**DWP figures on ‘unacceptable’ WCA reports cast doubt on decisions made on tens of thousands of ESA claims**

Tens of thousands of “fitness for work” benefit claims could have been decided by civil servants on evidence from assessment reports that should have been rejected because their quality was “unacceptable”, government figures suggest.

The concerns about the way Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) decision-makers have decided employment and support allowance (ESA) claims follow [last week’s revelations](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/dwp-figures-suggest-tens-of-thousands-of-pip-claims-could-have-been-decided-on-unacceptable-assessment-reports/) about similar concerns with personal independence payment (PIP) claims.

They are [based on figures provided](https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2018-04-16/136017/) by the minister for disabled people, Sarah Newton, to Labour MP Grahame Morris.

The figures\* show that the proportion of work capability assessment (WCA) reports sent back to DWP contractor Maximus\*\* because they were found to be of “unacceptable” quality – following audits of small samples of the reports – was as much as 100 times greater than the proportion sent back by DWP decision-makers when making day-to-day decisions on ESA claims.

This suggests that DWP decision-makers are frequently deciding ESA claims based on “unacceptable” reports instead of sending them back to Maximus assessors to “rework”.

[With Newton’s figures also showing](https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2018-04-16/136018/) that Maximus carried out more than one million WCAs and other assessments in 2016-17, and more than 1.1 million in 2017-18 – when only 625 reports were sent back by DWP to Maximus to be reworked because they were “unacceptable” – this suggests that tens of thousands of claims could have been affected every year.

DWP and Maximus yesterday (Wednesday) both denied that this was what the figures showed, with Maximus insisting that it was “inaccurate and misleading” to draw such a conclusion.

But disabled activists and researchers are deeply concerned by the figures and believe they are further evidence of the unfairness of the disability benefit assessment system, and of how tens of thousands of disabled people have been wrongly denied support through the social security system.

Maximus [took over the WCA contract from Atos](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/humiliation-greets-maximus-in-first-week-of-wca-delivery/) in March 2015.

The figures provided by Newton show that, in 2015-16, just 0.06 per cent of assessment reports were returned by DWP to Maximus for reworking because they were of “unacceptable” quality.

In 2016-17 this was 0.066 per cent (still far fewer than one in a thousand) and in 2017-18 it was just 0.056 per cent.

But when senior Maximus executives [appeared before the Commons work and pensions committee](http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/work-and-pensions-committee/pip-and-esa-assessments/oral/75298.pdf) in December, they told MPs that the audit process showed that the proportion of “C-grade” reports – those deemed “unacceptable” by auditors – was currently 7.3 per cent, more than 100 times higher.

[In subsequent written evidence](http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/work-and-pensions-committee/pip-and-esa-assessments/written/75875.html) to the committee, Maximus told the MPs that C-grade reports were those “considered not to have met expected standards for a variety of reasons”, whereas A and B grade reports were those that were “fit for purpose” and where “a decision could be made on the case” by DWP.

Last week, DNS heard from a DWP civil servant who works on the PIP “frontline”, who said that DWP case managers have strict targets for the number of PIP claims they need to process every day, are quizzed by their superiors if they miss their weekly targets and are “instructed to act on the assessor’s report, given that they are the medical experts”.

This week, DNS has heard from a former DWP civil servant who worked on ESA and said she and her colleagues were also “strongly discouraged from sending back reports we felt needed to be reworked”.

She said: “I was told to leave it, continue with the decision.

“I was told there is probably something we don’t know about that the assessor did... so to leave it, no need to return it.”

Anita Bellows, a [Disabled People Against Cuts](https://dpac.uk.net) researcher, said DWP again needed to explain the discrepancies in its statistics.

She said: “While the figures for reports deemed unacceptable and therefore needing ‘rework’ provided by disability assessors are low, the reports audited paint a different picture, one of disability assessors producing a huge number of unacceptable reports.

“But the discrepancies show something else. Statistics on the number of unacceptable reports are being manipulated and kept artificially low.

