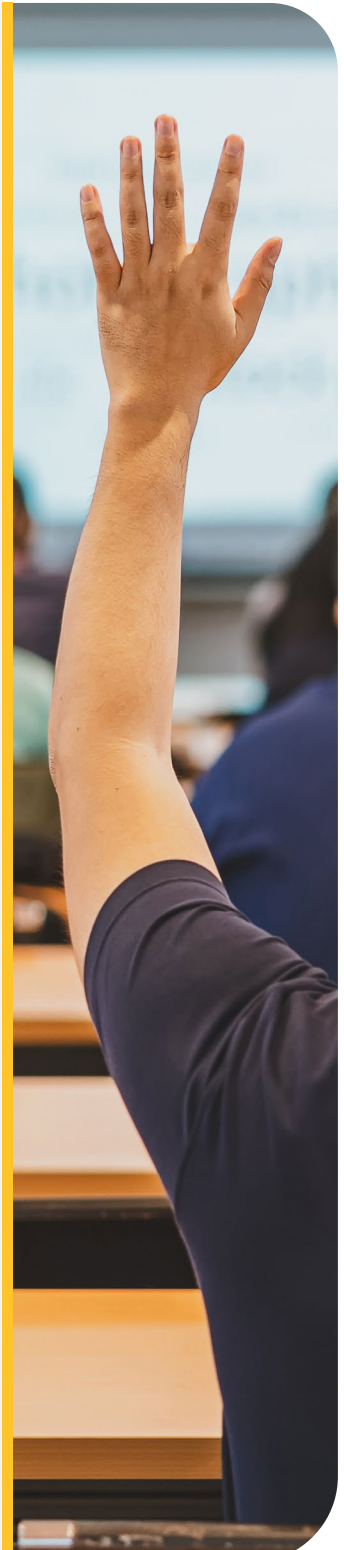
Geographical divides in health and disability in the UK have been well documented and explored in existing research. Data has pointed to a north-south divide, with poorer health, disability, and care outcomes seen in the North of England and Wales (ONS Analysis, 2023).

When observed through the lens of economic performance, regional inequalities have been shown to be even more stark, and expanding. Concerningly, the UK has a large and increasing productivity problem, with a fall in productivity growth since 2007 larger than any other G7 country except Italy (ONS, 2022). In the context of these economic challenges, the current Labour government has set out plans to reform employment policy and invest in the development of skills through Skills England (DfE, 2024), and its plans to Get Britain Working (UK Government, 2024). This focus on improving the productivity of the UK workforce extends to people with disabilities, and their need to productively and meaningfully contribute to the UK economy.

While national employment policies (Caveney and Jones, 2024) provide protections for the inclusion of disabled people in the workforce, local economic conditions, industry compositions, and employment practices contribute to distinct regional disparities in general levels of employment (Stansbury et al, 2023). Understanding these disparities is crucial for identifying areas where disabled individuals face heightened employment barriers, and where best practices might be leveraged to enhance employment outcomes.

Geographical variations in work opportunities, rurality, and access to amenities and services (such as transport links and healthcare) may all be contributing factors worthy of study. Our hypothesis in undertaking this research is that these geographical variations may link to disparities in the employment outcomes for people with disabilities in the UK. It may be that not only employment rates, but wellbeing and access to fair pay too, are more closely linked to local and regional characteristics than they are to other factors.

