

BCODP

British Council of Organisations of Disabled People

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Dear Reader,

Over the past decade we have seen a tremendous growth in the disability movement as disabled people began to draw together in attempts to overcome social and environmental barriers that prevent our participation in society. Many disabled organisations looked for ways to push away these barriers and by the beginning of 1981 members from national organisations of disabled people met with a view to sharing our experiences and knowledge in a joint effort to change our segregation. Leading from these discussions a steering committee was set up and by the end of the year the British Council of Organisations of Disabled People was established, holding its inaugural conference in November 1981. Since then three BCODP delegates have attended a conference in Singapore where the Disabled People's International was established and we now have a member on the World Council.

After the delegates returned to England, the newly elected Council set to work developing action plans to tackle the problems of our exclusion from society. The Council has had to work with limited resources and progress, although slow, has been consistent. We have systematically worked hard at laying firm foundations on which to build our organisation. Standing Committees have now been formed to make assessments and develop project work in the areas of education, housing and centres of independent living.

We are now ready to hold our first AGM and seminar; as we approach this event, scheduled for June 1983, we are bringing out our first Newsletter which highlights work in progress that has appeared in the disability world.

The first article is from the BCODP Standing Committee on housing. This gives an account of the work covered between BCODP and Shelter on their joint project in "disability housing". This project has been going on for over a year now and pin-points the way we need to

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Working together: A joint "disability housing" project between the BCODP and Shelter.

by Dick Leaman

Early Days

Since the formation of the BCODP in late 1981, and the setting up of its Housing Standing Committee soon afterwards, our work on that Committee has centred almost exclusively on a joint "disability housing" project with the housing group, Shelter.

In many ways that project at that time was opportune for us. It arose - as the BCODP co-incidentally did - in the now long dead and buried IYDP, when Shelter felt a need to involve themselves in a practical campaign for some sort of housing provision. At the same time it enabled our tiny and almost resource-less Committee to begin to work with a well established organisation to achieve real gains for disabled people. Nevertheless, it would not be right to see the BCODP's commitment to this particular project as a spontaneous reaction to events, nor as an opportunistic approach to the housing problems of disabled people.

Let us look at the outline of the project as it was first put to us by Shelter. Their plan was to raise flm, which they thought they could do by a payroll levy, i.e. in agreement with managements and Unions, large numbers of workers could be asked to contribute a small amount to the project, say .05p per week, which would be deducted automatically from their wages if they so agreed. Further, in consultation with the Housing Corporation, Shelter had established contact with and enlisted to the project, ten different Housing Associations which would receive this money to fund ten units of suitably designed accommodation within their ordinary housing developments. Thus one hundred integrated housing units would eventually be provided, and these would be throughout the country. Of the ten Housing Associations participating, only one, Habinteg in S. London, specialised in "disability

housing": but the others were nonetheless willing to co-operate in the project, and they were situated in N. London, Leicester, Walsall, Liverpool, Nottingham, Cardiff, Leeds, Newcastle and Salford.

This, then, was the proposal that was put to the newly-emerging BCODP, and on which we had to decide if and how it was appropriate for us to participate.

Our Needs

To put this decision into context, we have to look briefly at the BCODP and what it is. Although infant in terms of its development, the BCODP is not "just another" organisation. It has firm roots in the movement and struggles of disabled people in this country to improve our conditions of life. Obviously, as individuals we have always resisted our exclusion from normal society and the patronising and overbearing attitudes of many able-bodied people towards us. Individually we resist as long as possible being sent to life-destroying institutions. We struggle for educational opportunities, we search for jobs that we can do, and for the means to make ourselves mobile and to participate fully in our communities with access to all their facilities and amenities. Gradually, as these individual struggles have gone on and on, disabled people have become increasingly aware that we do not face these problems in isolation, but that they are the common experience of many others in a similar situation. Therefore over the years we have got together and formed our own organisations to discuss and represent our interest in finding solutions to these problems. this coming together, this increasingly "coming out" and identifying ourselves as belonging to a distinct social group of people with particular problems in common, is extremely important. In this process, and in the continuing failure of able-bodied professionals, "experts" and managers to understand or solve our problems for us, we are forced to organise ourselves more and more, and to build our own democratic structures through which we can demand a voice in the decisions which affect our lives.'

Thus the BCODP does not come from an abstract idea about the kind of organisation that might be best for us. Rather it is a necessary stage in this coming together and growing strength of disabled people in our struggles against segregation, and for the services and facilities that we need. Most of all it is part of the ever-growing demand of disabled people everywhere for consultation and participation in deciding how we live.

