Funding cuts cast shadow over new mental health strategy

User-led groups have welcomed a new government mental health strategy, but fear that spending cuts put its success in doubt.

The new cross-government strategy, No Health Without Mental Health, pledges "parity of esteem between mental and physical health services", with a focus on "early intervention and prevention" and services for children and young people.

The strategy also focuses on reducing the stigma and discrimination faced by people with mental health conditions, including support for the Time to Change anti-stigma campaign.

Sarah Yiannoullou, manager of the National Survivor User Network, said the initial reaction from mental health service-users and survivors had been to welcome the focus on children and young people, and a more "preventative approach" that would ensure the emphasis was "not just on crisis management".

But she warned that self-help groups, survivor groups and small voluntary and community organisations that had helped with preventative support were having to close due to funding problems.

She added: "There is such a conflict between what is being said in the strategy and people really believing that this can be delivered in the current climate."

She said the network was also disappointed with the government's lack of emphasis on service-users "leading the agenda".

She said: "We did have some input but at a distance. DH is still going to the large charities, but service-user led organisations need to be there as well.

"There are a lot of issues that only people currently accessing services will be aware of. We need to bridge that gap."

The government also pledged to introduce legislation later this year to repeal section 141 of the Mental Health Act, which says that MPs who are sectioned for at least six months must lose their seats.

Mark Harper, the Conservative minister for political and constitutional reform, who campaigned for the law to be scrapped in opposition, said section 141 "sends out entirely the wrong message that if you have mental health problems your contribution is not welcome in public life".

The strategy also allocates £400 million to pay for 1.2 million more people across England to receive psychological therapies over the next four years. This should mean 3.2 million people will use such services between 2011 and 2015.

The mental health charity Mind said the money was "an important step, as we know this is a highly effective and economic way of supporting people", but warned of the "backdrop of sweeping reforms to the NHS" and spending cuts, and said that "basic services must continue to operate on a local level despite tightening budgets".

3 February 2011

Court tells councils to think again on cuts after equality failure

A judge has told councils to rethink plans to slash spending on a London-wide grants programme because they failed to carry out a proper assessment of how the cuts would affect disabled people and other minority groups.

The high court ruling has been welcomed as a huge boost to disabled people fighting other public sector spending cuts.

London Councils, which represents London's 33 local authorities, wanted to scrap large parts of its grants programme, cutting spending from £26.4 million to £18.48 million next year, and to just £8 million in 2012-13.

Only London-wide schemes would have been funded, with other services left to local councils to support, while some city-wide services would also have lost future support because of a slimmed-down list of funding priorities.

Among disability organisations that would have lost funding were Disability Law Service (DLS) and Transport for All.

TfA receives £100,000 a year from London Councils – the bulk of its funding – and warned that losing the money could force it to close in the summer of 2012, just three months before London hosts the Paralympics.

DLS was set to lose funding for a project that provides disabled people with legal representation to take discrimination cases.

But Mr Justice Calvert-Smith ruled that London Councils had failed to consult properly or to carry out a full equality impact assessment (EIA) on the cuts.

He quashed all the funding decisions, affecting more than 200 voluntary sector organisations, and ordered London Councils to reconsider its plans, taking proper account of its public sector equality duties.

Nick Goss, managing director of Goss Consultancy, which provides EIA training to the Equality and Human Rights Commission, said the case was "a very clear signal to public sector organisations that by not giving due regard to their statutory equalities duties it was likely to cost, rather than save, public money through legal litigation".

He added: "The case reinforces the fact that it is not an option for public sector organisations to carry out EIAs and effective consultation, it is a legal duty and these have to be done in the right way and at the right time."

Linda Clarke, director of DLS, said: "In the current economic climate, with public authorities facing huge cuts to their budgets, we welcome this judgement, which reinforces the importance of seriously assessing equalities impact before taking decisions to cut spending which may disproportionately affect disabled people and other disadvantaged groups."

London Councils said it would now "reconsider the equalities impacts and consider different options in more detail".

3 February 2011

Court concludes that disabled volunteers have no rights

A court ruling that disabled volunteers are not entitled to protection under discrimination at work laws has sparked serious concerns over their rights.

The Court of Appeal ruled that a disabled volunteer for Mid Sussex Citizens Advice Bureau was not entitled to protection under the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA).

Mrs X – who hopes to appeal to the Supreme Court – claims that when the charity asked her to stop volunteering, it was discriminating against her because she was HIV-positive.

But the court found she was not protected by the DDA because she was unpaid and did not have a contract, even though she had a law degree and a post-graduate qualification and hoped to secure a training contract with Citizens Advice (CA) so she could qualify as a solicitor.

The court also found that volunteers were not protected by the European Union's equal treatment directive.

Alex Eastwood, a legal caseworker for Disability Law Service, said discrimination against disabled volunteers was "all too common", so it was "strange" they were not covered by the law.

