The Social Model of Disability

The Social Model of Disability makes an important distinction between '*impairment*' and '*disability*'. It recognises that people with impairments[1] are disabled by barriers that commonly exist in society. These barriers include negative attitudes, and physical and organisational barriers, which can prevent disabled people's inclusion and participation in all walks of life.

- According to the social model of disability, **impairment** is what has historically been referred to as a "disability" or a health condition. For many (but not all) disabled people, their impairment is a significant part of their life and may form part of their personal identity. For some people, their impairment may require considerable management and they may need ongoing medical support. Experience of impairment is personal. Everyone's experience is different. That experience is always valid and always important.

- **Disability** by contrast is the inequality, disadvantage, disempowerment or discrimination which may affect people with impairments as a result of barriers to access and inclusion. For example, a staircase is a barrier to a wheelchair user; providing a lift removes that barrier. Just a few other examples of barriers include the lack of British Sign Language (BSL) or a loop system, the lack of braille, large print or audio information, the lack of flexible and part time working opportunities, the lack of appropriate social care or lack of understanding of mental health issues or autistic spectrum disorder. Disability is therefore something which affects people with impairments but is different from impairment. Disability is something which disables someone with an impairment. Barriers can be removed. If you remove the barrier then you remove the disability.

This approach to disability was developed by disabled people and was formally adopted by the Welsh Government in 2002. This approach is enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of Disabled People, to which the UK is a signatory. The UN Convention states that "disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others". If fully realised, the Social Model would transform society, removing barriers and meaning that disabled people would be able to participate fully in society.

The historic approach to disability in the UK has been based on the Medical Model of Disability (in which a person's impairment is seen to be the thing which disables them).   This means that adopting the Social Model of Disability requires a fundamental shift in our attitude, culture and how we work. By adopting an approach based on barrier removal – and working with disabled people to identify solutions – we can create better policy and better services for everyone. The Welsh Government is committed to making this cultural shift but acknowledges that work will be required over time to ensure that all aspects of our work are brought fully in line with the Social Model of Disability.

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[1] Impairments are characteristics of a person. They may or may not be lifelong and they may or may not arise from illness or injury. They may affect a person's appearance and/or the way they function or communicate and/or they may cause a range of difficulties including pain and fatigue.

The barriers that people face

The vast majority of barriers that disabled people face can be broadly categorised in to one of the following areas

Attitudinal barriers	The attitudes of individual people can help to create the barriers people face. The decisions you make, the language you use, and your behaviour can either **create** or **remove** barriers. Attitudinal barriers can affect all aspects of disabled people's participation in society. In addition, actions which (even unintentionally) isolate or exclude disabled people can cause significant adverse impact on mental health and personal well-being.
Institutional barriers	Policies and procedures can prevent the full participation of disabled people within education, the workplace and the wider community, whether or not that is their intention. Examples of policies which support the full participation of disabled people may include policies on reasonable adjustments and opportunities for part time and flexible education or employment. The lack of such policies, or the failure to implement them, can cause significant barriers to equality.
Communication barriers	There are many types of communication barriers – for example, the use of inaccessible language, failure to provide sign language interpretation or alternative formats or placing signage at a level too high for wheelchair users. Communication barriers affect all aspects of disabled people's lives. For example, if a Deaf person is not provided with the text equivalent of announcements for platform changes then the Deaf person could miss their train, which compromises their ability to travel, limiting their equality and their ability (for example) to arrive on time for education or employment.
Environmental barriers	The more obvious examples of environmental barriers include failure to provide full and appropriate building access to wheelchair users. Examples of less obvious barriers include not thinking about how disabled people would get to a venue for a meeting, designing rooms with minimal contrast making it hard for people who are blind or partially sighted or have Usher syndrome to take full part in any activities in those rooms or being unaware of the need for some disabled people to have reduced light or noise levels .

How does this affect my work?

We have legal obligations to ensure that our policies, practices, procedures and working arrangements support the equality and well-being of disabled people. These are set out in the **Equality Act 2010** and the **Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015**.

The Equality Act 2010 uses the 'medical model' definition of disability ('a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term impact on a person's ability to carry out normal day to day activities').

However, in the development and implementation of policies and programmes the Welsh Government applies the Social Model of disability, recognising that those who are covered by the legal definition of disability are frequently disabled by barriers in society, or the workplace, rather than by their impairment or condition.

Eliminating barriers is always more easily done at the outset of policy development or service design, rather than having to try and make changes later when barriers become apparent. Within Welsh Government, there are many resources which you can use to assist you in identifying and eliminating barriers. Internally, you can access support from the Equality in the Workplace Team, TUS and DAAS, the staff disability network, all of whom may be able to advise on or help test proposals which affect staff. For more externally focussed work Equality and Prosperity Division may be able to advise. All policies and procedures should be subject to equality impact assessment and specific engagement with disabled people may be needed to inform equality impact assessment and assist you in inclusive policy design.

It is also important that the Social Model is reflected in the language that we use. 'Disabled person' or 'disabled people' is the appropriate way of describing people with impairments who are disabled by society.   'People with disabilities' or 'the disabled' should not be used.   Using the right language is important because it demonstrates the correct understanding of the issues.

Meeting the needs of disabled people often goes hand-in-hand with delivering better outcomes for all, as the following examples demonstrate:

The ability to send text messages by SMS has changed the way people communicate but it is especially useful for people who are Deaf or hard of hearing, allowing them to use conventional mobile phones for rapid communication.

Providing ramps, wider doors and automatic doors has not only benefited people in wheelchairs, but parents with prams, elderly people with walking sticks and people walking with their arms full.

During discussion on the Food Hygiene Bill, officials considered how blind people would read the rating stickers. This led to a policy change whereby the rating must be verbally given if asked. This has also allowed people who order a takeaway by phone to ask before buying.

Subtitles on TV screens have myriad uses for hearing people as well as those who are Deaf or hard of hearing, allowing people to follow programmes without disturbing others or wearing headphones and supporting Welsh-learners who can access both Welsh and English subtitles on S4C.

Designing websites to accessibility standards has made them easier for everyone to navigate.

For more information

For further information and advice on the Social Model of Disability please see Disability Wales' website (External link). http://www.disabilitywales.org/social-model/

For advice on equality impact assessment and applying the social model in policy development contact the Equality Team at equalityandprosperitymailbox@gov.wales

For advice on the appropriate use of language in relation to disability please see https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inclusive-communication/inclusive-language-words-

[to-use-and-avoid-when-writing-about-disability](#) For advice on equality in the workplace, contact the Equality in the Workplace Team and/or the Disability Awareness and Support (DAAS) Network

For peer support for disabled staff, please contact the Disability Awareness and Support (DAAS) Network

Further information about the Well-being of Future Generations Act (including pages 6 and 7 of the Essentials) can be found here: http://gov.wales/topics/people-and-communities/people/future-generations-bill/?lang=en.