**Disability Charities Consortium Manifesto**

**September 2022**

**About The Disability Charities Consortium**

The Disability Charities Consortium (DCC), brings together CEOs and policy leads from nine of the UK’s leading not-for-profit disability organisations. We make sure disabled people’s experiences are reflected in UK policy making, by working collaboratively to influence Government.

The DCC members are: Business Disability Forum (BDF), Leonard Cheshire, National Autistic Society, Mencap, Mind, Royal National Society for Deaf people (RNID), Royal National Society of Blind people (RNIB), Scope and Sense.

* The DCC feeds insights and topical concerns into the Disability Unit to help inform disability related policy development.
* DCC member CEOs regularly meet with senior officials in the Disability Unit, the Minister for Disabled People (MfDP) and other key ministers.
* DCC member policy leads regularly engage with the Unit’s stakeholder engagement team.

**About this manifesto**

This manifesto sets out the DCC’s thoughts on:

1. **Key strategic principles** that will enable disability inclusive change in the UK
2. **Key areas of focus** which includes assistive technologies, Access to Work, interlinking Access to Work with Disabled Students Allowance, sick pay, procurement law, and children and families
3. **The immediate priority** of addressing the cost-of-living crisis, particularly for disabled people and their families and carers
4. **Supporting innovation** through a Disability Employment Endowment Fund.

**Strategic principles for disability inclusive change in the UK**

Prior to the publication of the National Disability Strategy in July 2021, the DCC emphasised the need for the Strategy to have clear strategic actions which would be measurable, so that progress could be clearly tracked and communicated. To do this, measurement of progress needs to be ‘owned’ centrally. This means that disability inclusion needs to be a cross-policy and whole-Government priority, led by a joined up and cross-Government approach. In addition, the role and office of the MfDP needs appropriate resourcing and better profile to enable it to impactfully influence practice and progress across all ministerial departments. This is particularly important to avoid Government Departments working in silo. The approach instead needs to see Departments interlinking their work and working together on the same projects, rather than working alongside one another at different paces and potentially in different directions. Alongside this, effective and accessible engagement with disabled people is, of course, pivotal.

**Key areas of focus**

The DCC has identified the following key areas of focus for Year 2 of the National Disability Strategy:

1. **Access to assistive technologies**. For the most part, people generally only get access to assistive technologies if they are in work or in (predominantly, higher) education. This makes access to equipment to communicate, apply for a job, socialise, or access services and retail online a privilege, and this should not be the case. Disabled people should be able to access the technologies they need as soon as they need them, whatever their life situation (whether they work, study, or volunteer), and no matter what age they are. We have proposed a ‘Technology for Life’ provision model and fund which would assess people for the most appropriate assistive technology for their condition and current life situation, meaning they could ‘trade in’ the technology they have if they condition or life situation changes. Not having this means people do not have the right technology to help them learn, apply for jobs, or have the technology to enable them to do any of the things that may allow them to change their life circumstances, in an ever website-first world (as one example).
2. **Overdue investment and reform in Access to work**. Access to Work has long become outdated with business practices and demand. Employers are currently quoting up to a nine month wait between beginning an Access to Work referral and receiving the report; the process is employee driven even though it is an employer’s legal duty to make adjustments; and the cap remains in place, despite the Government hearing evidence that the people who need the most support to stay in work exceed it. In addition, even before enhanced market rates due to the cost of living, Access to Work awards have not kept up with how various supplier markets have developed. This means some awards are unrealistic and have led to many affected disabled people having to change their job, or leave work entirely, because they cannot get the support they need for a full time role. Further still, Access to Work remains only available to people in work or who have an interview booked. We have long argued that Access to Work should be embedded in Job Centres and available to anyone who is looking for work so that they can apply for jobs and contact prospective employers. An ‘agreement in principle’ process would also ensure disabled people are not overlooked for roles while waiting for an Access to Work decision when non-disabled candidates are available to start a role immediately.
3. **Interlinking Disabled Students Allowance and Access to Work**. Access to Work (ATW) and Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) have not developed alongside the increased diversity of work and learning. Disabled people who are on programmes that blend work and education have to apply for both ATW and DSA, which do not move at the same pace as one another, and where the processes are different. In some circumstances, disabled people have told us they have been given exactly the same equipment in their DSA as in the ATW award at the same time, which is not economical. DSA and ATW should combine during blended programmes.
4. **A fairer sick pay system**. The current Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) system has long prevented people from having a restful and full recovery from ill health or injury, and it has forced people back to work before they are ready, which too often causes them to go off sick again. The current system also does not equip people to plan a phased and sustainable return to work. Sick pay reform must: remove waiting days; be paid at an hourly rate and in line with the Living Wage; be available to all employees and workers, regardless of their earnings or working hours, or contract; be available for 52 weeks per year instead of just 28; be available to support reduced working hours as part of an agreed phased return to work.
5. **Improving the Procurement Bill**. The current Procurement Bill, moving through Parliament, contains no reference to ensuring products, services, and contracts must be accessible and inclusive to disabled people. A contract which does not consider disabled people in its design and delivery is poor value for money for the taxpayer as well as the commissioning organisation. There must be a requirement in the Bill which ensures contract designs mandate that suppliers provide a product or service that is accessible to disabled people **and** that reasonable adjustments can be made to that product or service, so that disabled people can use it throughout the delivery of the contract.
6. **Disabled children and families**. Greater support for disabled children and their families must be available much earlier than it is currently, to give disabled children the best future possible. This means more investment in children’s social care; greater access to respite, short breaks, and sibling support; and plans to increase the workforce of specialist support for children’s services.
7. **Specialist provision for children and young people with vision impairment**. The availability of specialist provision and resources for people with vision impairments (VI) remains inconsistent and a ‘postcode lottery’. Too many local authorities have ‘frozen’ budgets which service people with VI. The Government must ensure there is adequate and protected high needs funding for local authorities to deliver specialist education services and boost the number of Qualified Teachers of Vision Impairment and Qualified Rehabilitation Specialists. This should include a clear, fully funded action plan to improve recruitment and opportunities to qualify in this profession and investment in the retention of the current workforce.

