

Government increases funds for DFG but faces ‘lifetime homes’ call

The government has announced a seven per cent increase in the annual payments it makes to local authorities in England to help fund adaptations to disabled people’s homes.

The Communities and Local Government department said it would give £167.3 million to councils to help them fund disabled facilities grants (DFG).

The DFG programme should help about 40,000 disabled people make improvements to their homes this year, such as installing a downstairs bathroom, ramps or wider doorways, or improving lighting.

Lord McKenzie, the communities minister, said: “No one wants to go through the upheaval of moving house when it is avoidable. This money enables people to stay in their own home, while enjoying an improved quality of life.”

The increased funding was welcomed by the disability charity RADAR, which said DFGs often prevent disabled people having to move into residential care.

But it called on the government to stop means-testing the grants, which “can cause great hardship to those whose claims are turned down”.

And RADAR said there would be less need for disabled people to apply for DFGs if the government fulfilled its pledge to make “lifetime homes standards” – accepted housing design principles in areas such as accessibility and adaptability – mandatory for all new homes.

December’s pre-Budget report said any move to make them mandatory would now not occur until 2013 “at the earliest”.

Liz Sayce, RADAR’s chief executive, said the grant funding was “very welcome”, but she added: “We would like to take this opportunity to remind the government of the vital importance of lifetime homes standards in guaranteeing that sufficient accessible housing will be available, thus reducing the number of disabled people facing long waits for suitable accommodation.

“Building to lifetime homes standards brings great benefits for small additional costs, and yet the standards have not yet been adopted.”

1 April 2010

EU funds ‘being used to build segregated institutions’

European Union funds are being used to build large new residential institutions for disabled people across eastern and central Europe, according to a new report.

The European Coalition for Community Living (ECCL) said structural funds – money earmarked for development – were also being used to renovate existing institutions in European Union member states such as Romania, Hungary and Latvia.

Wasted Time, Wasted Money, Wasted Lives ... A Wasted Opportunity? says the funding for segregated institutions comes despite EU policies that seek to promote community living, and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which recognises disabled people's right to live in the community.

It says the money is being used to maintain the segregation of disabled people in large, remote institutions where "their exclusion from society is virtually absolute".

A string of reports over the last decade have detailed the "horrific reality" of institutional care for many disabled adults and children in central and eastern Europe, it says, highlighting the use of physical restraints, malnutrition, physical and sexual abuse, poor sanitation, inadequate clothing, and the lack of privacy.

Research suggests there are at least 300,000 disabled people living in long-stay residential institutions across the 10 EU member states in central and eastern Europe – many of them people with learning difficulties or mental health conditions.

The report says a continuing failure to use EU structural funds to develop community-based alternatives to institutions would be "a wasted opportunity and an inefficient use of substantial amounts of money", while disabled people would remain segregated and excluded from society.

Camilla Parker, the report's author, said: "The continued institutionalisation of disabled people is not acceptable in the Europe of the 21st century.

"Residents are often subjected to severe human rights violations and generally their quality of life is very poor.

"Investing in such long-term residential institutions is therefore not a good use of public funds. Structural funds should not be used to maintain this archaic system of institutional care."

The report calls for the EU to review its use of structural funds, for disabled people's organisations to be closely involved in future monitoring of how the funds are used, and for the removal of barriers to using the money to develop community-based services.

1 April 2010

Work test plans 'could blight lives of hundreds of thousands'

Government plans to start using its controversial work capability assessment (WCA) to test all those still receiving incapacity benefit (IB) could "blight" the lives of hundreds of thousands of disabled people, say critics.

Work and pensions secretary Yvette Cooper confirmed that the government would start testing the 1.5 million people still receiving IB from October, building up to more than 10,000 tests a week, with IB phased out by April 2014.

Since October 2008, new applicants for out-of-work disability benefits have had to undergo the new test – repeatedly criticised as too strict and inflexible by campaigners – in order to qualify for employment and support allowance (ESA), the replacement for IB.

This week's announcement came as the government revealed minor changes to the WCA, following the long-awaited publication of an internal review.

The assessment should now be easier to understand and more sensitive to fluctuating conditions such as ms and mental illness, while some people, such as those awaiting chemotherapy or with severe mental health conditions, will be exempt from the test.

