**Government’s lockdown-lifting ‘gamble’ is ‘utterly reckless’, say DPOs**

Disabled people’s organisations have expressed their “grave concern” over the government’s “utterly reckless” decision to lift most of the remaining COVID-19 rules in England from 19 July.

[The move](https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/update-on-the-pandemic-and-the-roadmap-to-freedom) from “rules and regulations” to “guidance and good sense” – although final confirmation will not come until Monday (12 July) – has come despite the sharply rising number of new infections across the country.

From 19 July, all social distancing guidance will be removed in nearly all settings, including the legal requirement to wear face coverings.

Legal requirements on businesses will be removed, while limits on attendance at concerts, theatre and sports events will be lifted.

The new health and social care secretary, Sajid Javid, also said that it would “no longer be necessary to work from home”.

But disabled people’s organisations (DPOs) and disabled campaigners have this week told Disability News Service of their shock and anger at the decision to sweep away a series of public health restrictions.

They said the move was a gamble with disabled people’s lives.

Mark Baggley, manager of [Choices and Rights Disability Coalition](https://choicesandrights.org.uk/) in Hull, said his organisation was “shocked at how all the safeguards are being swept away in one dramatic move”.

He said: “We know many disabled people have been very cautious since the lifting of some restrictions and many have yet to go out for any social occasion.

“It has been scientifically proven that the wearing of masks can prevent the virus being passed from one person to another and this has given many disabled people some reassurance when going out, whether for leisure or work.

“It appears that ‘following the science’ is no longer government policy and it is now ‘a certain amount of deaths is acceptable’.”

He added: “We all want life to return to some sort of normality, but it feels that the current way forward is a gamble where dice have been thrown and the risk is disabled people’s lives.”

Dominic Ellison, chief executive of [West of England Centre for Inclusive Living](https://wecil.co.uk/), said the UK government was again “rushing headlong into a populist action without consideration to the implications for disabled people”.

He said: “Everyone, disabled people included, wants to see society open up once more, but to abandon all protections in time to meet an arbitrary date is utterly reckless.

“To make it a matter of personal choice whether individuals continue to take simple precautions to protect others removes all aspects of choice for many disabled and clinically vulnerable people – opening society up for non-disabled people and confining disabled people to their second-class shielded lives, without the legal protections and support for their shielding.”

He added: “We implore the government to make good on its previous commitments to engage with disabled people’s organisations in designing a safer and inclusive route out of lockdown as we reorganise to live with the continued threat of COVID-19.”

Svetlana Kotova, director of campaigns and justice at [Inclusion London](https://www.inclusionlondon.org.uk/), said the government announcement had been “a shock” to many disabled people and would “put many people at risk, including millions of clinically vulnerable people”.

She said the lives of disabled people and other marginalised groups were being treated as “acceptable collateral damage in exchange for the roadmap to freedom”.

She said: “Although the vaccination programme has been successful, there are still many people, including younger disabled people, who have not been fully vaccinated.

“Lifting all restrictions, when COVID cases are rising so fast, will mean those younger disabled people will be forced to go back into work, others will be exposed to higher risks of contracting COVID-19 and many people will be exposed to the risk of long COVID.

“Some people medically cannot get vaccinated, others that are immunocompromised may not benefit as much as others from the available vaccination options.

“Lifting all restrictions without acknowledging extra difficulties some disabled people may face and providing support is wrong. It risks excluding and isolating people further.”

Professor Peter Beresford, co-chair of [Shaping Our Lives](https://www.shapingourlives.org.uk/), said the government’s response throughout the pandemic had been dominated by political concerns, the need to protect the economy and minimalizing state intervention, and had focused on “individual responsibility”.

He said: “The results of this approach have been cataclysmic in terms of death rate and suffering, public cost and economic loss.

“The latest decision to go ahead with the ending of all restrictions in the context of greatly rising infection rates and an incomplete vaccination programme denotes the same appalling thinking and the possibility of even more unquantifiable risks and damage.”

He added: “We are all, especially the most exposed, at the mercy of the most irresponsible political leaders in modern UK history.”

Kamran Mallick, chief executive of [Disability Rights UK](https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/), said the government’s strategy “effectively reframes the disease as a post-vaccine slight sniffle”, when this was “unequivocally not the case”.

He said: “Disabled people, and people with compromised immune systems, those formerly known as clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV) people, will be faced with the choice of shielding under their own determination with no support, or facing increased risk of infection by going out in wider society.

“The government has once again dismissed the lives and voices of disabled people with plans for the reckless removing of safety measures.

“We have learnt that for the vast majority of people, it is no hardship to distance in public spaces, and to wear a mask, a practice which in many Asian countries is standard during non-pandemic times.

