



# Current attitudes towards disabled people



**Scope**  
About disability

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# Executive summary

Twenty years ago we changed our name from The Spastics Society to Scope, because we recognised the impact of negative language and public attitudes on disabled people's lives.

Over the last two decades, the introduction of equality legislation and improved access to public spaces mean disabled people have greater opportunities, visibility and aspirations than ever before.

But despite this progress, negative public attitudes and awkwardness about disability prevail.

- Two thirds (67%) of the British public feel uncomfortable talking to disabled people.
- Over a third (36%) of people tend to think of disabled people as not as productive as everyone else.
- Over four fifths (85%) of the British public believe that disabled people face prejudice.
- A quarter (24%) of disabled people have experienced attitudes or behaviours where other people expected less of them because of their disability.
- One fifth (21%) of 18 – 34 years old admit that they have actually avoided talking to a disabled

person because they weren't sure how to communicate with them.

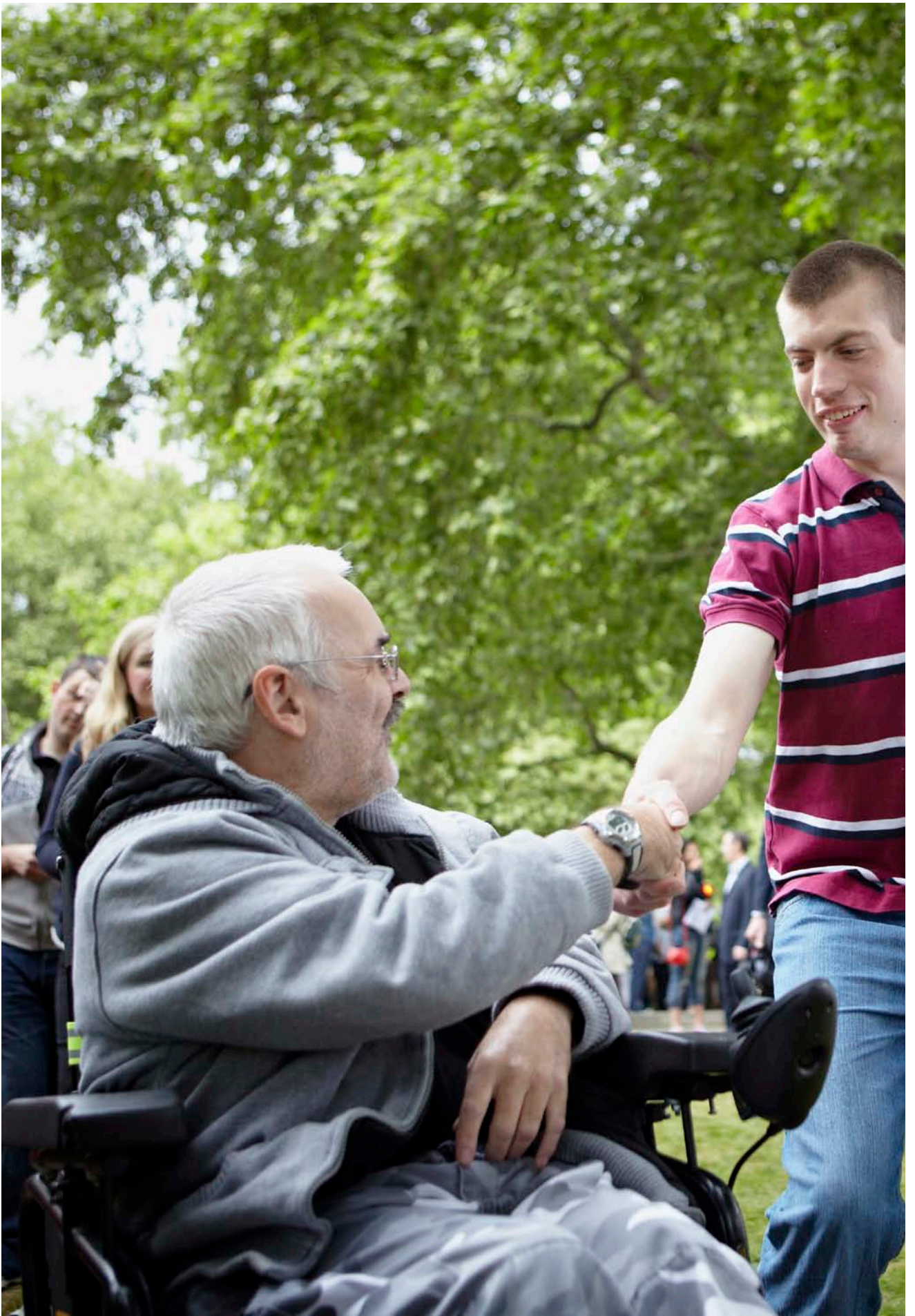
Disabled people and their families tell Scope that negative attitudes affect every area of their lives – in the playground, at work, in shops, on the street.

