

Written evidence from United Response [NDS0033]

Introduction

Since 1973, United Response has been supporting people with learning disabilities, mental health or physical support needs to live their life to the full. Our team of 3,400 staff works across 330 locations in England and Wales to support around 2,000 people aged 16 to 65+. We campaign to ensure the people we support have equal access to the same rights and opportunities, as well as challenging the negative attitudes and discrimination they face.

Executive Summary

- **The Cabinet Office and Disability Unit must develop more accessible and innovative means of involving individuals with learning disabilities in public consultations, both in-person and online.**
- **The Equalities Office should direct greater investment towards improving civic and political education amongst disabled people living in social care settings.**
- **Publish a measurable and timetabled action plan from the Disability Unit for best practices on accessible communication with disabled citizens across all Government Departments.**
- **The Department of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Cabinet Office, and Equalities Office to provide an update to the public on the new scheme for supporting disabled election candidates' progress and when it will formally open over the next six months.**
- **The Disability Unit must publish a detailed progress report on the Disability Strategy's commitments within the next four months and the incoming Secretary of State for Health and Social Care should issue a corresponding statement to the House of Commons during their first one hundred days in office.**
- **Develop greater, targeted support towards supporting older disabled people and people with dual diagnoses throughout the Strategy's implementation.**
- **As a matter of urgency, fully incorporate the UNCRC and the UNCRPD into domestic law to ensure that children and young people's rights and those with a disability are central to SEND reforms and considered of paramount importance to the Government.**

How effectively is the Government communicating with disabled people and involving them in the implementation and further development of the strategy?

Intricately linked to our proposals for better engagement during consultations are our concerns about the Strategy's pledges around involving more disabled people during the accountability and governance process. We welcome the Disability Unit's commitment to review the way the Government engages with disabled people, DPOs, and charities¹, but it mentions few specific changes that it aspires toward in this regard.

United Response believes that targeted direction is required from the Disability Unit here – with a detailed and published action plan that identifies gaps in disability engagement across all Government Departments, the introduction of measurable targets for each, and an explicit commitment to proactively involve disabled stakeholders throughout the process.

Further, whilst the Strategy makes an ample overview of the different means of improving government information's accessibility and that it will continue to consult with stakeholders², again, we are disappointed with the lack of measurable and timetabled policy commitments.

In tandem with our calls for better political literacy, we believe that explicit guidelines on best practices for engaging with disabled citizens should be devised and published by the Disability Unit as a matter of priority. These should be issued to all Government Departments and their agencies; with an understanding that the recommendations are an evolving resource to be built upon in regular consultation with the Disability Communications Working Group.

During the worst cost of living crisis in over forty years³, and with a difficult winter looming, increasing numbers of disabled people and their families are and will be seeking State support. Civil servants and service staff must be equipped with the working knowledge of how best to ease citizens' journeys navigating what can be an immensely complex system.

On a broader point of political engagement, United Response welcomes the Department for Housing, Communities and Local Government's pledge to initiate a new scheme supporting disabled candidates for elected office⁴. Yet although April 2022 was the stated

¹ HM Government. (2021). National Disability Strategy. Pg.96. [Online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-disability-strategy>

² *Ibid.*

³ Race, Michael. (2022) 'UK inflation rises at fastest rate for 40 years as food costs jump.' *BBC News*. [Online] 22nd June. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-61891649>

⁴ National Disability Strategy. Pg.27.

commencement date, we have heard few developments on the proposed scheme from the Department or Secretary of State since then.

We would urge the Department, Cabinet Office, and Equalities Office to provide an update to the public on the new scheme's status and when it will formally open within the next six months.

What progress has been made on the Disability Unit's review into the way the Government engages with disabled people?

United Response believes that disabled stakeholders must be at the heart of the Strategy's planning and rollout at all levels. Whilst the Government has made much of its consultative approach throughout the Strategy, at a national and devolved level, we remained unconvinced that disabled citizens have been successfully involved. Throughout the Strategy's development process, United Response has noted with profound reservations the lack of regular consultation between the Government and several major Disabled Persons Organisations (DPOs)⁵. Our concerns were sadly vindicated when the High Court ruled earlier this year that the public survey conducted before the Strategy's publication was unlawful because it failed to allow for meaningful responses from disabled citizens⁶.

Over twelve months have elapsed since the Strategy's publication, yet no formal report has been released updating the public on its implementation thus far. This is a worrying development which exacerbates not only historic and ongoing communication barriers between disabled people and the Government but also the twin issues of transparency and accountability. United Response, therefore, urges the Disability Unit to publish a detailed progress report on the Strategy's commitments within the next four months and calls on the incoming Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to issue a corresponding statement to the House of Commons during their first one hundred days in office.

