

## **DBC policy group update.**

The last meeting of the DBC Policy group was held at RNID on April 24<sup>th</sup>.

We discussed the following issues of concern.

### **1 – the Welfare Reform Bill**

There have been some positive changes during the passage of the Bill through the House of Lords, some of which have come about as a direct result of DBC lobbying. These include:

- Government amendments that have removed the power to sanction people from contracted employment service providers. This means that all sanctions under the ESA system will be handled by Job Centre Plus, therefore providing for more uniformity and consistency of decision making and a clearer appeals process.
- A Lords amendment that provides for the production of an annual report into the workings of the revised Personal Capability Assessment.
- Government amendments that provide greater definition as to what is meant by the term 'medical professional' under the Bill.
- Assurances that the revised PCA will allow for the combination of scores from mental and physical descriptors, allowing for a more holistic assessment of individuals.

A meeting between a delegation from DBC and the DWP team working on the Bill also took place in late March. Amongst the issues we raised were:

- Younger people. The Bill team told us that under the ESA regime, it is expected that 16 and 17 year olds will not have to undertake the same work-related interviews as older people, but will instead be referred to the Connexions service.
- The impact of the revised PCA on people being migrated from Incapacity Benefit or Income Support to ESA. DBC fears that many people currently claiming IB or IS will fail the new PCA and we are concerned that little is being done to protect them.
- We also got confirmation that the drafting of new regulations is unlikely to really start until January 2008.

Other issues raised at this meeting including the rules for couples claiming income-related ESA and the relationship between income-related ESA and Income Support on the grounds of Incapacity. The Bill team were unable to provide comprehensive answers to these concerns at the time, and we are awaiting a response. We fully expect to have regular contact with the civil servants responsible for writing the guidance for the Welfare Reform Act as the process continues.

## **2 - The Personal Capability Assessment**

DBC members continue to be active in detailed discussions regarding changes to the PCA. Our continued concerns about the consultation process and the quality of the end product were expressed. We remain very concerned that changes to the PCA will result in many people with disabilities or long-term health problems being left without key support.

## **3 – New telephone software for ‘cheats’**

We discussed the introduction of new telephone software that purportedly analyzes a caller’s voice for stress. This scheme is being piloted with benefits claimants in Harrow, North-West London. DBC will be following this issue closely.

## **4 – Call for evidence**

There was a call for evidence regarding the issue of current ‘exempt’ claimants of Incapacity Benefit being sent IB50 forms regarding their claim. Any organisations picking up on examples of this could send information to DBC.