

Outcome Briefing: Roundtable on Proposed Changes to the Disabled Student's Allowance

A discussion on proposed reforms to Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) and how changes to assistive technology funding could affect disabled students, universities and progression into employment.

Policy Context

The Disabled Students' Allowance provides non-repayable support for disabled students to meet additional costs arising from their disability while studying in higher education. [In 2023/24, more than 88,000 students received DSA](#), which currently funds specialist equipment and software, disability-related travel, and non-medical support alongside universities' existing responsibilities to make reasonable adjustments. This funding supports disabled students' full and equal participation in higher education by helping to reduce disability-related barriers that may otherwise affect participation, course completion, and attainment.

On 26 March 2026, the Department for Education (DfE) launched a [consultation](#) proposing changes to the way assistive software is funded through DSA. The consultation argues that, as free and built-in accessibility features have become more widely available through mainstream devices and software, and as some universities increasingly provide learning and accessibility technologies directly to students, the existing approach should be updated to reflect these developments.

Under the proposed model, the starting assumption would be that assistive software is already available to the student and can meet their needs free of charge, either through in-built features in mainstream technology, free software or provision from their university. DSA-funded paid software would therefore only be provided where a student has an additional disability-related need that cannot be met in this way. For a number of software

categories, including composition and mind-mapping, note-taking and captioning, research and referencing, revision, time and task management, and typing software, DSA funding would be limited to ‘exceptional circumstances’. Access to some paid speech-to-text and text-to-speech software would also be narrowed, while specialist software for vision impairment and optical character recognition would broadly continue to be funded. The consultation also proposes that, where paid-for software is approved, needs assessors would recommend a type of software rather than a specific brand, with DSA normally funding the lowest-cost product available that meets the student’s needs.

The consultation closed on 18 June 2026 and is no longer open for responses. [The DfE has committed to publishing the consultation results and its formal response in autumn 2026](#); at the time of writing, this has not yet been published. The proposals are therefore still under consideration.

The proposed DSA reform sits within a wider policy landscape in which government is placing greater emphasis on assistive technology across education and employment. The DfE’s [Special Educational Needs and Disabilities \(SEND\) reforms](#), introduced earlier this year, include a £1.6 million pilot of Assistive Technology Lending Libraries. The pilot enabled up to 3,800 mainstream settings to borrow and trial assistive technology, alongside national training to help educators use it effectively. At the same time, the DfE’s 2026 schools White Paper, [Every Child Achieving and Thriving](#), states that for children with SEND, “well-chosen assistive technologies can reduce barriers and enable more individual needs to be met through learning”.

As in education, the Government is also exploring how to strengthen access to assistive technology to help people gain and maintain employment. The Department for Work and Pensions’ (DWP) 2025 [Pathways to Work](#) Green Paper, identifies greater use of assistive technology as having the potential to “transform the employment prospects of disabled people”, and announced that the Cabinet Office is considering the establishment of a Centre for Assistive and Accessible Technology; a recent update on the exploration of a Centre further announced the establishment of a [“community of experts”](#) on assistive technology and plans for a call for evidence later in 2026. In addition, the DWP has created a £60 million *Pathways to Work Innovation Fund*, to fund the use of technology and other innovative approaches to improving employment outcomes for disabled people.

As such, the present proposals are made in the context of wider government efforts to expand access to assistive technology. If the DSA changes have the impact of restricting some disabled students' access to the tools they need, such proposals would appear out of step with progress on assistive technology elsewhere.

Summary

The APPGAT roundtable was held on 9 September 2026 to discuss the proposed changes to DSA funding for assistive technology. Chaired by Josh Fenton-Glynn MP, it brought together disabled students, universities, practitioners, disability organisations, technology providers, and sector bodies to consider the potential impact on disabled students in higher education.

A first group of concerns centered on the design of the reforms. Participants warned that the assumption that free or built-in tools would meet almost all disabled students' differing needs and circumstances was misguided. They also argued that the ill-defined 'exceptional circumstances' route could create further delays, burdensome evidential requirements, and increased anxiety for students. Participants linked these weaknesses to the lack of meaningful co-production and testing in the reforms consultation, arguing that disabled students, practitioners and assistive technology experts should have been involved in shaping the proposals.

The second group of concerns focused on where the consequences of reform would ultimately fall. Contributors warned that reducing government-funded support would not remove disabled students' underlying needs but could instead shift costs and responsibility onto universities and students. This means that the quality of support available may vary between institutions and individuals depending on their ability to make up for any shortcomings. They also questioned whether the reforms would represent better use of public funds once wider administrative, educational, and longer-term economic effects of employment are considered. In particular, participants argued that weakening DSA may undermine broader Government ambitions to improve access to assistive technology elsewhere across education and employment support.