## **But how can we improve attitudes to disabled people?**

Much of the discomfort people feel about disability may stem from a lack of understanding. Not enough people know a disabled person – nearly half (43%) of the British public say they do not know anyone who is disabled – and many are concerned that they will do or say the wrong thing when talking to disabled people or about disability.

Our research shows that both the general public and disabled people believe that more everyday interactions and greater public education about disability will increase understanding and acceptance of disabled people.

We all have a role to play and Scope is playing its part. This year, we're launching a national campaign to get us all thinking about what we can do to include disabled people more in our lives.



# Introduction

In 2014, disabled people continue to face challenges in many areas of their lives and many of these challenges involve people's attitudes. But what do attitudes towards disabled people currently look like? This report brings together a range of research that Scope has commissioned over the last two years to understand current attitudes towards disability and disabled people.

In this report, we take a look at the kind of attitudes and behaviours that people who aren't disabled display towards disabled people and the attitudes that disabled people themselves say they experience. We consider the reasons for these attitudes and what can be done to change negative attitudes.

This report is based on findings from a series of research projects commissioned by Scope. These comprise a large-scale mixed methods project conducted by

OPM and Ipsos MORI<sup>[1]</sup> and three surveys conducted by Opinium, including one on knowledge and attitudes towards disability.<sup>[2]</sup>

Research on attitudes towards disability and disabled people is steadily increasing, but there's still much more that can be done to understand the issues involved. Our focus in this report is on exploring the kinds of attitudes people hold towards disabled people and how that relates to people's life experiences and who they are.

This report does not attempt to explore the impact of specific policy changes or social and environmental trends on how attitudes are shaped and evolve over time. Nor does it consider the relationship between public attitudes and the incidence of victimisation and hate crime. Both are important areas of research that are beyond the scope of this work.

**Understanding how and why attitudes towards disabled people and disability are formed is crucial.**

# What do we mean by attitudes?



Attitudes are a complex collection of beliefs, feelings, values and dispositions which characterise the way we think or feel about certain people or situations. People's attitudes are a product of life experiences, including the relationships we build with the people around us.

For example, a person's attitudes towards one disabled person might be shaped by their personal experience of knowing another disabled person. And these attitudes often affect the way people behave in particular situations or towards other people.

Attitudes are transient and change from person to person, from group to group, and even within groups over time. Nonetheless we do tend to see

patterns in people's attitudes. People with shared characteristics or common social experiences may well develop similar attitudes towards disabled people or disability in general.

There is a growing body of evidence to indicate that disabled people are more likely than people who aren't disabled to experience the attitudes of others as a major barrier to education, leisure, transport, access to public services, social contact and accessibility outside the home.<sup>[3]</sup> Understanding the prevalence of positive and negative attitudes and which groups of people hold them is crucial if we want to understand how to improve public attitudes.

# Attitudes today

The last two decades have witnessed important legislative changes seeking to tackle discrimination towards disabled people.<sup>[4]</sup> Despite these changes, however, negative attitudes continue to persist.

## **Negative attitudes towards disabled people are widespread**

Research by Opinium found that the majority of UK adults generally believe that disabled people face prejudice in Britain.<sup>[5]</sup> In line with previous waves of the British Social Attitudes survey,<sup>[6]</sup> well over half (57%) of respondents agreed that there is 'a little' prejudice and a quarter (28%) agreed there is 'a lot'.

Nearly four in ten (38%) people surveyed think of disabled people as less productive than non-disabled people, over three quarters (76%) think of disabled people as needing to be cared for, and 13% think of disabled people as getting in the way some or most of the time.<sup>[7]</sup>

This evidence supports other studies that have shown that a substantial proportion of the population believe that disabled people are less capable than non-disabled people, in need of care, and dependent on others.<sup>[8]</sup>

A more recent survey found that just a third (33%) of British people said that they would feel comfortable talking to disabled people, with many worried that they will seem patronising or say the wrong thing.<sup>[9]</sup> The research suggests that one of the reasons behind such behaviours may be that 43% of people say that they do not know anyone who is disabled.