“These planned moves look and feel very much like people-pleasing, with no thought to those who stand to lose the most if they contract a virus which is still very much present in our midst.”

DR UK said it was seeking “urgent clarification” from the education secretary on how schools will be able to safeguard CEV pupils – particularly those in mainstream schools – without harming their education, [after he announced](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/covid-restrictions-in-education-settings-to-end-at-step-4) that requiring entire classes to isolate if a single pupil in that class tests positive for COVID-19 would end from the start of the autumn term.

Linda Burnip, co-founder of [Disabled People Against Cuts](https://dpac.uk.net/), said: “What some are calling ‘freedom day’ will for many disabled people mean many more months locked inside their homes, trying to remain safe from COVID.

“While the number of cases continues to rise steeply around the country, to suddenly end the lockdown and remove all safety precautions seems particularly stupid – even for the Tories.”

She said a key concern was for disabled workers who may now be forced back into workplaces with no protection in place.

[The Disability Union](https://disabilityunion.co.uk/), whose members are disabled people and carers, said the prime minister’s remarks and plans had done nothing to allay disabled people’s concerns, and it called on the government to engage in dialogue with disabled people and carers.

A union spokesperson said: “For too long, disabled people and carers have come to the conclusion that they must be collateral damage as the system seems to have disregarded their concerns and their voices.”

Disabled campaigner [Esther Leighton](https://twitter.com/Esther_Leighton) said the government’s announcement would mean that “people at the most risk need to have even more limited lives, without the support of government schemes to support that, while those who are at least risk enjoy even more relaxation of the rules”.

She said: “It will particularly increase risk for people who need assistance from others.

“Mask exemptions have always been there, and must remain, but to say that others in public spaces don’t need to wear them puts some people’s discomfort above the freedom, well-being and health of others.

“It surprises me that anyone, who is not exempt, cares so much about masks that they are willing to increase risk to others, and the wider country, by not wearing one.”

Fellow disabled campaigner [Natalya Dell](https://twitter.com/natalyadell) was another to describe the government’s plans as “reckless”.

She said: “I am a deaf person who can’t lipread or hear masked speakers.

“I also struggle to wear a mask myself for long due to it affecting my vision, which worsens my vertigo.

“However, I have worn a mask inside buildings and minimised how often I leave my house for the last 16 months, because I don’t want to put myself or others at risk.

“I am tired of deaf people being used as an excuse for removing mask mandates by people who clearly haven’t cared and will continue not to care about the rights and needs of deaf and hard of hearing people in general.”

A spokesperson for [Bristol Reclaiming Independent Living (BRIL)](https://bril.uk/) said that for Javid to say it would no longer be necessary to work from home and to remove legal requirements on businesses showed “a total disregard for the rights and wellbeing of disabled and chronically ill people and their families”.

The BRIL spokesperson added: “The government’s priorities are clearly not the safety or futures of our communities, but only the profit margins of private firms run by their friends.

“Javid admits that COVID cases will rise because of government actions, but they seem not to care.

“There is no thought about the implications for clinically vulnerable people, or the many thousands of newly disabled people with long COVID.”

Waltraud Pospischil, a BRIL member, said: “We need to make sure that after lifting restrictions, the UK recognises the contributions made from disabled people, those who need flexibility to work from home, and doesn’t put work- and pay-related pressure on those who would rather continue to shield, or avoid social contact as their choice to look after their health.”

Another BRIL member, Val Stansfield, said: “I am worried that 19 July is too much too soon.

“Although many are double- or single-jabbed, everyone can still catch or transmit it.

“We are told people will become ill and die, the Delta variant is rife, but we must learn to live with it. Live yes, but not give it free range to run riot.”

**8 July 2021**

**Pandemic exclusion led to confusion and fear, says ground-breaking Welsh report**

The levels of exclusion experienced by disabled people in Wales during the pandemic led many to report confusion, helplessness, abandonment, isolation, fear and frustration, according to a ground-breaking, disabled-led report.

The [Locked Out report](https://gov.wales/locked-out-liberating-disabled-peoples-lives-and-rights-wales-beyond-covid-19)\*, commissioned by the Welsh government, details how the pandemic led to medical discrimination, restricted access to public services and social support, exclusion from public spaces and public life, restrictions on independent living and an erosion of basic human rights.

The report, which was controlled and co-produced by disabled people, concludes that the evidence it collected over the last year suggests that disabled people feel their lives are “less valued” in Welsh society.

This is particularly reflected in their experiences of discrimination and exclusion when they tried to access public services during the pandemic, says the report.

It describes disabled people being unable to access public transport, maternity services, GP surgeries, emergency telephone helplines and pandemic-related public information.

