Climate and disability resource for local authority food planning

A resource to support local authorities to create sustainable food policy and projects that are equitable for Disabled people

January 2026

This document is part of a set of local authority resources developed by Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership's Climate and Disability project and the Sensing Climate research project. The Climate and Disability programme is part of the Community Climate Action Project, coordinated by Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership and funded by the National Lottery's Climate Action Fund.
The resources are designed to support local authorities to understand the impact that climate and nature projects can have on their local communities of Disabled people. The resources feature recommended actions that can be taken to make projects inclusive and just for Disabled people. As well as department-specific resources, there are also supplementary resources on co-production and inclusive engagement. We welcome any local authority to use the resources to support their work.

Introduction

The Food Foundation's Food Insecurity Tracker finds that households with a Disabled person are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity. This is in large part due to employment and income inequalities experienced by Disabled people. Yet other factors also

have significant impacts on access to food, such as:

- Lack of support (e.g. via personal assistants) to cook when unable to do so;
- Higher costs of food when needing to meet specific dietary requirements for health reasons or when reliant on pre-chopped/ processed food due to dexterity/mobility challenges, fatigue or inaccessible cooking facilities in poorly adapted homes.;
- Inaccessible and poor public transport links to food shops and the disproportionate likelihood of living in a food desert;
- Inaccessible placement of sustainable options in food shops;
- Barriers to online food shopping (inaccessible user interfaces, delivery costs, inappropriate substitutions etc.).

Welfare payments are often insufficient to cover the costs of energy bills alongside food, particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis which have left many Disabled people having to choose whether to heat or eat. These trade-offs, in turn, can exacerbate or instigate new health conditions and challenges to manage.

A disproportionate number of people using foodbanks are Disabled and/or include someone who is Disabled in the household. A 2025 analysis by WPI Economics for the Trussell Trust found that a further 440,000 people in Disabled households will be at risk of relying on food banks for basic nutrition with the Government's planned cuts to social security payments.

As climate change deepens UK food insecurity and disrupts supply chains, Disabled people are among those likely to be most severely impacted.

Climate messaging that advocates for greener diets needs to recognise that many people have little choice in the food they can access. This means that messages to eat organic, local, vegetarian or vegan food can be alienating and disempowering.

Similarly, climate messaging that encourages people to prepare for emergencies by storing supplies at home needs to recognise

that many households cannot afford everyday food, let alone emergency food, and/or may not have space to store it even when it is affordable.

There is also growing policy interest in supporting more people to 'grow their own'. Yet, currently much of the infrastructure that exists to support local food production does not meet the needs of Disabled people. Meanwhile, community food projects to support those experiencing food poverty don't always meet the needs of Disabled people.

Areas of climate and health-related food policy that risk creating new challenges for Disabled people include:

- **Shifts to sustainable diets creating barriers for people with complex dietary needs** - While the shift to sustainable diets is important, flexibility of options must be maintained to ensure that those who have complex dietary needs are able to secure a nutritious and enjoyable diet. Many parts of a sustainable diet, such as eating local fresh produce, also require more preparation work. This work is often not possible for Disabled people, especially when also experiencing shrinking care packages and welfare payments.

- **Food growing projects and infrastructure failing to meet the needs of Disabled people** - Building resilience around food chains calls for more food being produced at a local level and by members of communities. Community gardens, individual allotments, and community allotments are all part of this strategy but growing infrastructure is often inaccessible. Few allotment sites are accessible, raised beds and tools are often inaccessible, individuals may feel unable to manage growing by themselves, and public transport links to the sites are often poor, excluding people without cars and who cannot cycle. Meanwhile, many Disabled people do not have access to growing space to grow from home. Care needs to be taken to improve this infrastructure, and to enable people to take part in growing projects in a way that meets their needs.

- **Food projects failing to reach the segments of the community that are most in need** - A range of brilliant community food projects to support people experiencing food poverty exists, but unfortunately these rarely meet the access needs of all Disabled people. For example, community meals are not accessible to people who need support to leave their home, or who need interpreters, or who have specific dietary needs. Better channels are needed for raising awareness of opportunities that Disabled people could benefit from, alongside programmes to build confidence to encourage people to attend.