Men aged 18 – 34 are the group least likely to interact with disabled people and most likely to hold negative attitudes towards disabled people. In fact, one fifth (21%) of 18 – 34 year olds say they have avoided talking to a disabled person because they were not sure how to communicate with them.<sup>[10]</sup>

But age and gender alone do not tell us enough about a person to be able to determine what might cause negative attitudes towards disabled people. Figure 1 highlights two key findings from the Opinium research that tell us more about where negative attitudes stem from.

First, people seem to be much more comfortable around people with more 'visible' disabilities (physical or sensory disabilities), than they are around people

with less visible disabilities (mental health conditions or learning disabilities).

Studies have shown that negative attitudes and discrimination are worse towards people with mental health conditions and learning disabilities. This may be due to a generally poor level of understanding about these disabilities and how they affect people's social participation or it may be an indication of the prevalence of negative stereotypes concerning these conditions.

Second, people are more comfortable with the idea of a relative marrying a disabled person or the person next door being disabled than they are with their MP or boss being disabled.

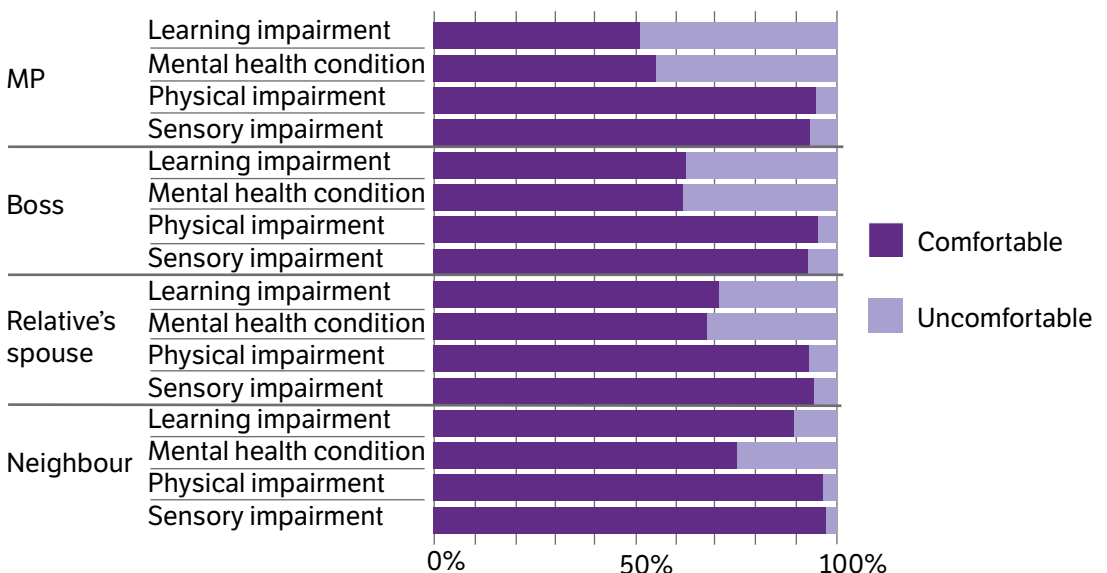
More than anything else, this suggests that people are more uncomfortable with the idea of disabled people being in positions of authority. The research did not uncover whether this is because they think disabled people can't fulfil these roles. Yet around a quarter (24%) of disabled people have felt that people expected less of them because of their disability.<sup>[11]</sup> If this is part of the reason, it points to a real lack of understanding around disabled people's capabilities.

**Many disabled people are experiencing these negative attitudes**

The pervasiveness of negative attitudes among the general public has not gone unnoticed by disabled people. Well over

Figure 1. Percentage of people saying they would feel comfortable if a disabled person was their ... in different scenarios

Source: Opinium research (baseline for these questions=1,861~2,025)





half (58%) of disabled people responding to a survey in 2013 said that they had not noticed any change in people’s attitudes towards them as a disabled person following the 2012 Paralympic Games – a major moment for disability in the UK.<sup>[12]</sup> One in five (22%) were of the opinion that people’s attitudes have worsened, while less than one in ten (9%) believed people’s attitudes towards disabled people have improved.

