

Campaign update

Summer 2010

Welcome to your summer 2010 edition of Campaign update, a quarterly newsletter for RNIB's campaign supporters' network. As the new political climate brings with it fresh challenges and opportunities for our campaign work, we take a look at the new government and its key policies and people. We also look at the fantastic success we've had as a network fighting the threat to benefits, the progress on some of our major campaigns and lots more.

If you do one thing!

Our campaign supporters are absolutely crucial to helping us achieve campaign success. There are lots of ways you can get involved and campaign with us, but if you only have time to do one thing this summer, please continue to help us campaign for improved support at the time of sight loss. If you haven't already, please contact us for your own "Lost and Found" campaign pack which includes templates and a three-step guide to taking action. Find out more in the "Lost and Found" article in this update.

rnib.org.uk/campaigns



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Election 2010 – post-election analysis

A new coalition government: a “new politics”?

Dan Scorer, RNIB’s UK parliamentary manager, takes a look at our new coalition government and investigates what the emerging changes might mean for blind and partially sighted people.

It’s been an exciting time in politics. For the first time in over 30 years we have a coalition government, with the parties coming together to work out a joint programme. In addition, 24 Liberal Democrat MPs, nearly half the total number of Lib Dem MPs, now hold government posts – five of them (including Nick Clegg) in the Cabinet.

What does it all mean for national and local campaigning?

It is clear that cuts to public spending and tax rises are the biggest potential threat we face. Government departments (apart from Health, which has its budget protected) are facing budget cuts of around 20 per cent. Tough choices will be made, and we may find benefits under threat and services under pressure.

In addition, local authorities will not be allowed to increase council tax. On top of this, rises in VAT and cuts to benefits could hurt the most disadvantaged, although the government has pledged to ensure that cuts will affect the worst off least. We may have a tough fight ahead to protect the services and benefits that blind and partially sighted people rely on.

What’s the “Big Society” all about?

During the election campaign David Cameron talked about the State having too much say in peoples’ lives, and about

giving power back to people to decide how their schools are run, their area is policed and what planning decisions are made.

This is likely to provide us with opportunities to challenge local services and get involved in making local decisions. Key policies in the “Big Society” programme are:

- Giving communities a greater say over their local planning system and saving local services, such as post offices and pubs.
- Creating new community organisers who will be trained to support the establishment of neighbourhood groups.
- Encouraging volunteering and involvement in social action, including launching a national “Big Society Day”.

The new political landscape could offer us a positive environment in which to influence. However, it will also present challenges and RNIB’s campaigns team will continue to analyse and respond where services for blind and partially sighted people may be at risk – and of course we will keep you informed via Campaign update.

Timetable for change – how the government formed its agenda

A timetable of key dates following the general election:

7 May – Election counts reveal a “hung parliament”, with none of the parties achieving an overall majority. Coalition talks

begin immediately between the Conservative party and the Liberal Democrats.

11 May – Gordon Brown announces his resignation, marking the end of thirteen years of Labour government. Conservative-Liberal Democrat negotiations agreements are reached.

13 May – the government announces key appointments including the following Secretary of State appointments: Andrew Lansley (Con) for health, Ian Duncan-Smith (Con) for work and pensions and Philip Hammond (Con) for transport.

20 May – publication of a full coalition government agreement setting out core policies and priorities, including a year-long Commission on Social Care to look at a range of options for funding care into the future.

24 May – the Chancellor, George Osborne, sets out how the government will make

£6bn of savings this year, though not by cutting front line services.

25 May – Key government Bills are announced in the Queen's Speech, which formally marks the beginning of the Parliamentary session. Twenty-one Bills will be put before Parliament over the next 18 months, including education, welfare reform, health, elections and voting, social care, public health and public services.

22 June – the government promises to set out spending cuts and increases in taxes in an Emergency Budget designed to halve the country's £160bn deficit over the next four years (see campaigners' directory).

Autumn 2010 – A full Comprehensive Spending Review to set government departments' expenditure and savings will report, with consultation involving all tiers of government and the private sector. No mention is made in the coalition agreement of involving voluntary organisations.

Campaigners' directory:

Who's who in the new government?

New members of the Cabinet, junior Ministers, and key appointments can be found on the Cabinet Office website at: parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/government-holding

Policies and priorities

A full coalition agreement, released on 20 May can be found online at the Cabinet Office website: cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/409088/pfg_coalition.pdf

Making savings

Detail about how the government will

make £6bn of savings this year can be found at: treasury.gov.uk

Bills announced

Key Government Bills, announced in the Queen's Speech on 25 May, can be found at: commonsleader.gov.uk, number10.gov.uk or directgov.org.uk

Have you got a new MP?

