

## **The Social Model of Disability**

The 'social model' of disability requires a change in society's values and practices in order to remove the barriers to participation which truly dis-able people. The social model has been worked out by disabled people who feel that the individual model does not provide an adequate explanation for their exclusion from mainstream society – because their experiences have shown them that, in reality, most of their problems are not caused by their impairments, but by the way society is organised and the barriers that exist.

These barriers can be:

- prejudice and stereotypes;
- inflexible organisational procedures and practices;
- inaccessible information;
- inaccessible buildings; and
- inaccessible transport.

These barriers have nothing to do with individual people's bodies. They are created by people, which means that it is possible to remove them. Organisations can take a social model approach to disability by identifying and getting rid of the disabling barriers within their control. These include management practices, the way work is organised and the design of buildings. They can also assist disabled service users and employees to get around other barriers over which the organisation has no direct control.

It is clear that change is possible and is starting to happen - eg. changing steps into ramps, information in Braille, accessible web-design. A barrier free society will gain the full benefit of the talents and contributions of all its citizens.

## **Examples of what disables people ...**

“I can’t speak; I am disabled by the fact that you won’t take the time and trouble to learn how to communicate with me.”

“I can’t hear. I am disabled by the fact that you won’t provide a British Sign Language Interpreter at meetings.”

“I can’t walk. I can get through the door of my local village community centre in my wheelchair because it is ramped, but I am disabled by the fact that it’s impossible for me to use the computer facilities because the desk is not height adjustable.”

“I have a learning disability. I am disabled by the fact that you don’t produce your leaflets in easy-to-read language and symbols, so that I can find out about the services you offer.”

“I have a mental health problem. I am disabled by the fact that I find it very difficult to find work, because many people just assume I can’t hold down a job.”

The following diagram outlines the changes in culture and practice that need to take place, from the individual model to the social model:

<b>Shifts in thinking about disability</b>		
<b>FROM</b>	<b>TO</b>	
Disability is an individual problem	▶	Disability is a problem in society
Differences in abilities are inadequacies	▶	Differences in abilities are assets
Seeing deficits	▶	Seeing strengths
Special service provision	▶	Accessible mainstream services
Society choosing for 'them'	▶	Disabled people choosing for themselves
Professionals know best	▶	People have different kinds of knowledge
Charity based	▶	Rights based
Patient	▶	Citizen
Institution orientated	▶	Community orientated
Us and them: exclusion - tolerance	▶	All of us: inclusion - valuing
<b>Individual (or medical) model of disability</b> - control or cure	▶	<b>Social model of disability</b> - change environment and attitudes