

# Press portrayal of disabled people A rise in hostility fuelled by austerity?

August 2012

## Disability Rights UK



P L M R

POLITICAL LOBBYING  
& MEDIA RELATIONS

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## About us

**Disability Rights UK** was formed through a merger of Disability Alliance, Radar and the National Centre for Independent Living on 1 January 2012. We aim to be the largest national pan-disability organisation led by disabled people. Our vision is of a society where everyone with lived experience of disability or health conditions can participate equally as full citizens.

Disability Rights UK's objectives are:

- To mobilise disabled people's leadership and control;
- To achieve independent living in practice;
- To break the link between disability and poverty; and
- To put disability equality and human rights into practice across society.

We are grateful to PLMR Ltd for their support for the publication of this report.

## **PLMR**

Political Lobbying and Media Relations (PLMR) is a company of award winning, internationally renowned communications advisors providing Political Lobbying and Media Relations advice. Our work cuts across a range of sectors from Health & Social Care to charities, and from pharmaceuticals and biotech to the public sector. PLMR is headquartered in London and work across the UK and European Union. Ranked in PR Week's top 25 Health & Social Care consultancies, PLMR is the recipient of two Cannes Lions Awards and gives five per cent of its net profit to charity every year.

PLMR has a strong commitment to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and is proud to work with DRUK – a charity led, run and operated by disabled people promoting meaningful independent living for disabled people, leadership and control and helping to break the link between disability and poverty.

## **Summary of survey findings**

We were pleased to have received a strong response to our survey on disabled people's views of how our national press covers disability. Until we read the responses.

Disabled people increasingly feel the press is discriminating and contributing to disability hate crimes and abuse. Sadly, disabled people believe that the

situation is worsening and that the Government is sometimes behind negative portrayals of disabled people in order to justify cuts in essential support.

Disabled people believe that tougher sanctions from an independent regulator are required to reign in the discrimination and rise in abuse that disabled people suggest is being experienced as a result of an unfettered press that does not currently accurately report relevant issues and fails to redress inaccuracy when highlighted.

Some of the most concerning statistics from our survey are that:

- Over three quarters (77%) of respondents cited negative press articles about disabled people; only a third (35%) named a positive story;
- 94% suggested press portrayal of disability equality issues was 'unfair' and 76% said the volume of negativity was 'significantly increasing';
- 91% said there was a link between negative press portrayal of disabled people and rising hostility/hate crime;
- Four in ten (42%) specifically suggested the Government was responsible for rising press negativity and hostility towards disabled people.

### **Why we researched this issue: the background**

We recognise our own role as a disabled people's organisation in helping tackle stigma, harassment and hate crime.

We worked with the DWP Office for Disability Issues to produce guidance on the issue in 2012<sup>1</sup>. We also work closely with the Disability Hate Crime Network<sup>2</sup> and are very grateful to Stephen Brookes MBE for his work on this issue.

We conducted a short survey of disabled people's views in 2012 after being contacted by members and other individual disabled people directed at press coverage of disabled people and welfare issues in particular. Our report lists some of the specific press coverage and individual journalists' articles that have been of concern to disabled people. Our survey also asked about positive pieces and individual journalists and we also provide examples.

One of our former charities, Disability Alliance, took action against national newspapers for printing misleading, inaccurate and potentially discriminatory articles on welfare – which resulted in The Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday

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<sup>1</sup> See: <http://www.radar.org.uk/people-living-with-health-conditions-disability/disability-hate-crime/>

<sup>2</sup> See: <http://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/reportingdisabilityhatecrimelinks.htm>

respectively printing a letter of explanation and an apology on separate, recent occasions.

Recent research<sup>3</sup> revealed an increase in negative reporting of 'disability'. 'Bad News for Disabled People: How the newspapers are reporting disability' included the following findings:

- Disabled people feel threatened by the changes in the way disability is being reported and the increase in the 'politicisation' of press coverage;
- Articles focusing on disability benefit and fraud have increased and impact on the general public's views and perceptions of disability. Focus groups involved in the research claimed levels of fraud were far higher than the statistical evidence documents. Some people suggested up to 70% of benefit recipients were fraudulent and justified the claims by reference to newspaper articles.
- There has been an increase in the number of articles documenting the alleged 'burden' disabled people place on the economy; and
- There has been a significant increase in pejorative language to describe disabled people which 'reinforced the idea of disabled claimants as undeserving'.