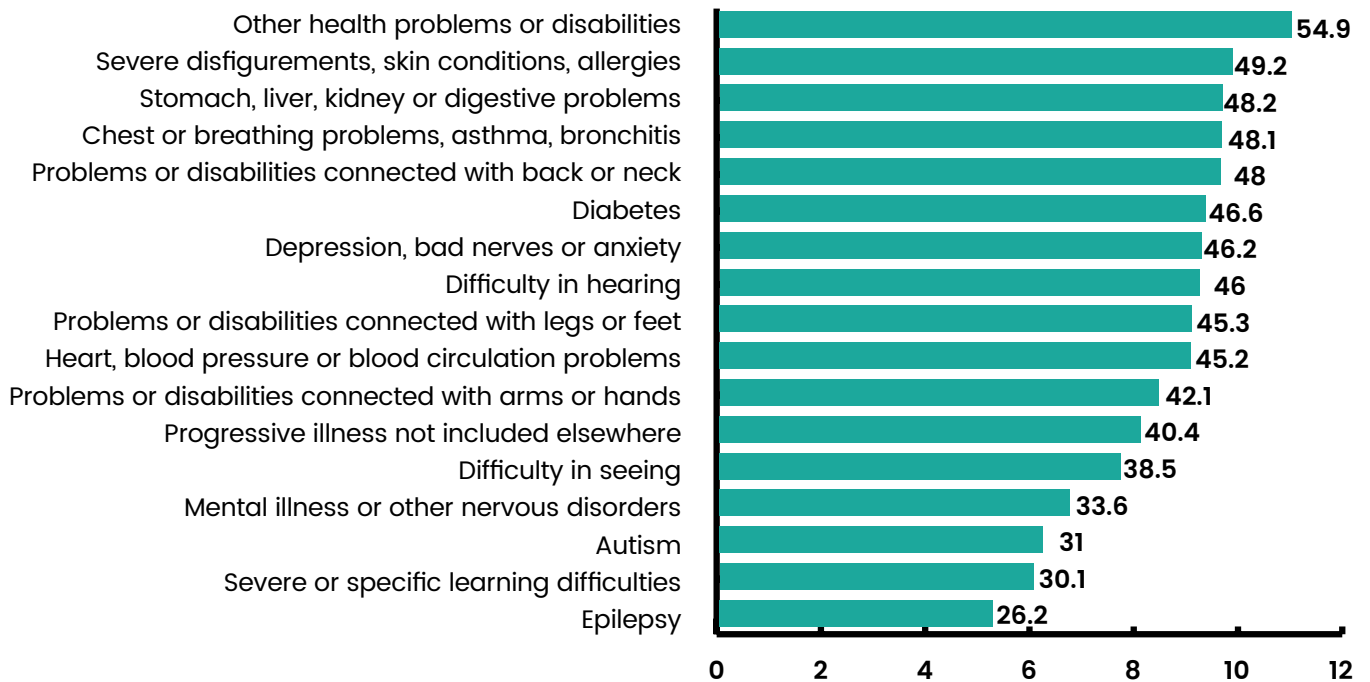
This paper provides an analysis of regional variations in employment outcomes, drawing on key indicators such as employment rates, pay disparities, industry and occupational profiles, and overall wellbeing as self-reported by individuals with disabilities. Our findings demonstrate that the employment opportunities available to individuals with disabilities in the UK vary significantly by region. We explore the relationship between geography and disabled people's employment prospects at the national, regional, and local authority levels, to explore underlying factors influencing these trends, and develop recommendations to reduce disparities and improve employment accessibility across the country.





Health conditions and employment rates

Employment rates for people with disabilities varies by condition. Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) data reveals a total of 50.5% of those with musculoskeletal conditions were in employment in 2023–24, compared to 45.1% of individuals with mental health conditions (DWP, 2024). It is important to note that whilst individuals with severe or specific learning difficulties are included in the data, data on people with wider special educational needs is absent, indicating an area where more research is needed. The below chart outlines the percentage of people in employment by health condition.





Our approach

This analysis draws upon multiple open-source datasets, and in most cases, data has been taken from the 2023–24 period. The DWP dataset, *Employment of Disabled People 2024*, serves as the principal source of data, offering employment rates and self-reported wellbeing scores at the local authority level, with the exception of Northern Ireland.

We sourced pay gap data from the *Raw Disability Pay Gaps, UK* dataset, published by the Office for National Statistics through the Annual Population Survey. Additional data from the Annual Population Survey has been utilised to analyse employment distribution across different industries and occupations at the local authority level.

We gathered NHS wait time data from NHS England, Public Health Scotland, StatsWales, and the Department for Health Northern Ireland. Specifically, data from the Consultant-led Referral to Treatment Waiting Times Rules and Guidance report for 2023–24 has been analysed to explore the relationship between healthcare accessibility and employment outcomes for disabled individuals.

Additionally, data from the Department for Transport (2019) has been used to measure travel times to employment centres across local authorities, allowing for an assessment of geographic accessibility to job opportunities. While this dataset predates the primary employment data used in this study, it remains the most recent release available.

Finally, urban-rural classification data (2021) from national sources in England, Wales, and Scotland has been analysed to assess the relationship between rurality and employment outcomes. This classification enables a deeper understanding of whether geographic remoteness presents a significant barrier to employment for disabled individuals.

