

Chapter Seven

Equality for disabled people

The Department plays a leading role in promoting equality for disabled people. For the first time more than 50 per cent of disabled people are in employment,⁴⁴ but we still need to work to make a reality of disability rights.

The Disability Discrimination Bill has been introduced into Parliament and the final parts of the Disability Discrimination Act have been implemented. The Strategy Unit's report⁴⁵ sets out a 20-year vision, so that, by 2025, disabled people in Britain will have full opportunities to improve their quality of life, and will be respected and fully included as equal members of society. But we have concrete plans that will take us very significantly closer to this vision over the next five years.

We are also:

- working to increase the awareness of existing disability rights;
- developing a major cross-government strategy to make our vision for disabled people a reality; and
- setting up a new Office for Disability Issues within government.

Introduction

154. Delivering fairness and opportunity for all creates challenges that are more severe for some groups than others. Disabled children are more likely to suffer from poverty and do less well at school. Disabled adults are likely to receive a lower income, less likely to be in work, more likely to leave the workforce before State Pension age and less likely to have adequate pensions.

We will continue to work towards greater equality for disabled people by eliminating both discrimination and the barriers that can prevent them from participating fully in society.

Gwen Leighton's story

Gwen Leighton was born with cerebral palsy. She was assessed as eligible for receiving financial assistance from the Independent Living Fund (ILF), in addition to direct payments she received from her local council and Disability Living Allowance. "ILF enabled me to attend college and then university where I graduated in 2002 with a BA Honours in Management of Business and Tourism. This was very special to me because when I was born my parents were told to put me in a home because I would not be able to achieve anything, and a couple of months later I lost my mum suddenly, so was so glad that my parents had seen me graduate. My ILF payments were then reassessed in 2003 and increased, allowing me additional support so that I no longer had to attend a daycare centre, which has allowed me to continue with my studies. Payments from ILF give me the freedom and flexibility I need, to do what I want, when I want to do it. I have a very good quality of life because of it, and I am looking forward to achieving an awful lot more, because of the support I get. Although I am the employer and my carers are employees, they become my friends and give me emotional as well as practical support."



⁴⁴ Using the Spending Review 2002 definition of the employment rate for disabled people.

⁴⁵ *Improving the life chances of disabled people*, Strategy Unit, 2005.

Disability Discrimination Bill

155. Improved rights are vital if disabled people are to play a full part in society. In 1997 only the most blatant discrimination against disabled customers was outlawed and there was no protection at all for employees of small firms. We have steadily widened the scope of the Disability Discrimination Act. From October 2004, the Act now covers a further 7 million jobs, a further 600,000 disabled employees and 1 million small employers. We also established the Disability Rights Commission. As opportunities open up, society gains from the talents of disabled people. Thanks to the duty of reasonable adjustment, disabled people's needs have to be met using a co-operative, common-sense approach. When enacted, the new Disability Discrimination Bill will provide disabled people with the comprehensive and enforceable civil rights that the Government has promised. The Bill is the final step towards meeting the Government's 2001 manifesto commitment to extend rights and opportunities for disabled people. It puts in place major reforms, assisting the drive to ensure that disabled people can lead independent and fulfilling lives.

156. The Bill will widen and strengthen legislative protection for disabled people by extending the Disability Discrimination Act to cover: an additional 175,000 disabled people with HIV, cancer and multiple sclerosis, effectively from the point of diagnosis; the functions carried out by public bodies; and private clubs with 25 or more members. The Bill also extends the existing legal provisions on premises, and introduces new and improved rights relating to transport. For the first time, it goes beyond individual rights of redress, with a more proactive commitment to equality by introducing a new duty on public bodies to promote equality for disabled people.

Extending awareness

157. We are also working to increase the understanding and awareness of disability rights and, in particular, the new duties for employers and service providers from October 2004. We launched a major campaign on 31 March 2004 to inform businesses, especially small and medium-sized businesses, of their new duties from October 2004.

158. We are improving the accessibility of information and services provided to all citizens, focusing on the specific needs of disabled people, and making information available in alternative formats. Through the Directgov website, we are providing tailored information directly to over 7,000 disabled people each week. We will continue to build on the success of the site with more information and accessible services designed to reach as wide an audience as possible.

Working with others

159. Without further action, disability rights will not eliminate the disadvantages faced by disabled people. A step-change is needed in the way that society addresses the disadvantages they face. This will require sustained action by the Government, employers, service providers, non-disabled people and, indeed, by disabled people themselves.

160. The Prime Minister's Strategy Unit has undertaken a detailed examination of the current position of disabled people. It published its final report and recommendations *Improving the life chances of disabled people* on 19 January 2005. This report sets out a new 20-year vision for disabled people: 'By 2025 disabled people in Britain should have full opportunities to improve their quality of life, and will be respected and included as equal members of society.'

161. The Strategy Unit report makes proposals in four key areas:

- **Independent living** – disabled people should be given greater choice over how their needs are met through individualised budgets.
- **Families with young disabled children** – their needs should be addressed as part of the support provided to all families. Services should support all families to achieve ‘normal lives’.
- **Transition to adulthood** – there should be better planning of how to meet individual needs; continuous service provision, not the current ‘cliff edge’ in provision; more opportunities and choices.
- **Employment** – effective early intervention should help disabled people to access or stay in touch with the labour market. Further steps should be taken to improve the employability of disabled people. And disabled people should be able to access ongoing, personalised support.

162. The Department has taken lead responsibility for the Strategy Unit’s report. We are keen to ensure that disabled people begin to see real improvements as soon as possible. So we will be working with other departments to identify early options for piloting new ways of working. Specific options include the recommendation on individualised budgets and looking at simplifying the assessment process across different agencies. We will also ensure that the process of engagement with disabled people and their organisations, initiated during the review, is maintained.

163. We will work with other Departments to set up the new Office for Disability Issues, recommended in the Strategy Unit’s report. This office will provide a broader context for Departments to develop policy in a co-ordinated way and will be the means by which they take forward the strategy for disabled people. In addition, we will work with others in Government to establish the Commission for Equality and Human Rights, ensuring that it meets the distinct needs of disabled people. Finally, we will represent the UK in European and international fora, including negotiations on a UN Convention on disability rights.

Disability and Carers Service

164. We will improve the performance of the Disability and Carers Service, which administers the extra cost disability benefits and Carer’s Allowance. The Disability and Carers Service has recently been granted Executive Agency status. This significant change will help to strengthen accountability, support modernisation and improve customer services. The modernised agency will work more closely with other agencies to offer specific services based on customers’ personal circumstances.

