

time for interaction?

discussion paper



Disability Rights Commission

time for interaction?

'was in the pub last night and someone mentioned that there was a table of 'weirdos' behind us.

I thought he was being rude about a table of idiots but looking round I saw a table with.... 2 albinos, a dwarf, a facially deformed 'pinhead' type woman and an ordinary bloke...

'no mate.... he's BLIND!' and right enough he had a guide dog by his feet.

It was a bit Geek Love and a bit like that bar in star wars.'

Hawkus

From the chatroom of the website 'Popbitch', July 2005

Damon Rose, editor of the BBC's disability lifestyle website 'Ouch', was surprised to find himself and his friends the subject of an internet chat-room ordinarily devoted to celebrity gossip the day after they had spent a summer's evening drinking in a pub in West London.

The shamed perpetrator appeared equally surprised to find Damon's response in said chat-room: *'Funny that. I was in the pub with my Mrs and a few mates and this funny looking geezer with a 'fro kept staring at us. Well, so I'm told. What with me being blind and everything'*

Hawkus posted a message to the Ouch website:

'Hello Damon. Well, what can I say... busted.

I'd like to apologise to you and your friends for the offence and upset my stupid comments caused. I often forget that the internet is read by many many people.



All I can say in any sort of defence is that it was the diversity of the disabilities of yourself and your friends that I found so interesting. How you came to be such close friends. Did you meet in a club? Did you just see each other as like-minded souls and gravitate to each other? I don't find disabilities funny or even that interesting or unusual to be honest. But as a group you were interesting.

I would have said I'm not prejudiced. Maybe I've just proved that I am.

If I see you in the pub again I shall introduce myself and buy you and your friends a round'.¹

Why in 2005 is a group of disabled people drinking together in a pub still considered a bizarre event? Why does a non-disabled population still appear to believe that disabled people largely exist beyond the exchange of ordinary everyday life? Why are people's impairments and conditions still a source of derision, ridicule and prejudice? And might the answer be found in finding ways to increase interaction between disabled and non-disabled people in order to help transform attitudes, expectations and opportunities?

¹ www.bbc.co.uk/ouch

 **I would have said
I'm not prejudiced.
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proved that I am** 

Escape from Alcatraz

The notorious island prison of Alcatraz in San Francisco Bay was said in its time to be the most difficult to escape in the world – if the barriers presented by the fortress-style building did not keep the prisoners in, the freezing cold waters with their dangerous currents separating the island from the mainland would make certain that escape was impossible. Its prisoners were to stay in absolute confinement, their liberty and opportunity to associate with society removed from them as punishment for the crimes they committed.

By way of contrast, across the Bay, the city of San Francisco is said to be one of the freest cities in the world for people with impaired mobility, with unprecedented opportunities to participate in everyday life.

The story of this success is one of disabled people's activism, partnership with local government in implementing the law and perhaps most fundamentally their interaction with the wider community.

In April 1977, frustrated by the unwillingness of three successive administrations to implement regulations which would bring into effect the first American civil rights law protecting disabled people from discrimination, disability activists around the country decided to occupy the regional headquarters of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare and demand that those regulations be implemented.

In other cities they stayed for a few hours or even overnight. In San Francisco, the protesters stayed for 25 days, forcing the issue onto the agenda and in doing so helping build the mass movement that led to the Americans with Disability Act of 1990.

In the last 10 years, the city administration has led the change, through the mayor's office on disability. It has used planning regulations to ensure that new or renovated buildings meet an access code. Sid Wolinski, of a San Francisco-based not-for-profit law firm, Disability Rights Advocates said, "The reason that compliance is relatively high in San Francisco, Berkeley and the Bay area is that there is a well-organised active disability community.....that's made a huge difference."

