

Good morning everyone

It is my pleasure to be here today to present on progress on disability issues across government agencies. Thank you Mark for the opportunity to be here.

It is a pretty broad subject to speak on – progress on disability issues across government agencies – but that is what is what is asked of government disability focal points like the Office for Disability Issues. The breadth of the work is also in fact the key reason why I wanted this job.

My background is international development, with both the New Zealand and Australian Government's official aid programmes. Now you might think that doesn't really seem to have much to do with disability here in New Zealand, but from my perspective it was a really useful experience to inform what my job now involves.

I've been in this role for about 18 months and before that I lived overseas for four years. Most of this time was spent in Cambodia working for the Australian Government's aid programme. I had a regional role which meant travelling across South East Asia to provide advice on how disabled people could be included in and benefit from the millions of dollars a year spent on their aid programme. This covered sectors from health, education, to social protection (or what is known here roughly as income support), to transport and rural livelihoods.

Now, it's clearly impossible for one person, let alone a foreigner, to provide detailed technical advice on all of the different things that disabled people may want and need in order to participate in all of those different programmes. That's why a major part of my role with building relationships with people and organisations in those countries, and helping to form collaborative partnerships between government agencies, non-government organisations and Disabled People's Organisations. By doing this, I was able to better understand the challenges disabled people faced, and to work through with them, what some of the solutions might be.

And it's this way of working that is essentially what the Office for Disability Issues is all about. As the government's disability focal point, our job is to help facilitate connections between the disability community and government agencies, as well as others, to help make sure the right information is feeding into the right decision-making process at the right time. As a small office it's not possible for us to be experts in everything that is important and relevant to disabled people and the disability sector, just like it wasn't possible for me to know everything about the ten countries that I covered and the situation for disabled people in each of them. Our job is about connecting the dots, and in doing so, covering the breadth of issues disabled people face. Being able to work in this way was one of the things that attracted me to this job.

The other main reason that attracted me to this job is because the Office for Disability is of course the focal point for disability within Government. And in my

previous role, part of my job was to provide advice to ODI equivalents in other countries. And I always thought they had one of the hardest roles – being small units, usually located a social affairs or health department, responsible for coordinating significant cross-government programmes on an issue, disability, that to be honest, pretty much no-one cared about. And yet, their roles were so fundamental. They were fundamental because we all know, the barriers that disabled people face don't fit neatly within the portfolio of one department, they cut across many. It is this breadth again, that makes cross-government work so important.

When I saw this job, I thought that the opportunity to be on the inside of a disability focal point for a change, instead of on the outside looking in, and to be in a developed, as opposed to a developing country, was too good to pass up on. And so that's why I'm here today.

Now, luckily for me, the situation for ODI here in New Zealand is nowhere near as challenging for my counterparts in South East Asia. There are some things that are going really well here in New Zealand, and yet, there are some things that remain really challenging. And so, I'll move on to the progress on disability issues.

Now I know that some of you may have been at the New Zealand Disability Support Network Conference last week, and for you, I apologise in advance for any repetition you may hear from what I spoke about then!

So where are the areas of progress? Well, from my perspective, a key one is the movement towards making sure disabled people are front and centre of the decision-making about their lives. This is taking place in so many areas, it's in the way some government agencies are designing or redeveloping their services – actually asking disabled people themselves what works or doesn't. It's in the range of personal budget initiatives that are taking place, including through the Ministry of Health and with Enabling Good Lives. It's also embodied in the Disability Action Plan which was co-designed by Disabled People's Organisations and government agencies.

Other areas of progress include being the first country every to formally respond to the recommendations from the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Having a unique Independent Monitoring Mechanism, which is made up of the Human Rights Commission, the Office of the Ombudsman and the Convention Coalition Monitoring Group to hold us accountable for implementing the UN Convention. Progress is not just being one of the few countries to have New Zealand Sign Language as an official language, but also by establishing a dedicated Board and Fund to promote and maintain the language.

I won't go on, but there are actually lots and lots of things that indicate real progress here, and I think it's something that everyone should feel proud of.

But, like I said there are some things that remain really challenging. There are disabled people who still fall between the cracks – both within their communities but also between the different services and supports offered by government agencies. And not necessarily because the services aren't actually available, but because people don't know about them. I can imagine this is something that comes up in your day to day work – people and families who have been disconnected and isolated for a long time.

Sometimes I think I can hear the system straining with the changes that are afoot. Systems and processes that were set up to deal with groups of supposedly homogenous disabled people, are now being required to look at each person individually, and of course to do so in a streamlined and efficient manner.

And just like I mentioned with the areas of progress, there are also many more challenges and now isn't really the place to dissect them all.

But, what I would like to do, is to talk about two upcoming processes that provide an opportunity for us to think about the areas of progress, work out what we can build on, and to draw attention to the areas that remain challenging.

And that is the annual update of the Disability Action Plan and the revision of the New Zealand Disability Strategy.

Firstly, to the Disability Action Plan.

