



Helping people for forty years



A brief history of the Disabled Living Foundation

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My association with the Disabled Living Foundation (DLF) goes right back to the beginning. Lady Pix Hamilton was one of the people who were instrumental in my legislation – the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970.

She was forward thinking and widely influential.

From then on I have been delighted to see the charity grow and independent living become a reality for more and more people with disabilities.

Warm congratulations on 40 years of helping older and disabled people to get the help they need.

The Right Hon the Lord Morris of Manchester AO QSO

Congratulations to DLF on reaching its 40th anniversary.

It is important to ensure that everyone has the chance, with the right advice and support, to realise their full potential. DLF provides vital services for disabled people to ensure that they can achieve their goals, from help and advice for everyday living to guidance on entering employment or starting a business. Over the course of its history, the organisation has shown dedication and innovation in assisting disabled people and those who support them.

The Government is committed to empowering disabled people by giving them choices and control over their own lives, and the work of DLF is essential in achieving this.

I'd like to extend my thanks for the important work DLF does for disabled people and wish the organisation every success in the future.

Jonathan Shaw MP, Minister for Disabled People and Minister for the South East



DISABLED LIVING FOUNDATION
Solutions for Independent Living
www.dlf.org.uk

‘Sometimes exciting, often challenging, never dull.’

This was how Chris Shaw described her first year as Chief Executive of the Disabled Living Foundation (DLF). It aptly sums up the first forty years of a pioneering organisation. Throughout DLF has remained true to its purpose – delivering practical solutions to everyday living for older people and people with disabilities.

The environment within which DLF has operated has changed out of all recognition. DLF has been in the vanguard of adopting new technology to manage its information, from punch card indexes to the *Living made easy* website. Its customers are now primarily individuals rather than professionals, although the latter remain key both as experts and as a way of reaching the wider public. Legacies and relationships with suppliers and retailers have replaced collection cans and reliance on Government support.

‘A time of excitement, frustration, hope, joy and sadness’

Elizabeth Fanshawe of her first year as
Director of DLF, 1984

In the early years DLF’s work was groundbreaking in creating and disseminating a knowledge base in largely unresearched fields. It drew on this to design and deliver practical services in information, advice, professional training and equipment display. DLF was one of the first organisations to recognise that most disabled people experienced multiple problems and how these affected many aspects of their everyday lives. It was unafraid to tackle neglected and sometimes taboo subjects like footwear and incontinence, unleashing a huge, pent-up demand for help. By removing barriers to participation in sport, music and gardening DLF recognised that disabled people had a right to enjoy life.

Although DLF’s workload has grown and evolved over the last forty years, adequate funding has always been an issue. As a charity it has always had to rely on the generosity of others: as a service provider it has had to respond to changing government policies and priorities. Its history is a story of making do, of innovation despite financial constraint and of the unexpected cheque in the post that provided a way forward.

As an organisation dedicated to delivering practical solutions DLF’s work has touched millions of lives – answering enquiries, helping people to try out equipment, training professionals from dance teachers to home helps, giving talks, attending seminars and exhibitions, representing DLF on countless committees. Looking back over 40 years, however, shows how much DLF has changed with the times, paralleling the wider movement of older people and people with disabilities out of institutions and care homes into the community as equal members of society.

Disabled living before DLF

It is difficult today to remember what life was like for disabled people forty years ago. Many were confined to homes or long-stay hospitals. Those who were able to retain their independence faced enormous difficulties in coping with everyday life: for example, rail passengers who were wheelchair users were often confined to the guard's van.

The number of disabled people grew significantly in the 1950s. Medical advances increased survival rates for individuals born with disabilities or for those who had suffered trauma such as spinal cord and brain injuries. There were also exceptional factors. The Second World War left a legacy of long-term injury and incapacity. Before the first effective vaccine was launched in 1956, polio epidemics left thousands of young people with varying degrees of disability. The use of thalidomide from 1958-61 as a treatment for morning sickness in pregnancy resulted in over 450 people experiencing the life-long effects of birth defects.

'Working in the first Disabled Living Centres, we could feel quite isolated. There were not many people in the field. DLF was pioneering in merging the interests of professionals and disabled people.'

**Maggie Winchcombe, founder member,
Joint Aids Centres Council**

People were also living longer. In the 1950s the average life expectancy for men grew from 63 to 66 and for women from 68 to 74, a trend that has continued ever since. The extra years gained were balanced by the impact of the diseases of older age on independent living.

Wartime proved the value of occupational therapy in rehabilitating returning troops. By the 1950s there were eight courses available for the growing number of young women who were attracted to it as a career option. As in decades to come, demand outstripped supply.

There was a very limited choice of aids for people with disabilities, often designed by hospital departments to meet the needs of individual patients. Many devices owed more to Heath Robinson than to good design.

'It has been said that no disadvantaged group was so utterly neglected.'

**Rt Hon Lord Morris of Manchester,
Vice-President, DLF**

Other than personal experience and occasional press coverage, public awareness of disability was almost non-existent. Words like 'cripple' and 'mongol' were still in common use and the vocabulary of mental health was even more depressing. Autism and dyslexia were dismissed as figments of parental imagination.

The record of officialdom was little better. Until the first comprehensive statistical survey of 1971, no-one knew how many disabled people there were in Britain. There was no legislation on access to the built environment: between 1959 and 1964 there was no parliamentary debate on disability. The few voluntary bodies had to be very selective in the help they provided: 'disabled people were expected to be hugely grateful for tiny mercies.'

In the Sixties 'the times, they were a-changin'. New groups emerged to campaign for change. One champion was the Central Council for the Disabled, founded in 1919 for 'the care of cripples'. This grassroots movement demanding rights as well as better services found a leader in Alf Morris, Labour MP for Wythenshawe. When, by a 600-1 chance, in 1969 he won the annual ballot for Private Member's Bills he put forward the Chronically Sick And Disabled Persons Bill and steered it through to royal assent in 1970.

