

London 2012 backs down over Olympic ticket discrimination fears

Organisers of the London 2012 Olympics have been forced to rethink their ticketing policies after disabled activists warned they would breach disability discrimination laws.

The 2012 organising committee, LOCOG, had decided that all wheelchair-users who were successful in the main Olympic ticket ballot would automatically be allocated an extra free ticket for a personal assistant (PA) or companion.

But tickets for non-wheelchair-users who need PAs were to be severely restricted, with just 10 free tickets for PAs available for each of the 645 sessions, including those in the giant 80,000-seat Olympic Stadium.

Out of 6.6 million tickets available for sale, only 6,450 tickets (less than 0.1 per cent) were to be reserved for the PAs of disabled people who do not use wheelchairs, such as those who are blind, or have autism or learning difficulties.

But disabled activists have now forced LOCOG into a climb-down after warning that these plans would have breached the Equality Act, as they were based on arbitrary limits rather than the need to make reasonable adjustments to allow disabled people to attend.

Disability News Service understands that both UK Disabled People's Council (UKDPC) and Level Playing Field (formerly The National Association of Disabled Supporters) have played key roles in persuading LOCOG to back down.

Under the 2012 "Ticketcare" system, all non-wheelchair-users who are successful in the main ticket ballot will still have to enter another ballot if they want to apply for a free ticket for their PA.

But LOCOG has now agreed to scrap the limit of 10 tickets per session, although it says there will still be a "minimum" of 6,450 tickets reserved for PAs and companions.

Mark Todd, 2012's accessibility manager, said this minimum "could easily go up. We think we can meet the need. We are hoping to."

When asked at what stage LOCOG had decided not to allocate just 10 PA tickets per session, he said: "We didn't make a decision. The feedback we got was that setting an upper limit would not work so we decided there was no upper limit."

LOCOG only launched its range of [ticket products for disabled people](#) – including Ticketcare – this week, more than a fortnight after its ticket application process opened.

Julie Newman, UKDPC's acting chair, welcomed the news that the policy had been altered, but said she had heard nothing from LOCOG since early March, when she raised her concerns and was told the 10-ticket maximum would apply.

She said she was “very disappointed” with the breakdown in communications, and added: “What I would really welcome is a formal response indicating what the final arrangements are. The arrangements have been changing continuously.

“It is very difficult to inform our members and ensure they have an opportunity to enjoy the games as we had always hoped they would.”

Level Playing Field declined to comment.

The day after Newman’s comments, as it launched its ticket products for disabled people, LOCOG sent UKDPC and other disability groups a copy of its press release – which makes no mention of the decision not to proceed with a 10-ticket limit.

Despite repeated questions from Disability News Service, LOCOG has refused to say when it decided to scrap the 10-ticket limit.

It has also been unable to explain why it decided to launch its ticket products for disabled people more than two weeks after the main ticket process opened, even though many disabled people are likely to need more time to select the events they wish to attend and apply for tickets.

The ticket products for disabled people include several accessible options, such as being able to request a seat with a direct view of video information screens for spectators who are Deaf, or to ask for a seat close to the action for those who are partially-sighted.

Additional services for disabled spectators will include some free blue badge parking at all venues, accessible shuttle buses, audio description, induction loops, a Changing Places toilet at all venues, information in accessible formats, facilities for assistance dogs, and a free mobility service which will loan out manual wheelchairs and scooters.

31 March 2011

Supreme Court to hear landmark case on councils’ right to cut support

The Supreme Court will this week hear an appeal case with “massively important” implications for disabled people who fear councils could try to cut their packages of support.

The court will hear the appeal of Elaine McDonald, whose care was cut by Kensington and Chelsea council even though it had assessed her as needing that support.

McDonald, a former principal ballerina with the Scottish Ballet, became disabled following a stroke in 1999 and later broke a hip in a night-time fall. She had been provided with a

weekly package of 22.5 hours of daytime support and another 10 hours of care seven nights a week.

A needs assessment by the council found night-time care was essential to provide supervision to prevent her falling while using the commode at night, due to a bladder condition.

But in 2008 – despite that assessment – the council said it planned to cut her care package, and said she could be given incontinence pads instead of an overnight care worker, even though she is not incontinent.

