

Life Chances for Disabled People Response from Action for Blind People

1. Do you broadly agree with the analysis of the issues in the report?

Action for Blind People warmly welcomes the 'Life Chances for Disabled People' report and believes the analysis of the issues to be both intelligent and progressive. We broadly agree with the report but welcome this further opportunity to highlight outstanding areas of concern. We support the long term strategic approach outlined in this report and recognise the need for a vision for the future, guiding principles and policy recommendations. We are keen to see this approach running parallel to the funding, promotion, monitoring, evaluation and continuous improvement of existing services for disabled people.

2. Are there any parts of the report that you disagree with?

The report is informative and well structured and we do not disagree with the issues raised however there is a tension in the language when *employing disabled people* is highlighted as a '*moral imperative*' for employers. This does not positively promote disability but rather serves to reinforce the notion that disabled people are a 'burden' and a 'problem'. We recognise the need for public education but are keen that messages are positive in their nature and tone and therefore would caution against using such emotive language.

3. Are there any serious omissions in the report's analysis?

The limits of this report are clearly outlined in the introduction however Action for Blind People is keen to ensure that the same life chances are afforded to disabled people who;

- have become disabled by losing their sight 'largely in connection with the ageing process'
- prove harder to reach
- have multiple needs

- do not define their primary identity as a disabled person and have not registered formally as such.

Any policies or structures that are developed to increase the participation of users in decision making must be accessible. This report highlights the need for involvement but does not focus in any detail on how they would enable the process; information must be comprehensive yet clear, and accessible in terms of the format and language used. Training and support will need to be provided to enable individuals to fully participate in the design and development of policies and services.

4. There are a number of examples in the analysis report of good practice and a number of issues and gaps are highlighted. Which of these do you think, if addressed, would result in the greatest improvement in disabled people's life chances?

The report provides a thorough analysis of issues and gaps however we are keen to expand on three specific points.

4.1. A needs led approach to service planning and delivery

When planning and developing services for disabled people – who are the real experts that we should be working with? The answer is disabled people themselves. We must deliver the services that disabled people tell us they want, expect and aspire to rather than simply what we think they may need. As the report points out, until now assessments of need have reflected what is needed by service deliverers not by disabled people themselves. We must empower disabled people by involving them in decision making processes, raising (yet managing) their expectations of the role of Government and offering meaningful choices between services including mainstream and specialist options. Enabling users to participate in services that are designed to improve their life chances will result in solutions that focus on positive outcomes rather than resources and processes.

4.2. Delivery of better joined up services

The lack of intelligent planning and an overall framework and vision for the future for disabled people has resulted in the development of fragmented services characterised by duplication and competing

priorities. There are gaps between services and variable quality standards resulting from competition for resources and the 'postcode lottery'. It is vital to improve the integration between both Health and social services and the statutory services and the voluntary and community sector. Precisely because disability is linked to poverty, social exclusion and isolation and often multi agency solutions prove most effective for individuals.

4.3. Equality of Opportunity in Employment

There are several key issues that need addressing; we need to focus on capacity not incapacity and must make work pay. Employer attitudes are prohibitive with 92% of employers believing that blind and partially sighted people are difficult or impossible to employ. We must educate and support employers to recognise the benefits of including disabled people into the workforce.

When people have been supported to find themselves jobs the key is to ensure that they stay in them and have opportunities to progress and to pursue career aspirations. However some disabled people benefit from working in supported environments and it is important that these individuals are not excluded from work. It is also interesting to note that 13% of disabled people are self employed which is higher than the figure for non disabled people (11%).

5. In the next phase of the project we will be looking at a few key policy options. Which policy options are taken forward will depend on a number of factors, including what impact would it have, how practical it is, evidence of need, and fit with other activities? We would like your views on what key policy option(s) should be taken forward

We have identified a number of existing policies that need further development or enforcement and in addition to this have highlighted some new policies that Action for Blind People would like to see implemented. It is fundamental to ensure that the voice of disabled people is heard and that they are included in policy design and development.

