



Briefing: a national disability strategy?

FAO: Disability Unit / Cabinet Office / UK Government / Media

This briefing note highlights priorities for the development of national disability strategy in the United Kingdom. We welcome open dialogue on the evidence base and policy choices arising from this.

The need for a national strategy

Publication of a national strategy is overdue.

We welcome the Government's 2019 manifesto commitment to 'publish a National Strategy for Disabled People before the end of 2020...to improve the benefits system, opportunities and access for disabled people in terms of housing, education, transport and jobs', which is now overdue.

- The UK lags behind international norms. Most governments in the world, and devolved governments in the UK, publish disability strategies and periodic action plans to implement them. The last update to national strategy was in 2013-14.
- In 2019, the Queen's Speech promised that:

"Our strategy will be ambitious, supporting disabled people in all aspects and phases of their life. The strategy will set out practical proposals on the issues that matter most to disabled people and we will use all the levers of Government to support disabled people to achieve their potential."

A social model approach

The strategy should be based on the understanding that disability arises from barriers to full participation and equality in society, both physical and social barriers.

The social interpretation of disability (social model) was developed from the experiences and priorities of disabled people and their organisations, notably in the UK, and is now an established norm basis for disability policy discussions.

- From this perspective, national strategy should aim to identify disabling barriers and to prioritise actions for their removal.
- It should also recognise that disability is a form of discrimination that is institutionalised throughout society, impacting on disabled people collectively as well as individually.

A rights-based approach

The strategy should be aligned with the UK's existing commitments to principles of international law.

The UK's 2009 ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) established important commitments, which provide a strong basis for strategic alignment.

- In 2017, the UN recommended the UK 'to develop a measurable strategic framework and plan of action, with sufficient financial resources', to implement its commitments under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).¹
- CRPD principles include dignity, autonomy, non-discrimination, participation, diversity, opportunity, accessibility, gender equality and respect for the capacities of disabled children.²
- The UK also has specific obligations to ensure that disabled children 'should enjoy a full and decent life' under Article 23 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

An inclusive approach

A national disability strategy is not only 'for disabled people' but also for a more equal, accessible and inclusive society that benefits everyone.

The development of coherent national strategy needs to work for all disabled people, of all ages, with all types of impairment, and for everyone in society.

- Most, if not all, of the UK population will benefit from a more disability inclusive society at some stage in their future lives, particularly in an ageing society.
- Making physical environments, transport and information technologies more accessible to the wide diversity of disabled people also has benefits for families, communities and businesses.
- These benefits extend to both residents and visitors to the UK.
- The strategy also needs to take an intersectional approach to disability policy making, considering the differential impact of universal and targeted policies across the diversity of disabled people (e.g. people with different types of impairment, older people, disabled women, and children/younger people).

A participatory approach

The active involvement of disabled people and their organisations should be a prominent feature in the strategy's development, implementation, and outcome monitoring.

Without visible and effective engagement with disabled people, the relevance and credibility of the overall strategy and its consequent actions, will be compromised.

- The UK has committed under international law that:

"In the development and implementation of legislation and policies to implement the present Convention, and in other decision-making processes concerning issues relating to persons with disabilities, States Parties shall closely consult with and actively involve persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities, through their representative organizations." (Article 4.3 CRPD)
- We welcome the consultative model of local/regional networks but it will not be successful unless it is properly supported and resourced to build capacity for representation in the communities where people live.
- A national strategy also requires a mechanism for national level accountability, such as representation on a national disability council or strategic advisory committee.

A targeted approach

A national strategy must acknowledge, and target actions to mitigate, the most pressing risks of inequality facing disabled people in the UK, including the risks of poverty and social exclusion.

Public consultations and commitments on strategy development have failed so far to acknowledge poverty and social exclusion among the priority themes for consideration, or in the evidence base.