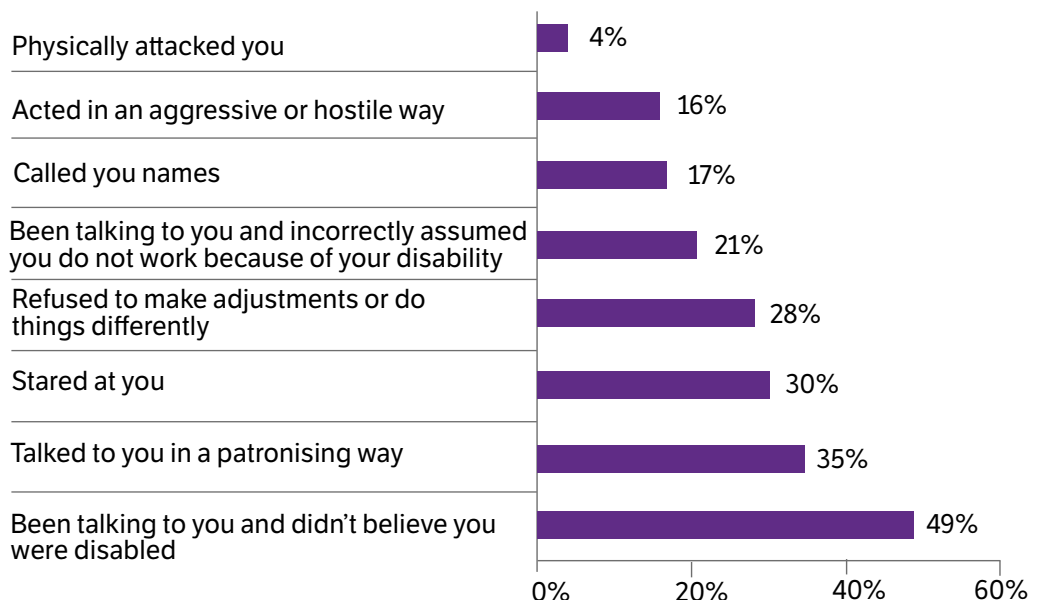
When dealing with members of the public, half (49%) of disabled people said that they had talked to someone who didn’t believe they were disabled (see figure 2). Over a third (35%) indicated that

they have been talked to in a patronising way and 30% have been stared at due to their disability. Many disabled people have also been in contact with members of the public who refused to make reasonable adjustments. Brian’s story illustrates a lot of these points:

**“If I’m tired, my speech can be slurred and I can duck and weave, if I go for a walk, all over the place. People look at you and think, ‘This person’s drunk and it’s only half past seven in the morning’. You see people crossing the road rather than saying, ‘Do you need help?’”**  
 Brian, Frome

Figure 2. Experiences that disabled people faced in the previous 12 months, thought to be a result of their disability, when dealing with members of the public

Opinium research (baseline for this question=1,014)



The OPM / Ipsos MORI research found that many disabled people experienced other people's attitudes or behaviours as a problem in challenging areas of their lives. For example, a fifth (21%) of people who experienced problems in relation to money and benefits said that other people's attitudes or behaviours were involved. This rose to 38% of disabled people who faced challenges around work and employment.

In some cases disabled people have experienced more violent behaviour as a result of negative attitudes. About 4% of disabled people responding to the survey

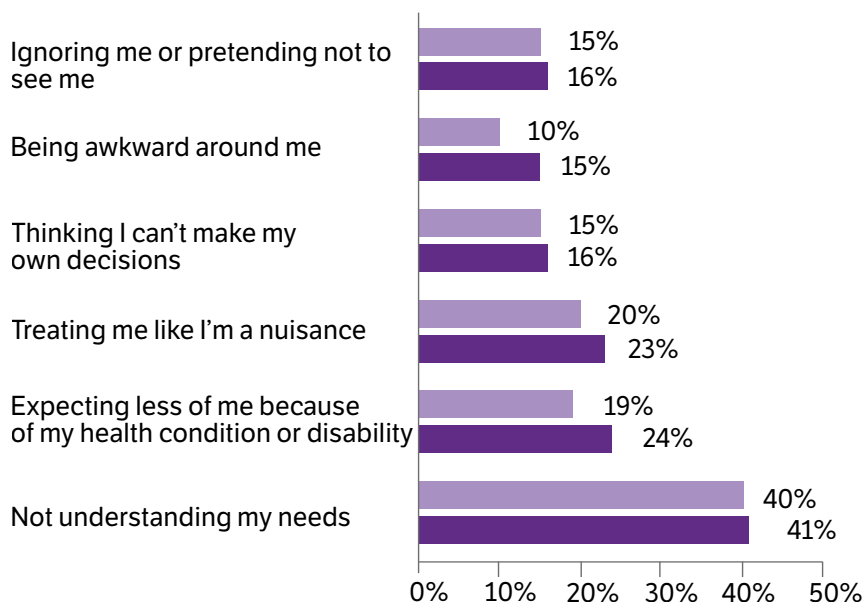
said that they had experienced a physical attack in the previous year. About one in six had experienced aggressive or hostile behaviour and a similar number had experience name-calling.

