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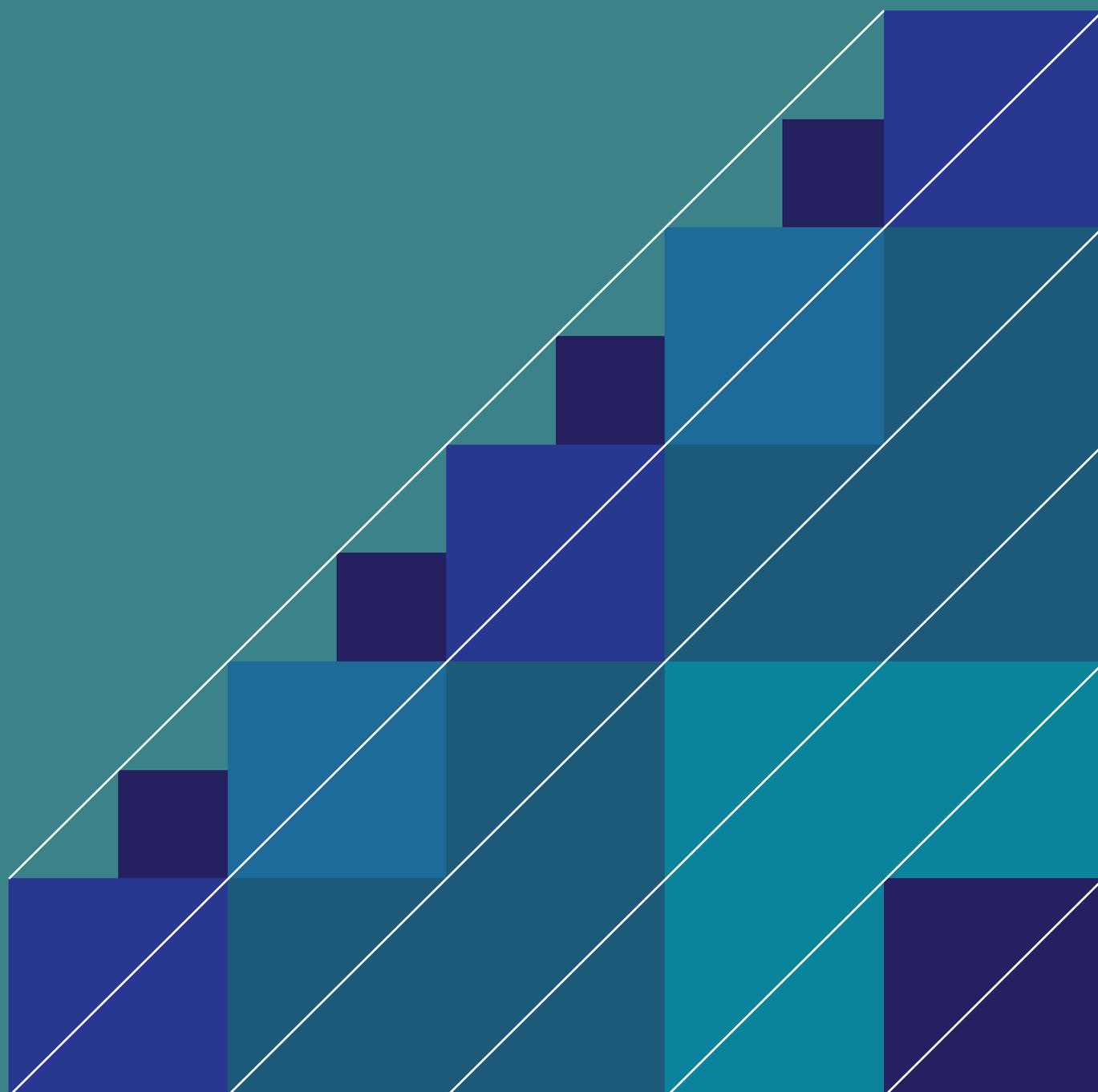
The case for enabling talented, young, disabled graduates to realise their potential and reach the top

A Discussion Paper by:

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July 2019



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Foreword

by Rt Hon Dominic Raab MP

A fair society is one in which every young person can make the best of their potential, whatever their start in life. That must include disabled people. I therefore welcome this important contribution to the debate about how we ensure that disability is placed firmly on both Government's and business' agendas, so that everyone can make the most of the opportunities in post-Brexit Britain.

2020 will be a year of change and of promise. It will mark a new start for the UK, as we begin our first full year outside the EU. We will be free to trade with the rest of the world on our own terms, and elected politicians in Westminster will become more accountable than at any time since we joined the Common Market over 45 years ago. With it will come the welcome chance to return to our domestic agenda, with a renewed focus on recognising the potential of the individual and widening opportunity for everyone.

This paper is timely because 2020 also marks the 25th anniversary of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA), introduced by the Conservatives in 1995. We should take pride in this social justice milestone and seize the opportunity to reflect on how we preserve and build on its legacy.

In that context, the authors' restless call for change and reform is inspired by a positive, optimistic and deliverable vision. Their approach makes a powerful and compelling case for recognising enterprise, ambition and equality of opportunity as the driving forces behind social mobility. Whilst acknowledging the need for care and support, their vision looks beyond dependence and focuses on a drive to remove barriers to opportunities, smash glass ceilings and unlock the talents and abilities of disabled people.

This is a refreshing change in emphasis and outlook. As we seek to grasp the opportunities of Brexit abroad, we must also better tap the pool of talent we have at home. This paper's focus on enabling talented, young disabled graduates to realise their potential and reach the top of their professions should inform and shape that vision by inspiring success, encouraging excellence and ensuring genuine competition for the top jobs.

The solutions set out below build on one of the most exciting aspects of the DDA and subsequent legislation: challenging society's negative perceptions of disability, perhaps most significantly through the inclusion of disabled children in mainstream education. As a result, a whole generation of young disabled people have benefited from opportunities that they were previously denied. They have had the chance to aspire and aim high. Lord Shinkwin and George Relph take this mission forward, with a challenge to government and business not to overlook the potential of talented, young disabled graduates as they recruit and forge the teams of the future.

If we genuinely want to build a fairer society, strengthened by the contribution of everyone with the talent and potential to succeed and lead, we must heed their advice and take seriously their thoughtful recommendations. This paper offers a bold philosophical and policy reference point for moving the debate forwards, and raising our ambitions to make the very best of the deep and varied talents of the many outstanding disabled people we have in this country.

About the authors

Kevin Shinkwin was created a Life Peer, taking the title Lord Shinkwin, in October 2015. Since then he has used his position to champion disability equality issues both in the House of Lords and the media.

Prior to entering the Lords, Lord Shinkwin spent most of his career in the charity sector, with roles at Macmillan Cancer Support, Cancer Research UK and The Royal British Legion, where he led successful campaigns on the Armed Forces Covenant and enhanced support for bereaved Armed Forces families. At the age of 24, he was appointed to the National Disability Council, which was created by the Major Government to advise on the implementation of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

George Relp has extensive experience of working with disabled people and on disability policy issues from his time with the UK's principal disabled people's organisation, Disability Rights UK, and as the Secretariat to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Disability. He graduated top of his cohort in MA Medical Ethics and Law from King's College London.

About the contributors

The authors are very grateful to the following for their written contributions to the paper:

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Corporates

Abode Impact; BBC; Enterprise Holdings; EY; King's College London; Marks and Spencer; Andy Street, Mayor of the West Midlands; MyPlus Consulting; the RBS Group; Ricorda Consultancy Ltd; Unilever; and the Valuable 500.

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Executive summary

2020 will mark the 25th anniversary of the most momentous social justice milestone of the 20th century for disabled people, the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA).

The significance of the DDA was what it promised: a fundamental shift in the dynamics of the disability debate. Yet almost 25 years later, its promise has still to be realised.

The dynamics of the disability debate remain negative: disability continues to be overwhelmingly associated with dependency, social exclusion, and under-achievement.

As the recently launched 'Valuable 500' campaign shows, the DDA's enabling vision – 'Disability on the agenda' – has not been kept. Instead, the development of a 'Diversish' approach, with a generic approach to diversity and equality issues, has seen the DDA's sharp focus on disability lost and disability fall off the agenda.

The successor legislation to the DDA, the Equality Act 2010, was meant to usher in a new age of equality.

