

## Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People

### Response to the Analytical Report

The report is very welcome. I am particularly pleased to find articulation of the social approach to disability and its importance for disabled people. The emphasis on dismantling disabling barriers is an approach that is more likely to bring about social inclusion for disabled people than an approach based on individual impairment. There is much in the paper that I endorse and I look forward to future emerging policy.

I have not formulated my response using the set of questions but my comments refer both to the paper overall and to particular sections. However, in response to question 4 I believe that if policy and strategy combine to make a real difference to inclusion for disabled people they must represent 'joined up' thinking in many different areas. Making improvements in some areas while leaving others untouched will make little difference to the overall picture. One very important way of making sure that all initiatives are appropriate and make a difference is to base them firmly within the social approach to disability.

#### Overview

1. I find the language used in the paper confusing. It begins by referring to the social model of disability and identifies people with 'learning difficulties' as being disabled people. However, later in the paper the term 'learning disability' is used. In the same way the paper refers to both disabled people and 'a person with a disability'.

If policy is to be based firmly in a social model of disability, then the language of the Analytical Report should reflect this. I believe that the language we use is the most important tool available to us in shaping conceptual thinking and bringing about changes in attitude. By talking about 'learning disability' and 'a person with a disability' the emphasis goes back to an individual impairment, rather than the barrier that discriminates against a person with an impairment. Terms that are consistent with the social model include disabled people, people with impairments and learning difficulties.

2. The Report does refer to the interaction of a variety of factors and the cumulative effect of disadvantage in several areas. Having reflected on this issue, those disabled people who are most likely to lead independent lives are also most likely to be those who do not face barriers in other areas. It is important to concentrate exclusively on disability in some initiatives because even though overarching principles may be similar, solutions need to be tailored to meet specific situations. One of the most effective ways of reducing disability would be to ensure that people with impairments have sufficient life chances through rigorous implementation of civil rights. This would not reduce impairment, but would empower and enable individuals in a variety of different situations.

3. Reference is made to the importance of disabled people recognising their own responsibility to take appropriate steps to increase inclusion for themselves. However, institutional disablism that has been experienced over many years will cause low self esteem and lack of belief in individual rights. Reversing negative attitudes amongst disabled people themselves is a long-term and difficult process. Disability equality training for disabled people is essential to equip them with positive attitudes and beliefs about their own capabilities and rights.

### Heterogeneity (Summary page 7)

Like gender and ethnicity, individuals have no choice about whether or not they have impairments. Attitudes of others towards impairment, including that of the Government, seem to attempt to reduce heterogeneity through assumption and legislation.

Non-disabled people tend to assume that disabled people share a common identity, that they are dependent and have a very low quality of life. This is apparent in the way that disabling barriers are constructed as part of the 'normal' physical environment. Facilities that are in place tend to reflect stereotypical requirements rather than reflect the diverse needs of individuals in our society.

Legislation related to the payment of benefits, also attempts to reduce heterogeneity. If people with impairments are to retain maximum independence and be economically productive they will need access to expensive equipment and technology. This can help to provide similar life chances with peers in similar socioeconomic circumstances, who are pursuing similar careers.

Means-testing that is based on a level of income determined by income support reduces all individuals to a similar, low income group. Personal income, that may have been earned before impairment, must be used to offset the cost of remaining independent. Choice and independence are greatly reduced through this reduction in income and the end result can be an individual dependent solely on state provision of services. These services are not sufficient or appropriate to bring about independence or to enable some disabled individuals to contribute effectively in society.

### Transition

As disabled young people move towards becoming young adults, they are unlikely to experience the same opportunities for independence that are available for their nondisabled peers. Many of the services provided for them will have been designed for adults and may not be suitable. Mentoring by disabled adults coupled with the use of direct payments would improve life chances. By themselves direct payments will not bring about improvements.

They need to be accompanied by structures designed to support young people and their parents in realising the potential of direct payments.