Key findings

Stark regional variations in disability employment rates

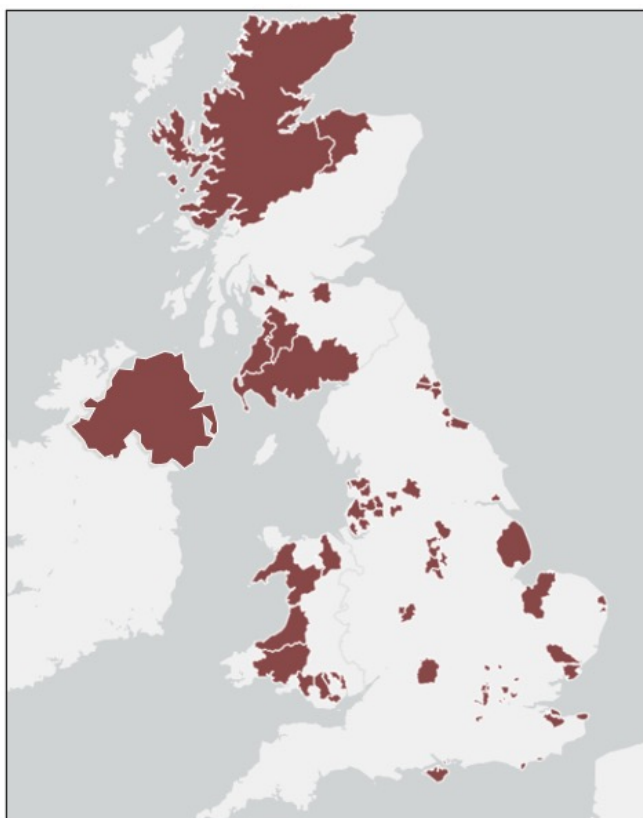
The data highlights a stark national divide in disability employment rates in the UK. Northern Ireland, Wales, and Scotland all demonstrate low disability employment rates in contrast with much of England. Of all the regions in the UK, Northern Ireland has the lowest disability employment rate at 38.3%. It also has the highest disability employment gap (41.7%), which measures the difference in the employment rates of disabled and non-disabled individuals. Wales and Scotland also exhibit high disability employment gaps, suggesting systemic barriers to employment.

Within England, a significant north-south divide in employment outcomes is clearly seen. The South West of England has the highest disability employment rate at 59.2%, whereas London demonstrates the lowest employment gap of 23.4%. The South of England, more broadly, shows stronger employment outcomes for disabled individuals. While this suggests that economic conditions and industry distribution play a role, further exploration of workplace accessibility and employer attitudes in these regions is necessary.

This north-south divide reflects broader economic trends, as the southern regions of England tend to benefit from stronger service-based economies, higher levels of investment, and a concentration of industries that are more accessible to disabled workers. The presence of financial services, professional and technical occupations, and creative industries in these areas appears to facilitate higher employment rates for disabled workers. Conversely, much of the economy of northern England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland have traditionally relied on manufacturing, industrial, and public sector employment, which may pose additional accessibility challenges.

Our analysis reveals that certain pockets of the UK contain multiple neighbouring local authorities with particularly low disability employment rates, effectively creating 'deserts' of low disability employment. These clusters of poor employment outcomes (where the average disability employment rate is only 45%) are predominantly found in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and parts of northern England, such as East Derbyshire, Lancashire, Merseyside, and the North East. By contrast, almost all the local authorities with high disabilities employment (in which the average disability employment rate is 67%) are found in the Midlands and southern England. The only exception to this is the Ribble Valley and surrounding area in Lancashire.

