

Councillor Claire Cozler

Disability Champion – Annual Report 2019

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

This year has been quite an eventful one in many ways, as alongside being the Champion for People with Disabilities, I have also been this year's Deputy Mayor, so have had the duties of Deputy Mayor to fulfil alongside my other duties.

On the personal side, my health has not always been my ally in this. Neither have extended waits for treatments which I was due to receive, and which are necessary for me to have some semblance of a normal pain-free life. This is becoming an increasing problem for people with disabilities, as treatments are shunted, cancelled, or promised for an indefinite moment in the future. I have also heard of problems with diagnoses and testing, and experienced them both myself and in regard to my son, and I know how many problems these can cause, not only for people knowing how to manage their conditions, but also in terms of social care, benefits and financial support.

I am obviously representing people with a disability both from a personal and an official angle, and have my own disabilities to contend with. This does however give me a unique insight into the problems people face. Issues with treatment regimes and diagnoses should not affect the life chances of people with disabilities, but they do, and often prevent them playing a role in work and public life. People with disabilities who play a part in public life are still fighting often entrenched attitudes that they should stay at home and keep quiet. There are very few of us who succeed in politics, and despite my own disability issues, I continue to work hard for the rights of people with disabilities in the area, and have continued to work 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 recently contributed to a national study about the representation of people with disabilities in public life, our experiences as Local Government Representatives and Candidates and within Local and National Government. The preliminary results of this study are due to be presented to a Select Committee next week, with the full study both being published and going to the Select Committee later this year.

I hope that the information given by myself and others nationally help to reshape the rules around Disability and public life. It is vitally important that people with disabilities play a role within both Local and National Government. 20% of the population have a disability, Attitudes need to change amongst not only people who

do not have a disability, but also 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. Nothing about us, without us. People with disabilities are equally capable of public office and work within Local and National Government, and are still under-represented in both sectors, and until both rules and attitudes are changed, and laws such as the Equality and Human Rights Act and the Public Equality Duty applied, not only amongst Local and National Government Employees and Political Parties, but also amongst Representatives, with clear actions to be taken and sanctions to be applied if they are not, nothing will change.

Councillor roles need to be 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 include meetings by remote access (the technology is there, and is used in other authorities), planning meetings for proximity and accessibility, or running information sessions for people with disabilities who are interested in becoming Councillors. It can be as simple as having regular breaks in meetings, or providing food for people with dietary issues. Part of this has been to have 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 have we represented the issues of people with disabilities, we have also acted as positive, active, role models. I think that we also need to attract younger people with disabilities, and people with differing issues, and also operate a Neurodiverse inclusive agenda in the future.

This year I have met people in the Disability field at various events, both as Deputy Mayor and as Disability Champion, and increased my networking. I have also been invited both as a parent and as Disability Champion to meetings with the SEND team from Lancashire County Council to look at delays in the diagnosis of ASD/Neurodiverse issues in children and young people, with some children waiting six or seven years for a diagnosis, because of cuts within services. I am pleased to say that as a result of these interventions, Lancashire County Council have finally begun to realise the issues that both lack of diagnosis and lack of Education and Health Care Plans have on Neurodiverse children and young people, and they have brought in extra expertise to address this. The cuts have potentially caused not only more distress to children and families, but also more elevated costs further down the line when children are not adequately supported and become excluded from school.

I have continued to represent the views and problems of people with disabilities on the committees on which I have served, including contributing to the Local Plan and other documentation. I have also given ad hoc advice to local voluntary groups about equality of access for all and diversity.

Increasingly, more of the issues reported to me as the Champion for People with Disabilities are around issues with benefits which are having a knock-on effect on

their daily lives, including everything from starvation and sanctions to eviction and homelessness. There have been benefit changes to both PIP and ESA, and as we are a Universal Credit pilot area, more people are being 'migrated' to Universal Credit daily. Unfortunately, many of these have proven not to be migrations but a literal restart of the application process, with delays of up to eight weeks until benefits are paid. In this period, which is not reimbursed, people are getting into serious debt with everything from Council Tax to credit, not to mention having to 'loan' money from the DWP which then has to be repaid. Many people are also reporting going from ESA onto ordinary Universal Credit with all the 'Jobsearch' requirements that implies, without being well enough to cope with them. Many of these people are struggling with their mental health too, and do not have the means or the technical skills to handle the requirements of the online application process. They are also reporting that the change to Universal Credit means a net drop in their already precarious incomes, with many allowances no longer being paid on Universal Credit, such as Single Parent Allowance and Severe Disability Premium.

