

It Looks Good on Paper.

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It doesn't do to get your hopes up does it? Because then you are all the more disappointed when the reality hits home.

I read the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit 'Improving Disabled People's Life Chances' report with great excitement, they seem to have finally got it! They are promoting the social model of disability – ok they got the language mixed up a bit at times, and the time scales are too extended – but still what an achievement for disabled people. Of course credit must go to those experienced disabled activists who were involved in the work to get this document written.

As a result of this report the Government set up the Office for Disability Issues, this is to have influence across all Government Departments, although it is located in the Department for Work and Pensions. It is to have a Forum of Organisations of Disabled People, some long term disabled activists are on the steering group which is setting up the forum. A real opportunity for us to all get together to move things along in the government departments

Then earlier this year out from the DRC comes the Duty to Promote Disability Equality Statutory Code of Practice. This sets out a duty on public bodies to promote equality for disabled people, it includes a recommendation to use the social model of disability. Again the language gets a bit muddled at times, but there is so much in there that looks good. This includes a requirement to treat disabled people more favourably in order to take account of our requirements. There is also a requirement to have active engagement with 'disabled people and their organisations'.

In some areas of the country Local Authorities are required to take a lead Local Strategic Partnerships, they are to work in equal partnerships with Health Authorities and the Police. They are to encourage the private sector to join in and – get this – Community Empowerment Networks, on an equal basis. Wow – we could really shift things if Disabled People's Empowerment Networks are given equal status with public bodies.

Six years ago *Coalition* ran some articles on the theme *Where Have All the Activists Gone?* I wrote an article entitled *Social Services is Dead, Long Live Charity*. I was making the point that whilst Social Services are pretty bad there is a glimmer of accountability through Local Authorities. But services are now handed over to welfare and charity organisations which are not public bodies and so are not accountable to the public. The Charities Commission is only interested in making sure there is no fiddling on the money side of things, they do not take an interest in whether they are oppressive.

In 2003 I wrote another article entitled *Signs of Success*, this was about what is considered to be success. I was arguing that success for organisations is about getting the business and keeping the business. The outcomes for disabled people are not really counted as a sign of success. I added that the welfare and charity organisations were getting more work from public bodies – such as Local Authorities, whilst disabled people's own organisations are struggling to survive. I agreed with Vic Finkelstein that an 'elite' of unelected 'representatives' of disabled people that goes 'hobnobbing' with those in high places without challenging them is not helping us.

I celebrate the success of individual disabled people who get on and get themselves into the corridors of power, maybe getting a pretty decent salary. But I do object when it has been done at the expense of good outcomes for disabled people and our organisations. Those individual disabled people who go into the realms of the powerful and influential in order to bring about real change for disabled people are like lone workers. They go equipped with few tools, they need a sound knowledge of how to use the social model of disability, and they need experience of how to use it against a system that was designed to keep us out. In 2004 I wrote in *Coalition* an article called *Selling Out*. This was about how these lone workers need the support of disabled people; this is their most powerful tool. Yet all too often when they are in the thick of it and turn to see who is supporting them – they are alone, possibly even criticised for not doing enough.

So back to the Prime Minister Strategy Unit report, the Office for Disability Issues and the Forum of Organisations of Disabled People. Well what organisations of disabled people are there left to go on this Forum? Not many – in fact hardly any because they have nearly all folded or they are hanging on by the skin of their teeth. The big traditional charities meanwhile are doing very nicely thank you. Indeed

other traditional style welfare, ‘care’ and charity organisations have come on the scene. Most have the gall to call themselves organisations of disabled people, because they have at least 51% disabled people in their membership or on their executive boards. But really they are service providers; they are big business with millions of pounds annual turnover.

Some welfare ‘care’ charities run a side line in ‘promoting’ equality – but don’t take it quite far enough to support local disabled people’s organisations to develop and run services. Rather they will bid against them at every opportunity and keep the business for themselves. So this Forum of Disabled People’s organisations could well be dominated by multi million pound big business charities. They claim to be organisations of disabled people – so what can we do?

Well there is always the new public Duty to Promote Disability Equality with its requirement to actively involve disabled people and their organisations. So how many ways are there to interpret what this means? Well there is the way that disabled people interpret it and then there is the way some public bodies interpret it. Take the example of a Local Authority not far from Manchester, it has a long track record of kicking disabled people in the teeth. I was in favour of not telling them about the duty, they would not even be bothered to keep abreast of developments. So we could take them to the cleaners.

But word got to them, and so they decided they best set up a series of formal meetings in the Council offices, they decided who to invite. This includes local care and medically orientated charities. They decide where meetings will be held, a modestly sized city centre council meeting room where there is no car park and not enough dropped kerbs from accessible bus stops or car parks (which are all some distance away). Some start quite early in the morning, and there is no mention of covering expenses. This is not a good start. Our energies are being used up on getting these basics sorted before we can start to look at the important matters of getting the scheme right.

Well perhaps the Local Strategic Partnerships with their Community Empowerment Networks (with Disability Empowerment Networks) can influence some change. Not my experience! The idea is that these networks are to be equal to public sector partners, or even be in the driving seat. Don’t make me laugh; we are hanging onto the back end of the trailer at best, told not to be adversarial as this would upset the good working relationship. No matter that disabled people have been

struggling for decades to be heeded, we still must fit in with the very systems and bodies that cause so much of our exclusion. Government Office provides the funding for the community network, they ask the Local Authority if they are happy with the host organisation, could this have anything to do with not wanting to upset the good working relationship? Well it's a thought isn't it?

The Network I know best is hosted by the body that brings together the numerous welfare organisations – service providers without public accountability. What a neat complete circle.

It is clear that public bodies are not going to do anything that they are not legally obliged to do – they will stick to the absolute minimum. All the good practice guides under the sun won't make a difference; they may as well not be produced for all the difference they make in some places, and it would be more ecologically friendly not to waste the paper and ink cartridges.

We are in a very different world now, of course the funding has gone – but at least that gives us freedom from the funders who can dictate our activities. All too often organisational issues have stopped us getting on with doing the things we really got involved for. Being a service provider can mean also being in a position to influence change – but it is risky when funders feel threatened.

This very different world means we have to do things differently. We have got some of our people talking to decision makers up to government level. Those disabled people go forth into hostile places and put up opposition to the charities, they need to know there is a strong network of disabled people to back them up when the going gets tough (which is often).

The only hope is for disabled people to keep on pushing the boundaries, but are we so disillusioned and burnt out that we cannot get together? We need to find ways of being a united force without the funding we have had in the past.

We need to be together to make best use of what looks good on paper, and to support our people in those top places. It is not going to work if a few individuals are operating in isolation, public bodies will use this against them and ask who are they speaking for, 'not many disabled people are supporting you are they?' There is not much opportunity to speak with other disabled people operating in that kind of situation.

Those that can and do go out into the big bad world need to know they are part of a team.

Even those who, for whatever reason cannot be in the thick of it, but are glad of what is being done by the lone workers, can offer their support by speaking out publicly and supporting the work that is being done, often in lonely circumstances.