In reality, for disabled people, the Act has highlighted inequality not just between disabled and non-disabled people, but between what the Act refers to as protected characteristic groups, such as LGBT, women, BAME and disabled people. For example, one only has to compare the absence of disabled people from the Boardroom with the increasing presence and contribution, on merit, of women and people from BAME backgrounds to realise that one protected characteristic group in particular – disabled people – continues to be less equal than others.

More of the same is therefore not an option. It is time for a new, radical, enabling vision. If we are serious about realising that vision, then we need to facilitate the development of disabled leaders of the future to drive tangible, sustainable change.

That means focusing on talented, young, disabled graduates now and treating them as actually capable of aspiring, achieving, and excelling. Crucially, it also means developing policies that remove the obstacles which stand in their way. We need to recognise and then unlock and promote the potential of talented, young, disabled graduates. Only then will they be able to reach the top of their professions and help put into effect the change they want to see.

This paper outlines strategic solutions which would help to bring about that change, both through identifying and removing the non-workplace related obstacles like inaccessible housing, and by driving change in the workplace which emulates the welcome steps that some leading corporates are already taking. Together, these measures will kick-start the process of ensuring talented, young, disabled graduates have an equal chance to succeed and excel.

Delivering on the DDA's promise will require both a commitment to true equality of opportunity and the political will to drive through the necessary policy changes at Central and Local Government level.

Enabling talented, young, disabled graduates to realise their potential – including their economic potential – and reach the top of their professions, benefits everybody. The 25th anniversary of the

DDA gives us another chance to honour its promise. It is in everyone's interests that we do not squander the opportunity.

Recommendations:

Accessible housing

1. Publish the guidance required under Section 8 of the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017 – to ensure that local authorities prioritise the production of accessible housing and produce plans to do so – by the beginning of 2020 to mark the start of the 25th anniversary of the DDA;
2. Commit to increasing the minimum standard of accessibility to Category 2, and adopt the ratio of Category 2 and Category 3 housing to be built from the London Plan, by 2022; and
3. Work with developers and the construction industry to ensure rapid and effective delivery of the above, whilst also examining how the supply of accessible housing can be supported by Government incentives as well as the business community.

Accessible transport

4. Ensure that all transport infrastructure developments, particularly rail and parking, are designed, built and upgraded in consultation with Disabled People's Organisations and with the standards of fully-independent travel in mind;
5. Ensure that mechanisms supposedly already in place, such as 'Turn up and go' and Access to Work, function effectively in the meantime to optimise access for disabled commuters, if necessary awarding compensation should assistance fail to materialise;

6. Make enforcement of the Blue Badge scheme by local authorities a statutory obligation to reduce the widespread and increasing amount of misuse, and recognise the need to match increasing demand for Blue Badges with an increase in the supply of accessible parking bays.

Access to goods and services

7. Review the current standards governing accessibility of the built environment, particularly with regard to those buildings from which goods and services are sold direct to the public, e.g. the retail sector, to ensure effective access for disabled people; and
8. Ensure enforcement of these standards and encourage adherence by a dual carrot and stick approach, based on incentives for being proactive and eventual fines for non-compliance.

Transparent and consistent reporting

9. Implement a consistent and transparent reporting framework for organisations with over 250 employees with indicators on disability equality practices, including indicators on both process (the practices), and the outcomes (disability employment at different levels), especially as they relate to talented, young, disabled graduates.

A force to drive sustainable change

10. Establish a Disability Opportunity Board within the Cabinet Office with responsibility for designing and delivering a programme to create the right conditions to enable talented, young, disabled graduates to excel, realise their potential, and reach the top of their professions.

Introduction

The rights of all disabled people to live well, as equal citizens in our society, have now been established in UK law for nearly 25 years. But the lived experience of millions of people with disabilities does not reflect the ambition set out in the law. People with disabilities are more likely to live in poverty, more likely to be isolated, to struggle with inaccessible transport and inadequate housing, and are often targeted for hate crime and victimisation.

Demos – a cross-party think tank founded just as the Disability Discrimination Act was being drafted – has long been interested in the challenge of living up to our aspirations of equal rights and opportunities for all those with disabilities. We have researched the links between poverty and disability; improving employment support to help disabled people find work; the additional costs faced by people with a range of health conditions and disabilities; and the difficulties of implementing a fair and accessible way of assessing people's eligibility for benefits.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to publish this paper which adds an essential – but too often overlooked – dimension to the debate about disability. This paper looks at the challenges disabled people face in the journey to become leaders in our economy and our society. Lord Shinkwin and George Relph have challenged us to think not just about how to protect disabled people from falling off the bottom of the opportunity ladder; they want us to aspire to get disabled people to the top of that ladder.

The world has been built by and for people without disabilities. It's even there in my word "ladder" which we use so often as a metaphor for life's journey, without reflecting on the ableist assumptions inbuilt in describing getting on in life as climbing a ladder. That is what needs to change. Just as we need to change our buses and our buildings to enable people with disabilities to use them: we need to change the structures of society and business to enable people with disabilities to make it to the top.

People with disabilities should be equally represented in the boardrooms, newsrooms, and political chambers of the UK. Of course, this alone would not resolve the problems faced by millions of people with disabilities in their everyday lives. But it would help. It would bring understanding of the challenges disabled people face right to the heart of decision making. It would enable us to construct a society, together, that builds ramps out of poverty, and ramps to opportunity, instead of ladders.

Polly Mackenzie
Chief Executive, Demos

01.

An enabling vision

Our vision is very simple:

“to ensure Government and business create the right conditions for talented, young, disabled graduates to realise their potential, excel, and reach the top of their professions on merit, to the mutual benefit of themselves and their employers”.

How many people know that 2020 will mark a quarter of a century since the introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA), arguably the most momentous social justice milestone of the 20th century for disabled people? Probably very few.

The DDA's stated aim was to put 'disability on the agenda'. A quarter of a century later, it is abundantly clear that its enabling vision has not been realised. As if to underline the point, the 'Valuable 500' campaign,¹ launched to great acclaim in Davos at the start of this year, uses an identical core message – 'disability on the agenda'. That the same aim should be considered necessary almost a quarter of a century after the Act's introduction speaks volumes. Disability has fallen off the agenda, and not just within the corporate world.

Politicians have failed to deliver on the DDA's promise. Instead of sustained progress, the DDA's sharp focus on disability and, thus, the momentum, has been lost. In its place, a generic – what the 'Valuable 500' campaign describes as a 'Diversish' – approach to diversity and equality issues has become the new orthodoxy and at considerable cost.

The disability ball has been dropped, to the extent that many disabled people now argue that we are going backwards. Indeed, as Paralympian Jonathan Adams told us: "Disability – and disabled people – are currently seen as an extension of society, rather than an integral part of it".² The harsh reality is that at the end of the second decade of the 21st century, the narrative remains overwhelmingly negative: disability is still associated with dependence, social exclusion, and under-achievement. The dynamics of the disability debate are stale, regressive, and counter-productive. For there to be any chance of sustained progress, those dynamics need to be challenged.

Vision

Our vision is predicated on doing exactly that. We believe it is time politicians and corporates stopped treating disability differently to other protected characteristics, such as gender, race, and sexual orientation. Instead, we need to emulate the impressive progress other communities have made in reaching, on merit, positions of influence and responsibility across all sectors. Our vision is very simple:

"to ensure Government and business create the right conditions for talented, young, disabled graduates to realise their potential, excel, and reach the top of their professions on merit, to the mutual benefit of themselves and their employers"

We totally reject the despondent inevitability of the status quo. Instead we believe in a positive, radical, pro-free market vision, which both captures the hope and promise of the DDA and helps secure disability's place on the corporate and political agendas for the long term.

Rationale

The central lesson of the hard-fought campaign to secure the DDA was that change does not happen by accident. It requires deliberate, concerted action by Government, business, and disabled people working in partnership and, crucially, backed up by enforcement of the law. Sadly, Government has indulged in an over-reliance on the carrot approach without realising that failing to wave a stick – i.e. enforce the law – reduces the incentive to eat the carrots.

The fact is that if the carrot-only approach was ever going to work, it would have worked by now. It has been tested to exhaustion, and it has failed.

That is why we believe the DDA's 25th anniversary offers a timely opportunity for us to shift the dynamics of the disability debate so that, like people from other protected characteristic groups, disabled people are enabled to make the most of their talents in order to reach, on merit, positions of power, in which they share decision-making responsibility. Gone will be the days when everything was done, by non-disabled people, to and for 'the disabled'. The notion that disabled people should be dependent on non-disabled people's goodwill is outdated and unsustainable. It needs to change.