The report also highlights how official statistics showed that 68 per cent of COVID-related deaths were of disabled people, even higher than [the 58 per cent figure in England](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/government-and-nhs-discrimination-linked-to-covid-deaths-of-disabled-people/).

But the report says there was “nothing inevitable about this statistic”.

Instead, it describes how social factors including discrimination, poor housing, poverty, employment status, institutionalisation, lack of personal protective equipment (PPE), “poor and patchy services” and “inaccessible and confusing public information” contributed “significantly” to this figure being so high.

The report concludes: “Official statistics expose how disabled people in Wales bore the brunt of COVID-19 deaths: a fact we note that has barely been commented upon by national or regional media.

“This is a ‘silence’ that suggests a certain acceptance of a degree of inevitability among politicians, the media and the public, which we do not and cannot accept, because to do so would make us complicit with the implied conclusion that disabled people’s lives are more expendable.”

The report says that many disabled people believed that the problems they faced during the pandemic were caused not by the Welsh government, but by the “attitudes, inactions and exclusionary behaviour” of other public agencies that it funds.

They believed the Welsh government had been “largely accessible and had reacted quickly and appropriately to problems raised”, but that this had contrasted with the treatment of disabled people by some local authorities.

The report argues that “transgressions of disabled people’s human rights” during the pandemic were “largely a consequence of the abandonment of a social model of disability, the reflex re-adoption of a discredited medical model and the associated de-valuation of disabled people”.

It also points to evidence reported by the Equality and Human Rights Commission of “medical discrimination” experienced by disabled people during the pandemic, and it calls on the Welsh government to introduce mandatory training for the Welsh NHS, which would be co-developed and co-delivered with Welsh disabled people’s organisations.

The report calls on the Welsh government to set up a national inquiry into the factors that caused the disproportionate death rates of different groups during the pandemic, including disabled people.

And it calls on the UK government to conduct a similar inquiry.

Among its many other recommendations, the report says the Welsh government should “urgently prioritise” its pledge to incorporate the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) into Welsh law.

It also calls on the Welsh government to appoint its first minister for disabled people, and, eventually, a disabled people’s commissioner in Wales.

And it suggests a national campaign to improve the public understanding of ableism in Welsh society and for the history of the disability rights movement, including the development of the social model, to be integrated into the national curriculum in Wales.

The inquiry was commissioned by the Welsh government’s Disability Equality Forum after it heard how disabled people were being negatively affected by the pandemic.

Both the inquiry’s chair, Dr Debbie Foster, professor of employment relations and diversity at Cardiff University’s Cardiff Business School, who wrote the report, and the chair of the inquiry’s steering group, Rhian Davies, chief executive of [Disability Wales](https://www.disabilitywales.org/home/), are disabled people.

Among other areas where the pandemic impacted on disabled people, the report says many encountered new barriers to travel, “restricting mobility and increasing isolation”, with disabled people becoming “increasingly reliant on expensive private taxi services”.

They also fell disproportionately behind with household bills because of their “disadvantaged position in the labour market, poor housing and increased costs associated with being disabled”.

It also describes the “multiple ways” in which disabled people were “physically and practically excluded” during the pandemic and “psychologically and emotionally marginalised in everyday public spaces and life”, including through the failure to pay sufficient attention to accessibility as public spaces in towns and cities were reorganised.

In its [response to the report](https://gov.wales/locked-out-liberating-disabled-peoples-lives-and-rights-wales-beyond-covid-19-welsh-governments), the Welsh government says the document “acutely highlights the toll the pandemic has placed on disabled people, exacerbating inequalities”.

Jane Hutt, the social justice minister, who commissioned the report, said the government had “already put in place many of the key building blocks to address inequalities in these areas”.

She said that incorporating UNCRPD into Welsh law “represents a significant commitment to supporting and improving the lives of disabled people”, while a minister-led taskforce would “address the inequalities highlighted by the report and oversee the implementation of actions”.

She added: “In all of the areas highlighted in the report we undertake to consider further the evidence presented, and to engage in meaningful debate about how best to mitigate harmful impacts on disabled people.”

She said the pandemic meant that the government’s [Action on Disability independent living framework](https://gov.wales/action-disability-right-independent-living-press-release), published in September 2019, would now need to be reviewed.

Disability Wales welcomed the report and the Welsh government’s commitment to setting up a minister-led taskforce.

It said this would be “vital to identifying solutions that tackle rather than perpetuate inequality as well as challenging cultural assumptions about disabled people being needy and vulnerable rather than active citizens with rights”.

It said the report showed how “legislation and policy enacted to secure the rights of disabled people failed to do so, even when needed most”.

Rhian Davies said: “In Wales we can be rightly proud of producing such a compelling report.

