



Safer Stronger Communities Select Committee

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| Title | Hidden in plain sight – disability related harassment | |
| Contributor | Director – Lewisham Disability Coalition | Item 3 |
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1. Introduction

In 2009 The Equality and Human Rights Commission has conducted a statutory inquiry called Hidden in Plain Sight, looking at disability related harassment¹.

This was prompted in part by the Inquest into the death of Fiona Pilkington and her daughter Hardwick were found in the family's burnt-out blue car in a lay-by not far from their home. The inquest into their deaths concluded that Fiona had killed herself and her daughter 'due to the stress and anxiety regarding her daughter's future, and ongoing antisocial behaviour'.

"We started to see a pattern emerging: our previous research indicated that violence and hostility towards disabled people was widespread in Britain. Intelligence gathered through our helpline and stakeholder network convinced us that there was a serious problem regarding the harassment of disabled people that needed to be better understood."

The Inquiry made a number of recommendations, both in terms of case management and crime-prevention, as well as challenging attitudes which contribute to disability discrimination." (EHRC)

Like most local authorities Lewisham deals with such incidents harassment as part of hate crime, anti social behaviour and safeguarding procedures.

Although there was no specific evidence of any weaknesses in Lewisham's approach, in comparison with other areas, Lewisham Disability Coalition has undertaken a small scale audit, based primarily of evidence from members and clients to review the picture locally.

¹ <http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/legal-and-policy/our-legal-work/inquiries-and-assessments/inquiry-disability-related-harassment/background-inquiry>

2. Methodology

In order to review the picture in how the systems work in practice, LDC has::

- Reviewed Internal Third party reporting process
- Held discussions with key partners
- Held a member meeting
- Conducted semi structured interviews with informants, identified via meetings and self reporting via drop in sessions

3. Definitions

A hate incident - Any non-crime incident which is perceived, by the victim or any other person, to be motivated by a hostility or prejudice based on a person's disability or perceived disability, race, religion or sexual orientation.

A hate crime - Any criminal offence, which is perceived, by the victim or any other person, to be motivated by hostility or prejudice based on a person's disability or perceived disability, race, religion or sexual orientation.²

Financial abuse - Theft, fraud or other abuse of a person's money or benefits.

4. Key findings

The picture that emerged was one of positives and negatives:

Interagency partnership - Lewisham has an interagency framework for addressing hate crime³ which includes third party reporting sites. In addition the Safer Neighbourhood Board has a specific body which reviews hate crime in the borough. The police are proactive with outreach work, including an LGBT liaison officer who frequently covers the broader spectrum of hate crime as part of her work with her communities.

However, during the summer of 2015 in Lewisham Disability Coalition itself, due to staff turnover, the information about the operational workings as a Third Party Reporting site had been mislaid and staff were not aware of how to report cases to the central point in the Council's Community Safety Team. While this is an area for internal concern within our charity and has since been addressed, it would suggest that Third Party Reporting sites are not regularly checked to ensure they are still fully operational.

Transport police have also been engaged, and are reviewing whether to do outreach work with LDC future events.

² [Agreed definition of monitored hate crimes and incidents.](#)

³ <https://www.lewisham.gov.uk/inmyarea/publicsafety/hate-crime/Documents/LewishamHateCrimeManual2013.pdf>

Case studies from the front line:

Client A – Client A is a stroke survivor who described a period of specific harassment at his home which he believes was directed at him on the grounds of his disability. He attempted to call the police. However, the person who answered the phone asked him “are you drunk”, possibly on the grounds of his slurred speech.

Client B – Client B has learning and mobility disabilities. She faces harassment from local school children, particularly during afternoon “busy times” and sometimes restricts the times of moving across the borough to avoid this, although she feels she should not have to. Harassment has included comments and fast food papers thrown at her. She has had positive support from transport police who have liaised with the schools where the perpetrators appear to come from. This has not completely ended the problems but has increased her confidence in reporting and speaking out.

Carer A – Carer A shared problems with public transport, particularly during busy times on buses where there are conflicts with disabled people, particularly in wheelchairs, and people with buggies. This can lead to disputes on public transport where discriminatory language and behaviour is used.

Client C – Client C is visually impaired. He has described problems with extreme anti social behaviour from a neighbour, some of which is targeted directly at his disability. He lives in social housing. His description is of the landlord’s attempts to address the ASB being frustrated by lack of support from the courts process.

Client D – Client D is on the autistic spectrum. An attack by a dangerous dog has triggered mental health issues and deterioration in his confidence in going out in public. He feels the court processes did not adequately support him as a vulnerable witness.

Client E – Client E has learning disabilities and believes they have been financially abused. The allegation via a supporter is that a relative “borrowed” considerable sums which was actually a deliberate deception and theft but the client being confused during at attempt to report this to the police who may not have made sufficient adjustments e.g. including an appropriate adult.

Client F – Domestic violence survivor where violence has been linked to her disability was not aware of the Lewisham VAWG support services, commissioned from Refuge.

Client H – Client H sought support after being loudly verbally abused in front of witnesses by a senior manager at his workplace. The issues of dispute were linked to request to undertake tasks that, according to our client, were not possible, due to his physical impairment.

General comments – Several informants raised a more general issue of welfare reforms contributing towards a climate of disbelief or resentment towards disabled people which had increased hostility towards them personally.

5. Conclusions

We have indentified some areas where practice could improve and advocacy and support have been required but not major failures in individual services.

However, the above cases are a snapshot and demonstrate that there are issues of disability harassment and situations where disabled people's access to justice appears fragmented.

Many of our clients continue to experience abuse and harassment and/or restrict their movement and times of travel to avoid trigger points and are not aware of how to get support or help. For example the majority of 'victims' who present to us do so about another issue initially (frequently welfare rights).

What does appear to be needed are as follows:

- Greater awareness-raising about rights and dignity for disabled people, undertaken in a way that does not reinforce negative stereotypes or increase fear of crime.
- Targeted interventions to address stereotypes.
- Public bodies to ensure that Equality Analysis Assessments of public spending cuts have due regard to the duty to address violence and harassment across protected characteristics of the Equality Act 2010, including disability.