‘A formidable pioneer’

It is more than coincidence that the Disabled Living Foundation (DLF) started operations in the same year as the 1970 Morris Act, the Magna Carta for disabled people. One of its requirements was to improve information about the assistance available in managing everyday life. This had been a passion of Lady Pix Hamilton for many years. She herself had suggested two clauses to the Bill: the encouragement of disabled people to become involved in housing advisory committees and the provision of training for employment.

Pix Hamilton (1913-2000) was a remarkable woman. Born Winifred Mary Jenkins she adopted the pet name of Pix. After graduating from Cambridge she was briefly married to a fellow economist and future Nobel Prize winner before finding lifelong happiness with old friend and wealthy businessman Sir Patrick Hamilton. As well as support he discreetly provided financial backing for her many causes. Personal circumstances influenced the direction of Lady Hamilton’s career when Patrick’s sister became paralysed in 1949. Deeply moved by her sister-in-law’s experience and with no family of her own, Lady Hamilton helped to bring up her four children.

‘There was a wonderful ambience. The project advisory staff worked literally across the office from each other so you had access to a huge range of expertise. Lady Hamilton was inspiring: she worked more than full-time. She would have you to her home to discuss new ideas: after one of Sir Patrick’s gins and wine with lunch, you still had to do an afternoon’s work.’

Valerie Scarr, Adviser, visual impairment project

After war work, as a regional administrator for the WVS Lady Hamilton threw her energies into the massive post-war welfare challenge of housing and feeding older people. At a time when the glass ceiling was only just starting to show its first cracks, she was typical of a new breed of women in the voluntary sector – professional, involved, organised and energetic with excellent committee skills. ‘She always did what she said she would do.’

In the 1960s Lady Hamilton chaired the Disabled Living Activities Group of the Central Council for the Disabled. She soon discovered how little was known about everyday life for people with disabilities, much less what was or could be made available to help them. She instigated ground-breaking research into topics as different as kitchen design and music. She involved architects and health professionals in building research bungalows to test everything from door handles to flooring. The bungalow in the grounds of the Nuffield Orthopaedic Centre, Oxford was named Hamilton House.

By 1969 Lady Hamilton decided that the Disabled Living Activities Group was ready to test its wings as an independent organisation although she retained her involvement with the Central Council and its successor RADAR, as committee member and sponsor. She also made time to lobby in support of Alf Morris’ Bill.

Remembering Lady Hamilton

Everyone who came across Pix Hamilton in their working life has their story to tell.

She was one of the first people to bring incontinence into the open. She once spent a long train journey with TV personality, Lady Isobel Barnett, discussing the problem until made aware that other passengers were listening in.

DLF was very much her creation. She found it quite hard to let go when she retired as she had been so hands-on. She used to entertain staff to afternoon tea. Some found her quite formidable while others found her plain speaking and easy to get on with.

Pix was an excellent committee chair keeping members stimulated and amused while ensuring that the meeting remained focused. She took minutes herself in longhand. She immediately dictated them to her secretary indicating clearly what action was to be taken, by whom and when.

She could pull rabbits out of hats when it came to raising money. To staff she was always Lady Hamilton.

It is rare for an able-bodied person to understand the relentlessness of disability... Lady Hamilton's appreciation of this, combined with the vision and energy to actually do something to remedy the situation, makes her unique.

She was meticulous in her attention to detail. When she realised that DLF's clothing display was confined to European dress, she wrote to British Embassies throughout the world to seek their advice.

Right: Lady Hamilton and Miss Stow, the Chairman and the Director of Disabled Living Foundation, outside the DLF premises on Kensington High Street (from the First Report and Balance Sheet of the Disabled Living Foundation, July 1971)

Even in her 80s she would regularly have staff round to her house for coffee to exchange views and debate new ideas.

Lady Hamilton was made a CBE in 1981, the Year of the Disabled. She handed over the chair of DLF to Barney Wilson in 1989, later becoming DLF's first President. She had recruited Barney to the Board some years earlier after reading an article about the 40 pounder he had hooked on the river Tay: at the time it was the largest salmon caught by a disabled person. Even weeks before her death Lady Hamilton spent three days a week in London engaged in the work of the many charities that she chaired.

'As a young researcher conducting clinical trials of mattresses to relieve pressure sores, I recall vividly being invited to luncheon in Lady and Sir Patrick Hamilton's elegant home. I appreciated this attention very much – and even more the introduction to the Foundation with its library and equipment for the disabled in Kensington High Street.'

Dr Mary Bliss, consultant geriatrician



DLF formally came into being on Friday 7th November, 1969. Its aim as a registered charity was 'Such Charitable Purposes Either In Connection With The Welfare Of Disabled Persons Or Otherwise As The Trustees Shall Think Fit.' Under the chairmanship of Lady Hamilton, the Trustees, whose expertise included medicine, accountancy and law, soon redefined their goal as: 'to study aspects of the life environment of the disabled including the elderly: to see where further thought can restore opportunity and then to continue to work as long as is needed to improve or rectify the situation.'

This was a hugely ambitious and long overdue task. Committees of experts, all under Lady Hamilton's guiding hand, investigated clothing, equipment design, education, gardening, music, incontinence and physical recreation as well as overseeing core activities such as information and the Aids (now Daily Living) Centre. By 1971 Lady Hamilton had recruited 150 members to her panels, the number doubling by 1979. Each panel had two or three Government observers to encourage information flows between policy makers and practitioners.

