

***Tell Us* Conference Report**

Introduction

Tell Us was the first public meeting of Equality 2025. The aim of the meeting was to get people's views and experiences on key issues relating to disability equality. These views and experiences were all recorded on the day and then used in the development of Equality 2025's work plan at a meeting held on the following day.

This event was the first part of Equality 2025's work to engage with disabled people around the UK. It needs to do this in order to be able to speak authoritatively on behalf of disabled people in its work with the Government.

The day was structured giving participants as much time as possible to discuss four 'hot topics' that had been identified in advance of the meeting.

Thirty-four disabled people attended the event, with the 20 members of Equality 2025 and staff from the Office of Disability Issues also present.

‘The biggest thing of today is that we wish to ensure that disabled people feel included and engaged in that process and we wish Equality 2025 to be an effective and visible model to show strong and equal partnership.’

Dedication to Menghi Mulchandani

Tell Us was dedicated to the memory of Menghi Mulchandani who died in October 2007. Menghi had been a campaigner for disability equality for many years and had worked with Equality 2025 for several months before her death.

Overview: the role of Equality 2025

Equality 2025 was set up after the Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit published a report called *Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People* in 2005.

This report recognised the inequality, discrimination and disadvantage experienced by disabled people and set out the aim to achieve full equality for disabled people by 2025.

Equality 2025 has identified five key areas of work -

- The life journey - to look at the typical life of disabled people, identify barriers to equality and develop solutions;
- Rights - to advise the Government on how to ensure that disabled people have equal rights;
- Capacity building disability organisations - to advise the Government on how to support organisations of disabled people and involve them in service provision;
- Equality and diversity - to advise the Government on how to reach the full range of disabled people;
- Including disabled people - ensuring that disabled people play a full role in the process of working towards equality.

The aims and objectives of Equality 2025 will change as its work progresses.

Hot topics

Equality 2025 had identified the topics of developing centres for independent living (CILs) and the United Nations Convention on Disability Rights. Two further topics were selected from those suggested by participants when they registered for the event - these were young disabled people and their rights to full citizenship, and hate crime.

Each topic was introduced through a presentation by members of Equality 2025 and participants then discussed one of the two pairs of subjects at their table for 45 minutes. The small group discussions were followed by feedback sessions and two members of Equality 2025 then presented key points from all of the small group discussions to the whole conference at the end of the day.

Topic 1: Developing Centres for Independent Living

1. It is crucial and fundamental that independent living is based on models that are easy for disabled people to access.

2. Disabled people need to be in control of CILs. This needs to be recognised and supported by the Government, along with the existing good practice and contribution of CILs.

3. Following on from the previous point, it was seen as particularly important that the Government and others accept the terminology and language developed by disabled people. The definitions of independent living and what is a user-led organisation were seen as especially important.

‘The Government needs to issue a clear defined blueprint of what a good user-led organisation looks like... and there needs to be a clear definition of what independent living is.’

4. The Government should support the right to independent living, as set out in the Independent Living Bill put forward by Lord Ashley.

5. There should be designated, long-term funding for disabled people’s organisations, including funding for organisations that support the national infrastructure/networks of disabled people’s organisations. It

may also be more appropriate for funding to come from other parts of the Government as well as or instead of the Department of Health to reflect the breadth of their roles.

‘There should be sufficient, ring-fenced funding (for CILs/user-led organisations). It should be protected so that CILs/user led organisations that provide services can get involved in complaining or campaigning without risking their funding.’

6. There needs to be consideration of the capacity of CILs and user-led organisations in terms of leadership, management, diversity (including the engagement of older people) and business/social enterprise approaches.

7. The geographical areas that CILs cover need to be considered, with particular reference to what is appropriate to rural and urban areas.

8. The idea of independent living needs to be more widely understood. This includes social services and other central and local government service providers moving to an

empowerment approach and away from approaches that are seen as patronising and paternalistic. The general public also needs to properly understand independent living if disabled people are to become fully accepted in the community.

‘Independent living will not be effective unless the public understand what it is about and what it means for them, and they are ready to accept disabled people in the community.’

Topic 2: United Nations Convention on Disability Rights

1. The Convention was seen as having far more potential to improve the lives of disabled people than the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). People believed that the DDA places too much emphasis on preventing discrimination and does not do enough to actually promote equality. The Disability Discrimination Act was also seen as relying too heavily on individuals to challenge discrimination.

Participants thought that the Convention had greater potential because it has a more fundamental approach that enshrines disabled people’s rights and is based much more

on a social model approach to disability. People thought that this is particularly important for tackling institutional discrimination.

‘We need to move away from this situation where people so often just pay lip service to what they think they can just about get away with doing under the Disability Discrimination Act.’

2. People wanted to see a clear commitment from the Government that it is going to implement the Convention, with definite time scales and costings to demonstrate this commitment. They wanted to see that the Government is ready to lead by example and act fully within the spirit of the Convention.

‘We want Equality 2025 to use all its good offices and linkage within central government to get them to ratify the UN Convention.’

3. It was seen as essential for the Convention to become enshrined in British law in a way that ensures that everyone has to pay proper attention to the rights of disabled people

rather than just paying lip service. This was seen in terms ensuring that there is an effective framework of rights with effective enforcement of rights.