“Believed to be the first of its kind commissioned and published by a national government in the UK, as well as being evidence led, Locked Out was co-produced with disabled people’s organisations.

“It highlights ‘the deep-rooted inequalities’ exposed by the pandemic that disabled people in Wales will have experienced first-hand.”

She said the report’s influence was “already apparent”, with the Welsh government accepting that the social model of disability “should be the organising principle for action”, agreeing to set up the taskforce, and confirming its intention to incorporate UNCRPD into Welsh law.

She said: “Disability Wales looks forward to playing a full and active part at this significant moment in progressing disability rights and equality in Wales.”

*\*Locked Out: Liberating Disabled People’s Lives and Rights in Wales beyond COVID-19*

**8 July 2021**

**Abortion law stereotypes, demeans and discriminates against disabled people, court hears**

A disabled campaigner was in the high court this week to hear her legal team argue that it was “morally and ethically wrong”, and discriminatory, to allow disabled fetuses to be aborted up until the moment of birth.

Heidi Crowter, from Coventry, is one of three claimants asking the high court to rule that a key section of the 1967 Abortion Act is incompatible with the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

Crowter, who has Down’s syndrome, and whose team has so far [crowd-funded more than £100,000](https://www.crowdjustice.com/case/downrightdiscrimination/) for the legal case, is joined in the action by two-year-old Aidan Lea-Wilson, who also has Down’s syndrome, and his mother Máire, from Brentford.

The court heard how Lea-Wilson was pressured to have an abortion – and felt criticised, attacked and undermined when she said she did not want one – after a 34-week scan revealed that Aidan had Down’s syndrome.

The three claimants argue that to allow a fetus with Down’s syndrome to be aborted after the 24-week limit for non-disabled fetuses was unlawful discrimination and “stereotypes and demeans” disabled people.

They are bringing the case against health and social care secretary Sajid Javid.

Jason Coppel, barrister for the claimants, told the court this week of Crowter’s lengthy campaign to change the law.

He said: “Today is the latest stage of a campaign she has been engaged in to change attitudes towards people with Down’s syndrome and in particular a campaign for the removal of what she regards as the discriminatory provision of the 1967 act.”

He said that a diagnosis of Down’s syndrome was the most common reason for fetuses to be aborted after 24 weeks.

Coppel told the court that Heidi Crowter and Aidan Lea-Wilson had been among the minority of fetuses diagnosed with Down’s syndrome who were not aborted and that they both now live “happy and fulfilled lives, as do – the evidence shows – the great majority of people with Down’s syndrome”.

He said the claimants believed it was “morally and ethically wrong to destroy a human life on the grounds of disability”.

And he said that the part of the Abortion Act which allows for later termination of fetuses likely to be born “seriously handicapped” (in the words of the legislation) – [section 1 (1) (d)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1967/87/section/1) – was “discriminatory and demeaning”.

The three claimants also want the court to declare that Down’s syndrome should not be considered a “serious handicap” under the act.

The court heard that about 90 per cent of fetuses diagnosed with Down’s syndrome in Britain are aborted.

Coppel told the court that the UN’s committee on the rights of persons with disabilities had [called on the UK government four years ago](http://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=6QkG1d%2fPPRiCAqhKb7yhspCUnZhK1jU66fLQJyHIkqMIT3RDaLiqzhH8tVNxhro6S657eVNwuqlzu0xvsQUehREyYEQD%2bldQaLP31QDpRcmG35KYFtgGyAN%2baB7cyky7) to change its abortion law, arguing that it was “concerned about perceptions in society that stigmatize persons with disabilities as living a life of less value than that of others and about the termination of pregnancy at any stage on the basis of fetal impairment”.

He also pointed to [a report by the UN’s special rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities](https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/43/41), who said in December 2019 that such abortion policies “aggravate” the message that disabled people “ought not to have been born”.

But Lord Justice Singh, one of the two high court judges hearing the case, alongside Mrs Justice Lieven, expressed concerns about some of Coppel’s arguments.

He said: “Isn’t it obvious that this is about giving women a choice – whether they continue with their pregnancy or not?”

He said there was “very powerful evidence” of women “who desperately want to have a baby, they learn very late in their pregnancy of a severe disability and they do the best that they can do.

“Sometimes, the evidence suggests, out of love for the baby they are carrying, they choose to exercise the right given by parliament [to have an abortion after 24 weeks].

“I am not sure one can say she should have just allowed the fetus to develop… as if that is all there is to it… when a woman who wants to have a child very late in pregnancy after the 24 weeks threshold learns that this child is going to have very severe disability.”

He said it was not a “fanciful” example to suggest that a disabled baby “may suffer pain in the first days, weeks or perhaps months of life”.