Overall, the roundtable's contributors questioned whether DSA reform could improve existing support without weakening personalised provision or shifting costs elsewhere, while emphasising the need to maintain continuity of support across education and employment,

and to involve those most affected in the reform's design. These issues are explored through six key themes below.

Participants Included:

- **Josh Fenton-Glynn MP**, Chair, All-Party Parliamentary Group for Assistive and Accessible Technology (APPGAT)
- **Abigail Chapman-Miller**, Project Coordinator (Accessibility Policy), Policy Connect
- **Robert McLaren**, Director of Policy, Policy Connect
- **Jack Churchill**, Chair, British Assistive Technology Association (BATA)
- **Carolyn Smith**, Treasurer and Director, BATA
- **Sarah-Jane Peake**, Secretary and Director, BATA
- **Michelle Power**, Director, BATA
- **Edward Churchill**, Student
- **Esther Aaf**, Student, University of Birmingham
- **Sam Wood**, Student
- **Aarifah Karim**, Policy Lead, Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB)
- **Tom Skelton**, RNIB
- **Alice Speller**, CEO, National Association of Disability Practitioners in Further and Higher Education (NADP)
- **Dr Emma Maslin**, Senior Policy and Research Officer, Association of Managers of Student Services in Higher Education (AMOSSHE)
- **Sophie Mattholie**, Director of Policy, Disabled Students UK
- **Sophie Harrison**, Managing Director, Arden University Students' Association (AUSA)
- **Megan Thomas**, Public Affairs Consultant, National Union of Students (NUS)
- **Avery Greatorex**, Vice President for Liberations, NUS
- **Lucy Merritt**, Education Policy Manager, Thomas Pocklington Trust
- **David Bass**, Director for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, Advance HE
- **Ellen Graves**, Policy Manager (Student Experience), GuildHE
- **Daniel Clark**, Associate Dean for Digital Learning and Learning Design, Canterbury Christ Church University
- **Gosia Kwiatkowska**, Director, RIX Inclusive Research Institute, University of East London
- **Nick Allen**, Policy and Public Affairs Officer, University of Northampton

- **Kerry-Ann Randle**, Director of Student Services, Bournemouth University
- **Jon Stanley**, Head of Student Support, University of Bedfordshire
- **Louis Trupia-Melluish**, Assistant Director (Fees), The Open University
- **Juliette Rowsell**, Reporter, Times Higher Education
- **Kellie Mote**, Accessibility Programme Lead, Jisc

Summary of Discussion Points

1. One size does not fit all

Participants in the roundtable expressed that the proposed reform rested on a mistaken assumption that free accessibility tools would provide sufficient support in all but 'exceptional cases', with that exception itself left ill-defined.

The discussion stressed that different impairments, courses and ways of working create different barriers, requiring different functions, configurations and combinations of assistive technology and software. In short, one size does not fit all. Lucy Merritt, Education Policy Manager at Thomas Pocklington Trust, explained that some free technologies may meet accessibility criteria on paper while still being inadequate in practice. She gave the example of a free platform being formally compatible with a screen reader, but so difficult to navigate that it is effectively unusable for a blind or partially sighted student. Daniel Clark, Associate Dean for Digital Learning and Learning Design at Canterbury Christ Church University, therefore argued against replacing specialist provision with a single standardised offer, emphasising that universal and more individualised forms of support can, and should, coexist.

This does not mean to say that free technology would not be suitable for use in any case. Kerry-Ann Randle, Director of Student Services at Bournemouth University, noted that free assistive technology already has an established place within the current system, with needs assessors recommending it where appropriate and some universities providing it directly. The concern, therefore, is not whether such tools should be used, but whether they should be presumed sufficient.

This distinction between availability and genuine suitability ran throughout the discussion. Alice Speller, CEO of the National Association of Disability Practitioners (NADP), argued that effective support should begin by understanding the barrier faced by the individual student and only then assessing whether an available tool can remove it, rather than starting from the assumption that it will. As she put it, “availability is not the same as accessibility”.

2. Shifting responsibilities and costs

Contributors made the case for inclusion by design, moving away from a reactive or deficit model in which ATech is introduced only once a pupil is struggling, towards an anticipatory approach that embeds accessibility into everyday teaching and learning from the outset.

Universal and specialised provisions were identified as both necessary and mutually reinforcing in moving towards an anticipatory model and delivering the inclusive design needed to support all pupils adequately. Universal provision should be available to all, with its design anticipating a diverse range of needs. Zoe Mather, Education Officer at nasen, explained that one way to achieve this is to integrate commonly used tools into every classroom, including text-to-speech, speech-to-text, captions, reading and translation tools, enlargements and overlays, as well as providing access to lesson materials before and after teaching.

