

# U Can Do I.T.

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Mr Nick Garland  
Strategy Unit "Disability" Team  
Cabinet Office  
Room 4.14 Admiralty Arch  
The Mall  
London  
SW1A 2WH

4 August 2004

Dear Mr Garland,

## **“IMPROVING LIFE CHANCES FOR DISABLED PEOPLE”**

U Can Do I.T. is a registered charity and for the last six years we have been providing computer training for disabled people in their own homes. We do this by recruiting a team of freelance tutors who are all highly qualified and tested by the Criminal Records Bureau. During this time we have carried out nearly 9,000 tutorials and given training to 633 people.

All our lessons conclude with an email to the office telling us exactly what happened and of course we have final reports on all our students. In addition to this we have recently carried out a complete survey of all our previous students to find out how they are using their computers and how their lives have been affected.

We have also been in touch with Maria Eagle at the Ministry of Work and Pensions to whom your report will be addressed. She attended a function we held in the House of Commons in May 2003 and since that time we have been in touch with Andy Wilde and Sue Bamford of the Disadvantaged Groups Division. In fact Sue Bamford suggested that we should write to you commenting on your report.

In fact at the suggestion of Andy Wilde we produced a Business Plan for a pilot study to provide computers and to give training to all disabled people in a single London borough. A copy of this report is enclosed and it provides some very interesting material which I may say is backed up by many of the statistics in your very full report. My comments on the report are as follows:

1. The analysis of the issues in the report unfortunately drifts away from it's original intention which is that of “improving the life chances of disabled people” and is almost entirely devoted to economic issues and in particular getting disabled people into



U Can Do I.T. (Internet Training)  
Registered Charity No. 1070571  
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employment. It seems to me this is regarded as the most important life chance. The fact is, as your own report shows, (table of those wanting work page 128) that most disabled people do not want jobs. Our experience shows that this is because they realise and employers realise that disability is a real barrier to work in many, many cases and realistic alternative strategies have not been considered.

2. There are really no parts of the report with which we can disagree because it is extremely well argued and all the intentions are clearly admirable. However, they are very general and as you will see below we make specific proposals about how improvements can be made.
3. Are there serious admissions from the reports analysis?

Yes there are.

### 3.1 Computers

We are extremely surprised that there is no mention at all of computers and the technical benefits which owning and knowing how to operate a computer can give to a disabled person. Few people realise in fact that a blind person can learn to use the computer using voice communication. We have seen from our own students how greatly a computer can alter someone's life. They can read their own emails, do their own shopping, do their own banking, book their own holidays, join disability organisations and become thoroughly socially involved. In fact the computer in the home is a passport for disabled people to break down the barriers which have been facing them for so long.

As you will see in the attached "business plan" which we prepared for the Ministry of Work and Pensions, the total cost of providing computers for disabled people throughout the United Kingdom is nothing like that which may be envisaged. We estimate that only 3% of the total number of disabled people, that is approximately 100,000 in all, would be eligible and would wish to have computers and learn to use them. The total cost of this project would be well within the current budget estimated by you at £35 billion in your report.

Your lack of any mention of computers is even more surprising because you share an office with the erstwhile Office of the e-Envoy charged with the responsibility of providing computer access for excluded groups. The e-Envoy solution which was to spend hundreds of millions of pounds setting up public access provision is entirely absolutely ineffective so far as severely disabled people are concerned. It is true that some of these offices are accessible by disabled people but they have not, do not and will not use them in any numbers. The reason for this is simple. Transport is very difficult and expensive; they may need special hardware to access their computers which cannot be economically provided for one person; they also need special software such as Jaws or Dragon Dictate if they are to operate computers and these cannot be available because they are specially designed to suit individual clients; there is no training available at the centres; disabled people are often sick and miss appointments; in any case they will need a computer at home because an untrained person is not going to remember how to use a computer by taking one or two lessons at a centre. We find that having a computer at home is absolutely essential if any progress is to be made and in particular all our courses contain ample homework provision so that the individual can get accustomed to working on their home once the course has finished. We have made fairly extensive enquiries from various outlets and the stories are all the same – very few disabled people turn up and those that do are probably in the better off category and in any case can afford to buy their own computers.

### 3.2 Work from Home

We strongly believe that disabled people should be encouraged by training and by opportunity to consider the possibility of working from home. We are interested to see from your report that BT had a project of this kind and Barclays Bank have also done some research.

