

Annual Report

Councillor Claire Cozler

Disability Champion

I am pleased to present my second report to Council detailing my role and activities as .5 Disability Champion, since Mel Guilding and I were appointed as Joint Disability Champions, in July 2015.

The Disability Champions are still finding their way in a relatively new role, which we are largely creating for ourselves. We still work in crossover with the other champions, but we are still scoping our particular role in different ways. Not all local Councils have this role, or equivalent, and national provision in this area appears to be patchy, in effect, Lancaster is one of the Councils leading the way in this area, and each of the Champions is exploring various sides of this, each working to our strengths.

I have been trying to explore contacts with local and national disability associations covering varying forms of disability, and I have also been trying to contact other post-holders in similar roles in Councils and public organisations. I feel that it is important in these times of unceasing legislative and benefit changes for people with disabilities, that we are all trying to work together to achieve the best results in a very difficult financial and social climate. I have also been investigating which other national and local organisations we can support, and who can support me in my role.

However, as someone with an 'invisible' disability myself, some of this has been slightly hampered by my own health issues this year. My own struggles to resolve these are sadly symptomatic of the struggles that people with disabilities currently have to face to achieve recognition, diagnosis and treatment, and their difficulties in maintaining a role in the workplace whilst trying to achieve these. Not all disabilities are constant, many have good and bad periods and supplementary issues appear alongside the other problems. Despite these personal challenges, I have done my best to still carry out my post giving guidance and help to others in equal need, offering a positive image of people with disabilities fulfilling a function in public service.

Now...

2016-17 has brought new and varied challenges. As Disability Champions we are still not part of a set national network, and as such we receive few formal invitations in the way that other more established Champions do, so it has still been a voyage of self-propelled discovery in many ways.

The changes in the benefits system, especially the trialling of Universal Credit in this area and the changes to Disability Living Allowance/Personal Independence Payment have brought many challenges in the casework field. Other factors have also been instrumental such as the effects on people with disabilities from the changes in Housing Allowance, and rules around Bedroom Tax/Bedroom Provision for carers.

This has brought much more complex and involved Casework for this year, with new challenges. Whilst I am well aware that technically, we are not officially supposed to do active casework, merely offer advice and guidance and represent people with disabilities in a symbolic way, I have found myself in situations where my dedication to my role as a duly-elected Champion for people with disabilities in this area, and my duty of care to people with disabilities, have given me a moral obligation to act directly.

The other factors which have contributed to a net rise in casework are the cuts in funding at local and national levels, meaning many support organisations to whom I could possibly have referred have been taken out of the picture. This often leaves people with disabilities with nowhere to turn, and in a much more desperate situation than before.

My casework has covered everything from benefits issues and assessments, housing problems caused by the changes in the system, access issues, housing repairs, helping people contact specialised organisations, and liaising with internal and external agencies from Social Services and the County Council through to the Benefits Agencies and Job Centre.

Sadly, with the current situation economically, there have also been problems that I and other agencies have been unable to solve, and agencies unwilling or unable to solve them because of new rules and regulations governing them. Sometimes all I have been able to do is to refer them through to agencies who can refer to the Food Banks, as the situations have gone on for so long without resolution, leaving the feeling that all you are able to offer is a small and temporary sticking-plaster for a long-term wound. I would estimate that 90% of the Casework this year has related to the constant changes in the Benefits System.

I have also attended events held by various Disability and Disability-Friendly organisations throughout the year, from the Dementia-Friendly Screenings at the Dukes through to an exhibition held in Morecambe by Mandem, an American artist collective working with and on the subject of invisible disability, hosted by a creative space in Morecambe run by someone who herself has an invisible disability. I have also been working to make the Disability Champions publicly visible by attending public events and networking with the public, agencies, and organisations.

I am doing my best to make the Disability Champion role both visible and accessible. People can contact me through a variety of social media platforms alongside the more traditional methods, as I am painfully aware that people living with disabilities often have issues accessing public services in the traditional ways. I am still trying to find somewhere for Disability Services, though with a limited budget and the access demands this requires, it is proving quite a challenge.