In 2011, Scope also reported on 'hardening attitudes' towards disabled people<sup>4</sup>. Scope's findings showed:

- 56% of disabled people have experienced aggression and even violence from strangers because of a health condition and/or impairment;
- Half of disabled people say they experience discrimination on either a daily or weekly basis; and
- 37% said people's attitudes have got worse over the past year.

The Inclusion London research suggests this rising hostility is directly caused by press coverage of 'disability'. Following a letter from the more than 50 organisations involved in the Disability Benefits Consortium on the issue of rising hostility being linked to the Government welfare cuts agenda, Alice Maynard, Scope's Chair, said she 'now "thought harder" about going out at night in London'<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> The research was commissioned by Inclusion London and undertaken by Strathclyde Centre for Disability Research and the Glasgow Media Unit. See: [http://www.inclusionlondon.co.uk/domains/inclusionlondon.co.uk/local/media/downloads/bad\\_news\\_for\\_disabled\\_people\\_pdf.pdf](http://www.inclusionlondon.co.uk/domains/inclusionlondon.co.uk/local/media/downloads/bad_news_for_disabled_people_pdf.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> See: <http://www.scope.org.uk/news/attitudes-towards-disabled-people-survey>

<sup>5</sup> See: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/jul/24/welfare-policy-incites-hatred-disabled>

Jaspal Dhani, Chief Executive of the United Kingdom Disabled People's Council has also suggested that press coverage of the Government's welfare agenda and negative coverage of disabled people 'has led to an increase in hate crimes against disabled people'<sup>6</sup>.

The Government's equality watchdog, the Equality and Human Rights Commission has also reported on disability hate crime<sup>7</sup>. 'Hidden in plain sight' concluded that:

- 1.9 million disabled people were victims of crime in 2009/10. It is unclear how many crimes were motivated by harassment, but disabled people are more likely to be victims of crime than other citizens;
- A culture of disbelief exists around this issue; and
- The bigger challenge is to transform the way disabled people are viewed, valued and included in society.

There is a need for the press to ensure it accurately reports issues and is not complicit in spreading or contributing to harassment of disabled people. We would not tolerate racist, sexist or homophobic bullying in our national press and disability harassment should be no less a priority.

We are very concerned at the perceived (and possibly associated) rise in harassment, discrimination and hate crime committed towards disabled people. We are nervous that press coverage has contributed to the problem experienced by thousands of disabled people.

## **Survey respondents**

331 people responded to our survey. We actively sought the views of disabled people and 78.5% of respondents self-defined as disabled people, with a further 8.9% stating they were a family member or carer supporting a disabled person. 6.4% were non-disabled people and a further 6.1% defined themselves as 'other' (with some being both a disabled person and carer and others suggesting they would not qualify as a disabled person for the purpose of Equality Act definition, social care or benefits but did self-define as a disabled person).

The majority of respondents (64.1%) were people with physical/mobility impairments, but – due to people experiencing multiple impairments/health conditions, 54% also had long-term health conditions (examples including

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<sup>6</sup> See 3.

<sup>7</sup> See: <http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/legal-and-policy/inquiries-and-assessments/inquiry-into-disability-related-harassment/>

HIV/AIDS, MS and Parkinson's Disease). 39.6% had mental health problems, 19.5% had sensory impairments, 13.4% had learning disabilities/difficulties, 7.7% were on the autistic spectrum or experienced other neuro-diverse issues and 1.3% were people with facial disfigurement.

The majority of respondents were 45 years of age or older: 61.4% were 45-64 and 4.9% were over 65. 32.8% were 24-44 years of age and 0.9% were aged 16-24. No-one under 16 completed the survey.

65.2% of respondents were female and 33.2% male. We received a very high response (1.5%) from the transgender community.

Respondents came from across Great Britain with a strong geographic spread across England, Scotland and Wales. We received no responses from Northern Ireland. Just one respondent was not from GB (living in Canada).

## **Survey findings**

In designing our questions for disabled people, we were keen to explore if there were positive national newspapers or journalists as well as examine the view that negative press coverage was increasing.

We were also keen to identify the impact a negative press can have on disabled people's lives – and what the potential causes might be for any perceived increases in press hostility. We also sought to analyse people's views as to the solutions or means of better tackling press negativity.

The main survey questions are available in full in Appendix A.

The following section outlines the responses to the survey questions and includes recommendations for the new press regulatory body in particular.

