

## **Access to Work: UKDPC boss's anger after government denies vital support**

The government's commitment to supporting disabled people in employment has been questioned again, after a prominent disabled leader had his application for workplace support rejected.

Jaspal Dhani, chief executive of the UK Disabled People's Council (UKDPC), has been told he is not eligible for funding from the Access to Work (ATW) scheme because he has such a senior position.

He said: "I had applied to ATW for a support worker. Their response was that as I am the chief executive, the organisation should be able to afford to pay for the PA [personal assistant] I require."

UKDPC employs the equivalent of only two full-time members of staff, including Dhani himself.

He said: "I explained that we are a very small organisation and we have very limited resources and the organisation certainly cannot afford to appoint the full-time PA I require."

He is appealing the decision to turn down his application.

Although UKDPC employs a part-time member of staff to work in its London office, that role covers administrative duties, and is not intended to provide the support he needs as a disabled employee, while funding for the post could end shortly.

Dhani, a wheelchair-user, said: "I am a disabled person in full-time work and with an identified need for a support worker. If I cannot get the support I need from ATW, then I risk losing my job."

The case comes at an embarrassing time for the government, as new figures published this week show the number of disabled people receiving ATW support fell from 37,270 in 2009-10 to 35,830 in 2010-11.

The number of successful new claimants has fallen even more sharply, from 16,520 in 2009-10 to just 13,240 in 2010-11, despite the government's claim that its controversial welfare reform programme is aimed at helping more disabled people off benefits and into work.

Dhani said: "This is one of the fundamental issues that we have been trying to stress to the Department for Work and Pensions [DWP] in terms of their revision of the ATW scheme.

"They say they want to support disabled people into work, but the current scheme falls short and fails many disabled employees."

A DWP spokeswoman said their ATW team was now re-examining Dhani's case.

**28 July 2011**

### **Access to Work: Government dismisses alarm bells**

Government figures have confirmed a dramatic slump in the number of disabled people granted funds to make their workplaces more accessible.

Figures published quietly by the government this week show there were just 13,240 “new customers” helped by the Access to Work (ATW) scheme in 2010-11, compared with 16,520 the previous year, a fall of nearly a quarter.

The total number of disabled people receiving ATW (which includes those continuing to receive support after claiming successfully in previous years) has also fallen, from 37,270 in 2009-10 to 35,830 in 2010-11.

In the first half of 2010-11, 7,700 new customers were helped (an average of 1,283 a month). This dropped to an average of 980 a month in the third quarter, and has now plunged to an average of just 867 a month from January to March 2011.

The campaigning disability organisation RADAR said the figures were “truly worrying”.

Marije Davidson, RADAR’s public affairs manager, said: “The alarm bells should be ringing in Whitehall and they should investigate this slump in figures.”

A Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) spokeswoman said total ATW spending rose to £105 million in 2010-11 from £99m in 2009-2010 – although this is an even smaller increase once inflation is taken into account – while the number of pre-existing claimants had increased.

The DWP spokeswoman added: “We are committed to making sure those who need support get it.”

But she dismissed the drop of nearly a quarter in successful new claims as a “small decrease” which was “likely to reflect an increase in employer contributions for small adaptations, which means that there is further funding available for those who need it the most”.

New ATW rules mean employers or disabled employees themselves now have to fund equipment such as basic versions of voice-activated software, most adapted chairs, and satellite navigation devices, rather than having them funded through ATW.

Last month, Liz Sayce, RADAR’s chief executive, published a review of employment support for the government and focused strongly on the need to expand and improve ATW.

But the government's response to her review – [now out to consultation](#) – made several references to concerns that her ATW recommendations could put “additional pressure on funding at a time when resources are limited”.

Davidson said the new figures meant the government should ask whether fewer people were aware of the scheme, or whether more disabled people were out of work or the government's ATW criteria were too strict.

And she said the government should ask what was happening to disabled people who have ATW applications turned down.

Davidson said: “In this time of increasing pressure on disabled people to find work amidst tough competition, and worse attitudes towards disabled people, Access to Work is a vital line of support.”

Anne Kane, policy manager for Inclusion London, added: “It makes absolutely no sense to restrict ATW. It is a huge success story and should be massively promoted.