**There's a general lack of understanding about disability**

A lack of understanding of one's individual needs is the attitude or behaviour most commonly experienced by disabled people – and the one that those who have experienced several negative attitudes or behaviours most want to change (see figure 3). Two in five (41%) disabled people said that they

Figure 3. Percentage of disabled people who have (a) experienced particular behaviours or attitudes from other people because of their health condition or disability and (b) said which behaviours or attitudes they would most like to change

Source: OPM / Ipsos MORI research (baseline for a=2,045; baseline for b=894)



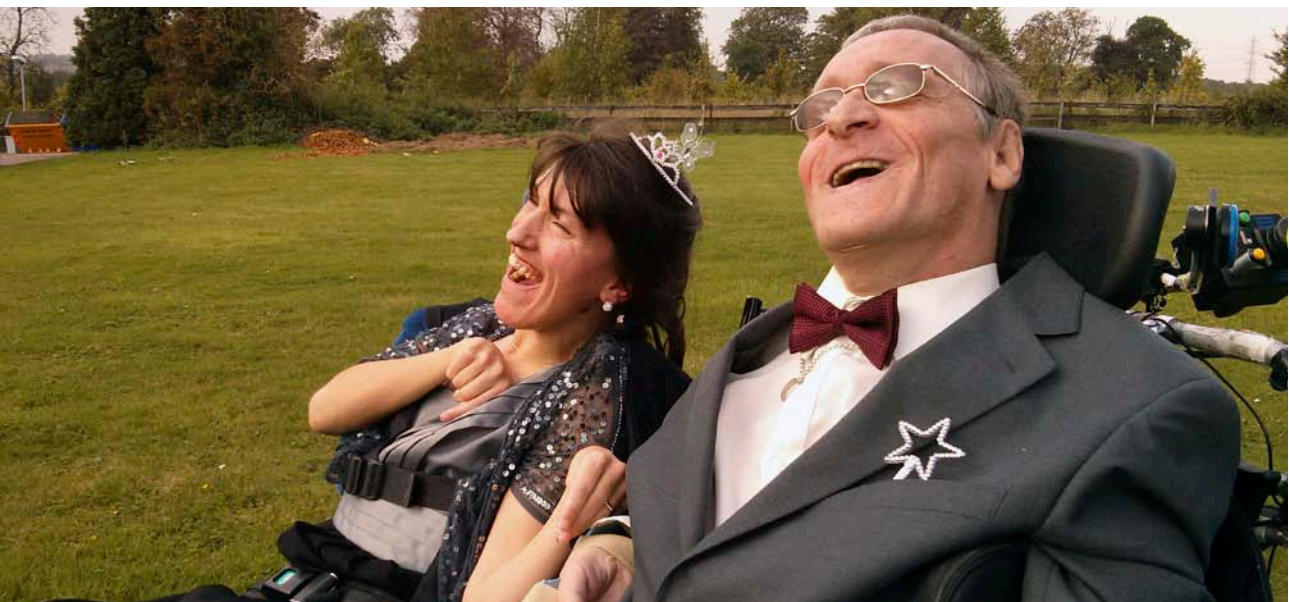
had experienced a lack of understanding around their individual needs from other people. A similar percentage expressed a wish to see this change.

Certain groups of disabled people are more likely to have experienced a lack of understanding of their needs – people with conditions relating to mental health problems (67%) intellectual, social or behavioural or learning disabilities (67%), memory (62%), dexterity (54%) and stamina/breathing difficulties (51%). About two in five people in these groups have felt treated like a nuisance.<sup>[13]</sup>

Disabled people of working age are more likely to have experienced most of these behaviours or attitudes than over 65s, with the biggest gap seen

in relation to ‘not understanding my needs’ (52% versus 27% respectively). ‘Working-class’ disabled people are also more likely than average to have experienced most of the attitudes or behaviours asked about.<sup>[14]</sup> Nearly one in seven (15%) disabled people in the OPM / Ipsos MORI research said that they had felt other people being awkward around them because of their disability. However, one in four (26%) non-disabled people in the Opinion research said that they tend to think of disabled people with awkwardness and discomfort.

This difference could be due to the phrasing of the questions, but it might also indicate that a large proportion of the population just aren’t engaging with disabled people.