LEO Academy Trust provides a strong example of how universally designed ATech can help preserve dignity and reduce the stigma associated with SEND support. By embedding accessibility tools discreetly within the Chromebooks used by all pupils, the Trust has reduced reliance on separate resources, withdrawal groups and continuous one-to-one adult support. This helps avoid drawing unnecessary attention to individual pupils while enabling them to access support alongside their peers.

Further discussion demonstrated how, in addition to universal provision, designing and incorporating individualised ATech would also be necessary to ensure all needs are met as specialised technology remains essential for some learners. Zoe Mather noted that inclusive design would need a continuum from universal accessibility tools to specialist technology that is highly personalised for communication, cognition, literacy, sensory needs, physical access and independence. She further detailed that inclusion should also mean support following SEND learners through key transitions, when provision is often fragmented because devices, connectivity and eligibility change.

Kathryn Stowell, Head of CENMAC, highlighted the lack of communication technologies available through lending libraries as a significant barrier to inclusion, noting that only two local authorities had equipped their libraries with such tools. This leaves many learners who do not meet the criteria for specialist augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) hubs without access to the local provision that should support them.

3. Ill-defined ‘exceptional circumstances’

Participants raised concerns about the potential impact of the proposal to rely on ‘exceptional circumstances’ as the route through which students could access support beyond free or universally available assistive technology.

A central issue identified was the absence of a clear operational threshold for what would count as ‘exceptional’, and the risk that students would first have to demonstrate that the standard provision had failed before additional support could be considered. Sophie Harrison, Managing Director of Arden University Student Association (AUSA), shared an estimate that, under the current proposals for determining what would count as ‘exceptional’, only 86 of her university’s 1,703 students currently receiving DSA would continue to receive a funded package. This could leave the remaining 1,617 students having to rely on free technology only, absorb additional costs and administrative burdens themselves, or, where this is not possible, enter an appeals process that could affect their ability to engage fully in their studies.

Concerns were also raised that the proposed model could reproduce and intensify problems already seen within the DSA scheme. Alice Speller (NADP) described the case of a student with cerebral palsy and autism who had previously received taxi provision through DSA but, after interrupting and returning to their studies, was told they no longer met a revised eligibility threshold. In lieu of adequate support, the student attempted to travel instead by public transport and was subsequently hit by a bus. Even further medical evidence was initially judged insufficient because it related to the immediate accident rather than the student’s underlying long-term condition. This case illustrates the risks that come with the reform’s proposed reliance on narrow eligibility thresholds for assistive technology, which may produce potentially harmful decisions that fail to reflect a student’s needs.

Other participants similarly warned against the reform’s potential to add further evidential requirements to an already too slow system. Esther Aaf, a University of Birmingham student,

described waiting around two years for her use of a wheelchair to be reflected in her reasonable adjustments, noting that other disabled students had faced similar waits even under the current system. As Josh Fenton-Glynn MP observed, an 18-month delay amounts to half of a three-year degree. Overall, contributors agreed that already substantial delays can have clear consequences for students' participation, progression and wellbeing, and any reform that risks adding further administrative burdens should therefore be approached with caution.

Beyond the practical implications of this clause, participants also questioned the effects of the language 'exceptional' itself. Lucy Merritt (Thomas Pocklington Trust) stressed that may visually impaired students “do not want to be exceptional” and should not be placed in a position where they are effectively asked whether they are “disabled enough” to qualify for support. Sophie Mattholie, Director of Policy at Disabled Students UK, similarly reported that students were already unclear about what they would remain entitled to under the reforms and anxious about losing support they currently rely on.

4. Inconsistency with the broader policy direction

The roundtable discussion emphasised how a strong DSA system is an important part of ensuring disabled people can progress from support in school and further education, through higher education and into employment on an equal basis with their non-disabled peers. The DSA's role therefore extends beyond university, and any reform should be considered within this broader policy context of supporting disabled people throughout this journey.

Within this pathway, Josh Fenton-Glynn MP and others stressed that assistive technology should be understood as a necessary part of enabling participation, rather than an additional benefit or a “nice to have”. This was reinforced by Sophie Harrison (Arden University Student Association), who described assistive technology as “essential tools” that allow disabled students to access learning effectively and on an equal basis with their peers.

Removing this essential support could have consequences far beyond students' immediate experience of university. Participants explained that higher education, supported by DSA, should be understood as one stage within a wider pathway of support across a disabled person's education and working life. As Avery Greatore, the National Union of Students (NUS) Vice President for Liberations, put it, there is a pipeline of support encompassing assistive

technology, from SEND provision, through DSA, and into Access to Work. Weakening one stage of that pipeline risks disrupting the wider journey.

