No Compromises:
Supporting people with MS to thrive in and out of work

Aman Navani, Asli Atay and Jon Fitzmaurice

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About The Work Foundation

The Work Foundation at Lancaster University is a think tank focused on improving working lives across the UK through applied research and new ideas. For over a century, we have worked to break down the barriers individuals and communities face in accessing good work.

We believe everyone should have access to secure, rewarding, and high-quality work. By engaging directly with workers, employers, policymakers, and leading academics, we deliver rigorous applied research to tackle structural inequalities in the labour market and improve working lives across the UK.

We are part of Lancaster University's Management School, and work with a range of partners and organisations across our research programmes.

About The MS Society

The MS Society is the UK's largest charity for people living with MS. We are here for everyone living with MS – to provide practical help today, and the hope of a cure tomorrow. We play a leading role in research. We fight for better treatment and care. We let people with MS know they are not alone and offer advice and support to help them.

Citation

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Permission to share

Respondent anonymity

To maintain respondent anonymity, names of respondents have been changed throughout this report.

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Executive summary

There are an estimated 150,000 people living with multiple sclerosis (MS) in the UK, which is one in 400 people. MS is a condition that affects the central nervous system and can cause problems with movement, thinking and feeling.

MS is more likely to impact women and people are commonly diagnosed with MS during their 30s and 40s, at the peak of their working lives. It is a legally recognised disability under the Equality Act 2010 and people's experience of MS can change over time and affect individuals in different ways.

The UK Government has committed to increasing the employment rate and supporting disabled people and those with long-term conditions to remain in work. However, there is currently limited evidence on the employment experiences of people with conditions like MS. It is, therefore, essential that the views and experiences of people with MS are gathered and used to inform policy and employer interventions.

In partnership with the MS Society, the Work Foundation at Lancaster University has undertaken a study to improve the understanding of the employment experiences of people with MS. It analyses existing literature, secondary data and a survey of 1,125 people with MS in the UK and highlights the enablers and barriers to staying, progressing and thriving in work.

MS impacts people's ability to work, and for some leaving work is the right thing to do

The vast majority of people with MS (96%) who participated in the study reported that their MS has had an impact on their ability to work.

Participants reported that the symptoms of MS can make commuting, navigating workplace environments and completing certain tasks challenging. For nearly a quarter of respondents (24%), MS had such a severe effect on them that they felt unable to work at all. Managing the symptoms of MS such as cognitive changes and restricted mobility can itself lead to anxiety and depression, which can affect work patterns and the ability to concentrate.

People with MS can face significant challenges at work

On a regular basis, people with MS experience a range of workplace challenges. Over a quarter of respondents (26%) cited unmanageable workloads as a key workplace challenge they experienced and one in five (21%) respondents had to contend with inflexibility over their working hours. A lack of workplace adjustments such as poor access to facilities and the lack of adaptive equipment was a challenge for 21% of respondents, while 19% cited a lack of occupational health support as a challenge. Social factors, like lack of understanding from employers and colleagues, also act as a barrier – 48% of people cited a lack of employer knowledge about how MS affects people's working lives.

Many people with MS feel forced to leave work before they want or need to, or compromise their health to remain in employment

One in two (50%) reported that at some stage in their lives they had left a job because of factors relating to their MS, and a third (31%) of those currently in work indicated that they work in a job below their skill level. People with MS are also more likely to be in part-time work, which can help manage changes in symptoms but can also leave people subject to unpredictable hours and lower pay. A lack of support and financial pressures led half of respondents (50%) in the study to stay in a job that compromised their health. This is more common for young adults, with 59% of 18–34-year-olds stating they have stayed in a job that has negatively impacted their health.

Over a quarter of people with MS who had left work (28%) said that better Government support – such as access to improved benefits – would have helped them stay in work. One in four (26%) said that better employee benefits, including occupational sick pay, would have supported them to remain in employment.

Flexibility is the most important form of workplace support for people with MS but adjustments to work environments are also crucial

Flexible working arrangements are a key priority, both for people with MS who are employed, and those who are looking for work. Half of respondents (53%) look for jobs with remote or hybrid work options while 44% search for jobs with flexible hours. A third of respondents (31%) indicated they currently have flexibility over work location and 30% said they benefit from flexibility over work hours. However, over one in five respondents (22%) who have a flexible work arrangement said it does not meet their needs and one in ten (11%) reported that they would like a flexible work arrangement but have not asked for one.

Greater flexibility is a key enabler for people with MS in work but supporting employers to make work environments adjust to people's MS related needs is also crucial. Two in five (41%) of those who left work because of their MS reported that the proper implementation of their reasonable workplace adjustments would have helped them to stay in work.

People with MS are supported by their employers, but employers lack the knowledge required to deliver tailored support

Encouragingly, four in five (79%) respondents who are currently employed said that their employers were supportive regarding their MS. However, employers could better understand MS, with 48% citing that a lack of employer knowledge on MS negatively affects their working lives.

Critically, survey responses underline the importance of employer action to improve the chances of people with MS remaining in work if they want to. Nearly half (45%) of those who left work because of their MS stated that a better understanding of the condition by their employer would have enabled them to stay in employment.

Welfare reforms and cuts present real risk for people with MS

The UK Government's recent Green Paper sets out plans to reduce disability benefit funding by almost £5 billion. Two thirds of respondents (67%) have used forms of welfare or employment support in the past and the proposed cuts are likely to create stress and anxiety for many in and out of work.

Over half of respondents (55%) had received Personal Independence Payment (PIP) – and the study reveals that over four in ten (41%) people with MS in work get PIP. Many of these people are likely to use PIP to pay for support that helps them maintain employment.

The proposed cuts will be primarily achieved through tightening the eligibility criteria for PIP in 2026[1] and these changes may lead to many more people with MS missing out on getting the right level of support. Without this support, there is a significant risk that fewer people with MS will be able to stay in or enter employment – or that more people with MS will compromise their health to stay in work.

Recommendations

At a time when the UK Government wants to increase the employment rate, there is a clear role for both Government and employers to do more to support those with MS to remain in and enter employment, without feeling the need to compromise their health.

This research highlights that people with MS experience multiple challenges at work, or as they transition to leave employment. The Government and employers need to tailor support to ensure that those people with MS who want to work can thrive in their careers.

To achieve this, the analysis in this report suggests action to be taken in three key areas:

1. Make access to secure and flexible work standard practice
2. Improve quality and access to in-work Government and employer support
3. Ensure all people with MS – whether in or out of work – have adequate social security support.

The full list of policy recommendations can be found on page 18.

1. Introduction

There are an estimated 150,000 people living with multiple sclerosis (MS) in the UK, equivalent to one in every 400 people. Each year 7,100 people are newly diagnosed with the condition.[2] MS is a legally recognised disability under the Equality Act 2010. The condition affects the central nervous system by damaging the protective coating around the nerves. This can result in symptoms such as blurred vision, severe pain, fatigue, and issues with movement, thinking and feeling.[3] MS is unpredictable. It can fluctuate on a day-to-day basis and can evolve over time. Women are two and a half times more likely to develop the condition than men.[4]

Most people with MS are diagnosed in their 30s and 40s. Yet, despite research indicating that most people in the UK are aware of MS, only one in five know that most people with MS are diagnosed at this stage of life.[5]

MS can impact people's ability to stay in work. The MS Society estimated that, in 2022, the employment rate for people living with MS was 47%.[6] This is lower than both the UK disability employment rate (54%) and the non-disabled employment rate (82%).[7] Previous studies have shown that people with MS face significant challenges in the workplace and often do not get the support and protection they need.[8] This can lead to them leaving work earlier than they wanted or make them compromise their health at work. While leaving work may be the right choice for some people with MS if their symptoms make it difficult to continue working, people with MS who are in work should have the workplace protections and support to thrive and flourish at work.