# Changing attitudes



Disabled people involved in the OPM / Ipsos MORI research had wide ranging ideas about whose attitudes need to change and the positive changes that would make important differences to various areas of their lives. Among these proposals, four recommendations were particularly prominent.

## **Whose attitudes need to change?**

The OPM / Ipsos MORI research asked disabled people directly whose attitudes they would most like to see a change in (see figure 4). Three in ten (29%) said that they would most like to see a change in the general

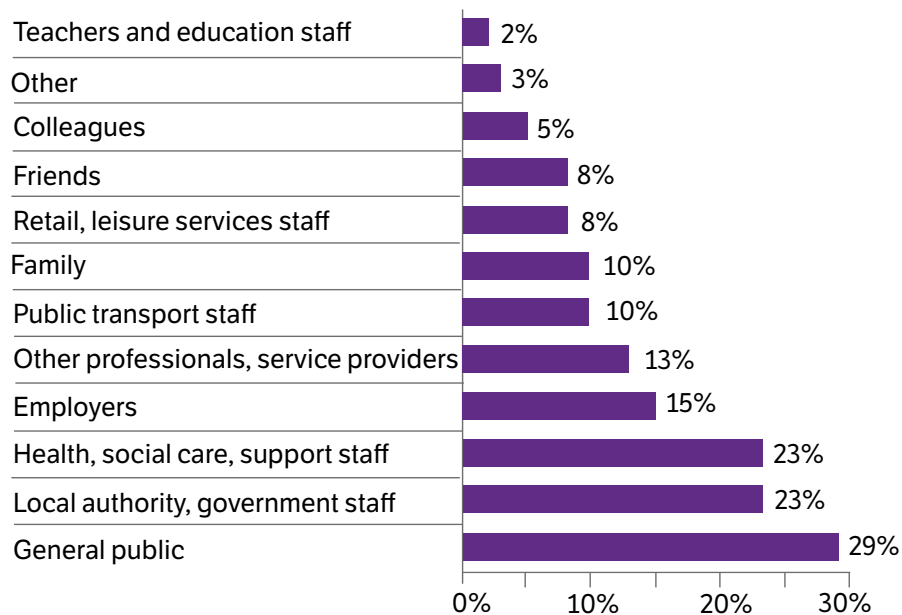
public's attitudes, which underlines just how prevalent negative attitudes are.

Aside from the general public, nearly a quarter (23%) of disabled people identified local authority / government staff as a group whose attitudes they would like to see change for the better, followed closely by health and social care staff (23%). This suggests that staff in the public sector still have some way to go if they are to achieve the outcomes specified by the public sector equality duty.

Fifteen per cent of disabled people surveyed said that they

Figure 4. Whose attitudes would you most like to see change?

Source: OPM / Ipsos MORI research (baseline for this question=2,045)



would most like to see a change in employers' attitudes. However, among disabled people who said they have faced problems around employment where other people's attitudes or behaviours were involved, the vast majority identified employers' attitudes (76%), followed by those of colleagues (51%) and the general public (26%).

It is also worth remembering that people who perceive themselves as stigmatised may also internalise the negative attitudes that they encounter in a disabling society. This in turn can have an impact on people's quality of life and wellbeing. Of the disabled people who reported they had faced challenges in several areas

of their lives, around a quarter (24%) said they would like to see a change for the better in their own anxiety / lack of confidence. As Emily points out, the lack of disabled role models doesn't help:

**“If [the young people I work with aren't] dealing with cultural shame or shame from their home life, they're dealing with their own internalised shame. And there's not that visibility of disabled people for them – so who are the disabled people that they look up to – to see hope from?”**

Emily, London

## Educating people about disability

A message that came through strongly in the OPM / Ipsos MORI research was that public education could help tackle the discrimination and stigma associated with disability. Likewise, over a quarter (28%) of people say that getting advice from disabled people would make them feel more confident talking or interacting with disabled people.<sup>[15]</sup> Investment in public awareness campaigns could help tackle the everyday negative attitudes that disabled people encounter.