He said government welfare reforms were likely to lead to disabled people being forced to undertake voluntary work, but without any protection from anti-discrimination laws.

He said: "Employers will therefore have no duty to make adjustments for disabled volunteers or take steps to prevent harassment of volunteers."

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), which "intervened" in the case, warned that if such laws do not apply to volunteers, organisations will legally be able to discriminate against disabled people and other groups.

An EHRC spokeswoman said: "Given that many employees begin their working life as volunteers, which provides them with valuable experience which they can use as a step up to paid employment, it seems unfair that certain groups of people can legally be denied this experience."

Andy Williams, from solicitors Charles Russell, who represents Mrs X, said the ruling could stop some people volunteering, harming the government's "Big Society" programme.

He said: "If the government's Big Society vision involves an increased requirement for volunteers, as things stand those volunteers currently have no legal rights whatsoever."

A CA spokeswoman said: "The law is clear that volunteers do not have the same legal rights and responsibilities as paid employees. That is not the same as saying that organisations should be able to treat volunteers unfairly."

She insisted that CA was "committed to equality, values diversity, and challenges discrimination" and had a "range of policies to support disabled people to volunteer", with more than 1,500 disabled people volunteering across England and Wales last year.

3 February 2011

DLA reforms lead disabled people 'to question value of their own lives'

Disabled people are beginning to "question the value of their own lives" because of government plans to slash spending on disability living allowance (DLA), according to a new survey.

Disability Alliance (DA) has released the latest results from a survey on the coalition government's reforms, which include plans to cut spending on DLA for working-age people by 20 per cent.

The disability poverty charity believes more than 800,000 disabled people are likely to lose their DLA because of the reforms.

Nearly one in ten of those who took part in the survey – most of whom were disabled people or carers – said death or suicide were possible outcomes of disabled people losing their DLA.

One said: “I would not be able to go to work, I would not be able to see my family or friends. Therefore I would not want to live.”

Another said: “It would add an extra burden on me which I know I couldn't cope with. I would probably have to think about ending it all.”

Neil Coyle, DA’s director of policy, said: “Disabled people are telling us in great numbers that they fear the overall cuts – but that losing DLA in particular has resulted in people questioning the value of their lives.”

So far, 13 per cent of those questioned believe cutting DLA would actually cost the government money, through higher costs for the NHS and local authorities, with Coyle warning of a potential “catastrophic explosion of costly demands in the longer-term”.

Half of respondents said their DLA did not provide enough money to live on because of their disability-related costs.

One said: “I could not survive and would end it all as all my family are in difficult financial circumstances and I would have no-one to help.”

DA has submitted an interim response to a government consultation on the reforms – including an analysis of the first 900 survey responses – because it fears the new welfare reform bill could be debated by MPs before the government has had time to respond to its consultation, which closes on 14 February.

A Department for Work and Pensions spokeswoman said the government was “absolutely committed” to protecting DLA and was “working with Disability Alliance and other organisations to make sure that the needs of disabled people continue to be met”.

She said: “We need to reform DLA to ensure that the £12 billion we spend on it makes the most difference and that people can rely on it for years to come. No final decisions have been taken.”

3 February 2011

Hate crime website should help close reporting gap

A relaunched national police website should make it easier for disabled people to report disability hate crime to their local force.

The True Vision site now allows victims of hate crime in England, Wales and Northern Ireland to report offences online in greater detail, making it easier for police forces to investigate.

The site includes a "secure online reporting facility" that automatically distributes reports to the relevant police force, information about hate crime and why it is important to report it, and links to organisations offering support.

Figures released last December show there were 1,402 disability hate crimes recorded across England, Wales and Northern Ireland during 2009, the first full year since police forces started collecting figures.

But there were huge variations between different forces, with three claiming they had not recorded a single disability hate crime in the entire year.

Marije Davidson, public affairs manager for RADAR, welcomed the relaunch and "any initiative that makes it easier for disabled people to report disability hate crime".

But she added: "However, if it is not backed up with support for disabled victims of crime in their community it is just an exercise in window dressing."

Assistant chief constable Drew Harris, hate crime lead for the Association of Chief Police Officers, said: "We have a particular challenge to increase the reporting of hate crimes that target disabled people and True Vision offers specific advice for disabled people and links to organisations who can offer advocacy and support to those who do not wish to approach the police directly.

"Only by increasing reporting can we gain a better understanding of the extent of hate crime and it is for this reason that I urge victims and witnesses to use the True Vision website and to continue to come forward so we can bring the perpetrators to justice."

3 February 2011

Failure to consult 'led to London bus design flaws'

Designers of the successor to London's inaccessible Routemaster bus have failed to include enough space for wheelchair-users, say campaigners.