The Disability Benefits Consortium (DBC) welcomed the exemptions but said the review does not reflect the problems the WCA is causing many disabled people, and the test remained "inflexible", failed to recognise the impact of some impairments and "prevents people accessing tailored support to get work".

A DBC spokesman added: "The Disability Benefits Consortium was asked to contribute to the review but is frustrated that concerns over the stringency of the assessment have largely gone unaddressed and opportunities for improvement have been missed."

Neil Coyle, director of policy for Disability Alliance, a consortium member, said the review's findings were "unacceptable" and failed to recognise the high levels of workplace discrimination that make it even harder for many disabled people to find jobs.

He added: "What is most worrying is that this pretence that [the WCA] is effective is going to blight potentially hundreds of thousands of people's lives when you see migration from IB."

Cooper also announced a series of other measures around welfare reform and disabled people.

There will be extra support for those who have been on IB for many years and are pronounced fit for work after taking the WCA, with compulsory jobs or work placements for those who don't find work after two years on jobseeker's allowance.

There will also be a guaranteed place on Work Choice – the specialist disability employment programme that will replace Workstep from October – for those on ESA who do not find a job after two years.

Those receiving ESA and considered able to take part in work-related activity will receive personalised support alongside a strict regime of requirements they will have to meet to continue receiving the benefit, with most expected to move off ESA within two years.

From April 2011, a new employment support programme for disabled people will replace Pathways to Work – which the government said was “not flexible or cost effective enough”.

And changes to the access to work programme will see larger employers pay a higher contribution towards workplace adjustments, subsidising the costs of smaller employers.

Cooper said: “This is a ‘something for something’ approach which gives people more help alongside a responsibility to take it up so that no one who is fit for work is left to a life on benefits.”

The DWP said it expected that its reforms to IB and ESA would produce over £1.5 billion savings over the next five years.

1 April 2010

National Care Service white paper: campaigners raise concerns

Two leading disabled campaigners have welcomed the government’s plans for a National Care Service, but have raised serious concerns about some of the proposals in the white paper.

Baroness [Jane] Campbell said she was “quietly satisfied” with the basic structure laid out in Building the National Care Service as she had “fought for a long time for a comprehensive service like the NHS” which would raise the status of social care and support.

And she said she was “thrilled” with the white paper’s commitment to “portability” – allowing disabled people to move to a new area and not face a reassessment of their needs – adding: “Disabled people have been fighting for the right to freedom of movement for over a decade.”

But she said there was a need for “a bit of reconstruction” and some additions to the white paper.

She said she was concerned at the suggestion of a licensing scheme for personal assistants (PAs), with the possibility of “compulsory statutory regulation”.

Baroness Campbell said the independent living movement had “fought very hard” for “permissive” and not “mandatory” regulation of PAs, and a licensing system would “undermine independent living and the right to risk taking”.

Rowen Jade, the newly reappointed chair of Equality 2025, the government’s advisory body on disability equality, shared her concerns.

She said registration could prevent her taking on inexperienced individuals with potential, and “take away opportunities for people that cannot provide bits of paper as proof that they will be good personal assistants”, and would “limit choices” and “limit the pool of available employees”.

Jade said she also wanted to see “definitions and explanations” of many of the phrases in the white paper, such as the government’s promise of “high quality” services.

She was particularly concerned about the emphasis on “reablement” and what that might mean for some disabled people.

The white paper says those approaching their council for support should be offered “a period of re-ablement” before a needs assessment takes place.

Jade said she was concerned that, for example, a council might persuade a disabled person who needed an hour’s support to be fed to have a feeding tube installed instead “in the name of independence”, but really as a cost-cutting measure.

Jade said some of her concerns had been “erased” after her first brief look at the white paper, but added: “I feel there is now a lot of work to be done in taking what is written in the document and making it work for disabled people.”

She said Equality 2025 would now be scrutinising the white paper “very carefully”. She added: “Equality 2025 will be working to make sure that those that are currently best served under the postcode lottery are the benchmark for the National Care Service.

“Realistically, there is never going to be a time when there is enough funding, but if there are cultural changes [across the whole infrastructure] a little bit of funding can go a long way, so I am optimistic.”

