

# UKDPC

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United Kingdom  
Disabled People's Council

## **A Report on Benefit Reform Proposals by the Coalition Government**

**Author: UKDPC, August - September 2010**

## **Background**

In August 2010, the UK Disabled People's Council (UKDPC) commissioned a survey of Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs) from across the UK to look at their views of the coalition Government's proposed benefit reforms.

Approximately three hundred organisations were polled over a period of three weeks, with a response rate of approximately 30 per cent.

## **Introduction**

UKDPC have analysed feedback from DPOs and found that the proposed reforms will have a far reaching effect on many.

A number of primary areas of concern have been noted by respondents and these are around two areas in particular:

Firstly, that those with hidden impairments or fluctuating conditions will be worst off under the benefit reform proposals.

Secondly, that there will be a substantial increase in people seeking help/advice from all the organisations asked, and that these organisations do not, and will not receive, enough funding to provide this support.

In 2008-09 £12.7 billion of means tested benefits were unclaimed, yet 30 per cent of disabled people live in poverty.

User-led DPOs, many of which have years of experience dealing with issues in their locality are vitally important to ensuring the needs of disabled people are not overlooked during local service reforms.

We are approaching a period where local services are likely to be cut or reduced due to a council tax freeze, therefore ensuring these DPOs are fully operational will hopefully prevent disabled people falling through the cracks due to the changes.

Many DPOs are concerned about the funding they receive from Local Authorities will be cut and therefore they may cease to exist.

People who are ill due to stress, or whose impairment worsens due to stress, will be worse off if they are made to endure stressful medical tests, or worries over their financial stability/outlook. This could cause a multiplier effect, as

these people may need treating by the health services and increased social care support – thus increasing the costs to the State.

### **Question by Question breakdown:**

Detailed in this section are the questions we asked, and how they were responded to. After each question we will include a general sample of the responses given.

#### **1. In general what impact, if any, do you think the proposed benefit entitlement reviews will have on your service users?**

Very Negative	69.5%
Quite Negative	21.1%
Neither Positive nor Negative	6.3%
Quite Positive	2.1%
Very Positive	1.1%

As you can see above, the majority of respondents felt there would be a very negative impact. Unfortunately the person/organisation who answered 'Very Positive' did not explain their reasoning behind this, nor did they provide details of who they worked for.

One organisation said: "Our service users are already reluctant to apply for benefits they are entitled to, and when they do so have to go through degrading and humiliating procedures to get the benefits. This is likely to get much worse."

Another stated that there was a public perception of the genuinely disabled as "scroungers" or parasitic in nature. They said they were fed up of not being believed, and being constantly confronted with the need to demonstrate the disabled person's inability and what they are unable to do for themselves.

They also stated that this leads to low morale and that a cross examination of genuinely ill people will have the effect of service users being further marginalised and not accepted into mainstream society.

This is something the Government need to be aware of and we are concerned of an increase in hate crimes against persons with disabilities.

The Coalition government are obligated, under Article 8(b) of the UNCRPD to combat stereotypes, prejudices and harmful practices relating to persons with disabilities, including those based on sex and age, in all areas of life. Under 8.2 (a) (ii) the government must seek to promote positive perceptions and greater social awareness toward disabled people.

By implying that disabled people are 'happy' to remain on a state funded benefits system, and that they do not want a job, is contrary to that aim.

This does not mean all disabled people can work, however it is primarily attitudinal barriers that prevent them from doing so. By suggesting people are 'work-shy' the idea that they will be bad employees is exacerbated.

Another respondent said: "the moving of goal posts in terms of what constitutes a genuine disability will mean that virtually no one, including the terminally ill and cancer sufferers will qualify under the new review criteria, pushing the already poor into an inevitable circle of poverty and debt."

Some campaigners have suggested that there may be cases of disabled people becoming so concerned they will not be able to live independently that they may take their own lives.