In November, the Court of Appeal ruled that the council had not breached care laws, McDonald's human rights or the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) by cutting her support.

The Supreme Court confirmed just two weeks ago that it had granted her leave to appeal.

McDonald's case is being funded by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, which said in November that it feared other councils would use the judgment to “reduce community care and services for disabled people”.

Douglas Joy, McDonald's solicitor, of Disability Law Service, said the Court of Appeal had found that a council could simply review a service-user's care needs – and then reduce their support – without needing to conduct a new assessment.

Joy said the “massively important” case, which is being heard on 4 and 5 April – although the judgment is unlikely to be handed down for several weeks – had “important implications” for many other disabled people, but his “primary concern” was to ensure that McDonald's night-time care package was reinstated.

Her lawyers will be arguing that a council cannot be considered to have conducted a lawful assessment simply by reviewing a disabled person's care package.

They will also argue that refusing to provide night-time care and forcing McDonald to wear incontinence pads was a breach of her human rights to dignity and to a private and family life, while the council also discriminated against her under the DDA.

Joy said the Supreme Court hearing would be the first time the country's highest court had looked at the issues surrounding community care provision for about 10 years.

31 March 2011

TUC protest: Disabled people send powerful messages to government

Disabled people who took part in the huge TUC protest march and rally in London have sent a series of powerful messages to the government about the impact of the cuts on their lives.

They told Disability News Service during Saturday's event why they had joined the hundreds of thousands of other protesters who took part in the March for the Alternative.

Linda Burnip, a founder of Disabled People Against Cuts, which played a big role in supporting disabled people to take part, said: "I am hoping to send a really powerful message to all politicians, including Ed Miliband [the Labour leader], that we are not going to be messed around with."

Stuart Bracking, a member of the Unison union, said he was demonstrating to protect services and to protest about cuts to disability benefits.

He said: "I have been on demonstrations over the last 20 years and the visibility of disabled people is much higher on this demonstration than it has been over the last 20 years."

Doug Whalley, who lives in a residential home, said he believed disabled people were being "unfairly punished" for "something that wasn't our fault".

He said the proposal to stop paying the mobility component of disability living allowance (DLA) to people in residential care was "really sick".

And he appealed to the government to "stop making up stuff about disabled people and tax the bankers, not the people who can afford it least".

Deborah Sowerby said she felt as if she was "among friends" on the protest, and added: "There has not been enough of this coming together. There are a lot of us and we are not going anywhere and that is why we are here today."

Adrian Whyatt, from the London Autistic Rights Movement, said: "We need to try and get them to see these cuts are not working."

He said disabled people were being "targeted" by the government, and pointed to the mobility component decision, and problems with the notorious work capability assessment.

Sian Vasey, director of Ealing Centre for Independent Living, said she was worried about cuts to social services, and added: "If they dismantle everything they are only going to have to rebuild it again."

Marian O'Brien, coordinator of Ealing User Involvement Service, said her message to the government was to not privatise services.

She said: "We want to keep our welfare state. The 'big society' will not happen because they are cutting back on funding. They are dismantling the welfare state bit by bit."

Anne Pridmore, chair of Being the Boss, which supports disabled people who employ personal assistants, said she believed the cuts had put disabled people's rights back 20 years, while the government's reforms were about "trying to get big businesses rich".

She said: "I am so angry. In three years' time it looks like I will end up in an old people's home. Without support, people will not be able to get up in the morning. If disabled people have not got the support packages they will not be able to go to work anymore."

Her colleague Jan Turner said: "I am here because of the service cuts, because of all of the money they are spending on the census and the Afghan war and the Gaddafi war and all the tax evasion.

"I think they are doing unnecessary cuts to people who are vulnerable. I am doing it for other people who can't protest."

Sheila Blair, also from Being the Boss, said: "I volunteer with a lot of organisations. What I don't want is for a lot of organisations like the ones I volunteer for to get to a position where they have no staff and everything is done by volunteers in the name of the 'big society', which is a lot of s***. I just get very angry about it all."

Frank Lerner, a retired head teacher, said: "Everything I have ever worked for in my life is being destroyed. I just think that this government is out to destroy the infrastructure of our society for their own easy ends.

"The cuts are nothing to do with what is needed, they are to do with what they want to achieve. It is dogma rather than necessity."