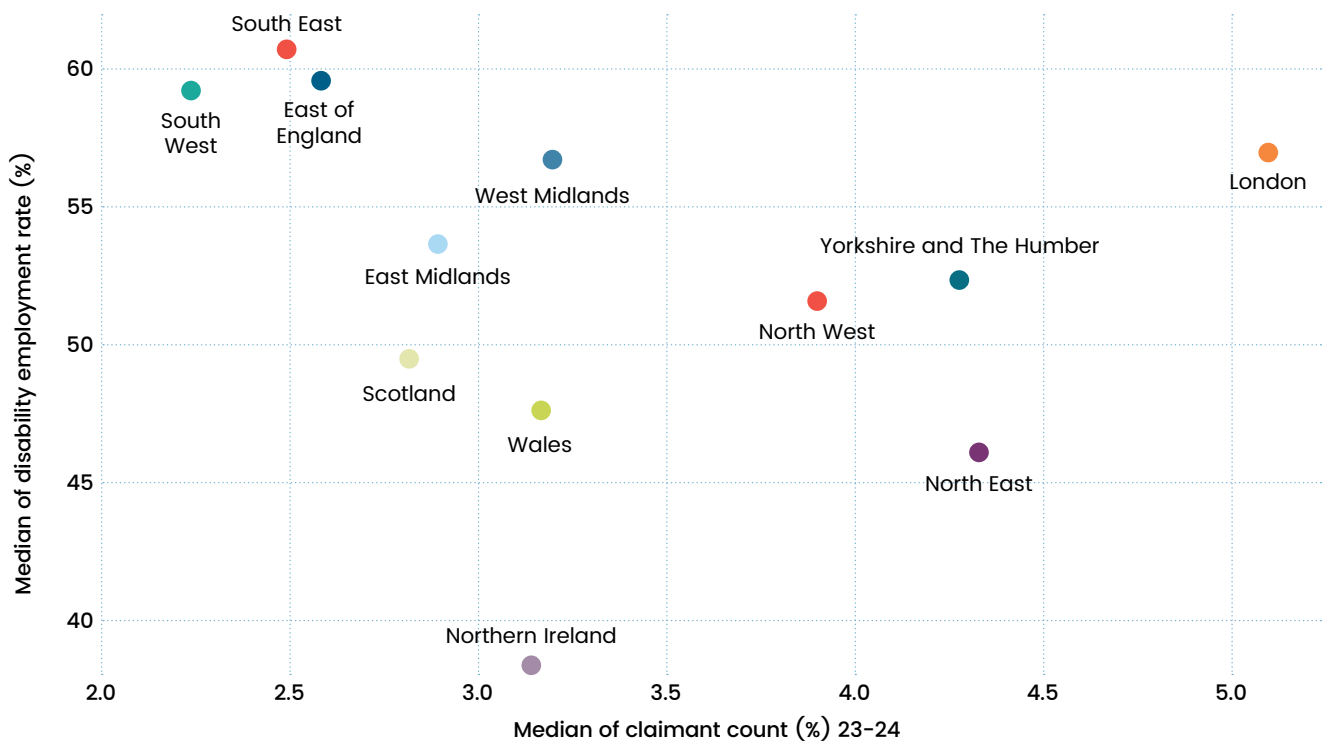
UK local authorities with the lowest disability employment rates



UK local authorities with the highest disability employment rates



The presence of these employment 'deserts' raises concerns about the effectiveness of regional employment support programmes, and suggests the need for targeted interventions to address geographical disparities. We considered the possibility that disability employment rates are low in these areas because overall disability rates are high; but further analysis of regional claimant counts fails to conclusively link them to disability employment rates. Although the South West, South East and East of England have both low claimant counts and higher disability employment, London bucks this trend with a much higher claimant count than other regions, including these pockets of low disability employment. Moreover, beyond England, none of the local authorities in Scotland or Wales experiencing high disability employment are in the top 20% of those with the highest claimant count. This implies that low disability employment is not purely a result of low employment overall.



There is a need for further research to better understand the reasons for these areas demonstrating particularly high disability employment rates across multiple neighbouring local authorities.

Differences in industry and occupation

A closer look at industry profiles within these high- and low- employment rate local authorities reveals notable differences in the sectors where disabled individuals are employed. Those with higher disability employment rates tend to have a greater proportion of their workforce (including both disabled and non-disabled workers) in industries such as transport and communication, banking, finance and insurance, professional, scientific and technical activities, and arts and recreation. In the regions with highest employment, 42% of workers are in these sectors, compared to just 26% in regions with the lowest disability employment rates.

This suggests that high-employment regions benefit from economies that provide more roles requiring cognitive and communication skills, which can be more accessible for individuals with certain disabilities. The prevalence of service-based industries in these areas also reflects greater opportunities for remote and flexible working, which has been shown to improve employment accessibility for disabled individuals.

Conversely, local authorities with lower employment rates for disabled individuals have higher employment rates in manufacturing, public administration, education and health, distribution, and hotels and restaurants. In these regions, 67.2% of the workforce are engaged in these sectors, compared to 53.5% in the regions with the highest employment. Many of these roles involve physically demanding work or rigid shift structures, which can act as barriers to entry for disabled individuals. This indicates that regional industrial compositions play a crucial role in shaping employment prospects for individuals with disabilities, and highlights the importance of workplace adaptations to accommodate disabled employees in these sectors.