No one should underestimate the significance of such a fundamental shift in the balance of power. As well as a continual commitment to partnership, investment, and political will, such a radical change will take time. Therefore, if the benefits are to be felt within the next 10-20 years, the process needs to start now; and it needs to start with talented, young graduates – those demonstrating clear potential and, critically, living with a disability.

One of the most exciting cultural legacies of the DDA – and subsequent equality legislation – is that an increasing number of talented, young, disabled people are now going through mainstream education and emerging from good universities with excellent degrees.³ Indeed, last year the proportion of students with disabilities in higher education in the UK was 14%, up from 13% the year before, a figure which is predicted to rise.⁴ But Helen Cooke, Chief Executive of MyPlus Consulting and a wheelchair-user, highlights the difficult situation facing disabled graduates: "[t]he facts are stark: disabled graduates at all qualification levels are less likely to have obtained full-time employment than non-disabled graduates".⁵ The bad news is that if we fail to act now, this is not going to change. Disabled students and graduates will continue to face insurmountable barriers in their search for a fulfilling and demanding career, which both develops and rewards them as individuals and maximises their contribution to business.

The sad reality is that as a society we are still letting talented, young, disabled graduates down because we are failing not just to enable them to realise their potential; we are effectively failing even to recognise that they have any.

We should be clear: diversity is not about doing something good at a cost to the bottom line. It is about business being open to the best and brightest talent of the next generation,

whomever they happen to be, and maximising their added value to its bottom line. Indeed, Unilever's former Chief Executive, Paul Polman, argues strongly that disabled people represent "an enormous opportunity business simply cannot afford to ignore",⁶ and Fleur Bothwick OBE, Director of Diversity & Inclusive Leadership at EY, believes that: "any organisation committed to recruiting and retaining top talent – talent that will be working with them through our fourth industrial revolution – should be sourcing from the broadest talent pool".⁷

And of course, this does not just apply to employment. If a high-earner has a disability, it cannot make commercial sense to exclude them from shops, pubs, bars, and restaurants. After all, since when was a £10 note disabled? Moreover, as all businesses know, being reflective of one's customer base is a crucial part of effective marketing and customer relations. Yet a short wheelchair push down the average UK High Street shows that many retailers are missing a trick, at great expense to their bottom line. In fact, the purple pound (the spending power of disabled households in the UK) is now worth up to a quarter of a trillion pounds but many businesses still willingly ignore this market.⁸

Ultimately, this is about sustainable, cultural change – bringing a firm end to the inequality of opportunity to realise one's potential and the injustice of wasted talent. Just as we have done with women and people from BAME backgrounds, we need to recognise, unlock, and promote the potential of talented, young, disabled graduates to reach the top of their professions and, thus, start sharing responsibility for making change from the top down. Sustainable, cultural, and ubiquitous change for disabled people means decisions being made at the highest level for disabled people by disabled people.

It is therefore time for a new, radical, enabling vision: we need both to start treating talented, young, disabled graduates as capable of aspiring, achieving, and excelling; and to develop policies that remove the obstacles that stand in their way.

02.

Challenging the disabling narrative

The prevailing societal view on disability remains one of dependence, pity, inactivity, and low expectation.

When the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) was passed in 1995, its key message and aim were to put disability on the agenda. Its passage into law was meant to signal the abandoning of the long-held perception of disability as being synonymous with low expectations and dependency. Instead, society should respect disabled people and enable them to lead full and independent lives. One might therefore assume that almost a quarter of a century would be enough time for disabled people to gain effective access to all sectors and echelons of society, and to enjoy, on merit, the same breadth of options and expectations of success as everyone else.

This has clearly not happened. Not only do disabled people not benefit from equal access to services, society, or the economy, but disability has once again fallen off the agenda. But what does it mean to put disability on the agenda, and why do we need to do it again? If the last 25 years teach us anything, it is surely that putting disability on the agenda cannot be about developing yet another warm-worded strategy that is never fully implemented. It has to be different this time. Having the political will to drive through change will, of course, be crucial. Yet it also has to be about more than that; it has to be about changing the narrative that society has built around disability.

Unfortunately, the prevailing societal view of disability remains one of dependence, pity, inactivity, and low expectation.

Recent research by Scope shows that 75% of people surveyed associate disability with dependence by thinking, some or most of the time, that disabled people in general need to be cared for.⁹

And as Neil Heslop OBE, Chief Executive of Leonard Cheshire Disability, explains, these erroneous views are pervasive and find their way into the business community: "Entrenched misconceptions amongst employers persist ... 24% say they would be less likely to employ someone with a disability, citing doubts about the ability of disabled people to cope with a job and concerns about the cost of workplace adjustment".¹⁰ This enduring and limiting narrative informs so many policies (developed by non-disabled people) which have a decisive impact on whether talented, young, disabled graduates can realise their potential and excel.

For example, there is no mechanism in place for people to transfer their social care arrangements if they move between counties or London Boroughs because it is assumed that disabled people will not leave their family home and will remain where they can be cared for. The same narrative explains why so few London Underground stations were built to have step-free access – less than 30% have it even now – and why disabled people are consistently unable to commute to work on equal terms with non-disabled people. The enduring assumption is that disabled people do not – or cannot – work and certainly do not hold senior management positions or run their own businesses.

Helen Dolphin MBE is someone who does both as well as being a full-time wheelchair user. She travels extensively for work and often encounters disruption on public transport because of inaccessible services. She says that whenever that happens,

“it makes me feel as though my career is not as important as others’; that there is an assumption that disabled people don’t need to go anywhere in a hurry”.¹¹

The result, as GP and wheelchair-user, Dr Hannah Barham-Brown, explains, is that **“we are still seen as a novelty in the workplace”**.¹² This harmful narrative is also the reason why Parliamentary debates on disability inevitably focus on benefits and welfare. While it is vital to secure a standard of living for some of the most economically vulnerable members of society, disability cannot be siloed into social security. Disability is not welfare, and welfare is not disability.

Gold-medallist Paralympian and company and charity director, Susannah Rodgers MBE, proves that the low-expectation narrative could not be more wrong: “[d]espite having a very restrictive impairment, I want to be independent, I want to contribute to society and to the economy, and I want to be living the life I choose to lead.

Without work, I would feel I had no purpose”.¹³

Indeed, between April-June 2013 and April-June 2018, for example, the number of people with disabilities in employment increased by around 900,000,¹⁴ which underlines the appetite and ability to compete in the workplace.

While this demonstrates that some progress has been made since the passage of the DDA, and that access to goods, services, and the economy has improved, it does not address the cultural challenge we still face as a society to enable talented, young, disabled graduates to excel. Outstanding and dedicated individuals, following the examples of Stephen Hawking and our proud Paralympians, continue to displace the narrative piece by piece, but it has not been enough for the step-change we need to see at the end of the second decade of the 21st century. The reason for this is clear: disability is simply not on the agenda.

This can be seen not only at the corporate, but also at the political, level. As of April 2019, the Minister for Disabled People is one of the few Ministers who is not a member of any Cabinet Committee or Implementation Taskforce – where the important and far-reaching decisions are made.¹⁵ Furthermore, the numerous Government plans and strategies produced for disabled people have simply not been delivered. In 2005 the “Equality 2025” plan promised that “by 2025, disabled people in Britain should have full opportunities and choices to improve their quality of life and will be respected and included as equal members of society”,¹⁶ before fading away in 2013. And the Coalition Government’s “Fulfilling Potential” workstream ended in a similarly quiet fashion after only a few years, despite the strategy making clear that “long-term” change is required.¹⁷

These recurrent and short-lived attempts to create a coherent, long-term strategy show that disability does not occupy a position of priority on the Government’s agenda. If it did, there would be evidence of clear and sustained progress – and, most importantly, accountability for that progress. Action on disability has lost the sharp focus it once had; when the DDA was repealed and replaced by the Equality Act 2010, disability was

harmonised with the other protected characteristics, including sexual orientation, gender, race, and others.

This change supposedly brought coherence to the equalities agenda, but as the 2016 House of Lords report into the impact of the Equality Act 2010 on disabled people concluded:

“combining disability with the other protected characteristics in one Act did not in practice benefit disabled people”.¹⁸

We suggest this is for two reasons. First, because the necessary, sharp, and targeted focus that the DDA inspired was lost, and second because the business and political communities have failed to give disability the same, equal priority as other protected characteristics.