Paul Longmore, director of San Francisco University's Institute on Disability, said: "The change has been staggering – not just the built infrastructure, but what this has meant for the freedom of disabled people. When I was growing up, in a public place I was usually the only person with a visible disability. The laws have transformed expectations and attitudes."²

Early successes led to an increased presence of visibly disabled people on the streets, as citizens making use

² Gateway to Equality,
Tash Shifrin, The Guardian
September 22nd, 2004

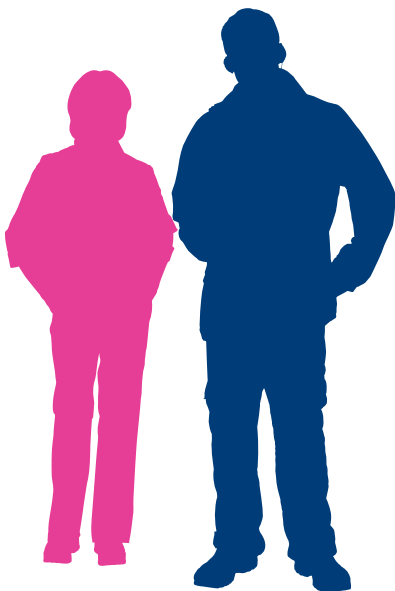
of public services like buses and trams, and as consumers in shops, cafes and bars. Ultimately it has been disabled people's interaction with the wider community that has become the real engine of change, shifting the question of accessibility from one of 'duty' to one of 'expectation' as disabled people have become an everyday part of the social fabric.

In 2005, after the intervention of disabled people, even Alcatraz is accessible.

Are we going to San Francisco?

The San Francisco experience suggests that whilst disabled people's activism and effective legal duties are fundamental steps on the road to equality, and in Britain, just as in the States, it has been disabled people and their organisations who have led the charge, a crucial third strand is the interaction between disabled people and the wider non-disabled community. The very presence of disabled people in mainstream economic, social and community life is an agent of change in itself, and disabled people's full inclusion will only come about if participation is viewed as a vehicle for change – as well as a desired end-state.

Promoting interaction such that it fosters change is not simply a matter of disabled and non-disabled people engaging with one another in shared spaces and institutions. It is equally about the nature of the interaction: the roles that disabled people occupy, the power balance and the quality of relationships that can be established. It is also about people with hidden impairments and conditions feeling confident to be open about them. Otherwise they may be interacting



with non-disabled people, but interaction goes unnoticed, beneath the surface of human discourse, and no transformation of attitudes occurs.

Despite disabled people's considerable achievements in moving public policy towards an approach aimed at tackling discrimination and inequality, the transition from disabled people being viewed simply as 'objects' of state assistance or charity to 'subjects' – citizens equal in status – is slower to arrive.

This transition appears fundamental if disabled people are ever to enjoy true equality.

The answers to this problem are to be found in part in actively transforming the relations disabled people enjoy with both Government and the wider community. We need to create the opportunities for the sort of interaction which will take disabled people on the journey to becoming equal citizens.

Familiarity breeds... acceptance

In its report 'Hidden Lives – improving the life chances of people with a learning disability', the organisation Turning Point reports:

*'After a long history of being quite literally locked out of sight, most people with a learning disability now live in ordinary settings in the community... But although most people with a learning disability have moved on from the legacy of long-stay hospitals, the present-day experience of prejudice, discrimination and harassment shows that many communities have still to adapt to this change'*³

3 Hidden Lives – improving the life chances of people with a learning disability. Turning Point, 2004

This suggests that in the absence of interaction with the wider community, it is in considerable part, a lack of familiarity which breeds contempt.

Where conflict exists between groups, or where one group is suffering at the hands of a more dominant one, the instinctive reaction is often to keep them apart. However, evidence suggests that prejudice between different groups in society can be reduced by increasing contact. Professor Miles Hewstone from the University of Oxford, has spent his career studying this strategy: “Contact (between groups) has enormous potential for improving inter-group relations between ethnic, religious and other groups within a country. It is a powerful tool against prejudice.”⁴

The involuntary isolation of many disabled people from the mainstream of British life over the last 200 years has undoubtedly left deep-rooted barriers at every level of society which continue to shape the extent and quality of interaction between disabled and non-disabled people today.

During the 20th century hundreds of thousands of disabled adults and children were placed in institutions including long-stay hospitals, homes and residential schools. Many disabled people lived away from mainstream life, learning, working and socialising in institutions closed from the outside world. Despite the participation of many other disabled people in mainstream activities during the period, our society has typically evolved without disabled people in mind, and the legacy of this exclusion can be seen across life. We are dealing with a housing stock, education system, employment market, transport system, shops,

⁴ British Psychology Society website www.bps.org.uk

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amenities, public services and a general public which had not ordinarily anticipated disabled people being part of the population they served or interacted with in daily life. This means that the causes of inequality which shape disabled people's opportunities today are deeply embedded in the psychology, design, organisation and practices of almost every area of British society.