**“Educating people is the last thing really, the big, real thing. It’s a hard one to do: to make people aware and educate them that actually a blind person, a disabled person, isn’t someone to shun. They’re actually just as worthwhile and employable and useful as the next person.”**

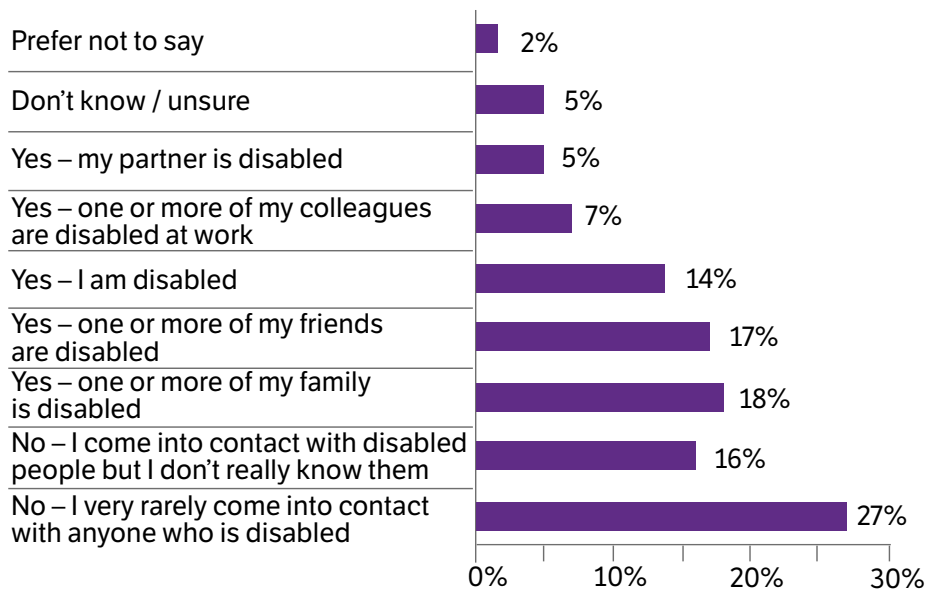
Gavin, Nottingham

## Making opportunities for everyday interactions

Public education is important but there is a wealth of research to suggest that attitudes towards disability and disabled people

Figure 5. Do you personally know anyone who is disabled?

Source: Opinium research<sup>[16]</sup> (baseline for this question=2,001)



are more likely to improve if there are more opportunities for disabled people and people who aren't disabled to have positive interactions in everyday life. However, it's surprising how few such opportunities there are.

Unsurprisingly, a third (33%) of people say that getting to know someone disabled would make them feel more confident around disabled people.<sup>[17]</sup> However, research by Opinium found that over a quarter (27%) of people say they rarely come into contact with disabled people (see figure 5). Altogether, two in five (43%) people don't personally know anyone who is disabled.

Fewer than one in five (17%) people said that they have friends who are disabled. Just 7% of people said that one or more of their work colleagues are disabled, which underlines the high unemployment rate among disabled people and the disproportionate employment of disabled people in particular sectors of the labour market.<sup>[18]</sup>

**Over a quarter of people say they rarely come into contact with disabled people.**

Attitudes towards disability and disabled people are much more likely to improve through more frequent interactions between disabled people and non-disabled people in everyday situations. Paradoxically, these interactions are unlikely to happen when many people hold negative attitudes.

### **Positive attitudes can be shaped from an early age**

Disabled people suggested that positive attitudes could be shaped through more interaction between children with and without impairments. In fact a recent survey carried out by Mumsnet and Scope found that four in ten (38%) parents said that their disabled children 'rarely' or 'never' have the opportunity to socialise and mix with children who aren't disabled.<sup>[19]</sup>

**“Parents – even in this day and age – seem to think my son is a leper with a contagious disease, yet he has CP [cerebral palsy]. If their kids ask questions they rush them away. People are very ashamed of disabilities – not the parents who have the disabled child, as I am more than happy to explain to their children what's up with my son. But parents seem to not want their children to understand some children have poorly legs or the like.”**

Helen, Surbiton

As Helen's story shows, parents and teachers also have a vital role to play in shaping and modelling attitudes. This message was also backed up by the results of the Mumsnet / Scope survey. The majority of parents surveyed felt that more positive attitudes and understanding of disability among staff (72%) and other parents (65%) would lead to more inclusive services and groups in their local area. This result highlights the important role that parents and professionals play in the socialisation of children and young people.

### **Seeing disabled people in the media**

A strong message from expert interviewees and from focus group and interview participants in the OPM / Ipsos MORI research was the positive impact of greater visibility of disabled people on reducing the stigma and discrimination towards disability. Participants were very keen to see more positive

portrayals of disabled people on TV and in mainstream media.