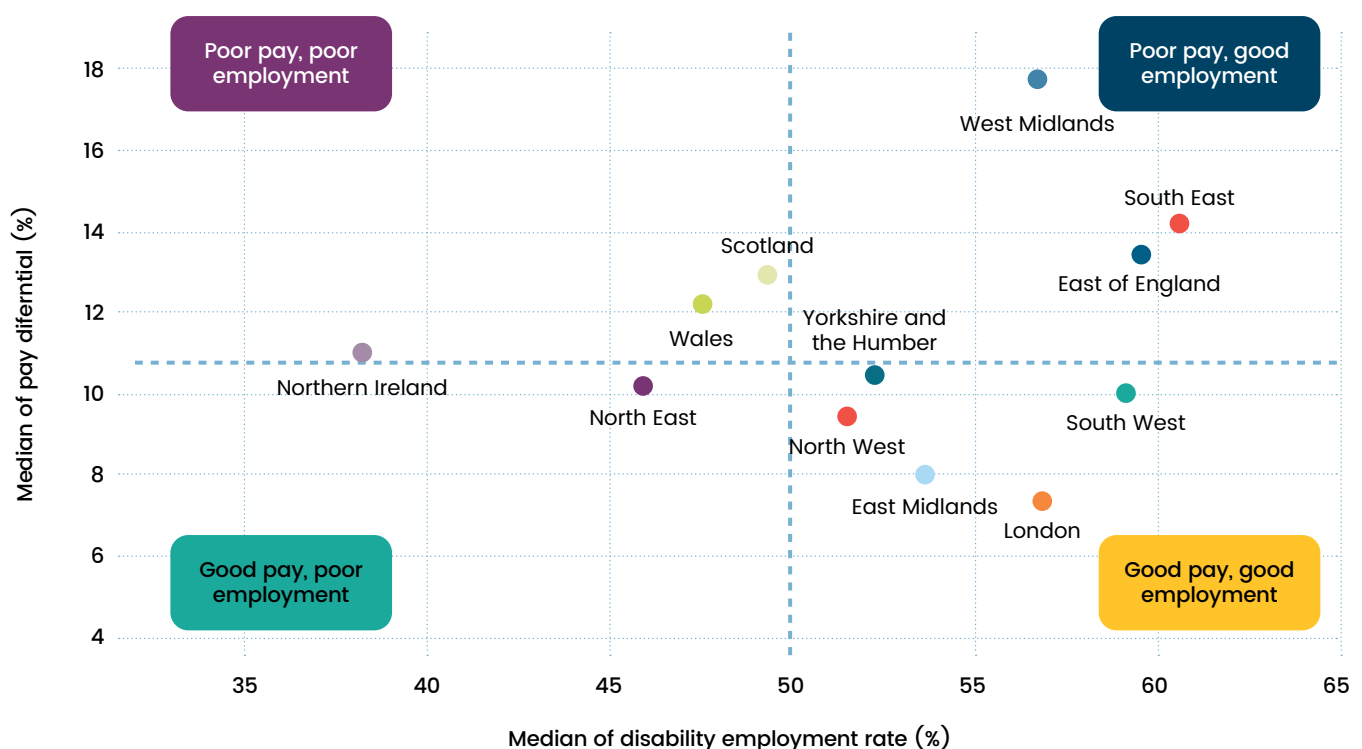
We can also observe employment by occupation. In local authorities with high employment, over 51% of working individuals are in professional occupations or management roles. Meanwhile, in those with low disability employment, only 33% hold these positions, with a higher concentration of workers in skilled trades, personal service occupations, sales and customer service, and process, plant and machine operative roles. The greater presence of professional and managerial occupations in high-employment areas aligns with the notion that disabled workers fare better in regions where knowledge-based industries dominate. In a separate working paper ('Wellbeing and fair pay, or plentiful work? The dilemmas facing disabled people in the world of work'), we have also drawn attention to the fact that disabled workers are underrepresented in professional and managerial occupations. This corroborates the notion that disability employment rates are higher where there is greater work availability in these occupations.

Pay disparities across regions

The disability pay gap, or the difference in earnings between disabled and non-disabled workers, also varies significantly across the UK. London has the lowest disability pay gap at 7.4%, while the West Midlands experiences the highest at 17.7%. Notably, the East Midlands performs significantly better than the West Midlands, with a pay gap of only 8.0%.

The geographical discrepancies in pay disparities raise important questions about workplace inclusivity, career progression opportunities, and employer attitudes towards disabled workers. While London and the East Midlands show better pay equity, this may reflect a combination of better local employment support, greater employer accountability, and industries that are more likely to implement inclusive hiring and promotion practices. Conversely, in regions like the West Midlands, lower wages and fewer opportunities for advancement may contribute to wider pay disparities. The definitive reasons for these discrepancies have not been uncovered through this study, and are to be further explored.