By the end of this week, information will be coming out about what this annual update process will involve. But just briefly – it will have two phases, firstly a call for ideas and submissions on key priority issues that need to be considered in the update process. Now it's really important to be clear that this process is not about looking at the whole plan and seeking to change it. Rather it's a more limited exercise focusing only on the priorities and actions in each of the shared result areas – from employment and economic opportunities, to personal safety, to transform the disability support system and promoting accessibility. As the plan is only a year old, we don't want to spend time revisiting the whole lot, but what we do want to do is to make sure that we have an opportunity to make sure it's got the most important and relevant things on it.

Once this feedback has been collated and analysed, it will be considered by the Disability Action Plan governance mechanism – government agencies and DPOs. And then a draft plan will go out again for public consultation for a final opportunity for feedback before it is finalised.

I am looking forward to this update process, because I think it's really important that we make informed decisions about where priorities lie – and we can only do that if we hear from the diverse voices in the disability community, including yourselves. Tough decisions will no doubt have to be made, and not everything will make it through that process. And this for me, just points to the importance of public consultation and getting the ideas on the table.

Just before I move on, there's one particular thing that I wanted to draw your attention to about the Plan and the update. The Disability Action Plan is only intended to include those actions that require more than one government agency to come together. While it would be nice to see everything agencies are doing in one place, the reality is at the moment it would be too difficult to coordinate and would detract from getting traction on the cross-government work – which can have its own set of challenges of course.

Secondly, to the New Zealand Disability Strategy.

As I mentioned earlier, the Government provided a response to the recommendations from the UN Committee on disability. This means that we have completed one full cycle of reporting on implementation of the Convention. I know Toni Atkinson is coming to talk to you tomorrow morning about what it was like actually fronting up to the Committee in Geneva. While this cycle has provided us an opportunity to take stock of where we are doing well and where there are areas for improvement, it has for me at least, highlighted the fact that we don't really have a long-term strategy of what implementation of the Convention looks like.

This is important because, while we have an obligation to implement the Convention, we don't have an obligation to do it all at once. There are some rights that governments must implement immediately, whereas the majority are considered rights for gradual realisation – that means they can be implemented gradually over time as resources allow. This is where a Strategy can help us – identifying what are the immediate priorities, what are some of the challenges that will take several years to overcome.

For this reason, and also because our current strategy was developed in 2001, and the world has now moved on, it is timely to undertake a revision of the Strategy.

Now I know that the word revision can for some of us think about doing a review of everything that's happened over the last 14 years and then use this to do some tweaking, but that's actually not what we're talking about with this process. Rather this is an opportunity for us to take a step back and think – what do we want this country to look in ten years time for disabled people and what do we need to do to get there?

Sometimes when I've talked about the Strategy people have asked me what's the point of having one if we already have the Convention and the Disability Action Plan? In my view, we absolutely need a Strategy to help fill the gap between the two of them.

My vision of a new Strategy is that we have something that's seen as a reference point; something we turn to when we want to know what approaches we should be taking in government, and something that disabled people and the disability sector can look to and have very clear expectations about what the government, and this country more broadly, is supposed to be doing.

In order to do this, we need to get the process right and that's why we will be taking the better part of a year. The reason for this is that we need to make sure the full diversity of voices in the disability community, and more broadly, are heard. Without that, we're not really going to know what the key issues are and what needs to be done about it. For all of us who work in disability, the thing we have in common is working to ensure disabled people have the same opportunities as everyone else. We need to make sure that we walk the talk when it comes to inclusive processes amongst our own communities – that's why this Strategy revisions needs to ensure those who don't often get to have a say, do.

This process will kick off in October sometime – we won't be asking people to engage with us on both the Disability Action Plan update and the Strategy revision at the same time, which would be rather difficult for everyone I think.

With both the Disability Action Plan and the Strategy revision, you might like to consider how the Association can provide input – while of course you are your own independent organisations and will have different perspectives that you may wish to feed in, there may be issues that are common across you and hence a consolidated submission may be useful. I haven't talked to Mark about that, so apologies Mark if I've landed you in it!

Finally, in drawing your attention to these processes and the possibility of putting forward joint submissions, I wanted to ask you a question that I think at least some of you may be uniquely placed to help with. And that is, what is both the difference and the commonalities between the services and supports disabled people, older people and people with a mental health condition require? Now I understand of course there are valid differences, and as we all know, no two people are the same. However it seems to me that these communities aren't as well connected as what they could be – and I wonder if we are all missing opportunities to connect up. This was one of the issues that surprised me about coming home, I actually think some of the developing countries I worked with are better a looking at the intersections between these communities.

By way of example , the Office for Disability Issues is administered by the Ministry of Social Development. And it just so happens that the Office for Senior Citizens is too – and by design, we sit right next to each other. There are many issues that we have in common, and we are increasingly trying to work together and join our voices up. My question for you is, do you see the similar opportunities, and how might this feed into the Disability Action Plan and New Zealand Strategy Revision?

Thank you.