Raymond Johnson, from People First (Self Advocacy), said he believed the banks should be forced to make cuts rather than disabled people.

He said: "Obviously there are lots of people here against the stupid cutbacks. Saying 'we are all in this together', I don't think so. There are a hell of a lot of people here."

Sandy Marks said she was protesting "because I can and because when they have finished with us I will not be able to".

Sarah Fisher, from Knutsford, Cheshire, said: "The banks got us into this mess but it is the ones who are least able to cope with cuts who are going to be paying for it. There is no fairness in what is happening."

She added: "I am hoping that this will help. I think if nothing else it will give a wake-up call to the government in that not everybody is behind this 'we are all in this together'."

Lisa Egan, co-founder of the Where's the Benefit? blog, said she was there "to protest against the cuts, because I need the welfare state and the NHS in order not to die".

Louise Hickman, from Hackney, said she had joined the protest because of the “vulnerability of support for disabled people in further education”.

Olcay Lee said: “We are here to stop the cuts if we can.”

Her husband, Andrew, director of People First (Self Advocacy), said: “Disabled people didn’t actively put us in this mess.

“We are very concerned that cutting services for disabled people, there is no logic to where the cuts are actually being made.

“Yes, we need to get the country into a better shape but disabled people need the right support. Without the right support there will be more money [needed] to clear up the mess.”

Andrew Hart said he was at the protest as a disabled trade union member, the trustee of a voluntary organisation that was suffering from the cuts, and the father of a son with autism, who was facing the loss of education maintenance allowance (EMA) as he prepared to start sixth form college.

Riven Vincent, from Bristol, the disabled mother who caused a media storm after saying she had asked her council to take her disabled child into care because of a lack of respite, called on the government to rethink its DLA reforms, and its plans to remove the mobility component from those in residential care.

She said: “I am marching because of the cuts that will affect disabled people, including my daughter Celyn (Williams).

“I have met David Cameron and he promised none of his cuts would affect disabled people and he has lied.”

Dean Thomas, from Nottingham, said he was on the march “because I can be here. For other people who can’t be here. The cutbacks are focused on the most vulnerable people in society. They are completely wrong.”

John, who asked not to give his surname, said he had joined the march because services were under threat.

He was scornful of David Cameron’s “big society”, and said: “The expectation that there will be all these volunteers to do the jobs is a bit false. There are already volunteers in society. How many more are there going to be?”

Margie Hill, from Knowsley, Merseyside, a member of the Unison union who works in local government, said she believed the government wanted to target disabled people, and was going to “try to pick them off, get rid of them” and “scupper our benefits”, while any new jobs would go to non-disabled people.

Catherine Callaghan, also from Knowsley, has been made redundant from her job with Greater Merseyside Connexions Partnership, which she said had cut more than 40 per cent of its workforce.

She had worked there with disabled young people, and said the loss of EMA meant young people would be “dropping out in their droves from education, hanging round the streets and there will not be people like us to interact with them to get them back on track”.

Jonathan Bartley, who is not disabled but cornered David Cameron in front of TV cameras before last year’s general election about his battle to secure a mainstream school place for his disabled son, Samuel, said his wife had lost her job at Sure Start.

He added: “Clearly it is affecting our family, our whole community, and it is very important that the government understands that this is not what the country voted for.

“What seems to be happening is the poorest and the most vulnerable are paying the price for the financial crisis they didn’t get us into.”

31 March 2011

TUC protest: Disabled people play part in march and rally

Disabled people came from all over the UK to play their part in a mass protest organised by the TUC against the government’s spending cuts.

Many were there to protest against cuts to disability benefits and other aspects of the government’s welfare reforms, while others were angry about the impact on inclusive education, and cuts to local services and support.

Leading figures in the disability movement joined representatives of the new disabled people’s anti-cuts movement, individual disabled people, trade union members and carers.

The many disabled people’s organisations represented included Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC), Black Triangle, People First (Self Advocacy), Disability History Month and the London Autistic Rights Movement.

Estimates for the number of protesters who took part in the march from London’s Embankment to Hyde Park ranged from 250,000 to 500,000. Although it is impossible to guess how many of them were disabled, scores of people joined a “safe” area for disabled people near the front of the march.