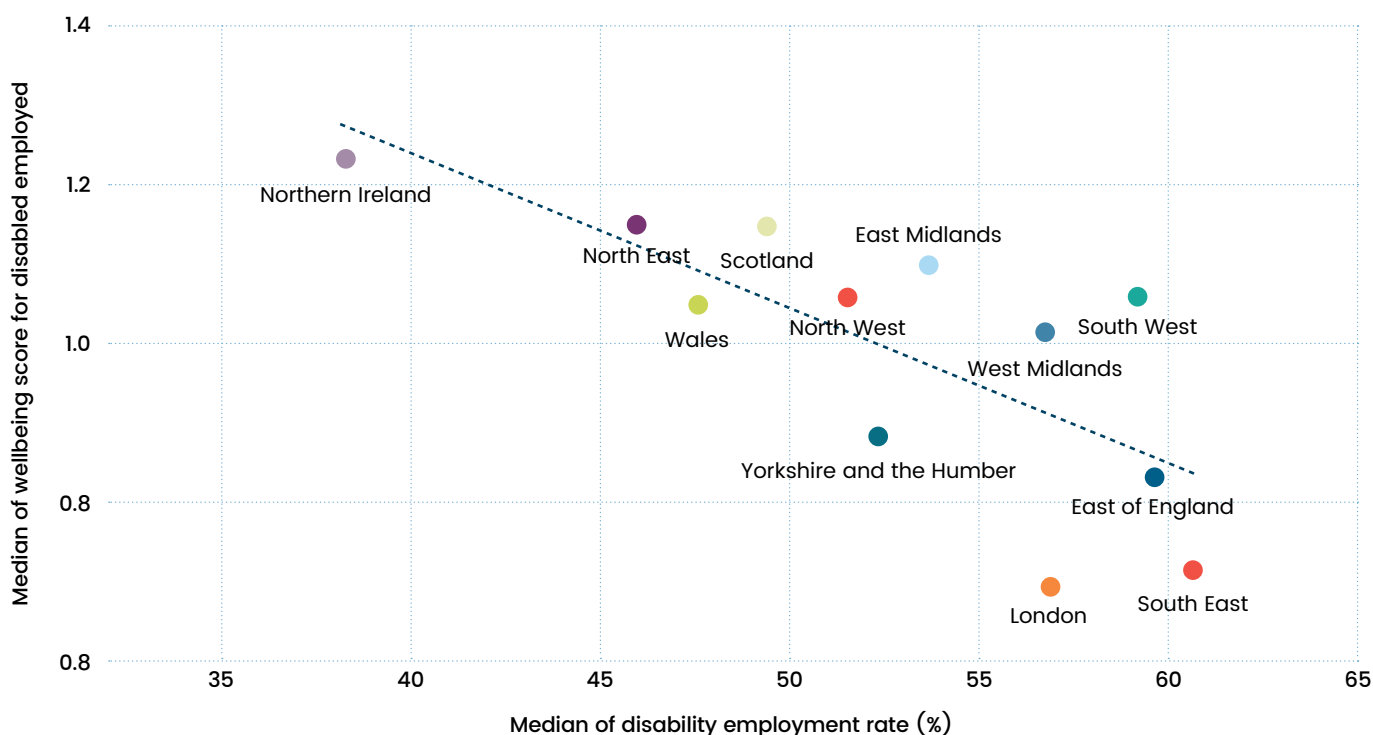
When employment rates and pay disparities are considered together, London, the East Midlands, and the South West emerge as regions offering the best overall employment outcomes for disabled individuals, combining high employment rates with relatively low pay gaps. Conversely, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland perform poorly on both measures, indicating both reduced employment opportunities and lower pay equity for disabled workers.





Wellbeing and employment outcomes

A counterintuitive finding from the data is that wellbeing among employed disabled individuals is highest in regions where disability employment is lowest. For instance, Northern Ireland, which has the lowest disability employment rate, reports the highest wellbeing scores among employed disabled workers. By contrast, London and the South East, which have the highest disability employment rates, report some of the lowest wellbeing scores.



This pattern raises questions about the quality of employment and workplace experiences of disabled individuals in regions with high employment rates. While employment is an important metric of social and economic inclusion, this finding suggests that the nature of employment, workplace culture, job security, and work-life balance require further scrutiny. It may indicate that in areas where employment rates are higher, disabled individuals may be entering workplaces that are not fully inclusive or accommodating, leading to increased stress and lower overall wellbeing. Conversely, in regions with lower employment rates, those who do find employment may be in more accommodating environments where workplace adaptations and support systems are better implemented. It may also be the case that in regions where disability employment is already low, individuals are highly sensitive to the benefits of employment, which is reflected in a boosted wellbeing.

