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December 2017: How technology is bolstering disabled people's legal rights, the Budget provides extra funding for home adaptations, White paper sheds new light on mobility equipment buying patterns among the over 50s

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Public policy, legislation and campaigns

The Budget provides extra funding for home adaptations

Last month's Autumn Budget set aside an additional £42 million for [Disabled Facilities Grants](#) during 2017/18, increasing the total funding available to the local authority-run scheme to £473 million.

Survey finds many NHS wheelchair service users are forced to buy a second chair

The spinal cord injury charity Back Up has published the [results of a survey](#) of NHS wheelchair service users. The research found that many were forced to purchase a second wheelchair due to problems with the original chair, with 50% citing changes in their personal needs and 24% saying that the one they were given by the NHS was uncomfortable.

White paper sheds new light on mobility equipment buying patterns among over 50s

The marketing agency specialising in products and services for older people Accord has [published a white paper](#) on the buying behaviours of mobility equipment owners aged over 50 years old. The results show many consumers actively seek out firms that offer good customer service and buying decisions are heavily influenced by word of mouth.

World Wide Web Consortium video promotes the benefits of accessible web design

The World Wide Web Consortium's Web Accessibility Initiative has produced a [four-minute video](#) explaining how accessible websites help disabled people make the most of the internet while also improving the online experiences of people without disabilities.



Training & events

[Moving and Handling People South 2017](#)



Watford, Hertfordshire

**Wednesday 31st January -
Thursday 1st February**

Workshops and topical seminars for health care professionals and carers

[Access and Engagement for Special Education](#)



Village Hotel, Maidstone

Wednesday 17th January

An information day for teachers, therapists and school staff who work with pupils who use assistive technology

[An Introduction to Access and Mounting for AAC Devices](#)

Technological developments and innovations

App uses [smart tags](#) to help visually impaired people to locate objects and fixtures

Two architects with sight loss have developed a new smartphone app that detects smart tags designed to be attached to everyday objects. [WayAround](#) allows people encode the tags with audio messages to identify items and offer other useful details such as reminding them of the expiry date.

New power wheelchair design runs on compressed air

Researchers based at the University of Pittsburgh have built a power wheelchair that swaps electronics and batteries with high-pressurised air. The [PneuChair](#) boasts a number of advantages over electrically powered wheelchairs such as being infinitely rechargeable, lightweight and waterproof.

Hand held device amplifies sounds for people with hearing loss

[The Echo Minitch Pro](#) helps people with hearing impairments to amplify voices and other sounds through a pair of headphones or the user's own hearing aids. The device is designed to be easy for people with reduced fine motor skills and those with visual impairments to use, and can be connected directly to the TV.

Voice recognition accessibility feature to be introduced to Google's Chrome OS

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accessibility feature that allows users to type using voice recognition.



Funding news

[The Dunhill Medical Trust funds physical infrastructure and equipment for older people](#)

[The Dunhill Medical Trust](#) offers grants to upgrade buildings and physical infrastructure aimed at community based organisations providing support to older people. The Trust funds accommodation as well as specific items of equipment.

Great Ormond Street Hospital

Friday 12th January

A day course for professionals responsible for the provision and assessment of complex AAC systems

Comment from Clive, author of dispATches

How technology is bolstering disabled people's legal rights

The ability to exercise one's legal capacity has long been recognised as a fundamental right. Legal rights tether us to society, acting as an essential passport to public services, banking, contractual agreements, marriage, voting and a host of other activities without which it would be hard to carry on with our lives. Disabled people have often been prevented from realising their full legal autonomy and forced to rely on others to act on their behalf. A confluence of technological change and legal reform is beginning to allow these rights to be reclaimed.

Intersecting trends

Mainstream and assistive technology have provided disabled people with unprecedented opportunities to interact with other people and organisations in different contexts and roles. These range from being able to physically access public spaces with the help of mobility aids and accessible building design to conversing directly with work colleagues, shop assistants and other service providers using a communication aid. The internet has simplified many activities that might otherwise have been difficult for some disabled people to undertake without assistance. Online banking, electronic contacts and the increasing availability of web-based public services are a few instances in which the world wide web has promoted disabled people's autonomy.

Finally, research with comatose patients suggests that it may be possible for the people to communicate decisions while within a state of unconsciousness, challenging our most basic assumptions about the prerequisites of legal capacity.

Alongside these technological trends, developments in national law and international proclamations have placed the rights of disabled people in the UK on a firmer footing. In 2005 the Mental Capacity Act spelt out the circumstances in which someone can be judged to be unable to make decisions and describes how they should be supported. The Equality Act 2010 makes it illegal for organisations to discriminate against people because of their disability.

On a global level, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was adopted in 2006. This wide-ranging declaration calls on signatories to take positive steps to support disabled people to exercise their legal capacity on an equal basis to everyone else.

In 2014 the United Nations issued an additional commentary on the Convention which clarified that governments should seek to promote legal rights in a variety of ways including by advocating universal design and accessibility in the public sector and other industries in which people engage in [legal](#) transactions such as banking. It also notes that supporting legal rights can mean recognising the alternative methods of communication to enable those who use non-verbal forms of communication to express themselves.

Upgrading justice

In a new paper Professor Jane Donoghue of Swansea University argues that the increasing use of technology at tribunal hearings and court settings in the UK may lead to better outcomes for previously marginalised minorities. Millions have been invested in new technologies that have displaced paper-based processes [and](#) automated routine administrative tasks, eliminating duplication and reducing unnecessary court appearances.

Experiments in digital justice have been underway since 2009 when South East London and Kent held the country's first virtual criminal trials via live links between police stations and the court. The government has started to roll out prerecorded cross-examinations for young or disabled defendants and witnesses following a successful pilot scheme.

These innovations not only help make the legal system more efficient but also increase the scope for accommodations to be made for disabled participants, for example, by offering extra time for people with communication impairments and additional breaks in potentially arduous proceedings.

Despite the modernisation of the courts, concerns over inequities in disabled people's access to justice were aired during this year's review of the UK's progress in implementing the UN Convention. In addition to the criticising cuts legal aid, campaigners told the United Nations committee overseeing the review that UK judges rarely offer reasonable adjustments and do not receive sufficient training in how to make reasonable adjustments for disabled people. Others have pointed out that the Judicial College's Equal Treatment Bench Book which outlines best practice in relation to people with protected characteristics as defined by the

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Equality Act is frequently overlooked.
Disabled people's full legal participation is now less a matter of practicalities (if it ever was) than a question of attitudes and understanding.

If you have news or information that you would like included in the next issue, or if you have any comments about dispATches, please [email Clive](#).

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