Tara Flood, director of the Alliance for Inclusive Education, said she was on the march to “tell the government that we are not going to accept the cuts that they are imposing on us or the return to the bad old days of segregation”.

She added: “People are not going to just sit back and let our services be destroyed and let disabled people’s lives be damaged beyond repair.”

Youcef Bey-Zekkoub, who was representing the accessible transport charity Transport for All, said he was on the march to show that accessible transport “is really important for disabled people like myself. My message to the government is they have to think again about these cuts. Especially about access for disabled people.”

The writer and performer Penny Pepper said she had taken part “because we have to be counted against the savage attacks against disabled people’s lives”.

She said: “We are seen as easy to target. We have to show that we are not easy and that we have a voice.”

Peter Purton, the TUC’s disability policy officer, said disabled people were the “worst affected” by the cuts, including disability benefit reforms, the loss of public sector jobs, and cuts to legal aid. He said he was “delighted” that so many disability groups had taken part in the protest.

The Labour MP Dame Anne Begg said she had taken part in the protest to show “solidarity” and that “there is an alternative and we know that the priorities of this government are wrong”.

She said: “It seems to me that those who have least seem to be losing the most and that is simply not fair. Disabled people in particular feel very strongly because they seem to be in the forefront of many of the cuts.”

There were criticisms of the TUC’s access arrangements, with some complaining that they had had to fight through crowds to reach the allocated “safe space” for disabled people near the front of the march.

The TUC had also said that the disabled people at the front would be able to set their own pace, but they were soon swamped and separated from each other by thousands of marchers who overtook them soon after the march began.

Kirsten Hearn, chair of Inclusion London and a member of the Metropolitan Police Authority, [blogged after the event](#) that the experience of having to fight her way to the front had been “very frightening” and that she had been “put in danger”.

Linda Burnip, one of DPAC’s founders, said the access arrangements had been “total chaos” and had certainly put disabled people at risk.

A TUC spokeswoman said it had made “extensive efforts” to make the event as accessible as possible, but was now carrying out an assessment of the access arrangements.

She said: “We would not pretend that everything was perfect or could not be improved, but we are pretty sure that this was the most accessible demonstration of its size ever organised in London.”

She added: “Some reported issues were simply due to the greater than expected numbers.”

There was some disappointment that the Labour leader Ed Miliband failed to mention disabled people in his speech in Hyde Park, even though he mentioned maternity services, Sure Start centres, small business owners, teachers, students, “families struggling to get by”, libraries, Citizens Advice Bureaux, community centres and the NHS.

His spokeswoman said later that other groups had also not been mentioned, and that Miliband had raised the government’s plans to remove the mobility component of disability living allowance from people in residential care at that week’s prime minister’s questions.

She said: “It is an issue he cares about and it is an issue the Labour Party cares about. He is actually aware of the deep concerns and anxieties that disabled people have about the effect of the cuts.”

Meanwhile, DPAC’s online protest for those unable to attend the march or rally saw an estimated 200 people email messages of support, which were “pinned” to an online map of the UK. The map, embedded on the DPAC website and other sites, received more than a quarter of a million views.

31 March 2011

Repeat of epic journey will highlight fuel price rises and benefits concerns

A disabled people’s organisation is to recreate an historic journey in which a three-wheeled “invalid carriage” was driven across the Alps, in a bid to highlight cuts to disability benefits and problems caused by rising fuel prices.

Campaigners will repeat the epic, 1,500 mile journey of O A “Denny” Denly in 1947, in which he drove his petrol-driven Argson tricycle – which had a top speed of 30 miles per hour – from London to Switzerland, across the Alps to Geneva, and back to London.

Denly had planned to visit Switzerland when he took his first leave from the Royal Navy, but became disabled after contracting polio in Ceylon in 1945. After leaving hospital and

securing a job as a hospital administrator, he decided to go ahead with the trip to Switzerland on his trike.

Denly, who died last year at the age of 86, was co-founder of the Invalid Tricycle Association (ITA), which later became the Disabled Drivers' Association, and merged with the Disabled Drivers' Motor Club in 2005 to become Mobilise.

[Denly's journey](#) – which included a climb of almost 8,000 feet – will be retraced in June using his original trike, which has been restored by a member of the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, who are based near Mobilise's Norfolk headquarters.