A changing policy landscape

At a time of rising ill-health amongst the working population, the Government has put boosting employment levels at the heart of its growth agenda and has pledged to raise the employment rate from 75% to 80%.[9] To support this target, the Government is undertaking reforms to employment support and health-related benefits, and overhauling employment law. These changes presents both opportunities and challenges for people with MS who are in or out of work.

The Government has launched the Get Britain Working White Paper which aims to reform employment support for people out of work.[10] This includes a Keep Britain Working Review to investigate how employers can help workers with long-term health conditions stay in work.[11]

At the same time, the Government is driving a comprehensive overhaul of employment law through its Employment Rights Bill.[12] The Bill represents a vital opportunity to extend access to secure work, with a focus on introducing new rights and protections from day one of employment. As the Bill continues its journey through Parliament, measures include a default right to access flexible working from day one and removing the lower earnings threshold and waiting period to access Statutory Sick Pay.

The Government has also recently launched a Green Paper with the stated intention of 'reforming the health and disability system'. Alongside a commitment to invest an extra £1 billion in employment support programmes and introduce reforms which intends to make it easier for those out of work to 'try work' without fear of losing their benefits, the 'Pathways to Work' package also includes measures designed to reduce spending on health-related benefits by £5 billion per annum during the course of this Parliament. This will be achieved via cuts to specific benefits such as the Universal Credit health element and restricting access to Personal Independence Payments. This has raised significant concerns for people with MS who rely on these benefits to maintain their standard of living and, in some circumstances, access work.

Identifying the barriers and enablers to positive employment for people with MS

At a time when the employment and welfare policy landscapes are undergoing significant changes, new evidence is needed on the barriers and enablers faced by people living with MS in accessing and remaining in employment.

This study is based on the findings from an online survey undertaken by the Work Foundation, in partnership with and funded by the MS Society, between 1 November and 21 November 2024 of 1,125 people with MS in the UK. It aims to:

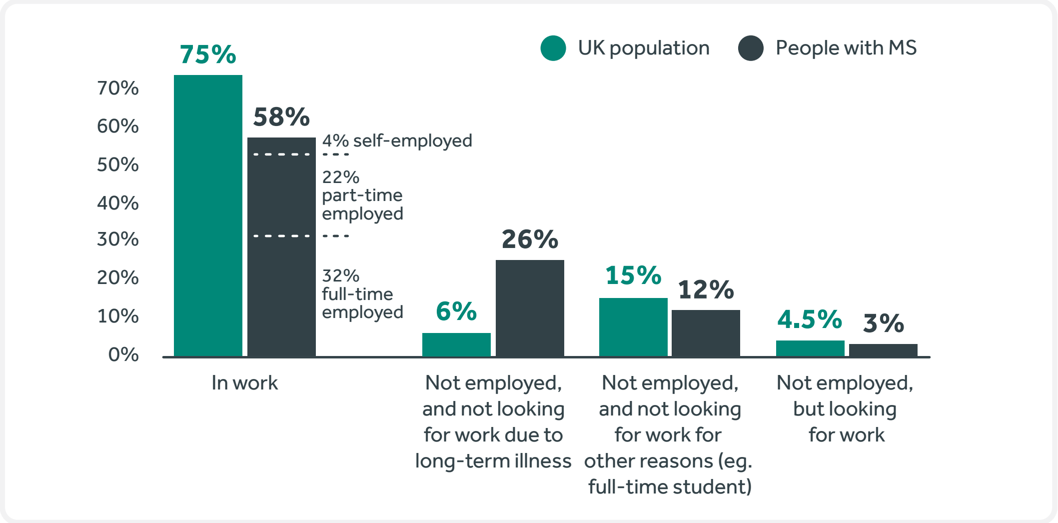
- Amplify the voices of people with MS
- Highlight barriers and enablers to staying and progressing in work
- Identify how government and employers can help people with MS thrive at work.

2. The employment experiences of people with MS

People with MS often have to balance the benefits of working with their ability to manage their symptoms.[13] For workers with the condition, symptoms can make commuting, navigating workplace environments, and completing certain tasks difficult. Managing the symptoms of MS, can itself result in anxiety and depression which can restrict individuals' capacity to undertake work.[14] High levels of stress in turn, could lead to a worsening of symptoms and increase the chances of a relapse or progression of MS.[15]

Nearly six in ten respondents surveyed (58%) were in employment, compared to 41% out of work.

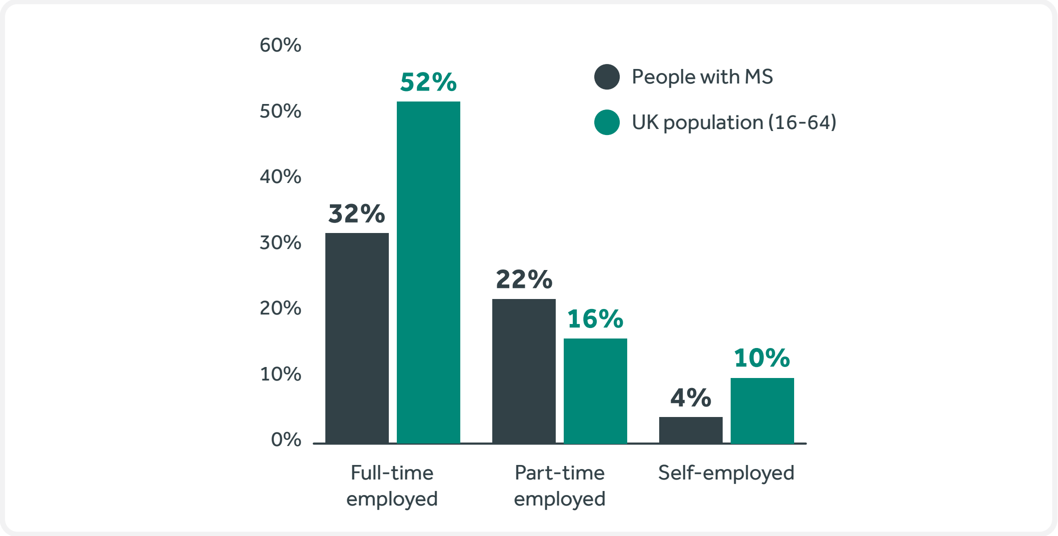
Figure 1: Employment status of survey respondents[i]



Source: MS Society/Work Foundation survey of people with MS, November 2024 and Work Foundation estimates of ONS labour market data (13 May 2025).

Amongst those in employment, people with MS are more likely to be in part-time employment compared to the overall UK workforce. Part-time work can allow people with MS the time and space to manage any flare ups and relapses in their symptoms without having to leave employment altogether.[16]

Figure 2: Breakdown of respondents in employment compared to UK workforce



Source: MS Society/Work Foundation survey of people with MS, November 2024 and Work Foundation estimates of ONS labour market data (13 May 2025).