If you are not sure who your new MP is you can look online at the parliament website and search by your postcode at: parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/mps

If you don't have access to the internet and want to find out who your MP is, call the House of Commons on 020 7219 3000.

Campaign Voice

In the run-up to the election, RNIB organised a series of Parliamentary Candidate events across England. Tony, a volunteer campaign co-ordinator based in Bolton, helped to organise an event at Bolton CVS where a number of local MPs and candidates were invited to find out about the issues affecting blind and partially sighted people.

“My main role, working alongside the local blind society, was to encourage as many blind and partially sighted people as possible to attend from across Bolton. Five candidates attended, including one MP. Issues raised included the lack of emotional support upon diagnosis of sight loss, travel and transport, and the issues facing blind and partially sighted people finding and retaining employment. All candidates showed an interest in the issues and were keen to find out more. One Conservative candidate invited us to attend an open meeting that David Cameron was holding in Bolton that evening, an opportunity that would not otherwise have come our way. Two of the five candidates have been elected as MPs in the new parliament, so it was invaluable to have the chance to make them aware of issues affecting blind and partially sighted people.”

Attendance Allowance saved

A big thank you to all our campaign supporters who made their voices heard by writing in to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and sending us your stories – which gave us terrific ammunition for our campaign to save Attendance Allowance (AA).

On 30 March we learnt that our intensive campaigning had paid off with the appearance of the White Paper, which included the government’s latest proposals.

In contrast to the earlier proposals to abolish Attendance Allowance (and the Disability Living Allowance (DLA) care component for people aged 65 and over) for new claimants, the White Paper stated that the government “rules out any changes to Disability Living Allowance or Attendance Allowance in the next Parliament ... We know that AA and DLA are extremely valued by those who receive them ... In many ways AA and DLA are the original personal budgets.”

This is a considerable victory for the campaign to save these benefits, in which RNIB’s campaigning has played a leading role. However, this isn’t the end of our involvement, with the change of government and the referral processes between social care and the benefit system yet to be worked out, we will engage closely with the continuing discussions and will keep you informed via future Campaign Updates.

You can let us have any further comments by emailing campaigns@rnib.org.uk or writing to Geoff Fimister, Campaigns Team, RNIB, 105 Judd Street, London WC1H 9NE.

Lost and Found campaign

Improved support for people who lose their sight

For too long, people losing their sight have tolerated inadequate care and support. Across England, campaigners are saying, “No more”. During the first few months of 2010, individuals and organisations responded in their hundreds to a consultation by the Care Quality Commission (CQC), England’s independent regulator of health and social care, to demand an urgent review of the care experienced by blind and partially sighted people. At the time of writing the CQC had yet to reach a final decision, but they have responded to RNIB to tell us that together we have made “a very valid case for the need for an in-depth review”.

Supporters of RNIB’s “Lost and Found” campaign are also turning the spotlight on local services and we are beginning to see improvements in the support that the NHS and local councils provide.

Campaigners and MPs have written to their Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) asking what they intend to do to meet the needs of blind and partially sighted people.

In Bristol campaigners supported Action for Blind People by linking up with their MPs to call on the local NHS to commit to an Eye Clinic Liaison Officer (ECLO). ECLOs provide crucial help at the point of diagnosis, when individuals are in greatest need of emotional and practical help. Thanks to lobbying, the local NHS has agreed to a new post. This is fantastic news as it means thousands of eye clinic patients will receive high-quality information, advice and support.

Progress is being made in other areas of the country too. At Shropshire and at

Moorfields Eye Hospital in London, hospitals have committed to improved eye clinic support. It is difficult to persuade the NHS and local government to commit to new funding against a backdrop of spending cuts, but improving support at the time of sight loss will continue to be a priority for RNIB and “Lost and Found” campaign supporters.

Take Action!

Help us maintain the pressure for improved support at the time of sight loss by contacting RNIB for your free Lost and Found Campaign pack. Contact the Campaigns Team on 020 7391 2123 or email campaigns@rnib.org.uk

Expanding the Lost and Found campaign

This year sees the introduction of the Equality Act and the 75th anniversary of RNIB Talking Books. It will also see some parts of RNIB, in particular fundraising, extend the Lost and Found campaign to talk about the issues around reading and accessing information. The campaign message is that “lost” is the ability to read standard print and “found” is that, through RNIB’s campaigning and services, more and more information and books are available in large print, audio, braille and electronic formats. The Campaigns team planned work on Access to Information and Reading will begin to use the “Lost and Found” campaign more in the future but for now we’re focusing on support at the time of sight loss.

Transport

RNIB is campaigning to protect and increase access to bus travel throughout England and Wales.

Bus travel is central to many of us being able to live an independent life. So why then do concessionary travel schemes differ so much through the country?