## **Leveson and press reporting of disability**

The Leveson Inquiry has been examining the culture, practice and ethics of the press.

Disability Rights UK believes the press has a role to play in ensuring positive attitudes towards disabled people and preventing discrimination and hate crime against disabled people. Sadly, disabled people feel this is not

occurring at present, with too much of the press dedicated to a negative portrayal of disabled people being ‘fake’ for example<sup>8</sup>.

Given the nature of recent coverage, it is unsurprising that the vast majority of our respondents believed the Leveson Inquiry should have included press reporting of disability-related issues:

- 97% suggested this should have been a focus of the inquiry;
- just 1.4% were against the specific inclusion of disability-related issues;
- the remaining 1.5% didn’t know if this issue should be covered or not.

### **Positive press portrayal: the champions**

We did not only focus on the negative press coverage. We also asked people to highlight any positive newspapers, individual articles or journalists – or items which helped tackle discrimination against disabled people.

Many respondents could recall positive pieces:

- 35.4% of respondents could recall positive coverage;
- sadly, 42.9% could not recall any positive press coverage; and
- a large number (21.7%) were also unsure or did not know of positive articles.

Many respondents named individual newspapers or journalists.

The Guardian was named more than other newspapers for positive coverage of disabled people. Polly Toynbee in particular was cited for her work but the Guardian was named as a positive champion for disabled people by thirty different respondents.

In second place was the Daily Mail, which may surprise some respondents due to the newspaper’s overall rating as second worst for coverage (see page 8). This was largely due to the work of one journalist, Sonia Poulson, who was named by 13 individuals (3.9% of respondents). No male journalist was named for positive coverage.

Far more respondents gave examples of negative reporting but the top three positive newspapers were:

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<sup>8</sup> The Inclusion London research provides further evidence of this point:  
[http://www.inclusionlondon.co.uk/domains/inclusionlondon.co.uk/local/media/downloads/bad\\_news\\_for\\_disabled\\_people\\_pdf.pdf](http://www.inclusionlondon.co.uk/domains/inclusionlondon.co.uk/local/media/downloads/bad_news_for_disabled_people_pdf.pdf)

1. The Guardian – named by 9.1% of respondents
2. The Daily Mail – named by 6% of respondents
3. The Mirror and The Independent – named by 0.9%

Many respondents told us how the positive articles made them feel, in an open space provided on our survey. Some examples are provided below (referencing the newspaper involved if clearly stated):

“A ray of hope in dark times” – Guardian

“Sue Poulton's articles in the Daily Mail are brilliant and so are Polly Toynbee's in the Guardian”

“The Guardian is usually positive in its portrayal of disabled people”

“Made me feel proud to be disabled”

“They make me feel like someone understands”

“Made me feel as though someone was in my corner I am not fighting alone” – Mirror and Guardian

We only set out to focus on national newspapers in our survey, though respondents did name some local outlets. For positive stories the following non-national papers were also highlighted by individual respondents:

- Western Morning News
- Bolton News
- Sunderland Echo
- Derby Telegraph
- Glasgow Herald
- Northern Echo

### **Negative press portrayal: the culprits and issues**

Unfortunately, far more respondents were aware of poor coverage and gave many more examples of negative articles or features and were quite critical of certain national newspapers.

We asked if respondents could give examples of newspapers which negatively portrayed disabled people or printed articles which directly or indirectly discriminated against disabled people. The responses were alarming:

- 77.3% could identify negative coverage;
- Just 5% suggested they could think of no negative coverage; and

- almost one in five (17.7%) didn't know or were unsure.

Of the newspapers most cited, The Sun was named by more respondents in our survey than any other outlet with 88 individual mentions. The Daily Mail also received a substantial number of mentions (70), contradicting some of the positive mentions of Sonia Poulson as mentioned above (see page 7).

The 'worst five' for negative coverage were:

1. The Sun, named by 26.6% of all respondents
2. The Mail, highlighted by 21.2%
3. The Daily Telegraph, cited by 6%
4. The Express, named by 4.5%
5. The Mirror, suggested by 1.2% of respondents

Whilst no female journalist was named for negative coverage, and Richard Littlejohn was used as an example for negative articles by a few respondents, the journalist most named (by far more than any others) for particularly poor work was Rod Liddle. Many respondents cited his 26<sup>th</sup> January 2012 New Year message to Sun readers specifically which suggested ME was a 'newly invented disease' which made you 'a bit peaky for decades'<sup>9</sup>.