“It is unthinkable that the DWP did not notice these discrepancies. And this begs the question: how many claimants had their claim decided based on unacceptable reports?”

A DWP spokeswoman denied yesterday that the figures produced by the minister showed that civil servants had for years been making ESA claim decisions on the basis of reports of an “unacceptable” quality.

She said: “In order to provide the best possible service to our customers, rather than resending reports for re-work our decision-makers tend to call the health provider’s customer service desk to discuss and resolve problems they identify.

“Returning assessment reports for re-work extends the length of time taken to make a decision and delays payment to our customers of the benefit rate to which they are entitled.

“By discussing the case directly and immediately, issues can be solved quickly. However, in a minority of cases, this is not possible and the report needs to be returned for re-work as per our procedures.”

But campaigner John Slater, whose freedom of information work [has previously produced crucial data](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/the-pip-files-nearly-one-in-three-capita-assessments-were-flawed-reports-reveal/) about the DWP’s disability benefit assessment contracts, said: “It’s deeply worrying that the DWP admitted decisions are sometimes made on the basis of poor medical reports plus telephone calls with the health provider’s customer service desk.

“The flawed reports are not re-worked and there is every chance that no record of what is said during these telephone calls will be added to the claimant’s file.”

He said this could also mean that if the claimant requested a copy of their assessment report it might not be an accurate record of the information upon which the decision was based, which he said had “clear implications for the appeals process”.

A Maximus spokesman said that the latest figures from the audit process – through which DWP checks on more than 700 assessment reports a month – showed it was now meeting its target of less than five per cent of these being given a C-grade.

Maximus has also met its target of more than 70 per cent of assessment reports securing an A-grade in every month since the start of the contract, he said.

The Maximus spokesman said: “Since we took over the contract in March 2015, we have delivered year-on-year improvements across the service.

“We have met or exceeded all of our quality targets since January 2018.

“Separately, we have always exceeded the DWP’s target that over 99.5 per cent of reports comply with the department’s standards, enabling them to make a decision on ESA eligibility.

“These two measures are distinct and it is inaccurate and misleading to conflate them.”

*\*The vast majority of these assessments were WCAs but Maximus also carries out assessments for other disability benefits, including disability living allowance for under-16s and industrial injuries disablement benefit*

*\*\*Referred to in Newton’s answer as CHDA (the Centre for Health and Disability Assessments), which is part of Maximus*

**10 May 2018**

**Charity faces claims of ‘abusive’ behaviour over care home closure meeting**

A disability charity is facing allegations of “insensitive and abusive” behaviour over the way its executives told disabled residents that they were about to close their care home because they could not afford to keep it open.

The news was broken on the same day that other executives from the same charity, Leonard Cheshire, were telling residents of a home on the other side of the country why they had spent £275,000 on a new logo and rebranding exercise.

Leonard Cheshire had sent letters inviting residents of the Greathouse home, near Chippenham, Wiltshire, to a meeting about “important changes to the service and how it will affect you”, that would take place just six days later.

But the charity failed to provide the letters in accessible formats such as large print or easy read, so some of the residents – who all have high support needs – were unable to read or understand them.

Some of their relatives did not receive letters telling them about the meeting.

Another letter, confirming the decision to close the home, was handed out after the meeting, and again was not available in accessible formats.

And when executives from the charity’s head office arrived for last week’s meeting, there were so many of them present that they created an “intimidating” atmosphere, according to one relative.

They also ignored some of the questions and comments raised by residents with communication impairments, says the relative.

The claims have been made by Sharon Bye, whose brother Chris is one of the residents and has praised the quality of the staff at Greathouse.

She subsequently made a “safeguarding” referral to the local authority, Wiltshire County Council, because she felt the way the meeting had been run was “abusive”.

Leonard Cheshire told the home’s residents last week that Greathouse would close on 27 July, partly because it could not afford the money for repairs and was finding it difficult to recruit staff.