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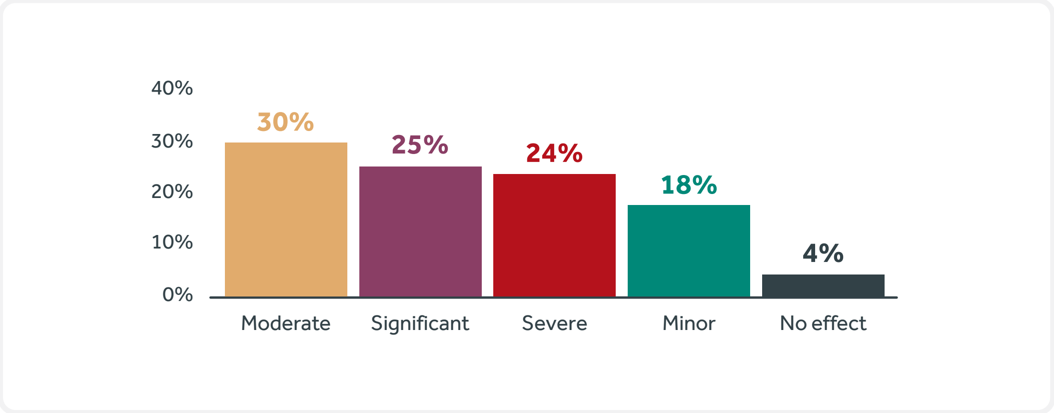
[i] Employment rates in the survey refer to all respondents aged 18+. UK wide employment rates are of the working-age population (16-64) and UK unemployment rate is of people 16+.

People with MS and their ability to work

The vast majority of respondents (96%) said MS affected their ability to work. For some, this represents a minor impact, but 25% reported a significant effect, and 24% indicated that it was severe enough to stop them from working.

Figure 3: Percentage of respondents reporting an impact on their work



Source: Work Foundation analysis of MS Society/Work Foundation survey, November 2024

The fluctuating nature of MS means that people with MS who can work may see a sudden worsening of their symptoms which severely impacts their ability to work. More than three quarters of respondents (77%) indicated that their ability to work had moderately or substantially decreased during the progression and/or treatment of their MS.

Some people with MS were also more likely to say their condition severely affected their ability to work, including:

- 32% of men, compared to 21% of women
- Almost half of those with advanced MS (46%) said that they couldn't work due to the impact of their condition
- 33% of those with other health conditions and disabilities.

Leaving a job can be the right choice for some people with MS, but some feel forced to leave employment before they want to

One in two survey respondents (50%) have left a job because of their MS and just over a third of those respondents (35%) say that no additional support would have helped them stay in work.

The Government intends to invest around £1 billion in employment support for those out of work due to long-term ill-health.[17] At the same time, it is undertaking a Keep Britain Working Review to look at how employers can help workers with long-term health conditions stay in work.[18] While this is welcome, for some people with MS seeking work is not appropriate. Just 3% of people with MS in our sample are out of work and actively looking for employment. James, who is not currently working or looking for work, told us the fluctuating nature of MS meant employment was not always suitable:

> **"(Do) not force people into looking for employment. People with MS could feel fit enough to work at one point in the day but this could change after a couple of hours. Also, no two days are the same. You can't plan anything!"**
>
> **James, out of work and not looking for work, aged 45-54 from the North West**

People with MS often leave work earlier than they would like to because they are unable to access adequate workplace support. A quarter of people with MS who had left work (28%) said that better Government support – such as access to improved benefits – would have helped them stay in work while a quarter (26%) said that better employee benefits, including occupational sick pay, would have supported them to remain in employment. Removing the barriers that people with MS face at work will enable them to use their skills and fulfil their potential at work.

People can miss out on opportunities to progress due to a lack of workplace support

Nearly a third of people who are currently in work (31%) reported working in a job that was below their skill level. Data from the Annual Population Survey indicates that disabled workers are less likely to be in higher skilled occupations such as managers, directors and senior officials and professional occupations compared with non-disabled workers.[19] Respondents often cited that employers did not appreciate and utilise their skills and experience:

> **"Employers should value their skilled workforce and use their skills with adjustment instead of forcing early retirement through for individuals with MS."**
>
> **Rachel, not in work and not looking for work, aged 55-64 from the South West**

Previous Work Foundation research has found that some disabled workers face a tension between career progression and managing their health condition.[20] Flexible work arrangements can benefit people with MS in several ways. For example, working part-time or fewer hours can be less stressful and can make it easier for people to manage their health conditions and disabilities. On the other hand, long-term part-time working can limit opportunities to progress or take on senior leadership roles and can make people less financially stable:

> **"My job has increased in responsibility over the course of my time living with MS. However, the impact of the nature of the work and workload means I cannot work full-time without it having a major detrimental impact on my MS."**
>
> **Linda, working part-time in a senior professional role, aged 45-54 from Scotland**

Research suggests that changing jobs is one of the fastest ways workers can progress in their careers, maximise their skills and increase their pay.[21] However, people with MS can often experience barriers to changing jobs or sectors. They face uncertainty about the level of support they will receive from their new employers and, despite discrimination being illegal, organisations may also be reluctant to employ them due to the perceived costs and adjustments they would have to make.[22]

One in ten respondents (10%) reported using the Access to Work scheme. Access to Work is a publicly funded employment support programme that provides practical and financial support to start or stay in work. However, lack of funding for the scheme has led to wait times of up to six months which can deter the take up of new work.[23]

Under current protocols, workers must reapply for Access to Work funding every time they move jobs.[24] A recent Government trial of 'Health Adjustment Passports' has allowed workers to take their existing funding and support to a new job.[25] If this scheme was universal, it could enable people with MS to have the confidence and support to move to new jobs and progress their careers.

Some people with MS compromise their health by staying in work, or leave work due to financial pressures

People with MS can feel compelled to stay in employment, even if it is to the detriment of their health. Half of the respondents in the survey (50%) reported they compromised their health by staying in a job that did not meet their MS related needs. This is more common for young adults, with 59% of 18-34 year olds stating they have stayed in a job that has compromised their health.

With cost-of-living pressures continuing, income loss due to leaving work can lead to serious financial insecurity for disabled people. The disability charity Scope has calculated that disabled people face a 'disability price tag', with disabled households needing an extra £1,010 per month to achieve the same standard of living as non-disabled households.[26] A study from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, showed that half of disabled people who are out of work and receiving disability support through the Universal Credit health element were either unable to heat their home, behind on bills, or had low or very low food security.[27]

For example, Anna continues to work to help make ends meet:

> **"I really need to give up work due to my MS symptoms, but I would be unable to support myself financially."**
>
> **Anna, part-time worker in an administrative role, aged 55-64 from the East of England**