He added: “If the law is incompatible with ECHR, presumably parliament would have to deny that woman that choice in those circumstances.

“Is that right? Is that then going to be the consequence?”

Sir James Eadie, for the government, later told the court: “The question this case throws up is where should society set the limits on criminalising women for the choices that they make in deciding whether or not to have an abortion.

“That question… raises profound social, moral and ethical questions, weighing a variety of different rights, interests and indeed beliefs.”

He said the legislation was “fundamentally about the choices – desperate and difficult choices in many cases – that confront pregnant women” and that there was “no negative stereotyping of the disabled” involved.

He said that any decision by a pregnant woman to abort a disabled fetus “says nothing about their views about disability generally”.

Sir James added: “No-one denies, or can possibly deny… particularly those of us who had the privilege of meeting Heidi yesterday… [that people with Down’s syndrome] can and do lead healthy, fulfilling lives, bringing joy to those around them.

“But equally… there are serious potential lifelong consequences that come with that condition in varying forms.

“Not every family is well-equipped to deal with those consequences emotionally or otherwise.”

The case ended yesterday (Wednesday), with the second day of the hearing held completely remotely after someone connected with the court or the case reported a positive COVID test.

Lord Justice Singh, in announcing that judgement would be reserved to a future date, said it was a “very important and difficult case”.

**8 July 2021**

**DWP silence over figures suggesting 50 deaths inquiries in just six months**

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has refused to explain why it appears to have launched more than 50 secret reviews into the deaths of benefit claimants in just the first six months of this year.

This would be a huge increase on recent years, which have previously seen an average of less than 30 completed reviews a year.

Figures [released by the department](https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-06-23/21211) in response to a parliamentary question showed it had started 97 internal process reviews (IPRs) into the deaths of claimants in the two years since July 2019.

But [figures previously released to Disability News Service (DNS)](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/dwp-admits-carrying-out-more-than-175-secret-reviews-into-benefit-deaths-in-nine-years/) by DWP have shown that it completed 40 IPRs in the 2019 calendar year and another 20 in 2020, as well as just 17 in 2016, 29 in 2017 and 18 in 2018.

Although these new figures do not allow for exact calculations, they do suggest that DWP probably started about 20 IPRs in the second half of 2019, 20 across the whole of 2020 and may have begun more than 50 so far in 2021.

But when asked why the number of IPRs appeared to have rocketed in the first six months of 2021, a DWP spokesperson refused to offer any explanation.

He also declined to comment on whether the increase could have been due to a change of policy on IPRs, an increase in the number of deaths of claimants linked to DWP’s actions, or DWP taking new steps to find out about more suicides and other deaths of claimants so that it could investigate them through IPRs.

The new figures were released by Justin Tomlinson, the minister for disabled people, to Labour’s shadow work and pensions secretary, Jonathan Reynolds.

Reynolds told DNS: “The sharp increase in internal process reviews is deeply troubling. Behind every number is a family who deserve answers.

“The government’s cruel assessment processes are having devastating consequences and questions need to be answered.

“How many reviews does it take before lessons are learnt and disabled people are treated with the respect and dignity they deserve?”

Last December, [DNS reported](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/call-for-action-over-scandal-of-benefit-claimant-suicides-ignored-by-dwp/) how new analysis suggested that DWP was failing to investigate the suicides of hundreds of benefit claimants every year, despite the vital lessons it could learn from such inquiries.

Labour’s Debbie Abrahams, who has led parliamentary efforts to hold DWP to account on deaths linked to its actions, told work and pensions secretary Therese Coffey this week that she believed “we are really only scratching the surface of understanding both the scale and the causes” of such deaths.

She called on Coffey again to explain why she was refusing to set up an independent inquiry into deaths linked to DWP’s actions.

Coffey [told the Commons work and pensions committee](https://www.parliamentlive.tv/Event/Index/7eabbf11-8486-484c-a107-1b4ee8945f96) this week (watch *from 10.47am onwards*) that inquests provided an independent process to investigate such deaths.

And when pushed again by Abrahams over the need for an inquiry, she said: I don’t feel the need to undertake that.”

Asked if she thought “everything is fine in terms of the process”, Coffey said: “We are motivated as a department to help improve the quality of life.

“It’s a key feature of our departmental plan.”

But when Coffey said DWP was continuing to make improvements, for example to the benefit assessment process, Abrahams highlighted the DWP barrister [who told last month’s high court hearing](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/jodey-whiting-dwp-tells-high-court-her-death-was-isolated-case-and-not-sign-of-systemic-failure-despite-years-of-evidence/) into the call for a second inquest into the death of Jodey Whiting that her suicide had not been part of a “systemic” DWP problem.

