

## **Fact Sheet 19 The Social Model of Disability**

### **Introduction to the Social Model of Disability**

Traditionally disability has been viewed from two broadly similar traditional and arguably, negative perspectives. They can be defined as the 'Medical Model of Disability' and the 'Personal Tragedy Model'.

### **The Medical Model of Disability**

Under this way of conceptualising disability, it is seen as being something that is inextricably linked to the individual concerned and is therefore seen to be 'their problem'. The answer to the problem of disability therefore, following such a model, can only be to 'cure' the impaired individual, so restoring them to 'normality', thus allowing them to fit back in to existing society. Under this Model, the 'experts' on disability are invariably the medical profession (who define who is and is not disabled), aided by allied occupations such as Social Workers, Occupational Therapists, Health Workers, Employment Advisors, Artificial Limb Centres, Special Equipment Advisors, etc. Under such an approach the focus is on altering (by surgery if necessary) the disabled person, to re-mould them to fit an unchanging and unsympathetic society.

### **The Personal/Charitable Model of Disability**

This is arguably just as negative a way of viewing disability. Here disability is viewed as an entirely tragic/negative/miserable existence where the only solution is to raise money/resources with the aim of somehow reducing the 'suffering' and 'sadness' of disabled people's lives. This type of attitude led to the establishment of huge money-making charitable concerns, where usually disabled people find themselves peripheral to the organisation itself.

### **The Social Model of Disability**

This was created by disabled people themselves, out of their own experiences. It was initially defined as: "*Disability is caused by social organisation, which takes little or no account of people who have impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities.*" (*Fundamental Principles of Disability, UPIAS*) – (1976). The Social Model is an intrinsically more positive approach to a disability. Here disability is viewed as something which is imposed on people with impairments (whether they have a physical impairment, sensory impairment, learning difficulty or mental health issue), by a society which creates barriers to equality. People with impairments are thus 'dis-abled' by the way society imposes barriers on their full participation in the community. Viewing disability in this light means that a wheelchair user is not disabled by their wheelchair, but by the barriers society erects that work against them [such as steps]. People with impairments are thus 'disabled' through such things as lack of physical access, people's attitudes, structural discrimination (as encountered with the benefits system for example) and any other barriers society may erect against them.

For disabled people, this is a far more positive approach to disability, because we are all members of society and, if we create barriers, then we can also remove them. It is a far less negative and demoralising approach to disability than traditional models (shown above) and the principals of the social Model of Disability underpin all the work being done by Wheelchair Users Group / Wheelpower / Shepway Access Matters (SAM) and are increasingly being adopted by other organisations working on disability issues.