**Woman ‘forced to sit in her own urine for two hours’ by PIP assessor**

A disabled women says she was left to sit in her own urine for nearly two hours after her plight was ignored by a healthcare professional carrying out a disability benefit assessment.

Maria Lane has spoken up about the “devastating” experience she endured during her personal independence payment (PIP) assessment, in the hope that other disabled people will not have to go through similar experiences.

She told – and showed – the assessor just 10 minutes into the assessment that she had had an accident and had emptied her bladder into her incontinence pad, and that urine was leaking into her trousers.

But she said the female assessor – who works for the government contractor Atos – “looked for a second at the pad” and then continued typing.

Atos has now launched an investigation.

For nearly two hours, she was forced to continue answering questions, with the assessor warning her whenever she failed to do so that if she did not respond she would have to return for another assessment.

Maria Lane has a number of long-term health conditions, including diabetes, osteoarthritis – which affects all of her joints and has spread into her spine – sciatica, a slipped disc, high blood pressure, and depression.

She is waiting for a major operation on her bladder, because of severe incontinence which means she has to wear pads permanently.

She said: “Once your bladder starts, you have to go. It will continue, no stopping, and then it leaks. I have no control over it.

“It just comes and I have to be prepared and change [my trousers] and if you’re nervous it is worse.

“I showed her all that, she must have seen, it was all over my trousers. She ignored me. She ignored me completely or she didn’t believe me.

“She has heard me alright because I showed them to her. She looked for a second and then went back to her report. She was like a robot. She had no emotions.”

She was also appalled by the way she was handled during a physical examination.

The assessor placed a chair behind her in case she fell over during the examination, which at one stage she did, and was “pulling my arms about” and causing her “terrible pain”, she said.

Now she says she has lost all her confidence, and has been left “devastated” by the “very upsetting” experience at the assessment centre in Enfield, north London.

She said: “It is embarrassing for me. I didn’t know what to do when I came out, I was crying.

“I want to prevent this happening to other people. I would hate to see other people going through what I have.”

She added: “I am 59 years old and I have never been treated like that. She took all my rights, all my dignity.

“It was inhuman to allow me to sit there.”

She currently receives the highest rate of PIP through the enhanced rate for both daily living and mobility, but is terrified about what will happen if the assessor recommends that she loses any of that entitlement.

She currently spends about £55 a week on incontinence pads, which is paid for with some of her PIP.

She said: “If I lose that money, what is going to happen?”

She believes she has been discriminated against by Atos, and is writing a letter of complaint to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), while one of her two daughters – both of whom work in the healthcare sector – has made an appointment to see her MP on her behalf.

She is the latest PIP claimant to come forward to describe appalling experiences at the hands of private contractors paid hundreds of millions of pounds every year by the government to assess their eligibility for disability benefits.

The future use of companies like Atos to carry out disability benefit assessments was an issue at last week’s general election, with Labour pledging to end the use of private contractors to carry out all disability benefit assessments, while the SNP had already pledged to ban the private sector from involvement in Scotland’s benefit assessments.

Atos has now promised to investigate what happened to Maria Lane, while DWP has described her account as “very concerning”.

An Atos spokesman said: “We were concerned to hear of this and that is why we have written to Ms Lane explaining that an investigation into the issues raised is underway.”

A DWP spokeswoman added: “All claimants deserve an objective, accurate and high quality service and Mrs Lane’s account is very concerning.

“Atos is contacting the claimant and we will work with them to look into the issues raised.

“We expect the highest standards from the contractors who carry out PIP assessments, and work closely with them to ensure PIP is working in the best way possible.

“Assessment providers have to conform to a strict set of quality standards regarding staff recruitment and training, to demonstrate that their health professionals meet all of our requirements before they are approved to carry out assessments.”

The assessors must be either occupational therapists, level one nurses, physiotherapists, paramedics or doctors, and must be fully registered and have at least two years post full-registration experience.

She said: “All health professionals are subject to on-going quality audit to ensure they continue to deliver high quality assessments.

“Where assessors fall below the required standards and do not improve, processes are in place to stop them carrying out assessments.”

She added: “Assessment providers have their own complaints process regarding the services they provide.

“This signposts complainants to the Independent Case Examiner if they remain dissatisfied with the provider’s final response to their complaint.”

**15 June 2017**

**Anger, resignation… and optimism in wake of general election result**

Disabled activists have reacted with a mixture of anger, resignation and optimism to a general election that saw the Conservatives lose their parliamentary majority.

Some believe that a resurgent Labour party under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, which defied mainstream media opposition and polling predictions to increase its number of MPs by 30, will inevitably form the next government.

Others have reacted with horror at the idea of a minority Tory government being propped up by 10 MPs from Northern Ireland’s “anti-equalities” Democratic Unionist Party (DUP).

And some have said they expect little to change with the government’s disability policies, following seven years of austerity that have seen attacks on disability rights and inclusion, and cuts to disabled people’s services and benefits.

Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC) [announced yesterday](https://dpac.uk.net/2017/06/must-oppose-government-held-dup/) (Wednesday) that it was calling on Deaf and disabled people and their organisations to boycott engagement with any government involving the DUP.

The grassroots network said in a statement: “Collusion with an anti-equalities party who openly oppose women’s right to choose and gay marriage while denying climate change is nothing less than shameful. Disabled people must be united in resisting the politics of hate.”

DPAC said the Conservatives were now “in chaos and cannot credibly remain in government”, and added: “Now is the best chance since 2010 to end a government that has carried out a regime of conscious cruelty against disabled people and systematically and deliberately dismantled our rights.”

In contrast, DPAC welcomed the progress the Labour party had made since the last election in improving its disability policies.

It said Labour had made “firm commitments to the issues that Deaf and Disabled people have been fighting to achieve for years such as enshrining our rights under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in domestic legislation, working with Disabled people to develop a national system of social care, and scrapping out-sourced benefit assessments”.