5.1. Existing Policies

a) ADSS 'Progress in Sight' Standards

The Association of Directors of Social Services in collaboration with RNIB, Guide Dogs etc have produced a comprehensive set of guidelines, 'Progress in Sight: National Standards of Care for Visually Impaired Adults'. The 16 guidelines contained in this lay out a strong and thorough plan for supporting blind and partially sighted adults. However Progress in Sight outlines *guidelines* and therefore they cannot be enforced by the ADSS. Government needs to look at finding ways to make these guidelines enforceable and to ensure that all Social Service teams are implementing them. A similar set of standards needs to be developed and enforced for visually impaired children and young people.

Social Service teams are also struggling to provide services to blind and partially sighted people due to a lack of staff in their sensory impairment teams. Limited resources is part of the problem however more often this shortage is the result of a lack of high calibre trained and experienced staff applying for available posts. This problem is compounded by a lack of sensory impairment teams across the country. Many Social Services have combined their provision with other disability teams and this has led to the marginalisation of specialists and a decrease in the level of service provided to blind and partially sighted people. We would like to see Government encourage sensory impairment teams and investigate ways to increase and improve staffing in these teams.

b) Employment Programmes/Policies

In recent years Government has done much to promote the employment of disabled people and we welcome this. However 75% of blind and partially sighted people of working age are unemployed – a shocking figure that remains unchanged from 10 years ago. There are several actions Government can now take to improve the employment rate amongst blind and partially sighted people:

- ensure that meeting the needs of blind and partially sighted people forms an integral part of any service provision designed to assist disabled people into work. Pan-disability employment programmes appear to be failing visually impaired people.

- promote Access to Work, and increase the resources available to this scheme to cope with the increased demand which is likely to result from the extension of the Disability Discrimination Act.
- increase the awareness of employers regarding their duties and responsibilities under the Disability Discrimination Act.
- continue to support the Workstep programme and encourage Local Authorities to do so. Supported employment is crucial for blind and partially sighted people who are not yet ready for open employment.

c) Promotion v Enforcement

The introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act in 1995, and its subsequent strengthening, has made a positive difference to the lives of disabled people. However there is still much to do. The current Draft Disability Bill and the Government's recent response to the Joint Committee's report increases our confidence that many of the gaps in the current legislation will soon be addressed. We hope that this legislation is introduced quickly and that both it and the DDA are enforced. However this is just half of the story.

Government needs to work to promote positive images of disability and to educate the public. Awareness of disability is now on the curriculum for citizenship lessons in schools but general awareness of disability remains low. Government needs to work to increase awareness and understanding of the social model of disability and the barriers and disabling environments that people face. They need to focus on what disabled people can do rather than on what they can't. The message needs to move on from 'helping disabled people,' to providing the correct support in a timely fashion and then enabling them to help themselves and be independent.

5.2. Policy Developments

a) Point of Diagnosis

The time around the point at which someone is diagnosed as losing their sight is crucial. 100 people a day are told they are losing their sight and one in five people will have to wait at least one year before getting help. We know that targeted, tailored, up to the minute

support at the point of diagnosis can have a long lasting and significant positive impact on the life of that person.

At present, provision of support at the point of diagnosis is patchy in some areas and virtually non-existent in others. Neighbouring health authorities often provide dramatically differing levels of support to people with a visual impairment.

We would like Government to ensure that support is provided at this key point of transition. All eye clinics and ophthalmology units need to have point of diagnosis provision and ring fenced funding to provide this provision. Currently 80% of blind and partially sighted people say that they rarely or never have the opportunity to speak to someone at the Point of Diagnosis. Intervention at this point is critical to ensuring the continued independence and self confidence of the newly diagnosed person and will also save the Government resources in the long run.