A Department of Health spokeswoman said the new licensing scheme would be run on a voluntary basis for all social care workers, and would be trialled first before the government decided “whether any particular groups of workers might need compulsory statutory regulation in the future”.

She said: “We are committed to making sure people receive high quality care, and there are a range of options that could ensure that a regulatory regime is proportionate.”

But she said it was “a complex issue and requires a sophisticated approach”, and the pilot scheme would allow the government to “give full consideration to the risks, costs and benefits associated with models of regulation”.

1 April 2010

National Care Service white paper: mixed reaction from charities

Disability charities have welcomed the principles laid out in the government’s new care and support white paper, but have criticised the lack of detail in key areas.

The disability network RADAR said it had long campaigned for care to be free at the point of use and available according to need, and praised other elements of the white paper such as its emphasis on personalisation and on choice and control.

It also praised the government for listening to calls to introduce “portability”, which would allow disabled people to move to another area without having their needs reassessed.

But it warned that “being able to take your assessment with you when you move house is not the same as a guarantee that the support you need and currently enjoy will be duplicated when you get there”.

And it called on the media and politicians to pay equal attention to the needs and rights of younger and middle-aged adults with social care and support needs, rather than focusing on older people.

Liz Sayce, chief executive of RADAR, said the white paper was “a major step forward in new ideas to solve the social care crisis”.

But she added: “The crisis is, however, with us already, and we are concerned that the proposed process for designing the National Care Service, and for providing the vital details of funding and staffing, will prove too slow for those whose care needs are already pressing.”

She said political parties must make the issue “one of their highest priorities, as we are in dire need of a solution to the problem as soon as possible”.

The Care and Support Alliance of disability, service-user, older people’s and carers’ charities broadly welcomed the white paper and the “positive momentum” it had created.

It praised the government’s “bold vision” to end the postcode lottery in care, and said it was “relieved” that it had ruled out using disability benefits in care budgets.

But it called for more detail on how the reforms would be paid for, and said it was “critical that we have consensus from all parties that there must be radical action to address our crisis in care”.

And Ruth Scott, director of policy and campaigns at Scope, said the government had “failed to grasp the nettle with regard to the current social care crisis facing working-age disabled people” and had remained “worryingly silent” on the “crucial” question of who would be eligible for support.

1 April 2010

National Care Service white paper: government criticised on funding

The government has delayed a decision on how to fund its social care reforms, causing widespread criticism and disappointment.

Instead of laying out its own plans, the government will set up a commission to examine the various options and offer recommendations for the “fairest and most sustainable” way to fund the social care system.

But any new funding system will not be introduced until after the next general election but one, with the delay likely to be at least six years.

The Department of Health said the annual total spending on adult social care was about £14 billion in 2008-09, and introducing free personal care when people needed it would cost an estimated extra £3.6 billion in the first year.

Although health secretary Andy Burnham said the commission would look at all the possible funding options, he also made it clear the government did not believe paying for care and support largely through increased taxation of working-age adults was a viable option.

Instead, he stressed that everyone would have to contribute “in a fair way” through some form of “shared social insurance”.

Burnham said the commission would “be asked to bring forward proposals on the principle that everybody contributes and that everybody should have a choice about how they make that contribution”, and added: “All options will be within its scope.”

He said people would be given “choice and flexibility” in how they contributed.

The Care and Support Alliance of disability, service-user, older people’s and carers’ charities called for more detail on the “key question” of funding, and said the proposed commission should be established “as a priority” early in the next parliament.

RADAR said it was concerned that there was no discussion of how young disabled people might be expected to contribute, and added: “Charging people who have not yet accumulated wealth will maintain their economic disadvantage compared to their peers.”

Stephen O’Brien MP, the Conservative shadow health minister, said the white paper had recommended “yet another commission, like the one ignored by the Labour government in 2000” and “does not mention costs, which no serious debate would ignore”.

Norman Lamb MP, the Liberal Democrat shadow health secretary, said Labour had again hit social care reform “into the long grass”, and was offering “a series of piecemeal reforms that have not been properly thought through or costed”.

But Burnham did describe how the offer of free personal care for those who had spent more than two years in residential care, from 2014, would be funded.