Professor Peter Beresford, co-chair of the national servicer-user and disabled people's network [Shaping Our Lives](http://www.shapingourlives.org.uk/), said he believed there had been a “sea change” in UK politics and that it was now inevitable that Jeremy Corbyn would eventually lead a new government as prime minister because Theresa May’s government was “running on empty” and “no longer has a point to its existence as it has had to abandon its manifesto”.

He said that a Corbyn-led government would “return to the best principles of the post-war welfare state and will fight for the rights of disabled people – as was clear in its manifesto.

“It may still have to catch up on progressive approaches to mental health issues, but at last there is hope for all of us.”

Disabled researcher Catherine Hale, a member of the [Spartacus online network](https://spartacusnetwork.wordpress.com/), was also encouraged by the “resurgent Labour party” that had “comprehensively ditched its toxic legacy of welfare reforms which cast suspicion on sick and disabled people”.

She said: “Under [shadow work and pensions secretary] Debbie Abrahams, Labour has listened and its manifesto promises for disabled people are a cause for celebration.”

But she warned that [sanction rates had nearly trebled](http://benefitsaware.centralenglandlc.org.uk/news/new-sanctions-figures/) under the government’s new universal credit benefit – compared with rates under jobseeker’s allowance – while the “dehumanising personal independence payment (PIP) regime and social care cuts are taking away disabled people’s lifeline to society on a daily basis”.

She said disabled people were still being “terrorised” by the “unfair” work capability assessment, which – since April – has been consigning new claimants of employment and support allowance placed in the work-related activity group to “destitution and despair” because of a £30-a-week cut imposed by the Conservative government.

She called on Labour to be a “loud and clear champion of disabled people”, and added: “Our fortunes ride with theirs.”

Disabled researcher Stef Benstead, also from the [Spartacus Network](https://spartacusnetwork.wordpress.com/), said she believed the Conservative government would have to make compromises, and that it was unlikely that “anything on the right-wing economically would get through” parliament, because it would be opposed by both DUP and the more centrist Tory MPs.

Mark Harrison, chief executive of [Equal Lives](https://equallives.org.uk/), said he would not believe the suggestion reported in some newspapers that Theresa May had signalled that “austerity was dead” until he had seen some firm evidence.

He said: “Until we see differently, there is no reason to believe that the new Tory government will behave any differently to the last one and the coalition.

“Austerity is very much alive in Norfolk, with the council making huge cuts to adult social care, disabled people being sanctioned, having their PIP assessments and losing entitlement and their Motability vehicles, becoming homeless, not being able to access mental health services, and now being charged huge sums of money to pay for their care.

“Waiting lists are getting longer in the hospitals and disabled children are being excluded from mainstream (academy) schools.

“Actions speak louder than words and we don’t trust the Tories based on the last seven years of brutality.”

John McArdle, co-founder of [Black Triangle](http://blacktrianglecampaign.org/), said he believed it would be “business as usual” in the Department for Work and Pensions, even though the government should see the election result as “a signal to the Conservative party that half the country finds their policies on social security absolutely unacceptable”.

He said: “It is incumbent on the opposition parties to turn up the heat on the government over the systematic abuse of human rights, as documented by the UNCRPD.

“We will continue to shine a spotlight on the government’s wrongdoing and raise our voices in opposition consistently until such time as the government desists from destroying disabled people’s lives and turns back from the grave abuses of our human rights.”

**15 June 2017**

**New disabled MPs pledge to fight for rights in parliament**

Two new disabled MPs who won their seats in last week’s general election have both pledged to use their time in parliament to fight for the rights of disabled people.

Marsha de Cordova and Jared O’Mara both scored unexpected victories for the Labour party as part of an election upset that saw Jeremy Corby’s party perform far better than had been predicted by most of the media and polling companies.

Disabled Tory ministers Robert Halfon – who was sacked from his frontbench role this week in Theresa May’s post-election reshuffle – and Paul Maynard were both re-elected as MPs, as was Labour’s shadow minister for disabled people, Marie Rimmer.

Stephen Lloyd won back Eastbourne for the Liberal Democrats, after previously serving as MP for the town between 2010 and 2015.

Among disabled candidates who narrowly failed to win seats were the Labour trio of Mary Griffiths Clarke in Arfon, north Wales, Pam Duncan Glancy in Glasgow North, and Wayne Blackburn in Pendle, while Kelly-Marie Blundell came second for the Liberal Democrats in Lewes, Sussex, and Labour’s Heather Peto came a distant second to the Conservatives in Rutland and Melton.

In one of the shocks of election night, De Cordova, who had been a Lambeth councillor and engagement and advocacy director for the sight loss charity [Thomas Pocklington Trust](http://www.pocklington-trust.org.uk/), overturned a majority of nearly 8,000 to beat Tory former health minister Jane Ellison by more than 2,000 votes in Battersea, south London.

In her acceptance speech, she said: “As a visually-impaired person myself, I feel passionately about the rights of disabled people.

“Accessibility in our public places and on public transport still falls short of what is reasonable. I will use my time in parliament to lobby for improvements in these areas.

“In the fifth richest country in the world, there can be no excuses for leaving behind a large number of our citizens.”

She also pledged that Labour would fight the “back door” privatisation of the NHS by the Tories and the attack on public services “by a Tory government that cares little about the many and that has proven that they only look after the few”, and that she would work with the mayor of London, Labour’s Sadiq Khan, to tackle the lack of social housing being built in her constituency.

An even more high-profile victory saw another disabled Labour politician, Jared O’Mara, defeat the Liberal Democrat former deputy prime minister Nick Clegg in his Sheffield Hallam constituency, overturning a majority of more than 2,000 votes in 2015 to win himself by a similar margin.

O’Mara, who has a background of working with disability organisations in Sheffield, said in his acceptance speech: “20 years ago, there was a 15-year-old boy with cerebral palsy who went to his careers adviser at school and his careers advisor asked him, ‘What would you like to be when you grow up?’

“And that 15-year-old boy with cerebral palsy said, ‘I’d like to be a politician.’

