

Minutes from Joint APPG meeting on the Disability Strategy

APPGs on Disability, Autism, Deafness, Eye Health and Visual Impairment, Learning Disability, ME, Mental Health

12 June 2012 14:30-15:30, Committee Room 4a, Palace of Westminster

In chair: Baroness Jane Campbell, DBE and Rt Hon Anne McGuire MP, co-chairs of the APPG on Disability.

Guest speaker: Minister for Disabled People, Maria Miller MP
Responding on behalf of the panellists: Sue Bott, Director of Development, Disability Rights UK

Purpose of the meeting:

The All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs) will discuss the development of a new Disability Strategy. This will be an opportunity for members to debate the issues that they want to make sure are reflected in a new Disability Strategy, raise any concerns and contribute to the final document which will be published in the New Year.

Anne McGuire MP: September will see the publication of the first papers connected with the Government's disability strategy. Today's discussion represents an opportunity to influence the strategy. It is also an opportunity for the Minister to hear disabled people's comments.

Maria Miller MP: Since the original discussion paper on 'Fulfilling Potential' was published in December 2011 we have received over 500 contributions, around half of which came from individuals. We held around 100 events so over 5000 people in total have shaped the plans. In September we will publish a summary of the discussions so far, the responses to the consultation and a statement from the Government on what it is already doing to address the key issues raised throughout the consultation period.

- The three themes in the consultation document; raising aspirations; individual control; and changing attitudes helped us to identify key priorities including transport, transitions for young disabled adults and better awareness of disabled people and their portrayal in the media.

- We will produce an action plan early next year together with additional research including further analysis of the life opportunities survey. The Government will particularly bear in mind the points raised in the recent report by the Joint Committee on Human Rights as it moves towards an action plan.

Sue Bott: We welcome the opportunity this strategy presents Government in terms of looking at everything it is doing in the round. We want the strategy to be underpinned by a number of principles. Key among them:

- access must be a key theme of the strategy, in terms of access to the built environment, access to information, access to transport and so on. We still feel the issue of accessibility needs addressing as there is a long way to go on improving access in all areas of life.
- we are concerned the 'Fulfilling Potential' discussion document did not really capture the challenges in the area of independent living.
- we are very concerned about a weakening in the equality duties public bodies are bound by and how the public sector Equality Duty might be diluted by the Red Tape Challenge.
- the strategy cannot come soon enough. There are many problems which need addressing, not least with so many new policies still being introduced which affect disabled people. We really hope this will be a joint working strategy.

We have had lots of words now we need to see more action.

Baroness Thomas of Winchester: What impact will local authority cuts have on the effective delivery of the disability strategy?

Lord Low of Dalston: I am concerned the Government is rowing back on the public sector Equality Duty. Looking at the equality duty and code of practice as a burden on business is the wrong way of looking at things. They have been shown to be of great assistance in helping public bodies improve their performance.

Chris Skidmore MP: I would appreciate an update on personalisation and the progress to date so that disabled people are given personal budgets as direct payments.

Baroness Campbell of Surbiton, D.B.E: Where is the Government's analysis of the cumulative effect of all government policies and changes on disabled people? Is this happening at all?

Maria Miller MP: All of these issues need to be reflected in the strategy. We are not operating in a strategic vacuum; we are building on the good work we inherited, on the Equality Act, the roadmap and the work around the Convention but we want to build on these things and decide next steps in the context of the coalition government's priorities.

- One of the ideas to emerge from the consultation is that we could use the Red Tape Challenge to tackle bureaucratic barriers disabled people face in their everyday lives so it could lead to some positive outcomes.
- Local authorities are dealing with an exceptionally difficult financial environment but the Department of Health realises the importance of making the right decisions on social care. It committed an extra £7bn to social care for this spending review period.

Baroness Thomas: Is this funding for social care ringfenced?

Maria Miller MP: I don't know the answer but the Minister for Care Services, Paul Burstow, is committed to personalisation. Some parts of the country are moving towards this vision quicker than others.

- In terms of the public sector Equality Duty (PSED), I work as part of the Inter-Ministerial Group so we want to make sure the PSED works for all concerned. There is no intention to dilute the PSED.
- I keep putting officials under pressure on Baroness Campbell's point asking for an analysis of the cumulative impact of the Government's policies. However many of the policies are still under development. Real co-production means working with disabled people and their organisations to get policies right but we cannot do a cumulative analysis across different areas of public policy yet as some policies still have to happen.

George Eustice MP: Is there any scope for removing duplication from different assessment processes, for example disability and out-of-work benefits, so eligibility to one benefit can be transferred across different benefits? I have heard some people are spending

nine months appealing benefits decisions but soon after undergo reassessment. Should we rethink this timetable?