He said the £800 million a year cost would be met through social care efficiency savings, a freeze on the inheritance tax threshold and money saved by increasing integration between the NHS and the social care system.

1 April 2010

National Care Service white paper: government unveils plans

The government has laid out plans for a “National Care Service” (NCS), based on the principle of free personal care for everyone who needs it.

Although many of the proposals in its Building the National Care Service white paper drew praise, the government was fiercely criticised for postponing a decision on how its reforms would be funded.

Health secretary Andy Burnham described the proposals as “bold and ambitious”, an “historic announcement” and “the biggest change to the welfare state since 1948”.

He pledged “nationally consistent” criteria that will state at which point a person becomes eligible for support, and “portable” assessments, so disabled people could move to a different part of England and not face a reassessment of their needs.

Burnham said care would be free at the point of use for everyone who needed it, giving disabled and older people “choice and control over their own care and their own lives”.

He also promised to “push forward” with the personalisation of services. By April 2012, everyone approaching a council for support will receive a personal budget.

And he said the government would not help fund its reforms by scrapping attendance allowance (AA) and disability living allowance for those over 65 – at least for the lifetime of the next parliament.

Burnham said this was because of the strong opposition to such proposals from disabled people and other campaigners during the government's "Big Care Debate". The white paper's equality impact assessment goes even further and says the NCS will be built around AA and DLA, "maintaining these benefits as a flexible form of support".

Other pledges include "accurate, relevant and accessible" information about entitlements and assessments, and easier access to both social care and disability benefits.

The first stage of reform will be introducing free personal care at home for those with the highest needs, through the personal care at home bill.

The government hopes that two key concessions on the bill – delaying its implementation until April 2011 and agreeing that MPs and peers would have to approve its implementation after it became law – will be enough to secure its passage through the Lords.

The second stage of the reforms, from 2014, will see those staying in residential care for longer than two years receiving free personal care.

The government will also set up a commission to recommend the "fairest and most sustainable" way to fund the NCS and a "leadership group" of "expert stakeholders" to advise on implementing its reforms, and introduce an NCS bill early in the next parliament.

The final stage of reform will be the full introduction of the NCS with a new funding system, soon after the next but one general election.

The white paper is at www.dh.gov.uk

1 April 2010

RADAR finds disabled people achieving high-flying success

A groundbreaking report has concluded that disabled people working in both the private and public sectors can and do reach the highest levels of seniority.

The disability charity RADAR heard from more than 900 disabled people in a survey of high-achievers, of whom more than 100 earned at least £80,000 a year. More than half of these high-earners had been disabled for over 20 years.

Despite the evidence of success, the survey – which also heard from more than 500 non-disabled people – found that non-disabled people were more than three times as likely as disabled people to earn over £80,000 a year.

The survey found that high-earning disabled people were likely to have benefited from mentoring and support from senior colleagues throughout their careers, but disabled people were less than half as likely as non-disabled people to receive such support.

The Doing Seniority Differently report also says that people with mental health conditions are less likely than other disabled people to earn more than £80,000 a year, less likely to be board-level executive directors, and less likely to believe they had had the same career opportunities as other employees.

And of those disabled people who could hide their impairments, only one in eight is open about it to the board or senior management team.

RADAR also carried out in-depth interviews with some of the disabled high-achievers, who said they believed disabled people could bring skills such as empathy, creativity, resilience and flexibility to their leadership roles.

Liz Sayce, chief executive of RADAR, who wrote the report, said these high-fliers had tried to improve their organisations and educate colleagues, “not waiting passively for access or cultural improvements”.

Sayce said: “When employers believe in talented disabled people, throw off risk-averse approaches, create cultures of openness, and offer mentoring – then many disabled people do indeed ‘fly high’.

“However, there is still a chasm of inequality between disabled and non-disabled people and it’s alarming that so many people feared that [if they were] open about their health condition or disability their careers would be jeopardized.”

Baroness [Jane] Campbell said the report “breaks new ground” by showing disabled people “what is possible” and offering “real learning on how to enable more disabled people to succeed”.

RADAR also launched Radiate, a network set up to allow disabled people working at senior levels to share skills, develop their talents and provide role models. The network is sponsored by Lloyds Banking Group, which supported the research.

