

# Minutes of the **Cross Party Group on Disability** 7<sup>th</sup> December 2023 (via Zoom)

## **Present:**

Mark Isherwood MS (Chair), Sioned Williams MS, Megan Thomas (Secretary), Sophie Mason, Rhian Davies, Amanda Say, Andrea Boyce, Andrew Harper, Ann Pankhurst, Cari Jones, Cath Lewis, Gary Simpson, Hannah Peeler, Jan Underwood, Jenny Carroll, Joe Powell, Kat Watkins, Kelly Stuart, Lowri Bartrum, Maggie Hayes, Shahd Zorob, Sheryll Holley (Captioner), Teresa Carberry, Tracey Blockwell, Trevor Palmer, Owen Williams, Joel Weston

## **Apologies:**

Llyr Gruffyd MS, Becky Ricketts, Zoe Richards, Lorraine Cosgrove, Teresa Davies, Petra Kennady, Clare Lewis

## **1. Welcome**

The Chair welcomed members and noted apologies.

## **Matters arising from the previous minutes.**

Transport for Wales has been invited to the next meeting, after some discussion Megan has not heard from them and is to follow up with her contact.

Megan has tried to get in touch with UK Finance but has not heard anything, is finding contact details for individual employees.

Letter to Mark Drakeford RE: Bus passes mostly drafted, Megan to circulate to Mark and Sioned.

Megan and Kat met with Cari to discuss the Scrap Social Care Charges website proposal. We concluded that the Disability Wales website would be a good host domain, however there is significant cost. Disability Wales looking at funding, to look at other options in the future if this is not feasible.

The minutes were approved as a true and accurate record.

**Proposed:** Sioned Williams MS

**Seconded:** Marg McNiel

## 2. Annual General Meeting

Mark Isherwood MS stepped down as Chair, Megan Thomas took over Chair for the election of the next Chair.

One nomination received:

Mark Isherwood MS

**Proposed:** Sioned Williams MS

**Seconded:** Owen Williams

Mark Isherwood MS was therefore re-elected unopposed for the position of Chair and retakes the Chair of the meeting.

Megan Thomas stepped down as Secretary. Elections for the secretary commenced.

One nomination received:

Megan Thomas and Disability Wales

**Proposed:** Sioned Williams MS

**Seconded:** Teresa Carberry

Megan Thomas and Disability Wales was therefore re-elected unopposed for the position of Secretary of the Cross-Party Group on Disability.

### **3.The UK Government response to the Cost-of-Living Crisis – Joel Weston Disability Benefits and Policy Leader at the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP)**

Joel spoke about the UK Government's response to the cost-of-living crisis, he began his role in the summer of last year (2022). The crisis emerged due to high inflation and told us that the urgent response needed placed restrictions on how targeted the Government could be with the support offered.

Joe Powell asks about a recent article from the Big Issue which reports that the DWP can access information on the bank accounts of people on benefits. Joel Weston responds that this is outside of his speciality but is happy to go away and come back on this issue.

Jan Underwood questions if disabled people will no longer be able to access the cost-of-living payment. Expresses that disabled people are frequently targeted and questions if there would be any change on this or why disabled people are targeted? Joel refutes that disabled people are targeted by the Government. He explains that yes there are no plans for further cost-of-living payments, but benefits such as PIP and Universal Credit are rising in line with inflation.

Amanda Say on that PIP is a benefit that is used for many different purposes by an individual. Including for household bills, equipment and paying for your care. There is no recognition of how far PIP stretches for some disabled people or additional support for extra costs. Joel responds that it is a benefit designed to support disabled people with their additional costs, but that as it is distributed to 6 million people, they cannot assess individual needs. It does try to establish

need and pays in different levels but is quite generalised. There are currently no plans to change it.

Amanda follows up asking if there is an opportunity within the cost-of-living crisis to change this for those using equipment that has additional costs attached? Joel responds that although there is an argument for it, there is not the ability within the system itself and the focus was on getting money to disabled people as quickly as possible.

Sioned Williams MS asks that despite costs being 50% higher, the Autumn Statement did not have any support for people, particularly disabled people who are impacted by high costs. She asks how the £150 cost-of-living payment was decided and why it was not applied this year. Joel responds that there was limited time to find a solution and the Government had to provide a financial package, then decide how to divide it amongst the groups who required the additional funds. Many disabled people also qualify for other benefits who will have qualified not just for the £150 payment but other payments. He believes that there will be another means-tested payment in the Spring, but after that the focus will be on reducing inflation.

Gary Simpson asks whether PIP is fit for purpose, mentions that the money being spent could be better utilised and that there needs to be more integration of the social model. He asks if PIP should be overhauled and if the 2-section approach should be terminated. Joel responds that the Government's position is that PIP is fit for purpose. He says that the recent White Paper on Health and Disability pulls the two assessments together into one.

