

12th April 2006

The Welfare Reform Team
Level 2
The Adelphi
1-11 John Adam Street
London
WC2N 6HT

Scottish Accessible Information Forum Response to Welfare Reform Paper

Background to SAIF

The Scottish Accessible Information Forum (SAIF) was set up to take forward the recommendations of the Scottish Working Group on Information Services for Disabled People and Carers in its final report *Enabling Information (1995)*.

Aims and objectives

SAIF supports the rights of disabled people and carers to have access to timely and accurate information to meet their needs. SAIF aims to improve the provision of information to disabled people and carers and make information more accessible to everyone who needs it. Rather than being forced to rely on others, disabled people should receive information directly and in their preferred format, enabling them to make informed choices and live independent lives as equal members of society.

Advisory body

SAIF acts as an advisory body to the Scottish Executive on issues relating to the accessibility of information for disabled people and carers.

Members

SAIF is made up of 21 people representing providers of information and advice and organisations of and for disabled people and carers. Over half of the members of SAIF are disabled people or carers themselves.

Remit

The key elements of the remit of SAIF are:

- to develop and promote quality standards in information provision to disabled people and carers
- to represent and promote the interests of disabled people in having access to information services
- to promote communication between national and local information providers
- to advise the Scottish Executive on policy relating to accessible information
- to improve disabled people's access to information.

Welfare Reform Response

SAIF would certainly agree that more needs to be done to break down the barriers that prevent many people from fulfilling their potential. One of the main barriers people face is access to good quality information in order to allow them to make informed choices about their future. Many disabled people are unable to access information in a form that is easy for them to use.

If there is a desire to see more of those on incapacity benefits moving into work, then the provision of information and support is essential. It is important that people are able to obtain information and support that is relevant to their particular circumstances. Services should not adopt a “one size fits all” approach to the provision of information to customers of the Department of Work and Pensions. We have concerns that appropriate and specific support will be very difficult to ensure, given the widely publicised plans for budgetary and staff savings within the DWP.

The need for sensitive and person-centred support and information for people claiming benefits is demonstrated clearly by the statistic quoted that a third of new claimants cite mental health conditions as their main cause of incapacity. People with mental health conditions in particular will require that services cater for their individual circumstances, although every customer of the Department will benefit from the provision of accessible information about their options and services tailored to their individual needs.

The introduction of more elements of compulsion into the incapacity benefit system is likely to make it more difficult for the Department to engage positively with those currently on incapacity benefits. Those who may be seeking to enter the workforce in the future are likely to be more reluctant to pursue available help if they are fearful of losing their benefits. It would be likely to produce more positive outcomes by ensuring customers are aware of the range of support services available to them and allowing them the choice to engage with those most relevant to their circumstances.

The language of the discussion paper is at times vague and it is difficult to tell what is being aimed at in certain proposals. For instance, it is said that claimants with “the most severe health conditions or disabilities” will be paid benefit without conditionality at an increased rate. It would be helpful if the government could define what it considers to be the “most severe” conditions. The statement that General Practitioners and health teams will be supported in helping people back to work by “identifying specific interventions that improve outcomes and seeking to incorporate performance against these within primary care contracts” is a complicated phrase, which would be very difficult for a layperson to understand.

The paper talks of inviting bids for “outcome-based contracts.” It would be of concern if “outcome-based” meant that providers would be expected only to shuffle people off benefits and into jobs. We would hope therefore that contracts would give some weight to the need to provide people with accessible and suitable information in order to allow them to make appropriate choices for them.

It is encouraging that the paper suggests that support will not be withdrawn from people once they are back in work. It is important

that support should be suitable to an individual's particular needs. If this is the aim of the goal of "maximum local flexibility," then that is to be welcomed. The introduction of the Local Housing Allowance paying a set allowance to people needing help with rent would seem to go against this principle.

The Scottish Accessible Information Forum seeks to improve disabled people's access to information. It produces **Standards for Disability Information and Advice Provision in Scotland**. The Standards, which were revised in 2004, are a useful tool for information and advice providers seeking to ensure their service meets the needs of disabled people. SAIF also produces guidance for local and national information providers on how to develop accessible information strategies. The Standards, and other information about SAIF can be found on the SAIF website at www.saifscotland.org.uk.

Yours sincerely

Ben Forsyth
SAIF Chairperson

Scottish Accessible Information Forum
SCC
100 Queen Street
Glasgow
G1 3DN

Tel: 0141 226 5261
Fax: 0141 221 0731
Minicom: 0141 226 8459
Email: info@saifscotland.org.uk