“The idea that the budget should be restricted or spread more thinly is nonsensical, because ATW generates tax and National Insurance income for the government.”

The government has repeatedly claimed that its much-criticised welfare reforms are aimed at helping more disabled people off benefits and into work.

But the coalition has already broken one ATW pledge, made in its “programme for government”, after backtracking on a promise to allow disabled people to secure ATW funding before they apply for a job.

**28 July 2011**

### **BBC has ‘turned its back on disability’**

The BBC has been accused of turning its back on reporting the crucial issues affecting disabled people, after admitting it will not be replacing its specialist disability news correspondent.

Geoff Adams-Spink, the BBC's age and disability correspondent and one of the country's leading disabled journalists, left the BBC in April to set up his own company.

But the BBC admitted this week that it will not be appointing another specialist to take over the role, even though it employs a string of specialist correspondents covering everything from transport and rural affairs to education, religious affairs, science and technology.

Adams-Spink, who declined to comment, had reported on disability issues for BBC News Online, radio and television.

The BBC's admission comes only weeks after the broadcaster sparked anger by deciding to shut down internet messageboards that allowed disabled people to start their own online discussions and seek advice on topics such as benefits cuts, discrimination and healthcare.

The messageboards were run by Ouch!, the BBC's own disability website, which has now become part of the BBC News department.

Stephen Brookes, a coordinator of the Disability Hate Crime Network and joint chair of the National Union of Journalists' disabled members council, said he believed the BBC had a duty as a public body to cover disability issues properly, and that it was breaching that duty.

He said: "I am not just concerned, I am deeply angered that he is not being replaced. They are saying that disability and equality is not an important matter and that is a dire statement for the BBC as a key news provider to make. I think that is a disgrace."

A BBC spokeswoman confirmed that Adams-Spink would not be replaced.

She said disability issues for BBC News were "covered fully by the UK affairs team, in particular BBC's social affairs correspondent Alison Holt".

She said the Ouch! team would be "working across the news website" and would "bring diverse disability stories and context to all audiences whilst also maintaining a conversation with the disability community", while the BBC had also "given special focus to disability issues when editorially appropriate".

But despite repeated attempts to clarify what reporting role the Ouch! team would fulfil, and whether the decision not to replace Adams-Spink was taken to cut costs, she declined to comment further.

The BBC has also faced anger from disabled activists over its coverage of the assisted suicide debate, after broadcasting five pro-legalisation documentaries and drama-documentaries in less than three years, while failing to produce a single documentary or drama-documentary from the viewpoint of those opposed to a weakening of the law.

**28 July 2011**

**Care watchdog faces new questions over inspection failures**

The care regulator faces further serious questions over its failure to root out evidence of abuse and poor standards, after publishing a series of reports into services run by the company at the centre of a major care scandal.

The Care Quality Commission (CQC) today published reports into standards at 23 services for people with learning difficulties run by the care provider Castlebeck.

The reports were ordered after a BBC Panorama investigation uncovered serious allegations of abuse at Winterbourne View, a private “hospital” near Bristol for people with learning difficulties, which was run by Castlebeck.

Of the 23 Castlebeck services reviewed, CQC found “serious concerns” with four of them, while a further seven failed to “fully comply with essential standards of quality and safety”.

The watchdog said it was taking enforcement action against the four services – Arden Vale in Meriden, Solihull; Cedar Vale in Nottingham; Croxton Lodge in Melton Mowbray; and Rose Villa, on the edge of Bristol – but for legal reasons could not yet say what that action was.

Among the concerns unearthed at Arden Vale, a private hospital, CQC found people with learning difficulties were “not always adequately safeguarded from physical and emotional harm”; at Cedar Vale, another hospital, CQC concluded that patients “may not be protected from abuse” and “were not always protected from harm”; and at Croxton Lodge, another hospital, CQC said people living there were “not safeguarded against potential abuse” and were “not safe”.

Castlebeck had already suspended four members of staff from the fourth service, Rose Villa, a home for nine adults with learning difficulties situated less than 10 miles from Winterbourne View.