“If you haven’t noticed already, that boy is me, I do have cerebral palsy and I want every single disabled person out there to know, everybody that’s got learning difficulties, everybody who has mental health issues, everybody who has a physical disability like me, or has any illness, I will be on your side, I will be your ally and friend and champion in Westminster.”

In [a blog written for the disability charity Scope](https://blog.scope.org.uk/2016/04/30/being-a-disabled-candidate-standing-for-election/) last year, when he stood unsuccessfully as a candidate for Sheffield council, he said that disabled election candidates can be “more passionate, resilient, empathetic and hard working than non-disabled candidates by virtue of everything being harder for us in life”.

He also spoke of his anger at the government’s decision to close the Access to Elected Office Fund (AEOF) after the 2015 general election.

The fund had helped local and general election candidates with their extra disability-related costs, and O’Mara said its closure had cost him “a large three figure sum” in fighting the council election.

He said then that more should be done to support disabled people into public life, and called for a return of the fund, as well as “full legal aid provision for disability discrimination cases”, and for political parties to choose some parliamentary candidates from shortlists made up only of disabled people.

Although there appear to be only six MPs who self-identify as disabled people, there are believed to be others who would be considered as disabled people under the Equality Act because of the significant impact of long-term health conditions or impairments – potentially including the prime minister Theresa May, who has diabetes – but who do not consider themselves to be disabled people.

[Labour’s shadow home secretary Diane Abbott could be one of them, after she revealed](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jun/13/diane-abbott-reveals-illness-and-hits-out-at-vicious-tory-campaign) this week – following Tory attacks during the election campaign that focused on her performance in media interviews – that she was diagnosed with diabetes two years ago and that her health had affected her performance during the election campaign.

She said that facing a string of interviews without eating enough food had affected her blood sugar levels.

Phyl Meyer, project manager for Inclusion Scotland’s [Access to Elected Office Fund (Scotland](http://inclusionscotland.org/information/employability-and-civic-participation/access-to-politics/aeofs/)), which is funded by the Scottish government and provides financial support for disabled candidates for Scottish local and devolved elections, said it had been “very disappointing to have been able to offer so much support which made such a big difference to disabled candidates in the local elections [earlier this year] and not to have been able to do that for the Westminster elections”.

He said that holding a snap election had also affected potential disabled candidates,

He added: “The very act of holding a snap election is hugely disadvantageous to disabled candidates.

“Making arrangements like personal assistants and communication support in such a short timescale is just totally unrealistic.”

Meyer said Inclusion Scotland was keen to push for job-sharing to be allowed for MPs.

He said: “It is very, very clear to us that without some sort of job-sharing option we are never going to achieve full inclusion for disabled people in elected office, unless the structure changes dramatically.”

Inclusion Scotland is considering setting up a new campaign to push for more elected disabled politicians, hopefully with backing from many of the 40-plus political activists [who received support from the fund](http://inclusionscotland.org/local-election-results-show-progress-towards-disabled-peoples-equal-representation-in-politics/) at the last local council elections in May.

It would replace the successful [One in Five](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/paper-calls-for-political-parties-to-move-from-one-in-129-to-one-in-five/) project, which campaigned for greater representation of disabled people in Scottish politics but has now closed down.

Deborah King, co-founder of [Disability Politics UK](http://www.disabilitypolitics.org.uk/), has campaigned for job-sharing to be allowed for MPs, and said she hoped the two new disabled MPs would back that campaign.

She said: “Disabled people are under-represented in the Commons.

“Hopefully, Marsha de Cordova and Jared O’Mara will support our campaign to get job-sharing for MPs.

“This would enable other disabled people to become MPs. We need more disability rights activists to come forward and stand.”

**15 June 2017**

**Care regulator faces questions over inspection failings at abuse homes**

The care regulator is facing fresh questions over its inspection failings after it emerged that it delivered glowing reports on standards at a dozen care homes, less than two years before abusive regimes were exposed at all 12 institutions.

The Devon care home at the centre of the scandal, Veilstone, had not been visited by inspectors from the Care Quality Commission (CQC) for three-and-a-half years by the time the abuse was finally exposed six years ago.

CQC had even failed to order an inspection of Veilstone after receiving allegations of abuse from a resident in August 2010, even though it was by then three years since its previous inspection.

Instead, it passed the allegations to Devon County Council to investigate, while also notifying the home and the police, but did not inspect the home until April 2011 – more than three-and-half years after Veilstone’s previous inspection by CQC’s predecessor, the Commission for Social Care Inspection.

Even then it failed to uncover the abusive regime.

It was not until a second whistleblower came forward in July 2011 and made similar allegations to the police, and CQC ordered another inspection of Veilstone as well as examinations of the other 14 Atlas homes, that the regime was finally exposed.

Last week, reporting restrictions on the case were finally lifted following a lengthy series of criminal trials and hearings that led to the conviction of 13 company directors and employees of Atlas Project Team, which provided residential care for people with learning difficulties and challenging behaviour.

Bristol Crown Court had heard how managers and staff at two of the homes locked residents in bare, freezing seclusion rooms with no heating or toilet facilities as a punishment.

Devon and Cornwall police worked with prosecutors to establish a pattern which showed how staff used “excessive and inappropriate seclusion” as a result of training provided by senior Atlas figures.

The Crown Prosecution Service said this had led to a “culture of abuse – unlawfully detaining residents in very poor conditions for long periods of time”.

But Judge William Hart jailed only one of the 13 people convicted, Atlas director Jolyon Marshall, with others receiving suspended prison sentences, conditional discharges, or in the case of Atlas founder and director Paul Hewitt, a £12,500 fine and prosecution costs of £105,000.

One of the Atlas residents had also been abused at the notorious Winterbourne View private hospital, a regime [which was exposed by the BBC’s Panorama in 2011](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/panorama-abuse-scandal-care-regulator-is-not-fit-for-purpose/) – at about the same time that the regulator was being warned about the Atlas homes – and also led to criticism of CQC.