Sadly, in the course of the survey there have been examples of this, one organisation reporting that "Many disabled people already live on the poverty line - cutting benefits will disproportionately affect people who rely on care packages. One service user took her own life last year over a £3000 proposed cut to her overnight care package."

## 2. In general what impact, if any, do you think the proposed benefit entitlement reviews will have on your organisation?

Very Negative	44.4%
Quite Negative	24.4%
Neither Positive nor Negative	27.8%
Quite Positive	2.2%
Very Positive	1.1%

Although there are a wider spread of results, there are still a substantial amount in the negative categories.

Comments expressed a concern that there will be a squeeze on the services DPOs can provide to their users. For example, one said: "Any changes in legislation have an impact on organisations delivering advice/information services. We already have a waiting list of clients running up to 4 weeks and this is likely to increase as more people will need advice and support as the changes are implemented.

"We also think that organisations supporting benefit claimants with their rights will become less popular to fund because of the negative image benefit claimants in general have at the moment."

Another organisation stated that they had been considering setting up a benefits service to help those in need, however, owing to the uncertainty of the future of specific benefits and qualification criteria, and the potential reduction in funding, they have decided against this.

By offering benefit advice and assistance services the DPOs help reduce costs to the local authority for two reasons, firstly, that they assist the authority's benefit advice services, and secondly, it reduces administration time dealing with incomplete forms.

Organisations are also worried that they 'employ' large numbers of volunteers and that if by volunteering people are perceived to be well enough to work that they may stop offering their time.

This has a potential two-fold effect. For organisations this is a real term reduction in employees and as such this would mean they are taking on more service users, with fewer staff to handle this activity.

Secondly, it would mean that for disabled people a key opportunity to integrate and socialise will have disappeared.

The government need to be wary of causing disabled people problems, as it could lead to a new generation of disability activists who will drive forward disability rights in the 21st century.

"It may create space for a sensible debate about how the state effectively supports disabled people to play a full role in society, moving away from a benefits system which leaves many disabled people having to live as dependent in order to achieve a reasonable income," say one organisation.

Both parties will want to avoid the scenes of the past of mass protest, sit-ins, and disabled people chaining themselves up, however the results of this survey suggest that if disabled people feel they are not adequately consulted prior to life changing decisions, this may be inevitable.

**3. On a scale of 1-5, with 1 being very high and 5 being very low, what level of impact, if any, do you think the following planned benefit reviews will have in relation to your service users?**

	1	2	3	4	5
Incapacity Benefit (IB)	66.3%	18.5%	10.9%	2.2%	3.3%
Disability Living Allowance (DLA)	75.3%	16.1%	5.4%	2.2%	1.1%
Housing Benefit (HB)	63.7%	26.4%	6.6%	3.3%	1.1%

It is clear from these results that the effect on DPO service users will be very high, particularly in relation to DLA.

Given the other feedback it is quite clear that there are grave concerns for DPOs in relation to benefit reform.

Further, the gap in percentiles between 'Very high' and 'High' is substantial, showing that these proposals have DPOs very concerned.

#### **4. What impact, if any, will there be in relation to Incapacity Benefit reforms on your service users?**

The answers provided to this question highlight grave concerns of disabled people regarding the qualification criteria for incapacity benefit.

There are fears that despite the claimant's conditions being unchanged, they will be unable to claim benefits, pushing more disabled people, of whom 30 per cent are currently in poverty, below the breadline.

One current claimant is concerned they would be ineligible for Incapacity benefit under the new system as they can sit up for short periods. This is despite them being on 24-hour oxygen and high dose morphine and unable to sit up for more than fifteen minutes. They point out that despite this, they would not be employable as they would be a huge insurance liability and am unable to remain awake for more than two hours at a time.

They do not know how they would support themselves financially if they did become ineligible and it is cases like this, where those with long term conditions which render them unemployable, yet who may be able to stand or sit for short periods, which are most concerning to UKDPC.

This also includes those suffering from cancer. Having fear surrounding your finances while trying to deal with the emotional shock of diagnosis, and physical effects of treatment, is unfairly adding to the stress of the situation. Given the Coalition have cut the plans for free hospital car parking, they should ensure those with cancer have access to money to pay for parking while undergoing treatment.