CQC gave Rose Villa a “good”, or two-star, rating after an inspection last year. But this week’s report lists a string of concerns, including evidence of a failure to protect some people against the risk of abuse, and decisions that restricted the liberty of residents.

Two of the other three services have also been inspected by CQC in the last 18 months.

CQC inspected Croxton Lodge this March, and concluded then that it was protecting people from abuse, in contrast with its new report.

Cedar Vale was last inspected in January 2010, when the CQC praised the staff’s “good progress” and “commitment”, following previous concerns over care standards.

Arden Vale, the fourth of the services, was last inspected in October 2007, when the Healthcare Commission – the CQC’s predecessor as healthcare regulator – reported that a string of standards were either “almost met” or “not met”.

Since 2007 – despite those concerns – the two regulators had decided it was not necessary to inspect Arden Vale, until the latest series of reviews.

The new CQC reports also identify company-wide concerns with Castlebeck, such as problems with training, inadequate staffing levels, and a failure to notify the authorities about safeguarding incidents.

When asked whether the new reports again demonstrated its previous inspection failures, a CQC spokesman said the “primary responsibility for safety rests with providers and the staff who work for them”, while commissioners – such as local authorities – also have a part to play by “not rewarding poor practice”.

He said CQC’s role was “mitigating the likelihood of people being harmed” and “dealing with failure... within a legal framework that sets out acceptable standards of care and gives us enforcement powers to take action when we need to”.

He added: “What we cannot do is guarantee people’s safety in each and every interaction they have with care – nobody can do that.”

A Department of Health (DH) spokeswoman said that both DH and CQC were “committed to learning lessons from Winterbourne and driving up standards across social care, acting quickly where there are signs of poor care”.

She said: “This isn’t just about the regulator: commissioners and providers need to work better too.

“The owners of Castlebeck in particular must take a hard look at these reports and take tough action now to ensure they do what they should have been doing all along – protecting the vulnerable people who had been placed in their care.”

The 23 new reports were published just days after CQC defended the failure of its inspectors to uncover evidence of serious abuse at Winterbourne View before the BBC investigation, as it published its damning report into the alleged abuse at the hospital.

Care services minister Paul Burstow said the new set of CQC reports was “deeply disturbing and indicates levels of care that are unacceptable” at Castlebeck.

He said he had appointed Imelda Redmond, chief executive of Carers UK, to work with the government on how to improve the quality of social care.

Castlebeck admitted that some of its services had “not met the high standards we would expect to achieve” and that it was “committed to addressing all of these shortcomings as a matter of urgency”.

**28 July 2011**

## **Website highlight's London's inclusion shame as it prepares for 2012**

Angry disabled activists have launched a website to highlight the “shameful” failure to put access and inclusion at the heart of next year's London 2012 Olympics and Paralympics.

They have focused their anger on the mayor of London, Boris Johnson, who they say is painting an inaccurate and overly positive view of access in the capital, and has ignored the impact of brutal cuts to government spending.

After the Beijing Olympics in 2008, Johnson promised that London would host the “most accessible and inclusive Olympic and Paralympic games ever”, and he repeated that pledge when launching his [Inclusive London](#) website this March.

His website details the access features of hotels, restaurants, pubs, tourist attractions and 2012 venues and aims to be the “first port of call” for disabled people planning a trip to the capital.

But activists have now launched their own website, [Inclusive London?](#), which they say allows disabled visitors to see “how inclusive and accessible London really is”.

Their “unofficial visitor guide” includes information on the mayor's decision to slash plans to improve step-free access at tube stations, problems with the city's inaccessible black taxis, cuts to Dial-a-Ride services, and problems with blue badge parking in central London.

The site also highlights cuts to disability benefits, workplace discrimination, the impact of air pollution on the life expectancy of the city's disabled people, cuts to legal aid, the shortage of accessible housing, the coalition government's pledge to “remove the bias towards inclusion” in the education system, and the tiny proportion of Cultural Olympiad funding that is going to disabled artists.

The website draws unfavourable comparisons with other cities to have hosted the Olympics and Paralympics, such as Barcelona, Beijing and Seoul.