The Alps Challenge will commemorate Denly's life and achievements and raise awareness of the renaming of Mobilise as Disabled Motoring UK (DM UK) as well as highlighting rising fuel prices and government cuts to disability living allowance (DLA).

Members of DM UK, and disabled members of the armed services, will each drive a leg of the journey, which will start at the charity's headquarters and end more than two weeks later at the Houses of Parliament, with the final leg driven by Baroness [Tanni] Grey-Thompson.

Helen Dolphin, director of policy and campaigns for DM UK, which campaigns on issues around the mobility of disabled people, said disabled motorists were being increasingly hit by rising fuel prices, while there were also "a lot of concerns about whether people will keep their DLA".

She said the message of the Alps Challenge was that disabled people do not want to return to "how things used to be" in 1947, with severely restricted mobility.

She said: "Because many disabled people have to drive automatic vehicles and use larger vehicles which carry heavy equipment, the amount of fuel they have to use is disproportionate.

"We have people saying to us, 'I have this wonderful car but it sits on my drive and I only use it when absolutely necessary.'"

The charity has asked the Treasury to introduce a VAT rebate on some of the fuel used by disabled drivers.

Dolphin said "Mobilise" had only ever been intended to be a temporary name. But the main reason for the change, she said, was that Mobilise was frequently mistaken for Motability, the charity which runs the disabled people's car scheme. Mobilise members voted 574 to 30 in favour of the name change to Disabled Motoring UK.

31 March 2011

Equality 2025's new chair pledges to keep disability 'at top of agenda'

The new chair of the government's advisory body of disabled people has pledged to ensure disability remains "at the top of the agenda" as public sector spending cuts begin to bite.

Dr Rachel Perkins said she was "delighted" to be appointed to chair Equality 2025, and said the advice body would need to "continually look at the implications for disabled people in all of the reforms".

The clinical psychologist carried out a well-received review in 2009 for the Labour government on helping people with mental health conditions into work.

Last summer, she was Mind's "champion of the year" in its mental health awards, and also received an OBE for services to mental health.

Perkins said the role of Equality 2025 was to examine the implications of policies for disabled people and "maybe suggest alternatives that are less damaging" and "ways that things could be changed".

She added: "We do have to make sure that issues facing disabled people... remain at the forefront of people's agenda."

But she stressed that she did not believe that ministers in the coalition government were any more guilty of failing to recognise the implications of their policies on disabled people than those in previous governments.

When asked whether she had joined the TUC's mass march and rally against the cuts, she said she had spent the weekend writing, away from London, although her partner had taken part.

But she added: "I would have been there if I had been in London. I do think there are concerns."

Shortly afterwards, she added: "I don't know whether I would have been there."

She made it clear that Equality 2025 was now – following changes made last year which reduced membership from a maximum of 25 disabled people to just eight – a "strategic advisory group", providing advice to ministers and senior officials "at the very early stages of policy development".

She said it was no longer an "outward-facing" group that provided a "conduit" for disabled people to feed their opinions to the government.

And she repeated the views of her predecessor, Rowen Jade, who told Disability News Service last year – following criticism of the body’s low profile – that its advice to government had to remain private and confidential.

But Perkins added: “There is no way that Equality 2025 replaces the role of disabled people’s organisations. It has a different role and that is providing that early confidential advice that means it cannot be public.

“If you want impact on policy at that early stage it is confidential and... has to remain that way.”

Perkins pointed to the significance of someone living with a mental health condition securing such a prominent role and said she was “absolutely convinced” that the disability movement needed to encompass the “full range of disabled people”, which was “something I have been writing and speaking about for a long time”.

She also said that too much of the dialogue about mental health centred on “treatment and needs” rather than “rights and access”.

She said: “I really do feel the social model rights to citizenship is absolutely the way we have to look at people facing the full range of impairments.

“We have to help government to see that they have to look at the full range of our experiences.”

She also paid tribute to Rowen Jade, who was much mourned across the disability movement when she died last September.

She said Jade was “an amazing woman” and would be an “incredibly difficult act to follow”, but that she hoped to build on her work.

Perkins said her first task as chair was to work with her fellow members on a work plan for the next year, but she said she could not yet say what those priorities might be.

