

Annual Report

Councillor Claire Cozler Disability Champion

I am delighted to present my first report to Council detailing my role and activities as 0.5 Disability Champion since Mel Guiding and I were appointed as Joint Disability Champions, in July 2015.

As the Disability Champions are new roles decided by Council this year, we have not had any previous practice to follow on from, so it has been very much about creating the role in our own individual ways. There are some areas of crossover with the Older Persons Champion, in the area of disability in older people, with the Armed Forces Champion in the area of veterans and service families with disabilities, and with the Children and Young Peoples' Champion in the area of children and young people with disabilities and their families.

Obviously, we both have quite different approaches to the role, and I can only speak for myself. Personally, I see the role as Disability Champion as both that of a local and national advocate for People with Disabilities in Lancaster and Morecambe, and as a point of contact to facilitate their dealings with the Council and other agencies/entities, to simplify the path of those who find it hard to speak out for themselves for various reasons.

The term 'People with Disabilities' in our local area covers a wide range of people, from those with issues from birth through to people with disabilities which have happened later in life, people with learning disabilities, those with issues around sight and hearing loss, and people with long-term health conditions, both physical and mental.

There are also the people with the 'invisible' and varying conditions, those which can vary from day to day. These are the people who are constantly told that 'they don't look sick'. Public perception often accepts that someone with a stick or in a wheelchair is a person with a disability, but fails to see a person with a chronic pain condition as equally disadvantaged.

This gives us an enormous and varied remit in post. It is extremely important to me that People with Disabilities and their families should have equal access in the provision of services, be they public or commercial services, and that they should not be disadvantaged or treated differently because of their disability. It is also vital for me that the existing rules and laws which have been put in place to create a level playing field for people with disabilities be applied where appropriate.

As someone who is myself disabled, I take my role extremely seriously. I have seen and experienced first-hand the detrimental effects of discrimination, in my public and private life, and I would like to use my public role to make sure that others do not have to suffer the same preventable issues and injustices.

The Present

So 2015-16 so far has been an exciting year. Unlike the other Champions currently in role, there have been few formal invitations issued, as many people are still getting used to the idea that we are here.

My year, therefore, has mainly been taken up with varied casework and in an advisory capacity.

The advisory side has mainly been agencies and people who have contacted me directly asking what they can do to include people with disabilities. These have varied from advice in terms of access and inclusiveness, from 'What would make taxis more suitable for people with disabilities to access' to 'How do we make our social media campaign open to the very people with disabilities we are trying to reach?' For these I have had to look at all aspects of disability

and how it can affect peoples' everyday lives, whether it be physical access or access to information technology.

My casework has also covered a wide spectrum. From internal council questions such as 'How can the cycle path be clipped to facilitate wheelchair access?' to 'How can a constituent with a disability begin to be rehoused?' I have also liaised with the County Council and other Governmental Agencies such as the Job Centre and the DWP, unknottng problems on everything from stair lifts to whether people are receiving the appropriate benefits for their situation.

Sometimes there are easily resolved situations, by the provision of a sign-language interpreter or larger-font communications, and sometimes they involve a three-day telephone marathon trying to work out where in the chain the problem has started.

The Future

Where am I going next? Firstly, I feel that now I have gained confidence in my role, I would like to start to work alongside disability organisations both in the area and nationally on the issue of local and national advocacy of the rights of people with disabilities. In this era of swingeing cuts, I feel that it is more important than ever for organisations and Councils to work together to advocate alongside people with disabilities to ensure that they maintain the rights that they have gained and to ensure their rights for the future.

People with disabilities are suffering severely in this climate of austerity, and not all of them can speak up for themselves. They are losing rights in terms of benefits and allowances, and are being called upon to justify themselves constantly, merely to enjoy the same rights in life as everyone else, a home, a family, the means by which to live, the ability to have a social life and friends. The rights of people with disabilities had advanced considerably over the last forty years, but unless those who cannot speak out have someone to speak out for them, they risk travelling backwards to the 19th Century, with people with disabilities being seen as 'a burden' and 'a drain on society', and dehumanised, rather than being seen as the people who still make the valid contributions to society that they actually are.

Secondly, I would like to work on a campaign of Disability Awareness, highlighting 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.

I would like to have Disability Awareness Weeks throughout the year, each highlighting a different and little-known disability and how it can affect people. As someone who suffers from an 'invisible' disability myself, I would particularly like to highlight the vast range of invisible yet debilitating problems that people have to face. This would have a dual aim of both awareness and education, as many of these problems can go undiagnosed for years.

The issue of Mental Health Awareness is also an 'invisible' area which needs highlighting. There is still a stigma around this which means that too many people are frightened to seek help and suffer in silence or disbelief.

I would like to challenge peoples' minds in everyday life, to stop them, when they look at someone using a disabled toilet or with a Freedom Pass on the bus, automatically assuming 'they don't look sick'.

Thirdly, I would like to network with other Disability Champions and Disability Advocates in other Councils and public bodies, to share good practice, ideas, training, and experience, to ensure that we are all working together to ensure the rights of people with disabilities all over the country.

2015-16 so far has been a very busy, challenging, and fulfilling year, and if I manage to achieve all of this, 2016-17 will hopefully be an even busier, more challenging, and more fulfilling one. Above all, as a person with a disability, I would like to challenge the view that people with a disability have no role in modern society, by performing my role to the best of my ability, both

personally, and on behalf of all the valid, diverse, courageous, wonderful people with disabilities in our area.

Part of this role is also about equality of access to the Champions. I can be contacted on Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/councillorclairecozler> On Twitter <https://twitter.com/ClaireCozler> and by telephone/email with the details on the Lancaster City Council website. I am also aiming to set up Surgeries for People with a Disability when I can, of course, find a completely accessible venue in which to do this.