Action for Blind People currently runs Point of Diagnosis services offering free and impartial advice to newly diagnosed people in the North East of England. We have found that where people receive suitable and timely support they are more likely to remain independent. Any service offered by the Government needs to provide:

- Free and impartial advice about all aspects of sight loss
- Welfare Rights advice including the type of benefits they are entitled to claim
- Support to retain their job, including information on Access to Work
- Support in terms of housing options and equipment
- Advice and support for children affected by sight loss
- Information on the latest technology
- Demonstration of daily living aids to make every day life much easier
- Signposting to local organisations

b) Joined up working between Social Services, Health Services and Housing teams

Government policy must reflect the need for health, housing, and Social Services to coordinate their activities. Disabled people need to know where to turn for support and advice. For example in the visual impairment sector, low vision equipment services are provided in 67 different settings such as opticians, one-stop shops and eye clinics to name but a few. And there are over 31 different agencies or professionals that could be involved in the process from opticians and optometrists to rehabilitation workers. We must beware of duplicating services and ensure that people do not fall, forgotten, through the gaps between service providers.

Combined with a Point of Diagnosis scheme, joint working between these three crucial departments could enable blind and partially sighted people to continue to live independent lives whilst enabling them to access support when they need it. A key worker scheme whereby blind and partially sighted people are allocated a contact within Social Services, or through the Point of Diagnosis scheme. They can then either provide direct support or confidently refer on to support in all three areas is crucial to improving the service that blind and partially sighted people receive.

c) Introduction of Paid Disability Leave

Action for Blind People firmly believe that the introduction of a period of paid disability leave would enable newly diagnosed blind and partially sighted people time to rehabilitate and learn new independence skills.

Like many newly disabled employees, people who develop sight loss often give up their work unnecessarily because they believe difficulties that have arisen cannot be overcome. This is also true of those whose condition worsens. Action for Blind People believes that a process of paid Disability Leave is necessary to allow these people time away from work to adjust and learn new working methods and for the employer to make the adaptations needed to enable the employee to resume work.

Disability Leave should begin with an initial assessment involving the individual, their employer and where necessary, a specialist adviser.

This results in an action plan, designed to bring about the changes they have agreed. If a period off work is needed to carry out the plan, this will be regarded as a period of Disability Leave when the employee's job and income should be protected.

d) Passport to Benefits and Reform of the Disability Living Allowance

Disability benefits need reforming in order to enable more blind and partially sighted people to claim all that they are entitled to. Action for Blind People believe that the current benefit system discriminates against blind and partially sighted people and people aged 65 and over; a group who are also statistically more likely to be blind and partially sighted.

Currently it is estimated that 94% of blind and partially sighted people don't receive all the benefits to which they may be entitled. Research also shows that people with sight problems face increased costs of living due to their sight problem that are not met by disability benefits. Much evidence suggests that loss of mobility and the ability to communicate can lead to a loss of independence, isolation and social exclusion.

We would like the Government to ensure that:

- people with sight problems are eligible to receive the higher rate mobility component of Disability Living Allowance (DLA)
- registered blind people are passported to receive the higher rate mobility component of DLA
- partially sighted people are passported to receive lower rate mobility component
- Attendance Allowance (AA) is replaced by DLA (or for AA to have a mobility component and lower care rate). This would mean that people who become blind or partially sighted (or disabled) from the age of 65 will have the same benefit entitlements as someone who becomes disabled before they are 65.
- disabled people are eligible to receive the winter fuel allowance
- the DWP introduces take-up targets for DLA and AA in order to increase the take up of disability benefits.

e) Accessible Sport for All

Action for Blind People believes that blind and partially sighted people should have equal access to sports and leisure facilities. Access to sport is vital to the health and fitness of disabled people. Action for Blind People runs Actionnaires clubs providing sporting opportunities to visually impaired children and young people. Through the clubs we have seen the impact that participation in sport can have on the lives of these young people in terms of increased confidence, self esteem and fitness.