People too ill to undergo the processes required of them will get sicker. Mental health of claimants will suffer through being subjected to such an iniquitous system.

There is a danger the proposals, will be a waste of money and resources by achieving the opposite of what is intended, and not at all helping people to make the most of their capabilities.

## **5. What impact, if any, will there be in relation to Disability Living Allowance reforms on your service users?**

One of the key pieces of feedback from DPOs is that many of the people they work with would like to undertake some form of work, but many cannot manage full-time work, and those who can find access and attitudinal barriers to work prevent them doing so.

A real term reduction in income, by moving disabled people off DLA onto Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) will have a negative effect on disabled people's quality of life as granted to them under the UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

One claimant said: "What if Job Seekers Allowance doesn't cover the cost of our care, then what do we do? It doesn't seem the government has considered individuals needs! They've just lumped us all in one category, and labelled us 'could be working!'"

Another points out that DLA pays for essential equipment, such as vibrating smoke alarms, big button phones and vital taxi fares to hospital appointments for those just above the low limit of earnings above means tested benefits.

Those with indefinite awards of DLA have most likely already allocated this money to heating costs, food costs, equipment maintenance costs or housing costs. If this was withdrawn how are they supposed to cope? What timescale would the reductions be made over?

## **6. What impact, if any, will there be in relation to Housing Benefit reforms on your service users?**

Reports from DPOs highlight major issues surrounding housing for disabled people.

After much campaigning from the Local Housing Allowance Reform Group, there has been a positive step in the provision of housing benefit for a carer's bedroom when it is not their place of residence.

Unfortunately other changes mean that the aim to allow disabled people to live independently in the community has been endangered.

Withdrawal of support will mean those who were previously able to live independently with some funding for care will not be able to do so. Ineligibility for benefits and funding cuts mean that many options are no longer available as financial restrictions dictate that disabled people, including disabled parents, may again become institutionalised as social care cuts are enforced and families become separated as care in the community is no longer available.

The survey indicates that nationally service users cannot find accessible social housing and rely on Housing Benefit to stay in the private ground floor flats they live in. There are local authorities across the country where disabled people, who are unemployed and have little income, have been told to rent on the private market. Although there are some ground floor, mostly suitable, properties, they are usually within new/refurbished apartment blocks, which are usually more expensive than old, inaccessible, terraced houses. If housing benefit is cut, disabled people will be unable to meet the rent for these.

If disabled people cannot afford the basic rent, let alone the utility costs, they will have little choice but to become homeless.

## **7. What impact will these proposed benefit changes have in relation to the concept of Independent Living?**

Manchester Disabled People's Access Group - "The proposed benefit changes will knock back the concept of independent living at least 30 years and disabled people will find themselves homeless and poverty stricken."

This is the fear nationally and has been expressed by a number of DPOs.

They all underline that Independent Living will no longer be an option for many people. This goes against the requirements of the UNCRPD article 19 which supports right to live in the community.

**8. Do the proposed benefit reforms help in the broad policy objective of increasing the ability of disabled people to live independently in the community of their choice?**

The withdrawal of social care, and moving of funding criteria to "critical and substantial" only means that those in most desperate need are supported only, and such support will fall far short of that which is needed to live a life of independence and choice

Disabled people who are lucky enough to find accessible social housing will likely be on sink estates where hate crime against them is worse.

**9. What do you anticipate will be the impact of Local Authority cuts on your organisation?**

The quality of life of disabled people will go downhill according to a number of DPOs.

Many will lose their local authority funding. This will have a negative impact in that the local authority will not have their advice and guidance. It could have a positive impact on their organisations though as they will be able to campaign more vociferously about some of the things the local authority that currently funds them is getting wrong.

Although some receive enough funding to cover their work, many have to fundraise to meet shortfalls. If they lose the core funding they will most likely have to close as there are not enough people willing or able to provide money non-governmentally.

