

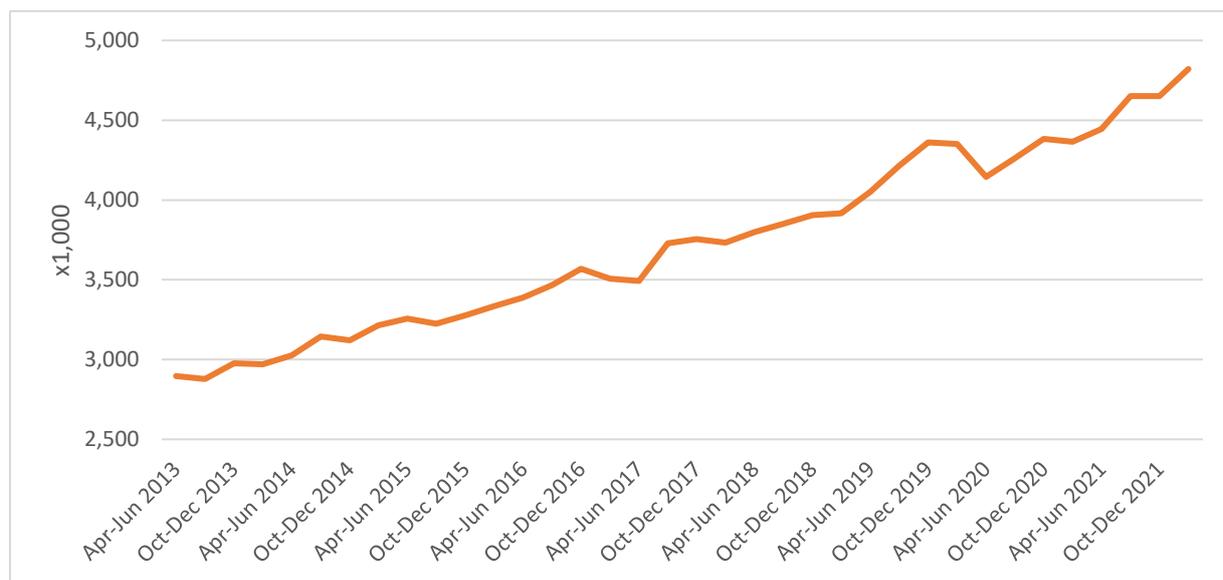
One-million more disabled people are in employment: What is being celebrated?



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The Disability Minister is celebrating reaching the Government's goal of one million more disabled people in work over the last five years.¹ The figure is 1.3 million since the target was set in April 2017. Perhaps there is less to celebrate, and the achievement is less of a milestone, when it is remembered that the 2017 commitment to have one-million more disabled people in employment over ten years replaced its 2015 commitment to halve the disability employment gap (DEG) in five years. The second commitment provided a useful cover while the first more ambitious commitment was abandoned. Without any real policy initiative or investment in support for employers and disabled individuals, this first commitment was unachievable. The attraction of the replacement commitment was that the labour market was on target to achieve it in any event and it did not require any sort of policy commitment. In effect, the 'one-million' commitment offered nothing new to disabled people who wanted to work and who were well aware of the employment disadvantage they faced.

Figure 1 Disabled People in Employment (thousands)



Source: ONS [Table A08 Disability Employment](#)

Notes: GSS harmonised definition: current physical or mental health condition(s) or illness(es) lasting or expected to last 12 months or more where the condition(s) or illness(es) reduce ability to carry out day-to-day activities.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-hits-goal-to-see-a-million-more-disabled-people-in-work>

To understand why the one-million employment target is so much less meaningful than halving the DEG, it is important to recognise two things: the first is that equality is best indicated by a relative measure – disabled people’s employment relative to the employment of non-disabled people (or DEG) and secondly that what drives the number of disabled people in employment is primarily the level of overall employment, which is determined by the economic cycle, and the number of people who report a disability. Both have increased since 2017, disability prevalence markedly so (from 17% to 22% of the working age population). Set in the context of a 1.9 million increase in the number of people reporting disability, the 1.3 million increase in employment looks less impressive. In fact, neither have any automatic relationship with disability disadvantage. This obviously makes the ‘one-million’ target a meaningless indicator as far as disability employment disadvantage is concerned.

DWP’s own research has indicated that 70% of the increase in employment of disabled people between 2014 and 2019 was down to factors other than the DEG. Rather it was driven by an increase in employment, an increase in the working-age population and an increase in disability reporting.²

Two select committee inquiries reports (2016 and 2021) were concerned about the government’s use of this one-million measure, as was the National Audit Office (2019). All three recommended the use of a relative measure as well the one-million target.³

If we turn our attention to the first DEG commitment a different story emerges. The graph below shows the falling DEG as measured by the purple line and using the left-hand axis. It has fallen by 5 percentage points (33 to 28) since it was set as a target in 2015. This is nowhere near what was required to halve the gap but at least it is movement in the right direction.