The relationship between employment rates and wellbeing suggests that future policy should not only aim to increase employment but also improve the quality of employment opportunities available to disabled individuals. This includes ensuring adequate workplace adjustments, promoting disability-inclusive work cultures, and providing mental health support to disabled employees.



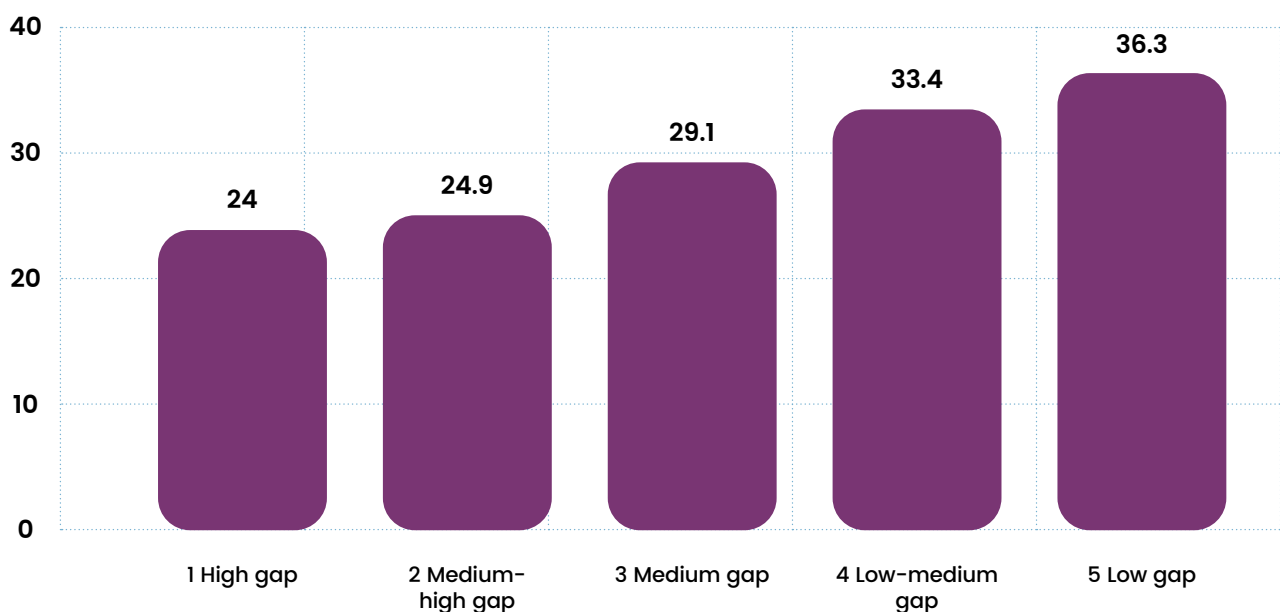
Further correlations of interest

Examining disability employment patterns at the local authority level reveals several notable correlations that provide deeper insights into regional disparities. One significant finding is the strong negative correlation between the disability employment rate and the disability employment gap. This means that as the employment rate for disabled individuals increases within a local authority, the gap between disabled and non-disabled employment rates narrows. Areas with lower employment rates for disabled individuals tend to have a much wider employment gap, reinforcing the structural inequalities that limit opportunities for disabled workers.

NHS wait times and the disability employment gap: Another critical correlation is between NHS wait times and the disability employment gap. NHS wait time data, specifically referral-to-treatment times, can act as a proxy for healthcare access and quality. The analysis suggests that in local authorities with higher disability employment gaps, where disabled individuals are significantly less likely to be employed compared to non-disabled individuals, average NHS wait times are longer, averaging 17.3 weeks. In contrast, in areas with lower disability employment gaps, NHS wait times tend to be shorter, averaging around 16.0 weeks. This suggests that access to timely healthcare may play a role in determining employment opportunities for disabled individuals, as prolonged wait times could contribute to extended periods of economic inactivity due to health-related barriers.

Work-from-home opportunities and employment outcomes: The ability to work from home also shows a positive correlation with better employment outcomes for disabled individuals. Data from the 2021 UK Census indicates that local authorities with lower disability employment gaps also tend to have a higher percentage of workers engaged in remote work. In areas with the lowest employment gaps, over 36% of individuals reported working from home, compared to only 24% in areas with the highest disability employment gaps. This highlights the importance of flexible work arrangements in improving employment prospects for disabled individuals, particularly in industries where remote work is viable.

