

Open season on disabled people? Submission to the Leveson inquiry

Inclusion London, a pan-London Deaf and disabled people's organisation, is making this submission to voice our growing alarm and concern at the increasingly hostile and inaccurate portrayal of disabled people in the media, and what we believe are clear links between this media coverage and the rise in harassment and hate crime of disabled people. We also share a wider concern about the Government's apparent role¹ in contributing to this sustained level of unfair and inaccurate reporting.

Our submission responds primarily to questions 5,7,8 and 10 that the inquiry is requesting evidence on.

Unfair and inaccurate media reporting

Recent research by Glasgow university, commissioned by Inclusion London² confirms what hundreds of thousands of disabled people know already: that disabled people are being demonised in the press, that fair and accurate reporting, particularly in relation to disability benefit fraud, has gone out the window and that this in turn is changing public perceptions and treatment of disabled people – for the worse.

The drip feed of daily headlines such as the 'Disabled Benefit? Just fill in a form'³, 'No more £35k BMWs for Motability drivers: new rules will stop disabled getting luxury cars on taxpayer'⁴ and particularly the constant repeating of wildly inaccurate statistics such as '75% on sick are skiving'⁵ are having a real and tangible impact on public perceptions of disabled people.

The Glasgow university research suggests the public believe rates of disability benefit fraud are at a 50-75% level and when asked why cite

¹ <http://www.inclusionlondon.co.uk/department-spins-dla-figures>

² Bad news for disabled people: How the newspapers are reporting disability. Strathclyde Centre for Disability Research and Glasgow Media Unit October 2011. Commissioned by Inclusion London

³ Daily Mail 11 November 2011

⁴ Daily Mail 25 November 2011

⁵ Daily Express 26 January 2011

articles such as the headlines above⁶. Actuals levels of disability benefit fraud, as shown by the DWP, stand in stark contrast to these wildly exaggerated claims, at a figure of just 0.3%⁷

Links to disability harassment and hate crime.

These sustained levels of unfair, biased and outrageously inaccurate reporting are having a direct impact on disabled people's lives. Disabled people, and their organisations, are reporting more and more hostility, harassment and violence against disabled people and as a result many hundreds of thousands of disabled people are living in fear. Stories such as that experienced by Peter Greener below, are occurring up and down the country:

'A nightmare neighbour launched a hate crime against a wheelchair user – branding him a benefit scrounger because he had seen him walking. David McGregor bullied Peter Greener..in a three-month torrent of abuse which ended when he sprayed offensive graffiti on his fence calling him a "lowlife" '8

The recent Equality and Human Rights Commission report 'Hidden in Plain sight' provides the most up to date picture of the depth and extent that disability hate crime blights our lives and highlights the role the media has in 'influencing attitudes to harassment' and 'the power of the media to positively or negatively impact on disabled peoples lives'.⁹

Press practices, ethics and standards

Our alarm at the link between current unfair and outrageously inaccurate media coverage and disability hate crime is shared by many. NUJ's Disabled Members Council recently issued a statement 'urging journalists to operate within our recognised code of ethics' and 'support and sustain fair and balanced reporting of matters relating to disabled people'.

We welcome and support this call for fair and balanced reporting yet we are increasingly concerned that such reporting is apparently being

⁶ Bad news for disabled people: How the newspapers are reporting disability page 61. Strathclyde Centre for Disability Research and Glasgow Media Unit October 2011. Commissioned by Inclusion London

⁷ DWP Incapacity Benefit July 2011

⁸ The Shields Gazette 25 November 2011

⁹ EHRC: Hidden in plain sight: Inquiry into disability related harassment' report page 158-159

actively undermined by the Government and in particular the way Ministers appear to be briefing the press and using DWP statistics. More and more reports are emerging of Ministers, such as Ian Duncan Smith, providing quotes to certain sections of the press, using selective and not representative government statistics, that end up as the headlines detailed above¹⁰ which in turn feed the lie of disability benefit fraud.

We are not alone in our concern regarding the relationship between Government and the press over the coverage of disability issues. On the 27 July 2011 Anne Begg Chair of Work and Pensions Committee wrote to Employment Minister Chris Grayling expressing the committee's serious concern at the most recent misrepresentation of DWP statistics in sections of the media stating 'that more care is needed in the way the Government engages with the media' and 'in the way it releases and provides its commentary on official statistics on the IB reassessment'.

We are extremely concerned that the Government appears to be using whatever means it can to justify cuts of £9 billion¹¹ of basic entitlements from disabled people. Cuts that will push hundreds of thousands of disabled people further into poverty, exclusion and isolation – a situation that is already resulting in disabled people taking their own lives.¹²

We believe:

- The Government must issue a clear and public rebuttal *every time* the media release inaccurate information citing Government / DWP statistics.
- That the Government commit to full transparency in their dealings with the press including keeping a publically available record of all communications between Government officials, Ministers, their aides and special advisors and the media.
- That there needs to be an independent review of how the DWP releases and provides commentary on its statistics to assess how fair and balanced this data is presented and communicated.

¹⁰ Disability News service 18 November 2011

¹¹ Demos report: Destination Unknown 2010

¹² See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-coventry-warwickshire-15645206> on the double suicide of Mark and Helen Mullins

- That the EHRC must carry out further research on the impact of media coverage on disabled people and the implications this has for disability hate crime, disabled people's protection under The Equalities Act and the UN Convention on the rights of disabled people.

We call on the Leveson inquiry, Press Complaints Commission, and OFCOM to :

- Carry out an independent investigation into the media reporting of disabled people. This investigation needs to include the impact this coverage is having on disabled people and the implications this biased and inaccurate reporting has for the culture, practices, ethics and standards of the press . It must also examine the opportunities disabled people should have for effective redress.

Statement of Truth

I believe the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

Signed

Date

28/02/2012

Tracey Lazard, Chief Executive, Inclusion London