Currently individual local authorities decide whether to issue companion passes (which enables both you and your companion to travel free if you find it impossible to travel on your own) or passes that enable travel before 9.30am. These elements are a discretionary part of the national scheme, which means that some local authorities offer them and some don't. This leads to massive differences throughout the country and confusion as people travel from one district to another.

People may lose out simply because of where they live. We have conducted research to locate the worst affected areas so that we can focus our campaigning. However, if you live in an area that does not issue companion passes or pre-9.30am travel, please let us know so we can work with you to lobby your local authority.

In April 2011, there will be a change in the administration of concessionary travel from borough/district councils to county councils. Worryingly, this could result in a further loss of some concessionary travel. As smaller districts with different schemes merge together to offer a larger uniform scheme, some people could lose out as discretions are removed.

We will be campaigning to ensure that all current discretions are protected and next year's countywide schemes increase discretions, instead of taking the opportunity to cut.

Take Action!

The current situation is muddled due to different local entitlements. Action therefore depends on where you live.

1. If you live in an area which does not issue companion passes or pre-9.30am travel, please contact your Regional Campaigns Officer.
2. If you do currently receive a companion pass, or can travel from 9am onwards, write to the new leader of the council at your local authority and tell them how much you value this entitlement.
3. Be aware of any correspondence you might receive regarding changes in your bus pass or travel pass and contact RNIB campaigns if you receive something which appears to threaten your entitlement.

Share your experience of hospital transport

RNIB has recently received a complaint from a gentleman who was refused hospital transport to attend an outpatient appointment at his local hospital. He was told that as he was blind he didn't satisfy the hospital's criteria for obtaining assistance with transport.

The campaigns team would like to hear about your experiences of obtaining hospital transport; perhaps your local hospital provides transport for blind and partially sighted people or you too might have been turned away. Please contact Samantha Fothergill or a member of the campaigns team on 020 7391 2123, or use the contact details at the end of this update.

Losing Patients

The Losing Patients campaign continues to hit buttons all around the country. Ten events have run so far, pulling in almost 500 blind and partially sighted people and NHS professionals. Over 35 NHS trusts are now the target of various follow up activities, bolstering our confidence that the NHS is indeed putting accessible formats on their “must do” list.

Another major development is that Losing Patients contributed to shaping the new Equality Act, which becomes law in October 2010. After months of debating and negotiating by MPs and members of the House of Lords, the proposed amendment making your right to accessible formats absolutely clear by law was voted through.

We should not get carried away though and assume that come October, all of us will get our appointment letters, test results and doctor’s letters in an accessible format. The NHS is the biggest employer in the UK and is made up of thousands of organisations. The Losing Patients campaign needs all of us to rope in more NHS trusts and keep the momentum up.

Take Action!

Have you got your Losing Patients support pack yet? Hundreds of people have used the template letter in their pack to formally notify their GP or hospital of their accessible format requirements. This is a crucial first step in securing your right to accessible information.

Did you also know that pharmacists are obliged to make the medicine instructions on your prescription drugs accessible too? To help you ask for accessible medicine instructions we have added a new notify letter template, which we’ll be happy to send to you straight away.

Contact the Campaigns Team on 020 7391 2123 or your Regional Campaigns Officer for your copy. Contact details are at the end of this update.



Haringey Phoenix group with Lynne Featherstone MP, outside Whittington hospital, holding copies of their notification letters

In your area

The rise and rise of NAG

The Northumberland Low Vision Action Group (NAG) was set up in 2009 to campaign for better services for blind and partially sighted people in Northumberland. The group has already achieved success in meeting the needs of disabled travellers by obtaining booked assistance at Morpeth railway station and amending proposals for electronic bus departure screens.

Penny Dane, from Second Sight in Newcastle upon Tyne, helped the group to form and arranged for the committee members to be trained. Following the group's growth and success, Penny is now able to take a 'back seat' and work on other projects.

RNIB is working jointly with NAG on a number of transport and access issues including the lack of rehabilitation training, pavement obstructions, low floor access on buses, and space for guide dogs on local trains.



Members of the NAG steering group with Roy Ruddick and Penny Dane



Wheelie bin campaign launched in Stockton

RNIB volunteer campaign co-ordinator Judith Robson, fed up with having her pavement obstructed by wheelie bins and recycling boxes, has started a campaign to clear up the streets. Despite Judith having to negotiate round the bins every day, Stockton Council maintained that the bins were returned to property boundaries after collection.

Good luck to Judith's campaign. We'll be working alongside her to reclaim the pavements for pedestrians.

Don't kerb our independence

Remember the decision taken by Newham Council to amend the amount of tactile paving at crossing points? Since the last update a great deal of work has taken place. This began with the Council issuing a consultation just before Christmas. They were seeking the views of local residents as a direct result of the pressure from RNIB and other groups in the area. The consultation ended at the beginning of February and as a result of the concerns expressed the Council has delayed their

implementation of the policy until at least June. This delay is the direct result of the number of campaign supporters who contacted the Council and the resulting level of concern which has been expressed by local Councillors. Well done!