Abrahams said: “Your lawyer said in the high court two weeks ago: ‘There are no issues.’ Do you not see the absolute contradiction?”

Coffey replied: “No, I don’t. I suggest that we want to continue to make continuous improvements, like any process.”

Her response comes despite DWP saying on its own website that it has set up a [serious case panel](https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/dwp-serious-case-panel), which first met in September 2019, to make recommendations “to address systemic issues identified from serious cases to prevent similar cases occurring in the future”.

Only last week, [DNS reported](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/dwps-excruciating-pip-assessment-torture-helped-cause-my-sons-suicide-says-disabled-mum/) how a young disabled man took his own life in June 2019, just weeks after DWP slashed his benefits, despite being warned he was severely depressed, malnourished, could not face leaving his flat, and had made several suicide attempts.

Coffey’s claim of “continuous improvements” comes despite nearly a decade of [high-profile tragedies](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/mother-of-fit-for-work-victim-calls-for-ministers-to-face-criminal-charges/)[, legal cases](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/victory-in-first-stage-of-fitness-for-work-court-case/), [campaigns](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/scottish-police-assessing-possible-investigation-into-ids-and-grayling/), [research](https://www.centreforwelfarereform.org/uploads/attachment/409/the-peoples-review-of-the-wca.pdf), [protests](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/carpet-of-flowers-turns-parliament-square-into-memorial-to-wca-victims/), [television exposés](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2012/jul/27/disability-benefit-assessors-film), [parliamentary debates](https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmhansrd/cm130117/debtext/130117-0002.htm#13011761000001), and [reports by MPs](https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmworpen/814/81402.htm) and [other organisations](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/woman-killed-herself-after-being-stripped-of-disability-benefit-says-watchdog/) into deaths linked to the department’s “fitness for work” regime.

Despite not commenting on the new IPR figures, DWP did state this week that it had taken steps to improve how it learned from serious cases, including increasing the size of its investigation team, improving what it described as the “visibility” of IPRs, and setting up the serious case panel.

It said that IPRs were intended to examine whether processes were followed correctly and how it could learn from the deaths of claimants.

*\*The following organisations are among those that could be able to offer support if you have been affected by the issues raised in this article:*[*Samaritans*](https://www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/contact-samaritan/)*,* [*Papyrus*](https://papyrus-uk.org/hopelineuk/)*,* [*Mind*](https://www.mind.org.uk/need-urgent-help/using-this-tool)*,* [*SOS Silence of Suicide*](https://sossilenceofsuicide.org/) *and* [*Rethink*](https://www.rethink.org/aboutus/what-we-do/advice-and-information-service/get-help-now/)

**8 July 2021**

**‘Increasing dismay’ of deaf film-makers over control of BSL broadcasting trust**

A group of deaf film-makers say they are “increasingly dismayed” by a charity’s failure to ensure it is run by users of British Sign Language (BSL), even though it spends about £2 million every year commissioning television programmes in BSL.

They say the leadership of the [British Sign Language Broadcasting Trust (BSLBT)](https://www.bslzone.co.uk/about) is mostly hearing people who do not use BSL.

The trust’s chief executive and head of commissioning are both hearing, and neither are fluent in BSL, while the chair and four of the other eight board members are hearing.

The BSLBT: Sign for Change campaign is calling on the trust to act on the lack of BSL-users in senior roles.

The trust was set up in 2008 to offer a way for commercial broadcasters to meet their [regulatory requirements](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv-radio-and-on-demand/broadcast-codes/tv-access-services) to provide BSL content on their channels\*.

The campaign has [set up an online petition](https://www.change.org/p/british-sign-language-broadcasting-trust-bslbt-sign-for-change-7ca6c0e5-23a0-479c-9847-c05f0cae0b2b?utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=custom_url&recruited_by_id=680f0920-b355-11eb-86ba-a128b462236c) that calls on the trust to “move with the times, and fall into line with other media organisations and broadcasters serving minorities and minority languages”.

It follows concerns raised by a collective of deaf film-makers, programme-makers, writers, directors and screen talent working in deaf media, who have shared their concerns about the way the trust is run with the communications watchdog Ofcom.

A third piece of campaigning pressure has come through an unpublished survey of deaf professionals working behind the camera in television and film, which found only 11 per cent agreed that the trust had “appropriate Deaf leadership” throughout the organisation.

The deaf media professionals behind the Sign for Change campaign told Disability News Service (DNS) this week that the trust’s plans for the next three years will see its output “dominated by hearing-led companies employing a handful of deaf staff”.

They say that the number of programme-makers whose first language is BSL, and those from a diverse background, is already “vanishingly small”.