Continuing changes in the benefits system, benefit caps, changes to Child Benefit, 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 and the rules around Bedroom Tax/Bedroom Provision for carers, or allowing the space for the equipment necessary for a normal life are also disproportionately affecting people with Disabilities. The total removal of Housing Benefit provision for the Under 25s, and the requirement that 25-35 year olds live in a room in a shared house at a reduced rate of Housing Allowance have affected many younger people with disabilities, especially when the nature of their disability makes it impossible to achieve this within the very prescriptive limits.

Yet more cuts to support and advice organisations have led more of them to me as a last port of call. Cuts and problems with Social Care provision and funding are also having a massive knock-on effect on peoples' care, and peoples' morale about their conditions. If they are uncertain of their care provision, it is difficult to live any kind of normal life, let alone look for work.

Some of the austerity cuts, decided months or years ago, are beginning to bite only now. The combination of all of these leads to a net rise in casework. More and more people, especially people with disabilities, are left in even worse situations than before. Technically this should not be the problem of the Champions, but when these events are having such a devastating impact on peoples' lives, we cannot stand idly by and watch, especially when Mental Health support is becoming harder and harder to obtain, more people are resorting to desperate measures in these straitened times. We often have to solve other issues before we can begin to solve the Council related issues behind the initial contact.

People are facing massive uncertainty around many things, the national uncertainty around Brexit and job security, uncertainty around benefits, the rising cost of living, cuts to the NHS and Local Government, and the disappearance or cutbacks of any agencies designed to help them. For people with disabilities this is magnified, they were already on the limits of 'just about managing', but now too many people are tipping over into the 'not really coping'. This is why there are rising numbers of people with disabilities with serious mental health issues, they are not only coping with their disabilities, and often the 'loss' of an active life, they are also faced with the demands of poverty and instability on top of that.

We are not so much plastering over larger and larger cracks, as attempting to shore up the whole sorry edifice with goodwill, volunteers and sticky-tape. Whether I am in the post or not, we have to continue to do so until things change for the better without anyone willing to intervene, as I, and many other people with and without disabilities, dread to think of the consequences if not.

Too many things now rest on the shoulders of volunteers, and I would like to take a moment to thank the volunteers of the many excellent local and national groups trying to make a difference. These groups are often taking on the roles of statutory agencies, and I feel that without their support, the situation would be even worse. People cannot depend on goodwill where state support is withdrawn, this is having a knock-on effect not only in the provision of services, but also on the local employment situation, with a loss of jobs alongside services.

Many people are not aware of the issues faced by people with disabilities. 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. We do have an ageing population, with disability issues, but we also need to be aware of the needs of younger and working-age people with disabilities, particularly in terms of public attitudes to disability. No-one chooses to be disabled. It is not a life choice, it is a circumstance with which you have to cope on a daily basis, and culpabilising people for a disability does not make it any easier. People do not choose to be 'a burden on society' or 'a scrounger', it is imposed on them by a society which often makes it impossible for them to find work in a competitive market.

Many of the issues come from a variety of intersectional problems, whether people 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 or old age with a disability. We need to be aware of all of these issues and many others, and how they can affect peoples' life chances, and work to offer support, treatment, guidance to equalise those life chances.

This will be my last report as Disability Champion. I do regret some things which I have not been able to achieve in my time in the post. Funding constraints have meant that many of the activities around awareness of disabilities, especially

invisible disabilities, which I hoped to organise have not come to fruition. I understand that the post may change in the future and possibly become part of a Cabinet remit, and I hope that if this happens there will be the resources available to increase understanding and awareness of disability in the area. I would also like to see us network and share good practice in this with other Local Authorities. I hope to see us work with National Campaigns and Organisations in the future, in terms of training, information and excellence of practice, both for Councillors and Employees.

I am however extremely proud to have been able to be Lancaster's first Champion for People with Disabilities, flying the flag for people with disabilities locally and nationally. I am proud to be one of the rare women with disabilities in Local Government, and to be able to act not only as a role model for women, but also as a role model for people with disabilities, to show them that they do have a role to play in Local and National Government, and in Politics in general, particularly as my term has covered the centenary of women's suffrage.

The thing I am perhaps most proud of though, is helping people. Being one small beacon of stability in an ever changing environment, a single point of contact for people in need. Whether it is in terms of acting with organisations for awareness or change, or whether it is helping individuals, whether in a simple thing like sorting out their refuse collection, or decrypting a cats' cradle of complex issues and helping them find a solution. One person does not make the solution, but the effect of one person's help on another's life can make all the difference, and it is by these small acts that sometimes a butterfly effect emerges, changing things on the grand scale for the better. I am extremely glad that I have been able to be a part of this change locally, and nationally, hoping to pave the way for more positive change in the future. I look forward to being part of that future change, and thank you all for having the confidence in me to allow me to do this.

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