For some, this puts into question whether in fact it is sensible to aspire to all disabled people enjoying equality and human rights as those principles are typically understood. For example, some have recently made the case for a return to people with a learning disability people routinely living together in institutions in direct response to these challenges, suggesting the barriers to participation in mainstream community life are immovable. The journalist Minette Marrin, for example, argues that "when people move into ordinary houses in the community, they do see more of people without disabilities. But this increase is due either to more visits from family or to brief contacts in shops and so on. Almost none of the increase is due to

independent adult friendships developed with neighbours or normal friends. What this means is loneliness and exclusion, and all in the name of inclusion....

This hugely undermines the value of the care in the community experiment.”⁵

Similarly, in her recent report ‘special educational needs – a new look’, Baroness Mary Warnock, argued that educating some children in separate schools was an appropriate response to the rejection and bullying which some disabled children face in ordinary educational settings.⁶

However, recent research by the charity Stonewall concerning the nature and causes of prejudice against marginalised groups, including disabled people, confirmed the ‘contact theory’ developed by Professor Miles Hewstone and others in finding that “overall...personal contact” and familiarity with difference are keys which unlock the shackles of prejudice. The research found that places of work and learning were the best environments through which to generate relationships which helped overcome prejudice and discrimination.⁷

Change through familiarisation is happening as more and more disabled people are in employment, ordinary education settings or involved in community activity. However, change can seem painfully slow; and for some disabled people participation rates remain particularly low. For instance, children with autism or adults with learning disabilities are often excluded, respectively, from educational opportunities and paid employment. A lack of attention to interaction as a

⁵ Sunday Times, 12th June, 2005 Loneliness and exclusion... and all in the name of inclusion.

⁶ Special Educational Needs – a new look. Baroness Mary Warnock. Philosophy of Education Society.

⁷ Profiles into Prejudice, Stonewall, 2004

vehicle of change may partly explain why, despite advances in the rights of disabled people, recent years have seen a new increase in the number of people with a learning disability placed in institutions, removing people wholesale from community life. It may help explain why people with a learning disability and people with mental health problems report harassment in their daily lives. It could explain the apparent social intolerance which has led to reports of people with learning disabilities, mental health conditions and neurological conditions being disproportionately issued with anti-social behaviour orders.

These various findings create a dilemma. If many disabled people do find themselves subjected to prejudice, bullying, harassment and exclusion, then how do we employ interaction as a means of overcoming prejudice without causing undue hardship for them as they interact in conditions which may be otherwise detrimental? Interaction may bring change but the process may nonetheless be painful.

Government as mediator?

The Government's 2004 race equality strategy proposes interaction as a key vehicle for promoting social cohesion. *'We will improve opportunities for children of all backgrounds to learn and socialise together and to develop an inclusive sense of British identity alongside their other cultural identities. We will help young people develop mutual understanding and social participation through embedding the development of citizenship education in schools, providing increased opportunities for volunteering...'*⁸

⁸ Improving opportunity, strengthening society. Home Office, 2005

In relation to ethnicity and religion, increased opportunities for interaction emerge as part of a strategy to achieve full participation, not simply as ends in themselves. Government, public authorities and other institutions are seen as having a central role in generating the conditions in which interaction can more easily take place, and in tackling the barriers to interaction including hate crime and harassment. Any separation or ghetto-isation – for instance, of Asian or Muslim communities – is viewed as harmful in terms of both community relations and life chances for people from ethnic or religious minorities.

Yet discussion of disabled people's opportunities to interact with non-disabled people, be it in schools, the workplace, social or community life, has not been as consistently considered interaction as a vehicle for the longer term goal of full participation.

Instead discussion has often started with an analysis of how achievable full participation is – or is not – in the here and now, and used this to draw conclusions on the overall desirability of disabled and non-disabled people being educated together, working together, living in the same neighbourhoods or socialising with one another.