In the Winterbourne View case, CQC admitted mistakes after failing to follow up a whistleblower’s allegations ([it failed three times to respond to his evidence](http://hosted.southglos.gov.uk/wv/report.pdf), according to a serious case review) because it believed the local council was doing so.

The Atlas trials and hearings focused mainly on charges of false imprisonment and conspiracy to falsely imprison residents at two of the company’s homes in Devon, but CQC documents show the abusive regime extended far beyond false imprisonment and spread across many of its 15 properties.

Analysis by Disability News Service (DNS) of inspection reports published by CQC show that less than two years before the abusive regimes were finally exposed, the watchdog had branded 12 of the Atlas homes “good” or “excellent”.

Inspection reports from 2009 and 2010 showed CQC repeatedly congratulating Atlas for the quality of the service it provided at 12 care homes across Devon, Hampshire and Berkshire.

The following year, in 2011, when CQC finally launched urgent inspections of all of Atlas’s homes, it found breaches of care standards in every one of the 12, as well as three others that had opened since 2010.

The CQC reports also show that the regulator failed to carry out a full inspection in 2010 of Veilstone, in Bideford, as it had promised it would the previous year.

The CQC reports which followed the 2011 inspections, and were published in early 2012, show disturbing levels of abuse across the institutions.

In one Devon home, Gatooma – the other home where allegations were dealt with in court – residents’ telephone calls to their relatives were listened to and recorded by staff.

In another home, Santa Maria, in Wokingham, Berkshire, records showed that one resident had been “sent to their room” 58 times in December 2010; in July 2011, the same resident was sent to his room 208 times, and by October 2011 he was being sent to his room 438 times.

In Santosa, a care home in Holsworthy, Devon, the inspectors found the behaviour of two residents was “being managed through the giving or removal of food”, while residents were paid a tiny amount of money to carry out a series of daily tasks.

The previous year, CQC had described Santosa as an “excellent” service.

In another Devon home, Teignmead, written information showed staff were attempting to manage one resident’s behaviour by the use of what they called a “time out protocol”, while there were reports of residents being physically restrained.

The records showed how one resident (X) “was observed through the crack in the door (lounge) to of been crying for 1 minute – [X] was directed to his room as per his time out policy”.

Another Teignmead incident report stated: “Due to [X] not listening to staff, [X] was directed to his room as per time out policy.”

That report also stated that, because X had not complied with the time out policy, he had been physically restrained twice for a total of eight minutes.

Two years before, CQC had described Teignmead as a “two star good service”.

All 15 homes had their registrations cancelled by CQC in August 2012.

CQC said this week that its “inspection methodology” in 2010 was that “unless information of concern raised with us indicated that we needed to make an additional visit, we would inspect two-star services every two years”.

But CQC had been warned repeatedly that its approach to inspection – which focused on homes submitting written self-assessments – could lead to some institutions avoiding inspections for up to five years.

In his book on another major abuse scandal\* involving adults with learning difficulties, at the Longcare homes in Buckinghamshire, experts interviewed by DNS editor John Pring warned in 2011 about the “diluted” protection offered by CQC’s new inspection system.

One told Pring: “They say they have a focus on poor performing homes, but my view is that this realignment has just been done to save money.

“There are just not the inspectors walking through the door like there used to be on a regular basis. It’s a paper assessment and I do not think that is wholly effective.”

Another warned that CQC resources were “thin and getting thinner” and that abusive regimes were slipping through the CQC net.

Dr Noelle Blackman, chief executive of the charity [Respond](http://www.respond.org.uk/), which has provided years of advocacy, emotional support and psychotherapy and counselling to victims of the abuse, and their families – and which also supported some of the survivors of the Longcare abuse – said this week that the Atlas regime had spread throughout its homes.

She said: “They all lived in fear as they witnessed their fellow residents going through the abuse, even if they didn’t witness it themselves.”

She said the abuse went far wider than was exposed by the trial, which focused on the use of solitary confinement punishment rooms.

Many residents were forced to carry out work, such as scrubbing the floors.

She said: “It was a huge part of the culture that the residents had to do a lot of the manual tasks and it was seen as a way of civilising these people who were seen by the managers and staff as being not quite human.”

If they refused to carry out the work, they were punished, by being deprived of food or being locked in a punishment room.

She added: “Part of the regime of coming out of isolation was that they had to carry out tasks to prove they deserved their freedom again.”

Five years after the abuse was finally halted, she believes CQC still has lessons to learn.

She believes the regulator needs to be far more “curious” about the services it inspects and not allow itself to be “fobbed off” by the “glossiness” presented by some of the care businesses it inspects.

One improvement in recent years has been the use of Experts by Experience, often disabled people themselves, who have experience of using services and accompany CQC inspectors on their inspections.

Blackman said: “They are curious, they ask the key questions, they instinctively know what is right.”

But all too often, she said, that information is not captured by CQC’s reports because the criteria they use are too narrow.

Asked about its failings, CQC insisted that its procedures had changed in the years since the abuse was exposed.

A CQC spokesman said the events took place “six or seven years ago when CQC was a different organisation, using previous methodology.

“When these abusive practices were discovered, CQC took action although we acknowledge that we should have responded more quickly to the concerns raised.

“Much has changed since 2011. Since then we have overhauled our regulatory approach; improved the monitoring of services and the way we respond to safeguarding concerns; introduced a new and more thorough inspection process; increased the numbers of people with learning disabilities involved in our inspections; and strengthened our enforcement processes.

“We have also worked with The Challenging Behaviour Foundation on the issue of restraint and we now subject services where staff frequently resort to restrictive interventions to much tougher scrutiny than we did five years ago.”

Asked if CQC believed there should be an independent investigation into its failings, he said: “CQC did carry out its own review at the time and we would of course contribute to any serious case review, along with all the agencies who were involved at the time.”

But he said the responsibility for preventing abuse “rests with the providers who must be held accountable for delivering on that quality”.