In turn the panels recruited researchers to gather data and prepare reports. A stream of publications followed giving practical advice and information primarily to professionals, and setting the ground rules for training and standards of good practice. The prodigious output of information sheets in clothing alone during the first two years ranged from foundation garments and footwear to clothing for people with stiff hips.

'We appear to be working in what is almost a virgin field.'

Lady Hamilton, 1971

The initial charitable endowment from the Hamiltons and their friends paid only for core administration and on condition that DLF embraced all people with disabilities including 'the elderly and those with multiple handicaps'. All project funding had to be raised from scratch. At £20,676 the first year's income more than balanced expenditure of £18,908.

'I was very aware of DLF right from the start as in 1969 I was working as a community occupational therapist. As there were many items that Councils would not supply we used to refer clients to DLF. After having a family I returned to work in 1992. Equipment had changed so I upgraded my knowledge many times with DLF.'

Muriel Will, occupational therapist

DLF had to make the world aware of its services. Lady Hamilton approved a logo to identify the organisation and recruited sponsors to spread the word. The first sponsors included footballer Bobby Charlton, cricketer Colin Cowdrey, motor racing champion Jimmy Hill, violinist Yehudi Menuhin and Alf Morris MP. Then there was the time-consuming task of setting up and bedding down a new organisation. The Trustees appointed the first director, Barbara Stow, who by mid 1971 was managing 30 staff from occupational therapists to an office junior from temporary premises in Victoria Street. DLF took out a 20 year lease on 346 Kensington High Street in November 1970. Under the supervision of Rear-Admiral P.G. Gibson, Christine Tarling was already busy selecting equipment for display.

Showcasing equipment

The Aids Centre opened to the public on 1st March 1971 with a display of 300 products. 'Lady Hamilton has three main objectives for the centre – to act as a shop window for disability aids, to help disabled people lead a fuller life, and to serve as a resource centre for professional workers.' (Design Journal, June 1970). Two occupational therapists staffed the 3000 sq ft showroom, crammed with products ranging from 'smoking gadgets' to 'manageable photographic equipment'. Demand was such that the team was five strong at the end of the first six months. Although primarily targeted at the caring professions, disabled people could visit the Centre two days a week by prior appointment.

In its first year DLF welcomed five hundred visitors a month to what it boasted to be 'the world's largest display of equipment for the disabled.' Three years later the collection had grown to 750 items. Each research project resulted in a new display from gardening tools to magnifiers for the visually-impaired. Some sexual aids were introduced in 1975 partly with the aim of raising public awareness.

'Younger people want wheelchairs that are funky. The simplest gadgets are often the best.'

Leslie Mayers, EDC

In return for user feedback manufacturers were happy to lend products to what, from the mid 1980s, became the Equipment Demonstration Centre (EDC). They also consulted DLF staff when developing new products. The GPO, for example, introduced a display of telephones and dialling aids, with Centre staff informing the design process in the light of user experience.

In the late 1990s Open Days for suppliers encouraged them to keep DLF staff up-to-date with product ranges. These also increased awareness of DLF's work at a time when manufacturers' generosity risked being over-stretched by demands for free demonstration equipment from the growing number of disabled living centres.

The first retailer to become involved in the EDC's work was the Army & Navy Stores who added recommended items to their mail order catalogue in the early 1970s. A decade later, High Street chains like Marks & Spencer lent appropriate items from their latest fashion ranges. A joint venture with the BBC radio programme In Touch resulted in a kitchen being built in the EDC to demonstrate simple ways of making life easier for people with visual impairments.

At first, visits to the EDC were free until the financial stringency of the early 1980s led to a charge being made for professionals for a number of years. The resulting fall in numbers was offset by a rise in visits from schools, as awareness of disability became embedded in the curriculum. By 1995 the Centre welcomed over 6000 visitors a year, the majority of whom were disabled people and their carers. People could drop into the Centre without an appointment two days a week. Visitor numbers increased significantly when, in 2003, the London Borough of Westminster awarded DLF the contract to meet demonstration and training needs for local residents and professionals.

Although the main categories of equipment, from hoists to wheelchairs, have remained much the same over the years, new materials, electronics and good design have made equipment lighter, more flexible and more visually appealing. New sections reflected changing DLF priorities: a legacy from a former member of staff, for example, allowed DLF to reintroduce gardening to its portfolio in 1996. Experts redesigned the In Touch kitchen and built a second, accessible kitchen. A telecare ‘SmartHome’ demonstrated how technology helps older people to lead independent lives for longer.

‘Although my needs were modest, DLF’s response was immediate and extremely useful. I now have a telephone with a built-in amplifier.’

Francis Robinson, service user

Over the years the EDC has displayed some ingenious devices from the Neater Eat robotic arm to the Talking Tin which lets people with low vision know what is inside. Today there are wheelchairs that can move the user from a sitting to a standing position and bikers can convert their chairs into tricycles by attaching the front end of a motor cycle.

Glowing carpets and bubble tubes stimulate the senses of young children. Even a hungry pet is catered for by a feeder that saves its owner having to stoop to fill the bowl.

There are plans to redesign the EDC in the near future, the latest in several refurbishments over the last 40 years to make its appearance fresh and appealing.

Right: *Children with disabilities enjoying music at Greenmead Primary School for Physically Handicapped Children, Putney (from the Fifth Report and Balance Sheet of the Disabled Living Foundation, 1975)*

‘My son is severely disabled. We were looking for information about equipment to help him in the home. We visited DLF to see their display of children’s equipment at their Demonstration Centre, where a therapist showed us around and explained the various pieces of equipment. We also took home some DLF factsheets. With the equipment we subsequently purchased we felt empowered and our son’s life was enriched, and it was easier for us to meet his needs and care for him at home.’

Pam B, service user



‘Good morning, Information, can I help?’