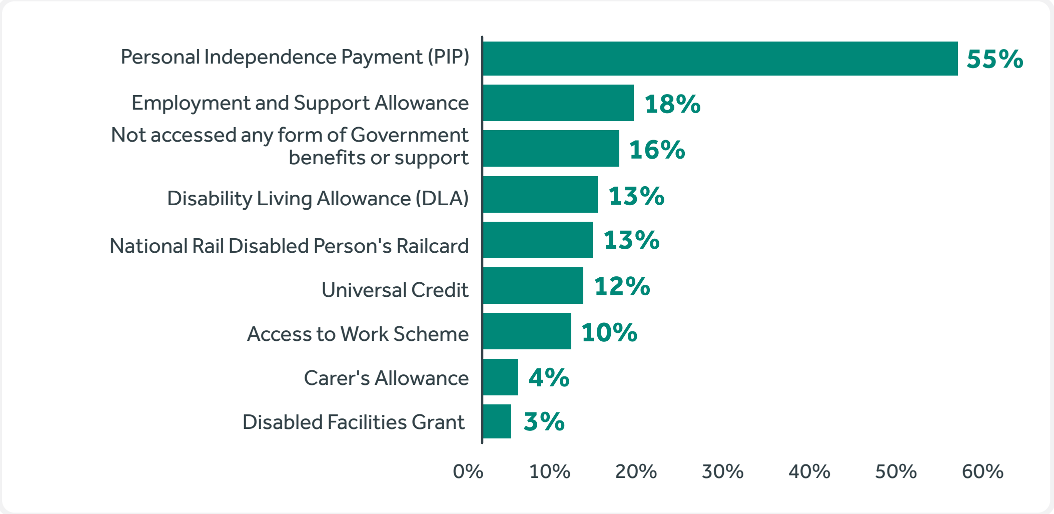
As part of the recently announced 'Pathways to Work' reforms, the UK Government is planning to freeze and nearly halve the Universal Credit health element. These changes could further heighten the risk that people with MS feel pressured to stay in work even though it may be negatively impacting their health and which could lead to increased pressure on NHS services.

Welfare reforms and cuts present real risks for people with MS

Over two-thirds of respondents (67%) have used government benefits. People with MS can require Government social security support when in work or when they leave the labour market. This study shows that four in ten people with MS who are in work (41%) receive PIP. This benefit allows people with MS to help pay for support that allows them to maintain employment for example paying for a carer to help them get ready in the morning.[28]

The Government also plans to cut health-related benefits by about £5 billion, which will be primarily achieved through tightening the eligibility criteria for PIP in 2026. This could make it harder for people with MS to access this benefit and new claimants with MS are likely to face stricter criteria to get this support. Evidence shows that even before the cuts were announced, the PIP assessment often failed to properly consider the fluctuating nature and hidden symptoms of MS.[30] The changes to PIP may lead to more people with MS missing out on getting the right level of support, which could lead to fewer people with MS being able to stay in or enter employment.

Figure 4: Percentage of respondents that have accessed forms of Government welfare benefits or support



Source: Work Foundation analysis of MS Society/Work Foundation survey, November 2024

Rigid and limited statutory support can make employment harder to sustain over the long-term

The low rate of Statutory Sick Pay in the UK – set by Government but paid by employers – means that some people with MS and other fluctuating conditions feel pressured to avoid taking time off despite needing to do so. This lack of rest and recovery can have negative health consequences and make employment harder to sustain over the long-term.[31]

The Government's proposals in the Employment Rights Bill to abolish the lower income threshold and waiting period to access Statutory Sick Pay are welcome but further steps need to be taken to increase the rate of SSP. The current rate of £116.75 per week is too low to provide an adequate safety net and forces workers to either return to work before they are ready or leave work altogether. Recent Work Foundation analysis found that almost half of UK employers (47%) do not go beyond the statutory minimum level of sick pay provision.[32] Increasing flexibility in the SSP regime by allowing it to be paid on a part-time basis, for example, could also benefit people with MS.

These findings underline the impact that MS can have on people's ability to work. For some, the severity of MS symptoms makes it too difficult to stay in employment.[33] People with MS should not be compelled to stay in work at the cost of their health and should be able to leave work without having to worry about their financial security. For those who can and want to work, employers and Government must acknowledge the challenges people with MS experience and tailor employment and welfare support to enable them to stay and thrive in work, whilst also looking after their health.

3. Workplace challenges for people with MS

People with MS often experience specific challenges at work as their symptoms change over time. Respondents cited several workplace challenges including around job design, work environment and social relationships.[34]

The challenge of unmanageable workloads and lack of flexibility

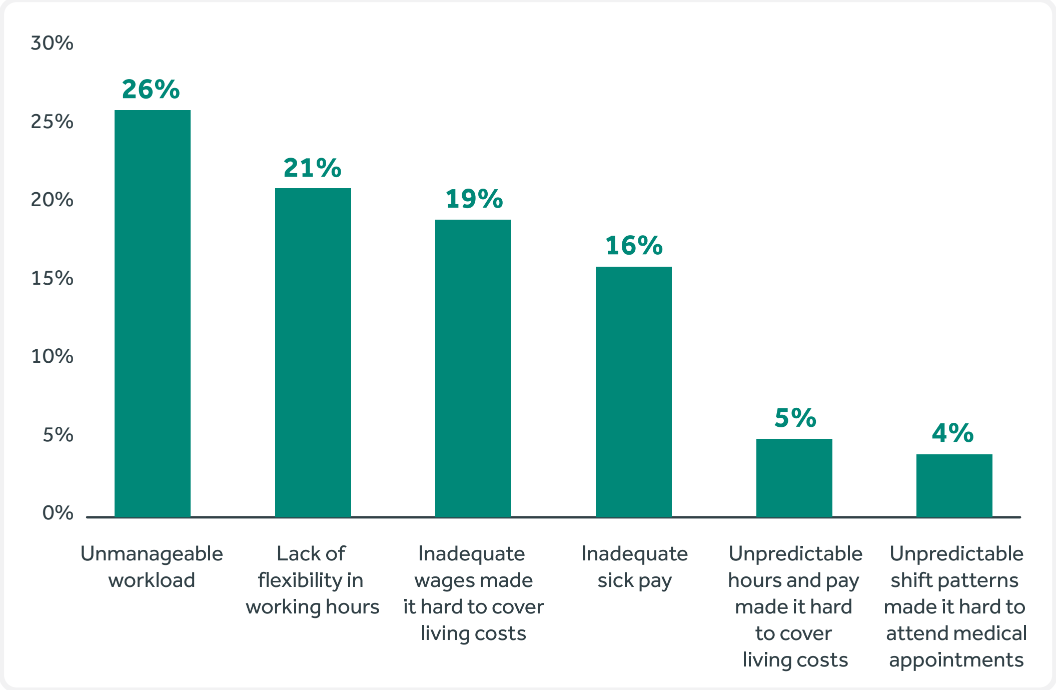
The most common workplace challenge cited by survey respondents was the prospect of unmanageable workloads, with a quarter (26%) reporting having faced such a situation. The second most reported challenge was a lack of flexible working hours (21%). For those whose health had been compromised by staying at work, a third of respondents (34%) stated that the lack of flexibility over working hours was particularly challenging.

Half of respondents (47%) in employment have a flexible working arrangement that meets their needs but a fifth (22%) have a flexible arrangement that does not meet their needs. One in ten (12%) people with MS stated they would like to have a flexible work arrangement but had not requested one. Despite all employees in the UK having the 'right to request' flexible working from day one of employment, some workers may decide to delay or withhold submitting a request out of a fear of stigmatisation by colleagues or potential harm to their future career prospects.[35]

Flexible working arrangements are not a panacea and can create their own set of challenges for people with MS. Previous Work Foundation research found disabled people who worked from home were often concerned that opportunities to grow professionally might go to those in the office, while their pay and career progression may be negatively affected.[36]

Nonetheless, the UK Government's proposal to make the right to flexibility the default option for all employees could give people with MS the assurance and confidence to apply for flexibility over their working hours, work location and workloads.

