

Making the Case for a Disabled Peoples' Hub

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This paper aims to explain the rationale for a disabled peoples' hub in Manchester.

Introduction:

The Business Employment Venture Centre (BEVC) in Ardwick was an early nineties Manchester City Council initiative, in partnership with disabled people's organisations in the City. Breakthrough UK Ltd (B-UK) was created and has managed and run the BEVC since 1997. Three disabled peoples' organisations, namely Breakthrough UK, Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People (GMCDP), and Manchester Disabled Peoples' Access Group (MDPAG), two of whom are nationally recognised, are based there. Between them, the current tenants of BEVC employ a combined workforce of 50 employees, at least 50% of whom are disabled people, and are all majority-run by disabled people. The excellent accessibility of policies and premises of BEVC as a workplace has played a major enabling part in achieving and sustaining this position, whilst the venue has been used by local, regional and national bodies to host a wide range of events.

The land and building at BEVC are owned by Manchester City Council (MCC) and leased to B-UK to March 2013. B-UK cannot afford the current leasing and running costs of the premises without financial assistance which MCC Adult Social Care is no longer able to provide in the current funding cuts. The building is a single storey former primary school built in the 1960's with poor insulation, asbestos, and a poor internal layout for modern business needs.

Background:

In the last thirty years disability has come to be viewed very differently than the prior medical / charitable / welfare perception. This came about because disabled people began to meet together and talk and came to redefine their position in society. The *social model of disability* was developed: the theory explains that disabled people experience discrimination because society fails to take account of their needs rather than because they have 'something wrong' with them. For example, accessible buses make it easier for wheelchair users to travel, whereas previously buses were not designed to be accessible. Manchester City Council was a leader in this field when it made the Town Hall – a Victorian 'gothic' building – accessible to disabled people.

GMCDP was formed almost thirty years ago, whilst Breakthrough itself has a fifteen year history of working cooperatively and in partnership with MCC and other public bodies to address and improve the situation of local disabled people via improved services and policies, in line with many of MCC's own targets to improve life chances of those most disadvantaged in the City. MCC has played a lead local government role in terms of joint working with disabled people from as early on as the mid Eighties.

Characterisation:

Disabled people are not an homogenous group: they are all ages, male and female, from the full range of racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds as well as LGBT. In short, disabled people are scattered throughout our communities, although often disproportionately represented in areas of high deprivation. Neither is disability usually a familial factor: most disabled people – though not all – are often the only one in their family and can experience significant isolation as a result.

Disabled people are also scattered *across* communities and do not necessarily interact within local communities, which can be inaccessible and hostile to disabled people except often as the recipient of local charitable activity. Coupled with the often still-inaccessible environment and infrastructure, including transport, these issues mean that disabled

people are often isolated from each other, lacking both positive role models and peer support: the stigma that attaches to disability means that often disabled people in the community also *avoid* association with one another.

Benefits of an *actual* hub

- Community growth and social capital

If Manchester is truly to be 'a place where anyone would choose to live, work, invest or visit' (the Community Strategy) then it must be so for disabled people also. We believe that the 'community' of disabled people in Manchester can only thrive, achieve wellbeing and be contributing citizens if there are proactive ways to physically bring people together to learn and share and ensure the growth of that community. Disabled people need access to each other, to peer support, mentoring and to role models, and a place where different impairment groups can come together to learn from each other and to develop both their own growth, confidence and experience and that of others.

- A centre of excellence:

Manchester has a proud tradition, and a national reputation, of being at the forefront of disability policy and practice, due in no small measure to the activities and self-organisation of disabled people in Manchester and the historic support of MCC. This has been possible because of the ability of disabled people and their organisations to interact and work together within shared premises, and to ensure continuity and the preservation of experience, especially in the current national context of demonisation of disabled people and the rolling back of welfare benefits and support.

- A focus for public bodies' consultation:

For example, B-UK recently hosted, at short notice at BEVC, a meeting with the Shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Liam Byrne MP) and the Shadow Minister for Disabled People (Anne

McGuire MP) which was attended by twenty five disabled people and is likely to result in significant amendments to 'Making Rights a Reality for Disabled People', a discussion paper from the Shadow Work and Pensions Team. This has followed many other consultations and focus groups organized at BEVC for statutory authorities, including MCC, Greater Manchester Police, Health Authorities, the government's Office for Disability Issues, and many more. These have collectively brought Manchester as well as BUK a reputation as thought leaders on developing life chances for disabled people at a local level. Such events would be less likely without the foundation stone of a fully accessible Hub.