Median work from home (%) by disability employment gap





Rurality and disability employment: An analysis of rurality and disability employment suggests no strong correlation between the two. Urban, mixed, and rural local authorities exhibit similar disability employment rates, ranging between 54% and 57%. This finding indicates that while physical accessibility may pose challenges in some rural areas, the primary employment barriers for disabled individuals are more likely linked to industry compositions, employer practices, and workplace inclusivity rather than geographical classification.

Travel time to employment centres and disability employment: When we looked at the relationship between employment rates and travel time to larger employment centres (hiring more than 100 people), we observed very little correlation of note. We specifically sought to understand whether living within less than a 15 minutes' walk or bus journey would be positively linked to employment rates for disabled people. The lack of a meaningful correlation is less surprising when one considers that nearly 50% of disabled people work in small businesses, and further reinforces the previous finding that being located in an urban centre (and close to many employment centres) is not necessarily linked to better employment outcomes.





Limitations and recommendations for future research

While this analysis provides valuable insights into regional disparities in disability employment outcomes, several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the data highlights correlations but does not establish causality. Future research should explore underlying factors driving these regional differences in employment outcomes. Understanding better the reasons for disability employment rates being particularly low in areas where unemployment is not strikingly high (such as parts of Scotland, Wales, and parts of the North West of England) is a clear recommendation for new research. Such an exploration could require a multi-method approach, incorporating both quantitative analysis of labour market data and qualitative insights from local employers and job seekers with disabilities.

The research would also benefit from understanding employer practices and perspectives in more detail. Further qualitative research is needed to understand employer attitudes and hiring practices across different regions, and whether there is significant regional variation and cultural variation within the employment attitudes of specific types of occupation and industries. Understanding how workplace culture, implicit biases, and recruitment policies shape employment opportunities for disabled individuals could offer actionable insights for targeted interventions.

From an analytical perspective, this study presents a snapshot of employment conditions, largely based on 2023–24 data; however, a long-term analysis of trends would provide more robust insights into the impact of policy changes over time. A longitudinal study examining employment outcomes for disabled individuals over multiple years would allow researchers to assess the effectiveness of different policy measures, economic fluctuations, and societal shifts on employment prospects.

Another important area for future research is the role of education and skills development in shaping employment outcomes. Investigating the extent to which disabled individuals have access to vocational training, higher education, and lifelong learning opportunities across different regions would provide a clearer picture of the barriers to career advancement and economic mobility. Finally, additional research could explore the effectiveness of regional employment support schemes, disability inclusion initiatives, and workplace accommodations in improving employment rates and job retention. By identifying best practices and assessing the effectiveness of existing interventions, future studies could contribute to evidence-based policy recommendations aimed at reducing the disability employment gap across the UK.



Conclusions

This research highlights substantial regional disparities in employment outcomes for disabled individuals across the UK. While London and the South of England tend to exhibit stronger employment rates and lower pay gaps, Northern Ireland, Wales, and Scotland demonstrate some of the poorest employment prospects. These disparities are shaped by a combination of economic structures, industry compositions, occupational opportunities, and employer dynamics not explored through this research. Regional variations also point to the impact of policy differences, investment strategies, and broader socioeconomic trends on the ability of disabled individuals to access employment.

A critical takeaway from this analysis is that improving employment outcomes for disabled individuals requires a multifaceted approach. Efforts must extend beyond increasing job numbers to ensuring job quality, career progression opportunities, and equitable wages. Regions with high employment rates but lower wellbeing scores for disabled workers indicate that employment alone does not equate to positive workplace experiences. This underscores the need for employers and policymakers to prioritise workplace inclusivity, mental health support, and long-term career development.

Furthermore, regional inequalities in healthcare access, particularly as measured by NHS wait times, suggest that employment outcomes for disabled individuals cannot be viewed in isolation from broader public service provisions. Ensuring that disabled individuals receive timely and effective healthcare support is an essential component of fostering sustainable employment participation. Likewise, the strong correlation between work-from-home opportunities and better employment outcomes for disabled individuals highlights the growing importance of flexible work arrangements in shaping inclusive labour markets.

Addressing these challenges will require coordinated policy interventions at national, regional, and local levels. Investment should be made in regional job creation programmes, and policies must support industries that foster disability-inclusive hiring practices, and promote fair pay structures to reduce wage disparities. Additionally, employers must take an active role in creating accessible workplaces, ensuring reasonable adjustments, and fostering an inclusive culture that supports disabled employees beyond mere compliance with legal requirements. Ultimately, a successful strategy for improving disability employment outcomes across the UK must be holistic, evidence-driven, and adaptable to regional contexts.

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