

Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People

Shaw Trust's Comments on the

Strategy Unit Disability Project

Analytical Report

1. Introduction

Shaw Trust welcomes the opportunity to offer its comments on the analytical report presented by the Strategy Unit's Disability Project. Shaw Trust has, for the past 22 years, been at the forefront of the provision of employment related services for disabled and disadvantaged people; during that time we have seen at first hand many of the barriers which prevent disabled people from being properly included in society. We have played our part in assisting the breakdown of those barriers and our experience over the past two decades has taught us that barriers change as progress is made.

When Shaw Trust was founded it was almost unheard of for severely disabled people to be employed anywhere outside segregated workshop provision. Many disabled people's expectations for themselves were limited by the expectations of others. Today, many more severely disabled people expect to be properly included in society and also to make their contribution to it, through participation in the world of work. More disabled people are participating in work and are playing a more visible and active role in society, yet barriers remain. All policy makers and service providers have a duty to continually challenge the role they play in shaping disabled people's expectations to fit within both the infrastructure of existing services and the resources available. Shaw Trust embraces this challenge and it warmly supports the publication of this Strategy Unit Analytical Report. Our comments in this paper are made in the spirit of supporting the overall aim of this Disability Project and in sharing the desire to make a real difference to the opportunities open to disabled people to improve the quality of life of themselves and their families.

Shaw Trust offers this paper as a first contribution to the development of the policy recommendations which will feature in the final report. We will be pleased to make any further contribution that the Strategy Unit may require.

For ease of use, our comments are made under the same headings as the Strategy Unit's initial report.

2. Definition of the Problem

In general terms we concur with the Strategy Unit's definition of the problems faced by disabled people; indeed it is helpful to see the issues so clearly identified and described.

We wholeheartedly endorse the comment on p16 that the work undertaken in this area across government is poorly co-ordinated; it is indeed the case that the focus of different departments creates a different language for defining impact of disability and this leads in turn to mixed messages being given to disabled people.

Our experience as a provider of services to disabled people allows us to wholeheartedly endorse the comment on the same page that "disabled people under any definition are a heterogeneous group, it is important not to over-generalise in analysis or policy making." We would extend this observation to include service delivery; it is clear to us that our success as a service provider has been the fact that we tailor services to individuals and their particular needs.

Similarly, we would support the observation contained on p25 that further barriers arise from a failure to implement best practice in policy-making and in service design and delivery. Laudable initiatives such as 'Valuing People', which laid out clear challenges to Local Authorities in terms of their services for people with learning disabilities seem to have lost impetus. There is a strong body of research as well as our own smaller scale analysis, which clearly suggests that the aspirations of many disabled people are not being fulfilled either through attending day care provision or by working within sheltered workshops. Yet Local Authorities are slow to make real change in this area, often citing lack of resources as a key reason. In this case, putting disabled people at the heart of how relevant public services are designed and delivered can only create change if there is a sustained challenge to Local Authorities to recreate their services for disabled people.

Shaw Trust would be pleased to share with the Strategy Unit some of its own plans for assisting Local Authorities in the re-structuring of their services for disabled people.

On page 27, the report draws attention to the correlation between impairment and employment outcomes, with people's likelihood of employment decreasing as the length of impairment increases. Our experience as a service provider suggests that this is linked to the lack of work focussed interventions for those who are deemed to be no longer required to seek work. We do not think people are more likely to report having an impairment the longer they are without work, we do think when people are without work, they rapidly lose confidence in their own abilities, that often this can develop into a form of mental ill-health and that this is exacerbated by distance from the labour market.

3. A Vision for the Future

We concur entirely with the three main components of the Strategy Unit's overall vision for disability and believe that this report has begun to outline a challenging agenda for government, service providers, employers and disabled people. The report identifies that there is a lack of clarity about relative rights, roles and responsibilities (p39) and also that "there is no overall statement of what disabled people can expect from Government and what Government has committed to with respect of disabled people." (p41)

There has been much debate in recent years about institutionalised racism within society as a whole & within specific organisations; disabled people face institutionalised prejudice. The prejudice faced by disabled people, like all prejudice, is based on fear; a fear of having to confront difference. Disabled people can be subject to violent attack or harassment, they are more frequently subject to a benevolent oppression which is more insidious and less frequently acknowledged. This benevolent oppression pervades policy making and service delivery, both within the public and voluntary sectors.

Whilst the greater involvement from disabled people in the manner outlined on p45 of the report should have an impact, this will be defined to a large extent by the framework that government puts in place and by the eventual statement made by government regarding its vision for disabled people in our society.

