

## **Government's benefits advisers deliver second attack on reforms**

The government's own benefits advice body has delivered stinging criticism of its major reforms to disability living allowance (DLA).

The social security advisory committee (SSAC) said the reforms appeared to be driven by the coalition's wish to cut the number of working-age disabled people claiming DLA by 20 per cent.

In its response to the government's public consultation on the reforms – which closed on 18 February – the committee called for clarification on whether the aim was to cut the number of claimants, reduce the length of time people receive DLA, ensure accurate targeting of support, or “achieve something else”.

The SSAC also said that the government's much-criticised plans to remove the mobility component of DLA from most disabled people in residential care should not go ahead because they would contradict the supposed aim to support disabled people to lead “independent and active lives”.

It is the second time in a fortnight that the SSAC has criticised key parts of the government's disability benefits reform agenda. Two weeks ago, it delivered a scathing assessment of the controversial and unpopular work capability assessment (WCA).

The SSAC said it was “concerned” that the DLA reforms were being introduced while the WCA – which tests eligibility for employment and support allowance (ESA), the replacement for incapacity benefit – was “still bedding in”.

The committee said there was a “need to learn lessons from the ESA experience” when planning the introduction of the Person Independence Payment (PIP), the replacement for DLA.

And it raised concerns about plans to extend the qualifying period for PIP to six months from the current three months for DLA.

The committee welcomed the government's commitment to enabling disabled people to secure more choice and control, and its aim to simplify the DLA system and make it less subjective.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) said it would publish its response to the consultation this spring, while the consultation responses would also be considered as the government's welfare reform bill moves through Parliament.

A DWP spokeswoman 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.

“We are working with disabled people and disability groups on the reforms and will respond to the public consultation shortly.”

**24 February 2011**

### **Channel 4 will offer ‘strongest-ever coverage’ of Paralympic World Cup**

Channel 4 is to broadcast live coverage of this year’s BT Paralympic World Cup, after securing the rights at the expense of the BBC.

The broadcaster will offer two hours of live coverage on the final day of the event, 28 May, with highlights programmes on 26 and 27 May and daily live coverage on its [website](#).

Channel 4 has already promised to make its wall-to-wall coverage of the London 2012 Paralympics the “biggest event” in its history, after beating the BBC to the UK television broadcasting rights.

Now it has also beaten the BBC to the rights for the world cup, which takes place in Manchester from 23-28 May.

ParalympicsGB, which manages Britain’s Paralympians, said Channel 4 would “provide the event with the strongest broadcast coverage it has ever received on UK television”.

The event will feature wheelchair basketball, athletics and swimming, with boccia and sitting volleyball included for the first time. Britain will take on teams from Europe, the Americas and the Rest of the World.

Phil Lane, ParalympicsGB’s chief executive, said athletes hoping to compete in 2012 would have the chance to compete in “a crucial world-class competition that will be a key indicator in their performances”.

Meanwhile, the London 2012 organising committee LOCOG has announced its programme of events for testing venues to be used in next year’s Paralympics and Olympics.

The line-up includes events covering four Paralympic sports – wheelchair tennis, archery, boccia and athletics – which will all take place in early May 2012.

They include the London Disability Athletics Grand Prix, which will take place in the Olympic Stadium on 8 May 2012.

A wheelchair rugby event in the Olympic Park’s Basketball Arena has yet to be confirmed.

Lord [Seb] Coe, chair of LOCOG, said: “When the world’s greatest Olympic and Paralympic athletes come to London in the summer of 2012, every aspect of our delivery needs to be the best it can be.

“The invaluable experience we gain through our testing programme means we can ‘road-test’ all our operational plans and make sure we have all the knowledge we need to deliver a truly memorable games in 2012.”

**24 February 2011**

### **Emergency text scheme ‘should be compulsory’**

Mobile phone companies should be forced to sign up permanently to a scheme that allows disabled people to send text messages to the emergency services instead of dialling “999”, according to the communications watchdog.

A trial of the [emergencySMS scheme](#) has been running across the UK since late 2009, and so far has 14,500 registered users, most of whom are Deaf or have hearing or speech impairments.

Messages are routed via the Text Relay call centre – which deals with calls to and from textphones – and users receive a message within two minutes to say their message has been received.

One woman who used the system has told how it helped save her colleague’s life, after she collapsed at work.

OFCOM said feedback from users and emergency services had been “overwhelmingly positive”, with about one text a day leading to attendance by the police, ambulance or fire service, while it had proved “robust, consistent and entirely dependable”.

Now it wants to “safeguard” it by making it compulsory for mobile phone companies to offer the service to disabled people who register their phone with the scheme.