Its launch comes as the accessible transport charity Transport for All (TfA) spoke out against plans to close weekday tube services to Kensington Olympia, the only fully step-free station in the area that allows interchange between rail and tube services and therefore access to the rest of central London. TfA said the plans would “further erode transport accessibility in London”.

Julie Newman, acting chair of the UK Disabled People's Council, said the “true story” on access in London had so far been missing from the “flurry of publicity that greets every new announcement about the arrangements for 2012”.

She said: “In reality, we experience growing difficulties in accessing transport, parking and all of the activities and facilities that are such an intrinsic part of living in a nation’s capital.”

Newman questioned whether the public face of London was “moving towards one that doesn’t include disabled people”, and said she feared disabled people would be “rendered invisible through omission”.

She said the new website and campaign asked important questions and raised vital issues around 2012 access and inclusion.

The campaigners themselves have so far remained anonymous, operating instead under the banner of “Spasticus”, a reference to the 1981 song Spasticus Autisticus by the disabled musician Ian Dury, which itself refers to a famous scene in the Kirk Douglas film Spartacus.

Activists are now wearing “I’m Spasticus” badges to express their solidarity with the campaign and the idea that the issue affects all disabled people.

A spokesman for the mayor of London declined to comment on the new website, but said in a statement: “London’s spectacular Olympic and Paralympic venues are the most accessible new sporting facilities of any Games and while there is still more to be done we are working hard with businesses to ensure visitors can enjoy all of the capital’s attractions and amenities during their stay next summer.

“The InclusiveLondon website – which actively encourages businesses of all types to sign up, advertise and improve their accessibility – has notched up more than 2.5 million hits since its launch in March.”

A spokeswoman for the London 2012 organising committee LOCOG declined to comment.

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### **Ofcom calls for ‘next generation’ of relay services**

New measures that would see significant improvements to telephone “relay” services for people with hearing and speech impairments have been proposed by the industry regulator Ofcom.

Among [proposals it is now consulting on](#), Ofcom wants to introduce a duty on providers to ensure access to a “next generation” text relay service, at a likely cost of less than £16 million a year.

It also wants communications providers to offer access to a new video relay service for users of British Sign Language (BSL).

Video relay services are currently only available commercially, and mainly funded through the government's Access to Work scheme.

Because such a service could cost more than £100 million a year – if demand was high – due to the need for trained interpreters, Ofcom has proposed restricting the video relay service to certain times of the day, or giving users a monthly allocation of minutes.

If the two proposals are confirmed following the consultation, Ofcom would update the legal duties already imposed on communications providers such as BT, Sky and TalkTalk.

Text relay involves an assistant converting typed messages into speech and then converting the spoken response back into typed words.

There is currently only one widely-available national text relay service – operated by BT but available to customers of all service-providers – but it uses technology that is 30 years old and has been described by campaigners as “slow and cumbersome”.

Many BSL-users find the text relay service difficult to use. Video relay services allow them to communicate in their first language, BSL, and enjoy conversations that are “quicker and more fluid” than those using text relay.

Ofcom research found deaf and speech-impaired people still believed text relay played “an important role” in ensuring they could communicate on an “equivalent basis” to voice telephone calls.

But they criticised the BT service for slow conversation speeds, the lack of privacy, and the inability to express or detect emotion, or to be used with equipment such as personal computers and netbooks.

Among suggested features of the next generation text relay service, Ofcom wants users to be able to interrupt during a conversation through the use of “live captions”, instead of having to wait until the end of a message.

The consultation ends on 20 October 2011.

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### **PA strategy aims to boost numbers**

New government guidance aims to boost the number of personal assistants (PAs), and make it easier for disabled people to employ them.

[The new framework for supporting personal assistants](#) in adult social care was launched this week by care services minister Paul Burstow, at the offices of Essex Coalition of Disabled People (ECDP) in Chelmsford.

The framework has been “co-produced” by the Department of Health (DH) in partnership with organisations including the National Centre for Independent Living, other user-led organisations, local authorities, individual PAs and disabled employers of PAs.

The government said the strategy would provide support for PAs and their employers, but stressed that the framework was just a “starting point for further work”.

The framework says the government will work with its partners to ensure that employers of PAs have access to the right advice and support, including information on the practical side of employment such as how to interview potential employees and draw up job descriptions.