Deloitte, for example, a leading “Big 4” professional services provider, published a Board Diversity Report in 2017 which mentioned only race and gender;¹⁹ disability was not featured as part of “diversity”. Indeed, as Fleur Bothwick OBE told us: “so many organisations are focused on gender and LGBT+, some also on BAME, but too few on disability, despite the stats. There is absolutely no excuse for disability not to be on every leadership agenda”.²⁰ And the problem persists: in June this year, DLA Piper and Green Park published a report into boardroom and leadership diversity, again limiting diversity to only gender and race.²¹ Both diversity reports accurately explained the benefits of being diverse: reflecting the customer base, promoting innovation and avoiding stagnation, and so on, but neither linked these potential advantages to disabled leaders and executives.

On the political side, the Government produced an LGBT Action Plan in 2018 committed to “taking bold action”, and established a dedicated LGBT advisory panel to drive through change.²² And in 2016 the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy commissioned Baroness McGregor-Smith CBE to conduct a comprehensive audit of racial discrimination and the barriers to equal employment opportunities for ethnic minorities in the workplace.²³ This complemented the wider Race Disparity Audit, authorised through the Cabinet Office and published in 2017, which examined how ethnic minorities fare across all prominent metrics of society, for example education and labour market participation.²⁴ These are robust and effective mechanisms designed to identify and correct injustice and inequality.

The comparison with the unrealised and half-hearted strategies produced for disabled people could not be starker.

The consistently “Diversish” approaches to diversity are indicative of the reasons behind a “repeated frustration from disabled people ... that disabled people’s rights [are] viewed by business, government, and society more widely as not as important as race and sex-related rights”.²⁵ Helen Cooke confirms this view from the business perspective: “Organisations say that they find it challenging to recruit disabled graduates but, in reality, it isn’t. What it does take is time, investment, and resources in the same way that it does, for example, to address gender inequality”.²⁶ The truth of these words has been borne out and, although society has made undeniable progress in breaking down barriers to success that arise simply from whom we happen to be, it has become increasingly clear

that one protected characteristic in particular – disability – is less equal than the others.

This only underlines why disability must now be put back onto the mainstream agenda. But if – this time – we want to ensure it remains there, we need to know why it fell off. The negative narrative around disability – which the DDA should have eradicated – persists because even when change is introduced, it is overwhelmingly conceived, developed, and implemented for disabled people by non-disabled people.

As Paralympian, Jonathan Adams, makes clear:

“[u]ntil disabled people begin to occupy influential positions, and start to represent ourselves as an active and integral part of society, lasting change to the culture around disability seems impossible.”²⁷

Without disabled people contributing, on merit, to high-level decision-making, whether at the top of business or politics, institutions can never fully understand or value the contribution disabled people can make – or indeed even recognise their potential, quite apart from how best to unlock and harness it.

Leadership and responsibility

That is why positive action must now be taken to enable a part of the disabled community – talented, young, disabled graduates – to become, on merit, influential leaders within business and politics. Only then can they drive change, communicate expectations, and raise aspirations which disabled people have long been conditioned into thinking should be kept low. This fundamental attitudinal change has to come as much from disabled people themselves as it does from society at large. A core learning from the DDA – that change does not happen by accident – is still just as relevant today. Change has to be deliberate and must be driven by disabled people in partnership with business and Government.

The current shortage of disabled people in positions of responsibility and leadership is sizeable. Look, for example, at the business world: disabled people continue to be severely under-represented in professional, executive, and senior management roles.²⁸ And in terms of the political machine in Westminster, while “diversity” amongst Parliamentarians in terms of race, sexual orientation, and gender is increasing and is rightly celebrated, **still only five out of 650 MPs identify as disabled.**²⁹ Given these facts, it is unsurprising that the disability ball has been dropped, that Government plans are left unfulfilled, and that executive and board-level “diversity” reports omit disability more often than any other protected characteristic.³⁰

Worryingly, Government documents continue to make suggestions like “the input of disabled people can be a positive factor” in shaping equalities legislation.³¹ Surely such involvement is absolutely essential from the outset in securing constructive and sustainable outcomes that deliver for the people who would benefit from them. This only underlines the continued relevance of the central demand of the global disability movement – “nothing

about us without us”. Indeed, as James Lee, consultant, explains:

“[i]f we are going to make progress on the removal of barriers that disabled people face, then we must be part of the conversation and architects of the solution as leaders in public office and the private sector”.³²

Fortunately, disabled people also have the resource of looking to the hard-fought success of other excluded communities and how they are achieving progress.

Most importantly, however, the state must look to facilitate this by removing the barriers that lie within its gift to do so.

25 years after the DDA was introduced, Government has the opportunity – and the responsibility – to create conditions within which every talented, young, disabled graduate can excel and realise their potential.

Pleasingly, there is already concerted and innovative action on disabled leadership taking place at the metropolitan level. Andy Street, Mayor of the West Midlands, explained to us: “[w]hen I became Mayor I launched the Leadership Commission and the resulting report, “Leaders Like Me”, told us that people with disabilities are underrepresented across the board in the workforce as a whole and in leadership positions. Our Inclusive Leadership Pledge (www.wmca.org.uk/Pledge) is beginning to inform and influence change, but I recognise that this progress is compounded by deep rooted individual, organisational and societal barriers over recruitment, lack of self-confidence and self-belief”.³³ While work like this on a grander scale may sound ambitious, it would only mean disability catching up with the impressive progress that has been made by other communities such as LGBT and BAME – progress that has been supported by clear action from the Government.

The responsibility to take action is not only owed to excluded individuals who are unable to realise their potential, but also to society. Unlocking individual potential and ensuring that talented individuals can develop their skills also harnesses their economic potential to the wider benefit of society. Yet so many businesses are failing to engage with this massive market – missing out on profits and, crucially, excluding disabled people from exercising their spending power on an equal basis. Such excessive and unnecessary losses can no longer be ignored, particularly as the proportion of disabled people in the UK is increasing as society ages. **It is therefore time for the Government to embrace action over words and put into place measures that afford everyone an equal opportunity to make the most of their potential.**

03.

Practical change

The sad fact is that the existing mechanisms have been insufficient to secure the comprehensive and ambitious change that successive Governments' own documents have repeatedly called for.

As more young, disabled people benefit from the changes set in train by the DDA and subsequent equality legislation, more of them are graduating from universities with decent degrees. But the scale of the problems facing us should not be underestimated. Disabled graduates are less likely to be employed than their non-disabled peers after graduation, as part of wider “notable differences in the outcomes of disabled and non-disabled graduates ... [this] echoes the findings of previous [investigations] which state that ‘disabled people as a group have suffered from persistent employment disadvantage’”.³⁴ Perhaps most disappointingly, 76% of disabled graduates are concerned that potential employers will discriminate against them,³⁵ though this should not be surprising given that disabled students are subject to confusing information.

For example, 35% of disabled students are advised not to disclose their disability when applying for work;³⁶ indicators such as these demonstrate the depth and strength of the narrative against aspiration and achievement.

The solutions we propose are scaled to match these problems. But the issue is more than simply whether or not a disabled person has a job. The freedom to excel and realise one’s potential also requires equal opportunities to progress one’s career at all levels. The current statistics, however, are deeply discouraging. Research by the Trade Union Congress found that **disabled people are over-represented in manual, administrative, and “elementary” roles, while being under-represented in roles such as “managers, directors, senior officials, professional occupations, and associate professional and technical occupations”**.³⁷ Indeed, in the Civil Service’s published data, although 10% of employees identify as disabled, only 5.5% of staff at Senior Civil Service level also identify as disabled,³⁸ and only 5.3% of barristers identify as disabled, less than half of the average prevalence of disability in the general workforce of 11%.³⁹

Talented, young, disabled graduates are currently being denied equal access to the full range and depth of the job market even though, of course, disabled graduates should expect the same opportunities as everyone else: “a career – not just a job”.⁴⁰

Just as Government can stimulate growth and sustainable employment in the private sector, it also has a vital role to play in creating the right conditions for talented, young, disabled graduates to secure demanding and fulfilling employment, career progression, and success.

Providing the freedom to excel requires breaking down barriers found both inside and outside the workplace. Although much of society’s focus until now has been on creating inclusive workplaces, the Business Disability Forum has found that disabled people currently experience **“systemic discrimination ... which effectively enforces ‘layers of discrimination’ before even getting to an employer or service provider”**.⁴¹ Removing the non-workplace barriers that disabled workers face is therefore necessary but in return Government and disabled people should be able to expect business to play their part in opening up opportunities to disabled talent. Sustainable and lasting progress for disabled people will only come as a result of joint action between business

and Government, acting with a unity of purpose which our recommendations reflect.