Figure 5: Challenges with job characteristics



Source: Work Foundation analysis of MS Society/Work Foundation survey, November 2024

The impact of inaccessible workplaces

The accessibility of the physical workspace, the availability of adaptive workplace equipment and the ease of commuting are all key factors that determine the ability of people with MS to manage their symptoms while staying in work. A quarter of people surveyed (25%) experienced difficulties traveling to work, while 17% cited a lack of flexibility in work location as a challenge. For example, as Hannah describes, being made to be in the office regularly can be particularly difficult for people with MS:

> **"The insistence on attending the office and travel for work make higher level roles out of reach for those with MS. I work at Director level and do not need to attend an office location, but I am refused consideration for roles as they insist it is essential to be in the office four days a week."**
>
> **Hannah, corporate director, aged 45-54 from the West Midlands**

A lack of workplace adjustments such as poor access to facilities and the lack of adaptive equipment was a challenge for 21% of respondents. Under the Equality Act 2010, employers have a legal duty to make reasonable adjustments for disabled workers who are placed at significant disadvantage because of their disability compared with non-disabled people or people who don't share their disability.[37] In practice, the process of requesting and implementing reasonable adjustments is often long and arduous.[38] If the request is turned down, the onus is then on the employee to challenge their employer's decision at a tribunal, which can be expensive and time-consuming.[39]

Figure 6: Challenges with work environment

Source: Work Foundation analysis of MS Society/Work Foundation survey, November 2024

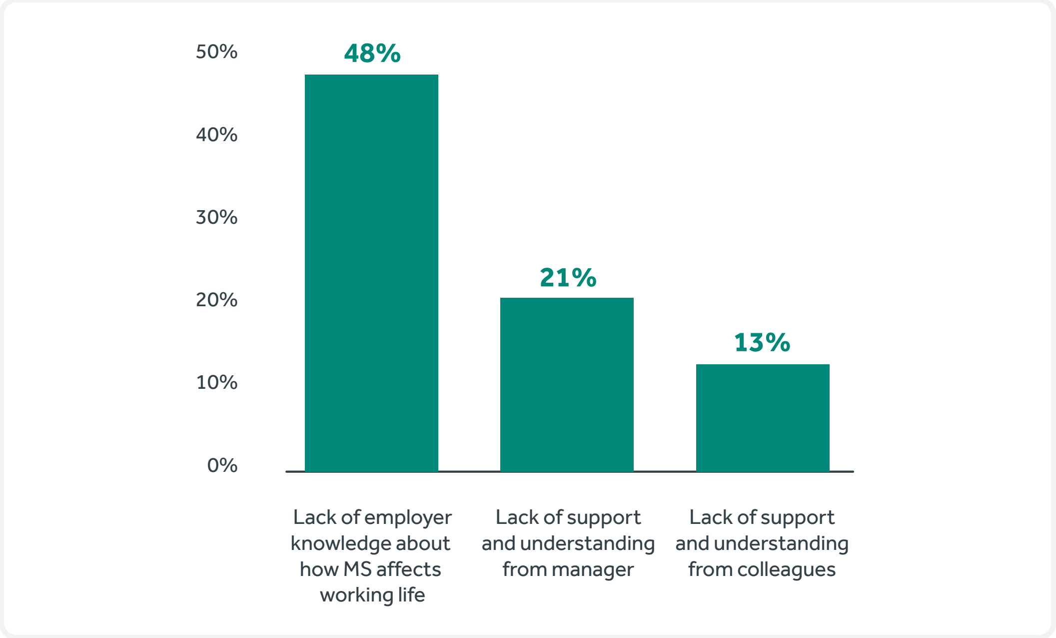
One in five (19%) found the lack of occupational health (OH) support challenging. The UK does not place legal requirements on employers to provide occupational health services. Only 45% of workers in the UK have access to occupational health provision while only 37% of employers offer OH services.[40] Occupational health services are more likely to be provided by large employers as small and medium enterprises (SMEs) may lack the financial resources to do so, which means that some disabled workers may miss out on occupational health support. Approximately 45% of survey respondents in work reported working for an SME, which highlights the importance of widening access to OH services.

Social support in the workplace

Workplace challenges for people with MS can also include a lack of understanding and support from colleagues, line managers and employers. The fluctuating nature of chronic health conditions can make it difficult for managers to predict support needs and at worst can cultivate a sense of disbelief and mistrust over time.[41] Without support from managers and colleagues, the varied nature of MS can mean people struggle to stay in work even though workplace adjustments are in place. George, a former teacher, reported that some employer protocols and systems do not acknowledge how MS can affect people at work:

> **"MS symptoms fluctuate and can be incredibly varied. When my teaching contract was terminated on the grounds of medical incapacity, this decision was largely based on the Occupational Therapist report where I could not give an exact return to work date due to not knowing when my MS flare up would be over."**
>
> **George, not in work and not looking for work, aged 35-44 from the North West**

Figure 7: Challenges with workplace social support



Source: Work Foundation analysis of MS Society/Work Foundation survey, November 2024

Nearly one in two respondents (48%) cited a lack of employer knowledge about how MS affects working life as a challenge they encountered. One in five respondents (21%) said a lack of support and understanding from managers was a challenge while 13% of respondents had to contend with a lack of support and understanding from colleagues.

Lack of employer knowledge and support correlated with people feeling forced to stay in work, even though it compromised their health. Of those who felt they had compromised their health in work, more than half (61%) cited a lack of employer knowledge as a workplace challenge relative to 34% of those who reported that their health had not been compromised. This highlights the critical role that employers can play in proactively supporting people with MS to manage their health condition at work.

However, respondents whose employers and colleagues knew about their diagnosis enjoyed high levels of workplace support. Around 79% of respondents in work who shared their diagnosis indicated that their employers were supportive while 86% said that their line managers were supportive.

Overall, these findings suggest that while employers and colleagues are generally supportive of colleagues with MS, many still lack sufficient knowledge and understanding of MS to support colleagues. Some people with MS, like Catherine, feel that employers do not address the ways in which the condition might undermine their working lives:

> **"My employer claims to be equal opportunities compliant but it is merely a box ticking exercise. The Government needs to do more to check that employers are really doing what they say they are doing."**
>
> **Catherine, part-time worker doing administrative work, aged 55-64 from the North West**