**The cost of living: An immediate priority**

The cost of living crisis disproportionately affects disabled people, their families and their carers:

* Some disabled people are not receiving their cost of living payments and, in some local authority areas, are being asked to provide proof of identity before payments are made. Processes must be consistently applied with clear guidance for local authorities.
* Benefits have not risen with inflation. Benefits are due to be uprated in April 2023, but that does not reach people in time for winter. Interventions must include an emergency increase in benefits, making debt deduction rates more affordable, and pausing deductions for overpayments.
* Energy bills are a key concern to many disabled people, their families, and carers. The Energy Bills Support Scheme has not gone as far as it needs to, and changes to the Warm Home Discount Scheme means those who receive DLA, PIP, and Attendance Allowance will no longer be able to claim from the Scheme. Changes to the Warm Home Discount scheme should be reversed, financial help available via the Warm Home Discount Scheme should be doubled, and a ‘social tariff’ should be introduced in the energy market to protect disabled people’s households with higher energy usage.
* Just over half of carers are eligible for the Government’s support. Pointing people toward the Housing Support Fund is not enough; the eligibility criteria for carers must be widened.
* The increase in cost of fuel has had an impact on disabled people being able to afford taxis. This affects people’s own spend, but it also affects their Access to Work travel awards, because awards have not increased alongside the rise in cost of fuel.
* The cost of British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters has also increased but, again, Access to Work awards have not been adjusted to reflect this.
* People who only receive PIP or contribution-based ESA have not been eligible for the Government’s support payments, even though many people receiving these payments live on low incomes. Cost-of-living support payments should also be made to people on PIP and contribution-based ESA.
* People who are BSL users, deaf, or living with hearing loss find it difficult to access the benefits system and are still asked to request information and attend assessments by phone. Accessing cost of living payments are also not being widely shared by Government in BSL. This means many BSL users do not know what they are eligible for or that information about cost of living even exists. Alternative communication options must be ‘uniform’ across the benefits system and Government information about cost of living.
* People who have received benefits sanctions have not been eligible for the cost of living payments. Sanctions and cost of living are separate issues, and people who receive sanctions should not be denied support that others get to help them through the rising cost of living.

**Supporting innovation: a Disability Employment Endowment Fund**

To be serious about Levelling Up, and to make a real step change in addressing poverty rates, closing the disability employment gap, and making sure disabled people reach their full potential, we need a different, more radical approach to innovation, supported by a significant financial investment from Government. The DCC has proposed to Government that they establish a Disability Employment Endowment Fund (DEEF).

This Fund would focus solely on initiatives that will: reduce disability employment gap; understand what works for disability employment support; share practice with networks and ensure knowledge is available to practitioners; invest in disabled entrepreneurs who want to start their own businesses; and create a Government-backed employment portal as a central place of information for any UK employer.

To start investment effectively, £200 million over three years is proposed to establish this Fund. There has been strong interest from the Government and other stakeholders including the Disability Confident Business Leaders’ Group. However, a ministerial ‘sponsor’ has not yet been identified to oversee and bring this Fund to fruition.

**Disability Charities Consortium, September 2022**