General comments from respondents about negative press coverage included:

- "Has made me feel suicidal - my illness makes life hardly worth living... but daily hounding in the press...feels there is no future, that I shouldn't ever go out on the rare good day, use my Blue Badge in case I am questioned, especially as the car is not mine but a friends" – Sun
- "I feel humiliated when the disabled are described en bloc as benefit cheats"
- "Made me feel unworthy" – Mail, Sun and Telegraph
- "Made me feel journalists regard disability accuracy less important than sport accuracy" – Mirror
- "Affected my mental health and my condition has worsened because I now hardly go out"
- "Made me feel like I was an outcast" – Sun
- "Makes me feel scared to go out" – Mail, Sun, Mirror
- "Made me feel like a second class citizen and as if all disabled people are seen as fraudulent 'scroungers'" – Sun

<sup>9</sup> The Sun does not seem to still have the article to view, but the 'Political Scrapbook' website has an image of the original article online at: <http://politicalscrapbook.net/2012/01/rod-liddle-disabled-the-sun/>

“Use of the word 'scrounger' is offensive and this type of article makes people distrustful of those with invisible/variable disabilities” – Mail  
“Victimised and harassed”  
“Ashamed to admit to people that I am in receipt of [DLA] in case they considered me as some sort of benefit scrounger. The newspapers continually refer to disabled people receiving any sort of benefit as frauds. It particularly affected me as I have an unseen disability.”  
“Makes me feel very depressed and inferior”  
“Made me feel sick and angry” – Mail  
“People around me have started treating me differently - like I've done something wrong”  
“Disgusted and degraded” – Sun  
“Made me feel like it was my fault... like I don't deserve to be alive because I'm a drain on my country and I don't deserve to be British”  
“Makes me feel like the world wants me gone” – Mail and Sun  
“Completely devalued and totally undermine my efforts to live as fully and independently as possible” – Express, Sun, Mail  
“Scared to go out in case some one said anything horrible to me” – Telegraph, Mail, Sun

Due to the large numbers of respondents who specifically cited Rod Liddle's New Year message in The Sun, some comments wholly relating to that article are provided below to demonstrate the level of offence and upset caused:

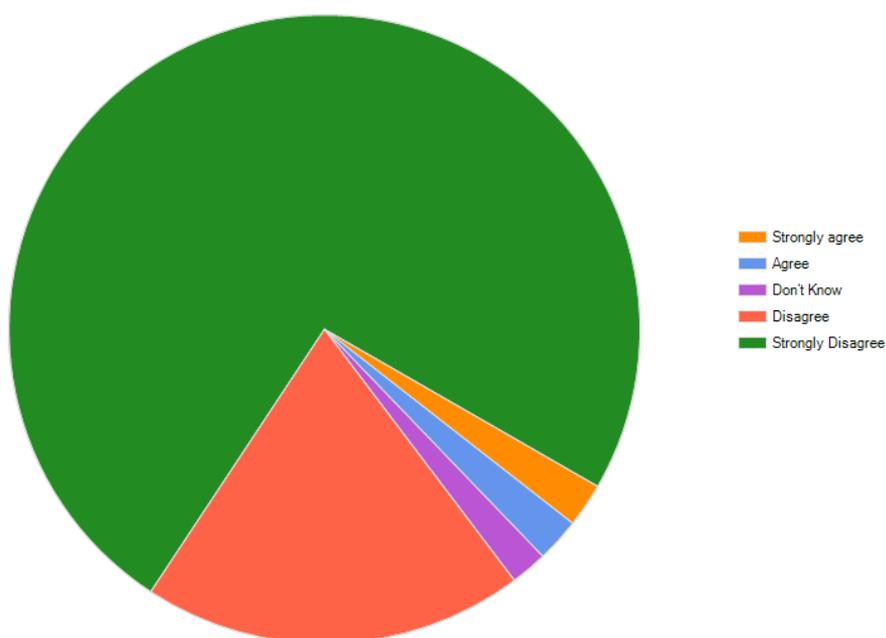
“Horrified and upset”  
“I found the ignorance and hatred expressed very offensive”  
“I was really upset that someone could actually make fun of...illnesses”  
“Completely incensed at the unfairness of singling out illness which are largely hidden. I have complained to the press complaints commission”  
“Feel scared...this is promoting hatred of disabled people and [articles like it] make people think they have the right to go up to a person in the street (who they don't even know) and challenge whether they are disabled or not, sometimes causing violence towards the disabled person. They also promote a view of all disabled people as being scroungers that are lazy and don't want to work when this is far from true, this makes me upset and angry”  
“Like a fraud and a burden, like he had taken awareness back 10 years”  
“I felt outraged, disgusted and found it hard to believe that in 2012 someone is allowed to get away with this...but it's as if as a disabled person, you don't really matter. I feel we are being pushed further and further down a hole and that society is going back to trying to hide us, make us go away and or kill us off!”  
“Made me feel that my everyday struggles were ridiculed and trivialised, and that my experience of pain and suffering were invalidated”