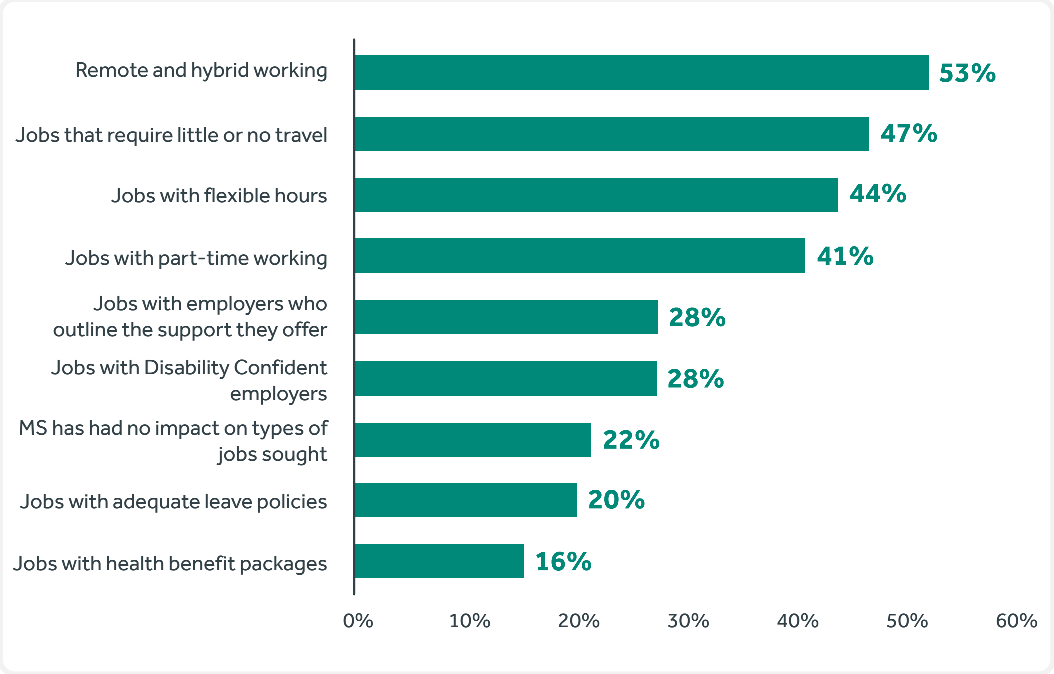
4. Supporting people with MS at work

MS is an unpredictable condition with a wide variety of symptoms and different forms of support are needed for individuals to stay in and thrive at work. The analysis in this study indicates that the Government and employers could support people with MS in three key areas: job design and flexibility, work environments and social factors.

Job design and the importance of flexibility

Flexibility is a key priority for job seekers with MS. When looking for a job, 53% of respondents prioritise roles with remote and hybrid working while 44% look for flexible hours. Recent analysis by the Work Foundation and Lancaster University found that one in five disabled workers mainly work from home, but there was more demand for remote and hybrid roles than jobs available.[42]

Figure 8: What types of jobs people with MS look for



Source: Work Foundation analysis of MS Society/Work Foundation survey, November 2024. (n=635; respondents who responded "not applicable" because they were not looking for a job were excluded from this analysis).

Nearly half of respondents (47%) look for job locations that require little or no travel. This is possibly because of the cost and availability of public transport options, and the ease of managing symptoms such as fatigue and pain at home. This can put serious restrictions on the types of jobs people with MS can apply for. For example, some people with MS – like Alice – have had to change sector to find remote roles without the need for commuting:

> **"I was a police officer when diagnosed but was forced to medically retire. I later worked in a school for just over two years, but my health really suffered. I have worked from home for almost two years, and it really is the only option for me."**
>
> **Alice, who works full-time in an administrative role, aged 55-64 from the South West**

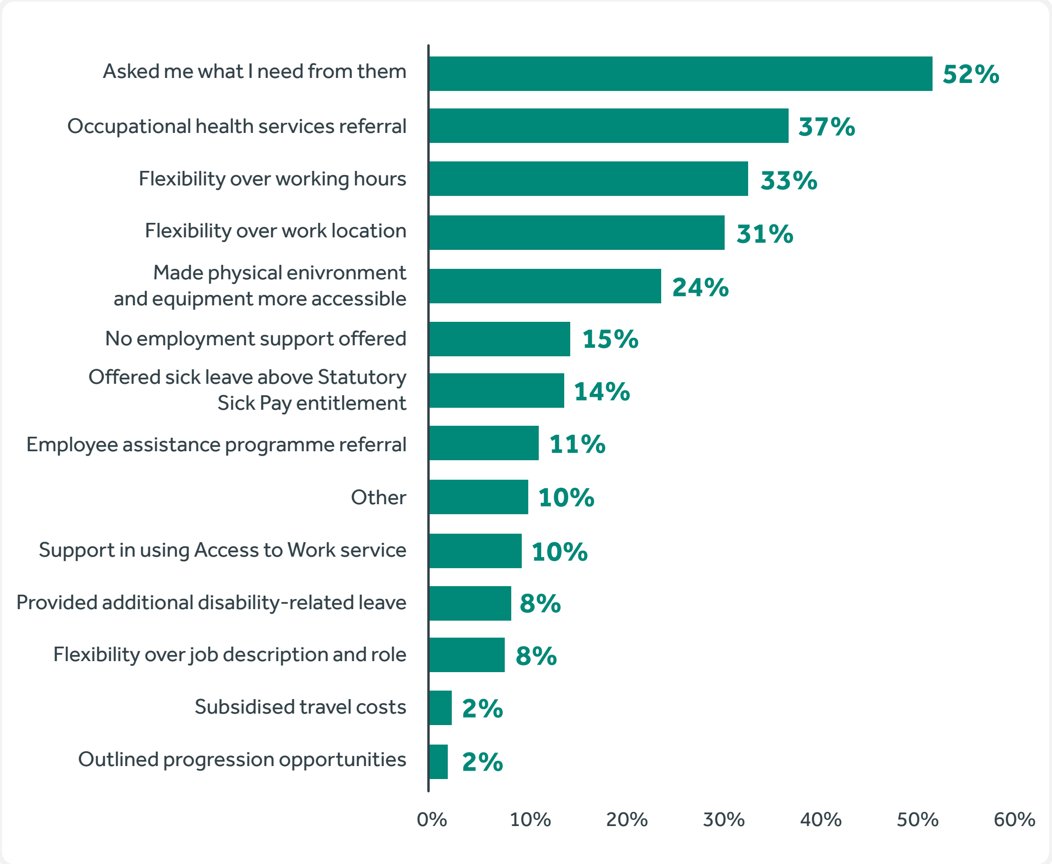
Over a quarter of respondents (28%) look for jobs with Disability Confident employers. Disability Confident is a three-tiered accreditation scheme designed to promote the employment of disabled people but has come under criticism for its failure to achieve this aim and its lack of oversight and enforcement.[43] The number of jobs advertised as Disability Confident are limited. Data from the Department for Work and Pensions "Find A Job" portal indicates that between 24 February – 26 March 2025 only 13.5% of jobs advertised were from a Disability Confident employer.[44]

Improvements to existing support

The most common form of employment support cited by respondents was employers asking them to outline any support or interventions they needed (52%). While employee involvement is encouraging, it also puts the onus on people with MS to spell out what adjustments they need and explain how their symptoms can potentially impact their work. Increasing employer knowledge about the symptoms of MS and how it may affect people's ability to work may empower employers to be proactive in offering more tailored workplace support to people with MS, while also remaining responsive to individual needs.

The inability to change work tasks can often lead to unmanageable workloads, which was a common workplace challenge cited. Only 8% of respondents had the flexibility to change their job description and role, while just one in fifty (2%) had employers who outlined progression opportunities that take account of their MS related needs. These figures suggest that while employers are willing to provide more common forms of employment support like flexible working arrangements, they may be less willing to consider more substantial adjustments to roles and responsibilities that could help mitigate the fluctuating challenges that people with MS face.

