Accessible Technology for Disabled People

Overview

- *Disabled people face barriers to affordable and usable assistive technology (AT)* [3] [4].
- *The Royal Society calls for inclusive design and skills investment* [3].
- *Current VAT relief applies only to devices solely designed for disability use* [9]*, excluding many adaptive mainstream technologies.*
- *Planned reforms to Personal Independence Payment (PIP) in 2026 could affect eligibility* [10]*, which will indirectly impact access to AT.*

Background

Assistive technology (AT) refers to products and systems that enable disabled people to live independently and participate in society, by supporting individuals in performing functions that would otherwise be difficult [1]. AT ranges from traditional aids, such as hearing aids, wheelchairs, and white canes, to digital tools such as screen readers, voice recognition software, and adapted smartphones.

There are an estimated 16 million disabled people in the UK [2], many of whom rely on AT for daily life; however, research shows that affordability and usability remain persistent barriers for disabled people [3] [4], with disabled households needing an additional £1,095 per month to have the same standard of living as non-disabled households [5]. Globally, the WHO estimates that nearly 1 billion people lack access to AT [4].

The Equality Act 2010 places legal duties on organisations to make reasonable adjustments for disabled people [6], including through technology; despite this, access to AT remains inconsistent, with gaps in funding, design, and digital skills [3]. The highlighted barriers can limit participation in education, employment, and public services [7]; further to this, rapid technological change risks widening the digital divide if inclusion is not prioritised [8].

Recent policy and financial developments may influence access to AT. Current VAT relief applies only to devices solely designed for disability use [9]; this excludes many adaptive mainstream technologies that could otherwise support independent living. Planned reforms to Personal Independence Payment (PIP) in 2026 could alter eligibility for many people [10], indirectly affecting individuals' ability to fund or access AT [11]. The Royal Society's 2025 report highlights that such financial and policy factors play a key role in shaping who can benefit from AT and how it can support independent and fulfilled lives [3].

International Comparisons

In Europe, the European Accessibility Act (EAA) requires EU member states to meet accessibility standards for ICT and services by 2025, improving access to digital tools and assistive technologies for disabled people [12].

In the United States, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) establishes longstanding legal duties for digital accessibility, requiring public and private organisations to ensure websites, apps, and other digital services are accessible to disabled people [13].

In Nordic countries, subsidies are often provided for mainstream technology adaptations, frequently without VAT barriers, improving access to assistive technologies for disabled people [14].

International approaches to accessibility highlight different priorities from the UK Equality Act 2010. The EAA mandates binding standards for ICT and services [12], the ADA emphasises explicit digital accessibility duties [13], and Nordic countries provide subsidies for mainstream technology adaptations [14]. By contrast, the Equality Act relies on broad duties to make reasonable adjustments without prescribing specific standards or funding [6]. These differences suggest that, as the Royal Society's 2024 report notes [15], the UK may face challenges in the uptake and effective use of AT compared with jurisdictions that provide clearer standards or financial support.

Key Issues

Affordability: VAT relief rules exclude many devices, increasing costs for disabled people. Current legislation provides relief only for goods "designed solely" for disabled use [9], excluding mainstream devices that can serve as AT, such as laptops or smartphones with accessibility features. Surveys indicate that disabled households can face additional costs of up to £1,095 per month for essential technology and equipment [5], creating significant financial barriers for individuals seeking to live independently via AT.

Design Gaps: AT is often developed without meaningful input from disabled people [16] [17], reducing usability and trust. The Royal Society found that many AT products lack co-design with end users [3], which can result in wasted public and private investment. Calls for "inclusive design" approaches emphasise involving disabled people throughout the development process to ensure products meet real user needs [3] [18].

Welfare Links: PIP is a key source of support for AT costs. While the previously proposed four-point rule has been scrapped, any future reforms to PIP eligibility criteria could still indirectly reduce individuals' ability to afford or access essential AT.

Digital Skills and Infrastructure: Even when AT is available, gaps in training and connectivity can limit uptake by disabled people [16]. Many disabled people require support to develop digital literacy [19], while some continue to rely on analogue alternatives. Unequal access to broadband, devices, and support services further exacerbates exclusion and reduces the effectiveness and adoption of AT [20].

Stakeholder Perspectives

Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs): DPOs emphasise that affordability, access to assistive technology, and independence are central to the rights of disabled people. They advocate for policies that reduce financial barriers and ensure individuals can participate fully in society, highlighting the importance of involvement in the design and delivery of AT.

Disability Charities: Charities focus on the practical barriers affecting disabled people, including VAT restrictions, potential changes to PIP eligibility, and wider digital exclusion. They often campaign for both policy reform and public awareness to ensure that disabled people can access the technology and support they need.

Industry: Technology companies support inclusive design and co-production with end users to improve usability and trust; however, they face challenges in balancing the cost of implementing accessibility features, meeting regulatory standards, and ensuring products remain commercially viable.

Government/Regulators: Government bodies must balance affordability, tax revenue, and welfare reform pressures, while enforcing standards and coordinating programs to enhance AT access for those who need it.

Policy Considerations

VAT Reform: Expanding VAT relief to include adaptive mainstream devices could reduce costs for disabled people and increase access to assistive technology. However, broadening relief may reduce government tax revenue and would require careful definition of eligible products to prevent misuse.

Inclusive Design: Mandating co-production with disabled users in the procurement and development of assistive technology could improve usability, trust, and alignment with real user needs. Implementation challenges include the need for capacity building, training for procurement teams, and possible increased upfront development costs.

Funding Safeguards: Decoupling assistive technology support from welfare eligibility could ensure continuity of access, regardless of changes to benefits like PIP. This approach would require establishing new administrative mechanisms and funding routes, which could be complex and resource-intensive.

Skills and Training: Investing in local digital inclusion and training initiatives can enhance the uptake of assistive technology and improve digital literacy among disabled people. Sustaining these initiatives requires ongoing investment, coordination, and support across regions, which may be challenging to maintain over time.

Evidence and Evaluation: Embedding monitoring and evaluation into AT policies can ensure interventions are effective and resources are well-targeted. While this improves accountability, it adds administrative burden and requires reliable data collection.

Public Awareness: Raising awareness of available AT, VAT relief, and training opportunities can increase adoption and ensure policies reach underserved groups. Sustained campaigns are necessary, which require coordination and ongoing investment.

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