Digital technology has made it much more accessible for the public to submit their individual views to the Government, as it has for Departments to facilitate quantitative data collection and analysis through methods such as online surveys. Many of these avenues of

⁵ Pring, Jonathan. (2020). 'Minister's silence over lack of engagement with DPOs on disability strategy.' *Disability News Service*. [Online]. 26th March. Available at: <https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/government-must-tear-up-national-disability-strategy-after-high-court-defeat/>

⁶ Bloomer, Alison. (2022). 'High Court finds National Disability Strategy unlawful.' *Learning Disability Today*. [Online]. 26th January. Available at: <https://www.learningdisabilitytoday.co.uk/high-court-finds-national-disability-strategy-survey-unlawful>

involvement, we feel, are still aimed at neurotypical audiences who do not struggle with processing jargon, large swathes of information and lengthy questionnaires. United Response recommends the Disability Unit continues to monitor public uptake and satisfaction with its methods of alternative communications during the Strategy's implementation.

We would also encourage the Cabinet Office and Disability Unit to develop more accessible and innovative means of involving individuals with learning disabilities in public consultations, both in-person and online. This should be done at both a national and devolved level *and* in close collaboration with disabled individuals themselves, DPOs, and charities.

Tied to this, we are calling for greater investment from the Equalities Office towards improving civic and political education amongst disabled people living in social care settings; many of whom, as our research showed, are not politically engaged⁷ and are reliant on their family members and social care staff.

Are there any specific groups that will be supported well, or supported badly, by the strategy?

United Response is acutely concerned about the Strategy's overall responsiveness to meeting the needs of people with complex needs and co-occurring conditions – specifically, autistic people and people living with a learning disability residing in social care. Our organisation supports many of these individuals across the country through our education, employment, and supported housing programmes.

Despite the Strategy's wide-ranging ambitions and welcome investments towards earlier interventions for children and young people with complex SEND, there are nevertheless children who slip through the State's safety net and grow into adults with unaddressed needs. Indeed, it is precisely these cohorts for whom United Response chiefly cares and advocates, and whose age group (aged 16 – 65+) we feel not do not enjoy the same parity of support under the Strategy as children and young people.

Older disabled people are particularly vulnerable to exclusion during the consultation and decision-making process. They are far less likely to be online⁸ and have fewer employment

⁷ United Response. (2021) *One in ten find voting confusing, new survey reveals on first-ever Accessible Voting Day*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.unitedresponse.org.uk/news-item/one-in-ten-find-voting-confusing-accessible-voting-day/>

⁸ Equality and Human Rights Commission. (2017). *Being disabled in Britain: A journey less equal*. Pg.131.

opportunities in a post-COVID and evolving job market⁹. Moreover, there is a concerning lack of data collection on measuring transitions between children and adult social care services. It is at the focal point in many disabled people's lives where better outcomes for adult life – particularly in higher education, sustained employability, and independent living – are decided through planned transitions.

United Response would urge the Strategy's future implementation to take account of these two cohorts and develop targeted interventions that meet their needs in line with existing initiatives.

Does the SEND review provide a framework that will meet the needs of young people with learning disabilities and autism with the best opportunities?

In our submission to the Department of Education's public consultation on the SEND review, United Response argued what was missing in the Green Paper was a fundamental recognition of how a rights-based approach could address many of the current system's failings and function as a mechanism to monitor the impact of the new reforms' implementation¹⁰. Enshrining the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) into domestic law would, we recommended, be a crucial step forward to realising this goal.

We believe a similar oversight has occurred within the National Disability Strategy in this regard. Whilst there are several references to the Government's obligations under the UNCRPD, it makes no mention of the UNCRC and no commitment to codifying either document into UK law. We would urge the Departments for Education and Health, along with their respective Secretaries of State, to pursue this as a matter of priority.

Further, we also voiced concerns about the adequacy of current standards and monitoring procedures to evidence how young people with SEND are being prepared for adulthood across the four Preparing for Adulthood (PFA) outcomes. We would reiterate our calls to

[Online] Available at: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/being-disabled-in-britain.pdf>

⁹ Leonard Cheshire. (2020). *Locked out of the labour market: The impact of COVID-19 on disabled adults in accessing good work – now and into the future*. Pg.11. [Online] Available at: <https://www.leonardcheshire.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/Locked-out-of-labour-market.pdf>

¹⁰ United Response. (2022). *United Response: SEND and Alternative Provision Green Paper response*. Pg.1. [Online] Available at: https://s33156.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/United-Response_SEND-and-Alternative-Provision-Green-Paper_Response.pdf

update these mechanisms, ensuring that the standards link up with initiatives across government to reduce the SEND employment gap¹¹.

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¹¹ Ibid. Pg.2.