Figure 9: Forms of employment support on offer



Source: Work Foundation analysis of MS Society/Work Foundation survey, November 2024

Awareness and understanding is key to enable more people with MS to stay in employment

Survey responses from those who have left work reveal better delivered workplace adjustments and social support could have made staying in work a viable option for many.

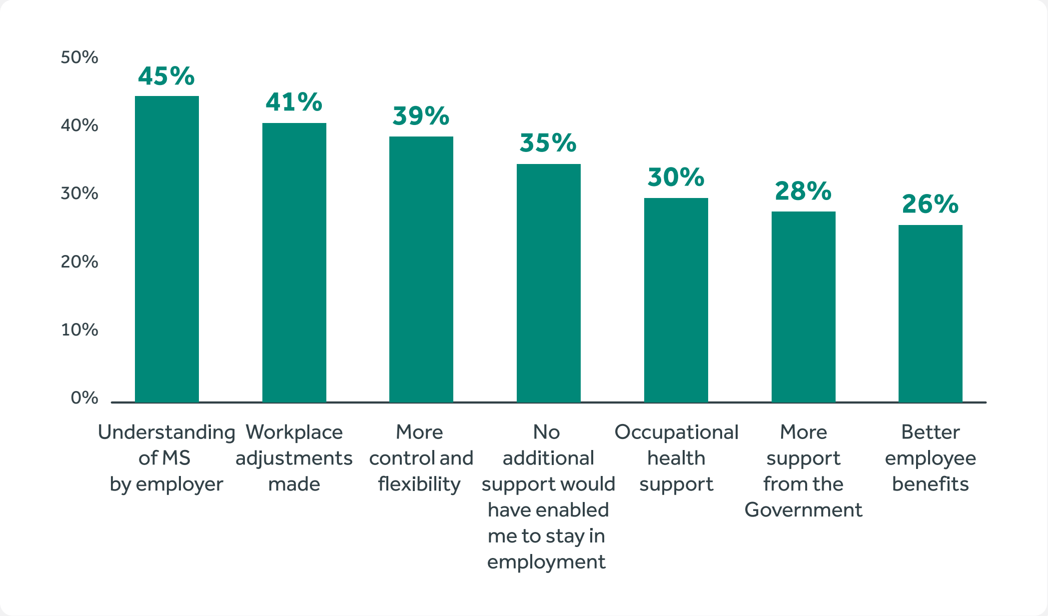
Two in five (41%) of people surveyed reported that the implementation of workplace adjustments would have helped them to stay in work. For some people like Lily, employers are unable or unwilling to provide the adjustments they need.

> **"I have a master's degree in social work. I have secondary progressive MS. Apart from depression and fatigue, my main problems are cognitive. Basically, I am not able to learn new things. In order for me to do any work, my employer would have to provide me with a driver and someone to perform my IT tasks. These are not considered to be suitable adjustments."**
>
> **Lily, not in work and not looking for work, aged 55-64 from Yorkshire**

Employers are often unaware of their legal duties to implement reasonable adjustments.[45] This means that, in practice, the onus often lies with the employee to identify the adjustments they require and advocate for them, which can be a protracted and stressful process.[46] This can be particularly challenging for disabled workers who have recently started working for a new employer, and are unlikely to have the close working relationships often needed to facilitate conversations about workplace adjustments and support.[47]

Nearly half (45%) of those who left work because of their MS stated that a better understanding of the condition by their employer would have enabled them to stay in employment. This reiterates how improved awareness, understanding and consideration of MS as a condition is key to enable more people with MS to stay in employment, and be able to flourish in their careers. It is unlocking these enablers, as well as tackling the challenges people with MS face in employment, that will then ultimately mean more people with MS live more independent, fulfilling lives.

Figure 10: Additional forms of employment support that would have helped respondents stay in work



Source: Work Foundation analysis of MS Society/Work Foundation survey, November 2024

5. Addressing the barriers to employment for people with MS

This research highlights that many people with MS face complex and interrelated challenges that may prevent them from thriving in employment. Leaving work is sometimes the right choice for people with MS to manage their health. It is vital that people with MS do not feel compelled to continue working to the detriment of their health due to an inadequate social security safety net. For the many people with MS who want to work and enjoy successful working lives, it is critical that employer practice and Government policy ensures that they feel supported to do so.

Strikingly, one in two people with MS (50%) in our study stated that staying in a job had compromised their health. It is incumbent on Government and employers to ensure that people with MS do not face a trade-off between managing their health and staying in work. At the same time, there are immediate opportunities to improve the lives of people with MS. The UK is in the midst of some of the biggest changes to workers' rights, welfare benefits and employment support in a generation. Against a backdrop of rising long-term illness, the Government is focussed on driving up the employment rate and boosting economic growth. For reforms to be successful and sustainable, the Government must work with people with MS and employers to address the barriers to supporting people with conditions like MS to stay and progress in work.

Recommendations

The analysis in this report calls for action to be taken in three key areas:

1. Making access to secure and flexible work standard practice

Over a quarter of respondents (26%) cited unmanageable workloads as a key workplace challenge they experienced and one in five (21%) respondents had to contend with inflexibility over their working hours.

When looking for a job, 53% of people with MS prioritise roles with remote and hybrid working, while 44% look for flexible hours. Yet flexible working arrangements are far from the norm in the UK, creating a barrier to staying in work for people with fluctuating conditions such as MS.

Currently, the onus is on people with MS to ask their employers for reasonable adjustments. This process can often be daunting and protracted. Even when successful, implementation can be slow. Making access to flexible work standard practice for all workers will significantly benefit people with MS and other disabled people.

To address these issues the UK Government should:

a) Ensure the Employment Rights Bill enshrines and strongly enforces the right to secure and flexible working as the default option from day one of employment

b) Update statutory guidance for employers on flexible working as a Reasonable Adjustment, including shortening the timeframe to respond to employee requests

c) Explore a legal duty to publish flexible working options in job advertisements building on research commissioned by the Government Equalities Office

d) Enhance and enforce paid leave entitlements to address health and recuperation needs. This should include:

- Setting out a roadmap to increase the rate of Statutory Sick Pay to an employee's weekly wage or the National Living Wage
- Introducing paid time off for healthcare appointments and for managing issues related to people's disability or long-term health conditions.

2. Improve the quality of and access to in-work Government and employer support

A significant proportion of workers with MS benefit from a range of Government benefits and support schemes including Disability Confident, Access to Work and others. At the time of writing, the future of many of these essential schemes is uncertain. In addition, respondents were clear that employer policies are critical in supporting people with MS to enter and remain in work. However, there remains a significant gap when it comes to employer understanding of MS which can limit the level of support on offer.

To address these challenges, UK Government should:

a) Increase funding of Access to Work and scale up use of Health Adjustment Passports, to widen access and speed up provision of in-work support for people with MS

b) Improve and extend access to occupational health services by mandating provision for large employers, increase the level of tailored provision on offer and consider how smaller organisations can be financially supported to offer such services

c) Overhaul and strengthen the Disability Confident scheme, including implementing the recommendation of the Disability Employment Charter requiring all employers at Disability Confident Levels 2 and 3 to meet minimum thresholds regarding the percentage of disabled people in their workforce

d) Align the Disability Confident scheme with the proposed Equality (Race and Disabilities) Bill and require large employers (250+ staff) signed up to the scheme to publish rates of reasonable adjustments and access to remote and hybrid work

e) Establish a national network of workforce health hubs as one-stop shops for employers and individuals to access advice on supporting people with long-term and fluctuating health conditions like MS to stay in work.

