

Strategy Unit
Cabinet Office
Admiralty Arch
The Mall
London SW1A 2WH

6 May 2005

Dear Sirs,

Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People

Ricability (Research Institute for Consumer Affairs) is an independent consumer research and information charity that works exclusively with older and disabled consumers. It was founded in 1962 by the UK Consumers' Association, publishers of *Which?* but is now independent of them. Most of its board, including the Chairman have personal experience of disability.

Our aims are to provide disabled consumers with unbiased, practical and authoritative information on products and services that help them live independently, and to carry out research with disabled people into the issues that affect their lives. We are the only organisation in the UK dedicated to carrying out tests of products and services for disabled consumers. More information about us can be found in the enclosed annual report and at our website at www.ricability.org.uk

We were very interested and encouraged to read *Improving the life chances of disabled people*. It has now been considered by our Trustees and staff. We were impressed by the scope of the paper and by the radical solutions it proposed to some long-standing problems. As a disability organisation with its roots in the consumer movement we particularly applaud the transfer of power from service providers to disabled people themselves.

Our comments on the paper are confined to those aspects that lie close to our own work and concerns.

Local authorities

The paper stresses the importance of the role of local authorities since they deliver many services locally. It proposes that each area should have a user-led organisation which will provide information, advocacy, assistance, consumer audits of local services and more. This implies a considerable level of specialist expertise. We would argue that some central support would be needed because some of these activities are highly specialised. For example consumer audits have established methodologies. If they are to be carried out to a consistent standard a methodological framework and technical advice would be essential. It would be useful to know how this is to be done, and how it is proposed to tap areas of existing knowledge and expertise.

Measures to facilitate the smooth transition into adulthood

The paper recognised that there is a gap between the services provided for children and those intended for adults. These do not match, and there is little to make the move from one to the other easy. Ricability has long been aware that there is little information for disabled teenagers that cover their own preoccupations in the right idiom. The paper underlines that information is needed, but appears to see this largely in terms of information for parents and for families rather than being directed at young people themselves. We consider that there is a need for information to be provided in a way that has credibility among young people and is not seen as an adjunct to that provided for adults. Some of the concerns expressed in the paper echo our own proposals to set up a teen magazine some years ago.

Our feasibility study into a magazine for disabled teenagers concluded that information for disabled teenagers was sparse and unenticing. Disability publications were seen as being aimed at older people while mainstream magazines for young people were not willing to cover disability issues in any depth or frequency. There was no publication for disabled teenagers which provides information they needed. Our discussions with disabled teenagers, disability organisations and the editors of current teen magazines suggested that such a publication would be welcomed by disabled teenagers and disability organisations. It would have to have the immediate appeal of mainstream publications and be genuinely rooted in the concerns, aspirations and lifestyles of its readers. A key requirement would be that the content should be determined and be largely written by people with recent and first hand experience of being a disabled teenager. We suggest that this approach should be revisited in the light of the concerns of *Improving the life chances of disabled people*.

Providing support and incentives for getting and staying in employment

Proposals for the continuation of *the New Deal for Disabled People* and other initiatives such as the *Pathways to Work* are welcome. Work-based rehabilitation, changes to the procedures for assessments for incapacity benefit and better training are likely to be effective in achieving a greater level of

Independent living

We warmly welcome the stress put on Independent living and the detailed proposals for making this a real possibility. Recognition that efforts in this area should be seen as an investment because it shifts people out of dependency marks a long overdue cultural shift in the way disability is regarded.

The problems of service delivery and organisation summarised in the paper chimed in with the findings of research we have carried out over the years. We therefore recognise the proposal to replace the patchwork of service provision with personal budgets, controlled by individual consumers as being both radical and ambitious. This very major change will put disabled consumers in the driving seat and we endorse it with enthusiasm.

We have three main observations:

Information

The paper recognised that high quality information will be crucial to the success of this development since disabled consumers will be taking responsibility for choosing the services they will receive. We were pleased to see that it foresaw the need for details of 'how to find your way around the system' as well as for information about the benefits and services themselves; our own experience has shown that both these are necessary.

The paper stressed the importance of peer advice and advocacy, taking as a model Centres for Independent Living. However it did not consider in any detail the role of national information, either in discussing what might be required or how it might feed into and support the service provided by local information points. The relationship between local and national information was a subject we explored in our evaluation of the DoH National Disability Information Project in the mid 1990s. We know that local information providers themselves need authoritative information, and that there are strong economic and methodological arguments for providing some of this centrally.

Our other main concern is in the delivery of information. Consumers can only be empowered if they have the information they need. Often those who need information the most are not aware of its existence, never ask for it or have just assumed that whatever is provided would not be relevant to them. Information needs to be prepared in forms that encourage and enable its use, and be proactively delivered to those who need it. We have many years' experience of providing information to consumers, and would welcome the opportunity of contributing to the development of the information services outlined in the paper.

Equipment.

The paper acknowledges that providing appropriate equipment and adaptations increases independence, reduces the need for personal assistance and reduces health problems. With DoH funding we are producing an electronic interactive guide to powered wheelchairs that will pilot a method of providing information that is individually tailored to the person receiving it. This model may be of value to the network of information services outlined in the paper. We were also interested in the paper's reference to the need for information that collates local and national users' views of services, equipment, and other support. Collecting and interpreting consumer feedback is an integral part of our work and is therefore an area in which our experience may be helpful.

employment among the disabled population. We fully endorse proposals for better information for both employees and employers.

The paper quotes research that gives somewhat conflicting information on the success of the *Access to Work* scheme and recommends that the scheme be reoriented to provide more personalised support. We have anecdotal and first hand information about the shortcomings of this scheme and have received several requests to carry out research among disabled employees about their experiences and perceptions. This ground may now have been well covered, but we consider that any changes to the scheme be research led and monitored to ensure it fully meets the needs of disabled employees.

General comments

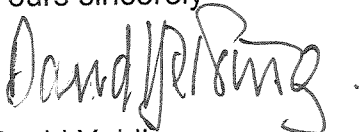
The aims of the paper are far-reaching and are set to revolutionise many vital services. The time table, with its 25 year horizon, is a long one. We hope and expect sufficient resources will be forthcoming to support the scale of this vision, and that support from all political parties will ensure that it survives any changes in priorities during that time.

We welcome the new Office of Disability Issues which will coordinate work. Naturally enough, the participation of disabled people is seen by the paper as being essential at all levels. To this end we also welcome the National Forum for Organisations of Disabled People. However the paper does not say much about the composition of this new organisation, who will be eligible to join or what its precise role would be. We would welcome the opportunity to contribute to this Forum once it has been set up.

We were pleased to see that the importance of collaborative working between government departments and between other organisations was to be encouraged, since the disability field has been characterised by its fragmentation.

As a research organisation with a central interest in several of the areas discussed in the paper we look forward to working with government departments and others to further the aims of the paper. We would like to discuss how we might contribute to some of the areas outlined. The effective provision of information is absolutely essential to consumer empowerment and lies at the centre of everything we do. Our chairman, Graham Corbett, and myself would welcome the opportunity to discuss this very difficult but vital subject with the Strategy Unit and with those in the DWP and other departments who will be responsible for the implementation of *Improving the life chances of disabled people*.

Yours sincerely



David Yelding
Director