OFCOM said that making the scheme permanent would cost a one-off sum of £80,000 and annual running costs of about £70,000, to be split between mobile network operators.

The proposal is part of changes that OFCOM believes need to be made to its regulations in order to comply with new European laws that come into effect on 25 May. [It is now consulting on the changes.](#)

Under the European regulations, disabled people must have access to emergency services that is as close to that enjoyed by other consumers as technology allows.

OFCOM said the emergency text scheme “does have limitations”, such as taking longer to exchange information, but offers “greater equivalence than current alternatives”.

Chris Bowden, senior usability officer for the charity RNID, said: “We welcome OFCOM’s proposal that the voluntary trial enabling people to text the emergency services should be made mandatory.

“This is a vital service which makes it as easy as possible for people with hearing loss to contact the emergency services in their hour of need.”

**24 February 2011**

### **BBC breached code over flashing images warning failure**

The broadcasting watchdog has upheld a complaint against the BBC for introducing a news report without warning that it contained flashing images that posed a risk to some people with epilepsy.

The news item on the BBC News at Ten on 23 November 2010 reported the announcement that Prince William and Kate Middleton had decided to marry at Westminster Abbey.

But the report included footage from the announcement of their engagement, which contained repeated flash photography.

OFCOM received a complaint from a viewer with photosensitive epilepsy, who was concerned at the amount of flashing images and the failure to include a warning.

The BBC said the report was preceded by a warning for its six o’clock bulletin, but the reporter on location for the News at Ten was not told to include a warning when she introduced the images.

The BBC apologised and said that “since this incident, news teams have been reminded of the importance of making sure that sufficient warnings are given in every case”.

The OFCOM ruling acknowledged that the failure was “a result of human error” but was “a matter of concern to OFCOM, and we do not expect a recurrence”.

The charity [Epilepsy Action](#) welcomed the ruling and said it was “vital” that warnings were transmitted.

But it also raised concerns about a new music video from American rapper Kanye West, All of the Lights, which features extensive flashing images that it believes have triggered seizures.

After it expressed concerns, the video was removed from YouTube – where it had already had several million hits.

Epilepsy Action said it was receiving calls from people who had had seizures after watching the video.

An Epilepsy Action spokeswoman said: “We are very pleased that someone has taken the decision to have it removed. We’re not quite sure yet whether it is YouTube or Kanye West’s representatives who have made this decision, or if it is a permanent move.”

Although OFCOM regulations apply to videos with flashing images that are shown on UK television, there are no such regulations online.

The charity has written to culture secretary Jeremy Hunt to ask for the regulations that apply to broadcasters such as the BBC to be extended to their websites.

A Department for Culture Media and Sport spokeswoman said: “We understand that Epilepsy Action have called for regulation relating to UK broadcasters hosting videos online, which would have a warning if shown on television.

“We are not aware of this being a problem, but if there was evidence of significant problems, we would expect broadcasters to respond without the need for heavy-handed regulation.”

**24 February 2011**

### **Disabled people’s protest ‘will send vital message to government’**

Disabled people and their organisations are hoping to send a critical message to the government with a major protest against its programme of spending cuts and welfare reforms.

The day of action on Wednesday 11 May will feature a rally at Methodist Central Hall, near the Houses of Parliament, and a lobby of MPs, while there is also likely to be a march.

The action is being led by the [UK Disabled People’s Council](#) (UKDPC), with backing from other disabled people’s organisations (DPOs) including the National Centre for Independent Living, the Alliance for Inclusive Education and Disabled People Against Cuts.

But the protest is also being backed by members of the Disability Charities Consortium – such as Mencap, Mind and Scope – and is believed to be the first time DPOs and non-user-led charities have come together for such an action.

Julie Newman, UKDPC's acting chair, said it was "absolutely critical" that large numbers of disabled people attended "to show that disabled people across the board are being affected".

She said the cuts and reforms would breach the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and could also breach the new Equality Act.

Newman said there was an urgent need for "meaningful dialogue" with the government, and added: "All of the public sector cuts and the proposed benefits changes, welfare reforms and changes to education affect disabled people disproportionately. That is the bit that the government don't get. This is about disabled people's lives."

She said the decision to work closely with the big disability charities was "not something we do lightly", but that there had been a better relationship since they began working together on monitoring implementation of the UN convention.

While there were still major differences between them, she said, the impact of the government's policies was "so extensive" that "for this particular period of time we are putting those points of disagreement to one side".

Alice Maynard, chair of Scope and herself a leading disabled campaigner, said it was "very important" that large numbers of disabled people attended the protest, although she warned that cuts to care packages would have an impact on many people's capacity to attend.