There are believed to be 21 residents of the home, all of working-age and all wheelchair-users with high support needs.

Chris Bye said the meeting had been “awful and very badly managed. They obviously had their own agenda to push and they just didn’t listen to residents.”

He said he felt “very sad” about the closure and added: “I have lived here a long time and we are a family.”

There are now concerns that allowing just three months to find new accommodation means he and other residents could be forced into homes for older people.

Sharon Byeis also angry that a council manager who attended the meeting failed to intervene to express concerns at the way it was being run or to explain his role.

In a letter to Neil Heslop, Leonard Cheshire’s chief executive, Bye has described Greathouse as “a vibrant community that is fully integrated into the locality” and ensures its residents “have as much independence as possible”.

She added: “I am devastated by your decision to close but also understand that you have a right to make a decision like this.

“What you don’t have the right to do is treat the people you support in an insensitive manner.

“As the lead officer of a national charity it is my hope that you will be horrified to learn that residents and families have been treated with such a lack of regard.

“I will go as far as to say that the actions to date constitute in my view abuse. I am sorry to say this, but it is true.”

After being asked by Disability News Service (DNS) about Bye’s concerns, Leonard Cheshire admitted that residents were given just six days’ notice of the meeting but said this was to “minimise any anxiety or upset associated with people having to wait for an extended period of time to attend the meeting”.

It also admitted that some relatives of residents had not received a letter telling them about the meeting, and that it was “investigating the reasons for this”.

But she told DNS that the charity did not consider the meeting was “abusive” and that executives at the meeting had tried to acknowledge all the points made by residents.

She said: “The message delivered was difficult for people to hear and people, understandably, became upset.

“There were a number of instances where people were talking at the same time, which made it very difficult for us to hear and acknowledge every point being made.

“We asked people to allow others to speak in an effort to ensure that those who wanted to be heard could be.”

She said the charity was “not aware of anyone being ignored”.

And she said the home’s manager had assured them there was no need to provide the letters in accessible formats.

She said: “We are more than happy to ensure that information is provided in alternative formats and would ask anyone who would like this to contact us.”

But she said the charity accepted that it “could have provided more clarity around who would be attending” the meeting.

She added: “At Leonard Cheshire we aim to offer the best quality service in modern accessible properties.

“Unfortunately the current grade II listed building at Greathouse needs considerable repairs and does not meet today’s standards.

“Difficulties recruiting specialist staff have resulted in an over reliance on agencies, and drop in demand for places over a number of years have also been a factor in reaching the difficult decision to close this service.

“We are working with all residents and their families in association with commissioners to help them choose their new home, and support them throughout this transition process.

“We are also supporting our dedicated staff with their future options.”

But on the same day the Greathouse closure was announced to its residents, two other Leonard Cheshire communications executives were called to Wetherby, Yorkshire, to explain to service-users at another home why the charity had paid a consultancy more than a quarter of a million pounds for a rebranding exercise that includes a new logo that has been described as “looking like something a toddler would draw”.

Leonard Cheshire service-user Doug Paulley, who lives in the Wetherby home and [is a fierce critic of the way the charity is run](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/leonard-cheshire-set-to-scrap-disabled-only-team-over-budget-black-hole/), said the treatment of the men and women who lived at Greathouse had been “disgraceful”.

He said [the last inspection report](http://www.cqc.org.uk/location/1-120084855) for Greathouse by the care regulator had been excellent, apart from the need for some renovations.

He said: “I am sure they could give substantially more time (like: a year or six months) for the residents to sort out alternative accommodation. I’m sure that they could renovate and stay open, come to that.”

He questioned the cost of the new logo with the two executives last week but said he was given a lot of “corporate guff” about how [the new logo](https://www.leonardcheshire.org/) “represents diversity” and was “less enclosing” [than the previous “box” logo.](http://www3.northamptonshire.gov.uk/councilservices/children-families-education/SEND/local-offer/national-organisation/2862-leonard-cheshire-disability)

And he said they told him the previous redesign in 2008 had cost £1.5 million and had been “a badly handled own goal”.