Mark Isherwood MS says that he has supported many constituents through the appeals process and almost all of them have been successful. He asks what is being done within the DWP to streamline this and prevent the waste to the DWP

and disabled people's lives to prove what is evident from the outset. Joel responds that although most decisions are overturned in tribunal, this is still a small proportion of people who take these decisions to tribunal and sometimes more information comes out that was not available to the original assessor. He recognises that this is an issue, but says it is something they continue to work on.

Mark responds that in almost all the cases he is referring to, the applicants have invisible impairments. Despite Mark repeatedly writing to the relevant Ministers, this issue persists. He asks if there are further thoughts to match the medical expert conducting the interview with the circumstances of the applicant. Joel responds that assessment providers are contracted and one of the ways their performance is monitored is quality of the reports. He also responds that one advantage of the pandemic is that assessments being done by video opens the opportunity from specialists from across the UK to be able to conduct interviews with more people.

Gary Simpson tells the group that in an appeal he had, the assessor had no medical experience and was working in a completely unrelated field prior to becoming an assessor. He argues that assessors have some medical experience. Joel responds that as far as he is aware, there is a requirement to have some medical experience to become an assessor, but this does not necessarily translate into a full understanding of all impairments or health conditions.

Cari Jones describes a positive experience living in the Netherlands which takes a more individualistic approach to benefits and compares it to the DWP, in which she experienced systemic ableism in trying to get support for both her disabled child and herself. She asks how the DWP ensures that they hire enough people with lived experience and in

the research done around PIP, what are you asking? As many disabled people feel failed by the system. Joel responds that the issues of the forms, questions and the lack of individual support within the system is an ongoing challenge for the DWP, as they are needed to assess individual need, but do make it more difficult for the disabled people to access support. For lived experience, within the policy area there is significant lived experience and many of Joel's colleagues are disabled people. Part of their policy team specifically looks at stakeholder engagement, so they do try and take on people's views as much as possible.

Sophie Mason says that some systems don't have the ability to consider additional costs that a disabled person may have whilst conducting assessments and if there were plans to change the system to better consider those factors. She talks about how the application form process is inaccessible for some disabled people and asks how they are making the process more accessible in the future. Joel responds that they are working on transferring it over to a digital system, which he recognises will also need to include access to paper copies of the form, he says that for some the application form isn't as difficult as it can present to be and that a digital form would make it easier. In terms of support to fill out the form, Joel says that this is a difficult balance to strike as they are the decision-makers and must avoid becoming advocates. He thinks the answer is in how they support other organisations to do the work of supporting disabled people to fill out these forms.

Trevor Palmer describes the process of producing an accessible form online as an art. He says that the DWP should consult with disabled people's organisations throughout the process of designing these forms, particularly at the development stage. Joel responds that yes; their User Research team is currently working with disabled people and organisations representing disabled people.

The following contributions were made in the meeting chat and have been read out by Kat Watkins.

Jan Underwood asks why medical professionals who know the individual well are not allowed to submit evidence. Joel responds that they do allow you to submit medical evidence, but why it is not entirely based on medical evidence is a government decision, he recognises that there is inconsistency but also mentions that the evidence provided puts strain on hospitals and medical staff.

Leandra Craine asks why a disabled person with an appointee must go through reassessments every time PIP is renewed? Joel responds that reassessments are important because people's needs change, whether that be they now require less financial assistance or that their entitlement has increased.

#### **4. Disability Summit – Mark Isherwood MS**

Item proposed by Mark Isherwood MS. Mark is the Senedd representative on the Commonwealth parliamentarians with disabilities group that the UK belongs to. Through this he has heard about the first-ever Scottish Disability Summit, organised by the Scottish Cross Party Group, which was held on the 25/11/2023. Mark has reached out to numerous people, including Disability Wales to discuss the possibility of hosting a similar event.

Rhian Davies agrees with the idea to host an event, but expresses caution at the resources needed to fund it. She attended the Womens Equality Network event "We Belong Here", which required WEN to raise considerable funds. Mark responds that it would be worth us engaging with our sister group in Scotland to see how they resourced their event.

Rhian agrees and suggests a meeting of the Wales Disability Reference Group to explore all resources available.

Action agreed: Megan to get in touch with the Scottish group for advice and Wales Disability Reference Group to discuss a potential event. Megan to report back on this in the next meeting.

## **5.AOB**

No further business.

### **Actions:**

1. Megan to get in touch with the Scottish Cross Party Group on Disability to discuss potential Welsh Disability Summit
2. Wales Disability Reference Group to meet and discuss potential event.
3. Megan to circulate letter to Mark Drakeford MS with Mark Isherwood MS and Sioned Williams MS.
4. Megan to update group on Scrap Social Care Charges webpage.