

STRATEGY UNIT - IMPROVING THE LIFE CHANCES OF DISABLED PEOPLE

Response by Leonard Cheshire to the Unit's interim report, August 2004

Background

Leonard Cheshire is the UK's largest voluntary sector provider of support to disabled people. It supports over 21,000 disabled people in the UK (90% in their own homes, 10% in residential care homes) offering flexible services to meet their needs. The charity campaigns for the rights of disabled people in the UK and raises awareness of the issues affecting them. The charity also works with disabled people in 57 countries worldwide, working in partnership with more than 255 autonomous and locally managed services and organisations.

We are pleased with the breadth and depth of the Unit's consultation with relevant stakeholders but are alarmed by the apparent absence of any real engagement with local government - which delivers a significant proportion of "life improving" services to disabled people. We recognise the ministerial contribution of the education, health, local government and social services lead government departments on the steering group, but feel that this is no substitute for engaging with local government and NHS agencies directly. Unless the important role that such local service providing and commissioning agencies play in disabled people's lives is properly and fully examined, the impact of the Strategy Unit's final report will be limited. The relationship between central government policy intention and the delivery of services locally is, we argue, pivotal to any study of this nature.

The report does not appear to have given regard to the situation in Scotland, where many key aspects of public services are delivered by the Scottish Executive. Given that areas such as access to work and benefits require joint working between Scottish Ministers and the DWP, the work of the Strategy Unit would be greatly enhanced by the involvement of representatives of the Scottish Executive.

Similarly, with the delivery of public services in Wales being largely devolved to the National Assembly, working closely with Ministers in the Welsh Assembly will be vital. The National Assembly's statutory obligation to promote and incorporate equality of opportunity as a cross-cutting issue must also be taken into account.

We are responding to the **Executive Summary** of the Strategy Unit's Interim Report.

Response

Heterogeneity

Disabled people also become disabled by barriers arising from society's low expectations of their abilities and negative attitudes e.g. "deserving poor", which are reinforced by a lack of familiarity with disabled people. Leonard Cheshire in its 2002 social exclusion report "*Inclusive Citizenship*",¹ explored the link between familiarity and negativity. There was a significant lessening of non-disabled people's negative perceptions about disabled people and their abilities when non-disabled people had regular contact with disabled people, notably through the work place.

Important trends

New technologies have a powerful positive role to play in improving disabled peoples life chances. However, the growing "digital divide" has the potential to alienate many disabled people from essential information as IT becomes increasingly the principal means of dissemination. It could also further reinforce disabled people's social and political isolation as they feel dislocated from social "chatter" and hence an ability to engage and contribute as a result. Closing the divide also hides potential perverse negative effects in that, by increasing accessibility to IT for disabled people, it may be that retail services and some forms of employment may become IT and hence home based thereby reducing opportunities to socially engage.

Rights, roles and responsibilities

Services must be provided that are deemed appropriate by both society and the people who will use those services. The importance of the role of end service users in determining appropriate services cannot be overemphasised. However, it must be recognised that there may be competition between various social groups based on issues such as perceived privilege (e.g. Blue Badge parking) when implementing service delivery. This needs to be acknowledged.

Routes into employment

Additional factors which would assist disabled people into work are things like workplace based social care services, accessible transport and greater consideration being given to preparing disabled people for work, particularly those who have never worked or been out of employment for a considerable time. It is important that voluntary work and disabled people's self-care are afforded a similar status, so that those disabled people who are unable to enter into full-time paid work, for whatever reason, are not disadvantaged by perception, stigma and a sense of low worth. A clear mutual benefit of more disabled people in the workplace is that levels of familiarity will rise and negativity fall¹.

¹ Knight, J., Heaven, C. & Christie, I. (2002) *Inclusive Citizenship*, Leonard Cheshire: London

Clarity of vision

Early intervention by service providers can be critical in empowering disabled people and preventing dependence. An example is the lack of innovation and imagination in local authority social services commissioning strategies that tend to intervene too late, creating distress for clients and an unnecessary and avoidable burden on other agencies. Leonard Cheshire reviewed this in its response to the Department of Health's "Vision for Adult Social Care" consultation response (attached). There needs to be a greater focus on the long term when commissioning and delivering services with purchasers, seeing this as an investment rather than an immediate budget burden. There is a prevailing short term and risk averse culture in many public services - "we have always done it like this, so we will continue to do so". This will always militate against dynamic schemes such as Direct Payments, which would give disabled people the power to improve their own lives – as they choose.

Conclusion

There are many good services available, which if more easily available would significantly improve disabled people's life chances. We have alluded to some, principally in the field of social care, in this response. Specific improvements would include:

- Easily available information about what services are available, from where and at what cost
- Greater clarity about eligibility and charging – specifically to address issues about a sense of unfairness and rationing
- Longer term thinking within public services, looking beyond the immediate and delivering services to meet envisaged needs
- Moves to remove barriers between service providing agencies – not just in terms of pooled budgets but also who makes the decisions
- Finally, the creation of an administrative function to oversee the effective implementation of central government service delivery policy intentions at local levels across all agencies.

[end]

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