The extraordinary thing is that at present there are no NVQ's for home working techniques. We have currently put in a bid to the Central London LSC for funding under the ESF Funding Stream to develop NVQ's for home working and we have a number of partners helping us with this including Cable & Wireless and Edexcel. The results of the bid will not be evident until the end of September.

We believe that NVQ's for home working would be an enormous plus for many disabled people and indeed for many other thousands of people who from personal choice or circumstances would like to work from home.

### 3.3 Quality of Life

The report also fails to include any real consideration of the quality of life for disabled people. It does hit upon the fact that the income for people who have to live on disability benefit is very, very small indeed and does not allow for any marginal expenditure. This means that the cost of computers and the cost of computer lessons will in most cases have to be funded by central or local Government.

It must be realised that this is not a question of pulling rabbits out of hats or indeed trying to fit square pegs into round holes. We have experience in the field, we know what people need and want and the constant theme of all educational organisations is to give the beneficiary the teaching that he or she needs to improve their lives, not try and force onto them the kind of training that they do not want and in the end will not use.

Your report does not make it evident that these lessons have been learnt or indeed even considered. There are in fact no proposals in the report directly related to improving the quality of life of the large majority of disabled people who do not feel able to work because of their disability. These difficulties are real and must be recognised and cannot be wished away or even legislated away. New ways must be found and the opportunity to work at home will be a natural and obvious answer for many people.

### 3.4 Access to Disabled People

You do mention in your report the need for co-ordination and information sharing on page 64. One of our constant complaints which we have made known to the Minister Maria Eagle is that the Data Protection Act does not permit charities to exchange information which they have on their books. For example we have a database of 933 people and we would love to share this information with charitable organisations providing holidays for disabled people and other similar activities. We are prevented from doing this by law and this becomes an excuse for local authorities to withhold information to charities wishing to find disabled people who they can help because of the Data Protection Act.

As you probably know there is a charities bill now being considered and in the consultation stage. We have written a letter to them about the Data Protection Act and I enclose a copy of this letter which you may find backs up the points already mentioned.

You do not mention in your report that disabled people are extremely hard to reach. Many disabled people are not at all outgoing and it is completely prohibitive to

advertise services in the national press or television. One of our most difficult tasks is reaching the people that we need to help.

We recently proposed to the Ministry of Work and Pensions that they should make available access to people drawing Incapacity Benefit or Disability Living Allowance. This proposal was denied on the grounds that if they gave information to us they would have to give it to every body! But why should they not give it to everybody who provides an approved service?

If you want co-ordinated activities that co-ordination must come direct from the Ministry itself. They have all of the necessary information, they can share that information with the charities and other organisations working with disabled people.

### 3.5 Trust Professionals

My next point concerns the complete absence of trust between funding organisations and charities. Enormous sums of money have been wasted by committees and organisations deciding how money should be distributed and who to on what grounds and what criteria and writing huge reports which costs many hundreds of thousands of pounds with no positive action following on. A typical example of this is the Treasury initiative under the Future Builders Fund. Originally £125 million was allocated to this project. £25 million will be spent on committees and talking about it and then four years into the project not a single penny has been distributed to any organisation to carry out any work.

There are numbers of successful charities working in the disability field. I particular refer to those who are specifically related to particular disabilities such as cerebral palsy, deafness, blindness or multiple sclerosis. These charities know what they are doing. They do not need reports to be told what to do or how to do it. What is needed is a flow of funds to established charities in the field which are not hedged about with a thousand proviso's.

We have just been in the process of completing a 30 page application to the European Social Fund which is so complicated and difficult that many very small organisations would not be able to compete. This means that innovation and the passion which many small organisations have for their cause is lost to the generality.

The Community Fund is another example of bad funding. The waste of time and complications involved in the series of committees and applications is quite extraordinary. The amount of money wasted on red tape is shocking. A much easier solution would be to channel charitable funds to existing well established trusts like Esmee Fairbairn, Bridge House Estates or The Henry Smith's Charity who know that they are doing and have a well established track record and who get on with the job cheaply and without fuss and expense.

### 3.6 Action Not Words

I am sorry to say this but what is needed is much less talking and much more doing. Unfortunately many people who are writing these reports have no idea what the world of disability is like. You cannot get this from committees and books. You can only get it from first hand experience dealing with disabled people. The ignorance about what disabled people need at higher level prevents action from taking place because the ignorant are always timid. The answer to all this is trust in well established organisations.

I very much hope these ideas are helpful and that significant progress will soon be made.

With best wishes.

Yours sincerely,

Anthony Wigram  
Chairman