Councils will carry out background and reference checks on potential PAs if asked to do so by disabled employers, while the government will ensure Jobcentre Plus staff are “well informed” about working as a PA.

The government will also continue to examine a possible voluntary register of social care workers – to include PAs – by 2013.

Mike Adams, ECDP’s chief executive, said: “We have worked closely with the minister and his colleagues to ensure the strategy he is launching today will work for people on a day-to-day basis.”

Burstow praised the coalition’s work and said: “Personal assistants can make a huge difference to people’s lives and by offering practical support like payroll services and access to training, the staff and volunteers here have helped nearly 4,000 people to make the most of this opportunity.

“The difference it has made to these people’s lives is a clear reminder of why personalisation is so important and is at the heart of our plans for social care.”

The new strategy is part of the government’s plans for the personalisation of adult social care. By 2013, the government wants every eligible service-user to be offered a personal budget to spend on their own care package.

It has estimated that by 2025 this could create nearly 1.2 million PA jobs in England, compared to the current total of less than 200,000.

**28 July 2011**

## **Work capability tests: Media sparks horror with stories of ‘fakers’ and ‘shirkers’**

Activists have attacked newspapers and the government over “appalling” coverage of the release of new statistics on claimants of out-of-work disability benefits.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) released figures this week showing the number of disabled people found “fit for work” after being tested by the controversial work capability assessment (WCA).

The figures actually show that the proportion of claimants found fit for work – and so ineligible for the new employment and support allowance (ESA) – is falling sharply.

But the Daily Express headlined its report with the words: “Sick benefits: 75 per cent are faking.”

The Daily Mail headlined its story: “Time’s up for the shirking classes: Just one in 14 incapacity claimants is unfit to work under new, tougher tests.”

In the wake of the media coverage, Dame Anne Begg MP, chair of the Commons work and pensions committee, wrote to employment minister Chris Grayling.

Her committee published a report this week that criticised media coverage of the assessment process as often “irresponsible and inaccurate”, while calling on the government to take “more care” in the language it uses and how it presents its WCA statistics.

She called on Grayling in her letter to contact newspaper editors “to ensure that the reports they carry about ESA claims are factually correct and that they avoid pejorative terms such as ‘shirkers’ and ‘scroungers’ which are irresponsible and inaccurate”.

She told Disability News Service she was “really angry” with this week’s coverage of the government statistics.

Stephen Brookes, a coordinator of the Disability Hate Crime Network, said the latest stories were “appalling” and “almost beyond belief” and were “potentially creating hostility and hate crime” against disabled people.

Geoff Adams-Spink, a disabled journalist, disability equality consultant and director of [Adams-Spink Ltd](#), said this week’s stories completely undermined the government’s claim that it was not responsible for the “anti-disability media coverage”.

He said the stories were clearly a result of DWP briefings “designed to create a hostile climate towards people who have support needs”.

The stories are just the latest to attract the anger of disabled people over the last year. In April, disabled activists demonstrated outside the Mail's London offices to protest about the newspaper's "disablist" and "defamatory" coverage of incapacity benefit reform.

This week's Express story confuses new ESA claimants with those already claiming old-style incapacity benefit, who will be reassessed over the next three years and will be far less likely than new claimants to be found fit for work.

The Express also fails to mention that the WCA has been heavily criticised for being flawed, inflexible and unfair, with many people with significant support needs denied the benefit; and that 40 per cent of appeals against being turned down for ESA are successful, with up to 96 per cent successful when they have expert representation at their appeals.

The Mail headline and story suggest that successful ESA claimants placed in the work-related activity group (WRAG) – for those disabled people who will need support to return to work – are "workshy" and "shirking".

The Equality and Human Rights Commission said it was aware of complaints about the Mail and Express stories, but declined to comment further.

This week's media stories, and the government's press release, fail to mention that the number of people being found "fit for work" actually fell dramatically between August 2010 and February 2011.

In August, 63 per cent of claimants who completed the WCA were found fit for work, with nine per cent placed in the support group (for those whose impairment prevents them working) and 27 per cent in the WRAG.