He said: “We will take action if we find that a provider is failing – first to protect people in their care, and also to hold them to account through using our enforcement powers.”

He said CQC now had “a new, more thorough inspection process”, introduced three years ago, and “will never rely solely on the assertions of a provider about the quality of their care without crossing the threshold to check”.

And he said there were now systems in place “to ensure that safeguarding processes are not closed without the outcome of the investigations being recorded”.

[*\*Longcare Survivors: The Biography Of A Care Scandal is available through the DNS website*](http://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/longcare-survivors-the-biography-of-a-care-scandal/)

**15 June 2017**

**Shock and anger of abuse survivor, 20 years on from scandal**

A woman with learning difficulties who survived an appalling regime of abuse at a notorious residential home has spoken of her shock and anger at seeing television reports of similar crimes at care homes in Devon two decades later.

Last week, reporting restrictions were lifted following a series of criminal trials and hearings that led to the conviction of 13 company directors and employees of Atlas Project Team, which provided residential care for people with learning difficulties and challenging behaviour.

Bristol Crown Court heard how disabled residents were locked as a punishment in bare, freezing seclusion rooms with no heating or toilet facilities.

The court cases focused on charges of false imprisonment and conspiracy to falsely imprison residents at two of the homes, but official documents show the abusive regimes at the Atlas homes extended far beyond false imprisonment and spread across many of its 15 properties.

The reporting restrictions that had been imposed on the trials were lifted almost exactly 20 years after three members of staff were sentenced, in June 1997, for their part in an abusive regime at care homes for adults with learning difficulties run by the company Longcare in Buckinghamshire\*.

Dorothy Thomson was a resident of the Longcare homes\*\*, and was subjected to years of terrifying physical abuse, psychological torture and other ill-treatment and neglect at the hands of Longcare boss Gordon Rowe and his sidekicks.

She only escaped after confiding in her sister, and her social worker, and her bravery in speaking out helped lead to the regime being exposed three years later, in 1994.

Gordon Rowe never faced justice, as he killed himself as he was about to be charged with a catalogue of crimes, but his widow Angela was jailed for ill-treatment and neglect, with one of their former managers jailed for ill-treatment, and another manager fined.

This week, Dorothy Thomson told Disability News Service (DNS) that the television reports of the “disgusting” and “terrible” abuse in Devon had reminded her of her own ordeal at Stoke Place, one of the Longcare homes.

She said: “Nobody on earth would ever imagine what I went through.

“Because there was occasions when I would sit on the shower room floor and bang my head against the floor and I just kept thinking to myself, ‘I just can’t take anymore,’ and I just wanted to die.”

She sees troubling similarities between what happened in Devon and the events at Longcare more than two decades ago, such as staff cruelty, residents forced to carry out menial tasks, homes located in isolated rural settings, and a punishment regime that included the withdrawal of food from residents who refused to obey staff.

She said: “It still goes on. Stoke Place, for instance, was hidden away, nobody could see what was going on. They couldn’t hear any shouts.

“It feels terrible, because it should never happen. The table should be turned onto the staff that work with them.”

She feels so disillusioned with the failure of successive governments to address institutional abuse in the 20 years since the Longcare scandal was exposed that she refuses to vote.

She said: “I will never vote in a million years, because people will not do anything.

“All the politicians are interested in is making money. They are not interested in people’s feelings.”

Thomson said that it was “disgusting” and “terrible” that the authorities were still failing to prevent such abuse.

She wants to see all homes for disabled people shut down, and says she blames the government, and the police, for failing to act.

She said: “I went through a life of hell and other people shouldn’t have that life. They should be treated like everyday people, not with cruelty, because people are not animals.

“They should treat them just like ordinary people, with lives and feelings. We have the right to live normal, happy lives.”

Dr Noelle Blackman, chief executive of the charity [Respond](http://www.respond.org.uk/), which provided psychotherapy to some of the Longcare survivors and has also provided years of support to victims of the Atlas abuse, and their families, said the similarities between the two regimes were striking.

She pointed to the systematic nature of the abuse, which was part of the culture of the institutions, and how it was legitimised by the managers and directors.

There was also the “humiliation” experienced by female residents, some of whom were displaying signs of having been sexually abused, another characteristic of the Longcare regime.

She said: “If they were frightened and wet themselves, they would have to stay wet.

“If they stayed in the shower scrubbing themselves for a substantial time they were punished for that and sometimes would have to walk naked or almost naked from one part of the home to another because they had taken too long in the shower.”

Both Longcare and Atlas made huge profits by providing services for a group of clients that other providers did not want to support.

And she pointed to “complacent or even negligent” commissioners, among local and health authorities, that “allowed that culture to grow stronger and stronger”.

There were also low-paid and poorly-trained staff, who were “easy to groom. It’s easy to bring in staff who previously were working as cleaners or in McDonald’s and not train them at all, or train them in a regime like this.”

Blackman added: “It’s depressing. I have been working in this field since the 1990s and I feel we are seeing the same things now as we were then and I do not feel things are changing, and that things are even less likely to change now.

“All these places are institutions. People should not be living in institutions. People should be supported to live normal lives.”

Blackman said she was particularly concerned about institutions that claim to be experts in managing “challenging behaviour”, as Atlas had done, and which often use “punitive” strategies to control residents who are usually “traumatised” and “coming from a place of anxiety and fear”.

She added: “After all this time, we still haven’t got the right kind of support in the community.

“Either we are paying large amounts of money for people to be supported in these kinds of institutions, or they are carted off to assessment and treatment units, which are just holding pens, they are not places to live.”

And she suggested that that situation was almost worse now than it was 20 years ago in the wake of the Longcare scandal, because the government’s austerity cuts meant there were not now the resources for the kind of innovative projects that supported people leaving the old long-stay hospitals in the 1980s and 1990s.

And she said any money there was was being siphoned off by shareholders of the companies that provided private sector assessment and treatment units, which had replaced the long-stay hospitals.