DLF inherited the team who had managed the Information Centre of the Disabled Living Activities Group since the mid Sixties. In their first year at DLF they welcomed 250 visitors, answered over 3,000 telephone enquiries and replied to 3,160 letters.

Initially enquiries came largely from professionals who paid for the service as part of their DLF subscription: by the mid 1990s half of the hundred calls a day came from disabled people or their carers for whom the service was free. The early 2000s saw an increase in enquiries from employers as they took on board the new disability discrimination legislation.

‘DLF produces information on a grand scale.’

Tom Jackson Chairman, DLF, 1991

Frontline information staff drew on the expertise of dedicated advisers. Lady Hamilton had a talent for spotting neglected areas of provision such as services for people who were not blind but whose sight affected their ability to carry out some everyday tasks. In the early 1970s the news that DLF was investigating incontinence aids resulted in a flood of letters from individuals who had up till then felt unable to discuss their condition. By 1980 Dorothy Mandelstam, DLF’s Incontinence Advisor, known affectionately as ‘the Queen of Continence’, had observed a positive shift in public attitudes towards the Cinderella of disability. Women’s magazines were no longer coy about covering a condition that affected many of their readers.

Media coverage matched growing public interest in disability and DLF increasingly became a journalist’s first point of contact especially on equipment. Such publicity had a knock-on effect, one article in *Woman* magazine about easy-to-fasten clothes resulting in 300 letters. When BBC’s *Watchdog* consumer programme investigated one manufacturer as a result of complaints by the public to DLF, the result was several hundred enquiries.

From the late 1970s the growth of local information centres and services for people with specific disabilities meant a new networking role for DLF information staff to share experience and avoid duplication of scarce resources. Lady Hamilton was concerned about ‘noise in the system’ confusing people as to whom to approach for what. In 1986 she proposed to John Major, Minister for the Disabled, that DLF would be willing to run a telephone helpline to direct callers to the most appropriate source, provided funding was made available. Her vision resulted in the Government setting up a national disability information network (DIALs), with local federations of information providers drawing on the expertise of UK-wide services like DLF.

By the late 1980s four fifths of enquiries came by telephone, resulting in the information team being so swamped that 40% of callers were greeted by a busy line. A caller queuing system, pre-recorded contact details for other organisations, a separate subscriber helpline and a booklet ‘With a Little Help’ dealing with commonly asked questions largely resolved the problem.

After the Helpline had to close for a time due to lack of finance, the National Lottery came to the rescue with an award of close on £400,000. ‘All the blood, sweat and tears (and there were many) in preparing the bid... were well worth it.’ The Helpline was relaunched in late 1997 with the target of advising 40,000 people a year about independent living. People with disabilities had a major say in its running, both as employees and members of a new advisory panel. Advice and information were only a phone call away.

Today a team of three handles over 27,000 enquiries a year, with email having replaced letters as the most popular means of written communication.

Right: Rt. Hon the Lord Aberdare trying out equipment in the Aids Centre (from the First Report and Balance Sheet of the Disabled Living Foundation, July 1971)



Milestones

1970
Parliament passes Alf Morris's Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act.

1971
Alf Morris becomes the world's first Minister for Disabled People and VAT on disability equipment is abolished.

1972
Ian Dury and the Blockheads make number one in the UK hit parade.

1974
DLF supporter Michael Flanders is the subject of TV's 'This is Your Life.'

1979
DLF opens the Equipment Demonstration Centre to the public.

1981
DLF mounts the world's first exhibition of aids for disabled people in developing countries.

1982
The UN General Assembly adopts the World Programme of Action for Disabled People.

1985
The Queen opens DLF's new headquarters in Harrow Road. Two years later Prince Charles tries out an electric wheelchair and plays the omnichord.

1988
Author Christopher Nolan wins the Whitbread Book of the Year for 'Under The Clock'.

1990
The Community Care Act encourages flexible care in people's own homes.

All celebrities mentioned are people with disabilities

1991

Geoff Adams-Spink edits radio's 'From Our Own Correspondent'.

1995

DLF organises its first Moving & Handling People event.

The Disability Discrimination Act is the first expression of the rights of disabled people in UK law.

2004

DLF helpline manager Bob Ross wins a landmark judgement after taking airline Ryanair to court for charging him to use a wheelchair.

DLF launches its Silver Jubilee appeal which raises £400,000. Celebrations include a House of Lords reception, a fun bike marathon and an art exhibition.

Tanni Grey Thompson OBE wins her record-breaking 11th gold medal at the Olympic stadium in Athens.

2005

The Disability Discrimination Act introduces comprehensive and enforceable civil rights for disabled people.

2006

DLF launches AskSARA.

2008

DLF launches its award-winning *Living made easy* website.

2009

The UK ratifies the UN Convention on The Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Hilary Lister becomes the first woman of her kind to sail solo round Britain.

DLF celebrates its 40th birthday.

Keeping professionals and increasingly the public informed took many guises – bulletins, information sheets, notes, seminar reports, training materials, speaker notes, publicity leaflets, press releases and the annual report, which by the mid 1980s ran to over 100 pages. All had to be researched, written, edited, proof-read and, from the mid 1980s, transferred to the appropriate technology of the day.

For decades DLF was also a major book publisher either using its in-house print shop or in association with external organisations. Its first publication was 'The Problems of Clothing for the Sick and Disabled, both in hospital and in the community to include the elderly infirm and the mentally disordered.' Its unwieldy title masked the report's importance as possibly the first study ever of clothing for disabled people. By 1980 when it was decided to outsource distribution in order to reduce costs, DLF's publishing arm was offering over 50 titles for sale. They included sheet music for one-handed jazz pianists and a children's book about a disabled girl called Rachel.

