

Improving the life chances of disabled people

Summary

The Prime Minister's Strategy Unit has published an analysis of the barriers to the social and economic integration of disabled people. Consultation on this document will feed into the formulation of recommendations later in the year.

The closing date for comments is **13 August 2004**. They can be emailed to the Strategy Unit Disability Team: disability@cabinet-office.x.gsi.gov.uk Tel: 020 7276 1881.

The report is available from:
www.strategy.gov.uk

This briefing was prepared by David Janner-Klausner a colleague in LGIU.

The information in this policy briefing applies to England only but the issues raised may be of a wider interest to our subscribers

You are encouraged to circulate this policy briefing to anyone in your authority who may find it useful, including headteachers and school governors.

Background

The Prime Minister's Strategy Unit (PMSU) started its work on improving the life chances of disabled people in December 2003. The overall aim of the project is to identify practical ways to remove barriers to the full integration of disabled people in all aspects of life.

The project has three stages. The first was a scoping exercise conducted with stakeholders and using written materials, to identify areas for in-depth analysis. The second stage was to conduct the in-depth analysis, on which the present report is based. The third and final stage, which will take place by the end of 2004, will present recommendations for action.

The report ties in with the work of the Social Exclusion Unit on mental health and social exclusion and will also feed into the Spending Review 2004.

Key features of the analysis

The PMSU report is framed within a social model of disability, explicitly moving away from the medical model. In the medical model, disability is seen as an individual burden, which invites “looking after” by specialist agents of society. The social model focuses on the barriers to participation in mainstream society. Institutions of society and individuals are required to change attitudes and provisions to enable equitable and productive participation by disabled people in all aspects of communal life and allow them to take advantage of all the opportunities that communal life provides.

The report articulates a three-part vision for the future that starts with the social environment:

- removing disabling environments, attitudes and disproportionate social barriers
- providing finance and service based support to meet individual needs
- empowering disabled people – including through delivery of the first two aims.

The report itself is lengthy (240 pages) and comprehensive. Its focus is on the barriers and their removal. It looks at barriers to integration throughout a lifecycle, from childhood to middle age, and at each point identifies the practices that could facilitate integration.

Much of the analysis refers to local government and its role in providing services that are consistent, coherent and committed to integration. This is particularly important with regard to the early years, which are important in themselves and can set lifelong patterns for aspiration and achievement. The report highlights a number of barriers currently facing disabled people in their early years, which include limited pre-school provision for disabled children and exclusion from mainstream children's services. Disabled children and their families have to engage with multiple sources of advice and support. It points to a lack of co-ordination and lack of information sharing at local authority level.

The report identifies issues around support at school, which mean that disabled students do not always achieve what they could. There are issues around transition planning in year 9, when all young people with a statement of SEN should have a transition plan drawn up at their annual review. Sometimes transition planning does not take place, takes place later than year 9, and/or does not involve the relevant professionals. The report points out that there are some examples of good practice emerging, where local authorities involve disabled young people and their parents in transition planning in a meaningful way.

There are also weaknesses in the support for the needs of young disabled people through Connexions, which is greatly under-prepared to support disabled young people.

The report looks at healthcare issues, and the need to improve practices in family medicine around temporary and long-term disability. The report points to the huge cost of sickness to businesses and that despite this there is very little concern with occupational health.

Disabled people are less likely to be employed and those on long-term benefits become detached from the workforce. The UK is unusual compared with other developed countries in that high overall rates of employment are twinned with comparably low rates of employment of disabled people. The typical pattern is for the two rates to directly correlate. 90% of recipients of incapacity benefit expect to find jobs in due course. A year later, however, 40% are still unemployed and at that point they have only a 20% chance of finding a job within the following five years. The key barrier to employment of disabled people is the attitude of employers, but it is also the case that the financial

incentives to work are still quite limited for a substantial proportion of the claimant population.

The report draws together common themes from its analysis of the different service areas. These are:

- putting disabled people at the heart of service provision
- early intervention
- cost effectiveness
- joined-up working.

There is a need for a cultural shift in service provision. Services for disabled people should not be add-ons to non-disabled peoples' services. Attitudes of service providers, says the report, often demonstrate a lack of awareness of the needs of disabled people.

Early intervention is critical. This means the service providers or a disabled person anticipating a future need or constraint and preparing for its onset in advance, rather than "falling off a cliff" when the event happens. Examples are given that relate, among others, to a two-year old with a hearing impairment. Early intervention will alter the pattern of language and communication skills acquisition of the child. Simple changes can make a great deal of difference – for example, where the child sits in class and teacher training. The outcome for the child will be inclusion, rather than problems in educational performance and communication that can lead to attainment deficiencies and a need for expensive subsequent support.

Joining up services is particularly interesting to local authorities. The report suggests that Local Strategic Partnerships can provide a useful shared platform for coordinating services locally. Disabled people should be engaged in local partnerships as a priority.

Conclusion and comment from TEN

This is a comprehensive and important report. It offers detailed analysis of structural barriers that face disabled people, across ages and areas of life. It is optimistic about the ability to identify barriers and tackle them.

The report should be read by anyone involved in service delivery and wider planning. Local authorities may wish to comment on the analysis offered in

general, and specifically about areas where the local authority and local education authority have key responsibilities. It will also be a useful tool for councils that want to examine their practices as employers towards existing staff and recruitment practices.

The Green Paper, *Every child matters*, and the Children Bill which is currently before Parliament and gives effect to the legislative provisions of the Green Paper, are intended to tackle some of the barriers identified in the report, such as lack of co-ordination and information sharing at local authority level. It is an ambitious agenda which will take time and courage to implement locally. However an incremental approach of changing working practices and processes locally could start to make a positive impact on the life chances of disabled children and their families. For example, a recent Ofsted report on Early Excellence Centres, the forerunners of Sure Start Children's Centres, found that there were good support programmes and procedures for their development and inclusion into mainstream education. (For a summary of the report, see TEN policy briefing 28/04)



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