- Disabled people in the UK are disproportionately at risk of financial poverty, including in-work poverty, and with wider equality gaps in poverty and social exclusion than in neighbouring countries. The wide disability employment is not the only factor contributing to this.
- In 2015, a UN inquiry found that UK government welfare reforms ‘disproportionally and adversely affected the rights of persons with disabilities’ resulting in a reduction of support to meet the costs of living with disability and constituted a systematic violation of human rights.³
- The Covid pandemic has revealed the elevated risk of disabled people to isolation, ill health and death associated with institutionalised care and lack of community-based support.
- We welcome the 2019 government’s manifesto commitment to ‘additional capacity in community care settings’, and to make housing more accessible, but this is unlikely to have effect without reversal of the accumulated funding cuts to local authorities who bear the primary responsibility in these areas (as well as support for disabled pupils at school).

A mainstreaming approach

The national strategy should promote a methodology of mainstreaming disability equality in all major initiatives of government.

Strategic prioritisation and action planning must be targeted but consideration of disability equality is needed in all major programmes to achieve comprehensive impact beyond ‘disability’ policy.

- There is an opportunity to acknowledge that disability inclusiveness is vital to the success of big agendas such as ‘levelling up’, ‘Building Back Better’, digitisation, environmental sustainability and resilience to societal risks – using these to drive investment in innovation for a more inclusive society.
- Ensuring accessibility is crucial in all infrastructure investments, public and private (affecting the physical environment, transport and information, communication and technologies, and including e-government). This applies also to the provision of goods and services in general.
- There are gaps and weaknesses in the regulatory framework on accessibility that need to be addressed. The effectiveness of monitoring and enforcing compliance with disability-related entitlements are in need of improvement (including under the Equality Act, the benefit system and the social care system).

A cross-sectoral approach

All major government departments and devolved administrations should have ownership and accountability for the development and delivery of a national strategy.

Strategic initiative from the Disability Unit in Cabinet Office, and with Ministerial accountability, is welcome but a cross-sectoral approach is needed.

- Each main government department should be required to develop a sectoral action plan, aligned with the strategy and relevant to their own remit and priorities.
- The devolved governments, and dependent territories, of the UK also have important responsibilities and autonomy to develop disability strategies and action plans.⁴
- The Disability Unit should maintain oversight of sectoral plans as a central government focal point for co-ordination and reporting.
- UK commitments under international law provide a common frame of reference for this.

An evidenced-based approach

National strategy needs to be underpinned by an appropriate evidence base and a structured commitment to monitor progress against robust indicators.

We welcome the Disability Unit's commitment to develop a medium and long-term evidence strategy, including evidence of disabled people's experience and indicators of outcome inequalities.

- The UK was formerly an international leader in the development of a national disability survey and disability equality indicators, both of which were ceased by recent governments.⁵
- The UK has committed in law:
 - “to collect appropriate information, including statistical and research data... to identify and address the barriers faced by persons with disabilities in exercising their rights” (Article 31 CRPD)
- Both quantitative and qualitative data are relevant to this task, both in targeted data collection methods and disaggregation of disability data from general surveys and administrative sources.
- It is important to compensate for gaps in data, particularly gaps in representation in mainstream datasets (e.g. for disabled persons living in congregative settings or disabled children in general).
- There is a need to join up data from different departments and agencies of government, and to task relevant departments with evidencing their sectoral action plans.

About the Centre for Disability Studies

The Centre for Disability Studies (CDS) is an international centre of excellence for research and teaching at the University of Leeds, combining expertise across the fields and law and public policy, social sciences, design and engineering, health and the arts.

- For more information, see <https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/> or follow us on Twitter [@CDSLeeds](https://twitter.com/CDSLeeds)
- This briefing drafted on behalf of the CDS by Professors Mark Priestley and Anna Lawson

¹ United Nations (2017) *Concluding observations on the initial report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland*, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolNo=CRPD%2fC%2fGBR%2fCO%2f1

² United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-2.html>

³ United Nations (2017) *Inquiry concerning the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland carried out by the Committee under article 6 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention*, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G17/326/14/PDF/G1732614.pdf>

⁴ For example, *A Fairer Scotland for Disabled People: delivery plan* <https://www.gov.scot/publications/fairer-scotland-disabled-people-delivery-plan-2021-united-nations-convention/pages/3/>

⁵ ODI Disability Equality Indicators (archived) <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20131101163230/http://odi.dwp.gov.uk/disability-statistics-and-research/disability-equality-indicators.php>