The accessible transport charity Transport for All (TfA) says the new Routemaster's wheelchair space is too small, and "considerably smaller" than spaces on London's existing buses.

The concerns come eight months after Transport for London (TfL) admitted failing to consult with disabled people's organisations on the bus's design.

The mayor of London's transport advisor, Kulveer Ranger, said then that disabled people would be able to "see the bus for themselves and feed back their opinions" when the full mock-up of the bus arrived in the capital.

But having seen the mock-up, TfA said that the "manoeuvring skills of a Paralympian basketball player seem to be required to get yourself into the space" in the new bus.

The old Routemasters were scrapped by the previous mayor, Ken Livingstone, largely because they were not accessible.

Lianna Etkind, TfA's campaigns and outreach officer, said: "We say that the best practice in consultation is 'nothing about us without us', and disabled and older people should be included from the very earliest stages and not just at the end."

If TfL had done that, she said, they would have avoided having to make "last minute" changes to the design, which is due to be finalised this autumn, with the first buses set to appear on London's streets early next year.

Etkind said the bus was London's chance to "set a gold standard for accessibility" in advance of next year's Olympics and Paralympics, but she was "not confident" that TfL would "make the appropriate changes" and "do the right thing for London's disabled and older people".

She said the new bus had some positive access features, including a low floor, the “i-bus” system, which announces destinations visually and via audio, and plenty of grab rails.

But she said that “if the final design incorporates a wheelchair space of this size, it will be bad for disabled people, and bad for parents with pushchairs”.

A TfL spokeswoman said that, following initial feedback, some changes were made “to the location of the hand poles and the seats to provide more space for manoeuvrability”, but that “further changes could be made”.

She said creating more space for wheelchair-users would mean fewer “low floor” seats for older people or those unable to stand.

But TfL declined to comment on whether the design problems proved they should have consulted with disabled people earlier.

3 February 2011

Mail welfare story sparks complaints to press watchdog

Disabled campaigners have complained to the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) after a national newspaper accused hundreds of thousands of disabled people of “trying it on” in a bid to secure out-of-work disability benefits.

The story in the Daily Mail was based on a government press release that aimed to justify its welfare reforms by pointing to the number of people being assessed as “fit for work” through the controversial work capability assessment (WCA).

But campaigners have accused the Mail of inaccuracy, discrimination and harassment of disabled people.

The article was published only two days after disabled activists took to the streets to complain about the unfairness of the WCA, and the company that carries out the tests.

The Mail story says the government's "astonishing figures laid bare how 94 per cent of new claimants were either 'trying it on' or would be fit enough to work in the near future".

The story implies that most people who applied for ESA were trying to defraud the system, stating that "just six per cent of one million claimants who tried to obtain sickness benefit in the last two years of Labour were actually incapable of working".

The figures actually show that of those applicants for employment and support allowance (ESA) – the replacement for incapacity benefit – who completed the WCA, only two-thirds were found "fit for work" and ineligible for ESA.

The Mail story included disabled people placed in the "work-related activity group" – who have not been found "fit for work" – to reach its "astonishing" 94 per cent.

A follow-up column in the same paper – with a headline stating "400,000 benefits cheats show scale of workshy Britain" – then refers to unsuccessful claimants as "scroungers" who are "on the fiddle" and "defrauding the system".

But more than 40 per cent of those found "fit for work" are appealing against that decision, and about 40 per cent of these are successful and have subsequently been placed on ESA.

An initial complaint about the story was made to the PCC by members of the campaigning blog The Broken of Britain, who say the 94 per cent figure is "a clear manipulation of the facts in order to produce a highly misleading headline".

They also say the headline – "400,000 'were trying it on' to get sickness benefits" – was "grossly inaccurate".

Six more complaints have been lodged about the news story, under clauses in the PCC code relating to accuracy, discrimination and harassment.

A string of serious concerns have been raised by disability organisations about the unfairness of the WCA, particularly for those with fluctuating conditions or hidden impairments, such as people with mental health conditions.

An independent review last November was highly critical of the test and said the government should improve “every stage” of it to make it “fairer and more effective”.

The Daily Mail declined to comment on the complaints.

3 February 2011

Government to review impact of housing benefit cuts

Campaigners and MPs have welcomed the government’s decision to commission an independent review of the impact of controversial cuts and reforms to housing benefits on disabled people and other minority groups.

Lord Freud, the minister for welfare reform, made a “firm commitment” to commission independent research into the impact of the reforms.

He said the research would look at the effect of the cuts on disabled people, homelessness, black and minority ethnic households and older people, among other areas.

The coalition government plans to reduce housing benefit by 10 per cent for anyone who has been on jobseeker’s allowance for a year.

It will also introduce a new cap on housing benefit payments, as well as new age limits so claimants under 35 – instead of 25 – will have to share flats or houses instead of being able to rent their own home.

