

Charities Celebrate New Rights for Disabled People

The Disability Charities Consortium (DCC) has today welcomed the passage of the Disability Discrimination Act 2005. The DCC consists of Leonard Cheshire, Mind, Mencap, RADAR, RNIB, RNID and Scope.

DCC Chairman Dr John Low of RNID said, "We are delighted to see this vital law for the protection of disabled people's rights, placed firmly on the statute book."

The new public sector equality duty, which forms the centrepiece of this legislation, will have a major impact for disabled people. It will ensure public bodies such as local councils, universities and hospitals think about the needs of disabled people when planning their services. The DCC is especially pleased with the Government's reassurance that schools will be fully covered by the new duties. Schools have a particularly important role in promoting disability equality because of their unique influence on future generations. They provide the bedrock for disabled people to fulfil their potential later in life.

The DCC also welcomes the new transport provisions in the Bill. The Consortium was delighted that an amendment to specify an end date for rail vehicles to comply with accessibility regulations into the Act was accepted in the House of Lords. This means that the date of 2020 is now set in law and cannot be put back, reassuring disabled travelers that access to the rail network will ultimately improve. Other amendments accepted will increase the transparency of the process by which certain trains can be exempted from some aspects of regulations.

The new Act will also broaden the definition of disability by removing the requirement that a person's mental illness be "clinically well-recognised" in order for that person to gain protection from discrimination. The Consortium believes that this is vital in making the law more accessible to people with mental health problems. However the DCC are disappointed that the House of Lords amendment on depression was not upheld. Whilst the amendment was not perfect, it sought to put right the very real problem of discrimination experienced by people with a history of depression.

"This Act will close many of the gaps that prevent disabled people from having adequate legal protection," concluded Dr John Low. "It is a huge step forward for the millions of disabled people in England and Wales.