Recommendations

Our recommendations cover five areas where action would show that the Government is serious about seizing the exciting opportunity that the DDA's 25th anniversary offers:

1. **Accessible housing** – the current lack of accessible housing creates a significant barrier to talented, young, disabled graduates enjoying equal access to the job opportunities that a decent degree should bring;
2. **Accessible transport** – a lack of accessible public transport was the most common non-workplace barrier reported by our contributors, and often presents insurmountable challenges to working. The poor provision of parking for disabled people near work is also an issue, particularly in the centre of major cities like London;
3. **Equal access to goods and services** – disabled people are as entitled as non-disabled people to enjoy the freedom to spend the money they earn. Yet inaccessible shops, pubs, bars, and restaurants still routinely prevent them doing so as consumers;
4. **Transparent and consistent reporting** – until we match advances being made in other strands of diversity (e.g. gender) in terms of transparent and consistent data reporting by businesses, it is hard to see how we can either establish a baseline or assess progress towards genuine equality of opportunity for disabled people; and
5. **A strategic and accountable oversight body** – key for maintaining purpose, drive, and responsibility for delivery of change.

Accessible housing

The inadequate supply of accessible housing in the UK is a significant barrier to talented, young, disabled graduates who may have secured their dream job offer, but who cannot take it up because they cannot find somewhere accessible to live. Abbi Brown, an award-winning advertising executive and wheelchair-user, told us: “whereas my peers could easily move into flatshares or sleep in spare rooms until they found their feet, it took me weeks to find a flat which I could physically access. Even then, there was a step into the flat, meaning I had to get out of my wheelchair and tip it up to get inside”.⁴² Indignity and inconvenience aside, this represented an added element of danger every time Abbi came to and from her home. James Lee also told us that his struggles to find accessible accommodation caused him to “turn down opportunities for paid work and career advancement”,⁴³ showing just how much of a barrier to work it is not to have a suitable home. This is, in fact, borne out in research:

disabled people with unmet housing needs and living in inaccessible accommodation are four times less likely to be working than those in accessible accommodation.⁴⁴

The devastating shortcomings of current policy, however, demonstrate that the experiences of Abbi and James are not at all unique. The Equality and Human Rights Commission has found that only 7% of homes are minimally accessible, or “visitable” for disabled people. Similar research by Abode Impact, focusing on wheelchair users, found that 62% of respondents had experienced barriers to accessing the private-rented sector due to a lack of accessible properties, and that 80% of wheelchair users lived in a home that was not fully accessible to them.⁴⁶ Since the private rented sector is quickly growing in prevalence – more than doubling in size between 2002 and 2016 – and is now the most prominent tenure type in London,⁴⁷ these findings highlight the major problems faced by disabled graduates looking for work in central business hubs of the UK.

Securing a stable and adequate supply of accessible housing is therefore a priority if we are serious about opening up equal access to the full spectrum of the job market. And it is an urgent priority: the Papworth Trust estimates that there are 580,000 working-age disabled people with unmet housing needs.⁴⁸ But, crucially, there is evidence to suggest that many councils do not track either the demand or the supply of accessible housing in their areas.⁴⁹ This means that not only is this crisis going unremedied, but, much more worryingly, that its very existence is simply not on the radar of many decision-makers.

This problem is compounded by a lack of guidance from central Government. Although recent documents, including the Housing White Paper and the National Policy Planning Framework, do make reference to fulfilling the housing needs of disabled people,⁵⁰ there is no recognition of the scale or urgency of the problem. This is further demonstrated by the delay in implementing important sections of the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017. Section 8(2)(b) of the Act requires the Secretary of State to “issue guidance for local planning authorities on how their local development documents (taken as a whole) should address housing needs that result from old age or disability”. Yet more than two years after the Act gained Royal Assent, Section 8 has still not even been commenced. Without a clear purpose or objective in relation to the supply of accessible housing, the current crisis is unsurprising – indeed, only 17% of councils have set out a strategy to build accessible homes.⁵¹

Given that there is a total of 1.8 million disabled people with unmet housing needs, and that the number of disabled people is increasing, the current approach is completely unsustainable.

Increasing the supply of accessible housing is one essential aspect of progress; another is ensuring that the definition of “accessible” housing is sufficiently robust to deliver against actual user needs. Part M contains three categories of “accessible” housing: 1) Category 2/M4(1) “visitable”; Category 2/M4(2) “accessible”; and Category 3/M4(3) “wheelchair user”, but these classifications have come under criticism. The minimum standard of accessibility – Category 1 “visitable” – has been found severely deficient, and not responding at all to the needs of disabled people. The Women and Equalities Select Committee, is not alone in recommending that Category 2 be made the new minimum standard.⁵² They have also recommended that regulations abandon the requirement for Local Authorities to prove an immediate “need” for accessible housing. Given the incredible deficit of accessible accommodation we are facing, this requirement is unnecessary.

The other requirement on Local Authorities is to prove that incorporating accessible design does not impact commercial interests in relation to the viability of development. This requirement reflects legitimate business concerns, and cost-related concerns have also been repeatedly expressed by the Government.⁵³ But such endemic reluctance to adopt higher accessibility standards ignores three crucial factors.

First, it ignores the obvious business case for building accessible accommodation: given the shortage, there is clearly a market for this type of housing. Abode Impact is currently putting together a £300 million fund to purchase homes in London and make them wheelchair accessible for renting to disabled people – thereby proving the investment case for developers – and Branch Properties is one example of estate agents which capitalise on this market and specialise in securing accessible and adapted accommodation.⁵⁴ Moreover, not only is accessible housing in demand; it is also cheaply deliverable. Estimates place the extra costs associated with building housing in accordance with Category 2 at between £521 and £1387 depending on the property and spacing requirements.⁵⁵ In the grand scheme of things, these are clearly minor costs. They could easily be transferred to the consumer at a proportional rate – of the 1.8 million disabled people with identified housing needs, 39% are in the top half of income distribution for the entire population – or covered by Government assistance, for example by offering subsidies to developers similar to those under the Help to Buy scheme which aims to deliver affordable housing.

Secondly, the current approach is not only failing to respond to a severe and immediate deficit of accessible housing; it is also failing to plan for the future. Houses are a long-term resource. As developer, Lord Borwick, noted in a recent House of Lords debate, houses often last around 100 years, and the chances of someone living in that house at some point having access needs is very high.⁵⁶ But, as Habinteg have recently found, by 2030 “just 1% of homes outside London are set to be suitable for wheelchair users despite [there being] 1.2 million wheelchair users in the UK and a rapidly ageing population”.⁵⁷ And unfortunately, while the Government are taking limited steps to provide more accessible accommodation, they are approaching it the wrong way.

Last year, the Chancellor announced an extra £45 million would be made available for Disabled Facilities Grants (DFG), which fund adaptations to peoples’ homes. This is important, particularly as it allows people to stay in their current home if they wish to do so, for example, to retain a current job. However, it makes far more sense to focus on incorporating accessibility standards from the beginning, rather than rely on even more retrofitting.

Indeed, only two years after the DDA was passed, Government research suggested that raising design standards would save £39 million per year on accessibility renovations (in 1997, which is equivalent to savings of £70 million today).⁵⁸

And in the private rented sector, where landlords can often be reluctant to install adaptations, ensuring that properties are accessible from the point of construction would eliminate this issue while also allowing the landlord to open up the property to a larger market.

Thirdly, and most importantly, being proactive and increasing the supply of accessible

housing through changes to the standards – rather than relying on retrofitting – affords disabled people equal freedom of choice to access the market. As Marianne Waite and Will Pike from the 'Valuable 500' campaign told us, “there is a real need to increase the amount of affordable accessible housing. After all, it doesn't matter what job you get if you can't find somewhere to live within a feasible distance of your employer”.⁵⁹

The failure to be proactive and secure an adequate supply of accessible housing is resulting in talented, young, disabled graduates being denied the chance to choose where they live and, by extension, to choose which job opportunities they take up.