The decision to commission an independent review was welcomed by RADAR.

But Marije Davidson, RADAR’s public affairs manager, said disabled people should be involved in developing the terms of reference for the review, and that the charity would “like to hear how the Department for Work and Pensions plans to involve disabled people throughout the review”.

The Commons work and pensions committee, which is led by the disabled MP Dame Anne Begg, also welcomed the review.

The committee had highlighted in a report how difficult it was to predict the effect of the changes and called on the government to “fully evaluate the impact”.

Witnesses told the committee that the housing benefit reforms would “inevitably” lead to “evictions and increased levels of homelessness” for some groups, including disabled people.

Dame Anne welcomed the government’s commitment to an independent review, which had been a “key recommendation” of the committee’s report.

She added: “At that time, I highlighted how difficult it is to predict exactly what the impact of these changes will be. We look forward to assessing the outcome of the review.”

The government’s formal response to the committee’s report is due later this month.

3 February 2011

Failure to close roads forces athletes to pull out of marathon

Two of Britain’s leading Paralympic athletes were forced to pull out of the world championships wheelchair marathon because the organisers had failed to close the course to traffic.

David Weir – who had already won three gold medals during the IPC Athletics World Championships – and fellow British athlete Shelly Woods withdrew on the morning of last weekend’s road race in Christchurch, New Zealand.

The rules of the governing body – the International Association of Athletics Federations – state that all roads have to be completely closed to traffic for such races.

UK Athletics, the governing body for athletics in the UK, said it would write to the IPC [International Paralympic Committee] to “reiterate” its concerns about the incident.

Baroness [Tanni] Grey-Thompson, who was in New Zealand working for the BBC, backed their decision to pull out, telling her followers on Twitter that she agreed with Weir that it was “too big a risk” to race on open roads and that there was “nothing clever about putting yourself in danger”.

Peter Eriksson, the British team leader, said the team “fully support” the decision to withdraw from the race “although obviously the athletes and UK Athletics as a whole are disappointed that they can’t show what great form they’re in”.

He said: “Safety, however, is paramount, and with less than 600 days to go to the London 2012 Paralympic Games this presents a danger we are not prepared to take.”

The world championships were the last major event before the 2012 Paralympics.

In the medals table, Britain came third behind China (21 golds) and Russia (18 golds), and the British haul of 38 medals (12 golds, nine silver and 17 bronze) was second only to China, which finished with 58, with Russia on 35.

Eriksson said it was a huge improvement on the Beijing Paralympics, in which the British team finished 18th in track and field.

He said: “Overall we’re starting to see the gradual transition to a much more professional squad with a fantastic team spirit and it’s paid off; I’m confident that our success will now continue through to London.”

Meanwhile, the German mobility technology company Otto Bock has become the second Paralympic-only sponsor – after Sainsbury’s – for the London 2012 games.

Otto Bock will provide repairs during the games to Paralympic athletes with prostheses (limb replacements), orthoses (limb supports) and wheelchairs.

3 February 2011

Activists postpone protest after EHRC's meeting pledge

Disabled activists planning to occupy the equality watchdog's offices in protest at its failure to stand up for the rights of disabled people hit by government spending cuts have agreed to postpone their action.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) contacted activists from Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC) after hearing about the protest, and promised to meet with them to discuss their concerns.

The EHRC has faced repeated criticism from disabled activists over its low profile on disability rights issues since its launch in 2007, but this would have been the first such protest action.

DPAC had told Disability News Service that they planned to occupy the EHRC's London offices sometime in March, although they said they would not be announcing which day the protest would take place.

They believe the EHRC should be challenging councils that are failing to provide adequate support for disabled people, and backing more legal actions on behalf of disabled people.

They have also pointed to the commission's failure to speak out on cuts and reforms to disability living allowance (DLA) – and particularly the loss of the mobility component for most people in residential care – as well as problems with the controversial work capability assessment; the closure of the independent living fund to new members; and cuts to housing benefits.

They say all these policies could be challenged as breaches of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, particularly as the commission is monitoring its implementation.

Members were particularly angry at the commission's failure to fulfil a pledge to contact DPAC to discuss its plans to support disabled people.

Linda Burnip, a founding member of DPAC, said: "Following a threat to occupy their offices, they suddenly got in touch with us. We have postponed [the occupation] pending a meeting. They have given me a list of things they are planning to do."

She said the EHRC had told her that they were “limited in what they can do and how they do it”.

Before the EHRC’s intervention, Burnip had said: “We expect them to be helping uphold disabled people’s human rights and the UN convention and they are not. They basically might as well not exist.”

An EHRC spokeswoman said: “Our disability programmes director has had a positive discussion with Disabled People Against Cuts about their concerns and we’re planning to meet with them to discuss this issue further.”

1 February 2011

News provided by John Pring at www.disabilitynewsservice.com