Paulley told DNS that the latest rebranding had been a “ludicrous pointless infantilising waste of money, done by media consultants who know nothing about disabled people’s lives, social care and politics”.

The executives had told him the charity had decided to drop “disability” from its name – the previous rebranding in 2008 had added “disability” – because they did not like people being given the “badge” of disability.

Paulley said: “They say they don’t like people to be labelled as there is a lot of diversity in disabled people.

“Well, yes, of course there is; but the whole point of the social model, which they claim to espouse, is that it’s not the person that is disabled, it is society which disables them – so society is labelled, not the person. But they just don’t get it.

“Also does this mean that they are now going to provide services to non-disabled people?

“And are they going to undermine campaigns on issues for non-disabled people, as they do for disabled people?”

A Leonard Cheshire spokeswoman said: “Like other big charities we periodically have to invest in the future – so we can together support more individuals to live, learn and work as independently as they choose.

“Work around the brand isn’t just about a logo and the investment has also paid for website redesign, as well as development of high impact materials to help staff do their jobs more effectively, following detailed consultation on the approach.

“We work with disabled people to create a fairer, more inclusive society and the new brand better reflects the diversity of the services we now provide, both in the UK and internationally.”

Wiltshire County Council refused to say why it failed to intervene in the meeting, or to confirm the safeguarding concern raised by Sharon Bye.

But it said in a statemen: “We were saddened to hear that Leonard Cheshire has chosen to close this care service, and recognise the impact this will have both on those receiving care, and the staff involved in providing it.

“We are working with Leonard Cheshire and our partner organisations to provide advice and support to those residents affected and will ensure they get suitable alternative accommodation and care as quickly as possible.

“Some of the matters raised at the recent meeting for the home’s residents and their families will be discussed with Leonard Cheshire to ensure that the position going forward is handled as sensitively and carefully as possible.”

**10 May 2018**

**EHRC appoints eight disabled people to advisory committee**

The equality and human rights watchdog has appointed eight disabled people to its disability committee, including leading activists, advisers and academics.

The new appointments mean that all 14 members of the Equality and Human Rights Commission’s (EHRC) disability advisory committee (DAC) will be disabled people.

The committee was formed last year to replace the statutory disability committee, which had powers under the Equality Act 2006 to take important disability-related decisions within EHRC, such as allowing it to overrule officers on critical and strategically-important legal cases.

The DAC does not have these powers. Instead, its members will inform the commission’s work on protecting and promoting rights and equality for disabled people.

The new members are Liz Sayce, Lord [Colin] Low, Professor Nick Watson, Simone Aspis, Miro Griffiths, Fazilet Hadi, Sarah Coleman and Maddy Kirkman.

Sayce is the former chief executive of [Disability Rights UK](https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org) (DR UK) and its predecessor organisation RADAR, who retired from that post last year after 10 years.

She has a background in mental health and disability policy and is a member of the governing committee of Healthwatch England and the government’s social security advisory committee, and is a non-executive director of the Care Quality Commission.

She is also a former director of policy and communications at the Disability Rights Commission.

While at DR UK, she spoke out on issues around [disability employment](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/government-adviser-criticises-lack-true-disability-employment-strategy/), [the rights of disabled asylum-seekers](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/deplorable-home-office-guidance-will-breach-rights-of-disabled-asylum-seekers/), and [for reform of the Mental Health Act](https://www.nsun.org.uk/its-time-for-full-legal-equality) and implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

But she is still best-known among many disabled activists for writing [a controversial report for the coalition government](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/sayce-employment-support-review-support-must-focus-on-the-individual/) on employment support for disabled people.

Lord Low is a vice-president and former chair of RNIB, and a former law lecturer and researcher.