She said: "We are hoping there will be a big turnout and that the government will realise there is a strength of feeling about this and it is not a bunch of 'whinging scroungers'."

She also welcomed the better relationship between DPOs and the big charities. "We have been edging closer towards something that allows us to work together for some time. I think that has got to be helpful."

But she warned that the big charities would have to be "mindful of their place" and "recognise where we come from" and ensure they do not "squash" disabled people and their organisations.

**23 February 2011**

### **Minister calls for council action on dangerous pavement parking**

Campaigners have welcomed new measures that should make it easier for councils to stop motorists risking the safety of disabled pedestrians by parking on pavements.

Vehicles parked on pavements can force wheelchair-users, people with visual impairments and other disabled people into busy roads. They also damage pavements, making it more likely that people with visual and mobility impairments will trip and fall.

Liberal Democrat transport minister Norman Baker has now written to local authorities to ask them to use their powers to stop pavement parking where it is a problem.

The Department for Transport has also given permission to all councils in England to use traffic signs to indicate a local ban on pavement parking, rather than having to seek permission every time they want to do so. Parking on pavements is already banned across London.

Baker said: "Parking on the pavement can be selfish and dangerous, putting pedestrians – especially those with disabilities or using pushchairs – in danger.

"If a vehicle is blocking the pavement then people often have no choice but to walk in the road where they are at much greater risk of being involved in an accident."

Jill Allen-King, public relations officer for the National Federation of the Blind of the UK, said the announcement was "really good news" as the federation had been campaigning on the issue since 1979, when it launched its Give Us Back Our Pavements campaign.

Her mother-in-law died in hospital following a fall she sustained tripping on a pavement damaged by a lorry continually parking on it, she said.

She added: "It is not only the hazard it creates, you also can't get past with your guide dog and have to go out into the road."

Helen Dolphin, director of policy and campaigns at the charity [Mobilise](#), also welcomed the government's announcement.

She said cars parking on pavements can block the path of wheelchair-users, who have to put themselves in danger by using the road instead.

And she said councils could do far more to use the enforcement powers they already have to keep pavements clear of all obstructions.

**23 February 2011**

**Hundreds of thousands 'will lose essential lifeline' through DLA reforms**

Government reforms to disability living allowance (DLA) could lead to more than 835,000 disabled people losing an “essential lifeline of support”, according to three leading disability organisations.

The Disability Rights Partnership (DRP) – the working title for the proposed merger of Disability Alliance (DA), RADAR and the National Centre for Independent Living – said the changes would have “a hugely detrimental effect” on a “significant number of disabled people and their families”.

The warning came in [DRP's response](#) to the government's consultation on its proposed DLA reforms, which closed on 18 February.

Under the proposals, which will be introduced through the new welfare reform bill, DLA will be replaced by a new Personal Independence Payment (PIP) from 2013.

But the three organisations were deeply critical of the reforms, which they said were “underpinned” by the government's plans to cut DLA spending on working-age people by a fifth – saving £2.17 billion by the end of 2015/16.

DRP warned that it was “very likely” that all current DLA recipients were at risk of losing some support, through lower rates, reduced eligibility or direct cuts, with the 643,000 disabled people on the low rate care component most at risk.

The partnership said the cuts to DLA spending would mean “disabled people shouldering a disproportionately large share of the burden of tackling the national deficit”.

And it said the reforms would increase costs for the NHS and councils, and reduce tax and national insurance revenue for the government when disabled people were forced to give up their jobs, or work fewer hours.

DRP also said the consultation had been too short to allow a proper analysis of the impact of the proposals, which also lacked detail, creating “anxiety for many disabled people and their families”.

DRP produced a string of recommendations, including the introduction of a sliding scale of support, rather than “regimented” lower and higher PIP rates; further analysis of disabled people's costs; and for any new assessment to be in keeping with the “personalisation” agenda and avoid unnecessary bureaucracy.

The partnership also called for any new assessment to take account of the maintenance and ongoing costs of aids and equipment; and for there to be annual, independent reviews of PIP's implementation.

More than 1,700 people completed DA's survey on the government's proposals, with the results included in DRP's response.

Less than 10 per cent of the respondents said DLA covered all their disability-related costs, such as transport, heating and laundry, and aids and equipment.

**23 February 2011**

### **Disabled people to play lead role in TUC protest**

Disabled people are set to play an important part in a protest planned by the TUC against the government's public spending cuts.

Disabled people will be at the front of next month's march – which will start at London's Victoria Embankment and end with a rally in Hyde Park – where they will be able to set their own pace, while there will also be a static protest for those disabled people unable to take part.

There will be a wheelchair-accessible area in Hyde Park, and a shorter route for those not able to take part in the whole march.

