

Welfare reform

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Whenever the reform of Incapacity Benefit is mentioned those receiving it are understandably anxious. They feel that it is unlikely that such reforms will improve their lot, while government attempts to change the ways of financing those who are incapable of work through sickness and disability are often accompanied by language which seems to the vulnerable to be at best threatening, at worst downright aggressive and bullying.

It is now back on the political agenda after being high in the Government's manifesto at the General Election. A Green Paper has been expected since last summer and is now scheduled for the New Year. DA has received queries about it, including ones wondering whether we are doing anything to fight these reforms.

The simple answer to the latter question is that we are, but not blindly and not on our own. A group co-ordinated by MIND has been set up to monitor the situation, and particularly to protect the interests of those with mental health disabilities. It includes representatives of major mental health charities, the Royal College of Psychiatrists, and other interested parties. I am representing DA with the approval of the directors and staff.

The group will not necessarily condemn the reforms out of hand; it is well aware of the danger of being destructive and negative. We know that IB has to

be reformed; the question is how it can best be done. The group will examine every aspect of any proposed reforms when it knows them, and will oppose those that they feel may harm those with conditions such as depression. It believes that coercion back to work is unacceptable and that encouragement is far better. Beyond this it is working out core principles with which it will operate and these will guide its future thinking and actions; at the time of going to print I have not received these so I cannot state what they are.

The group first met on November 25 and next meets in mid-February. By that time the Green Paper should have been published; if it is published earlier the group will meet in January. It is looking for people to be case studies and to talk to the media should the need arise. If any reader is willing to help in this way please contact me.

Members who are worried about this issue should not panic. It was suggested at the meeting that the earliest that any changes can possibly be implemented is 2008 or even 2009. It is also worth pointing out that the Green Paper is only the start of a long process that involves consultation, votes in the Commons and Lords (with a well publicised possibility of revolts), etc. It is likely that changes to those proposed in the Green Paper may well have to be made before they are finalised – assuming even that they become law. In setting up this Group at this time we are declaring that disability includes those with non-physical conditions, as well as those whose voice is normally heard and those

who can be seen to be disabled. Those with emotional conditions (mental illness if you prefer it!) have their own problems and through this group they will have a voice. By working together in this specific field we stand a far greater chance of being taken seriously.

As a member of the group (with a great interest and concern about this issue) I will be constantly monitoring the situation and if any reader is genuinely worried they are welcome to contact me in confidence. There will doubtless be more reports on this vexed topic in future issues!