- An incubator for community development:

B-UK, through the BEVC, has supported the growth of other organisations – primarily Manchester People First, who were based at BEVC before moving to new premises, and the Manchester Direct Payments project, which was established under the management of B-UK and based at BEVC for several years. The Right to Control Centre for Independent Living has also been usefully based at BEVC, facilitating the development of this important government pilot. B-UK has also been able to support both MDPAG and GMCDP with premises costs in the past.

- Potential economies of scale

At BEVC currently such activities as caretaking, security, cleaning and reception are shared: an actual hub offers more potential for cost sharing in a positive way, with – for example – back office functions, networking and interactions, skill sharing, and greater opportunities for facilitating consultation across a range of organisations and their membership.

Why actual and not 'virtual'?

- Continuing poor access in mainstream society:

This is the significant issue that other non-disabled people do not have to face. Anyone who has tried to organise a meeting and ensure access for disabled people knows that much of the built environment can still be a no-go area, both in terms of accessible buildings and the general environment and infrastructure. For many disabled people the attitudinal awareness of other premises providers have made it very difficult for some disabled people to have confidence to use other public spaces.

- Many disabled people use the internet and social media

They use it to communicate and work together, whilst organisations have made use of social media to improve access to services and to ensure involvement of disabled people. However access to the Internet is not the sole answer for disabled people: the ONS reports that to June 2012 there were 3.91 million disabled adults who had never used the internet. This 3.91m represents around 34% of all disabled adults, i.e. 1 in 3 disabled adults has never used the internet: the equivalent figure for non-disabled people is around 10%, i.e. 1 in 10 non-disabled adults has never used the internet.

- Access to peer support / community:

As mentioned above, disabled people are a *community of interest* rather than an actual or geographical community, and do not necessarily interact easily with their peers: when they do it is often not by *choice*. A virtual hub is not the answer to this as it would not facilitate the meeting and interaction of a wide range of disabled people.

Benefit to MCC and partners:

- Sustaining a national profile:

The integrated Commonwealth Games, the paraplegic World Games, the Metrolink system, accessible black cabs, B-UK itself: these are high profile examples of projects and initiatives which have benefitted from the expert coordinated input of disabled people and their organisations, and which have given Manchester a national and international profile. The fact that Manchester is widely recognised as an accessible City is testament to the benefit of facilitating the coming together and supporting of disabled peoples' organisations. whilst the B-UK Independent Living Awards have raised a profile across sectors and attracted Government Ministers as speakers.

- An international profile:

Exchanges and interactions with academics, politicians and public sector officers from – among others – the Netherlands, Uganda and Japan have resulted from the work of the organisations based at the BEVC; for example a Japanese Professor of Disability Studies recently visited BEVC to learn about our approach to employment support and policy influence – a contact made possible via the Breakthrough Policy Think Tank.

- Ready access to a body of advice and experience:

There is a value to having a *known* place where disabled people can congregate and have a presence. Over thirty years of knowledge and experience are available at BEVC: a current *cross-organisational* project is planning ways to make that knowledge readily available to young disabled people and to foster community and continuity. MCC has made use of this experience in the past, for example in compiling the *State of the City: Communities of Interest* reports. Amongst others, Transport for Greater Manchester have used BEVC and its networks to consult on the Second City Crossing whilst the NW Strategic Health Authority, GMP, and the

government's Office for Disability Issues have all made use of the facility to bring disabled people together.

Should there be a Disabled Peoples' Hub?

a) Not having a physical hub:

All the benefits of clustering disabled peoples' organisations in a hub, as outlined above, will be lost, along with the historical wealth already created.

The loss of a large accessible meeting space with adequate parking would be a loss to the community.

b) Loss of employment opportunities:

BEVC provides employment in an area of significant deprivation and worklessness. If the three disabled peoples' organisations move out of the area these local employment opportunities will be lost.

Suggested options:

1. The three organisations, or others, find individual or joint alternative accommodation in the City.
2. The three organisations liaise and negotiate together regarding a 'virtual' hub.
3. The three organisations liaise and negotiate with MCC to find a 'win/win' solution to the question of an actual hub.

NB: options one and two will have significant cost implications which may be beyond the current financial capacity of the organisations.

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