Consideration also needs to be given to better coordination of allocation of resources. Given that assessment should be needs-led rather than service driven, the role of service providers as gatekeepers is not appropriate. Budgets are, and always will be, limited, but combining gatekeeping with provision, is likely to prevent movement towards development of cost-effective, alternative services

### Employment

Many references are made in the full report to the disabling barriers presented by the benefits system. A further barrier relates to the way that the rules are interpreted by benefits officers. Two people in identical situations can be treated differently. They might receive different advice and information, and ultimately be paid different benefits. This is neither fair nor equitable and reflects 'a postcode lottery'.

There is a great emphasis on economic activity. The value of voluntary work is referred to, but should receive greater emphasis. Many disabled people work long hours entirely on a voluntary basis helping statutory organisations to improve their services for disabled people. The experience and expertise of disabled people is essential to the design and development of cost-effective services. There is little recognition of the value this adds. Systems are only in place to support those in paid employment. For example, access to work is not available for those receiving remuneration to serve on a public body.

Undertaking this kind of voluntary work can help to improve employment opportunities for disabled people.

When a fee is offered, some disabled people are not able to accept payment because it would affect payment of benefits. In other instances payment is neither offered nor available. Disabled people are working as consultants and should expect to be appropriately rewarded.

An agreed national system for financial reward, for working with local authorities (aligned with an improved benefits system) would help to increase social inclusion. When disabled people and service providers work effectively together public money is used more appropriately and this brings economic benefit to the community.

Reference is made to 'reservation wage' (summary, page 27). After payment of taxes etc, individuals have some choice over the way they use their income. It is not a choice if income must be spent on the equipment required to retain independence. If this expenditure reduces available income then disabled individuals may be prevented from playing an economic role. Impairment is not a matter of choice. Currently some elements of legislation

penalise impairment, and the more severe the impairment the greater the penalty.

An example of such a penalty can be seen in the expectation that local authorities will recoup 9% of the SSA through charging for their services. This charge can increase dependence through reduction in income. As the hourly charge is decided by individual local authorities the 'postcode lottery' remains.

Severe impairment requires an increased number of hours when care is provided and often increases the number of carers employed at one time. This will attract a high charge. This can be explored in some detail by making a comparison with other service provision. Adults have a choice about whether or not they become parents. State education is compulsory and provided at no cost for parents/guardians. If this service attracted a charge in the same way as services provided by Social Services, parents/guardians would be expected to pay for the education their son or daughter received. This could include a means test to see if individual parents could afford to pay and the more children in the family receiving education the higher the charge would be. Any such system would cause a national outcry!

Reference is also made to the social effect of a welfare state. The way that services are provided by a welfare state can create dependence. In some areas there has been movement towards recognition that disabled people are consumers. Many people (current estimates 1.2 million) are employed in the provision of social care. Jobs in this sector rely on continued dependence of disadvantaged groups.

The challenge for our society is in moving towards a citizenship model that recognises the rights of disabled people, facilitating choice and control. A citizenship model is underpinned by a requirement for accountability and personal responsibility.

#### A Further Factor for Consideration

The whole concept of 'charity' and disabled people is not explored. There is a tension between charitable activity and mainstream activity. It is my belief that one of the reasons equality for disabled people lags well behind that of other disadvantaged groups, is related to disabled people being considered as objects of pity and therefore deserving of charity. An approach that supports achievement of rights partly through charitable handouts, does nothing to improve equality.

The attitude that disabled people should be supported by voluntary contribution through charity is one that is deeply ingrained in our society. This is reflected in a reluctance to pay disabled individuals for their contributions in the same way as any other consultant would be paid.

Disabled people are expected to give their time free in return for voluntary support from the community.

There is an expectation that any initiative aimed at improving quality of life for disabled people will be supported by funds raised from charity, trusts, etc. This expectation means that disabled people are seldom seen as ordinary citizens in a diverse society.