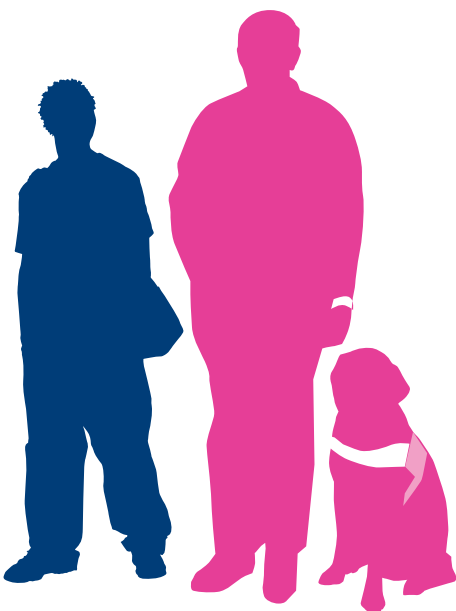
Such analysis inevitably creates a deadlock by arguing (in effect) that if full participation does not work now, then separate sheltered workplaces, special schools and places to live are needed; which means there is no opportunity to gradually increase interaction until the conditions required for full participation are reached.

The factors standing in the way of positive interaction between disabled and non-disabled people have been paid little attention in mainstream public policy.

For example, ensuring that all new housing meets 'lifetime homes' criteria in order to ensure that more disabled people have choices about where to live and can visit the homes of their friends and neighbours; the extent to which community care and support services promote disabled people's active participation in family, community and economic life; action to proactively tackle hate crime and harassment against disabled people; and the extent to which disabled and non-disabled people can associate freely with one another in public spaces.

The experiences of Rachael Monk, a member of the DRC's Learning Disability Action Group, illustrates how the failure to address barriers to interaction helps perpetuate the arguments in favour of disabled people being excluded: *'All throughout my educational life I have been excluded from taking part fully, but it was done discretely and made out as if it was best for me. For example, I had to fight to go to a mainstream school. Just because I had a disability people assumed I would want to go to a residential school. In the schools I went to there was no speech therapy, therefore I was not allowed to sit my exams, even though I had done the work all year and was more intelligent than a lot of people in my class. Because I couldn't communicate fully, I was excluded.'*

Change does not happen overnight, and change can be a process in which the benefits come to some before others, but by failing to promote something as effective as interaction we are in effect denying future generations a society in which disabled people finally have the opportunity to fully belong. Government and public bodies must employ the same approach to



promoting disability equality as they propose for promoting race equality, viewing interaction as a major tool towards achieving a more inclusive and equal society, whilst systematically addressing the barriers which stand in its way.

Your country needs you

Contact alone is not enough. The nature and impact of that contact in bringing about any change will depend to a considerable extent upon the relative power of disabled and non-disabled people in the contexts in which they meet. As well as increasing the overall extent of contact between disabled and non-disabled people, a successful strategy employing interaction would need simultaneously to seek to transform these power relationships.

There is considerable interest across the political spectrum in 'civil renewal', with the objective of engaging people in partnership with public authorities in the delivery of public policy on (for instance) sustainability, health, education and crime; and through doing so engaging individuals and communities with each other with the aim of fostering social cohesion. Examples include the encouragement of volunteering or take-up of positions in civic life: patient/public involvement in the NHS, local consultations, citizens' juries or becoming a school governor.

The Westminster Government sets out its approach as follows:

'The Government's approach for active communities is of strong, active and empowered communities –

increasingly capable of doing things for themselves, defining the problems they face and then tackling them together. It is a vision in which everyone – no matter their age, race or social background – has a sense of belonging and a stake in society.’⁹

This strategy is central to the Government’s proposed reforms of the public sector, seeking to give citizens a voice in matters affecting their lives, and sharing risk and responsibilities between government and the communities it serves. Similarly, the Government has signalled its desire to transform the relationship between citizens and the welfare state, from one in which those it supports have been ‘written off’, for example people on incapacity benefit or users of social care services, to one whereby its support is viewed as a social and economic investment, putting the resources in place to protect and promote disabled people’s right to participate and contribute in family, community and economic life.

Unfortunately, initiatives to encourage community engagement tend to re-affirm the assumption that disabled people should only be recipients of other people’s decisions or good works, as opposed to active citizens themselves. In a Home Office report on community self-help, the role of disabled people is represented as follows: networks (linking local residents to each other) are central to: the care of children; support for old, sick, disabled and isolated people.¹⁰ This is the only mention of disabled people in the report. Similarly, whilst acknowledging the value of interaction for people with a mental health condition, the latest Government initiative in this area ‘Together We Can’ looks at examples of partnership between government and citizens; but makes no explicit

⁹ www.homeoffice.gov.uk/comrace/active/index.asp

¹⁰ Home Office Active Community Unit, 1999, p.1

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mention of disabled people as active members of the community other than in relation to a mystery shopping exercise in the London Borough of Camden.¹¹

The Russell Commission report on encouraging volunteering was unusual in its characterisation of disabled people as potentially active participants. However, volunteering remains outside the scope of the Disability Discrimination Act, and schemes available to support people in the workplace, such as Access to Work, are not available to those wishing to volunteer.