But even the DEG tends to overstate progress on closing disability employment disadvantage. When the prevalence of disabled people in the working-age population is increasing for social rather than medical reasons, the DEG closes without any real impact on the employment chances of any given disabled person.⁴ As more people with less severe impairments, and lower support needs, report disability, employment and employment rates for disabled people naturally increase. The green line measured on the right-hand axis adjusts for this ‘prevalence rate effect’ and shows no improvement in total employment disadvantage for disabled people since 2013. There is nothing to celebrate if the aim of either commitment was to address disability employment disadvantage.

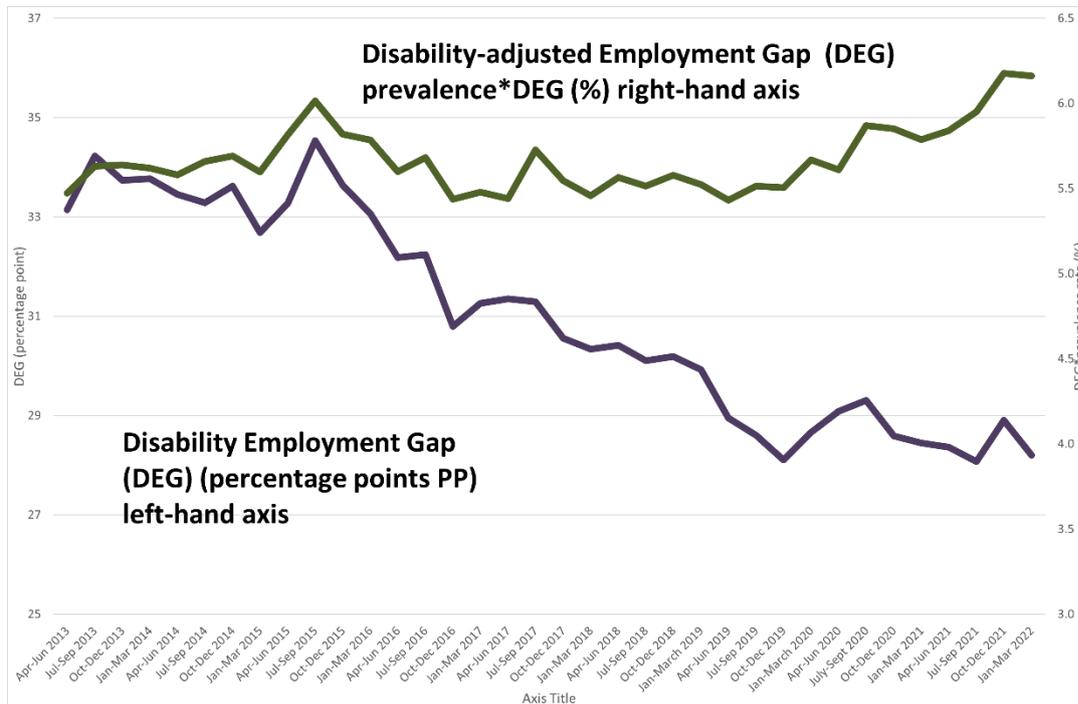
² DWP (2021) [Employment of Disabled People](#)

³ House of Commons Work and Pension Committee Report [Disability Employment Gap](#) July 2021
House of Commons Work and Pension Committee Report [Disability Employment Gap](#) January 2017

National Audit Office [Supporting Disabled People to Work](#) March 2019

⁴ See Disability@Work [A Tale of Two Commitments](#)

Figure 2 Measuring Disability Employment Disadvantage



Source: ONS [Table A08 Disability Employment](#)

Notes: Further details at <https://www.disabilityatwork.co.uk/>

An interesting result from looking at both lines together is that from the first quarter of 2020 the DEG stops falling and the prevalence-adjusted DEG rises, quite sharply from the first quarter of 2021. This looks to be an early indication of the impact of the pandemic on disability prevalence. The pandemic represents a health shock. It increases disability prevalence for functional rather than social reasons and so does not have the effect of narrowing the DEG. Hence, what we see in the graph is that the narrowing in the DEG stalls as the prevalence of disability increases, resulting in an increase in the prevalence-adjusted DEG. The aftershocks of the pandemic make real effort and investment on disability employment disadvantage increasingly urgent.