

The National Learning Disability & Ethnicity Network Annual Conference Monday 6th November 2006

Keynote Speech by Meg Munn MP

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I'm sorry I couldn't be with you for more of today's event - other commitments have kept me away until now.

I want to talk about what Government, in particular my department, is doing to work with people who have been the most excluded from mainstream society. How we are trying to remove barriers that prevent people leading full and active lives, particularly those who face multiple disadvantage.

I know that local authorities are responding better to the needs of people with mobility related needs, such as access to buildings, compared to those with less visible disabilities. I also know that authorities do not always keep information about the needs of people with disabilities in a centralised manner, meaning they have to constantly repeat their requirements at every point of contact. This shows that services are not yet flexible and responsive enough to cater for people's differing needs.

We want to change that, and local government will have to re-shape the way it operates in order to make services responsive. In the Local Government White Paper, which was issued recently, we have included a requirement that local authorities must find out the views of the most disadvantaged and take action, including hard-to-reach groups such as people with disabilities from ethnic minority communities.

People with learning difficulties and their families from ethnic minority communities are amongst the most disadvantaged in our society. Over three-quarters of people with learning difficulties from ethnic minority communities in Britain are struggling without support. We have emphasised to local government that we all must promote race and disability equality.

Overcoming Barriers

The new Disability Discrimination Act 2005 comes into force in December this year. It will help overcome barriers that are people's way by institutions such as government and local authorities. These organisations are engaged in producing Disability Equality Schemes now, and you have an opportunity to tell them what barriers you face and how you think they should be overcome.

My department has listened to people with disabilities describe what they consider are the barriers to independent living. They have told us to concentrate on:

- improving housing opportunities,
- encouraging inclusive environments,
- encouraging increased engagement in public life, and
- increasing the accessibility of our communications.

Despite an increase in the accessibility of housing, local buildings and public transport, we know problems like steps, high kerbs or poorly maintained pavements make it hard for some people with disabilities to benefit. We will be promoting Inclusive Design Principles to improve the access to the local built environment for everyone.



With the new local government changes the opportunity for engagement in public life will be helped because we will be requiring local authorities to engage with all sections of society. The department will increase the accessibility of our communications by up-dating our website to modern standards, and other documents will be made available in alternative formats on request.

In my own department we support independent living in three ways:

- Our Supporting People programme has provided £5 billion over the last three years for support services linked to housing, helping over one million people live independently.
- Our Disabled Facilities Grant has provided over £120 million to help people adapt their homes rather than going into institutional care. In the last year we have removed the means testing for this grant for families with disabled children, making it easier for the family to stay together.
- We are joining with other government departments to pilot Individual Budgets as a way of increasing people's control over the funding allocated to their care. The pilots are progressing well, and we hope this will lead to situations that are flexible and controlled by the individuals themselves.

Across Government we are trying to better co-ordinate services between departments. For instance I am a member of the Ministers group called Improving Life Chances of Disabled People. We are working so that by 2025 people with disabilities will have full opportunities and the same choices as others to improve their quality of life, and be respected and included as equal members of society.

There are four main areas of work:

- helping people with disabilities achieve independent living,
- improving the support families with young disabled children need,
- facilitating a smooth transition into adulthood, and
- improving support and incentives for getting and retaining employment.

Co-ordinating the Work

The new Office for Disability Issues was launched in December 2005 to coordinate the work. It will soon be launching the UK Advisory Network on Disability Equality, an important new way for government to liaise with people with disabilities. It will have between 20 and 25 members who are all disabled, and will include people from ethnic minority communities and people with learning difficulties.

Studies suggest that by 2021 10 per cent of people with a learning disability will be from minority ethnic communities. We need to know directly from these people what they think the problems and solutions are. This new Advisory Network will be one of the important routes that people's views will reach Government.

The transformation of my department from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister into the Department for Communities and Local Government is ongoing. When announcing the changes in May, the Prime Minister set the new department a series of challenges to build better, stronger and more inclusive communities. A key element of this work is equalities - and the new department has taken on responsibility for equalities in race, faith, gender and sexual orientation.

The new department is responsible for policy in areas of major importance to people's lives: from housing and planning to social justice and economic inclusion. We know that we have to ensure that improving equality is not an add-on to these themes, but central to them. We work with other Government departments to help them take a similar approach, so that when a developing a new policy the question 'how can this be used to improve equality?' is kept in mind.

When all the differing strands within society feel involved, when people feel engaged with their surroundings, when they feel they have something to contribute and their contribution is welcomed, society functions well. That is what equality is really about. We want to make our country a better one for all to live in, and make life fairer for all our citizens.

Thank you.