*\*The Longcare scandal led to a hugely-influential independent inquiry, which directly influenced several pieces of legislation including Labour’s Care Standards Act, which saw an independent national regulator taking over responsibility for registration and inspection of care homes, and new whistleblowing laws, as well as the introduction of multi-agency adult protection guidance.*

*\*\*John Pring’s book on the Longcare scandal, Longcare Survivors: The Biography Of A Care Scandal,* [is available through the DNS website](http://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/longcare-survivors-the-biography-of-a-care-scandal/)

**15 June 2017**

**Polling station ‘discrimination’ fuels calls for online voting**

The experience of a partially-sighted voter who believes he was discriminated against at a general election polling station last week has added to calls for disabled people to be allowed to vote online.

Dan Williams, director of [Visualise Training and Consultancy](http://www.visualisetrainingandconsultancy.com/) in Cardiff, had asked Cardiff council in advance if he could vote using a large print ballot paper, but was told this was not allowed.

The law states that all ballot papers must be the same size, so voters with sight loss are only allowed to be given a sample large print paper and a tactile voting device (TVD) that is placed over the actual ballot paper and guides them to the correct space for placing their mark.

But when Williams turned up to vote, he said he was told the polling station did not have any large print ballot papers for him to refer to, while he said staff did not know how to use the TVD.

Although he used the TVD to vote, he is not convinced that he marked the correct box.

He is now writing to the council to complain, and is calling for new laws that would allow online voting or the use of a large print ballot paper.

The council claims its polling station staff did know how to use the TVD and that there was a large print ballot paper on the wall.

Williams said he was not even told about the large print ballot paper on the wall but was just told the polling station did not have any large print sample ballot papers.

[Electoral Commission guidance](https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/164255/EPE-Polling-station-handbook.pdf) says that – as well as a large print display copy – there must also be an “enlarged handheld copy” of the ballot paper that partially-sighted voters can take with them into the polling booth for reference.\*

Williams’ experience comes after a new report, backed by the disabled president of the Liberal Democrats, Baroness [Sal] Brinton, called for an online voting option – as introduced in Australia, Switzerland and Estonia – to prevent a breach of disabled voters’ human rights.

The report, produced by the youth-led digital democracy thinktank WebRoots Democracy, warned that many disabled people were set be deprived of the right to a secret ballot in last week’s general election.

[The report, Inclusive Voting,](https://webrootsdemocracy.org/2017/06/05/online-voting-to-prevent-breach-of-rights/) calls on the Equality and Human Rights Commission to investigate these potential breaches of disabled people’s rights.

Baroness Brinton says in an introduction to the report: “A cornerstone of our electoral system is that voters should be able to vote independently and in secret.

“This simply is not the case for many voters with vision impairments and other disabilities.

“It is not right that hundreds of thousands of voters are being made to depend on others to cast their ballot on their behalf, or risk accidentally spoiling their vote.

“It is clear that the technology exists to enable independent and secret votes for all.

“As set out in this report, countries such as Australia have successfully implemented online voting for vision impaired and disabled voters. It is time for us to look at that here in Britain, too.”

Among its other recommendations, the report says that all major political parties should be legally obliged to produce their election manifestos in accessible formats before the opening of the window for postal voting.

The sight loss charity RNIB has also called for the law on access to voting for partially-sighted voters to be reviewed.

An RNIB spokeswoman said: “Partially-sighted voters are telling us they want to be able to vote independently and in secret.

“While having a large print reference copy of the ballot paper does help some, we think the current system is not properly enabling voters who cannot read the official ballot paper to cast their vote with the same independence and secrecy as everyone else.

“Online voting trials were successfully conducted in the UK many years ago. RNIB thinks this option should be trialled again, with a view to rolling it out to anyone for whom the paper-based voting system creates barriers of access.”

RNIB has received more than 500 responses to its [voting access survey](https://www.rnib.org.uk/campaigning-current-campaigns-accessible-information-campaign/voting-and-elections) following the general election.

The spokeswoman added: “We will be analysing the data in a few weeks but in the meantime, we’re responding to a steady stream of complaints about blind and partially-sighted people’s experience of the voting process.

“People are telling us they have experienced the same problems as highlighted in our reports Turned Out 2015 and Turned Out 2016. They were not able to vote independently and in private.”

Only three days before the election, lawyers for Rachael Andrews, from Norwich, announced that she had accepted £2,000 compensation and an apology to settle a legal challenge against her local authority, Broadland District Council, for failing to enable her to vote independently and in secret at the 2015 general and local elections.

Andrews, who is blind, had visited her local polling station with her sighted mother-in-law and blind husband and had asked to use a TVD, but was told they did not have one.

She was forced to ask her mother-in-law to read out the candidates’ names and mark her votes on the ballot papers on her behalf.

Her lawyers, Leigh Day, later argued that the council had breached the Equality Act by failing to provide a TVD, and had also breached the right to vote by secret ballot in the European Convention on Human Rights.

Her case was settled out of court.

Andrews said: “I felt that the polling station staff didn’t care that I would not be able to cast my vote independently – I felt like I didn’t exist and that my vote counted less than everyone else’s.

“The fact that I had to chase for a response and resort to legal action to seek redress added to my feelings that my complaint and my inability to vote in private was not taken seriously by my local authority.”

A council spokeswoman said it had apologised to Andrews and “improved our voting systems for all our visually-impaired residents.

“On the occasions that Mrs Andrews has voted since, we have liaised closely with Mrs Andrews to support her to vote more confidently and independently.”

She said that every polling station now had a TVD “prominently displayed” while all presiding officers were trained in how to use them.