While participants' views about the best way to portray disabled people and disability issues on television varied, there was consensus that seeing more disabled people as everyday characters (rather than obviously 'good' or obviously 'bad' characters) would help to raise awareness of disability among the wider public and reduce stigma and discriminatory attitudes:

**“We need a more realistic view of disabled people – we're not all heroes or villains, even though I love stories about disabled people becoming heroes, overcoming adversity. But we all have the right not to climb a mountain!”**

Female participant from OPM / Ipsos MORI research

Experts interviewed during the research were particularly keen to see more disabled people as role models and in the leadership positions which are responsible for championing change. They felt that this would be powerful in changing wider society's attitudes towards disabled people.

**Parents and teachers have a vital role to play in shaping and modelling attitudes.**



# Conclusion

Public attitudes have an impact on the material and non-material aspects of everyone's living standards, and disabled people in particular. At Scope, we believe that we won't see structural changes that improve disabled people's living standards without tackling attitudinal change at the same time.

The findings in this report show that large sections of the population hold negative attitudes towards disabled people and these attitudes are underpinned by a general lack of understanding about disability and disabled people's needs.

Generally speaking, men are more likely to hold negative attitudes than women, especially among younger age groups. Moreover, attitudes towards people with less 'visible' disabilities tend to be much more negative.

There is a lot that can be done to change this, including better education; ensuring there are more opportunities for disabled people and people who aren't disabled to have positive interactions; and encouraging more positive portrayals of disability and disabled people in the media.



# Notes

[1] OPM and Ipsos MORI (2014) Removing barriers, raising living standards, Report for Scope. The research consisted of in-depth qualitative research, conducted by OPM, including 10 focus groups and 30 one-to-one interviews with disabled people with a range of impairments and/or health conditions; and quantitative survey research, conducted by Ipsos MORI, including an online survey of 1,674 disabled people and a face-to-face survey with 371 disabled people, which combined to give a representative sample of disabled people across the UK. In addition, OPM conducted ten interviews with disability experts, change experts and members of the coproduction group.

[2] Opinium (2013) research: 2,081 online interviews with nationally representative sample of UK adults aged 18+, conducted between 11 – 19 September 2013.

[3] Office for National Statistics (2014) Life opportunities survey, understanding disability wave two, part II. <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/los/life-opportunities-survey/wave-two--part-ii/index.html>

[4] These include the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, superseded by the Equality Act 2010.

[5] See note 2 above.

[6] Office for Disability Issues (2011) Public perceptions of disabled people: evidence from the British Social Attitudes Survey 2009. <http://odi.dwp.gov.uk/docs/res/ppdp/ppdp.pdf>

[7] Scope analysis of Opinium research (see note 2 above).

[8] Department for Work and Pensions (2002) Disabled for life?: Attitudes towards, and experiences of, disability in Britain.

NatCen (2007) Attitudes towards and perceptions of disabled people – findings from a module included in the 2005 British Social Attitudes survey. <http://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/files/library/robinson-NatCenDisabilityModuleAug2007.pdf>

[9] Opinium (2014) research: 2,001 online interviews with nationally representative sample of UK adults aged 18+, conducted between 11 – 14 April 2014.

[10] See note 9 above.

[11] Opinium (2013) research: online survey of 1,014 UK adults aged 18+ whose day-to-day activities are affected by long standing physical or mental impairments, conditions, illnesses or disabilities, conducted between 7 – 17 June 2013. <http://news.opinium.co.uk/survey-results/paralympic-legacy>

[12] See note 11 above

[13] About two fifths (42%) of people with mental health conditions and 41% of people with intellectual, social or behavioural or learning disabilities have felt treated like a nuisance.

[14] 'Working class' is used as shorthand for people who were categorised as C2, D or E under

the NRS social grade system. Conversely, people who are categorised as A, B or C are loosely defined as 'middle class'.

[15] See note 9 above.

[16] See note 11 above.

[17] See note 9 above.

[18] Trotter R (2014) A million futures: halving the disability employment gap. <http://www.scope.org.uk/Scope/media/Documents/Publication%20Directory/A-million-futures-halving-the-disability-employment-gap.pdf>

[19] Scope analysis of Mumsnet / Scope survey of 550 parents of disabled children in England and Wales, conducted between 24 January – 7 February 2014.



Scope exists to make this country a place where disabled people have the same opportunities as everyone else. Until then, we'll be here.

We provide support, information and advice to more than a quarter of a million disabled people and their families every year. We raise awareness of the issues that matter.

And with your support, we'll keep driving change across society until this country is great for everyone.

**Two thirds of the British public feel uncomfortable talking to disabled people. Share your experiences of public attitudes on Twitter.**

**#EndTheAwkward**

**[www scope.org.uk](http://www.scope.org.uk)**

Call 0808 800 3333 to let us know if you'd like this information in a format that's accessible for you.