Aware of this background, the BCODP's representatives define its aim as to "carry out programmes of practical action and to promote the active participation of disabled people in securing equal opportunities for our full integration into society". This, of course, is not new. The BCODP does not claim to have invented the struggle of disabled people, but by bringing together our representative organisations on the basis of these established principles, it gives that struggle its most advanced form and carries the movement forward. What it requires most of all is that we take those principles seriously and apply them always in our work.

Working Together

To return, then, to the project with Shelter: what is offered us first and foremost was a programme of practical action which would lead to the provision of some form of integrated housing for disabled people. But more than that, the fact that the project was set up in a number of geographical localities created the possibility for us to work with and support organisations of disabled people on a local basis and around a concrete issue of how they wanted to be helped to live in their own communities. Although the BCODP itself is necessarily a national body, the key to what it is about is just such active participation of disabled people in local issues. In early negotiations with Shelter, therefore, we established two main principles. Firstly, that the way to promote suitable housing projects in any locality is by working with disabled people in that area, and supporting them in obtaining the kind of housing they think appropriate for themselves. Secondly, as the material direction of all our activity is toward the full integration of disabled

people, we did not think it possible to look at the housing situation of disabled people as a whole, without regard to the existence of residential institutions. This meant that in order to create real housing alternatives we need not only to obtain the provision of bricks and mortar, but at the same time to raise the issue of personal help and support arrangements within the community, if we are to enable severely impaired people to have the choice of non-segregated housing.

Both of these points were accepted by Shelter and written in to their project descriptions. On this basis we agreed to a joint project, and have since worked closely with Shelter's Project Worker and participated fully in the project's Management Committee.

During the year or so of our Standing Committee's work we have consistently concentrated our efforts on making contact with individuals and groups of disabled people throughout the country to stimulate and support activity around the housing issue. It is often laborious and frustrating work, but we hope that we have been carefully building up constructive relationships and laying a solid foundation for further development. We now have varying degrees of contact with disabled people and their organisations in nine of the ten areas covered by our project. Had we more resources, we could do much more much more quickly.

Change through Control

In the meantime, however, the project itself has changed a good deal. Shelter have found themselves unable to organise any public fund-raising for the project: but at the same time, as they have come to look more closely at the real problem facing disabled people, they have seen such a spontaneous and little-considered "solution" as of small relevance. Our main need is not to have money raised for us, but to have control of the facilities and services that determine how we are able to live. Further, having had no previous experience in the subject,

Shelter were taken aback to learn what most disabled people know only too well - that local authorities on the whole have very little knowledge of the needs of disabled people in their areas, and almost no principled approach to the solution of those problems. Confronting this fact has led Shelter into the area of further research, and a report on local authority housing practices, with an introduction by the BCODP, is soon to be published.

We on the BCODP Standing Committee have little difficulty with the lack of fund-raising, especially as Housing Association projects are invariably fully funded and the loss of this element in our campaign does not significantly impede our practical work with the Associations. We would be concerned, however, if there were any on-going tendency within our project towards academic research unrelated to building the activity of disabled people in achieving practical housing gains.

We welcome the co-operation and support of Shelter, or other organisations, in any attempt to improve the conditions in which disabled people live. But in our work to achieve this aim, the BCODP has clear principles, and however hard and slow it may sometimes seem, our main efforts will always be to bring disabled people into the forefront of our own struggles for the kind of housing and personal support arrangements that we need, because we believe that this is the only possible solution. Our message to disabled people everywhere is consistently the same: get together, get organised, and get things changed.

If you would like to contribute in any way to this work, please contact the BCODP Housing Standing Committee, c/o 5, Crowndale Road, London NW1

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Breaking the Myths of Special Education

by Colin Low

The Aims

At its inaugural conference on 7th November, 1981, the BCODP adopted as one of its specific aims the reduction by half of the number of disabled children in special schools over the next ten years. We believe that integration, particularly at the formative stage of development, is essential to sweep away the barriers of ignorance and prejudice that keep the disabled and able-bodied apart and ultimately lead to discrimination, dependency and an inability to cope. But more than this: we believe that unnecessary segregation from the community represents a denial of full citizenship and freedom of association to disabled people.