*\*The council claims Williams turned down the chance of a postal vote, despite offering him support to fill in the application form, and that it offered to send him a TVD “on the condition that he sent it back”, but that he turned this offer down because he was “concerned about the cost of the postage to send it back”.*

*But he said this was not correct and that the council had told him that “the TVD was expensive and couldn’t be sent out to everyone who had a visual impairment who wanted to post a vote.*

*“In addition, I explained that I would still need someone to help me use the TVD as I wouldn't know how to line it up.”*

*He says he was also told by the council that the TVD templates were now “outdated” because the format of the ballot papers had changed.*

*The council was unable to respond by 1pm today (Thursday) after being asked to comment on its apparently misleading statement.*

**15 June 2017**

**Rebranding of ‘toxic’ Atos will fail, activists promise**

The “toxic” government contractor Atos has been accused of trying to create a smokescreen to hide its past failures and “appalling reputation”, after quietly announcing that it is changing the name of its disability benefit assessment arm.

The company – blamed by many disabled people for repeated, serious and harmful failings in the way it has carried out assessments – has told “stakeholders” that its Atos Healthcare brand has now been renamed Independent Assessment Services.

The company carries out assessments for the government’s new personal independence payment (PIP) – which is gradually replacing working-age disability living allowance – across London, the south and north of England, and Scotland.

Only this week, Atos has been forced to launch an investigation after Disability News Service (DNS) reported how a disabled women said she was left to sit in her own urine for nearly two hours after her plight was ignored by one of its PIP assessors.

[This followed a major DNS investigation](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/election-forces-mps-to-abandon-pip-inquiry-but-evidence-backs-up-dishonesty-claims/) that uncovered scores of cases in which claimants described how Atos assessors – and those from the government’s other PIP assessment contractor, Capita – produced dishonest reports after carrying out face-to-face assessments.

Atos was previously responsible for delivering the even more controversial work capability assessment (WCA) – a process that researchers, activists [and the Equality and Human Rights Commission](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/disability-rights-have-regressed-in-nine-areas-says-ehrc/) all concluded had caused significant harm and distress to many of those who were assessed, and was also linked to deaths of claimants – before it quit the government contract in 2014.

Disabled activist Gail Ward, from [Black Triangle](http://blacktrianglecampaign.org/), accused Atos of trying to create a “smokescreen” to cover up its “incompetence” in carrying out assessments.

She said: “Atos can rebrand all they wish. We will still call them Atos at every opportunity.”

She said Atos’s actions had left many disabled people trapped in their own homes, after losing their entitlement to PIP, with many having to return their Motability vehicles.

And she said many grassroots campaigners were receiving requests for help in dealing with “fabrication of facts” in Atos PIP assessment reports, which had caused many sick and disabled people “a great deal of distress”.

Her Black Triangle colleague John McArdle added: “Atos has not changed its spots. It is still working as the government’s henchman.

“We see the same litany of wrongdoing that has been reported by DNS, with fraudulent reports and catastrophic harm being caused to disabled people.”

He said the attempt to rebrand itself as a “respectable organisation” would fail, and added: “Atos is infamous for carrying out systematic abuse of the fundamental human rights of disabled people.

“It is a toxic brand and has become a byword for corporate wrongdoing worldwide.”

One PIP claimant who has previously given evidence as part of the DNS investigation into dishonest assessment reports said she was “not surprised” at the Atos rebranding.

She was assessed by an Atos nurse, who produced a “fictional” assessment report that was “totally inaccurate”, including a description of a medical examination that was a “total fabrication”.

She said Atos had an “appalling reputation”, and added: “It doesn’t matter what they call themselves, the same people are running the company and the same people are doing the assessments.”

Atos has told stakeholders that it carried out the rebranding to make it “clear that we are ‘independent’ providers, distinct from DWP” and because the new name explains more clearly the service it delivers.

It also claims that the involvement of Atos will still be clear in the branding of the new name, [but its new website](https://www.mypipassessment.co.uk/) shows Independent Assessment Services with the words “delivered by Atos” only in tiny letters underneath.

An Atos UK spokesman said: “We believe the new name better reflects the role the company undertakes on behalf of the DWP and the assessment work the company carries out.

“The change also follows [the first independent review by Paul Gray](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/personal-independence-payment-pip-assessments-first-independent-review) which recommended a number of changes to claimant communications\*.

“It has been planned and undertaken in consultation with a number of disability representative organisations, who have been supportive and have welcomed the change.”

Both of the two disability organisations Atos said had supported the name change have told DNS that they did no such thing.

The Atos spokesman added: “The change has no effect on any policies and procedures, or the way in which assessments for PIP are carried out.

“All claimants are being advised to continue to attend assessment appointments and respond to communications in the normal manner.”

*\*Among its recommendations, the review highlighted how “the branding of letters for different parts of the process emphasises the different organisations involved rather than highlighting that they are all part of what should be an integrated PIP journey.*

*“This practice also makes the development of a blame culture between different parts of the supply chain all too easy.”*

*Gray recommended that the assessment process should be made “more integrated under common branding”, but there was no suggestion that Atos Healthcare itself should change its name.*

**15 June 2017**

**Sophie Partridge: Friends mourn activist and performer of ‘wit, wisdom and kindness’**

Friends and fellow campaigners are mourning the loss of Sophie Partridge – a disabled performer, writer and activist of wit, wisdom and “genuine kindness” – who died last week.

She was best-known for her work as an actor, performing in the London 2012 Paralympic Games opening ceremony, and in a string of [Graeae Theatre Company](http://graeae.org/) productions.

But she also played a leading role in high-profile disability rights and anti-austerity campaigns, fighting the closure of the Independent Living Fund (ILF) and cuts to the Access to Work programme and other government support.

Her close friend and fellow performer Mik Scarlet said Partridge was “super talented, warm-hearted… and improved the lives of everyone she came in contact with”.

Other friends and fellow campaigners also paid tribute this week to her talent, her kindness and her commitment to disability rights.

The disabled crossbench peer Baroness [Jane] Campbell, said she would be “sorely missed by many”, while Eleanor Lisney said Partridge was an “untiring” campaigner who had “a ready smile and encouraging words for everybody”.

Scarlet said he first met her when he was at the BBC’s Disability Programmes Unit (DPU) in the early 1990s and she was playing the part of a personal assistant-user in [a piece for the magazine programme From The Edge](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJHj7LvHt9I).