But by February this year, just 55 per cent were being found fit for work, with 12 per cent in the support group and 32 per cent in the WRAG.

A DWP spokeswoman claimed that "seasonality" could be affecting the figures, while claimants assessed as fit for work often take longer to process, so "fit for work proportions are most likely to increase as the later results come through".

She said: "It is possible that there is a trend emerging, although it is still too early to say whether there is a change in the underlying data, or a result of the limitations in the data described above."

When it was pointed out that the decline in numbers of those found fit for work appears to date back to last autumn, she declined to comment further.

Both the Express and the Mail declined to comment.

The DWP has yet to respond to Dame Anne's letter to Grayling.

**28 July 2011**

### **Work capability tests: MPs 'objectionable' for criticising charities**

A committee of MPs has criticised campaigning charities for not doing more to promote the "opportunities" offered by the government's controversial reassessment of incapacity benefit claimants, and for "fuelling anxiety" among disabled people.

[The report, from the work and pensions committee](#), analyses the government's programme to re-assess about 1.5 million claimants of "old-style" incapacity benefit (IB) by 2014, following the introduction of its replacement, employment and support allowance (ESA).

The report's "central conclusion" is that the assessment process is failing the vital task of accurately assessing the "employability and needs in the workplace" of disabled claimants and feeding that information to providers of employment support under the new Work Programme.

The report says this failure is the "cause of much of the confusion and anxiety" around the test used to assess disabled people's "fitness for work", the work capability assessment (WCA).

It says the WCA was clearly flawed when introduced but had been improved, although further changes were still needed.

But the MPs on the committee also turned on disability and other organisations that have publicised widespread concerns about the WCA and for campaigning for the test to be improved.

The committee said it suggested to employment minister Chris Grayling that "organisations which represent people on benefits shared some of the responsibility for the negative attitude to the IB reassessment and for fuelling anxiety amongst claimants about the process".

And it said those organisations "could contribute enormously to allaying the concerns about reassessments by giving equal weight to publicising the opportunities an effective assessment process could offer" in addition to their "important role in raising legitimate concerns".

Neil Coyle, director of policy for Disability Alliance, said there was a "very worrying trend of criticising disability charities for highlighting legitimate concerns", which was "a little bit objectionable".

He said: "Disability organisations supported reform and wanted to see more disabled people getting into work and that is not happening and the WCA is a big part of the problem.

"The evidence is clear: there are still problems with the WCA. We do not have an effective assessment so it is very difficult for disability organisations to maintain enthusiasm for a process that is failing the people we represent."

Anne Kane, policy manager for Inclusion London, said she welcomed the report's clear criticism of the WCA, but added: "Our view is that disabled people's organisations, charities and the TUC are reflecting rightful anxiety about a test that is designed to lower the number of people receiving ESA.

"It's not about getting people into work, the outcome is to get people off a certain level of benefit. The test is designed for that purpose."

Lizzie Iron, head of welfare for Citizens Advice, said the charity had "consistently supported the high level aims to help more people into work".

But she added: "The reason for our current messages is that the evidence we've seen so far indicates that the new benefit isn't achieving the high level aims. When we see the system working, we will be very happy to promote its success."

Dame Anne Begg, the disabled Labour MP who chairs the committee, which has a majority of coalition MPs, told Disability News Service that the report had included "mild criticism" of the charities but it had not intended to "undermine the really important work the charities do".

She said: "They have the right to advocate, but they also have a role to play in ensuring the processes are improved and also what happens to those who are found fit for work."

The committee said that both the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Atos Healthcare, which carries out the tests, had made "considerable efforts" to improve assessments, but the DWP "needs to do more to ensure that Atos treats claimants properly and that it produces accurate assessments".

The report says the government should pay just as much attention to changing the attitudes of employers as it does to ensuring disabled claimants are "work ready".

It also criticises Atos for continuing to hold many assessments in inaccessible buildings, and suggests the government should introduce a second provider to carry out WCAs after the reassessment process has ended in 2014, in order to "drive up performance through competition".

**28 July 2011**

## **The 'Hardest Hit' are set to protest across the UK**

Disabled people across the UK are being urged to take part in a series of protests across the country against cuts to services and benefits.