How to succeed

The Education Act, 1981, establishes that disabled children should be educated in ordinary schools wherever possible, but hedges this about with more than enough get-out clauses for the lazy or reluctant authority. If we are to achieve our aim, we shall have to work with our constituent organisations to ensure that authorities develop the requisite systems of support to make integration a practical proposition. Without this, all talk of education in ordinary schools is just so much empty rhetoric. Indeed, one of the distressing things I find about education authorities is the extent to which their interest in integration remains at the level of mere talk. There is quite widespread commitment to the principle of integration, but very little awareness of what this actually entails in practice. We must work to change all of this. Indeed I hope that we will be willing to work with professional and other organisations beyond the BCODP to build a broad alliance in favour of integration. I believe the potential support is there, and that it is only by mobilising such a broadly-based coalition that we shall be able to achieve our goal.

We cannot act as a placement agency, but we should be able to channel people in the direction of those who can help, and we can lend our support to those seeking a more flexible range of placement options. We would hope also to have a useful input to make into the training of ordinary school teachers to work with disabled children.

Breaking Myths

We must also work to break down some of the myths of special education which enable those who would continue to segregate us to draw so many red herrings across our path - the myth that integration means treating disabled children just the same as able-bodied, and leaving them to sink or swim as best they may in the ordinary school without anything whatsoever in the way of special help or support. The myth that children who move from ordinary to special school represent the "failures" of integration, when like as not they have enjoyed nothing in the way of properly supported integration at all. The myth that you can integrate a person into the community just as well from a special as from an ordinary school - it's the quality of the education that's the thing. Or the myth that freedom of choice somehow means the preservation of segregation rather than the extension of opportunities for integration.

I was appointed by the Council to coordinate its education campaign at the very back end of 1982, so as yet there hasn't been time to do a great deal. But watch this space for developments.

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Perspectives on independent living centres in the United Kingdom

by Faith Watson and Ken Davis*

Learning together

The Derbyshire Coalition of Disabled People is one of a number of groups in Britain who are engaged in the struggle to create centres for independent living as a means of spearheading the current drive for self determination and social integration of disabled people. As a disabled peoples' organisation, we have sought to co-operate with these groups, which are dispersed as widely as Devon and Norwich, Manchester and Hampshire. The strategy here is connected with the need to break the mould cast for us by the disability establishment. Their power and dominance rests on our fragmentation and divisions and this defines the nature of the task. Our own Coalition, and the BCODP itself are examples of the requirement for all disabled people to come together and find unity of purpose through the process of working together.

This same requirement is reflected in the growing sense of unity between those of us concerned to provide centres for independent living. So far, these contacts have been informative and supportive, and have led to a realisation that, whilst there are things we can do in common, there are many local factors which will make each development different. The coming together of 'CIL Groups' is therefore also a process of mutual education and is of vital importance to BCODP in as much as it informs any theory of independent living out of the direct experience of grassroots involvement.

Early approaches in Derbyshire

In Derbyshire, the Coalition identified a 'CIL' for the County as one of its earliest objectives and it was approved in principle by the County Council as a project it would wish to support, as far back as 1981. In itself this situation represents a departure from the CIL model first developed in the USA, and it introduces

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the important point that CILs in Britain have to take account of the fact of a very different social, economic and political background.

By and large, independent living centres in the USA are based on the principles that services for disabled people should be controlled by disabled people themselves; that such centres should serve all disabled people; and that they should not provide any residential function. They are the embodiment of a philosophy of sturdy independence which retains as much of the early pioneering spirit as it does the cult of the individual. The dream is that the Centre for Independent Living will enable the disabled American to experience a similar sense of untrammelled individual freedom as is taken for granted by his or her non-disabled contemporary. It is a philosophy put into practice by disabled people, the severity of whose impairments leave no room for anyone to claim that some people are too disabled to live independently.

As such, these disabled American pioneers have held out an example which is as inspiring to their oppressed counterparts here in Derbyshire as it is threatening to our oppressors. Significant and potent though their example is, by comparison with our own relatively highly developed social welfare system, in the USA disabled people had little choice but to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. Although in 1981, Derbyshire was making significant moves to accommodate disability consumer pressure, it was nevertheless typically British in as much as boots, straps and pullers were all part of the statutory and voluntary framework.

