

Speech by Minister for Community, Dr Stephen Ladyman MP.

SCIE independent living seminar – November 22

As I'm sure most of you know SCIE have been my partners in consulting people about what should be in the new Green Paper on adult social care. I am very grateful to the Institute for their help in this work.

When I began on the journey to the Green Paper I did it by setting out my outline vision. I talked of services that promote independence not dependence. I am delighted that your consultation has come back with a loud and clear 'yes please' to that message. And so I'm also delighted to be here at a seminar aimed to promote that message and support people in independent living.

We have a unique opportunity to start to build a social care service that meets the demands of the 21st Century. That has to be a goal worth striving for. I know it's also a goal that most, if not all here, share.

This is about realising and expanding the potential of all members of our society including those most often excluded.

It is about everyone being able to live the lives they want, the way they want.

It is not about what professionals want, it's not about what organisations want. It is about what people want.

It is in every way about independent living for everyone.

So, when the Green Paper is published it will be very much about the independent living outcomes that people using services and their families have told us they want.

For example, people using services are telling me we have over-emphasised the protection function of social care at the expense independent living.

The social care workforce does provide support to tens of thousands of people every day and every day that workforce keeps people safe.

But quality of life is not all about being safe, it is also about taking reasonable risks.

Too often the services we provide focus heavily on reducing risk. The result? People have little or no control over their own lives. In fact, this risk-averse approach does the opposite of what a social care service should do. It undermines peoples' confidence in themselves and their own abilities.

Now, I've been listening to disabled people with all sorts of impairments as well as older people. Overwhelmingly they say the same thing-professionals often underestimate their abilities and capacity to make decisions. They feel patronised and unheard.

So how do we change that?

How do we change things so that every individual has the right to make their own decisions and has choice and control over what they do in life?

I am more and more persuaded that one way of achieving this is by moving much more towards self-assessment where the person requiring support takes the lead in identifying what outcomes they want to experience. Those outcomes may be paid work, to remain living at home, accessing local facilities, and bringing up children but they should be outcomes chosen by the person using services.

And those people must also then be responsible for realistically assessing the resources required to deliver those outcomes. After all, with citizenship – and independent living is all about citizenship – there comes responsibilities as well as rights.

There is increasing evidence that given this responsibility people use it wisely. And after all obtaining what you actually need and want, often from sources outside the mainstream of social care can be much more cost-effective than supplying what the professional thinks is required.

It also seems to me, that if we help individuals to feel confident in their ability to assess their own situation, then far more of them will take up the opportunity of direct payments. Won't there be a natural progression from one to the other?

I know that there has been resistance to direct payments in some quarters, whether overt or not, from councillors, managers, staff, care providers and even some voluntary organisations.

Nevertheless, those people who do take up direct payments give them rave reviews, so why don't more people get them?

Well one reason is that if your first encounter with social services feels like a relinquishing of power and control-where your needs have to be "professionally assessed" by someone that probably doesn't know you then this is hardly conducive to building a sense of power and capacity in the customer. And that is why a social care service that assumes and creates dependency and lack of capacity has no future.

That doesn't mean we won't need social workers in the future. But they will need to offer timely and appropriate support that enables people to move on with their lives.

So shouldn't we explore the role of social workers as "navigators" and "brokers"?

I am also keen to explore in the Green Paper other ways that people can obtain the benefits of Direct Payments. Should people who cannot manage a direct payment or even consent to have one, benefit from the flexibility and choice that comes with a direct payment chosen and managed on their behalf by a trusted third party?

And isn't there a role here for the voluntary sector and those other organisations that are already active in supporting independent living? Advice, information, advocacy and a helping hand. Aren't these key tools to support people who want to remain or become independent?

And might there be some merit in considering whether everyone should have a personalised budget following an assessment? The person could then choose to take the cash as direct payment or use the cash for identified council commissioned or provided services. Or mix and match, with some cash and some services.

This would bring a transparency into the system that is not there now. It also makes clear to the individual what their budget is, wherever they choose to spend it.

I get the sense that the only people who routinely know what their support package costs are those with direct payments and I think that people might surprise us with their choices once they know what they have to spend!

I am not, for example, convinced that individuals would so often consider the option of residential care as some people assume. Certainly there are some interesting and hopeful findings coming out of the 6 "In Control" pilots that are happening with people with learning disabilities.

I have little doubt that older people, people with learning and physical disabilities and people with mental health problems would choose independent living whenever and wherever they felt they had a real choice. And I am sure that those people who need a supported environment are generally more attracted to an extra care environment rather than a care home, whatever age they are.