In 2004, of 15,437 public appointments in England only 545 were of people who self-defined as disabled, with broadly equivalent figures in Scotland. In Wales during 2004-5 disabled people made up 18 out of 180 Assembly-sponsored public appointments meaning disabled people have little comparative influence over the governance of our public bodies and institutions.¹²

Currently, some of the rules concerning eligibility for incapacity benefit, combined with the climate of suspicion and misunderstanding generated by some

¹¹ Together We Can. Home Office, 2005

¹² Cabinet Office, 2004a. Report of the Short Life Working Group on Improving Diversity in Public Appointments, London: Cabinet Office Public Appointments Unit.

sections of the media, can discourage the legitimate participation in voluntary and community activity by those genuinely not able to return to work. This means that at least a million people who say they would like to work, but who are severely disadvantaged in the job market, may feel compelled not to engage in voluntary or community activity for fear of displaying characteristics which may put their benefit income under threat. This denies society their contribution and denies them the opportunity to interact with the wider community. It also prevents people from engaging in activities which may help them build the skills, confidence and social networks which would increase the chance of their return to work.

The Prime Minister's Strategy Unit report on the Life Chances of Disabled People was broadly welcomed by disabled people for having embraced the idea of promoting 'independent living'.¹³ Independent living means dedicated services and support, such as social services, benefits and support for disabled children at school being fashioned around the individual's aspirations and in support of their having equal chances to participate and contribute to society. This could help to overcome existing problems whereby some disabled people can only obtain help to go to bed for the night if they are prepared to do so at 5.30 in the afternoon, clearly undermining participation in family, community and economic life; or whereby the lack of support available to disabled children and young people outside school or college hours means disproportionate amounts of time are spent with family rather than a wider circle of friends.

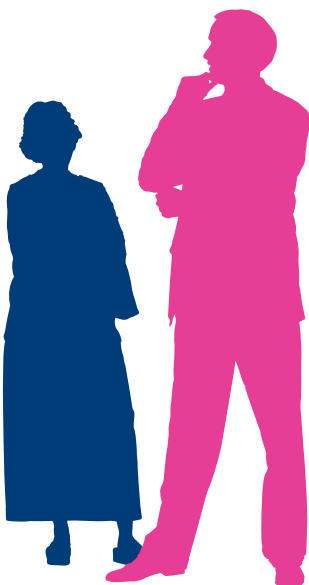
¹³ Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People. Cabinet Office, 2005

However, some have expressed concern that ‘contribution’ in the report may be too narrowly conceived simply around paid employment, and that the independent living agenda, which has been developed by the disability movement, could be subordinated to the welfare to work agenda. It is vital that independent living should be viewed as a key enabler both of paid employment (when relevant) and of the whole range of family and community responsibilities that other citizens are expected to hold. The current lack of consideration in official reports for disabled people as active citizens – seeing them rather as recipients of other people’s active citizenship – is a cause for concern.

The absence of effective support for disabled people to play an active part in community life denies opportunities for positive interaction, and the notion of disabled people only as recipients of community activity entrenches low expectations. This denies disabled people opportunities to play a productive part in transforming communities in ways that would help secure their inclusion and belonging.

Getting on at work

Stonewall’s research found that alongside education, the workplace provides significant opportunities for transforming attitudes and expectations through interaction. This would support the argument that work is for most people the best means of escaping social exclusion. A recent survey by Remploy, a Government sponsored provider of jobs for disabled people, found that people with illnesses or disabilities strongly prefer



working alongside non-disabled people in open, inclusive workplaces.¹⁴ Unpublished research carried out by the DRC found that the most effective means of transforming the attitudes towards disabled people of small employers was through enabling them to recognise that many of them already employed a disabled person or had interacted with a disabled person in some way.¹⁵

51% of disabled people overall are now in work, an increase from 43% in 1998. There are, though, significant differences between disabled people. For people with mental health conditions the figure is only 21% and for people with a learning disability 26%, although even for these groups the employment rate has been rising, year on year.¹⁶

This suggests increasing opportunities for interaction and attitude change. Yet the problem of lower status in the workplace persists. For example, despite considerable growth in the number of disabled people working in the public sector over the last four years, disabled employees are less likely than non disabled to occupy the more senior managerial, professional and technical positions. This affects both their status and the opportunity to interact at those levels of organisations where decisions are made and change brought about.