Disability in Britain

In one sense, the comparatively low level of social welfare developed in the States can be seen as an advantage only inasmuch as there were fewer vested interests to be overcome and therefore fewer barriers to the self-determination of disabled people. In Britain the systematic expropriation of disabled peoples' autonomy has been an

inexorable process over the last 150 years, giving fruit to an array of professional interests such that there is today scarcely any aspect of a disabled person's life without some expert or other to look after it. From the standpoint of the independent living philosophy disabled people in Britain do not only have to live with the reality of their individual impairments but also they have to re-educate a professional Hegemony which has become part and parcel of the very fabric of disability. In Britain in the Eighties, the task before the independent living movement requires us to claim back our autonomy and to gain control over our lives as a pre-requisite to full social participation and the overcoming of disability.

The Coalition's progress towards obtaining a centre for independent living has been assisted by the growth of an alternative hegemony of ideas. In part this has been "pulled" by social theories of disability and professional iatrogenesis * in part "pushed" by practical examples of independent living. This has helped to undermine the charity-dependency ethic which pervades to some degree many aspects of the statutory and voluntary sectors. The Coalition is well placed to subscribe to this new climate of ideas, both through practical projects, public campaigning and use of the media. Its latest film "Statement of Intent" is a contribution designed less as fodder for TV social entrepreneurship as a serious attempt to raise awareness about disability politics in Britain today.

The \$64,000 Question: Who Controls?

In considering whether the question of control actually meant total, exclusive control of Centre for Independent Living by disabled people, the Coalition has concluded that a negotiated form of shared control is both more realistic and principled. It is, of course, true that the example of disabled people in action can and does

* Ed. medically created illness

exert a powerful influence on the motivation and level of expectation of others. But the Coalition considers that the successful introduction of peer experience into a centre for independent living does not depend on disabled people exerting total, exclusive control of the Centre. Since the notion of services to disabled people usually implies a relationship with the non-disabled, it is considered that the fact of this relationship should not be denied in the method of their delivery, design or control.

Clearly, the practical issues arising from this position would place any disabled peoples' organisation at risk of being compromised. In accepting this risk, the Coalition accepts that the service providers, the statutory and voluntary agencies, political parties and unions are realities which cannot be wished away. They will exert modifying influences on the way any centre for independent living develops to be sure; their power in relation to the Coalition is historically disproportionate. These are matters of fact which already continually test our commitment. But to deny their existence would be to fail to challenge oppression from within the relationship, fail to work with supporters within the system; and fail to prefigure the end of full social participation in the means of achieving it. All this of course depends on the Coalition developing its negotiating strength from an ever broadening base of active membership.

End Game

Ideally the Coalition would have liked to have seen a centre for independent living in the County supplant an existing, dependency creating institution and re-direct its resources into independent integrated living services. To achieve this would be the equivalent of an ant stopping a dinosaur in its tracks. But there are other ways of struggling and, in our movement, struggle is the name of the game.

We are now working actively and co-operatively with our own County Council to devise a centre for independent living which is not an isolated monument to the efforts of a few people. Rather do we envisage such a centre as merely a dynamic support for a system of local services to meet local needs, wherever possible under local control. That summarises the approach of our Coalition in relation to our own local situation.

Our solidarity with local groups who may develop quite differently is unequivocal, but in the process of clarifying issues and generating the necessary climate of material and other support, we see the work of BCODP as absolutely vital.

Finally, it is the Coalition's conviction that disabled people in Britain must build on, and extend the American experience as well as adapting it to meet local socio-cultural imperatives. We accept that the Berkeley pioneers have successfully raised our consciousness: but we do not have to slavishly conform to ideas which were right for them in the seventies. We can and should draw on their strength, and make a direct challenge to oppressive, charity based relations. However, in Britain, we can now make a bid to make these relations productive and set the helping relationship at right. By producing centres for independent living we can ensure that the efforts of professionals and other experts support the self-help and activity of disabled people themselves.

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proceed to achieve change. The second article is from the BCODP Standing Committee on education. It examines the myths that are attached to the need for keeping "special schools" and suggests the type of work needed to ensure we integrate schooling for disabled children. The third article is a contribution from members of the Derbyshire Coalition of Disabled People who are involved in the current struggle taking place to create CIL's in Britain. This newsletter shows the progress the Council has made, emphasises on going work and points to avenues to be explored.

Since the early days of 1981 the BCODP has become well established, its membership is growing and the Council is gaining strength. It will continue its progress and is showing positive signs of increasing its success in the years to come.

With best wishes,

Brenda Robbins

Brenda Robbins
Editor - Publicity Co-ordinator

May 1983

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Disabled Drivers Association

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Spinal Injuries Association

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