The local and regional protests will take place this autumn as a follow-up to May's hugely successful national Hardest Hit protest in London.

The UK Disabled People's Council (UKDPC) is again working with members of the Disability Benefits Consortium to organise the follow-up protests, which will take place on 21 and 22 October.

UKDPC hopes many of the protests will be led by disabled people's organisations (DPOs).

On Friday 21 October, the aim is for disabled people and other activists to lobby MPs at their weekly constituency surgeries. The following day, there will be marches, demonstrations and other protests across the UK.

[The Hardest Hit](#) protest on 11 May saw thousands of disabled people march through the streets of Westminster in protest at the government's cuts to disability benefits, its welfare reforms and cuts to services for disabled people. Some estimates put the number of people who took part at more than 10,000.

Jaspal Dhani, UKDPC's chief executive, said his organisation was encouraging DPOs to join forces with local branches of disability charities or coordinate protests of their own. UKDPC will be producing information to help DPOs organise their own campaigns.

UKDPC has already heard from 20 DPOs that are interested in taking part in the protests, including organisations in Wales and Northern Ireland.

Dhani said: "We would like this to happen across the UK. It will be an opportunity for disabled people and organisations to be much more focused on issues that they feel are of importance to them at a local level. At the same time, we want it to echo the messages to government as well."

Julie Newman, UKDPC's acting chair, added: "The idea is to bring the protests to the local authorities. Although central government is cutting funding, local authorities are making the choices about where they make the cuts."

Dhani is also keen for anti-cuts groups like Disabled People Against Cuts to be involved in the protests, possibly by organising their own events on 21 and 22 October.

**27 July 2011**

## **Silent threat of electric vehicles ‘must be curbed’**

Car manufacturers must be forced to adapt their near-silent electric vehicles so they no longer pose such a serious threat to the safety of blind pedestrians, say campaigners.

[A new report for the government](#) downplays the risk caused by quiet electric and hybrid vehicles to the safety of partially-sighted and blind pedestrians.

But blind and partially-sighted people are increasingly concerned about the environmentally-friendly vehicles because they say they are often impossible to hear approaching.

Engine noise can provide an indication of a vehicle’s speed, whether it is accelerating or decelerating and how close it is to the pedestrian.

Jill Allen-King, chair of the European Blind Union’s commission on mobility and transport, took part last year in tests in France of a new electric vehicle for a major manufacturer.

She said: “I just couldn’t hear it and my hearing is good. I said I was absolutely adamant that they have got to do something.”

She said the two most important access and transport issues for blind people across the world were the risks caused by electric cars and shared street developments, in which kerbs are removed so motorists and pedestrians have to share the street space.

She said: “These are the two issues we have got to fight, because otherwise, with shared spaces and electric vehicles, blind people will just not stand a chance.

“We recognise the value of environmentally-friendly vehicles but they have got to put a sound on all the electric vehicles, otherwise they will just be killing us off.”

The new report, by the Transport Research Laboratory, says accident statistics from 2005-2008 are inconclusive on whether electric and hybrid vehicles pose more of a risk to partially-sighted and blind pedestrians than cars with regular internal combustion engines.

But its own experiments with 10 partially-sighted pedestrians in a semi-rural setting showed the risk was 1.4 times greater, and 1.3 times greater in urban conditions, while electric and hybrid vehicles were “far more difficult to detect” than normal engines at the “lowest steady speed and when pulling away from rest at the lowest speed”.

Despite these results, the report concludes that while there may be a “potential risk”, the “scale of the problem is currently very small”, while moves to impose minimum noise limits would be “challenging”.

Norman Baker, the Liberal Democrat transport minister, said the government was “committed to the introduction of electric vehicles in a way that will complement the department’s long-standing efforts to protect vulnerable road users”.

But a Department for Transport spokeswoman said a decision on whether manufacturers would be forced to add artificial noise to their electric and hybrid vehicles would be taken at European Union (EU) level.

She said the new research would feed into the EU’s work, but the government had yet to decide whether adding noise was a good idea.

Allen-King now plans to write to Baker, to her own MP and to David Blunkett MP, who is blind, to call for action.

**27 July 2011**

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