3. Ensure all people with MS – whether in or out of work – have adequate social security support

The Government has recently announced £5 billion worth of cuts to health-related working-age benefits. These proposed cuts will tighten access to the Personal Independence Payment (PIP) which stands to significantly impact many people with MS. Two in five people with MS who are in work currently receive PIP (41%).

These proposed cuts present a very real risk that people with MS on PIP will be forced to leave work if they're unable to pay for the support that allows them to maintain employment, such as carers to help them get ready for work. Our study shows that a quarter of people with MS (28%) who have left work stated that better Government support – such as adequate benefits – would have helped them stay in work.

Other proposed cuts – such as to disability support on Universal Credit – could have a particularly negative impact on people with MS who are unable to work and need this support to cover key living costs. This cut could force more people to compromise their health to stay in work, as they may be worried about their financial security on Universal Credit when they leave employment. This could lead to people with MS requiring more support from health and care services if their MS were to worsen.

At a time when the Government is aiming to create pathways to sustainable work, these cuts could have stark unintended consequences forcing some people with MS to leave work early and forcing others to compromise their health by continuing working.

In light of this new evidence, the UK Government should reverse plans to constrain access to PIP and the Universal Credit health element. Instead, the Government should:

a) Set a clear ambition and strategy for setting disability benefit rates that properly enable disabled people – including those living with MS – to cover their essential living costs irrespective of whether they are in employment or not.

b) Undertake an urgent, full review of how the wider social security system can be strengthened and how it can support more people to remain in or enter employment. The review must put the needs of disabled people at the heart of it and should include the role of PIP in supporting people to continue working if they choose to. The urgent review should include:

  - Considering how the PIP assessment process can better consider the fluctuating nature of conditions like MS and its invisible symptoms
  - Establishing a better system for people to access the mobility component of PIP by working with experts to design a new, less rigid and arbitrary approach that better considers fluctuation and invisible symptoms
  - Working with experts to resdesign how fluctuation is assessed in PIP to create a fairer, more flexible approach that reflects how symptoms affect people over time.

Methodology and demographic breakdown appendix

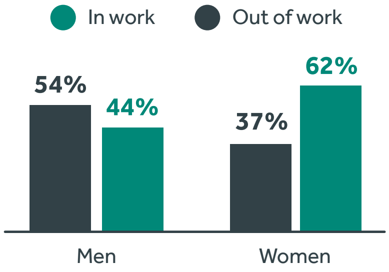
The methodology of this research employs a mixed methods approach, including:

1. A literature review
2. Analysis of key administrative data including the Labour Force Survey and Annual Population Survey
3. An online survey by the Work Foundation in partnership with MS Society of 1,125 people with MS. It was undertaken between 1 and 21 November 2024.

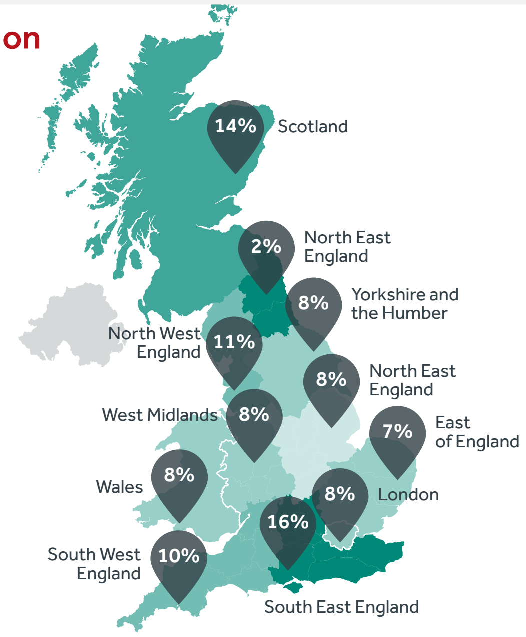
The full demographic background of the survey respondents can be found below.

Gender

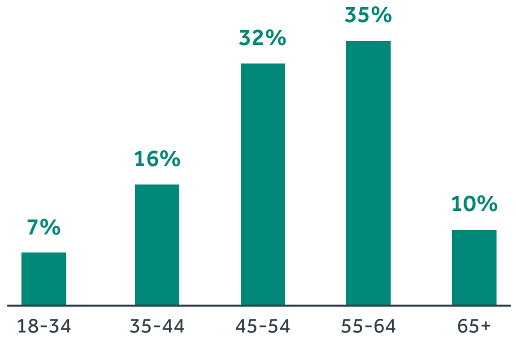
Gender and employment



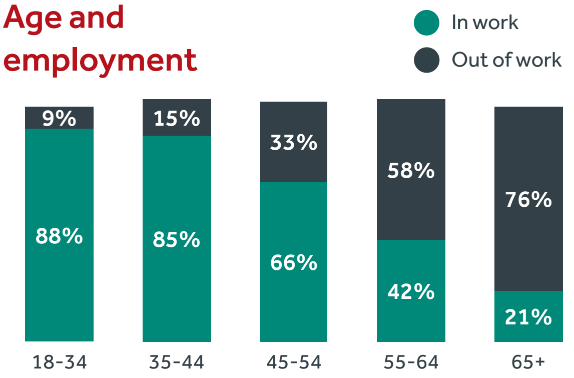
Region



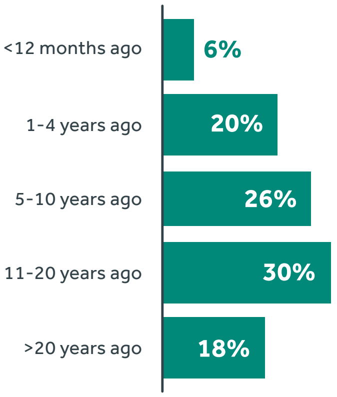
Age



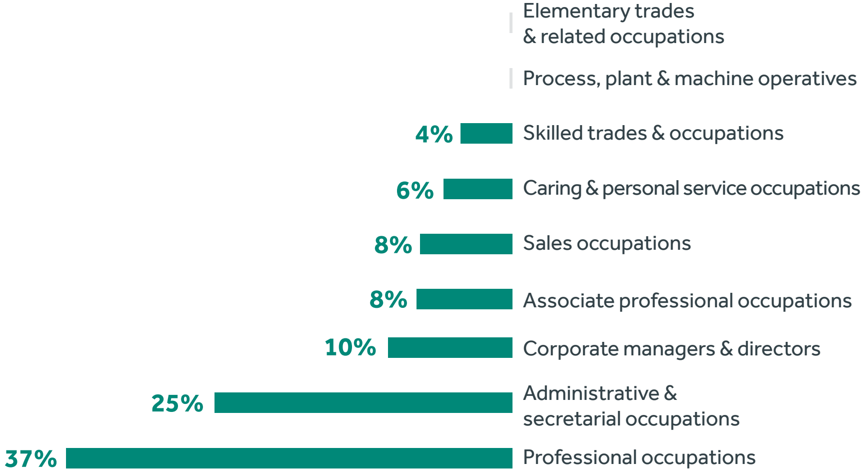
Age and employment



Duration since diagnosis



Occupation



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