He speaks regularly on human rights issues in the House of Lords as a crossbench peer, [and spoke out last summer](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/crossbench-disabled-peer-calls-for-an-end-to-austerity-and-the-misery-it-has-caused/) against the “personal misery” caused by “neoliberal austerity”, which he said was part of a 40-year project to “systematically shrink” public sector spending.

[He has also spoken out](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/hard-brexit-could-see-disabled-people-lose-right-to-independent-living-say-peers/) against the harm that Brexit will cause to disabled people.

Watson is professor of disability research in the School of Social and Political Sciences, and director at the [Strathclyde Centre for Disability Research](https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/socialpolitical/research/sociology/strathclydecentrefordisabilityresearch/), both at the University of Glasgow.

He is probably best-known to many activists as the co-author of [a research report which concluded](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/biopsychosocial-basis-for-benefit-cuts-is-cavalier-unevidenced-and-misleading/) two years ago that the research successive governments had relied on to justify slashing disability benefits – through the biopsychosocial model of disability – was riddled with inconsistencies, misleading statements and “unevidenced” claims.

He was also co-author of the [Bad News For Disabled People report](https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_214917_en.pdf), which found in 2011 that there had been a “significant increase” in the number of negative stories about disabled people in national newspapers over the previous six years.

Aspis has more than 20 years’ experience of campaigning for disabled people’s rights, particularly on inclusive education at [The Alliance for Inclusive Education](https://www.allfie.org.uk/), and currently also acts as an advocate for autistic people and those with learning difficulties who have been sectioned and cannot secure their release from psychiatric hospitals.

She has also previously worked with the UK Disabled People’s Council and People First, as well as with the [Reclaiming Our Futures Alliance](http://www.rofa.org.uk/) on the shadow report it submitted last year to the UN’s committee on the rights of persons with disabilities.

Griffiths, a campaigner, researcher and adviser on disability rights, and a former project officer for the [European Network on Independent Living (ENIL)](http://www.enil.eu/), is another [who has spoken out](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/brexit-vote-disabled-people-speak-of-shock-horror-and-dismay/) to warn of the damaging impact of Brexit on disabled people’s rights and social justice.

[He has also spoken publicly](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/governments-failing-to-respect-disabled-peoples-organisations/) of how governments in the UK – and abroad – have shown “a clear lack of appreciation and respect” for disabled people’s organisations by ignoring their views and advice when developing new policies.

He spent six years [on Equality 2025](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/end-of-the-road-for-equality-2025/), the government’s now-disbanded high-level advice body of disabled people.

Hadi is a former solicitor and local authority equality manager who spent two decades at the disability charity RNIB, including as deputy chief executive, and is a former chair of the Law Centres Federation.

She [has previously told peers](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/private-sector-shames-government-on-equality-act/) that she believed the private sector had done a better job of implementing the Equality Act than central and local government.

[She spoke out six years ago](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/ministers-warned-over-adding-fuel-to-disablist-fire/) to warn ministers that it felt as though disabled people were “a group under siege” and that the government had been drawing false distinctions between “disabled people” and “tax-payers” and between “deserving” and “undeserving” benefit claimants.

Coleman is a policy officer with Mencap, and is a former youth worker and advocate, and has led community involvement projects and delivered disability equality training, as well as having experience as a family carer.

Kirkman is a former national disabled students’ officer at the National Union of Students, and currently works in the third sector in Scotland, conducting research and strategy projects with a small disability charity, and continues to be an active member of the disabled students’ movement.

The new members join DAC’s existing members, the acting chair Dr Rachel Perkins, Dr Marc Bush, Helen Chipchase, Professor Anna Lawson, Michelle Scattergood and Colin Young.

All 14 members of the committee self-identify as disabled people.

The new appointments completed an application process that began last November. The members of the committee are set to nominate their own chair at their next meeting.

David Isaac, EHRC’s chair, said: “Improving the lives of disabled people is at the heart of everything we do and creating a strong DAC with such a wealth of expertise and personal experience across such a broad range of fields is essential to our work.