- **Additional barriers around access to food during pandemic situations**, which are likely to occur more frequently as climate change worsens. During Covid-19 lockdowns, 60% of Disabled people struggled to access essential supplies, including food, and 90% of Disabled people were concerned about access to food. Many Disabled people rely on their support network to shop for them, which can be severely impacted during pandemics. Others rely on online shopping delivery slots, which become oversubscribed during lockdowns. Some supermarket websites and telephone helplines were inaccessible to people with sensory impairments. Social distancing measures, long queues, changes to the physical layout of shops during pandemics can also contribute to food insecurity for Disabled people.



Introducing Catherine

Catherine is a Deaf person with arthritis who lives on her own. She struggles to cut up vegetables to make the healthy vegetarian meals that she used to enjoy when her care package was large enough to enable her PA to cover some cooking duties. So she now largely eats ready meals that her neighbour brings her. However, these are expensive, very different to what she would choose to cook for herself and contributing to her putting on weight which is worsening her arthritis. She feels bad about the large amounts of plastic these meals use but is unsure of how else to feed herself. A friend has informed her of a community meal in her neighbourhood but she is too nervous to attend, knowing that no one who communicates with BSL will be present. She is also nervous about traveling on the bus since the walk either side of the journey is longer than she would normally attempt.

(Catherine is a fictional composite character taken from the real lived experiences of multiple Disabled people.)



Key questions for planning

- **Have you conducted an Equalities Impact Assessment (EqIA) on your food plans?**

- **If so:**
    - Have you considered impairment-specific effects? E.g. mobility barriers to preparing food, dietary needs due to restricted diets or allergies?
    - Have you taken intersectionality into account? E.g. being disabled and from a low income community that is in a food desert leading to multiple barriers around accessing food etc.
    - Have you worked with a pan-impairment Disabled People's Organisation to review and feed into the EqIA to identify potential gaps?
    - Have other organisations fed in from the perspective of communities who may not specifically identify as disabled but who often experience high levels of impairment or illness? E.g. people who are homeless, van dwellers, refugees and asylum seekers?
    - Have you set out tangible actions to address any identified gaps in the plans?
- **If not:**
    - Could you resource a DPO to review your food plans to identify gaps?
    - Could you involve DPO representatives within an equalities partnership to embed such insights and EqIA processes into your long-term food planning and monitoring?

- **When creating new food growing spaces, are they being designed so that Disabled people can benefit from them?**
    - Are 10% of private allotment sites accessible and all community growing projects accessible?
    - Are food growing projects being created in spaces Disabled people already visit, e.g. GP surgeries and local parks?

- **Are you working with local food businesses to ensure they understand legal accessibility standards?**

- **When the Council is providing food, through an event or service, are the options able to meet diverse and complex dietary needs?**

- **Have you considered your communications through a disability justice lens?**
  - Does your communications team have disability training?
  - Do they understand how to frame food communications to ensure that people do not feel shamed or stigmatised for not being able to take specific actions?
  - Could communications be co-produced with a DPO?

- **Have you established effective links with other Council departments and agencies involved in food resilience planning? E.g. Is the planning department enforcing accessibility measures in new food shops, and ensuring that no new food deserts are created by housing developers?**

Areas to prioritise

- Support Disabled people to source accessible and affordable food that is good for the planet.
- Changes to food should be accessible and not make difficulties for anyone's medical or mobility needs.
- Support Disabled people to grow their own food.

[Read the full list of actions to consider around disability and food in Bristol's community climate action plan by and for Disabled people.]



Further resources

- The Food Foundation 2023 report, 'Food insecurity and inequalities experienced by disabled people': https://foodfoundation.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-12/Disabilities%20briefing_FINAL.pdf
- The Trussell Trust 2025 report, 'Hunger in the UK': https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-09/hunger_in_uk_sept25.pdf
- WPI Economics 2025 analysis for Trussell, 'Policy Assessment Spring Statement 2025 Disability Benefit Reforms, the costs of hunger and hardship': https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-06/disability_benefit_reforms_impact_on_hunger_and_hardship.pdf
- The Autism Allotments project: https://autism-allotments.co.uk/
- Accessible garden design advice by Thrive: https://www.thrive.org.uk/get-gardening/make-my-garden-more-accessible

Contact: Sarah.Bell@exeter.ac.uk, contact@bristolclimatenature.org

Suggested citation: Bell, SL. and Geen, E. 2026. Climate and disability resource for local authority food planning. A resource to support local authorities to create sustainable food policy and projects that are equitable for Disabled people. Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership with Sensing Climate.

Thanks to Martin Fodor, and Mark Leach (Bristol City Council) for feedback, and WECIL for supporting with case studies.