¹⁴ 'There's more to me than being disabled'. Remploy, 2005

¹⁵ DRC audience research, 2004

¹⁶ Labour Force Survey, Autumn, 2004

Part of the scene

Where people live, work and go to school or college is a major part of the equation, but the opportunities disabled and non-disabled people have to interact through social, cultural and community activities is equally important.

Enrique Penalosa, a former mayor of Bogota, Colombia, said "Public spaces are not a frivolity... They are just as important as hospitals and schools. They create a sense of belonging. This creates a different type of society. A society where people of all income levels meet in public spaces is a more integrated, socially healthier one."¹⁷ In a recent speech on racial and cultural integration, the Chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality, Trevor Phillips argued that meeting each other at work, where we have to, is not enough. We have to mix in the community, and in our social and cultural lives, so that we have common experiences, common gripes, common ambitions, and, dare I say it, common hopes and dreams.¹⁸

The San Francisco experience clearly demonstrates this point where disabled people are concerned. However, there are crucial differences between the British and American experience. For example, one British study found that one in four (26%) disabled respondents said they had experienced difficulties participating in leisure activities, such as going shopping, going to the cinema, concerts or eating at restaurants.¹⁹ Issues such as access to equipment including powered wheelchairs or the safety of the pedestrian environment for people with sensory impairments clearly influence the extent to which some disabled people are able to get out and about.

A national survey by Sport England (2000) revealed lower levels of participation in sport among young disabled people compared with the rest of the population. The most popular sports for young disabled people are horse riding and swimming, where participation levels are higher than in the overall

¹⁷ New Statesman, 15th August, 2005

¹⁸ The debate about how we create the path to integration starts here. Trevor Phillips, July 12th, 2005

¹⁹ Chowdhury, R and Worley, A (2003) An NOP Survey on disabled people's experiences of access to services in Britain. Prepared for the DRC.



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population of younger people. However, these are sports which tend to organise events specifically for disabled people. Participation in other sports alongside non-disabled people is low.²⁰

Indeed, in a case supported by the DRC, Samuel Doran who has Downs syndrome had learnt to swim at his local pool in a class for disabled children. Needing to move on to more advanced lessons to develop his swimming ability, Sam's mother asked if he could join in the mainstream lessons but was refused because she also asked if she could come into the water during the first few lessons to give Sam confidence in the new class. The case was resolved and this basic adjustment to the policy of the swimming pool allowed Sam to join in lessons with other, non-disabled children.

The Arts Council for England has found that disabled people attend fewer arts events and participate less frequently than non-disabled people in leisure activities, again reducing opportunities for interaction with the wider community.²¹

²⁰ Young people with a disability and sport. Sports Council, 2000

²¹ Arts Council for England, 2003

The internet is widely held to have transformed human interaction beyond recognition, allowing for trans-national communities of interest to form, uninhibited by geographical or other barriers. However, only 36% of disabled adults live in households that have access to the internet, compared with 61% of non disabled adults.²² A DRC formal investigation found that 81% of websites failed to meet even basic standards of accessibility, placing many disabled people on the wrong side of the digital divide and out of touch with the wider world.²³

Poverty blights many disabled people's lives and clearly circumscribes people's ability to engage in social and recreational activities. High levels of unemployment amongst disabled people of working age, the relative poverty of older disabled people and many families with disabled children are all factors which determine the extent to which disabled people can engage in wider social and cultural life.