Tomorrow.....

Where now in year 3? I am beginning gradually to achieve my aim of networking with the diverse charities, associations and other Council Champions. I still feel that this is vital to safeguard the hard-won rights of people with disabilities, and feel that it may be even more so post-Brexit when all the parameters may well change again, as much legislation is currently dependent upon the Equality and Human Rights Act, itself a piece of EU legislation. It is important to actively advocate with and for people with disabilities in these changing times, and at the moment no-one knows where these, and many other things, may lead.

Austerity has already caused a raft of problems for anyone with disabilities, and now legislative changes may well take away yet more hard-acquired rights. Rules and regulations change constantly according to new legal and appeal rulings and I, and anyone affected by these have to keep themselves abreast of this constantly changing playing field.

This year people with Mental Health issues and 'Invisible' disabilities seem to be the people being targeted by the constant changes. People who have been out of the workplace for years are suddenly being found 'fit to work' in a new and changed environment which seems to care most about reinserting people into the job market or simply removing them from the Benefits system with no real hope of reinsertion or training. Their care, health, and wellbeing seem to be of secondary concern. The parallel crisis in the NHS often means that these people are then not getting the support and evidence they need from medical professionals in order to challenge these decisions, and to take care of their health, both mental and physical.

Universal Credit has meant that if one benefit is cut, all of the rest are also cut, and they are going through months of delays with no money whilst reapplying, then getting into debt whilst all of this is being re-established. We are living in changing, and often bewildering, times not only for those often least equipped to cope with them, but also for their caregivers. The

sheer volume of these changes has pushed many people to the edge, financially and physically, and our duty is to help them wherever we can.

All of the changes mean that my initial aim of providing information and resource sheets for people with disabilities is proving very difficult to achieve. As soon as one set of information, or one route of support is established, it disappears or changes, sometimes to come back under a different name, or not to come back at all. I feel increasingly that these will have to be a virtual resource to allow for changes.

Part of the issue is also making people who do not have a disability aware of the issues faced by those who do. So many changes are happening, and unless or until they are affecting you or someone that you care for, they pass most people by. It is too often a case of 'until it happens to you.....'

I am pleased to say that some shops and organisations have begun to become more proactive in the field of 'Invisible' disability. Small actions like mentioning on facilities signage that not everyone who is disabled looks that way, help towards understanding that not all conditions can be seen, and prevent rash value judgements and accusations. This goes a long way to begin to combat the mentality of 'You don't look sick', and recent disability-shaming and disability-targeted hate-crime.

I would like to publish a 'Disability Positive Guide' to highlight the shops, cafes, and organisations that are actively engaging with people with disabilities and working towards positive attitudes and equality of access.

I have been working around my idea of Disability Awareness Weeks to highlight the issues that people with a disability have to face in everyday life, the challenges they have to face to live the 'normal' life that everyone else takes for granted. In order to achieve this, I have been contacting disability organisations in order to collect information/resources to make these possible. I would like to make these events as informative as possible, with contacts that people can use to seek help and inform themselves about issues.

I would like to make this partly a series of events (for which I am sourcing resources and collaborators), and partly weekly information, perhaps in the form of a blog, which can then be used as a reference and information point for people dealing with these issues.

I have been in discussion with Lancaster University, and others, about the idea of collaboration on some of these projects, and perhaps the exciting prospect of collaborating with them on some of their disability research.

2016-17 has been a busy, exciting and challenging year in more ways than one. Some of the projects are taking longer to come to fruition than I would have liked, but in taking longer they will be more comprehensive, and perhaps, more lasting. As a person with a disability, sometimes achieving this has posed me more problems than the average person, but I also feel that it gives me a unique insight into the issues faced by the other people with disabilities who I represent. Despite the possible issues they can face, I still feel that it is vital that people with disabilities are involved in every sphere of public life, so that they avoid becoming the invisible people at home, and I hope that I, in my small way, am helping to achieve this for everyone with a disability in our area.

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