“I am now afraid of going out and of using my blue badge”

The only local paper cited for running an item which caused offence or negativity was the Gloucestershire Echo.

We also asked respondents if they thought the national press fairly portray welfare and general disability equality issues. The results suggested an overwhelming majority (93.6%) felt that our national press are deeply unfair in the coverage and portrayal of disability-related issues. This came despite the mentions of some positive coverage.

Do you think the national press fairly portray welfare and general disability equality issues?



Strongly agree: 2.3%  
Agree: 2.3%  
Don't Know: 1.9%  
Disagree: 19.5%  
Strongly Disagree: 74.1%

### **From bad news to worse?**

We also asked respondents if they felt national newspapers were getting better or worse with regards to reporting disability-related issues. Sadly, our findings confirmed the evidence gathered by the Inclusion London .... Disabled people believe they are getting a worse news-deal than ever before.

We asked: Do you believe that negative stories about disabled people are increasing or decreasing in the national press? Respondents replied:

- Significantly increasing: 76.5%
- Increasing somewhat: 17.2%
- About the same: 3.7%
- Decreasing somewhat: 1.5%
- Significantly decreasing: 0
- Don't know: 1.1%

The contribution the media collectively (and press in particular) can make to challenging discriminatory attitudes and informing the general public is one we take very seriously and fully support. However, it is very disheartening that disabled people feel so poorly covered by our national press and that the belief is the situation is worsening and contributing to negative attitudes and even hate crime.

One respondent wrote:

“I have suffered from a serious impairment for 50 years. I can honestly say that during my many years of facing discrimination and barriers obstacles and practical difficulties both in and out of the workplace I have never felt so threatened and intimidated as I do today”

It is essential to tackle disabled people's declining confidence in the national press.

### **Links between negative press and negative attitudes**

We were keen to explore if the rise in hostility, hardening attitudes and hate crime towards disabled people was linked to negative articles and headlines in the national press.

Many respondents believed there was a causal link between negative headlines seen by millions of people on newsstands or online and the rise in increase in hostility, negativity or discrimination towards disabled people.

- Yes, definitely: 77.5%
- Yes: 13.9%
- Don't know/unsure: 6.7%
- No: 1.9%
- Definitely not: 0

[If people answered 'yes' we asked:] Please describe any negative incident and what role you believe a newspaper may have played in causing it:

"After the 'free BMWs for disabled' headlines...my car was vandalised. I've not displayed Blue Badge since. I've been yelled at, sworn at and insulted, crutches kicked"

"Personally experienced verbal abuse in the street, after...articles calling disabled claimants Scroungers. I was follow by a group of youths in the street and called "A scrounging disabled bastard"."

"I've been spat at and called a scrounger when in the street"

"A relative, using her mobility vehicle in a supermarket, was sworn at and called a "fat scrounging cow" and heckled to "get a fucking job". The abuser clearly thought that mobility vehicle users are unemployed and fair game"

"If I go out with my cane I get accused of faking it"

"I have tunnel vision - Retinitis Pigmentosa - with cataracts removed and lens implants in both eyes...Two middle aged gentlemen decided I wasn't as blind as I looked and came very close up in their challenge - right in my face. Took a couple of weeks to deal with the anger...These newspapers should be ashamed of themselves"

"I have noticed that when I'm using the electric scooter I am looked at more, and certainly feel intimidated"

"Colleagues at work making derogatory comments about disabled people based on stories they read"

These examples suggest a rising tide of vilification of disabled people, spurred on at least in part by a national press which inaccurately reports issues and causes significant distress to disabled people.

We have attempted to tackle inaccurate stories – including the first example above (after the Mail on Sunday ran an article suggesting thousands of people had BMW Motability vehicles). One respondent believes this article caused someone to damage their adapted vehicle. But the response to the complaint was delivered weeks later and received no front page coverage (like the original, deeply inaccurate piece).