One way suggested of doing this was for discrimination to become a criminal offence rather than a civil offence as it is at present.

4. It was hoped that the Convention would provide the basis for a much broader approach to disability, with a feeling that current approaches are quite narrow and focus on physical impairments.

5. It was felt that there is a strong link between disabled people being able to achieve equal rights and the media's portrayal of disability being improved.

6. People called for the Government's proposed single equalities bill to be based on the model of the UN Convention rather than that of the DDA.

Topic 3: Young disabled people and their rights to full citizenship

There was recognition that the position of young disabled people means that they are the most oppressed disabled people as they do not have the power to challenge the limitations and low expectations that are imposed upon them.

Beyond this, the key issues and ideas were:

1. All services and institutions need to be overhauled so that their aims and emphasis are to ensure that young disabled people remain in the community with their parents and peers. Inclusive education is a key part of this.

‘Young people are seen as objects rather than people because of the system structures.’

2. There needs to be an anti-disablism campaign with an emphasis on young disabled people.

3. Work needs to be carried out with the parents of young disabled people to re-educate them about disability and raise their expectations for their children and ensure that they can be their children’s allies.

‘There needs to be an early re-education of parents of the rights of their disabled children, turning them from being potential opponents of their child’s rights to being their allies.’

4. At the same time, young disabled people need to be encouraged to dream and have the same aspirations as non-disabled young people.

5. Professionals, teachers and service providers need to be re-educated to recognise the benefits of encouraging the aspirations of young disabled people and have a duty to provide support and encouragement. This should include disability equality training.

‘Training on disability issues and inclusively ought to be mandatory in all teacher training and ought to be delivered by disabled people.’

6. Young disabled people need to be in a position to set their own agenda and particularly to look at issues around advocacy/peer advocacy. There should be a national voice

for young disabled people through a national organisation or a young disabled people's parliament.

'It is about changing the power balance and giving young disabled people the power that other non-disabled young people have.'

Topic 4: Hate Crime

1. There is a lack of understanding of hate crime amongst the police service, the judiciary, the general public and disabled people themselves.

'When does harassment become a hate crime? We weren't sure and nor are most disabled people or anyone else really, including the police or people in the criminal justice system.'

2. There needs to be a code of practice that clearly defines hate crime and how it should be dealt with.

3. The causes of hate crime need to be identified.

Participants thought that negative images of disability - particularly those in the media - play a particular role in this

and that a television campaign would be helpful to challenge this.

4. Several difficulties were identified around the reporting of hate crime. Participants pointed to access issues around dealing with the police and judiciary and the need for support after reporting a hate crime. There were particular concerns that disabled people reporting a hate crime are vulnerable to reprisals.

‘People need to be able to report hate crime in places where people feel safer than they do at police stations, like other community settings and also within disabled people's organisations.’

5. There was considerable interest in the use of restorative justice with people who commit hate crimes. It was suggested that community orders to make perpetrators work with disabled people would challenge their negative views of disability.

‘It is as much about educating the perpetrators as much as educating society.’

6. The police and victim support services need better understanding of disability issues if there is to be proper support for disabled people receive proper support after experiencing a hate crime.

Question time

The day concluded with a 'question time' session during which participants were able to ask questions that were answered by a panel of members of Equality 2025.

Question 1: How will Equality 2025 work to ensure that the single equalities bill reflects the views and concerns of disabled people?

Answer: The single equalities bill has been delayed but the Government will bring it to Parliament in the future. Equality 2025 will work with disabled people, disability organisations and as many partners as possible to influence the bill and ensure that disability issues are properly addressed. There is particular concern to ensure that the current disability equality duty on public bodies is maintained.

Question 2: How can equality be achieved for disabled people living in residential homes?

Answer: These issues are important and also affect people living in the community without proper support for independent living. There needs to be an approach that gives disabled people choice and control, and this needs to start with work to support independent thinking where people are not yet ready for full independent living.

Question 3: How can the campaign for disability equality work with other sections of the community to make sure that it achieves its aims?

Answer: The way forward on this was seen as disabled people working individually and collectively to challenge barriers to equality, including working to improve the law where necessary.

Question 4: There seems to be a conflict between the Equality 2025 agenda and the perceived limits of the single

equalities commission and the proposed single equalities bill, how can this conflict be addressed?

Answer: Equality 2025 needs to work with disabled people to influence the Government and give a clear message about what disabled people want.

Question 5: How will Equality 2025 work with disabled activists and try to make sure that we do not have to wait until 2025 for equality?

Answer: It was agreed that 2025 is a long time to wait but there are some targets - such as every area having a centre for independent living by 2010 - that are closer. Equality 2025 will have to work with all disability organisations and the whole disability movement to achieve its aims.

Conclusions

The day was the beginning of the process of dialogue between Equality 2025 and disabled people around the country. This will continue with a series of regional meetings and the members of Equality 2025 engaging with disabled

people in the areas that they cover. There will be another national meeting which will probably be held in 2008.

‘It has been really helpful to have the kind of detailed discussions that we have been able to have today... I noticed that when we were all sitting around the tables talking there was a buzz, and given some of the stuff that has come up it has been clearly obviously a helpful place to be, to begin some of these dialogues.’

Michael Turner

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