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Launch event report and analysis

Or

What happened, what was talked about and what it meant

October 2020

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# 1.0 Introduction

As a result of COVID-19, our launch was transferred from a face-to-face to an online event. Faced with the prospect of an unknown length of time until we could gather again person-to-person, the organisation decided to engage with our members via a zoom conference launch. The launch was structured using a mix of presentations, discussion and entertainment from live performances.

This report provides an analysis of the content generated at the event which consisted of focus group discussions, (via breakout rooms in zoom), Q&A panel discussions, feedback and audience participation. The narrative from the sessions was coded then thematically analysed and the results are presented here.

There were a number of positive outcomes to the launch event, especially the benefits of a collective experience as illustrated by the concluding comments of the chair:

*… having a space where we can come together as disabled people and feel empowered by each other and reinvigorated, ready to go back‑in‑out in the world where we knew we would face the micro‑aggressions, sometimes the bigger hate crime incidents and things that made us feel small so we could build ourselves up through being, in a space with like‑minded people and feel hardened and ready for the fight we knew we would have to face once we went through our front door …*

*Well today, I've had a huge does of that, I feel so inspired by this the speakers that we've had, and the opportunity to talk to other disabled people.*

The launch was such a success that we are continuing with a similar consultative model in our ongoing work.

# 2.0 Collectively identifying the problems

The top talking points of the day are shown in the following figure and table, in priority order and include: experiences of disablism; reasons behind disablism; voice & reputation; and being young & disabled. We examine each in turn after the graph with verbatim comments from participants in italics as illustrations.

**Figure 1.0 Top talking points of the day**

**Table 1.0 Top talking points of the day**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Category | % covered |
| Experience of disablism | 53 |
| Reasons behind disablism | 30 |
| Voice & reputation | 9 |
| Young disabled people | 9 |
| Hate crime | 5 |

## 2.1 Experiences of disablism

Throughout the day participants talked about the daily experience of disablism from non-disabled people in all of its guises, for example:

*The absolute daily level of low level discrimination that we get … the out and out prejudice …*

People went so far as to say that there was a: *hostile environment towards people with disabilities*, which was influenced by the media and government. However, it was also noted that: *two‑thirds of British people admit they feel uncomfortable talking to disabled people and go out of their way to actually not have to be in the same room or encounter anyone with disabilities.*

An example of every day disablism was given by one participant, using the common response from non-disabled people when a disabled person refuses assistance:

*How many times have you heard the really sarcastic voice say, "well sorry for trying to help you”.*

## 2.2 Reasons behind disablism

There were many reasons given for disablism and all its forms, from ineffective legislation, negative stereotyping in the press, lack of role models, general perceptions of disability and low expectations. For example:

*… careers adviser said there was no point in applying for university because the best job I could ever hope for was answering phones.*

*… films feature uplifting and heart-warming stories about pity of the disabled person, but they're not allowed to be involved in the writing or acting or directing behind the scenes.*

*… I'm still dealing with cases of disabled children who are excluded from education … the Academies Bill allows academies to refuse to take disabled children.*

One of the key reasons behind disablism was the non-adherence and an absence of enforcement of government guidance in the way of making reasonable adjustments to professional and public environments. It was pointed out that where businesses/organisations do make adequate adaptations to their physical environments, this should not be celebrated as them doing a good job, but just something which is standard. Currently this is not done and connected to other areas. This provides an overall backdrop of inaccessible environments, non-supportive government policy, and an attitude of benevolence when installing minimum access requirements.

## 2.3 Voice & profile

The issue of voice was a thread throughout the day with the feeling from participants that disabled people were generally too quiet, too hidden and under represented. It was also discussed that not only is representation of disabled people generally quite poor in the media, there are very few inspirational characters to provide role modelling for adults or children. For example, Tanni Grey Thompson commented:

*I get really excited when I see a disabled person on TV*

Another participant said:

*We’re just invisible, you never see us, unless it’s about benefits or on public picture in the press, you can forget about being inspired by disabled figures on the television!*

It was noted that members of our own community had a role to play in this:

*We need to share the stories that we need to help people to empathise with us, that we're more than just benefits cases, or problems or difficulties.*

There were several comments about tokenism, involving a disabled person but not really involving them as others were and about how tiring this was.

## 2.4 Being young & disabled

Although this was not a major focus of discussion, young people were mentioned at regular points throughout the day. It was felt that young disabled people were particular in need of education, inspiration and involvement. For example, one participant said:

*We have to educate younger disable people who some of the young disable people I spoke to recently because we have a vaguely accessible toilet and vaguely accessible train system think we're done, and we're so not done.*

Another participant talked about the absence of role models outside of Paralympians and also the absence of choices available to non-sporty disabled children.

# 3.0 The response

During the day, as well as sharing experiences, we also shared proposals for improvements to counteract the disabling world we find ourselves in. We can generally group these into three areas of: voice, profile & influence; employment; and physical adaptations as shown in the following graph and table.