“Only by this means will the commission’s work be well-informed, relevant and effective in advancing the rights of all disabled people in this country.”

**10 March 2018**

**A year on from new taxi discrimination laws… and not a single prosecution**

Local authorities have failed to prosecute a single taxi-driver for discriminating against wheelchair-users under new legislation introduced more than a year ago, according to new figures released under the Freedom of Information Act.

The figures show that not one taxi-driver out of more than 30,000 so far covered by the new legislation has appeared in court, despite widespread reports of discrimination.

On 6 April last year, the government finally brought into force laws that impose fines of up to £1,000 on drivers of taxis and private hire vehicles who refuse to accept wheelchair-users, try to charge them extra, or fail to provide them with appropriate assistance.

But the new laws only apply in those areas of England, Scotland and Wales where the local authority has drawn up a list – under section 167 of the Equality Act – of all the wheelchair-accessible taxis and private hire vehicles in their area.

So far, only about 120 of 347 councils have drawn up a list under section 167 – just seven local authorities have failed to respond to freedom of information requests – even though the Department for Transport (DfT) has said that it should take no more than six months from April 2017 to bring in the new measures.

Those that have compiled a list cover more than 30,000 wheelchair-accessible taxis, according to figures compiled by [transport access campaigner Doug Paulley](https://www.kingqueen.org.uk/s167/) through the freedom of information requests, which were sent last November.

But Paulley’s figures also show that, of the councils that have drawn up a list, not one of them has prosecuted a taxi-driver for discriminating against a wheelchair-user – under section 165 of the act – or is aware of any drivers in its area facing prosecutions by other organisations or individuals.

Only Transport for London appears to have taken any steps towards a prosecution, telling Paulley in its freedom of information response that it had launched 19 investigations under section 165.

It said this week that two taxi-drivers were being prosecuted under section 165, with the first due to appear in court later this month.

Paulley said he was “really disappointed” by the implementation and enforcement of the new laws, which he said had been “lamentably poor, with no sign of improvement”.

He believes the figures show the legislation is not fit for purpose and needs to be replaced.

He said: “I find it difficult to believe that there haven’t been any offences committed under section 165 of the Act.

“It is not credible to believe that since this legislation was implemented, none of the drivers of any of those taxis have refused a wheelchair-user travel, failed to strap the wheelchair-user or their wheelchair in properly, left the meter running whilst loading a wheelchair-user or failed to assist the wheelchair-user into or out of their taxi.

“I have personally experienced discrimination in these terms, by drivers of vehicles on a section 167 list.”

The Department for Transport (DfT) declined to say if it was concerned about the figures or if it believed the legislation needed to be redrawn.

But it said it was encouraged by the response from local authorities which have drawn up a list under section 167, and that it had provided guidance to help councils implement the requirements of the new laws, and expected all authorities to make the most of their new powers.

A DfT spokesman said: “We are clear that disabled people must have the same access to transport services that others take for granted.

“It is unacceptable that a minority of taxi and private hire vehicle drivers discriminate against wheelchair-users.

“We have provided councils with the means to challenge such behaviour, and they should use these powers to ensure that drivers provide wheelchair-users with assistance and cannot charge them extra.

“We expect all councils to take the steps necessary to ensure that all passengers can travel free from the fear of discrimination.”

**10 May 2018**

**New fund will empower disabled women as memorial to Firman and Partridge**

A disabled women’s collective hopes that a “ground-breaking” new memorial fund will empower disabled women by paying the costs of attending events they would otherwise not be able to visit.

The memorial fund\* is being set up by [Sisters of Frida (SoF)](http://www.sisofrida.org/) to remember [Eleanor Firman](http://www.sisofrida.org/in-memory-of-eleanor-firman/) and Sophie Partridge, who were both members of its steering group, and who both died last year.

The Eleanor and Sophie Memorial Fund will provide financial support for disabled women to attend events such as conferences and concerts – both mainstream and disability-related – that they would not otherwise be able to afford to attend.