Alice Speller (NADP) similarly emphasised that disabled people are often lifelong users of assistive technology. Its role in higher education therefore encompasses more than supporting course completion: university should also provide a space for students to build confidence and familiarity with the tools and strategies they may continue to rely on in employment. Maintaining continuity of this support is important not only for participation and attainment at university, but also for helping disabled people enter and sustain employment later in life. Louis Trupia-Maluish (The Open University) reinforced this point, warning that lower continuation, completion and achievement rates among disabled students could have longer-term consequences for their future workforce participation.

Given DSA's essential role in enabling participation in higher education and supporting progression into employment, participants argued that the reforms raise wider questions about policy coherence across [SEND Reform](#), DSA, and the future of [Access to Work](#). The reasoning follows that, if the Government is increasing access to assistive technology in schools and recognising its role in supporting disabled people into employment, then reducing access to specialist support through DSA risks creating a gap in that wider pathway. As Carolyn Smith, Treasurer and Director at BATA, argued, these reforms risk pulling in different directions, concluding that there was "no joined-up thinking there".

5. The economic case

In light of the DSA's wider role in supporting employment outcomes, participants also questioned whether the proposed reforms would deliver one of its stated aims: improving value for money. The discussion put forward a broader economic perspective, arguing that reducing support at university could weaken some of the longer-term returns generated when disabled graduates complete their studies and move into sustained employment.

Jack Churchill (BATA) described the current DSA system as "net positive to the exchequer". He and Carolyn Smith (BATA) noted that students who received the DSA have significantly higher completion rates than disabled students who are not supported through the scheme and so the DSA helps more people benefit from the graduate premium. These considerations are especially relevant given the backdrop of the Government's current focus on reducing disability and ill-health-related economic inactivity. The question is therefore not simply

whether DSA expenditure can be reduced in the short term, but whether doing so risks creating greater costs elsewhere in the system over the longer term.

6. Reform should be evidence-based and co-designed

Participants also questioned the robustness of the evidence underpinning the proposals. While the consultation included an Equality Impact Assessment, Jack Churchill (BATA) and others argued that it was not sufficiently comprehensive, particularly given the limited involvement of disabled students and assistive technology specialists in developing and testing the proposals.

Issues were also raised about the comparative analysis used to support the assumption that free software could adequately replace specialist products. Freedom of Information (FOI) requests cited at the roundtable found that the DfE held no data comparing the accuracy of free tools with specialist software, had not established an accuracy threshold for determining comparable functionality, and had not tested free accessibility tools within the ‘lockdown’ browser settings commonly used for online assessments.

Further FOI responses also prompted questions about how far relevant expertise and evidence from lived experience had informed the proposals before they were published for consultation. Jack Churchill (BATA) noted that the DfE had been unable to provide details of any assistive technology specialist, clinicians, or disability-led organisations consulted before concluding that free tools offered comparable functionality to specialist software.

While these groups would have been able to contribute evidence in the subsequent public consultation, participants argued that their lack of involvement in the earlier stages of the reform's development suggests that there had been no meaningful co-production: a process in which people with lived experience are involved as equal partners from the earliest stages of policy design through to development and evaluation. Co-production is widely recognised as good practice in disability and accessibility policy because it ensures that reforms are shaped by the people most directly affected, rather than simply consulted after proposals have already been developed.

Gosia Kwiatkowska, Director of Rix Inclusive Research Institute (RIX) at the University of East London described this failure to work with disabled students as “the biggest problem” with the consultation process. While Alice Speller (NADP) summarised these concerns by

stressing that any reform should be “evidence-based and co-produced with disabled students, practitioners and experts”.

Many of the practical shortcomings identified throughout the roundtable may therefore stem from a policy design process that was insufficiently informed by lived experience and specialist expertise.

Next Steps

Policy Connect will share this outcomes briefing with officials at the Department for Education, policymakers in Parliament and participants in the roundtable, using the evidence and insights gathered to inform ongoing work of the APPGAT.

Participants are also invited to provide any further evidence or arguments following the meeting, with Policy Connect continuing the conversation as the Government considers its response to the consultation.

For more information regarding this work and other accessibility policy projects, please contact Robert McLaren at robert.mclaren@policyconnect.org.uk.

About the APPGAT

The APPGAT aims to disseminate knowledge, generate debate and facilitate engagement on assistive technology among Members of both Houses of Parliament. The group is chaired by Josh Fenton-Glynn MP (Labour), with parliamentary Officers Lord Shinkwin (Conservative), Sadik Al-Hassan MP (Labour) and Lord Low (Crossbench), and Members including Steve Darling MP (Liberal Democrat), the Rt Hon. Lord Blunkett (Labour) and Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson (Crossbench).

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Our work focuses on five key policy areas: Education & Skills; Industry, Technology & Innovation; Sustainability; Health; and Accessibility.

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