The good news is that some Local Authorities are leading the way. The London Plan already requires all new builds to be at least Category 2 accessible, as well as 10% of new builds to be Category 3 “wheelchair accessible”;⁶⁰ and some other councils have followed suit in applying these high standards. This shows it is clearly feasible to incorporate accessible design from the start – and start to deliver genuine freedom of choice for disabled people – without unduly prejudicing commercial interests.

The adoption of such an approach across the country would impress on developers the strong business case that exists for developing accessible housing. Furthermore, the still-awaited guidance mandated by the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017 is a clear opportunity to set these standards. Housing entrepreneurs should look forward to the opportunities which exist to negotiate with top businesses to secure accommodation for talented, young, disabled graduates as part of their job offer ‘packages’. Corporates could work with developers and organisations like Abode Impact and Branch Properties to provide accessible accommodation to prospective candidates, allowing them to hire and develop the best talent. Such deals would be a win for everybody: the developers, the businesses, and most importantly the talented, young, disabled graduates, whose career prospects would depend on being able to find somewhere accessible to live, especially if, for example, they are a wheelchair-user moving to London to take up a demanding job following graduation.

Recommendation 1: Publish the guidance required under Section 8 of the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017 – to ensure that local authorities prioritise the production of accessible housing and produce plans to do so – by the beginning of 2020 to mark the start of the 25th anniversary of the DDA;

Recommendation 2: Commit to increasing the minimum standard of accessibility to Category 2, and adopt the ratio of Category 2 and Category 3 housing to be built from the London Plan, by 2022; and

Recommendation 3: Work with developers and the construction industry to ensure rapid and effective delivery of the above, whilst also examining how the supply of accessible housing can be supported by Government incentives as well as the business community.

Accessible transport

Between an accessible home and an accessible workplace, there must be an accessible way to travel. Indeed, this concern dominates the working day of many disabled people. Susannah Rodgers MBE told us:

“I choose jobs based on their location rather than what I would ideally like to be doing ... This is the most significant issue I face.”⁶¹

Sophie Christiansen CBE, a fellow gold-medallist Paralympian, said: “I have regular issues commuting to work by train – not being able to get on the first train home like everyone else because I have to wait for assistance staff to be free, prolonging my 13-hour work day and taking away my independence. I would often end up being left on the train if it were not for kind passengers hailing down the guard who hadn’t been told about me, even after I’d spent time booking assistance in advance”.⁶² Surely almost 25 years after the DDA, these extra, unnecessary challenges and barriers to working should not be permitted to interfere with the freedom of talented, young, disabled graduates to realise their potential and achieve great careers. Yet, they still seem depressingly common.

Paul Polman, the former CEO of Unilever, emphasised to us the need to improve and increase accessible transport, and suggested that “the growth in automated vehicles, coordinated ride-sharing, navigation applications, integrated payment systems and other advancements can all make a massive difference in helping people with disabilities get to work”.⁶³ Indeed, the link between accessible transport and employment is recognised by the Government’s Inclusive Transport Strategy: “[Accessible transport] helps us get to work, stay in touch with friends and family, contribute to society and access vital services like healthcare and education. Easy access to transport is central to building a stronger, fairer economy”.⁶⁴ The Strategy is comprehensive and covers all forms of travel. However, what it does not do is set ambitious targets to achieve fully independent travel for disabled commuters.

Derek Hirst, a consultant who has worked on the HS2 project, told us that his “involvement with HS2 has led to the delivery of a strategy that supports an aspiration for ‘independent access for all, from street to seat’. During this work, I considered user needs against the requirements in the regulations – and found the standards lacking in a number of areas. The Inclusivity and Accessibility Strategy [of HS2] therefore addresses these deficiencies and steers HS2 towards delivering an inclusive and accessible railway, not just one compliant with the minimum requirements”.⁶⁴ Derek makes clear that the HS2 line is being designed to provide accessible, independent travel not due to the requirements of relevant regulations, but because of higher, external standards which are not found in regulations and do not apply to all new constructions or retrofits. HS2 is designed to facilitate the commute of 300,000 workers daily.⁶⁵ If we are serious about providing disabled commuters with equal access to employment opportunities, it is unacceptable that a project of such scale is not legally compelled to meet full, independent accessibility standards.

This is sadly an indicator that the narrative against working, commuting disabled people continues to inform policy. It is imperative that the regulations governing the minimum standards of transport network accessibility are updated to promote the opportunities of talented, young, disabled graduates, not limit them. Abbi Brown's experience shows that, unfortunately, they currently do the latter:

“I live within ten minutes’ walk of three different tube stations, but I can’t get into any of them. I live fifteen minutes’ walk from a major UK train station, yet I regularly struggle to get onto any of the trains”.⁶⁷

Clearly such basic infrastructural changes will take time to roll out. However, this cannot be used as an argument against delivering a public transport network that enables everybody to reach their full potential if that is the goal – which it is.

Before this objective is fully realised, Derek Hirst also suggests developing and implementing a short-term plan that bridges the accessibility gap in the short term until the long-term goal is realised. This plan would ensure that current alternatives to fully-independent travel, for example booked assistance for a train journey or a taxi to travel to work, actually deliver accessible journeys that are effective commutes, something that is not currently the case. The Access to Work scheme, for example, can cover employers’ costs in paying for taxis or alternative travel arrangements, but Helen Dolphin MBE reports there is little knowledge of the scheme, and it is difficult to operate if you are self-employed.⁶⁸ Indeed, research by the Centre for Social Justice indicates that only 25% of employers have heard of and understand Access to Work.⁶⁹

Parking is another case in point. Royal Marine veteran, Mark Ormrod, told us that “there seems to be a lot of abuse of the system, which means that people who need to use their [Blue] badges to park close to their place of work lose out”.⁷⁰ The evidence suggests that up to one in five Blue Badges – 500,000 out of 2.5 million – are misused, damaging the ability of disabled workers to travel to work by car. Yet, incredibly, **only 1215 people were prosecuted for Blue Badge misuse in 2017-18, out of the total 500,000 misuse cases – an enforcement rate of just 0.24%.**⁷¹ To add to this perfect storm, eligibility for the scheme is in August this year being widened to potentially over one million additional people,⁷² and no apparent steps are being taken to increase the supply of Blue Badge bays or strengthen the protection against fraud. With Blue Badge theft up six-fold in the last five years, it is hardly surprising that the integrity of and faith in the system – which enables many disabled people to commute to work – is at an all-time low.⁷³

Much more must be done to ensure that disabled professionals are not punished or taxed for trying to work on an equal basis to their non-disabled counterparts. Dr Hannah Barham-Brown told us: “transport to work, particularly when I lived in London, was so inaccessible, my journey could easily take twice as long as it took an able-bodied person; and yet the Freedom Pass still doesn’t work on trainlines before 0930, so you’re charged for the privilege of travelling double the distance to work”. A transport system will only be fully and effectively accessible when it provides travel that is independent, rather than reliant on support systems like arranged assistance, which are inherently prone to failure

and leave poorly served disabled commuters feeling like second-class citizens.

To secure a transport network that will create the right conditions for talented, young, disabled graduates to realise their potential, there needs to be a fundamental shift in transport providers' and policy-makers' attitudes towards disabled travellers.

In short, they need to stop assuming that because someone has a disability, they have time to waste, and they need to start recognising that there is such a thing as a disabled commuter.

Only then will service providers appreciate that equal access to travel means much more than being dependent on assistance which fails to materialise and leaves the disabled commuter stranded on a train.

Recommendation 4: Ensure that all transport infrastructure developments, particularly rail and parking, are designed, built and upgraded in consultation with Disabled People's Organisations and with the standards of fully-independent travel in mind;

Recommendation 5: In the meantime, ensure that mechanisms supposedly already in place, such as 'Turn up and go' and Access to Work, function effectively to optimise access for disabled commuters, if necessary awarding compensation should assistance fail to materialise; and

Recommendation 6: Make enforcement of the Blue Badge scheme by local authorities a statutory obligation to reduce the widespread and increasing amount of misuse, and recognise the need to match increasing demand for Blue Badges with an increase in the supply of accessible parking bays.

Access to goods and services

Part of the narrative of success and aspiration is the ability to spend the fruits of your labour on goods and services. Many public-facing businesses, for example in the retail sector, nonetheless willingly forfeit the £249 billion purple pound by failing to make themselves accessible. An inaccessible workplace is not only a barrier to employing disabled people – so obvious it almost doesn't bear mentioning – but it is also a barrier to engaging with the entire consumer base. 24 years after the DDA – Part 3 of which imposed a duty on suppliers of goods and services to "make their offerings accessible to disabled people" – there are still shops on High Streets that reject the custom of disabled people.