It is essential the new regulator is empowered to prevent further inaccurate coverage and ensures swifter, proportionate redress. Without such powers disabled people could experience even greater levels of abuse based on inaccurate press coverage of sensitive issues.

## Responsibility for negative press coverage

We also asked what disabled people felt caused negative press coverage – and the increase in negativity if respondents believed the situation was worsening<sup>10</sup>.

Our survey asked about the causes behind rising hostility. Some disabled people believed that the press are unchecked and able to dismiss challenges to inaccurate reporting. One respondent simply stated:

“No consequences to [the] demonisation of disabled people”.

Other respondents had more unusual views, including someone who wrote:

“MTV culture”

Unfortunately, they did not elucidate further.

The single most identified cause by disabled people and other respondents was a perceived link between negative press coverage and a Government agenda that requires a reduction in support and services for disabled people.

The strength of feeling that responsibility for the rising hostility to disabled people in our national press comes at least in part from Government was apparent from respondents’ statements, including the following examples:

- “The government are scape-goating”
- “Government spin and distortion”
- “We are an easy target for papers and other news media that support current government attacks on the welfare system trying to scare people into seeing it merely as a drain on resources, without pointing out that many people may have to depend on this provision at some stage. Reports never seem to mention that the majority of claimants have paid into the system for many years”
- “Rhetoric from the government about scroungers and benefit cheats”
- “The Government has to take responsibility for initiating this negative and prejudiced change towards disabled people”
- “Government propaganda”

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<sup>10</sup> We specifically asked: ‘Do you believe that negative stories about disabled people are increasing or decreasing in the national press?’ and if respondents stated it was increasing we asked: ‘And what do you think has caused the increase?’

- “Government policy”

239 people completed this question and most believed that responsibility for negativity in the national press was believed to be a direct result of Government activity. Whilst seven respondents named the Prime Minister directly, over 100 references to ‘Government’ were made in response to this question. Other key words in disabled people’s responses included ‘welfare’ and ‘reform’ – presumably due to the context of Welfare Reform legislation.

Of the responses to this question, the most commonly stipulated causes of a rise in negativity in the press towards disabled people were:

- ‘Government’ – 42.3%;
- ‘welfare’ – 16.3%;
- ‘reform’ – 12.1%;
- ‘DWP’ (unusually and very specifically) – 8%; and
- ‘cuts’ – 5%.

Many respondents clearly felt the press took their lead from Government and held them responsible for the negative reporting of welfare issues.

Millions of disabled people are supported by DWP in work, through out of work benefits and through impairment-related higher costs of living payments like Disability Living Allowance. However, a majority of respondents to this survey thought Government influenced press coverage which discriminated against disabled people.

We have attempted to tackle examples of unfortunate Government language which exacerbates negative press stereotyping. When the DWP Press Office referred to ending out of work benefit payments for about 280,000 disabled people<sup>11</sup> who have worked as making ‘the benefit system...fair to taxpayers’<sup>12</sup> we highlighted that the only people affected had worked and paid Income Tax and made National Insurance contributions. Disabled people are taxpayers and the system needs to be fair to all. Comments that make an unnecessary and inaccurate division between disabled people and taxpayers can feed misleading newspaper articles and broader prejudice/stereotyping.

The Office for Disability Issues (ODI) sits within DWP and we believe should play a more significant role in shaping DWP communications to ensure

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<sup>11</sup> From April 2012 disabled people in the Employment and Support Allowance Work-Related Activity Group have been affected by a 365 day time-limit to payments (backdated to April 2011 for people already in receipt of the benefit).

<sup>12</sup> For a copy of an article quoting DWP on this point please see:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2011/sep/21/terminally-ill-told-benefits-cut>

instances like this are not repeated. We worked with the ODI on hate crime guides<sup>13</sup> and are working together on the pan-government Disability Strategy.

We are a constructive organisation and aim to ensure the best results for disabled people and best use of limited public resources. We hope the Disability Strategy will ensure government aims for tackling discrimination and hate crime against disabled people is delivered. We view the nature of press coverage as crucial to delivering what the EHCR described as the 'societal challenge' of hate crime.