We would like to see the Government introduce policies to ensure that disabled people have equal access to sport and leisure opportunities. Government should ensure that:

- funding is made available to ensure that all local authority run sports and leisure facilities are fully accessible
- funding is made available to ensure that all staff at local authority run sports and leisure facilities have received comprehensive disability awareness training and know how to best enable a disabled person to take part in sport
- a requirement for school sports teachers to support disabled children to take part in sport at school is introduced, funded and enforced.

f) Community Equipment Provision

The provision of basic equipment which enables visually impaired people to remain independent should be provided by Government. For example deaf and hard of hearing people are not expected to provide their own digital hearing aid, so why are blind and partially sighted people expected to provide their own liquid level indicators and CCTVs?

Currently there is some patchy provision of equipment for blind and partially sighted people. Some equipment, such as magnifiers, are currently available from a variety of statutory sources including Low Vision Services, ophthalmologists and the ICES (Integrating Community Equipment Service) but what, if anything, someone will receive is very much a postcode lottery. Government needs to instigate a policy of providing suitable equipment to all blind and partially sighted people who need it. The ICES goes someway towards this and it could be further coordinated through a Point of

Diagnosis service and joint working between health, housing and Social Services. If Government were to buy equipment in bulk to provide such a service it could be expected that the price of equipment would fall, as the price of digital hearing aids did when the Government commissioned them for the NHS. Government needs to look beyond merely providing magnifiers when it comes to community equipment for blind and partially sighted people.

5.3. Implementation

The key to implementing policy recommendations for disabled people will be to ensure that; the disabled person is at the heart of planning, constructive targets are set for statutory agencies and also that partnerships are developed and nurtured with a range of voluntary and community organisations. It is a positive trend that the voluntary sector is increasingly commissioned by the Government to deliver services for disabled people. The key is early and coordinated intervention. A multi agency approach will ensure that as a result of integrated planning fewer people fall through the gaps, that those with multiple needs are effectively catered for and that we offer meaningful choice instead of chaos and confusion. We must also ensure that there is a greater emphasis on transitional planning so that life chances do not decline at key points of transition. In addition to working together to deliver services and share best practice it is key that the outcomes are shared – owned by individuals themselves not services and agencies. Accountability is crucial – we must all work together because we cannot and must not fail disabled people but must seek to do the most we can not the least we can get away with to dismantle social barriers in line with the social model of disability.

6. About Action for Blind People

Action for Blind People is one of the UK's leading registered charities working with blind and partially sighted people. We currently provide direct support for more than 20,000 people each year. Our mission is **'to inspire change and create opportunities to enable blind and partially sighted people to have equal voice and equal choice'**. We provide support in four main areas:

- **Work:** Action's Employment Development Teams provide a free, impartial service to support blind and partially sighted people of working age, and employers with a range of employment related concerns. Teams are across England with three supported employment factories in London, Norfolk and Salisbury.
- **Housing:** Action's Your Choice service supports blind and partially sighted people of any age to access and enjoy the home environment of their choice. Action also offers a range of comfortable, affordable housing and accommodation to meet the varying needs and expectations of blind and partially sighted.
- **Leisure:** Action manages four quality Hotels offering holiday breaks to blind and partially sighted people, their families and friends. We also work with mainstream leisure providers to promote more accessible holiday breaks. Action is also working to increase sporting and leisure opportunities for blind and partially sighted people.
- **Support:** Action for Blind People provides free, impartial information and advice on all issues connected with visual impairment to blind and partially sighted people, their families, friends and carers and professionals and service providers through our National Helpline and two Mobile Information and Advice Units.

Action for Blind People has a wide range of experience delivering direct services for visually impaired people. Through our range of activities, we are committed to increasing opportunities for blind and partially sighted people as well as working towards changing attitudes.

Registered Charity No: 205913