They also say that nearly all BSLBT content is commissioned for its “flagship” 8am slot on Film4, which means, they say, that there is no swearing, depiction of alcohol, drug use or nudity, or treatment of hard-hitting issues.

They said that this “infantilises and demeans the deaf audience”.

They want Ofcom to review the way the charity is run.

They added: “The charity does not need to be a charity, or even to exist at all.

“It should be replaced by a more streamlined organisation focused on understanding what deaf audiences want, and giving a more diverse range of film-makers and programme-makers the opportunity to develop a career in acting, writing, directing and producing.”

They say there is “simply no accountability” and so they are “speaking out for radical change”.

And they criticised the trust for failing to engage with the petition, with the survey, and with the concerns of deaf programme-makers and film-makers.

They added: “It is as though they are hoping this issue will go away. It will not go away.”

The Ofcom letter, which was sent separately to the Sign for Change campaign, is also strongly critical of the trust’s commissioning strategy.

It says the trust runs a near-monopoly in the provision of BSL content in the UK, so there is “simply nowhere else for deaf creatives to go for sign-presented work”.

Award-winning Deaf writer-director Ted Evans, who runs [Defeye Films](https://www.defeyefilms.co.uk/), was one of those behind the letter to Ofcom.

He also supports the Sign for Change campaign and signed its petition, and he says it is just “common sense” that “anyone who has direct influence over deaf issues and/or sign language should be able to sign”.

But Evans, [who was named by Creative England](https://www.creativeengland.co.uk/ce50/) in 2018 in its list of 50 of the country’s most exciting creative talents, has broader concerns about the trust.

He is particularly concerned that both BBC See Hear and BSLBT broadcast pre-watershed programmes at 8am, which “limits what deaf filmmakers get to produce and what deaf audiences get to watch at home”.

He said: “At a time when our community, and society generally, is going through great change, deaf TV has remained stale and outdated.

“The BSLBT’s current guidelines stunt progress, infantilise deaf people and influence how we are represented from within the community.”

Evans said that many deaf people have expressed dissatisfaction with the content produced by the trust, and the next generation “don’t seem to be engaging with deaf TV in its current format”.

He added: “I think competition is healthy and Ofcom should explore other alternatives if BSLBT are unable to meet the demands of a diverse, modern deaf audience.”

Further evidence of concerns has come from BSL-user Erika Jones, who has worked as an assistant producer for the BBC since 2014,and who compiled a detailed report after surveying deaf professionals working behind the camera in television and film, believed to be the first such report of its kind.

Of those who responded, only nine per cent were happy with how BSLBT was run, with only 11 per cent agreeing that it had “appropriate Deaf leadership” throughout the organisation.

One of the respondents, quoted in her Unmuted report, said: “They need to go back to the drawing board and be led by a person who embraces Sign Language – it is BSL BT after all!”

Tim Patterson, the trust’s chair, told DNS this week that the charity had the budget to commission only 25 to 30 programmes a year and so tried to provide a broad range of programmes “so that we have something to offer to everyone”.

He said the trust offered “a fantastic selection of programmes which demonstrate the breadth and depth of Deaf culture and language”.

He agreed that it was “very frustrating” that the Film4 slot was at 8am, and he said the trust constantly seeks “better slots”, while it works “really hard to push the boundaries and to cover challenging stories and issues in very inventive ways”.

Another broadcasting slot, on Together TV, was much lower-profile and almost none of that channel’s programmes are subtitled, he said.

He added: “We do commission most of our content for 0800.

“We reject, however, that this infantilises or demeans the deaf audience and the range of content that we offer is evidence of this.”

Patterson agreed that the trust “should have put more resource and effort into qualitative research carried out face-to-face in BSL sooner”, but he said it would soon begin to do this regularly.

He said the panel for his own appointment as chair last year was 50 per cent Deaf and 50 per cent hearing, and his appointment was unanimously approved by the board, while eight of the trust’s 15 staff are Deaf BSL-users, including its head of operations, its communications manager, and its two executive producers.

He said he saw a “united team of Deaf and Hearing people”, while hearing members of the team take BSL classes.

Patterson said that all the trust’s programmes come through an open commissioning round and the proposal for every programme idea must come from a Deaf person, although he said his “mind is definitely not closed” on reviewing the commissioning criteria, while a new commissioning advisory panel was wholly filled by fluent BSL-users, all but one of whom are Deaf.

He said: “We work with television production companies owned and run by both Deaf and hearing people.

“Each company is very different and so they offer different opportunities and experiences for Deaf people to learn and develop new skills as well as to bring their experiences and share their perspectives with other programme-makers.”

He said: “Deaf people can, and do, submit ideas to a number of different funding bodies. For example, the BBC, the British Film Institute.”