## **Tackling inaccurate press coverage: our recommendations**

Survey respondents held divergent views on how to tackle poor quality press coverage of disabled people. But there were issues on which respondents agreed, including the need to:

- provide adequate balance and redress for correcting inaccurate stories and articles;
- ensure swift action to tackle inaccurate, misleading or potentially discriminatory articles;
- regulate independently; and to
- allow group action against articles where individuals cannot or will not seek individual redress.

### **1. The need for adequate balance**

Disability Alliance took action against one national newspaper for printing a misleading, inaccurate and potentially discriminatory article on mobility support (using DLA to pay for Motability vehicles). The initial article was a front page spread. The correction piece was much smaller and presented much later in the newspaper (underneath the letters page).

In our survey, we asked if people agreed that misleading or inaccurate stories about disabled people's support should receive equivalent space for corrections. The responses were overwhelmingly in favour of such a proportionate system of redress:

- Strongly agree: 92.9%
- Agree: 6%
- Don't Know: 0.7%
- Disagree: 0.4%
- Strongly Disagree: 0

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<sup>13</sup> See: <http://www.radar.org.uk/people-living-with-health-conditions-disability/disability-hate-crime/>

We recommend that the independent body replacing the Press Complaints Commission will have such powers and will be able to take such proportionate action on the behalf of disabled people.

## **2. The need for timely action against poor quality coverage**

The Press Complaints Commission can take about three months to investigate and resolve complaints about misleading articles on disabled people. This allows attitudes to harden and inaccurate coverage to have festered in the minds of ill-informed readers – and includes people who have only seen a headline on a newsstand or, increasingly, online, and not understood it is inaccurate or is later corrected (especially if the correction forms a very small part of an often overlooked page).

We asked if people felt disabled people (and other complainants) should have quicker access to redress and: 90.3% felt this was necessary; just 3.3% disagreed; and 6.4% were unsure or didn't know if quicker redress was required.

We recommend that the new regulator has sufficient resources to address concerns raised by disabled people (and others) swiftly and accurately.

## **3. The need for an appropriate agency to address concerns**

The Press Complaints Commission (PCC) was an association of newspaper editors and there were no obligations to join. The Express, for example, opted out of the PCC.

We asked respondents if an independent agency, funded by national newspapers would make a more appropriate means of ensuring fair reporting of disability issues:

- 57.4% strongly agreed
- 17.4% agreed
- 16.6% didn't know
- 2.6% disagreed with this suggestion
- 6% strongly disagreed

Three quarters (74.8%) demonstrates strong support for our recommendation of a sector-funded but independent regulator. We look forward to the new agency's development and hope to work closely with the new body to help ensure a better news-deal for disabled people from our national press.

#### **4. The need for collective action to prevent discrimination**

Under the former PCC rules it was not possible for organisations to challenge discriminatory newspaper coverage against disabled people without an individual with direct experience. Disabled people were often reluctant to come forward, especially on welfare issues (where people are often made to feel incredibly grateful even for the small amounts of support often available) and due to the ‘hard line’ attitudes to benefits in particular expressed by national newspapers.

In our survey, we were keen to explore what other measures were possible and asked if disabled people should be able to take collective action against stories which negatively portray disabled people or cause a rise in discrimination or negative attitudes.

- 86.2% strongly agreed with this approach
- 10.8% agreed
- 2.2% were unsure/didn't know
- Not one person disagreed
- But 0.7% strongly disagreed

97% support for collective action reveals significant concern that effective action was unavailable under the former system. This high level of support should also mean the Government accepts our recommendation that representative organisations, like Disability Rights UK, are able to take proportionate action through a new regulatory body against any newspaper publishing discriminatory articles.

#### **Other concerns highlighted by respondents**

We also asked disabled people to tell us anything else relevant about newspaper coverage of disabled people. We provided a blank space for people to use to express their views. Some were very disturbing:

“We are already living very difficult lives and with the welfare reform on top of this, there will be more suicides”

#### **Ordinary, not extraordinary lives harder to portray?**

Many respondents suggested the need to have journalists better educated or trained. Some felt that more positive articles about the routine lives would be useful. One respondent specifically mentioned the need to ensure journalists better understood disabled people's higher living costs<sup>14</sup>:

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<sup>14</sup> For evidence on disabled people's essential, unavoidable higher living costs please see the DWP international comparative study. Available online at: <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/ports2009->

“Lack of coverage regarding extra expenses incurred by disabled people”

Some disabled people also commented that, even in positive articles in the press, it was only ‘heroes’ who overcome impairments and/or health conditions that get covered:

“Even when there is a positive story, people with disabilities are portrayed as ‘brave’ in overcoming adversity”

The ‘routine’ nature of living with an impairment and/or health condition gets overlooked, despite – perhaps even because of – so many UK citizens managing to do so daily.