The Baroness Uddin: There is a serious discrepancy between what is intended in terms of independent living, personalisation and early assessments and the experiences of many disabled people, especially disabled people living in disadvantaged communities or from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. I hope this strategy alleviates some of these problems because there are many inconsistencies in terms of realising aspirations and individual control; in some areas getting access to personalised support is harder and so too is accessing advice and advocacy.

Tom Clarke MP: I was surprised and disappointed to hear on Radio 4 about increased numbers of attacks on guide dogs, sometimes meaning guide dogs have to be withdrawn. Hate crime is still a very big problem with nine out of ten people with a learning disability having been a victim of hate crime and bullying. There are 10 million disabled people in the UK and only 1200 cases of hate crime were prosecuted compared to almost 50,000 prosecuted for religiously motivated crime. Disability hate crime is serious and I would like the Minister to elaborate on the strategy's plans to address this.

Malcolm Bruce MP: There are cuts taking place but there are still a number of innovative, helpful things we can do to help disabled people move into work. I would like more information on the support, sometimes technological support, which is being given to employees and employers, so for example signing, electronic relay services, and so on; to help disabled people move into and remain in work.

Maria Miller MP: We managed to protect the budget for specialist disability employment support - £340m - in fact we managed to secure an additional pot of money, which will support an extra 8,000 disabled people to get into work. We are shifting our support from Remploy factories to Access to Work which is also about strategically recognising disabled people are a part of our community and not segregated.

- I am also appalled about the attacks on guide dogs and lend my support to the campaign to tackle this issue. An attack on a

guide dog is similar to an attack on a disabled person so we need to take strong action.

- We are finding improved and new ways of getting people to report disability hate crime. These reforms are now accelerating and although there has been a 20 per cent increase in report rates we still need to go further on this. I have written to all MPs asking them to speak to their chief police officers about hate crime, which cannot be tolerated in a civilised society.
- We recognise the acute issues faced by some disabled people, for example those from certain minority ethnic backgrounds.
- One of the reasons we didn't want to introduce PIP for disabled children at this stage is that parents have a tough enough time and we want to learn from the experiences of reassessing working age claimants. I am working closely with the Minister for Children, Sarah Teather, to arrive at a simpler way to assess the needs of disabled children. We want to make the benefits system fairer; we want to help people to be independent too. I would defend the importance of maintaining separate benefits and assessments for PIP and ESA; they are looking at two different things.

Eleanor (panellist from APPG on Eye Health and Visual Impairment): I am really pleased the Minister has been able to confirm her support for the Equality Act 2010. How will we use the disability strategy to affect a real shift in what the Equality Act intended: the provision of accessible information, particularly from the NHS? These are the practical issues that matter most to blind and partially sighted people so we hope the strategy will be rooted in these types of practical solutions.

Neil (panellist from APPG on Mental Health): We need to use this opportunity to tackle public attitudes and indeed the attitudes of some public service professionals, so for example Jobcentre Plus. We also need to take account of the reforms already underway affecting disabled people, which will affect their health and wellbeing. Unless the issues that most affect disabled people's wellbeing (for example housing) are addressed, all the other measures proposed for future prioritisation will be harder to achieve.

Lloyd (panellist from APPG on Learning Disability): How will Government make sure the strategy emphasises people with a learning disability get equal healthcare?

Jeff (panellist from APPG on Deafness): Many of the current assessments for benefits and support focus on individuals' functional ability to carry out certain tasks, but what about their ability to communicate, in terms of accessing the correct services? I also have another concern around the quality of communication support and whether deaf people are getting the right quality support to help them communicate their needs and abilities at assessments.

Mark (panellist from APPG on Autism): How will the Government support people on the autistic spectrum given its stated belief to focus on those with the greatest needs? As someone with Asperger syndrome how will the strategy ensure disabled people get the specialist support they need to get into and when at work so as to avoid discrimination?

Maria Miller: We have picked up on the need to get the PIP assessment criteria right for people with sensory impairments. In its early days the Work Capability Assessment (WCA) struggled to properly recognise some conditions. We have learnt from the WCA you will never get it right first time, these are very complex areas so we need to work with disabled people to get things right. The Harrington review has shown the importance of working with organisations to help improve assessments.

- People with the greatest need could well be on the autistic spectrum. The employment rate for people on the autistic spectrum is very low. Lord Freud is working with the National Autistic Society (NAS) to address this. I challenge the assertion that on PIP, that we won't protect people on the autistic spectrum. The challenge back to Mark is that we receive all relevant comments to ensure PIP recognises the needs of people on the autistic spectrum that DLA never recognised.

Baroness Campbell of Surbiton: Based on the attendance today we can see the interest in a new strategy. However we don't just want words, action is the only thing that will liberate us.