Coming out

Evidence also suggests that the extent of prejudice and discrimination against disabled people in British society has led some to hide and disclaim aspects of their identity, with significant personal consequences. The Government's Social Exclusion Unit report into mental health quotes a person as saying: *'I feel reluctant to admit I've got a mental health condition; the stigma and rejection are too hard to face'*.²⁴

The Guardian journalist Rebecca Atkinson, who is losing her sight, recently expanded on this theme: "For years a sense of shame and a fear of rejection

²² Family Resources Survey, 2003-4

²³ DRC formal investigation into website accessibility, 2004

²⁴ Social Exclusion and Mental Health. Cabinet Office, 2004

made me hide my fate from even some of my closest friends. I couldn't find the words to deal with the ensuing surprise/pity/silence. My closet groaned under the weight of my future. People saw the hair and heels but never the moth-eaten truth that nestled in the bottom drawer.

But the years ticked by and, eventually, I couldn't uphold my self-inflicted show of normality. Blaming my calamities on just being a clumsy git became less and less convincing. The stress of hiding overcame the stress of not seeing. It was time to kick open the closet doors. So I told everyone I knew.”²⁵

Such statements resonate strongly with the experiences of gay people in Britain. Indeed, if more disabled people who are in positions of public life 'came out' then this might help re-fashion perceptions of disabled people, including those living with long term health conditions. Recent examples include Ann McGuire, Minister for Disabled People who stated “I am a disabled person. I have diabetes”, and Lord David Putnam who talked of his experience of living with ME. The ex-Cabinet Minister Chris Smith revealed his HIV status after being influenced by the remarks of Nelson Mandela, the former South African president, about the death of Makgatho, his son, from Aids. Mandela said that HIV and Aids should be treated by society as nothing more than illnesses and there should be no social stigma associated with them.

Until people who are achieving or contributing choose to 'come out' about their impairments, a kind of vicious circle operates: the achievers are (apparently) non-disabled, thereby confirming the stereotype that only

²⁵ The Guardian, 30th July, 2005

non-disabled people achieve. This makes it harder for others to be open about their impairment, which in turn confirms the stereotype – and so on.

If interaction increased, and *existing* interaction was increasingly revealed as more people chose to come out, there would be significant mutual benefits for disabled people, government and wider society.

A right to interaction?

The duty of public authorities to ensure that citizens have opportunities to interact with the wider community in public spaces and places of leisure has also been tested under human rights legislation. In the case *Botta vs Italy*, the European Court of Human Rights found that *“Although the object of Article 8 (of the European Convention on Human Rights) is essentially that of protecting the individual against arbitrary interference by the public authorities...this provision may nonetheless, in certain cases, impose on those States positive obligations inherent in an effective respect for private life even in the sphere of the relations of individuals between themselves...Such positive obligations may exceptionally arise in the case of the handicapped in order to ensure that they are not deprived of the possibility of developing social relations with others and thereby developing their own personalities”*.

In Britain, the Disability Discrimination Act 2005 includes new duties on public authorities to promote disabled people’s participation in public life, to eliminate harassment and to promote positive attitudes.

The Equality Bill currently before the Westminster Parliament proposes that the DRC's successor – the Commission for Equality and Human Rights – should have duties to work towards the elimination of prejudice against, hatred of and hostility towards disabled persons and to work towards the elimination of the involuntary isolation of disabled persons.

Specific strategies to promote interaction between disabled and non-disabled people will be a chief means through which Government and public authorities can meet these various legal duties.

Interaction plan

The DRC proposes that improving the level and quality of interaction between disabled and non-disabled people should be seen as both a key aim of public policy and a means of reaching the aim of full participation. We suggest that interaction holds an important key to transforming attitudes and expectations and in doing so contributing to the promotion of equal opportunities for disabled people.

In discharging their duties under the Human Rights Act 1998 and Disability Discrimination Acts 1995 and 2005 – and in reaching wider goals of civil renewal, social cohesion and reform of the Welfare State – Government departments and public bodies in all three countries of Britain should develop clear proactive strategies for promoting opportunities for disabled and non-disabled people to develop positive social relations. The DRC has some suggestions for discussion and we welcome comment or other proposals. For example:



