



**Speech by Gillian Merron, Cabinet Office  
Minister and Minister for the East Midlands,  
to the In-volve and Digital Public conference  
on 'Communicating Effectively with  
the Hard to Reach', 18<sup>th</sup> October 2007**

Introduction

Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here with you today.

I went into politics to change lives and, in extreme cases, transform them. As a minister, and as an MP, I see people in the unhappiest of circumstances.

People with challenging lives; with complex needs. People who have problems not just with housing but with immigration, social security, tax, childcare, health care. People who need access to many parts of government.

And it's not necessarily that the answers on the surface aren't there for them. We know that in most cases, the services themselves, the help, is in place.

The problem is that those people who would be the government's 'best customers', are also the least likely to be using the services

They are, by definition, hard to reach.

### Social Exclusion Task Force

Communicating with and engaging with the most at risk groups is essential to improving their chances in life.

Not just so they can better access the services they so desperately need, but so we can find out how the services can be better tailored to fit. After all, it is those using services themselves who are best-placed to tell us what works

Engagement also plays a vital role. It gives those people who would otherwise not speak out the chance to be heard. It gives them a voice.

The Social Exclusion Task Force recognises all of these roles. Its remit is to extend the opportunities enjoyed by the vast majority of us to those whose lives have been characterised by deprivation and exclusion. We want to help meet the aspirations of people who find themselves struggling with different problems but we know that to really to do that, it's not enough to provide extra help, we have to really engage with the communities and people we aim to help.

So how are we doing that?

Well let's start with access to services.

### Engagement to access services

Communicating well involves thinking about why people currently aren't engaging. This may be down to obvious factors – language barriers, for example. Or it may be

down to a degree of reticence, apprehension or detachment.

In some cases this can be overcome by involving people from the same background or with similar experiences to the target group in delivering services to them - for example, Southwark's Community Involvement Team.

For others, we need to go further.

I talked about those individuals with complex needs. They tend to come into repeated contact with emergency services, but often don't get the sustained and intensive support that they need in order to make real progress and find long-term solutions.

So a range of pilot projects is now taking place – through the work of the Social Exclusion Task Force and across Government – that aims to build up strong personal relationships between the client and professional through a lead professional model.

For example, the Government's Family Intervention Projects target some of the most challenging families in a local area. Lead professionals work with the family to develop a support plan that considers the needs of the whole family.

Disengagement is not an option. The lead professional will keep calling round, offering a combination of challenge and support. The family communicates with services through the lead professional, who acts as a broker for the family. They have a single line of communication, rather than having to deal with a wide range of different services.

The Family Nurse Partnership also uses this consistent communication approach. This programme targets vulnerable parents-to-be. The health visitor works intensively with the parents from early pregnancy until the child is two. The strong relationship built up between health visitor and parents is crucial to achieving the best start in life- for the baby – as well as for Mum and Dad. In fact, I was recently visiting the Family Nurse Partnership pilots in Derby, when a young father told me how the visiting nurse had helped him fill out an application for

college. It was great to hear an example of how we can utilize the skills of those involved in delivering services to engage and improve results more widely.

It's also about persistence. And personalisation.

### Engagement to shape services

Next I want to talk a bit about how engagement with these groups is shaping what we do as a department, and as a government.

Last week's Pre-Budget Report and Comprehensive Spending Review weren't just about inheritance tax, although I think if you just read Wednesday's front pages you might have felt a little misled.

They were also about changing our public services. Specifically, ensuring that the public has a greater say in the design, delivery and governance of their services.

One of the ways this vision will be realised is by improving approaches that engage hard-to-reach groups.

And to do that, we will need to harness third sector expertise.

As the well trodden advert went – you reach parts that others can't reach.

Because you excel at one-to-one engagement – you are able to talk to individuals and communities that don't want to come to us.

You innovate – finding new ways to tackle old problems.

And you give people a voice, helping them change not just their lives, but the lives of those around them.

Nowhere is this route more obvious than in implementation of the new Socially Excluded Adults Public Service Agreement, another key announcement in last week's PBR. What this means is that the Government has said that supporting vulnerable adults is one of its top priorities.

It's actually the first time there's been a social exclusion PSA, which is particularly noteworthy given that there used to be 600 PSAs and now there are only 30 across the whole Government. This Government priority aims to increase the proportion of socially excluded adults in settled accommodation and employment, education or training. It's about helping people meet their own aspirations of having a home and a job.

Giving those suffering the disadvantage of a learning difficulty, mental health problems, a childhood spent in care or time spent in prison back their life chances. People the third sector excels at reaching out to.

Improving the support offered to socially excluded adults will mean working across all services, and making sure they link up properly together. The difficulties people face are all connected and so services need to join up too.

And to ensure its effectiveness, development of the PSA involved engaging with the very adults it aims to help, to ensure their views were taken wholly into account.

For example, the Task Force ran 11 focus groups with vulnerable adults to gather evidence of what works, and what else was needed.

We consulted commissioners, frontline staff, and around 50 end-users in several locations across the country – from Staffordshire and Southwark.

And officials visited a number of projects including the Revolving Doors programme in Holloway prison and Turning Point in Brixton.

Turning from the development to the delivery of the PSA, we're asking Local Strategic Partnerships to consider the potential for governance structures involving socially excluded adults; collecting information on their needs, perceptions and preferences to improve service delivery; and the potential for having user satisfaction indicators linked to the PSA.

The PBR also announced that the Government is publishing for the first time a Service Transformation Agreement, which underpins delivery of the whole of the

new PSA framework. This Agreement sets out an ambitious programme of reforms including one, key measure regarding effective communication:

To rationalise the plethora of government websites by closing down the majority and moving their content to the Government's two single access websites, Directgov and Businesslink.gov.uk.

These one-stop-shops will give customers access to the information and services they need with much greater speed and ease.

Sometimes good communication is just about using the right words, in the right place.

### Engagement to empower – digital inclusion

There is a growing realisation and hope that the use of digital technology – like the internet – could be an effective tool in offering flexible services to help further tackle social exclusion, as it allows much easier, 'virtual' access to services.

For example, by giving people greater access to hardware such as PCs and mobile phones, as well as broadband, they are more likely to be able to link into discussion or community groups, online learning or training, whatever their age, ability or ethnicity.

The Government has helped to fund computer access for young people who had fallen out of the education system. Its new online community 'Notschool.net' now engages between 500 and 700 young people each year.

And there's lots going on outside of Government too. The 'FixMyStreet' website is developing innovative ways of helping people communicate with local public services, by allowing people to report local problems and issues via a map-based website, and then track the response of the public service responsible.

And that's where digital technology's real power lies. Because it is not just a great tool for improving access, it is also one of the key ways that communication can empower.

Digital technology allows people to access more than information just on school applications, or their local NHS dentist. It can help to break down barriers and strengthen communities. Blogs and websites such as MySpace and Facebook show just how technology can provide a voice to those who may otherwise find it difficult to engage in their wider society.

I want to transform the lives of the people I represent for the better. It's what I was elected to do. I believe we are only beginning to understand the potential of technology to help do that for all members of society.

### Closing words

Communicating with those who are most in need of services is one of the 'Holy Grails' of provision. In many cases, those who most need services are the very people that are least likely to engage with them.

Government doesn't hold all the answers to how this can be done.

So, I'd like to end by asking you what you think. How can we go further? How can we better engage with the most at-risk groups?

This conference is a unique opportunity to share our thoughts on what works.

I look forward to hearing your views.

**Ends**