

'Personal Independence Payment' (PIP) to replace DLA

As you may have heard, Disability Living Allowance (DLA) for people of working age is to be replaced by a new disability benefit called 'Personal Independence Payment' (PIP). The change will start in April 2013. As yet there are no plans to extend PIP to children under 16 or claimants who are over 65.

Earlier this year a public consultation was carried out seeking views on a limited range of proposed aspects of PIP. Together with the 'Stonebird' resource for people with severe ME – www.stonebird.co.uk - we submitted a comprehensive and strongly worded critique titled 'Neither Reasonable nor Fair'. You can find this on the 25% ME Group website: http://www.25megroup.org/campaigning_awareness.html.

A government response to the consultation duly appeared in April, basically forging ahead with the proposals with the notable exception of dropping the proposal to remove mobility component from people in residential care, which had proved highly controversial.

Much is made in the government response of "putting disabled people at the heart of the reforms", including "we will continue to work with disabled people and their organisations in the development and testing of the assessment". The assessment in question is an "objective medical assessment" that will operate on a points based system similar to IB & ESA.

This type of assessment was first put forward in the June 2010 emergency budget under the heading 'Disability Living Allowance: reform gateway from 2013-14'. Savings of £350,000,000 were projected for the financial year 2013-14, rising to £1,075,000,000 in the following financial year.

The introduction of this type of assessment was specifically proposed on the basis that it will save money – *by implication, there would have to be fewer awards of benefit*. The government later decided to build on this proposal, abolishing DLA altogether and replacing it with a 'Personal Independence Payment' (PIP), but preserving the plan to introduce an "objective medical assessment". **By 2015, the PIP budget is to be £2.17 billion lower than the present DLA budget.**

Initiative to involve people with ME in testing the new assessment system

Against this background, when we recently learned of an initiative seeking participation of DLA claimants with ME to road test the proposed new assessment system we were less than impressed. We are of the view that the basic purpose of this process is to compare how people have fared under the present DLA assessment system with how they would fare under the proposed new PIP assessment system, in order to "fine tune" the points system to ensure that the projected savings will be made.

Earlier this month James Bolton (Deputy Chief Medical Adviser at the Health Work & Wellbeing Directorate) made contact with the 'Forward ME' Group at Westminster, seeking people with ME to participate in this study. He said:

"As I'm sure you're aware, on Monday 9th May the Department for Work and Pensions published initial draft assessment regulations/criteria for Personal Independence Payment. We are currently seeking views on this initial draft and plan to test its likely impact during the summer. As part of the testing we're keen to understand better the likely impact on some specific impairment groups. At this point, one key impairment group we'd like to look at is ME. We're approaching particular disability organisations to help with this as we're keen to provide an opportunity for representative groups to be involved in the testing process. "

Forward ME informed us about this initiative, and we fed back our concerns. No one has been in touch to say that they share our concerns, and some – notably the MEA – feel strongly that this is an initiative that should be supported. AfME are also seeking participants.

Taking part is entirely voluntary and there will be no consequences for people who decline to come forward. The DWP have also stated that "An individual can change their mind about participating at any time, for any reason. If they wish to opt out after their details have been passed to me, they should contact me directly and I'll inform G4S."

We think that it would be wisest not to accept if you are approached to participate. However, it would appear that we are alone among the national ME charities and support organisations in taking this position.

The choice is yours.

Breaking News Potential Legal Challenge

“The Disability Alliance says proposals to scrap the Disability Living Allowance and replace it with a new benefit don’t comply with the law. Ministers say that too many people are claiming the Allowance and it reduces the likelihood of some disabled people seeking work.”

[6.00 a.m. news, Radio 4, Saturday 2nd July]

An umbrella organization of disability charities and groups - the Disability Alliance - has taken legal advice with a view to mounting a challenge to the change from DLA to PIP. The change from DLA to PIP will disadvantage a particular group of disabled people – those whose needs currently qualify them for low rate care component of DLA. There will be no equivalent level of support for these people under the PIP system. The UK Equality Act and aspects of European law protect *all* disabled people. See <http://www.disabilityalliance.org/dlchallenge.htm>