30 March 2011

Number receiving support plunges, even before cuts begin to bite

More than 80,000 fewer disabled and older people received council-funded support services last year, long before the impact of government spending cuts began to bite, according to a new report by the care watchdog.

The Care Quality Commission's (CQC) annual [State of Care in England report](#) said the number of adults receiving council-funded care dropped by nearly five per cent during 2009-10 – from 1.78 million to 1.7 million – according to estimated government figures.

The report suggests this could be because of the gradual tightening by councils of eligibility for such services.

The CQC report says there were also “significant reductions” in the numbers of people receiving all “major community care services” provided by councils, including support at home, respite care, meals at home, and equipment and adaptations.

Its publication came as a survey by the Care and Support Alliance – whose members include RADAR, the National Centre for Independent Living and Disability Alliance – found nearly a quarter of disabled and older people (and carers speaking on their behalf) said their care services had been cut, even before councils start to implement deep spending cuts in April.

Nearly a quarter of those questioned in the survey – which looked at the impact of changes to people's services between November 2009 and February 2011 – said they or the person they cared for were not receiving any services, even though they needed support.

More than two-fifths said they found it harder to afford essentials such as food and heating, while more than half had seen their health deteriorate as a result of changes to their services, and more than half said the changes had made it harder to maintain their independence.

The alliance said: “This research shows that significant numbers of families affected by illness and disability are going without the care and support services they need.

“This will only be exacerbated by bigger cuts to come as the government reduces funding to local councils.”

The survey is being sent as evidence to the Commission on Funding of Care and Support, which is due to publish its recommendations this summer.

Meanwhile, the CQC report says the quality of care services has “continued to show further improvement”, with the proportion rated “poor” falling from three per cent in May 2008 to one per cent in April 2010.

But the report raises concerns about the treatment of some people detained under the Mental Health Act, and says many detained patients who were said to have consented to treatment appeared to be refusing to give consent or lacked the capacity to do so.

The report concludes that there have been “major improvements” in social care and health services, but Dame Jo Williams, CQC's chair, warned that the overall picture was still “far from perfect”.

30 March 2011

Report makes 'compelling case' for government rethink on cuts

The poverty and inequality faced by disabled people will be deepened even further if the government fails to rethink its planned regime of spending cuts, according to a new report.

The report, published by Inclusion London, provides detailed evidence of the impact of the cuts on disabled people and makes "a compelling case" for the coalition to "think again".

The report says the removal of disability benefits, public sector job losses and cuts to services suggest the government is moving towards providing a "bare minimum" safety net, rather than aiming for a "genuinely more equal society".

And it says the cuts will erode "basic and fundamental human rights", such as the right to live independently, have an adequate standard of living, participate in public life, and have equal access to justice.

Previously published research shows disabled people are likely to be in the lowest income groups, which could face a loss of 20 to 35 per cent in net income a year through changes to tax and benefits and cuts to social care, housing and education.

The report says about 114,000 disabled people working in London's public sector risk losing their jobs, while 32,000 Londoners are set to lose their disability living allowance due to the cuts.

Anne Kane, Inclusion London's policy manager, says the evidence shows the government should do more to tackle discrimination, exclusion and inequality rather than making "harsh cuts that will hit the poorest most".

The report, [All in this Together? The Impact of Spending Cuts on Deaf and Disabled People in London](#), says the estimated 1.4 million disabled people in the capital already face "significant" pay inequality, with average net pay of almost £50 a week less than non-disabled people, as a result of discrimination in education, training and employment.

Kane says this discrimination "will be worsened by the government's proposals for education, equality legislation and public sector restructuring and spending cuts".

The report, funded by London Councils, says disabled Londoners are more likely to live in rented accommodation and to rent from their local authority than non-disabled Londoners, and four times more likely to receive housing benefit.

Kane says: “These facts of poverty and discrimination will be made much worse by the government’s proposed cuts to housing benefit and possible changes to social housing.”

The report concludes that “it is clear from the evidence that the coalition government’s policy agenda will lead to worsening outcomes” and “greater hardship” and inequality for disabled people.

It adds: “The overwhelming message that emerges is that disabled people in London are likely to be amongst those that suffer the most from the tax, benefit and spending measures announced last year.”