'My first encounter with DLF was a somewhat desperate one. When I was 60, I married the entertainer Freddie Van Doren whom I had gone to school with. He was by now 95% paralysed with MS. I had absolutely no previous experience of caring for a disabled person and here was my new husband, totally reliant on me and what care resources I could muster. That is where DLF came to my rescue. They played a very practical and necessary role for me at that rather nerve-racking time in my life.'

Barbara Van Doren, service user

Publishing, however, was a loss-making operation. This was due to a combination of regularly having to produce new editions as more information came to light in under-researched fields, and of the desire to keep prices low to encourage a wide readership. In the 1990s publications reflected the growing trend to communicate directly with users with practical titles like 'How to get equipment for disability' and 'A Garden for You'.

In response to new Government regulations DLF produced user friendly information guides – 'Handling People', 'Flying High' and 'Access Solutions'. Such titles replaced the more academic texts of previous decades. Staff in larger branches of Boots were among the users of the 450 page best-seller 'Equipped For Living' published in 1996 which went into several editions. Today DLF websites with their facility to download information guides have increasingly replaced conventional publishing.

'I visited some 10-15 years ago to choose a bath lift and since have received excellent help over the phone. I have made the occasional donation but am impressed by the way that advice is given freely without demand for money.'

Angele Vidal-Hall (92), service user



Keeping pace with technology

The paperless office and the world wide web were beyond the realms of the imagination in 1970. How DLF has managed its information mirrors the leaps and bounds in technology over the ensuing decades.

Initially information was stored on index cards, in boxes and filing cabinets, and increasingly in piles on the floor as space became ever tighter. At first staff compiled product lists and a bi-monthly bulletin by hand with liberal use of Tippex and rubbers. By 1983 these were brought together as the Information Services Handbook, later the Hamilton Directory, with its 20 sections, each of roughly 50 pages with ten entries per page. By 1974 over 90% of local authorities with social work responsibilities and nearly 75% of health districts subscribed to DLF's information services. Volunteers from the WRVS helped to collate and mail the increasingly complex orders.

Although one of the DLF's most valuable contributions, the information service proved the most difficult to fund. The Trustees turned to technology as a solution, significantly reducing the time taken to generate product lists. DLF moved into the computer age in 1982 with a Superbrain, thanks to a one-off grant from the Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS).

More ambitious ideas were already in the air. In 1984 the Trustees gave the green light for the whole information bank to move from paper to computer disc. Computerisation proved to be a time-consuming and expensive process but it more than paid long term dividends. DLF Data was born in 1986 when first demonstrated to outside groups and a year later staff were using it on a daily basis. By the end of the decade it held 17,000 references.

An issue that challenged the skills of both librarians and occupational therapists was how to retrieve the information by subject. After many drafts the thesaurus of over 7,500 terms was published in 1988. It was the world's first comprehensive index to equipment for the disabled.

The donation of a more powerful computer in 1988 made it possible for users throughout the UK to access DLF Data online. By the mid 1990s trained operators in 100 local centres were using it to advise their clients. By now personal computers were a fixture on most professionals' desks and DLF Data moved on to CD-ROM with the added bonus of sound and images. The public could access DLF's information bank directly for the first time, at local disabled living centres, while a touch screen version in the EDC allowed visitors a new means of access. By now DLF Data covered 14,000 products, 2,000 suppliers and 700 self-help groups, making it the UK's largest database of its kind. In 2000 it broke the 20,000 barrier with up to a hundred products being added each week.

'An organisation which is out on its own as far as the information provision on disability equipment is concerned.'

DHSS official, 1987

Computers also offered the potential to share data throughout Europe. From the late 1980s information staff helped to pilot Handynet, an initiative to create an EU-wide computer information resource on disability. DLF became the UK co-ordinator for the project, providing much of its data on suppliers for distribution on a set of subject-specific CD-ROMs. In the early 2000s it was one of six partners in the EU's EASTIN project to create a website that combined the best of each country's web services. Participation spurred DLF's website team to even greater things at home.

A sentence buried in the annual report – 'An internet page was launched at the end of 1995' – marked the start of a revolution. A year later the site had 100 visitors a day and an email address: by 2001 there were 10,000 web pages, downloadable factsheets and an online shop. Clearly the internet offered the way ahead to deliver DLF's new priority of reaching out to as many of Britain's eight million disabled people as possible.

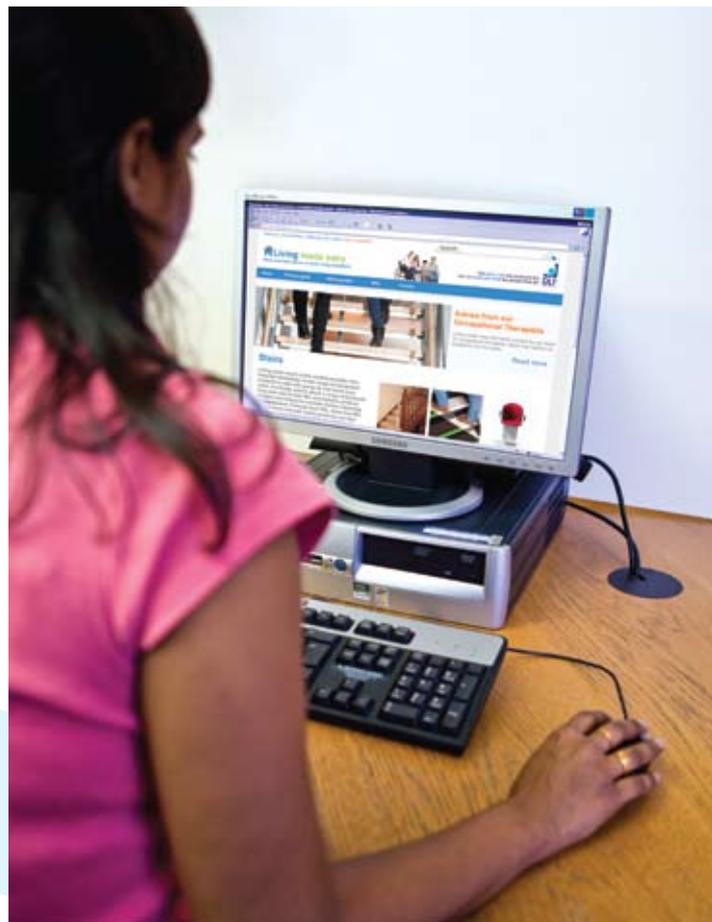
The first step towards the provision of online advice came with the development of the SARAbility software in 2002. Four years later SARA (Self-Assessment, Rapid Access) went online, giving the public direct, free access to parts of DLF Data for the first time. By answering a set of simple questions, individuals could receive an assessment of their equipment needs and suggestions as to how to meet them. Continued development saw the launch of the even easier to use AskSARA, with retailers like B&Q and Local Authorities seeking licences for customised versions for their own purposes. Today over 30,000 people a year use AskSARA for help and this figure continues to grow.