I have said that I see extra care housing as the dominant form of housing with care for older frail people over the next 20 years. Why 20 years? Because I believe it will be the work of a generation to turn the position around so that older and disabled people have access to all the living options they want.

At the moment the options are not there in anything like the right numbers. That's why I would like to see more mixed tenure extra care housing estates, with flats for sale and flats for rent. And shared ownership options too.

In many ways outlining the desired shape of care and support in the future is not difficult, people using services have given us many of the answers – mapping the means to get there is much harder.

That is why getting the workforce development strategy right will be central to achieving change. We must get the right mix of skills, and attitudes, across the various agencies, people who are flexible and responsive to individual circumstances and promote the control and choice agenda. We need staff, and I am sure that we already have some, that will work in real partnership with people using services, treating them with respect and valuing their views. Staff that will support and champion the cause of independent living.

If we are to move, as we surely should, to more self-directed care then this has potentially huge implications. Already two thirds of the workforce is employed in the independent sector and with the advent of more people using direct payments and the like this figure will increase and more people will choose to work directly for one or more individuals rather than an agency or company.

But the future is not just about the workforce supporting people. It is about all of us: friends, neighbours, citizens. It is about healthy sustainable communities, with councils and their partners promoting public health and working towards the well-being of all citizens. It is about enabling people to contribute and participate in their communities. It is about opening up services so that everyone can access them, such as schools, libraries, gyms and swimming pools.

When I talk about contributing and participating, I don't mean only the people who require no additional care and support. I truly believe that the majority of people have something to offer and will make it available if they have the chance. And I also believe that there is a huge hidden caring capacity in our communities if we simply unlock it.

So, what about Time Banks or Local Exchange Trading Schemes. Time Banks started in the USA and were launched here in 2000 and already have 66,000 people registered. They are very similar to LETS that started here in the early '90s.

LETS are local community-based mutual aid networks in which people exchange all kinds of goods and services with one another, without the need for money.

As grassroots initiatives they are open to everyone - people of all ages, skills and abilities; local clubs and associations; voluntary groups, charities, community initiatives; housing co-operatives, small businesses and local services - helping everyone to give and take, connect to new resources, and find a genuine community identity.

LETS offer equal opportunities to all - whether employed or unemployed, financially secure or on low income, black or white, able or disabled, young or old.

LETS use a system of community credits, so that direct exchanges do not have to be made. People earn LETS credits by providing a service, and can then spend the credits on whatever is offered by others on the scheme: for example childcare, eldercare, transport, food, home repairs or the hire of tools and equipment. One of the things that disabled and older people often bemoan is the absence of just such practical support as this.

Social care doesn't have to be about services that wrap people in cotton wool, it can be about simple services that leave people with their pride and dignity intact and which make independent living a real option.

Research in about 1996 indicated that at least 40,000 people were involved in some 450 LETS schemes, most of them established according to the democratic and co-operative model.

I think that as the world changes we can find ways such as these to reconnect with our communities and help each other in mutually respectful and cooperative ways.

Of course, as we strive to find ways to help people live independently we cannot overlook what technology can offer. Of course people will always be needed in social care but sometimes frequent monitoring visits and the like are intrusive and irritating to people, they reduce independence and can actually decrease the quality of their lives.

This is not just about the future, these technologies are already enabling many people to choose to remain at home with the confidence that they have the security and support they need.

I want to see a universal focus on promoting independence and services becoming much more person centred. I want as many people as possible enabled to live within their communities, in their own homes. And technology is one very powerful tool to making this happen.

The key will be to bring technology into mainstream social care and into people's homes and lives. And redesigning homes and care services to take advantage of what technology can offer.

I want to encourage us all to be imaginative and respond to what older and disabled people want, now and in the future, rather than relying on some of the tired outdated forms of service provision we have had in this country.

I want to work with SCIE, the Disability rights Commission, the Commission for Social Care Inspection, the National and local Centres for Independent living and others to make my vision for independent living a reality.

That feels like a good place for me to finish. I haven't yet finished thinking about these and other issues, but the emphasis in the Green Paper will be on outcomes for people and the most accessible, inclusive and realistic ways of achieving them.

I hope you will join me in this endeavour and see adult social care take its rightful place in our communities.

A person is a person, whatever their age or disability. A citizen is a citizen, wherever they live and whatever their needs. I have the right to live independently, and so do you, so does everyone.

We recognise now that all individuals have fundamental human rights and that means all of us, able bodied or otherwise, vulnerable or otherwise.

One of those rights in my belief is the right to independence. We have to use the Green paper as the start of a process of making sure every single one of us has that right – not just theoretically but in practice – wherever they live, whoever they are and whatever their needs.

I hope you have a good seminar today.

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