For more information, visit www.radar.org.uk/doingseioritydifferently

31 March 2010

Urgent changes needed to housing benefit rules, say MPs

New housing benefit rules are creating a “real barrier to independent living” for disabled people and should be changed urgently, according to a committee of MPs.

The Commons work and pensions committee said there was “clear evidence” that the rules on local housing allowance (LHA) were causing serious problems for disabled people.

LHA was rolled out nationally for new claimants in the private rented sector from April 2008, as part of the government’s welfare reforms.

But LHA rules do not allow disabled people to claim for an extra bedroom if they need it to allow a personal assistant to stay overnight.

Although councils can make discretionary housing payments (DHPs) to cover the additional needs of disabled people in rented accommodation, these are short-term and only paid if the council has sufficient funds available.

Citizens Advice told the committee’s inquiry into the LHA that to expect disabled people to cope with such insecurity with their housing was “just not acceptable”, while the Local Government Association argued that councils “do not have enough money in many cases to meet such extra needs from DHPs”.

The disabled Labour peer Baroness Wilkins told the committee that the system was “causing the disabled people affected real hardship and loss of control” and demanded “urgent action” from the government.

Warwickshire and Coventry Council of Disabled People said the effect of the new system was “directly the opposite” of government policy in its Independent Living and Putting People First strategies.

The committee said it remained “very concerned”, and pointed to the continuing failure of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to produce an equality impact assessment for the new policy, or show how it was complying with the Disability Discrimination Act’s disability equality duty (DED).

It called for an urgent change to the rules to “allow for reasonable adjustments for disabled people”.

A spokeswoman for the DWP said it would respond to the report “shortly”, but a consultation earlier this year included a proposal that some disabled people should receive an LHA rate that reflected their need for an extra room, and produced “feedback from a lot of people”.

She added: "We are aware there is concern about it. Plans for across-the-board housing benefit reform will be coming out later this year. That element could very well be part of it."

She said the DWP believed its DED obligations had been met through a regulatory impact assessment carried out alongside the introduction of the welfare reform bill that led to the introduction of LHAs.

31 March 2010

Campaign calls for Vodafone to think again on sat-nav system

Campaigners are calling on Vodafone to reconsider its plans to scrap a mobile phone application that makes it easier for blind and partially-sighted people to travel independently.

Wayfinder Access was the first "GPS" navigation programme designed for blind people to use on their mobile phones – together with screen-reading software – to tell them where they were at the press of a button and allow them to plan routes to unfamiliar locations.

But Vodafone – which last year bought the Swedish company that developed the software – is to close the system "in the next year or so", and in the meantime will no longer provide updates to take account of new buildings, roads or developments.

It is also refusing to offer refunds to users who have bought lifetime licences for the system.

More than 2,000 people have signed an international petition calling on Vodafone to maintain the service or produce a "comparable alternative", including users from the UK, USA, India, Germany, Italy and Australia.

Campaigners say blind and partially-sighted people in countries like South Africa and India have no alternative to Wayfinder.

One man from the UK who signed the petition said the system was "a vital service" to aid the navigation of visually-impaired people, another described Vodafone's decision as "a tremendous step backward", while a campaigner from the US said "only technology like this starts to equal the playing field to provide freedom and independence to visually-impaired persons".

Peter Barker, technology adviser for the charity Guide Dogs, said Wayfinder Access had helped the mobility and independence of a lot of blind and partially-sighted people, but newer systems had now "superseded it".

He said: "Those responsible for Wayfinder need to find a way of assisting their customers to transfer to something else or just keep Wayfinder going for a few more years on the understanding that they are not investing any more in its development. It's a difficult situation."

He said Vodafone had offered the system to other organisations, including Guide Dogs, which turned it down because "it has become obsolete".

A Vodafone Group spokeswoman said: "Financially it is not economically viable. We are looking at alternative ways of offering the service, but just not through Wayfinder.

"At the moment we do not have a final solution as to what it is we can offer our customers. We will do our best to make sure it is as good as [Wayfinder Access].

"It will be a slightly less effective service in the short term as we look for a more cost-effective way of managing the service in the long term."

31 March 2010

News provided by John Pring at www.disabilitynewsservice.com