He said he was “immediately struck by her talent as an actor”, and added: “She was word perfect every time and had the most amazing comedy timing.

“It wasn’t just me that was struck by her talent, the whole DPU was too and Sophie was soon a regular on the show.

“She was the go-to actor whenever we wanted an ‘every person’ type who could play straight in the silliest of situations.”

He later worked with Partridge again – and they became close friends – when they were both part of the Rhinestone Rollers Graeae production.

He said: “This show was amazing, and Sophie was a star.”

They also worked together on the Paralympics opening ceremony, with Scarlet remembering her “dry wit and ability to make everyone else laugh while appearing to not be joking”.

He later worked with her again [on a news report for Channel 5](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=caLXqDKwE74&t=10s) on the legacy of the London 2012 Paralympics, in which “she described why so many felt so let down by the supposed legacy of 2012.

“The whole news team were thoroughly impressed with her, and she made the item.”

Baroness Campbell said: “Sophie brought a sense of fun, satirical genius and genuine kindness to every occasion, whether social or campaigning.

“I don’t think I’ve ever enjoyed being teased so ruthlessly, as I did when I was by Sophie.

“Her sharp wit was particularly welcome when we were campaigning together on issues that frighten so many disabled people to their core – regression on independent living and assisted suicide, being our mutual top two.”

But she said she also enjoyed her talents away from the “battlefield”.

She said: “As a consummate actor, she also enthralled me, in plays like *peeling* in 2002 and her solo performance in Song Of Semmersuaq.

“For someone so small, she was a giant on stage and on the barricades.”

Lisney said Partridge never talked about herself and her achievements, and was “a lovely person, very unassuming, [with] a great sense of humour and a caring person.

“She had a ready smile and encouraging words for everybody. She cared for people beyond her own circle of friends.

“As a campaigner, I remember her best in her untiring work for the ILF. She was very effective in her message.

“She fought for disability rights, whether as a creative practitioner or as an activist.”

In a statement, Graeae said the company was “devastated” to hear of her death.

The statement said: “Sophie’s talent has been woven through Graeae’s productions and workshops since 2000 and many of us feel privileged to have called her our friend.

“We feel her loss deeply but she leaves behind a legacy of delighted audiences of tens of thousands who were lucky enough to have seen her perform.”

Partridge had trained in Graeae’s Missing Piece programme, and went on to take one of the lead roles in Kate O’Reilly’s play *peeling,* which Graeae said was “inspired by Sophie’s wit and warmth”, and appeared in Graeae’s George Dandin, Flower Girls, the Rhinestone Rollers and The Limbless Knight.

But she also led workshops and residencies for Graeae and was part of its outreach team over the last 17 years.

Graeae said she was a “tireless advocate campaigning for the need for an inclusive society”, and a “brilliant spokesperson for the rights of Deaf and disabled people”.

Partridge was one of the most prominent of the disabled activists who spoke out against the planned ILF closure.

In an interview recorded by campaigning journalist Kate Belgrave [in January 2013](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LIzCtAsBV4M), she described how she had written to the then prime minister David Cameron, and told him: “It’s not my impairment which makes me vulnerable, it is your cut. It is your policies.

“You know, you give us decent resources and we will add to your economy, we will contribute to your blessed, blinking Big Society, we will play our part but we have to have adequate resources.”

In the film, she said it was “too scary to contemplate” the thought of disabled people being forced into residential care as a result of the ILF closure, and added: “One way or another we have to ensure that that does not happen. We can’t go back 30-odd years.”

In a parliamentary meeting attended by Labour MPs John McDonnelland Jeremy Corbyn in January 2015, several months before they became Labour’s leader and shadow chancellor, Partridge said she could not imagine life without ILF.

She told that meeting: “Younger people who are in situations that I was in when I was 21, wanting to live independently, wanting the same opportunities as any other young person… I cannot see how that is going to be achievable without the ILF.”

She also campaigned against other government austerity measures.

In October 2013, she attended [the 10,000 Cuts and Counting memorial event](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/carpet-of-flowers-turns-parliament-square-into-memorial-to-wca-victims/) in Parliament Square, held to remember disabled victims of austerity.

Alongside fellow speakers, including Corbyn and McDonnell, she read extracts [from the emails, blogs and other posts of Karen Sherlock](http://benefitscroungingscum.blogspot.co.uk/2012/06/karens-story-rip-karen-sherlock.html), who had died the previous year after fighting the injustice of the government’s “fitness for work” assessment regime.

She also supported the [StopChanges2ATW](https://stopchanges2atw.com/) campaign, describing in 2014 how she had suddenly encountered problems when applying for Access to Work support so she could appear at the DaDaFest International 2014 festival, where she was to perform Song Of Semmersuaq.

She said at the time: “It just seems to be one assault after another on disabled people, it really does.

“It is undermining our status in society every day, bit by bit.”

She was also a prominent campaigner on disabled people’s right to life issues, including supporting [Not Dead Yet UK (NDY UK)](http://notdeadyetuk.org/) in its opposition to legalising assisted suicide.

[In another film](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c2zKafyiCNg&feature=youtu.be), for NDY UK in 2015, as part of its Assist Us To Live Not Die! campaign, she said: “I’ve been dependent on people my whole life so what kind of statement and judgement is that on my life, and also what if anybody that acquires an impairment becomes disabled, what kind of a message is that to send to them that it’s all completely hopeless and they might as well kill themselves?”

Her last message on the social media platform Twitter was to express her support for Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, six days before the general election, telling her followers: “How could anyone NOT vote for Jezza?! :-)”

Scarlet said Partridge was “one of the wisest people I have known, super talented, warm hearted and a massive loss to everyone who knew her.

“She fought for disabled people’s rights, shone on stage and screen, was an amazing friend and improved the lives of everyone she came in contact with.

“She may have been pixie sized, but the hole she has left in the universe is too big to measure.”

**15 June 2017**

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