The logical next step was to make entire sections of DLF Data available to the public free on the internet. The pilot – *Bathing made easy* – explored the business model of generating income by carrying sponsorship from equipment suppliers, while at all times retaining the impartiality for which DLF was known. Following the success of *Bathing made easy*, and the follow-up website *Telecare made easy*, development of the site continued, culminating in the launch of *Living made easy* in late 2008. With six sections, and growing thanks to the backing of 15 sponsors, the site allows users to make informed choices by comparing products. Nearly half a million people have used *Living made easy* since its launch and this can only grow as more topics are covered.

Despite all the new ways of delivering information, a printed edition of the Hamilton Directory is still produced every two years in four instalments as well as being accessible online as DLF Data.

'I contracted polio in the merchant navy after leaving school. I have had regular contact with DLF both as a client and as a professional since 1972. Over the years DLF's services have become more comprehensive and selective but have not lost their essential practical character and the ability to think laterally. Online is a hugely useful development.'

Ian Harrison, Chair, Leicestershire Association for the Disabled



Keeping in touch

Marketing started at home with a shop window display at DLF's Kensington headquarters in 1974, the same year as it commissioned its first exhibition panels to take its message on the road. Three years later the number of requests for speakers was so high that a set of tape slides was prepared to reduce demands on staff.

DLF first sat in the director's chair in 1973 when charitable trust funding allowed it to make a film – 'Not Just a Spectator' – promoting sport for the physically disabled. Three films on fishing followed and in 1981 'Give Us A Chance' to encourage participation in sport by people with learning difficulties. In 1995, the year of its quarter centenary, DLF turned the cameras on itself with the video 'Find Us the Tools'.

Marketing techniques were applied to fundraising, a priority from the start. The Friends of DLF was created in 1971 and the first full-time fundraiser Colonel T.F.S. Christopher was in post by the end of 1972. Fundraising not only brought in income but helped to raise DLF's profile through the media. It could also be fun. Events in the first decade included dog sled racing, fashion shows, the Tring Trek, concerts and theatre previews. Students supported DLF during charity weeks. DLF staff took to the streets, one year raising nearly £150 by singing carols for two hours at Waterloo Station. They also sold Alexandra Roses in Trafalgar Square. Collection boxes circulated, the regulars of the Hand & Flower in Hammersmith Road proving particularly generous.

In the 1980s the marriage of Charles and Diana was celebrated by auctioning an edible model of St Paul's Cathedral. On several occasions DLF went to the dogs, holding fundraising evenings at greyhound race meetings. The Nineties saw an auction of celebrity leg wear including a pair of Cliff Richard's shoes and Derek Jacobi's tights; a sponsored run by the Army from John O' Groats to Land's End and a super-model fashion show. There were fundraising adventure challenges from running the London Marathon to white water rafting in Nepal. In 2006 DLF revived the idea of a celebrity auction, this time on ebay.

As a national charity DLF found it increasingly difficult to compete with local fundraising for disabled people or with the growing number of charities focused on specific conditions. In response, the Trustees pioneered the Care and Share Lottery, a co-operative venture among 21 charities: proving unsuccessful, it was soon disbanded. The idea of a lottery was revived in the early 1990s until the advent of the National Lottery turned DLF from an organiser into a beneficiary. There was a brief experiment with two DLF charity shops. Even loose change counted. In the 1990s new collection cans appeared in Burger King and Boots and DLF was the beneficiary of the coins thrown into the Horses of Helios fountain in Piccadilly Circus.

'I find the work experience rewarding, and given that I am in a wheelchair myself, I can really see the benefits of what DLF does.'

Efloawan Glover, student volunteer

The debate as to whether advertising and sponsorship risk compromising DLF's reputation for independent and impartial information has continued for 40 years. The 1975 annual report carried advertising for the first time, ranging from spa resorts promoted by French Railways to Wheelymac chair covers. Although advertising was dropped from the annual report, the 1990s saw its introduction to the Information Services Handbook for a time.

By now DLF's relationships with industry were becoming closer in other ways. Jointly with BHTA, the leading trade body for equipment suppliers, it launched the Independent Living Design Awards in 1993 attracting over 100 entries in its first year. Businesses increasingly sponsored guides for the general public from air travel to choosing a wheelchair. Today, businesses sponsor sections of *Living made easy* without compromising DLF's reputation for independence. The quality standards that DLF demands are driving change through the equipment industry.