### **An economic argument for balanced coverage?**

Some respondents suggested they no longer buy newspapers or buy less as a result of feeling inadequately or even pejoratively represented in articles. One person wrote:

“The papers are largely a waste of time now”

This suggests a perhaps economic argument for newspapers to better reflect disabled people’s lives and contribution in the UK. Other respondents, however, suggested hostility towards some people was a deliberate means of selling papers:

“Accuracy is being left out [of reporting] in order to sell papers on the back of inflammatory articles that demonise sectors of society”

### **Better off local?**

Other respondents suggested an imbalance between national and local and regional newspapers:

“My observation is that regional newspapers are much more balanced in their coverage of disabled people than national newspapers”

Local papers seem to have more space for positive news stories. It may support the theory that some national journalists simply follow the agenda of the Government of the day – but also explain a growth in some local papers’ distribution at a time of (general) national press circulation decline<sup>15</sup>.

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[2010/rrep542.pdf](#) For other sources on higher costs please see:

<http://www.jrf.org.uk/system/files/1859352375.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> See: <http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/section.asp?navcode=161> for information on national, local and regional newspaper circulation.

## Appendix A: Our Survey Questions

The questions from our survey are below for ease of reference<sup>16</sup>.

The Leveson Inquiry is looking at the culture, practice and ethics of the press. We think the press has a role to play in promoting positive attitudes towards disabled people and stopping discrimination and crime against disabled people. We think the Inquiry should include press reporting of disability-related issues.

1. Do you agree that the Leveson Inquiry should consider how disabled people are portrayed by the national press?
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Don't Know
  - Disagree
  - Strongly Disagree
  
2. Can you give examples of press stories which have negatively portrayed disabled people or printed an article which directly or indirectly discriminated against disabled people?
  - Yes/No/Don't know or unsure

[If 'yes'] Can you please tell us the name of the newspaper and when (if you know) the article was printed? And can you describe how the article made you feel please?

3. Can you give examples of press stories which have positively portrayed disabled people or printed an article which helped tackle discrimination against disabled people?
  - Yes/No/Don't know or unsure

[If 'yes'] Can you please tell us the name of the newspaper and when (if you know) the article was printed? And can you describe how the article made you feel please?

4. Do you think the national press fairly portray welfare and general disability equality issues?

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<sup>16</sup> Excluding personal questions (eg about age, gender and impairment).

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Don't Know
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

5. Do you believe that negative stories about disabled people are increasing or decreasing in the national press?

- Significantly increasing
- Increasing somewhat
- About the same
- Decreasing somewhat
- Significantly decreasing
- Don't know

[If answered increasing] And what do you think has caused the increase?  
[Open box question]

6. Do you think negative press stories on disability issues has caused any increase in hostility, negativity or discrimination towards you or other disabled people?

- Yes, definitely
- Yes
- Don't know/unsure
- No
- Definitely not

[If yes] Please describe any negative incident and what role you believe a newspaper may have played in causing it:

7. Disability Alliance took action against one national newspaper for printing a misleading, inaccurate and potentially discriminatory article on mobility support (using DLA to pay for Motability vehicles). The initial article was a front page spread. The correction piece was much smaller and presented much later in the newspaper (underneath the letters page).

Do you agree that misleading or inaccurate stories about disabled people's support should receive equivalent space for corrections?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Don't Know
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

8. The Press Complaints Commission can take about three months to investigate and resolve complaints about misleading articles on disabled people. Do you believe that disabled people should have quicker access to redress?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Don't Know
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

9. The Press Complaints Commission is an association of newspaper editors and there are no obligations to join. The Express, for example, has opted out of the PCC. Do you believe that an independent agency, funded by national newspapers is a more appropriate means of ensuring fair reporting of disability issues?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Don't Know
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

10. Do you believe disabled people should be able to take collective action against stories which negatively portray disabled people or cause a rise in discrimination or negative attitudes?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Don't Know
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

11. The survey is anonymous and we will not use your contact details in our response. But please let us know here if you would be willing to speak to a journalist about the issues you have raised [we would only pass on your contact details with your prior permission]:

- Yes
- No

12. Please use the space below to tell us anything else you would like about your experience of newspaper coverage of disabled people: