

Notes From The RADAR MP Dialogue Meeting held At SYCIL
With Rosie Winterton M.P. On Saturday 4th June 2011

Miss Winterton opened the meeting by thanking everyone for attending, and highlighted the fact that it was the third or fourth such meeting between herself and service users at SYCIL.

Rosie Winterton then went on to explain the idea behind the RADAR MP Dialogue Scheme, as some of those attending this year, had not attended in the past. This year's theme nationally was "disabled people as representatives", as RADAR recognized that there are few disabled M.P.'s or local councilors, but that many areas of public policy impact upon the lives of disabled people. Rosie mentioned that at present the Welfare Reform Bill is going through Parliament, and that if those at the meeting had any issues relating to this that she could put them forward to Parliament. It was important that disabled people's voices were heard, and that disabled people should be directly represented.

An open discussion followed during which several issues were highlighted as areas of concern.

Several representative from the local Deaf community were present, and put forward their concern that lack of accessible information was a major barrier for deaf people. Until earlier this year SYCIL had had a Deaf Development Worker post (initially 2 part time workers) and this had made a huge difference to local deaf people in enabling them to access information and services. Unfortunately due to funding constraints these roles had been discontinued, and this was seen as a frustrating backwards step. Relying on BSL interpreters 24hours a day was not seen as a practical option, but the Deaf Development Workers made a huge impact on being able to access services and information.

Rosie, said that the withdrawal of funding for the Deaf Development Workers was a good opportunity to highlight what was needed to improve access for the Deaf community, for example to the NHS and the Public

Health Scrutiny Committee, and suggested that the group collate evidence of the impact of people not getting the help they need early rather than much later when things had deteriorated, and consequently more expensive intervention is required. Rosie admitted that although she was aware of the College For The Deaf, she had not previously been aware of the size of the deaf community in Doncaster. In previous years Doncaster had had a cabinet member responsible for equalities, but now this role was being undertaken by The Mayor ; Rosie suggested that members of the deaf community make a request to see the mayor to discuss their concerns, and Jane Kidd said she would help Mary Jones to arrange this. Maddie O'Sullivan informed the group that a review of the work which had been done by the Deaf Development Workers was currently being undertaken at SYCIL. Rosie mentioned that some PCT money was going to DMBC in the near future, and suggested that the deaf delegates present need to make contact with DMBC as soon as possible to argue the case for funding for Deaf Development Worker posts.

The conversation now changed to the importance of disabled people being able to participate in democracy, and Councillor Nevitt mentioned that often voter apathy was a problem, to which one of the delegates present mentioned that people often did not bother to vote because they felt that their vote did not matter, as disabled people and disability issues were low on the agenda of all the main political parties. Rosie responded to this by pointing out that all political parties took great notice of what was in the or manifestos, and do not later put forward ideas about issues which are not contained within the manifestos. She mentioned that the Labour Party was currently reviewing its manifesto, and would be including the needs of disabled people within this, as the party was aware of the needs of disabled people and carers, evidenced for example by the introduction of Carers Grants in the past.

There was broad agreement within the group that the present government was hitting disabled people hard, to which Rosie replied that coalitions don't have a clear mandate so it can be hard to see what is in each coalition partner's manifesto. She also pointed out that the current

government was tackling the deficit in a very different way to the way that The Labour Party would have done, especially in the speed of change it wanted to achieve.

Jane Kidd pointed out that workers at SYCIL were finding it increasingly difficult to be able to help people to access welfare benefits support, and that this was resulting in disabled people losing benefits or not being able to claim the benefits to which they may be entitled. Anyone under the age of 50 years old who needed a home visit was in an especially difficult position as there were currently no services available to do welfare benefits home visits for this client group. Concerning welfare benefits Rosie mentioned that one of the Labour Party's concerns was the possible withdrawal of DLA mobility from disabled people who live in residential homes, and that campaigning by organizations such as RADAR made it clear that the current government did not understand the impact of the cuts on disabled people. Another area of concern was the impact on disabled people of new changes to housing benefit – Rosie said that she would give Jane details of the likely impact of housing benefit changes on disabled people, and mentioned that sometimes the press can distort the facts about how much people can get in housing benefit.

The conversation now switched to disabled people and work, in light of the current re-assessment of incapacity benefit claimants for the new Employment and Support Allowance. Many disabled people did want to work, but it was pointed out that discrimination and ignorance amongst employers in the workplace was still rife. The Labour Party and Department for Work and Pensions sought to make the working environment accessible for disabled people, but with financial constraints, things such as Disability Equality or Deaf Awareness Training were now more difficult for employers to be able to afford. In such a climate it was easy for employers to overlook the positive contribution which disabled people could make to the workplace, as with more people unemployed they could more easily overlook disabled people for whom some reasonable adjustments may need to be made. Mary Jones said that the trade unions should do more to help disabled people find and keep work, and Rosie

agreed that in some cases where an employee had become disabled, that a trade union could make a difference. Councillor Nevitt pointed out that in the current climate where there were around 20 million people of working age, but only around 6million in a trade union, the impact of the unions was likely to be limited. Rosie said that the unions needed to advertise their services more, especially at a time when health and safety legislation was being eroded, more people were likely to need union support for issues such as industrial deafness, and getting any compensation was getting harder.

The next issue for discussion was the media, for example the tabloids being very negative about disabled people. One recent statistic quoted was concerning the amount of benefit which was lost to fraud, but this was dwarfed by the amount of money which was lost to the public purse as a result of tax evasion, although this tends not to be mentioned, likewise the amount of benefits which go unclaimed. This selective publicity was felt to be very damaging to the public perception of disabled people. It was pointed out that benefit fraud often makes it even more difficult for genuine claimants to be able to get the money to which they should be entitled, for example £5bn worth of benefits goes unclaimed by older people alone. Public perception of disability can often be a problem as many disabled people don't look any different to anyone else, and as a result the public may not respond to them appropriately.

Travel was highlighted as a problem area for some disabled people, not only physical access, but accessible information for deaf people. There were some good examples in the south of England, but unfortunately this good practice did not seem to be widespread across the country as a whole.

The final area of discussion was the importance of engaging young people in politics. In the past radicalism within society had always come from younger people, and the previous Labour government had brought in citizenship classes in schools. Universities also used to be strong political arenas, but this was declining. One member of the group said that

although he was interested in politics, that sometimes things can go over the heads of younger people at general meetings, which may account for younger people's apparent lack of interest in politics, although it was important to be informed about their rights concerning things such as personal budgets.