30 March 2011

Cost-effective robot devices ‘could be future of assisted living’

Advanced robotics and computer technology could soon be combined in a much more cost-effective way to offer independence for disabled people with high support needs in their homes, a conference has heard.

Trying to “reinvent people” by cramming everything into one extremely costly “humanoid” device would do little to achieve independence, the conference heard.

Instead, the assisted living systems of the future could see many different robotics devices scattered around the home, all controlled by a central computer.

Richard Greenhill, founder of [Shadow Robot Company](#), the British company that has created “the world’s most advanced robot hand” – which is so lifelike it can handle a raw egg without cracking it – said the assisted living robotics devices of the future could be relatively inexpensive and use mostly cheap, easily-made parts.

He said such systems would be far more likely to boost a disabled person’s independence than a “humanoid” robot “tottering around the place on wheels or legs” to deliver a cup of coffee.

Greenhill was speaking at a two-day international conference, Technology with Disabled and Older People, hosted by the London School of Economics.

Greenhill said he was working on developing a system that could use robotics devices that were 10 or even 100 times cheaper than current technology.

He said the system would be designed in such a way that if one device malfunctioned, the others would still work.

He said such devices “may move quite slowly and may not be very powerful” but would still be able to provide the necessary support with aspects of independent living such as communication, cooking, washing and entertainment, and would use different technology for different tasks.

Greenhill told Disability News Service afterwards that it would also be important only to provide as much support as was needed, so the robotics devices did not “take over” from the disabled person and were designed to “help you rather than treat you as a piece of meat”.

This could also mean the role of the care workers of the future would be “radically different”, providing technical support and discussing with the service-user what changes to make to their system, rather than performing lifting and other manual tasks.

But he said he worried that the new system could be “a bit obtrusive”, so there was a need for discussion with disabled people about how much of this potentially bulky technology they would accept in their homes.

Feedback from potential users on the development of such systems would be absolutely vital. “It has got to actually please the users,” he added.

For information about Shadow Robot’s work, email contact@shadowrobot.com.

30 March 2011

Legal aid cuts could hit disabled people harder, say MPs

Disabled people could be hit “disproportionately” hard by the government’s planned cuts to legal aid, according to a committee of MPs.

A [report by the justice select committee](#) says the evidence it received during its inquiry into the planned reforms to the legal aid system suggests that disabled people and other “vulnerable” groups could be “disproportionately hit by the changes”.

The committee’s report adds: “If this were to happen it would sit uneasily with the Government’s commitment to protect the most vulnerable in society.”

The government plans to cut an estimated £350 million a year from the £2 billion legal aid budget for England and Wales by 2014-15.

Among the areas where eligibility for legal aid is set to be removed are legal advice on benefits and less serious housing and debt issues.

But the committee's report says it is "concerned that the ability of the most vulnerable people to present their cases will be weakened because they will not have had help and advice in preparing them".

It adds: "This could deny justice to the individuals concerned and increase the time and expense necessary to deal with the case at tribunal."

The committee said the changes have caused "serious concerns" among the providers of legal aid services and other organisations.

Citizens Advice has estimated that for every £1 of legal aid spent on benefits advice, the state potentially saves £8.80, for example in tribunal, housing and NHS costs.

AdviceUK – which supports free, independent advice centres – told the committee that one of its member organisations estimated that half of its clients had "physical health difficulties" with nearly half having "mental health difficulties", while another member said 70 per cent of its welfare benefits clients were disabled people.

The government has admitted it does not know what impact the changes will have on disabled people and black and minority ethnic groups because of "information gaps".

The government wants voluntary organisations to provide services in place of legally-aided support, but "many of the organisations concerned have said they will not have the funding to do so", the committee's report says.

One way to make legal aid savings would be to force the Department for Work and Pensions to pay a fine when its "poor decision-making" on benefits claims leads to large numbers of successful appeals, the report suggests.

Sir Alan Beith, the Liberal Democrat chair of the committee, said there was "cross-party consensus on the need to reduce the cost of the legal aid budget", but he added: "Concerns remain, however, that there is the potential for vulnerable groups of people to be disproportionately hit by the changes."

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News provided by John Pring at www.disabilitynewsservice.com