Patterson said the trust was “open to change” and its discussions about the issues that have been raised have been “lively and fruitful” and he was “looking forward to pursuing them”.

But he said that any structural reforms were a matter for Ofcom and the broadcasters that fund the trust, although BSLBT would be “very happy” to take part in any discussions.

He also said that the trust had “written to the petition on more than one occasion seeking dialogue and have had no response.

“The board has prepared [an open letter](https://www.bslzone.co.uk/latest/open-letter-deaf-tv-programme-makers-from-bslbt-board) which will be published in BSL and English on our website shortly.”

Ofcom said it had received the letter from Ted Evans and his fellow campaigners and was “looking into the matters raised”.

*\*BSLBT is currently the only provider approved by Ofcom for this content, other than broadcasters providing their own programmes in BSL*

**8 July 2021**

**Channel 4 Tokyo coverage ‘is vital chance to put disability back in the mainstream’**

Channel 4’s coverage of this summer’s Paralympics in Tokyo will be a vital opportunity to put disabled people and disability back onto the mainstream agenda, according to one of its disabled presenters.

The broadcaster announced this week that more than 70 per cent of its presenting team will be disabled people – a record number for UK television – as it provides more than 300 hours of coverage on its main channel.

Some of the coverage will be presented from Tokyo, with some shows to be hosted in the UK.

Channel 4 said its plans for the games would be its most ambitious yet for a Paralympics, including dedicating its More 4 channel to team sports, and featuring 16 livestreams on its Paralympics micro-website.

Disabled presenters will include Ade Adepitan, who will present the highlights show, Arthur Williams, JJ Chalmers, Ed Jackson and Sophie Morgan, as well as Adam Hills, Alex Brooker and comedian and writer Rosie Jones on The Last Leg.

Disabled pundits offering expert sporting analysis will include Baroness [Tanni] Grey-Thompson, Steve Brown, Liam Malone, Danny Crates and Liz Johnson.

Channel 4 said its coverage of the Paralympics would be the most accessible ever, with Channel 4 and More 4 offering live subtitles, and parallel live coverage of the opening ceremony on 4Seven that will offer British Sign Language interpretation and audio description.

Most of the content on the Paralympics micro-website will also have subtitles, said Channel 4.

There will also be a series of disability-themed programmes in the build-up to the Paralympics, including Jonnie’s Blade Camp, a two-part documentary featuring two-time Paralympic gold medallist Jonnie Peacock; a one-off documentary featuring amputee racing driver and presenter Billy Monger training with British Paralympic stars; and a Come Dine with Me Paralympics special.

The channel will also broadcast Sophie’s Great Escape, a two-part documentary featuring disabled presenter Sophie Morgan testing alternative lifestyles as she travels on a modified three-wheeled motorbike from Cornwall to Scotland.

Morgan told Disability News Service (DNS) this week that it was a “really important time” for disabled people to be featuring in the mainstream, with “so many of us being forgotten” during the pandemic.

She said: “It gives us a chance to remind people that we are here and that in addition to the sporting efforts and achievements that we are going to see in the games it is a great time to remind people of the challenges that disabled people face, the many barriers that still exist in society, and the ways in which we fight to overcome them and will continue to do so.

“Every games carries with it another responsibility and I think this time, post-COVID, these games in particular need to remind people just how much disability needs to be thought about, not forgotten about as it usually is, not side-lined.”

She welcomed the announcement that more than 70 per cent of presenters would be disabled people and that Channel 4 was “once again taking the lead”, particularly in the wake of the failure of broadcasters to meet targets on off-screen representation of disabled people, as [reported last month](https://creativediversitynetwork.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Interim-Briefing-Report-on-Doubling-Disability.pdf) (PDF) by the Creative Diversity Network.

Morgan will be covering the swimming in Tokyo, reporting from the pool alongside retired three-time Paralympic gold medallist [Giles Long](https://twitter.com/gileslong?lang=en).

And she said her own show, Sophie’s Great Escape, would be a “step in the right direction” because it was “not necessarily about disability”.

Baroness Grey-Thompson, herself the winner of 11 Paralympic gold medals in athletics, who will be splitting her time between Channel 4 and BBC, will mostly be commentating on athletics but may also cover wider issues.

She told DNS: “We know that sport brings people together, especially when there are successful moments or British athletes are doing well.

“I think right now we need some cheering up and as we have seen with the Euros, sport is a great way to do that.

“The number of disabled people employed is very positive, although I am keen to see more disabled people employed in the media outside Paralympic sport.

“In the last couple of months, we have seen more disabled people in TV adverts, which again is a step forward, but it needs to be more natural and not a surprise when we do see it.”

**8 July 2021**

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