One organisation said: "the viability of continuing would be called into question by our trustees. The projects we currently manage could not continue independently of the local authority funded service as there would not be enough to cover all our running costs."

Another pointed out they have already lost £35,000 of revenue this year (from March) because of Primary Care Trusts and Regional Development Agencies being abolished, including £10,000 of local authority cuts. The organisation, based in the North East are a social enterprise of disabled people with few reserves and cannot keep going much longer.

They have already made two disabled people redundant.

"We were ready for personalisation but the local authority have not decommissioned the high capacity private providers or their in-house departments in councils to allow us to run our own services."

## **Conclusion**

The responses to this survey are deeply concerning. DPO concern is around two areas in particular:

1. Hidden impairments – There is a general consensus from respondents that those with hidden impairments, or fluctuating conditions will be hit hardest by the proposals.

Further, there is widespread concern from within the DPOs that such conditions are not fully understood by those conducting Work Capability Assessments and that this could lead to incorrect reductions in and or removal of benefits.

2. That there will be a substantial increase in people seeking help/advice from all the organisations asked, and that these organisations do not, and will not receive, enough funding to provide this support.

With funding becoming increasingly scarce, many DPOs need help to improve their business skills, which will most likely involve them seeking outside help from expert consultants and other DPOs.

External consultancy will cost money in the short term, and this will involve spending capital the DPOs do not necessarily possess.

User-led DPOs, many of which have years of experience dealing with issues in their locality are vitally important to ensuring the needs of disabled people are not overlooked during local service reforms.

We are approaching a period where local services are likely to be cut or reduced due to a council tax freeze, therefore ensuring these DPOs are fully operational will hopefully prevent disabled people falling through the cracks due to the changes.

Many DPOs are concerned about the funding they receive from Local Authorities will be cut and therefore they may cease to exist.

Most worryingly is that the vast majority of respondents felt there was a strong likelihood that the proposed reforms will not help the aim of independent living, in fact at least one organisation believes it will “set the course of Independent living back 30 years.”

If disabled people are forced to forego their chance of independent living, the majority will end up in hospital or residential care. This is not a cheaper option than funding social care packages, and also is in contravention of article 19 of the UNCRPD. Art. 19 recognises the equal right of all persons with disabilities to live in the community, with choices equal to others, and states parties shall take effective and appropriate measures to facilitate full enjoyment by persons with disabilities of this right and their full inclusion and participation in the community.

People who are ill due to stress, or whose impairment worsens due to stress, will be worse off if they are made to endure stressful medical tests, or worries over their financial stability/outlook. This could cause a multiplier effect, as these people may need treating by the health services and increased social care support – thus increasing the costs to the State.

### **Points to note**

Many disabled people who want to work experience attitudinal and access barriers to work meaning they are unable to do so (Improving Life Chances of Disabled People report, 2005).

Disabled people are reliant on benefits to maintain their accessible housing needs.

There are no hard figures highlighting the plight of disabled people from minority backgrounds who are worse off, for example ethnic minorities are generally worse off than other disabled and non-disabled persons.

The changes will have a negative impact on disabled people's aspirations and efforts to integrate in society, particularly the desire to live independently.

Many DPOs in our research are concerned about a rise in hate crime against disabled people who are perceived to be claiming unfairly according to the press.

## **Recommendations**

The Government needs to consult DPOs and disabled people at every stage of these proposals.

Once proposals have been finalised there should be frequent reviews undertaken and fora held to identify areas where the policies are experiencing shortcomings. These should be particularly focussed at under-represented groups, e.g. DPOs for BME communities, and must be pan-impairment.

The effect on those with fluctuating/hidden conditions must be observed closely in order to offset the concerns raised by DPOs in this report.

DPO funding must also be maintained in order to provide service users with efficient, acceptable experiences of the benefit application process. If DPOs have the capacity to assist people who are applying for benefits the cost of administration should be reduced as there should be fewer mistakes on the application form.

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