From the mid 1980s there were renewed efforts to reach wider audiences through national exhibitions. DLF first had a modest presence at NAIDEX, the UK's largest exhibition for homecare, disability and rehabilitation, in 1973 with a display of the clothing collection. From 1991 it has run the exhibition's Information Point, directing visitors as to where to find relevant equipment for their needs.

'They don't do any marketing.'

Reaction of Barney Wilson on becoming DLF's Chairman in 1989

Radio and television have always been exploited as a way of reaching mass audiences. In the 1970s Michael Flanders the entertainer who had contracted polio during the Second World War made a fundraising appeal on radio and Edward Woodward, the star of the spy series 'Callan', made a similar plea on television. Rabbi Blue took up the cause on radio in the early 1990s while actor Miriam Margolyes made a similar appeal in late 2009. Television companies also regularly consult DLF about equipment for series on disability. Programmes have included ITV's 'Link', where Niam McAleer became a presenter, and Channel 4's 'One In Four'.

From the mid 1970s. DLF increasingly used market research to evaluate its services, With computerisation came the ability to analyse enquiries and the discovery that the organisation was reaching only 'the tip of the iceberg' with nearly three quarters of enquiries coming from London and the South East. Renewed efforts were made through speaking engagements and road shows to take DLF into other parts of the UK. An evaluation of the new Helpline in 1997 found that 98% of callers were satisfied with the answer to their query and that 100% rated staff as polite and friendly. Evaluation soon became an integral part of DLF's marketing activity.

A new strategy led to the setting up of a joint marketing and publications department in 1992. The first full-colour, 14-page annual report and a new brand identity demonstrated the impact of professional marketing. Although targeted primarily at potential donors and business, the professionals were not forgotten. In 2005 the first DLF Digest, a free bi-monthly newsletter, was delivered to their email boxes.

The web offered new opportunities through supplier and retailer advertising and sponsorship of factsheets, as well as by raising awareness of DLF among silver surfers. Staff had to apply new marketing techniques to benefit, by ensuring that DLF appears high on the list of search results and that it keeps in touch informally through a presence on social networking sites like Twitter. The internet has helped to move DLF from a niche player into the mainstream public eye in its chosen field.



Sharing knowledge

As the first national resource of its kind in Britain and possibly the world, DLF has always believed in sharing knowledge. It was in at the start of what became a global movement of disabled living centres. Although it is often claimed that DLF was the very first such organisation in Britain, the honour goes to the British Red Cross Society's regional Disabled Living Centre in Leicester. In 1959, after it mounted a small exhibition of aids for the disabled, the county's Medical Officer of Health approached it to provide advice and training for community nurses. It opened a permanent equipment demonstration centre in 1970, a year before DLF.

DLF actively encouraged the setting up of such regional centres, Newcastle, Liverpool, Mansfield and Birmingham being among the pioneers. DLF was a founder member of the Joint Aids Centres Council (Assist UK), set up in 1978 as a networking organisation. DLF housed its development worker until the early 1990s when it looked as if the space would be required because of a proposed merger with RADAR, which in fact never happened. Today Assist UK leads a network of over 50 local disabled living centres.

From the start DLF welcomed foreign visitors to study its activities and adopt its model in their own countries. Freda Jacob, founder of the Independent Living Centre of Western Australia in 1977, recalled: 'The greatest thing that has ever happened to me was in 1970 when I heard Barbara Stow talk about the Disabled Living Foundation in England. She said that if we had one in every country we could communicate all the new things that were out and we needn't re-invent the wheel.' National and regional organisations sprung up in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, America and Scandinavia, some as a result of Lady Hamilton's tour of the Far East in 1978. Today DLF is still a role model, attracting professionals and students from places as far afield as Korea, China and Mexico.

In response to a report that service providers 'appear to have little knowledge of the many aids and their existence, purpose and advantages', from 1971 DLF offered one day training courses for physiotherapists and occupational therapists using the resources of the EDC to demonstrate aids applicable to groups of people with specific disabilities. By 1980 training, delivered in a purpose designed suite, was an integral part of DLF's national advisory services in information, equipment, incontinence, clothing and visual impairment. Delivery varied according to demand. In the early 1980s training packages such as 'The Flying Suitcase' and 'The Walking Holdall' were developed for hire.

'Whenever we have had a problem we thought appropriate to bring to him or something he might like to know, we have written or gone to see him.'

Lady Hamilton of Alf Morris as Minister for the Disabled, 1975

In 1988 DLF held its first in-house residential training course, Wider Horizons, which dealt with the long term implications of suffering a stroke. In the 1990s it broadened its reach to care workers, pharmacists and district nurses and moved into disability awareness training for staff in the arts. Delivery moved with the times into distance learning and online courses. Since 2003 DLF has trained thousands of people as trusted assessors, to advise on basic solutions for daily living, thus reducing waiting lists for occupational therapy appointments. It also helps retailers to train staff to advise on the daily living equipment they sell over the counter.

DLF moved into the conference business after a chance social meeting between Rosemary Good, who was preparing an information pack on moving and handling people for DLF, and a staff member from the magazine publishing arm of Macmillan. An informal chat evolved into the first, one-day Moving & Handling People Conference held in Kensington Town Hall in 1995. The Conference attracted one sponsor and two or three exhibitors. It is now a two and a half day event, organised solely by DLF, at the Business Design Centre with over 80 sponsors and exhibitors. Ministers regularly give the opening address as a valuable means of getting across government policy on disability.