The TUC says it is organising the protest on Saturday 26 March to “give a national voice to all those affected by the cuts” and “to show that people reject the argument that there is no alternative”.

Organisations that will be involved in the disabled people's section of the march include two campaigning disabled people's organisations, Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC) and Black Triangle, as well as two mainstream campaigning organisations, London Coalition Against Poverty and Benefit Claimants Fight Back.

Linda Burnip, a founding member of DPAC, said: “We want to highlight the problems that disabled people have and to let trade unions and other people know what our problems are.

“It is really important for as many disabled people to be there as possible because the cuts are going to start biting even more in April.”

Those disabled people who cannot attend the action can submit their photographs and a written statement to be included on placards carried by protesters on the day. To include your details, email [mail@dpac.uk.net](mailto:mail@dpac.uk.net)

For updated details of the disabled people's part of the protest, visit: [www.dpac.uk.net](http://www.dpac.uk.net)

For details of access arrangements, visit:

<http://marchforthealternative.org.uk/2011/02/18/access-and-disability/>

**22 February 2011**

## **UKDPC says government's DLA plans 'will kill aspiration and hope'**

Government plans to reform disability living allowance (DLA) are "obscene" and represent the "death of aspiration and hope" for disabled people, according to the UK's leading representative voice of disabled people's organisations.

The UK Disabled People's Council (UKDPC) has told the government – in its [response to the public consultation on its DLA reforms](#) – that DLA has an "incalculable" value to disabled people seeking independent living.

The government says it wants to make total savings of £2.17 billion in DLA spending by the end of 2015/16 and cut the number of working-age people claiming the benefit by 20 per cent.

There was particular criticism by UKDPC of plans to prioritise DLA support to "those people least able to live full and active lives", which it said represented "a significant failure... to value the wide range of human experience".

It added: "Is it enough to help people out of bed in the morning and back to bed at night with a couple of meals possibly thrown in, and the bed changed for good measure... what is endorsed is the death of aspiration and hope."

UKDPC was equally critical of the suggestion that the new assessment should take into account the aids and adaptations a disabled person uses.

It said the government's "focus on aids and adaptations" and "measuring ability" was "a travesty of civil liberties" and a "cynical" attempt to justify an "agenda of cost saving".

It also pointed to "serious concern" about the proposal to remove the mobility component of DLA from people in residential care, and warned that gay and lesbian disabled people would no longer be able to access LGBT venues without this financial support.

UKDPC said it believed disabled people's DLA eligibility should be decided through self-assessment "with supporting confirmation" by a GP or another professional "with a working knowledge of the individual and their daily living".

The response – based on views expressed by UKDPC members – also pointed to the many barriers that prevent full inclusion and independent living for disabled people, including poor access to public transport, cuts to local authority support, the lack of accessible housing and barriers to work.

**21 February 2011**

## **Minister seeks clemency for thalidomide survivor from Philippines president**

A government minister has written to the president of the Philippines to ask for the release of a thalidomide survivor who has served 18 years in prison for drug smuggling.

Liberal Democrat Foreign Office minister Jeremy Browne has asked Benigno Aquino III for “clemency” in the case of Billy Burton.

Burton was handed a life sentence after he was caught trying to smuggle more than five kilogrammes of cannabis out of the country in 1992.

But the time he had to serve before being eligible for parole was increased from eight to 20 years, then 30 years and then 40 years as the government increased sentences for drugs offenders. Burton is now not due for release until 2032, when he will be 70.

The campaign to push for clemency on the grounds of Burton’s impairment is being led by Guy Tweedy – another thalidomide survivor – who met Browne before Christmas to ask for his support.

Tweedy said: “I am very grateful that they are actually going to do something. I am very optimistic.”

A Foreign Office spokeswoman said: “Jeremy Browne did write a letter to the president, which was passed to the president’s office by our ambassador, and that was supporting the plea for clemency.” The letter was delivered on 14 February.

The Thalidomide Trust, which administers the compensation paid to UK thalidomide survivors, has supported Burton during his prison sentence, and is backing the campaign.

The trust’s national advisory council – an elected committee representing thalidomide survivors – is also backing the campaign. Tweedy is deputy-chair of the council.

Burton, originally from Wetherby, west Yorkshire, has ongoing health problems related to his thalidomide impairment.

He and more than 15,000 other prisoners are kept in huge warehouse-type buildings, and have to buy or beg wood to build their own living spaces.

They also have to buy any food other than the basic ration of rice, and to protect themselves from other prisoners must belong to one of the four gangs that rule the prison.

**21 February 2011**

News provided by John Pring at [www.disabilitynewsservice.com](http://www.disabilitynewsservice.com)