

Councillor Claire Cozler

Disability Champion – Annual Report 2018

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

This year has been quite a different one to the previous two, as various events have overtaken me, some of national significance, some of personal significance.

On the personal side, I started the year with my son's seriously broken leg, which kept me at home for 2 months, and finished it fantastically with two kinds of flu and shingles, which kept me at home for a couple of months, so I have not achieved all that I had initially hoped for this year. Neither of these related to my actual disability, either of which could happen to anyone, disabled or not, but inconvenient nonetheless.

As a person with a disability myself, I am obviously representing people with a disability both from an official and a personal angle, and have my own disability, which can include extended recovery times for common illnesses, and odd treatment regimes, to contend with, alongside still entrenched attitudes that people with disabilities should play no part in public life. Despite my own issues, I continue to work hard for the rights of people with disabilities in the area, and have worked with some national campaigns for the representation of people with disabilities this year as well, as well as national political campaigns for the representation of people with disabilities in politics.

I still feel that it is important that people with disabilities play a role within Local and National Government. 20% of the population have a disability, and it is vital that not only do attitudes change amongst people who do not have a disability, but amongst those that do. The authentic voices of people with disabilities need to be heard in the public sphere, representing their real needs and their real issues and challenges. People with disabilities are equally capable of public office and work within Local Government, and are still under-represented in both sectors.

I would like to work to ensure that the role of Councillor is made more accessible, both physically, and by demystifying the role, so that more people with disabilities feel able to be represented within the Council Chamber. This could involve running information sessions for people with disabilities who are interested in becoming Councillors. Part of this is having extant, visible Councillors with Disabilities, and the commitment of Lancaster City Council to have Champions for People with Disabilities working to ensure this representation, especially as the two current Champions have disabilities themselves. Not only do we represent the issues of people with disabilities, we also act as positive, active, role models.

I have, like the other Champions, attended events as the Champion for People with Disabilities, including local disability groups and Councillor Pattison's Older Peoples' Champions Meeting in March. I also represented the City Council at the Hate Crime Conference, where I was disturbed to note the rise in Hate Crimes against people with disabilities, and indeed many other types of Hate Crime. I am saddened to see how this is representative of divisions being created within our society, and the rise of a cruel blame culture which pits people from every minority against each other, rather than working together for a fairer society for everyone.

I have also represented the views and problems of people with disabilities on the committees on which I have served, including contributing to the Local Plan, and whilst on the board of the Dukes Theatre, I also fed into their Equalities Plan. I have also given ad hoc advice to local voluntary groups about equality of access for all.

I have also attended Multi-Agency Groups, and the Community/Art of Hosting Meetings called in Morecambe in response to the poverty issues in the area highlighted by Granada Reports at the end of last year.

This may seem slightly distanced from the role of Champion for People with Disabilities, but when you consider that benefit changes to both PIP and ESA, and the introduction of Universal Credit now mean that at least 50% of people with disabilities and their partners live in poverty, it becomes an intrinsic part of my work to help alleviate this where I can. I therefore worked with the Alhambra in Morecambe on their anti-poverty initiative over the Christmas Period, distributing food and clothes to many families in need. Many families with a disabled member find it even harder to access the support that is available, with a lack of access to transport/support sessions compounding their issues.

90% of my casework this year has involved issues with benefits, changes to benefits, and benefits being removed without warning, leaving people in dire situations, including homelessness. People being found 'fit to work' who are eminently not so, and people with mental health issues who have, because of their conditions, failed to jump through the ever more complicated set of hoops required of them, and fallen through the net of the benefits system. The further cuts to support and advice organisations have led more of them to me as a last port of call.

Continuing changes in the benefits system, the full rollout of Universal Credit in this area, the changes to Personal Independence Payment, and the phasing out of Employment and Support Allowance, especially the differential between the Work Related Action Group and the Support Group disappearing, have brought many more challenges in the casework field. Other factors have also come into play such as the effects on people with disabilities from changes in Housing Allowance, rules around Bedroom Tax/Bedroom Provision for carers, and the changes in Housing Benefit provision for the Under 25s that have affected many younger people with disabilities.

In parallel, the changing situation with much NHS provision, from waiting times and diagnosis, leaving many people in limbo without a firm diagnosis, yet unable to

work. Problems with Social Care provision and funding are also having a massive knock-on effect on peoples' care, and peoples' morale about their conditions.

The continuing austerity cuts in all fields, some of which are only beginning to take effect now, have also contributed to a net rise in casework. Funding at local and national levels is disappearing fast, many support organisations to whom I could possibly have referred have been taken out of the picture, or have lost their public funding and are running on a shoestring with only volunteers. This leaves more and more people with disabilities in even worse situations than before.

Whilst this is not strictly part of our role as Champions, to represent people within the benefits system, whilst these problems are having such pronounced and life-changing effects on peoples' lives, especially as a problem with Universal Credit literally leaves them with nothing to live on or pay the rent, I cannot in all conscience pretend they aren't happening. If these issues are leaving people with literally no quality of life, and affecting the services the Council provides to them too, I am compelled to do as much as I can to alleviate this.

There have sadly also been more and more problems that I and other agencies have been unable to solve, with many agencies unwilling or unable to solve them because of new rules and regulations governing them, or a complete lack of people available to help. More and more it feels like we are attempting to plaster over larger and larger cracks and that the whole sorry edifice will tumble down soon. But we continue to do so, because in parallel, there have been record numbers of people with disabilities taking their own lives because of the extremity of the situations in which they find themselves, and without anyone willing to intervene, this will only worsen.

A large part of the issue is also making people without a disability aware of the issues faced by those with a disability. With so many changes constantly happening, unless or until they are affecting you or someone you care for, they pass most of the population by. It is often a case of 'until it happens to you.....', or finally realising that someone who is struggling has a hidden disability that they struggle to disclose. It is too easy to judge without being aware of all of the facts surrounding peoples' issues.

Many of the issues facing people with disabilities come from a variety of intersectional issues, whether they are young or elderly with a disability, from the LGBTQA community, facing even more prejudice as a person with a disability who comes from a community outside the UK, or simply facing loneliness with a disability. In light of this, I have started some work on intersectional issues. I will be working with a local Domestic Violence Group on the particular abuse of people with disabilities, from the physical, through to emotional and financial abuse, and will hopefully be working with other local groups on the intersectional issues facing people with disabilities of all backgrounds. I am also hoping to work with a local LGBTQA group about the particular issues surrounding being LGBTQA and having a disability. I am hoping to network with more local groups to explore these

intersectional issues, especially around the complex issues surrounding Neurodiversity.

Here is to a happier, healthier, and more stable year ahead for all of us. There is a lot of work still to be done. We still have Brexit to contend with, and especially the post-Brexit period when parameters will be changing again, as much legislation is currently dependent upon the Equality and Human Rights Act, a piece of EU legislation in itself, and it is unknown as yet what, if anything, will replace this. It is even more important to actively advocate with and for people with disabilities in these uncertain times, at the moment no-one knows where these may lead. At least we can be one small beacon of stability in a constantly changing environment.

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