Within its final report we would urge the Strategy Unit to take a bold position and state more categorically that the expectations that society has of its disabled people are too low. It could then outline how the life chances of disabled people will be improved by raising those expectations. This should include a more radical reinvention of government provision with a greater emphasis on what is needed in order to help more disabled people to access employment. The Strategy Unit has a real opportunity to challenge the underlying assumptions which maintain the status quo of low expectation and which, in turn, inform spending decisions. For example, how much is spent on welfare benefits in comparison to services to help people access employment, how much is spent on residential care in comparison to direct payment support?

Shaw Trust would be pleased to develop these ideas in order to inform a government statement of this nature.

4. Analysis of the Issues

Shaw Trust concurs with the six main areas identified in the Strategy Unit's report. We offer comments only within areas within which we have operational experience and primarily focus on commenting on the key issues and challenges to address in those areas.

Further to this we make a general point about the focus of the Strategy Unit's report; it appears to concentrate very heavily on potential solutions being delivered by either government or government agencies and is perhaps over dependent on using existing ways of working to provide the necessary solutions. It may then have put aside an opportunity for a truly radical review of government provision. As an example, it is our observation that there are cultural issues which pervade the way that some government departments engage with disabled people; a more rapid change could be achieved by the wholesale contracting out of service delivery. Similarly, the report frequently returns to the theme of the need for improvement in joined up working, both at strategic and delivery levels. Did the Unit consider more radical solutions to the issues it has identified, for example, a geographically designed "one stop shop" for the commissioning of all services provided by Health and Social Services?

Shaw Trust would be pleased to provide more detail to the Strategy Unit on the above points, if so desired.

4.1. From Childhood to Adulthood

P93 of the report rightly draws attention to the fact that little work-focussed support is targeted specifically at disabled young people. In terms of the challenge of supporting young disabled people as they make the transition from education to employment, we would argue that there is a role for a new programme which could be co-funded by DfES and DWP, which would offer a complete service, from careers advice and work experience whilst the young person is at school, which co-ordinates any support requirements within further/higher education and which provides any necessary support and guidance which enables the young person to move into employment.

Shaw Trust would be pleased to share the work we have done in this area should the Strategy Unit wish to develop this as an option within the final report.

4.2. Preparation and Prevention

Again, we support the Strategy Unit's analysis of the barriers that are at work in this area and believe the report is correct in highlighting the need for a "whole person" response to accident and illness (p113) and is also right in identifying that the over-medicalised approach of the current system has contributed to lack of success in this area.

One approach to a solution would be to take a step further from seeking departmental champions and towards a single “whole person” budget which travels with the individual as they access the range of services they need. The present system requires, as the Strategy Unit has pointed out, individuals to reinvent even the language that they use to describe their requirements depending on which government department’s services they are accessing.

4.3. Routes into Employment

Once again, we largely concur with the Strategy Unit’s analysis of the current situation and the key barriers. We support the extension of the DDA and also would welcome greater promotion of the act by government. In terms of further practical steps that enable disabled people to enter and remain in work, we would argue that programmes such as NDDP still have a great potential to make a difference. NDDP Job broking allows for specialist service providers to engage with disabled people who are some distance from the labour market and to provide them with an introduction to employment. At the same time it provides employers with initial support and guidance which enables them to buy in to their obligations under DDA. Both employers and potential employees seem to value the fact that the Job Broking service is at arms length from the Job Centre; even the in-house provision brands itself quite distinctly from Jobcentre Plus.

We agree with the Strategy Unit that there is a need to allow for a wide range of work options which can respond flexibly to the need of each individual.

Shaw Trust has already submitted detailed proposals to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. We would be pleased to share these ideas with the Strategy Unit.

4.4. Over 50s

As the report says, there are a range of complex issues to address if the current generation of disabled people who are close to retirement age are to be assisted towards work. Undoubtedly there is a greater role to be played by volunteering, there may also be a role for the establishment of social enterprises which could be targeted to attract this particular client group. What is clear is that there will be a need for a range of different provisions and it is highly probable that support requirements for this group will need to be ring fenced.

One major area of work in relation to the over 50s is the need to ensure that the onset of disability and/or ill health within this age group does not result in the all too familiar response from employers for medical retirement, since it is clear that once out of work on medical grounds the chances of people from this group returning to work are less than one in five. Much more work is needed on the retention of employees as a matter of urgency if the economic consequences for employers, pensions funds the state and individuals are to be avoided.

Shaw Trust has a wide range of experience of intervention with both individuals and employers to prevent none work becoming an outcome for people who become ill or develop a disability whilst in work and we would be happy to discuss our views on future schemes with the Strategy Unit.