

Dear Sir/Madam

I would like to receive regular email updates about the above project.

But just to give you some hints as to what is/has been happening for so long (which I'm sure will be confirmed by the social exclusion report that is about to be published) are in my opinion, as follows:

I work in the field of mental health and what I have found is that when we think about social and particularly economic contributions we more than often enough end up talking about employment. The facts are that disabled people are less likely to be employed than able bodied people. You are more likely to be employed if you have a criminal record than if you have a mental health problem! In fact only 13% of people with long term mental health problems are employed as opposed to 38% of people who are physically disabled.

Why?

Because of the stigma and discrimination that comes from having a mental health diagnosis. Loss of family, friends, social networks, leads to isolation. Poor social and economic outcomes as self esteem lowers and really you question what is the point of getting out of bed? I'm invisible, I don't earn any money, people are scared of me, community services are frightened to engage with me. I'm alone.

What can be done?

Sort out the benefit system for a start! There is no point in commissioning these reports when anecdotal evidence will tell you that people who are disabled or who become disabled usually lose their means of income and have to resort to the state for support. The state does not support them in going back to work in a "staged" way, but only in a full time way. Many people are not in a position to do this. Make the benefit system less punitive and more flexible. Work with the DWP on this. If people have limited funds, how are they supposed to participate in the social aspect of life? Why should they come off benefits when they aren't going to be better off? How can you have a system that means it is better not to work than work - particularly if you want to! But that is the system that we have.

If people with mental health problems and other disabilities became more visible this would in turn combat the "us" and "them" stigma that surrounds society. There is no "us" and "them" as 1 in 4 of us will experience a mental health difficulty which could turn us into the disabled mentioned in your report at any time. Positive personal experience is the best way of combating stigma, but how people are expected to do that if they are wasting away in an isolated bedsit not communicating with others or being seen

because public places like gyms and leisure centres don't encourage this is beyond me. Their lives may be suffering but those who have these stigmatising beliefs are also suffering as they never get challenged and have a chance to change.

I am not saying this because these are all theories that have no basis. I am currently in the process of setting up a supported employment programme for "disabled" people and the minutiae of the benefit system just seems designed to keep people from making an economic and social contribution. Many people want to work, but as soon as they start to earn anything over £20 a week they will be penalised in some kind of way, with housing benefit, council tax etc etc affected. There is very little provision built into the system if people get ill again and no support exists to help people go at a pace that suits them and in some cases their health difficulties.

What are its implications?

You have a massive work force who want to work, could work given a bit of financial and other kinds of support, but are not able to. Many of these people have degrees and a wealth of expertise and experience that is not being used. This would show people that having a mental health problem is not the end of the world (as most people fear) but you can go on to recover and live a healthy fulfilling life that contributes enormously to society.

I hope and pray that what I have written above are the kind of findings that you experience. I do applaud the fact that this report is being undertaken, but hope that you will listen to what people say and make real recommendations that are going to have an impact on people's lives where it counts.

Thank you for taking the time to read this. I'm sorry if I have gone on about this subject, but it is something I feel strongly about.

Kind regards

Stephanie McKinley