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From: INGE, Verity [mailto:IngeV@parliament.uk]

Sent: 30 April 2012 16:11

To: DWP Ministerial Correspondence

Subject: Andy Shipley, Trustee, BucksVision, 143 Meadowcroft, Aylesbury, Bucks HP19 9HH

Dear Chris

I recently met representatives from BucksVision, a charity for the blind and partially sighted, to discuss their concerns about the assessment criteria for the new Personal Independence Payment (PIP).

Mr Andy Shipley, one of the trustees of the charity, has now written to me in detail about the charity's concerns. I have attached a copy of his letter and would be grateful if it could be considered as part of the consultation process for the "Personal Independence Payment: assessment thresholds" consultation that your department is running.

Yours ever,

David

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Dear Mr Lidington,

Further to our meeting last Friday afternoon, I am writing to outline our concerns regarding the changes to disability benefits, in particular, the apparent implications for visually impaired people, contained within the proposed Personal Independence Payment assessment process.

The vast majority of blind and partially sighted people of working age currently rely on DLA to help us meet the extra costs we face every day as a result of our sight loss. The help we get from DLA is not a luxury; it means we can live life independently. Without it we would be unable to do everyday things that people with sight take for granted like food shopping, getting to doctors or hospital appointments, being involved in local groups and looking for work. This is of particular significance when you take into account that the unemployment rate of visually impaired people is 2% higher than for all other forms of long term impairment or health condition.

BucksVision is extremely concerned that in key areas the PIP assessment fails to recognise Sight loss is a serious disability. The DWP claims that it wants the assessment for PIP to consider social participation and other barriers to independent living, but across a wide range of activities it envisages blind and partially sighted people scoring zero points.

The face-to-face assessment will consider claimants' individual circumstances across eleven activities, ranging from preparing food, bathing and grooming, communicating and moving around. We are very concerned that the assessment won't adequately take into account the extra challenges and costs that visual impairment presents people with sight loss, in completing these activities independently, safely, with confidence and dignity.

The proposals for PIP appear to exclude many of us with a severe visual impairment from the enhanced mobility allowance. It will be very disappointing if this is a conscious decision by DWP, as it will wipe out the hard-won extension to the higher rate of DLA, putting the clock back to 1992 when wheelchair users were guaranteed the higher rate while blind people were excluded.

It appears that the PIP assessment will score people on their ability to travel by themselves to familiar and unfamiliar locations. We hold considerable concerns that many visually impaired recipients of higher rate mobility allowance may lose it when it is reassessed. The government should acknowledge that blind and partially sighted people can be put at risk by unexpected obstacles even on familiar routes and regularly have to use taxis to travel safely.

It appears to us the PIP 'Moving around' criteria has been designed so it relates to a person's physical ability to move around. It is our understanding that just two years ago, there was a cross-party consensus that sight loss has a significant impact in this activity. Unexpected barriers and obstructions can present a huge risk of trips and falls to Blind and Partially Sighted people and negotiating an unfamiliar space can pose a huge challenge. The apparent u-turn in this area, in the part of the Coalition Parties, if indeed the case would be a great disappointment and let down to the visually impaired population, who's needs, it had appeared were universally acknowledged by policy makers .

Regardless of the length of time a person has lived with sight loss, the challenges not only remain, but also increase over time. Taxi fares, the cost of specialist equipment and assistance around the home all add up. The Government appears to be assuming that visually impaired people, whilst requiring higher awards initially, will 'adapt' - or get equipment or reasonable adjustments - so can be deemed to need less support when reassessed. We are therefore very worried that there will be routine reductions to PIP allowance after reassessments. The daily costs imposed by having sight loss will not diminish, and as we grow older, are very likely to increase.

Another example of the DWP's apparent lack of understanding about the aids and appliances many blind and partially sighted people use and their fundamental role is the way the "communicating" activity has been drafted. It excludes visually impaired people who use spectacles or contact lenses to access written information. It is the case however, that many people with some useful vision need specialist spectacles or lenses to access information. Their difficulties accessing written information aren't considered by the draft regulations.

For the daily living component, the current draft does not give sufficient weight to accessing written information for someone who is partially sighted and on a whole range of activities like "making financial decisions", "engaging socially" and "grooming" someone who is partially sighted would not score any points at all. This simply makes no sense. It would mean partially sighted people who currently receive the lower rate of DLA (care component), and need that support to live independently, would not be eligible for PIP at all.

Blind and Partially Sighted people across the UK are currently facing a lot of uncertainty over cuts and changes to care services in the county, and the introduction of changes to a benefit that we have been able to rely on, is imposing considerable stress on us. This in turn will inevitably lead to increases in health conditions as the stress and uncertainty persists.

Yours sincerely

Andy Shipley
BucksVision Trustee