Among those at a launch event for the fund in south-east London were Firman’s older brother Richard, and her partner, Gerry Lyons, a Labour borough councillor in Waltham Forest.

Richard Firman told the event that their family had not been aware of how extensive his sister’s activism had been – she had also been a composer, musician and music teacher – and they had been “astonished” and “humbled” at the huge turnout to her funeral last year.

Eleanor Lisney, a SoF co-founder, said that when she and Firman had visited Geneva in 2013 to present evidence about [the impact of austerity on disabled women](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/input-from-fridas-sisters-convinces-un-to-call-for-uk-action-on-disabled-women/) in the UK to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), they had had to “scrounge” for funding from the National Union of Journalists and Waltham Forest Trades Council.

It was this struggle for funding that helped persuade SoF to launch the fund as a way of remembering their former colleagues.

When she died last year, Lisney paid tribute to Firman’s “warmth, her passion, creativity and friendship” and said she had never failed to stand up against injustice.

There were also tributes paid to Partridge at the fund’s launch, with Lisney describing her as “a precious person” who was “full of joy”.

[When she died last year](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/sophie-partridge-friends-mourn-activist-and-performer-of-wit-wisdom-and-kindness/), friends and colleagues had paid tribute to her wit, wisdom and “genuine kindness”, her work as an actor, and the leading role she played in high-profile disability rights and anti-austerity campaigns.

Michelle Daley, another SoF co-founder, said the fund was “a great opportunity for disabled people to be able to do things that they would not be able to do.

“There are not any other grants available.

“This is ground-breaking in many ways. We are testing the waters, doing something new and different, but it is also being done by disabled women for disabled women and with no resources.

“It will remember the names of some powerful disabled women and will empower other disabled women and give them freedom.”

Daley said that both Partridge and Firman had been “passionate” about enabling access for disabled people.

She said SoF hoped organisations and individuals would contribute to the fund\* so that it could provide grants to more disabled women.

SoF will announce details in due course on its website and through social media of how to apply for funding.

The event in Greenwich, south-east London, also marked the success of a year-long [peer-led development project](http://www.sisofrida.org/projects/peer-development-project/), which provided mentors for disabled women to develop their own projects and research skills, and share their knowledge more widely.

The scheme was led by Sisters of Frida and backed by the [Rosa fund for women and girls](http://www.rosauk.org/who-we-are/).

Sorena Francis spoke about her project, which set up a user-led peer support group, the [More Than 1 Forum](https://www.facebook.com/morethan1forum/), and uses creativity and the arts to raise the profile of disabled people in her borough.

She said: “It’s hard out there for disabled people, very difficult. Society just wants to add more of a divide. It’s them and us.

“To be a part of a collective is very important but also normally in society women are quite competitive, so it has been very healing for me to be in a space where people are supportive and they mean that.”

Another was Magdalena Szarota, a co-founder of [One.pl](http://www.onepl.org.pl/english.htm), an organisation of disabled women in Poland, whose project was about using photography as a way of telling disabled people’s stories.

Tope Onanuga, another participant, aims to relaunch [her blog](https://topeonlinesite.wordpress.com/) to support disabled students when applying for university.

She said: “I had a mentor who works in radio and she gave me tips on writing and how to develop writing. She gave me a lot of good advice and a lot of feedback.”

Vivienne Hayes, chief executive of [Women’s Resource Centre](https://thewomensresourcecentre.org.uk/about/), the national umbrella organisation for the women’s sector, told the event that the support of Sisters of Frida had been “vital” in enabling her organisation to have an intersectional approach to its work.

She said that “solidarity” between women’s groups was “absolutely the most important thing”.

She said: “In 30 years doing this work, I can’t remember a more difficult time.

“For us to try to hold back the tsunami of government policies that seem to only aim to take away our rights and impoverish us we have to come together.”

