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# Inclusion London

Ellen Clifford



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Inclusion London is an umbrella organization supporting over 70 Deaf and Disabled People's Organizations (DDPOs) across London and helping them grow. DDPOs are led mainly by deaf and disabled people. They work to protect their rights, campaign for equality and inclusion, and provide a range of peer-led services and support. Inclusion London has also recently established a Disability Justice project, which seeks to take strategic legal action under the Care Act, Equalities Act and Human Rights Act.

Ellen Clifford is the Campaigns and Policy Manager at Inclusion London. She supports DDPOs with campaigning skills, seeks increased representation of the direct voices of deaf and disabled people in the media, and also focuses on addressing national policy and reporting to the United Nations. Ellen is a mental-health survivor and identifies as a disabled person under the social model of disability. She is also an activist in the Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC) network of community-led campaigns. DPAC exposes and shames government policies that affect disabled people. The network also creates space for people to come together, provide tips and peer support, and feel empowered.



Reclaim our Spaces: 'We go into places where people in power make the decisions that affect our lives.' Members of Disabled People Against Cuts in the UK Parliament.

## Reclaim our Spaces

We definitely use this a lot. We go into places where people in power make the decisions that affect our lives. For example, we always try to get meetings in Parliament. It isn't designed for wheelchairs, so this means we won't fit in the room. We'll overspill into the corridors, which makes people very visible and politicians can't ignore that. However, it is easier to campaign successfully on access issues as opposed to welfare reform and social care.

We try to influence decision-making in any way that we can. Other ways to reclaim the space of decision-making are through legal challenges in the High Court and using the United Nations Convention. For example, DPAC triggered an investigation through the UN Disability Committee and I went to Geneva to give evidence on behalf of DPAC and Inclusion London. This can help to influence opposition politics. But the only way to challenge local authorities is by an individual being brave enough and strong enough and having enough support to take legal action (although changes to Legal Aid mean that not everyone is eligible for that anyway).

We are involved in all areas of concern and where disabled people's rights are under attack: education, housing and transport. For example, some train companies claim that people can't expect to have assistance on a turn-up-and-go basis, and should therefore book this assistance 48 hours in advance. Accessible transport is an icon of disabled people's rights to movement, as it is about freedom to travel. In July at DPAC we organized a Week of Action claiming, among other things, the right to ride for people with disabilities. The UK's transport system is not built to accommodate people in wheelchairs travelling together, so we will organize direct-action activities to raise awareness of this issue.

## Common Good

The inclusion of disabled people is good for the whole of society, but this is not an easy argument to make. The economic aspect is mentioned usually, making a business case for investing in independent living. For disabled people to have the same life chances there is a cost – for adaptations or for support from a personal assistant. If the government invests in personal assistants they create jobs and disabled people can then become employed and contribute to the economy. The messaging around austerity is that disabled people are too expensive, that we're a burden on society and can't expect to have the same choices and chances in life as everyone else. In general there is a perception that we are more isolated than we actually are. But there's a lot of us and our lives are inter-dependent. If benefits and support are cut this also affects family, friends and neighbours. A friend of mine was going to a community choir and she was told by her social worker that they were cutting her social-care package. If she wanted to keep on going, the other members of the choir would have to take her to the toilet and give her her medication. Attacks on disabled people affect wider communities. Other people do care about this and are upset about it.



Common Good: ‘There’s a lot of us and our lives are interdependent; if our benefits are cut it also affects family, friends and neighbours.’ Audrey and Dave, members of DPAC.

However, there is a danger in using this economic argument. We need to have a value-based understanding that every life is important. One of the issues with the government trying to get everyone into work is that some people simply can’t work. There are many disability organizations that don’t want to say so because they risk devaluing disabled people. But at the same time focusing only on this idea that work is good for you also has a devaluing impact on people. The government Green Paper that came out at the beginning of this year was welcomed by many charities because it was all about employment support for disabled people. But underpinning the paper is a very scary message that work benefits everybody and if you don’t take part in work-focused activities you’re going to lose the support you need. This ignores all the UN recommendations and goes even further. Sometimes there are tensions between organizations who lobby politicians (they tend to use the economic argument), while grassroots activist movements use the value-based argument. As an activist first and foremost, there are some red lines I wouldn’t cross in a job even if the job depended on it, if I felt my politics were being contravened too far. I believe that the best way to influence change is through collective resistance and demanding change. Parliamentary democracy is very limited but I try to use it when I can.



The Social Model of Disability. 'The key thing about the social model is that it's a tool for social change, for people to identify a common barrier and mobilize collectively.' Members of Disabled People Against Cuts at a protest.

## The Social Model of Disability

The idea behind the social model of disability is that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with disabled people. The key thing about the social model is that it's a tool for social change, for people to identify a common barrier and mobilize collectively. Some examples of using the social model include having a ramp instead of stairs for wheelchair users; or someone with mental-health support needs having a personal assistant. In fighting for these things disabled people will often protest and come together. There have been some wins in the past, such as the campaign for accessible transport, in which people chained themselves to buses.

One of the things we are currently fighting for is for the government to completely overhaul welfare-benefit assessments and use the social model. The model currently used is designed to get people off benefits, ignoring the evidence and assuming that we can get well if we tried harder, that we don't need support and we can manage on our own, blaming the individual for their own impairment. We have the Care Act 2014,<sup>1</sup> but local authorities are not implementing it because they say they have had massive funding cuts and aren't able to give people the support they need. What is largely used is a 'clean and feed' model of support. Someone comes to your house for a short time and makes you a cup of tea or takes you to the toilet. Local authorities are telling people they have more independence by using incontinence pads rather than having someone helping them use the toilet. People don't have access

to food and water for hours and they're left to sit in chairs. If a disabled person complains about these things they are labelled as being 'difficult'.

In terms of mental health, the Mayor of London's recent initiative Thrive London takes a very individualistic approach. It talks about equipping Londoners to manage mental health but doesn't acknowledge that some people will need support or that their situations are aggravated by benefit cuts. It's very easy to talk about challenging stigma, there's definitely a role for that, but it also needs to look at other concrete barriers that people are facing.

So collective resistance and action are very important. Disabled People Against Cuts creates a space for us to come together and support each other, and give people a sense of hope. One of the impacts of the cuts is that people are trapped in their own homes, which makes them even more invisible and creates segregated communities. And much of society is unaware that this is happening because it's behind closed doors. So what we try to do through the protests is bring people in and make them publicly visible. We ensure funding for travel and we ally with other groups campaigning against cuts to provide buddies and support for disabled people.

## Note

- 1 The UK Care Act 2014 is national legislation that outlines the rights of people with disabilities and carers, and specifies the responsibilities of local authorities towards them.