Indeed, a study by KPMG showed that three quarters of disabled people have left a shop or business due to poor "disability awareness or understanding". It is no surprise that the "Walkaway Pound" – the revenue lost in these cases – totals as much as £420 million per week.⁷⁵

The business case against such poor practice is, therefore, obvious. But for disabled people, such shops are rejecting their custom on the basis of their disability, and this must change. Abbi Brown states the urgency of the situation clearly: “I’m 26 years old; the DDA has been around for nearly as long as I’ve been alive, yet **four in ten disabled adults are unable to access their local shops due to inaccessibility**”.⁷⁶ So while the business case for providing access is there for corporations to recognise and accept, ultimately, disabled people are entitled to equal freedom to spend their hard-earned money – as the DDA intended to be the case.

For as long as equal access to goods and services – and workplaces – is denied to disabled people, the narrative against aspiration and achievement will endure. That is why it is imperative to ensure that appropriate standards for equal access are in place, and that they are enforced. To facilitate this, we propose a tax-tapering scheme which offers incentives for introducing adaptations, followed by fines for non-compliance. Helen Dolphin MBE has also suggested adding good accessibility as a condition for being granted certain licences because, “unfortunately, the Equality Act 2010 has not made businesses comply”.⁷⁷ Similarly, the Women and Equalities Select Committee have said that “reliance on the minimum standards of the building regulations is not sufficient to secure an inclusive built environment”.⁷⁸ Another key problem is enforcement: there are “systematic barriers” to enforcing the Equality Act standards and making a claim is much more difficult than it ought to be to secure such a basic right.

This is fundamentally an issue of freedom and equality of choice. Businesses need to understand that if they choose to ignore their responsibilities, they will find that a stick lies behind the carrot. The first year of the five-year scheme – November 2019 - November 2020 – would see a tax reward being given to all businesses which undertook to make reasonable adjustments in order to become accessible within the first 12 months. The second year would see a reduced reward; the third year would see no reward. The fourth year would require businesses to meet the full costs themselves within that year and to pay for their name to be published in the local newspaper if they failed to comply, and the fifth and final year would see any businesses which had still not made the necessary reasonable adjustments fined.

The rationale is simple. Quite apart from the cost to the economy and the Treasury of such counter-productive exclusion, the injustice of disabled people still being denied equal access to many providers of goods, facilities and services is a core part of the low-expectation narrative.

Maximising the incentive for businesses and other service providers to address this themselves within a clear timeframe goes with the grain of a pro-business carrot-based approach while enabling Government to use a stick if access is still denied.

It also shows that we have learnt the central lesson of the DDA: change does not happen by accident. For an exhortation to change to have credibility, it needs to be backed up by

the power to ensure it does actually happen.

Recommendation 7: Review the current standards governing accessibility of the built environment, particularly with regard to those buildings from which goods and services are sold direct to the public, e.g. the retail sector, to ensure effective access for disabled people; and

Recommendation 8: Ensure enforcement of these standards and encourage adherence by a dual carrot and stick approach, based on incentives for being proactive and eventual fines for non-compliance.

Transparent and consistent reporting

Transparent reporting by large companies on workforce data has played an important part in promoting positive change. The Government has legislated to require reporting on the gender pay gap, and – after the failure of the voluntary reporting mechanism – are now consulting on whether the same should be done for race.⁷⁹ As has been recognised for many years, “businesses may find further incentives to improve their recruitment and retention of disabled people from a commitment to publish information on their record, for example as part of their annual report. This would signal a commitment at board level which may be important in engaging staff throughout the organisation”.⁸⁰

The argument is therefore one of basic consistency: if equality of opportunity is ever to mean anything, disability must be treated the same as other protected characteristic groups, including gender and race.

Therefore, while the publication last year of a voluntary reporting framework for disability in the workplace is a step in the right direction,⁸¹ we urge the Government to learn the principal lesson of reporting on other protected characteristics and move straight to mandatory reporting on disability for firms of more than 250 employees. The evidence is clear: the Government’s own figures show that when they left it to the business community to report ethnicity data voluntarily, only 11% of employees said that their organisation collected data on ethnicity pay. The question is, therefore, that if voluntary reporting is not working for race, why should it work for disability? Yet, incredibly, the voluntary reporting framework for disability was published last year after the Government had already begun consulting on mandatory reporting on race on the grounds that the voluntary system had only secured “limited progress”. It is therefore clear that disability is being treated less favourably.

Reporting which is consistent across protected characteristics would signal that these “Diversish” approaches to diversity and inclusion are unsustainable and that engaging with disability issues is necessary for employers who employ a sufficient number of people. **Our solutions to the problems raised in this paper are pro-business, but the business community also needs to be pro-disability equality.** The reporting

we propose is not about naming and shaming, nor about mandatory quotas or other prescriptive measures for increasing employment.

Rather, the reporting framework is centred on the principle of being open about your employment practices, as the Government now requires for gender, and sending a clear signal to all potential employees, including talented, young, disabled graduates, that the business community is committed to moving with purpose to achieve equality of opportunity.

Reporting on statistics encourages companies to examine their own practices, outcomes, and values as a company, and based on the data reported, corporates may choose to set their own targets and strategic priorities. The BBC were pleased to report that they had already exceeded the 8% disability employment target they had set themselves for 2020, and had increased their goal to 12% – both for the general workforce and for leadership.⁸³ And in the private sector, Unilever has established itself as a leader by committing to a global 5% target for disabled employees.⁸⁴ All targeted, progressive, and ambitious efforts are welcome and – importantly – are enabled by the collection of workforce data.

Furthermore, engaging with your company's disabled staff – and the statistics aggregated behind the individual cases – is necessary to provide adequate support to ensure individuals can reach their potential. Claire Maydew, Diversity and Inclusion Manager at Marks and Spencer, told us that they “monitor the proportion of colleagues in our workforce who have a disability or health condition and closely analyse their engagement scores so that we can see where further action may need to be taken to support employee wellbeing”.⁸⁵ The basic question is, as Donna Miller, EU HR Director for Enterprise Holdings, puts it: “[a]re we doing everything in our power to ensure we create the best environment for employees with disabilities to do their best work?”.⁸⁶ This is what businesses want – to develop and harness top talent – and that requires close and effective engagement with the workforce.

We accept that such reporting may be a first or early step for many organisations in giving serious consideration to disability issues. But it is a fundamental first step to understanding and developing a diverse and innovative workforce to tackle the issues of the future. We hope the examples of best practice included in this paper show what can be done, and also inspire others to be similarly innovative and ambitious in finding solutions that put an end to treating disability less favourably than other protected characteristics.

What exactly should be reported? Tracking representation of disabled staff, especially at senior management levels, such as at the executive and board level as the BBC and NHS do,⁸⁷ is essential. A cross-sector and top-to-bottom picture is important to ensure that disabled graduates are able to access the full breadth and depth of their career options. There is, as well, evidence of a significant disability pay gap;⁸⁸ for the closest consistency with gender and race, reporting on this would also be important for graduates.

In essence, our proposal is a call for consistency, transparency, and commitment – not heaping burdens on business. But the

burden of achieving equality of opportunity cannot be put solely on disabled people either.

The business community must accept its responsibility to treat disabled people with the same attitude and respect as it does other diversity strands, and play an active role in dismantling systemic barriers. As Marianne Waite and Will Pike, of the Valuable 500 campaign, told us:

“[i]n the last 30 years, bold business leadership has played a crucial role in driving social change. Now is the time for bold business leadership to do the same for disability inclusion”.⁸⁹

If we are serious about ambitious, sustainable change, then businesses must put disability on their agenda and keep it there; mandatory reporting is our suggested method to help achieve this.

Recommendation 9: Implement a consistent and transparent reporting framework for organisations with over 250 employees with indicators on disability equality practices, including indicators on both process (the practices), and the outcomes (disability employment at different levels), especially as they relate to talented, young, disabled graduates.

A force to drive sustainable change

The almost quarter of a century since the DDA's enactment has featured successive yet repeatedly dropped plans to achieve disability equality. They have failed, we suggest, due to both a lack of political will and responsibility for their delivery but also because non-disabled politicians think that disabled people matter less than other protected characteristic groups. This is why our final recommendation is that Government establish a strategic and accountable oversight body, for example a Disability Opportunity Board, to ensure delivery of key proposals.