- The new Office for Disability Issues could helpfully audit initiatives across Government concerned with active citizenship, civic renewal and participation. Government could ensure that legislation and services are reformed in support of disabled people's participation in family, community and economic life, with a strong emphasis on disabled people as contributors to civic society. An audit of policies across Government could help to ensure disabled people are consistently supported to contribute – not viewed as passive recipients of other people's civic activity.
- The Department of Health and local government in England could use the opportunity presented by the Green Paper on Adult Social Care and White Paper on care outside hospital to promote the opportunity for people to choose to live with support in the community rather than feeling compelled to move into residential care. Disabled people's opportunities to interact with the wider community and the change this may help deliver will be thwarted without such a right to choose.
- The Government departments of England, Scotland and Wales responsible for transport and local government could ensure that barriers to participation in the physical or travelling environment are properly addressed through spatial and travel planning, and that policies on 'sustainable communities' take full account of disabled people's participation.
- The Home Office, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the departments in Scotland and Wales with equivalent responsibilities could ensure that all of its policies and programmes in relation to

civil renewal, active citizenship and community cohesion characterise disabled people as being in relationships of mutuality with the wider community – as active players, not merely recipients. Specific policy attention could be given to putting access and support structures in place to make this happen. It could also look specifically at the question of promoting disabled people's real and self-perceived safety in the community, and tackling the disturbing use of anti-social behaviour orders against disabled people.

- The Cabinet Office should seek significant improvement in the numbers of disabled people in public life. More generally, Government could encourage increased participation by disabled people in civic life, for example as school governors or members of housing association committees.
- The Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Scottish Office and National Assembly Wales in partnership with the Arts and Sports Councils could continue to pursue strategies to promote disabled people's participation in cultural life and sport. This could include capitalising on opportunities such as the Paralympics 2012, allowing Britain to become a beacon of accessibility and full participation, including via the new infrastructure and transport systems serving the games. Working with the Department for Work and Pensions, they could develop a strategy for promoting fairer and more realistic depictions of disabled people in the media and on television, and improving access for disabled people to the internet.
- In reforming Incapacity Benefit, the Department for Work and Pensions could seek to remove

disincentives which prevent disabled people on Incapacity Benefit from assuming other roles in society, many of which may aid their gradual return to work, building confidence and overcoming social exclusion. The aims of welfare to work reform could include promoting positive interaction between disabled and non-disabled people through workplace engagement, volunteering and other civic roles.

- The Department for Education and Skills, National Assembly Wales and Scottish Office could continue working towards a policy of promoting the inclusion of disabled children in mainstream education, and widening participation in further and higher education. This should include continued progress towards co-locating special and mainstream schools. Citizenship should be something which is both taught and practiced in schools. This would provide disabled children with opportunities to assume responsibilities such as sitting on school councils or working with other children to support schools to develop their school accessibility plan.
- More politicians and other figures in public life who are disabled or living with long term health conditions could be encouraged to go ‘on the record’ about what it has meant to them and how it has shaped their world-view and opportunities. For example, the DRC estimates that at least eight members of the National Assembly for Wales could be covered by the definition of a ‘disabled person’ under the DDA but only two have formally made their disability known.
- The Commission for Equality and Human Rights should have clear and unambiguous responsibilities

to seek to foster positive social relations between disabled and non-disabled people.

Meanwhile in the chat-room

Damon's exposure of the 'Popbitch' chat-room discussion received an unprecedented response to the Ouch website, many dismayed at the attitudes on display. Damon decided that culprit 'Hawkus' had had enough hounding, but asked Ouch readers the following question:

 **So, should we meet Hawkus for a beer?** 

What do you think?

debating points

Do you think greater levels of interaction between disabled and non-disabled people helps to shift attitudes and expectations? What examples do you have to prove or disprove your view?

Do you think Government should adopt a specific strategy to increase the overall level of interaction between disabled and non-disabled people to help build a more inclusive society? What steps could they take?

Are there good reasons why disabled and non-disabled people should live, work, learn and socialise in separate places? If you have answered yes, do you believe that this will this always be the case?

join the debate

We want to make it easy for you to take part, so we are offering a number of ways for you to share your views, comments and ideas.

You can write to us or send a tape concerning your views and comments to:

The Disability Debate
Disability Rights Commission
3rd Floor, Fox Court
London WC1X 8HN

Or email your comments to us at:
interaction@disabilitydebate.org

You can use this discussion paper to have a discussion in your local area or within your organisation and send or email us a note of the meeting.

You can telephone 0845 333 0303 (local rate number) and leave us a message concerning your views and comments.

You can send your comments via text message to 07797 882 888 (SMS registration number).

Unfortunately, the DRC does not have the resources to send staff out directly to discuss the issues with people in their local area. However, we will be making a special effort to discuss the issues directly with 'hard to reach' groups over the coming months.

We look forward to discussing the issues with you!