We hope that these concerns will be reflected in the decision which we expect the Council to take at a forthcoming meeting.



Better buses for Nottingham

A group of blind and partially sighted people in Nottingham has been working with RNIB, Action for Blind People and Nottingham City Council to develop guidelines to improve bus services in the city and county. A consultation was followed by journey mapping, where people took unfamiliar bus journeys to report back on the good and bad experiences.

Key findings were about the importance of visual awareness training for information centre staff and bus drivers, and the difference that audio announcements can make for a person's confidence on taking a bus journey.

Already changes have been made as a result of the project, including tactile numbers at bus stops, and more is planned. The recommendations will be published in the summer and we will be working with

Nottingham City Council to take the learning to other councils across England.



Car-free pavements in Essex

The initiative to stop people parking on and obstructing the pavement in Frinton and Walton, Essex has received a fantastic boost. Essex Police are delighted with the project and they want to extend the scheme across the whole county if local groups and individuals are willing to work together with them. The scheme aims to raise awareness of the impact of obstructing pavements through a traffic light system of warning leaflets with green as an information leaflet and then amber and red as different warnings placed on car windcreens by Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs). If a car is caught obstructing the pavement for a third time a fixed penalty notice is awarded.

The great success of the campaign is that so far only three fixed penalty notices have been issued; most people find somewhere else to park after receiving the amber leaflet.

Student posters urge safer cycling

Cyclists can be a real danger especially in areas where pedestrians and cyclists can mix. In Leicester a group including De Montfort University, Leicester City Council

and RNIB challenged university design students to create a poster to urge cyclists to think about others when riding in shared areas. Twelve designs have been chosen to be displayed across Leicester throughout the summer at events and activities, including Sky Ride. In October the posters will be displayed in 24 poster sites throughout the city centre.

The designs vary but all urge cyclists to take more care and the project has taught the students about sight loss as well as getting the wider message across. A public vote will decide the winner of the competition which will be announced at an event in November.

Getting cross in the South West

Campaigners all over the South West are lobbying their local councils to install road crossings in their areas.

The volunteer campaign coordinator in Tiverton has written to her local council to ask for a road crossing to be installed on a nearby busy road. Currently Samantha is unable to walk independently to her local supermarket, doctor's surgery and other amenities, which are only a five-minute walk from her house, because the road is too unsafe to cross.

In Gloucestershire, the volunteer campaigner is working with the local school and the council to address parking difficulties outside the school. Parents parking on zigzag line, on pavements and in disabled parking spaces are causing great difficulties for pedestrians using this area.

In Paignton, a local campaigner has gathered over 150 signatures to petition her local council to improve an existing road crossing at the end of her street. The road crossing is currently a staggered zebra

crossing. Once in the middle of the road, she finds it impossible to identify whether the traffic is moving behind her or in front.

Securing the right to read in West Cheshire

When RNIB and local campaigners in Cheshire West and Chester found out that their council was planning to "decommission" the Talking Books service because the "current system no longer works" they responded swiftly, explaining to the council that for the members of RNIB's Talking Book service it most definitely works and many people describe the service as a lifeline.

We argued that as blind and partially sighted people have such a limited choice of reading material (less than five per cent of all the books published each year are made available in print, audio and braille) their local authority should be doing everything they can, both morally and as a legal duty, to maximise access to all available books – not reduce that access. By not paying subscriptions to RNIB Talking Books, Cheshire West and Chester Council risked denying local blind and partially sighted people free access to the largest provider of audio books.

Thanks to this swift action by RNIB and local campaigners, the Council have agreed to continue funding the service and will now be looking at ways to improve provision and access to the service across the county.

This year is the 75th anniversary of the RNIB Talking Books service. We will be using this anniversary to ensure that councils retain this important service for blind and partially sighted residents.

Are you online?

Help us save resources and improve our campaign communications: let us know if you're online and if you are able to receive your campaign update by email. Please contact the campaigns team to give us your current email address and postcode.

Get in touch

Central campaigns contact and enquiries:

RNIB Campaigns Team, Judd Street,
London, WC1H 9NE
Campaigns hotline 020 7391 2123
Email campaigns@rnib.org.uk or visit
rnib.org.uk/campaigns

Regional campaigns contacts:

We said goodbye in May to our East Midlands and East of England regional campaigns officer, Ruth Stockdale, who has done a fantastic job in supporting and developing local campaigns in her region. We are delighted to welcome Claire Kay who will be taking over that role and Lynsey Brooks, who will be taking on the role of regional campaigns officer for the South East of England.

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