*\*To donate to the fund,* [*visit the SoF donation page*](http://www.sisofrida.org/donate/) *and mark the contribution for the Eleanor and Sophie Memorial Fund*

**10 May 2018**

**Boards of biggest companies should appoint ‘disability champions’, says new report**

Every one of the country’s biggest companies should ensure they have a “disability champion” on their board by 2020, according to a new report co-authored by a leading disabled social entrepreneur.

The report also calls on the boards of Britain’s biggest 350 businesses to include disability as a formal agenda item at least once every year.

[Leading From The Front](http://kpmg.com/uk/disabilityinclusion) is a review of research and best practice in the field of disability, and has been written “with a board-level audience in mind”.

Its co-authors are Mike Adams, the disabled chief executive of [the social enterprise Purple](http://www.wearepurple.org.uk) – formerly Essex Coalition of Disabled People – and David Gracie, director of legal services at the accountancy and consultancy giant KPMG.

They conclude that becoming “disability inclusive” as an employer opens up organisations to “a wider talent pool, different ways of doing things and a far broader customer base”.

As well as appointing a board-level champion who is accountable for disability issues and regularly tabling disability as an agenda item, employers should also promote disability issues to their suppliers, networks and audiences, they say.

They also say that employers should sign up to the government’s much-criticised Disability Confident scheme. [Adams himself has previously raised concerns](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/purple-boss-raises-concerns-over-disability-confident-accreditation/) about how the scheme was working.

The report also says that large employers – both in the private and public sector – should use their power to bring about permanent change in the way their suppliers address disability.

And it says employers should secure the right specialist support on disability, to help them “navigate those potentially tricky first conversations and get the right policies in place from the very start”.

The report says the value of the “purple pound” – the collective spending power of disabled people in the UK and their families – is an estimated £249 billion a year.

It says that three-quarters of disabled people have walked away from a business because of poor disability awareness – costing businesses £420 million a week – while inaccessible websites and apps cost £11.75 billion in lost revenue in the UK in 2016.

And it says that one academic study found 92 per cent of consumers felt more positive about companies that employed disabled people.

But it also points out that less than one in 10 businesses have a defined strategy for targeting disabled consumers.

The report says that Mars UK saw sales of Maltesers increase by 8.1 per cent – double its target of four per cent – after a series of adverts featuring disabled cast members, in its most successful campaign in 80 years.

Agnes Fletcher, an equality advisor to Arsenal, which became the first professional football club to achieve Disability Confident “leader” status, spoke in the report of the Arsenal For Everyone initiative, which includes a long-term commitment to disability.

The club’s management team take the lead on diversity, with the initiative promoted at every level of the organisation, helping staff understand the importance of disability issues, she says in the report.

Fletcher, a former director of policy and communications at the Disability Rights Commission, says: “Being open about these issues also benefits Arsenal’s employer brand and status as an inclusive place to work.

“The latest equality and diversity survey showed that more employees and casual staff are identifying themselves as disabled.

“So being disability inclusive doesn’t just open up Arsenal to a bigger fanbase but a wider talent pool too.”

Sarah Newton, minister for disabled people, said that about 6,000 employers had now signed up to Disability Confident, which aims to challenge employers’ attitudes towards disability and help remove workplace barriers faced by disabled people.

She said that if an employer signs up to Disability Confident it “sends a powerful message to potential employees that they will get the support they need to thrive in the workplace”.

She said: “Disability Confident can offer your organisation a valuable support network and guidance to help you create a more inclusive workplace.”

The report says that most of the experts interviewed for the review spoke about the importance of the people at the top of organisations “setting the right tone” on disability.

Adams said: “Put simply, disability is board business. It affects everyone associated with your company – your customers, your staff, and your stakeholders.

“Having spoken to some of the most forward-thinking businesses of all sizes when it comes to disability, a common thread quickly emerged – the tone is set by those at the top.

“We need more leaders to follow suit and create a new culture in which disabled people aren’t just accommodated but embraced because everyone understands their true potential.”

**10 May 2018**

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