The Royal Bank of Scotland Group, among other leading employers, have appointed an executive lead for disability issues, recognising the need for top-level accountability:

“We have an Executive Committee champion who ensures disability enjoys the focus it deserves and have plans across our business to drive the importance of accessibility”.⁹⁰

A similarly influential and well-positioned driving force must exist at the Governmental, executive level to design and deliver ambitious, cross-cutting, and effective change.

This recommendation encapsulates the key lesson from the DDA: change does not happen by accident. It takes concerted effort.

This Governmental body to drive change should be built on three key principles. First, having clear objectives and purpose; second, having the means to secure change through optimum placement in the hierarchy and a cross-Governmental role, e.g. through input to relevant Cabinet committees; and third, clear and meaningful accountability to senior Cabinet Ministers and, through them, to Parliament.

Mechanisms do exist in the current structure, but empirically they have been shown to be insufficient to secure lasting change. The Office for Disability Issues (ODI) was created in 2005 as a central hub for action on this agenda, but since 2010 the number of staff has dropped from 48 to 16; as recently as 2018, it had only 12 employees.⁹¹ And while there has been a Ministerial position for Disabled People in operation for several decades, the portfolio is spread wide and is often focussed on welfare issues, which makes it harder to challenge the all-consuming narrative of dependency.

Completely silo-ing disability within the Department for Work and Pensions – including the portfolio of the Minister for Disabled People and the position of the ODI – only compounds these difficulties. The Race Disparity Audit mentioned above and produced by the Racial Disparity Unit – which sits centrally in the Cabinet Office – is a good template for work that should also be done for disability: work that is comprehensive and identifies the clear intersections between different Departments and Ministerial portfolios. Although there have also been various and successive Inter-Ministerial and Cross-Department Working Groups on disability, it is hard to discern the added value that these groups have brought to the policy-making process in terms of actual outcomes.

The sad fact is that the existing mechanisms have been insufficient to secure the comprehensive and ambitious change that successive Governments' own documents have repeatedly called for.

It is this shortcoming that informs our call for a body which cuts across Government and sits prominently in the Cabinet Office, to promote, transparently and ambitiously, equality of opportunity for disabled people. At least half of the membership should be comprised of disabled people, and the board's reach and impact should extend across and beyond Government. This body could be active outside Government by working to facilitate the creation of valuable external support mechanisms, such as networks or mentoring schemes for disabled people, similar to those established for gender, race, and LGBT groups, while also fostering strong relationships with business.

Almost 25 years after the landmark piece of legislation that is the DDA and despite successive plans and strategies for disabled people, there is still a significant deficit of opportunity. This deficit can only be tackled with clear and purposeful action, driven by a dedicated, informed, and influential body such as a Disability Opportunities Board.

Recommendation 10: Establish a Disability Opportunity Board within the

Cabinet Office with responsibility for designing and delivering a programme to create the right conditions to enable talented, young, disabled graduates to excel, realise their potential, and reach the top of their professions.

Maximising opportunities for young, talented, disabled graduates

Taken together, we hope that these measures kick-start the conversation to maximise employment and progression opportunities for talented, young, disabled graduates. There are many barriers to success that must be eliminated to enable disabled people to realise their potential; we have highlighted only some of the issues and possible solutions. Fundamentally, the change must come from a co-ordinated and sustained effort from both business and the Government, which is why our recommendations are directed at both.

It is within Government's gift to eliminate non-workplace barriers, and it is in the interest of the business community to create inclusive workplaces and implement inclusive practices to acquire and develop top talent which reflects the customer base. **But it is important that Government recognises and uses its facilitative role in ensuring consistent progress throughout the corporate community.** This is because, although several corporates are stepping up as leaders and best practice examples, too many are falling behind and failing to engage with the entire talent pool and, as a result, denying talented, young, disabled graduates the equal opportunity to contribute and excel.

Sophie Christiansen CBE recalls her search for a job upon leaving university:

“When I graduated from university I applied for every graduate scheme under the sun. On my CV, I had a first-class Masters degree in mathematics and, at the time, two Paralympic gold medals. But out of the endless applications I only got through to one interview round”.⁹²

Sophie has since increased her gold medal count to eight and now works 13-hour days at Goldman Sachs. Yet her experience remains sadly all too common because many employers have failed to move on.

This is their loss. As Maria Coulson, Managing Director of Ricorda Consultancy, argues strongly: “there is now substantial evidence that businesses with an inclusive culture perform better, improve market share, have success in new markets, enjoy better retention, and benefit from an improved brand reputation. Diversity and inclusion should not be seen as a tick box exercise but as a key driver in the culture and business model for every organisation”.⁹³ But most importantly, such experiences demonstrate that some businesses are still denying talented, young, disabled graduates the equality of opportunity to aspire, excel, and reap the rewards they deserve. Government therefore has a key role to play in supporting business and facilitating the comprehensive, permeating, cultural change which society needs even if that means, as it inevitably sometimes does, employing the stick as well as the carrot.

Baroness Deech noted as much when she said of the Government's response to the Lords enquiry into the Equality Act 2010: "A recurring theme in the Government Response is that conversation and raising awareness achieve more than regulation and are cost free. Sadly, the evidence in our report shows that this is a faulty belief".⁹⁴

Almost 25 years ago, the DDA marked the start of a legislative process which was supposed to deliver robust legal rights and penetrating cultural changes designed to enable disabled to succeed. Ironically, a quarter of a century later, we are not even calling for the next step, just delivery of the first.

We recognise that this paper cannot claim to be comprehensive. For example, there is certainly also scope for developing direct talent streams from study to work. Helen Cooke and MyPlus Consulting do excellent work in this space and a recent scheme operated by King's College London, which directly connects disabled students to top London firms with internship opportunities, is another great example to follow.⁹⁵ The pilot was operated last year and Kristian Eskesen, King's Internship Officer, told us that "feedback from participating interns and employers has been overwhelmingly positive. Out of the six students we placed as part of this pilot scheme, one was offered permanent employment and three were fast-tracked to the employer's graduate scheme".⁹⁶ EY and Enterprise Holdings have also both suggested innovative ways to improve the transition from study to work for disabled students.⁹⁷ The opportunities for innovation and creativity are abundant, and we hope that some of the best practice examples included in this paper prompt similar ambition by corporates looking to gain the edge of inclusive employment.

The fact that there is so much to do should not in itself be used as an excuse for inertia or counted as a reason to prevent the process from starting.

This paper has consistently presented the case for both business and society to play positive and proactive roles in solving these issues, making them not only an obligation but also an opportunity that cannot be ignored. That process cannot start soon enough. The central message of this paper is that we need to get the conversation started now because with the uncertainty of Brexit predicted to continue dominating political discourse for the foreseeable future, one thing is certain: we cannot rely on the Government alone to act.

It therefore falls to disabled people and business to kick-start the conversation – on how we mark the DDA's 25th anniversary – in the hope that Government will recognise its responsibility to respond. That is what this paper aims to do.

Conclusion

It is time for radical, holistic, cultural change in the way that society, business and politicians view talented, young, disabled graduates.

The 25th anniversary of the DDA offers a uniquely valuable chance to extend the opportunity agenda. We need to learn the lessons of the DDA and subsequent equality legislation: progress on disability requires a sharp focus on disability combined with strong political will from the centre to make change happen across Government. As above, establishing a strategy and oversight body, for example a Disability Opportunity Board based in the Cabinet Office, would therefore be key to coordinating and driving forward the delivery of the radical and cost-effective solutions outlined above.

Optimising opportunity, encouraging excellence and enabling talented, young, disabled graduates to realise their potential will always be a pipedream unless and until they themselves are enabled to drive the changes which for too long they have relied on the goodwill of non-disabled people to make. The measures outlined above are far from comprehensive, but their implementation would be far-reaching not just in terms of their economic, social, and political benefits, but also, over time, in their political consequences. Concerted action by Government, business, and disabled people working together could shift the dynamics of the disability debate for good.

Next year's 25th anniversary provides a timely opportunity to get the conversation started. We need to consider how it is fair or progressive that the right to enjoy fundamental freedoms - such as the freedom to realise one's potential; to live in an accessible home; to be able to commute to work; and to spend the fruits of one's labours - only applies if you do not have a disability. It is time for radical, holistic, cultural change in the way that society, business, and politicians view talented, young, disabled graduates.

25 years is long enough. Why should talented, young, disabled graduates have to wait any longer just because they are disabled?

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