DLF has always enjoyed a close relationship with Government. Lady Hamilton had the confidence to drop in on Ministers without an appointment if necessary. In the early 1970s she initiated research into wider issues relating to disability such as the shortage of occupational therapists and the employment of disabled people with professional qualifications. In the 1980s broader themes for research included provision for disabled airline passengers and the feasibility of assisting solicitors preparing cases for compensation for personal injuries by estimating future daily living costs. The latter resulted in DLF moving into fee-based consultancy. Its reputation for sound practical advice meant that Government and other agencies increasingly added DLF to their list of consultees: in 1992, for example, staff participated in over 50 external committees. In the new century DLF's input has shaped government policy on improving equipment provision and integrating community equipment services.



Making ends meet

In 1970 Lady Hamilton wrote: 'If we had more money we could do much more.' Little has changed over the last forty years.

Although the DHSS provided a three-year start up grant and funded the EDC, DLF has always been reliant on fundraising. Sir Patrick and Lady Hamilton regularly called on the chequebooks of their wide network of influential and wealthy friends. She had no qualms about asking them to host fundraising dinners, balls or coffee mornings. Erna Simon, who had been a world champion archer as had her husband Ingo, was a major benefactor: her personal trust provided core funding of £50,000 towards the EDC as well as support for the demonstration garden at Syon Park. Similar gardens were later opened in Battersea Park, the first to be created specifically for disabled gardeners, and at the Royal Horticultural Society's garden at Wisley.

With the establishment of DLF's reputation and the necessary passage of time, legacy income started to flow in from the early 1980s. In 1996 this source of income topped £200,000 for the first time. More than once the opening of an envelope or a telephone call out of the blue has made a major difference.

Despite every effort, lack of money has been a recurrent theme through DLF's history. In 1979-81, the era of sharp inflation and soaring public sector salary bills, DLF's very existence was threatened. Firm financial management, enthusiastic volunteers and a more favourable economic climate rescued DLF in the nick of time. Director Belinda Banham worked part-time from 1979-81 and then on a purely voluntary basis until 1983. By now there were sufficient funds to appoint a new director, Elizabeth Fanshawe. Thanks to polio as a child, she was the first DLF employee to use a wheelchair, having been recruited as an assistant in the EDC in the early 1970s.

By the early 1980s, DLF had run out of space. Projects such as new display areas for the EDC and transferring the information bank to computer had to be put on hold. Staff were 'hot-desking' decades before the practice became fashionable. After a two year search for affordable, premises, DLF purchased its present headquarters in 1984. As Christmas 1984 approached, staff settled into the light, airy offices with 'luxuries' like a lunch room. The move posed a short-term financial headache but proved a long term asset. Some services such as gardening and sport were passed on to other appropriate organisations, always part of Lady Hamilton's philosophy.

'When I came for interview in 2002, I noticed that there were holes in the carpet. This made me suspect that there were also holes in the finances.'

Anwar Islam, Head of Finance and Administration

The worst recession since the Second World War meant more difficult times. Paul Brierley was seconded as Director from the Department of Health to provide a steady hand at the helm. Lady Hamilton's 'can-do' commitment to any issue relating to disability that passed over her desk had resulted in scarce resources being spread rather thinly.

In 1992-3 DLF made a small surplus for the first time in many years thanks to two major bequests. The new chairman, Tom Jackson, looked forward to ‘a leaner, fitter, more efficient DLF’. One of the ways this was achieved was to set up a new advice services team, bringing together the professional expertise throughout DLF and marking the end of special projects.

In the mid 1990s cutbacks in government funding and a trend towards new initiatives rather than the support of established services took DLF in a new direction. With her background in the arts, law and fundraising, from 2001 Director Nicole Penn-Symons breathed new energy into ‘a rather dusty organisation’ by applying a new business model. She took DLF on the road to forge closer sponsorship relationships with equipment suppliers and retailers. Her experience as Director of Lottery Projects at the Arts Council for England proved useful when bidding for funds. Money, however, remained tight and again the Helpline was rescued from closure, this time by a charitable trust. Careful financial management brought DLF back into the black in 2004/5.

‘DLF’s dog sledding expedition to the Arctic changed my life. For the first time in 20 years of being in a wheelchair, I was treated as an equal. I felt a real sense of achievement completing such a challenge.’

Sue Marshall, adventurer



Images (from top):

Charlie Higgins raised funds for DLF by giving up sweets

Judy Woolfenden MBE – inspirational adventurer, explorer and fundraiser for DLF

Prudential staff volunteer at DLF’s offices

Into the future...

DLF history exists to inspire us, not to limit us. We take inspiration from the determination and ability to influence so ably demonstrated by Lady Hamilton. We take inspiration from our history of innovation. Above all, we take inspiration from our past and present contact with older and disabled people, who trust us to listen, advise and inform as they tackle the sometimes difficult circumstances of their lives. It is an inspiration that will shape our future.

In the future we will be the first port of call for older or disabled people, their families and carers who want to live independently, safely and well – and need information and advice to do so.

In the future we will support thousands of professionals every year through our training and information so that they have the right skills and knowledge to work at the highest standards with older or disabled people.

In the future we will reach into every corner of the UK with the expert advice and impartial information we have spent 40 years accumulating.

This history makes it clear that we could not have achieved what we have so far without every bit of the support given by many hundreds of organisations, companies and individuals. A deep thank you goes to everyone who has supported us over 40 years. Please do not stop now. The job is not done. There is just as much, if not more, to do now than at any time in our history. To make the changes we need to, to be that first port of call for older and disabled people and to reach into every corner of the UK – with what we know to be much wanted and needed services – will take every bit as much work and support now, and in the coming ten years, as characterised the last 40.

Christine Shaw, CEO

With our grateful thanks to Elspeth Wills for her pro bono work researching and writing this history.



Language has changed over the forty years since DLF was founded. This document tries to avoid out-of-date terminology unless it forms part of an official title or quote. As a historical document, however, at times such terminology may be provided to show how attitudes have changed over the decades. No offence is intended.



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