One member succinctly encapsulated a general feeling amongst participants:

*We want to get to a position where we're not disabled people, or a minority group that’s just bolted on, we are part of the people and part of the normal of human life and experience and we're there from the beginning … we're not something that is thought as an afterthought.*

**Figure 2.0 Top propositions for action**

**Table 1.0 Top propositions for action**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Category | % covered |
| Voice, profile & influence | 48 |
| Employment | 33 |
| Physical adaptations | 20 |

## 3.1 Voice, profile & influence

The number one proposition was increasing the profile and the influence of disabled people, for example:

*We need to shout, we need to listen, and we need to speak.*

The way we need to do this was also discussed, with one participant urging us to:

*We need people to shout at the edges, we need people to own that social media space and use it positively but use it. We need people to listen to the arguments and that are used against us and then tear them apart and we need people to talk to us.*

It was felt that we should work in partnership with other organisations to increase our voice and influence. There was also a strong sense of coproduction, and the need for our own community to lead the process of change. For example, one participant said:

*Disabled person needs to be the running and pushing and making suggestions.*

Another participant went into some detail:

*There are incredible disabled equality strategists that we should be using to put that into place, and they can support other people, but it should be nothing about us without us. We need disabled people in positions of power and that's not a tokenistic box ticking exercise, it is people who are in positions to creatively and fundamentally drive the narrative for change. And this means being salaried, in leadership positions, being on boards, but this means that we need to have the skills to get us into those positions. So, it is about training. Not tick box training, it is about career paths and progressions and it is building that into organisations at every level. It is about recognising access needs and meeting them. It is recognising that learning disabled people may need a support worker with them to do that role, but they can and what they come out with and what we have together will be incredible.*

The same participant continued:

*It is about bringing people along with you, if you have an opportunity, it is opening it up to more voices at every possible time and bringing them on board with you. It's finding allies.*

## 3.2 Employment

Employment was also a consistent theme throughout the day, with discussions focusing on the inequity of opportunity and general difficulties experienced by disabled people trying to find work. One participant illustrated:

*The world of work tends to be a battle ground for people with disabilities.*

An example of this was offered by another:

*… Making a case for what you need can be more stressful than just carrying on putting up with things that weren't very good in the first place.*

There were consistent calls for employers to make adequate adaptations to enable participation. For example, one participant said:

*Employers need to make real proper adjustments, not just pay lip service. So, we had the example from [name] who needed a quieter workspace so was put in a cupboard and continued to be used as a cupboard.*

There were a number of reports explaining how difficult it can be at work and when you are there, you have no energy to do anything else other than your job. This was the reason behind a lack of disability activism in the workplace, as disabled employees are often unable to work beyond the expected hours. It was suggested that disabled people could be provided with the capacity to become involved in additional activities at work.

The North East area was felt to be particularly difficult for disabled job seekers as a result of high general unemployment rate. Before COVID-19, unemployment was three times the national average.

Tanni Grey Thompson brought the issue of the disabled pay gap which was recognised as an issue which was ignored. However it was pointed out, the difficulty of getting any parity with non-disabled people’s employment and that a gender pay gap can only be aspirational.

## 3.3 Physical adaptations

Access and the physical environment remains a perennial top priority issue with the majority of disabled people. Environments which could be made accessible, but remain not so, are a particular bugbear of ours. However this does demonstrate that if there was a concerted effort, a great number of environments could be opened up to disabled people. In the North East, with a higher proportion of disabled people than other areas across the country (one in four people in the North East are disabled), large numbers of people would benefit from this. Another member commented that disabled people have been arguing for more flexible homeworking for years, to no real affect. COVID-19 happens and non-disabled politicians implement homeworking for all in a matter of weeks. The flip side of this, changes to make services and environment equal take too long. Our patron pointed out:

*I was promised in January first this year all trains would be accessible I remember being excited [but] a non-disabled person involved in train companies told me, that you know Tanni you just need to be a bit patient*

One member succinctly put it:

*I don't need help I just need access*

There were a number of discussion points around improving lighting systems in public areas.

# 4.0 COVID-19

Bearing in mind the seriousness of COVID-19 and its disproportionate impact on the disabled community, it is essential that we continue to monitor the situation. During the event, COVID-19 and its impact on disabled people was discussed, starting with the worrying statistic that disabled people are 11 times more likely to die from COVID-19 than a non-disabled person. There were a number of benefits reported, particularly the normalisation of sedentary/self-isolated living. Working from home was widely welcomed as it put disabled employees on an even footing with non-disabled employees for the first time. An additional impact worthy of note is a reduction in the number of disabling encounters, for example, our patron said:

*For me I've had six months I haven't had any discrimination at all, it is amazing.*

This holiday from disablism has had a positive impact on our self-worth and self-image as we are not constantly being reminded of our impairments` and the effects on us.`

However, post lockdown, there are real concerns about access and facilities needed by disabled people that are being used for social distancing or other public health purposes. One participant said:

*… like the toilets that were closed and if you're getting on the bus, they taped up the front seats so you have to battle your way down the bus to get a seat and everything like that.*

# 5.0 Conclusion and next steps

Our launch was successful in a number of different areas, from announcing the arrival of the organisation and presenting our intentions, demonstrating the intention of engaging with our members, listening and acting upon what has been said; demonstrating the viability of this method of communication and engagement. For this reason we will make use of the knowledge created here to create a set of themes (see below) which we can investigate in more detail and get the input of our members, to ask them what their priorities are within each area, such as what aspect of employment would it be most useful to address first. We will also use this knowledge created here and in the subsequent consultation (planned for end of October) upon which to base our next strategic plan. We will take the following themes into the next consultation:

* Voice, profile & influence: which directions?
* Employment: is there anything we have missed? [we have an ongoing employment campaign]
* Physical adaptations: where to start?
* COVID-19: continuing to monitor the impact of the pandemic on our community.

The launch also affirmed our focus as a disability rights and collective advocacy charity. It was clear from the feedback of our members and participants that voice and representation, are fundamentally important to the lives of disabled people in our region.