

The Learning Disability Action Plan **A Critique**

Adrian Roper critiques the Learning Disability Action Plan, its good points, not so good points and raises some important questions.

There is a saying that a camel is a horse designed by committee, and all sorts of battles no doubt went on in order to ensure that this particular camel retained four legs and one head. I congratulate members of the Learning Disability Implementation Advisory Group (LDIAG) for producing the Action Plan in the first place. They have had to overcome all sorts of problems due to the size of the group and the differences of opinion within it. Those who worked hard to make it as good as it could be under the circumstances deserve our thanks and have my respect. But, yes, I think the Action Plan is a bit of a camel.



Of course, there are some good points about the thing that need stating.

Good point number 1....

Well, all of the recommendations are OK really. It's difficult to argue against a call for more person-centred plans, and more health checks, and more local opportunities for community living and more jobs, and so on. I say, yes! Absolutely! Let's have some more of the good things which we know people need.

Good point number 2....

The Plan gives a clear message that a lot of funds are needed in order to provide support and accommodation for people currently living with parents aged 70 or over, notwithstanding the many younger adults who also want a home of their own. The way in which the plan suggests such funds might be found is far less satisfactory, and I'll come back to that later, but at least an important issue is highlighted in a very stark fashion. This is good.

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Good point number 3....

It is proposed that the LDIAG be wound up and put to rest. It was established in 2002 in order to assist the Welsh Assembly Government in implementing the report of the previous Advisory Group, a report called Fulfilling the Promises. To the best of my knowledge, most of those Promises are still unfulfilled, and we have only got today's camel on which to ride ourselves towards the Promised Land! So good bye, LDIAG. Let's hope the proposed small Task Force has more to show after six years of effort.

But enough of the positives! Let's ask a few probing questions.

Question 1.

Is anyone out there fed up with pages and pages of words, which sound lovely, but then you can't remember what they said exactly, and you know they are going to end up at the bottom of a draw somewhere, unread and forgotten? Fulfilling the Promises came out in 2002 after another document with an even more challenging title: It was called Not another Dust Gatherer. Goodness, how cynical they must have been back then. We keep getting these documents, but can anyone remember anything changing as a result of any of them? Words, words, words. And here we are again. It's called an Action Plan, but most of it is the same old hopes and desires. Can't we just have a couple of easy-read spreadsheets saying who will do what by when,

with some realistic timescales, clear and achievable steps, and upfront statements about whose money needs to be spent on each task. That would be an Action Plan. Instead we get waffle about things like "Sophisticated Commissioning". Big words! They are even worse!

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spent on Learning
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Question 2.

Where is the insight? Where is the Vision? Reading the document you would think that everything is OK in terms of professional structures and roles. It suggests that what is needed is more of the same, but better; that it's really just a matter of the various professions getting their acts together. But is that right? Do we still need so much investment on the professions, when they cost so much and hold so much power to themselves? Where is the Vision of a service system which empowers individuals and families? Where is the Vision of a service system which is really plugged into local communities and nurtures local supportive relationships? The world has moved on since the 1980s, but you wouldn't really guess it from reading this Plan.

Question 3.

Why would this Plan succeed when so many other documents like it have failed? It is a matter of human nature that you are most likely to get people to do what you want if you either threaten them with something nasty, or offer to reward them with something nice, or coax and inspire them with good leadership. Back in the 1980s, we had quite a bit of that, especially the rewards and the leadership. But the Action Plan has nothing much to offer in any of these respects.

Question 4.

Where is the concern for carers? There are no Targets for respite care, or carer support. But the vast majority of support for people with LD comes from family-care givers. Surely they need to be a big part of this Plan too?

Question 5.

Where is the commitment to respect and empower people with learning disabilities? There is the briefest of mentions of Direct Payments, but no target, and nothing about even exploring the latest developments around Self Directed Services. We don't want a mad rush into new service arrangements that might quickly fall apart, but let's not ignore All Wales People First and others calling for some action research in this area.

And what about a commitment to raising the voice of people with learning disabilities within planning and commissioning structures, and ensuring their voice is heard? If it's in the Action Plan, I missed it.

Question 6.

Why is it that Supported Living services, provided primarily by the low wage voluntary sector, is being set up for a big squeeze on its funding, whilst no such squeeze is being suggested in relation to the incredibly high cost, high wage services provided by the NHS? The Plan suggests that about £21m should be extracted from existing Supported Living services by 2013, through cost efficiencies, in order to get the reward of £7.5m new cash from the WAG. Providers in this sector have been slimmed and sliced since 1994, and even now are as eager as anyone could possibly expect to explore new ways of achieving better value and affordable quality of service. But why just pick on us? There is over £90m being spent on Learning Disability services within the NHS. Can someone have a good look at that too, please?

Question 7.

If we are going to squeeze third sector providers in order to meet strategic objectives, can we NOT do it through the crudest of cost driven competitive retendering processes? The Cardiff and Vale nightmares must not be repeated. Could the Action Plan make that clear too?

So, questions, questions, questions; but what would I like to see in the final Action Plan?

The answer is: Not a lot! Less is more. Keep it short and focussed. I'd like that spreadsheet I

mentioned earlier, with who does what by when on it. And, I would like to see a commitment to three things:

1. At least one full-time officer in the WAG devoted entirely to people with Learning Disability.
2. A People's Parliament of people with learning disabilities to advise WAG Ministers, WLGA, and service providers too.
3. An All Wales Learning Network. That's one of the

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draft plan's best suggestions, to bring people together, to argue and learn together.

Hopefully this article offers some food for thought, some analysis of the draft plan which can help those charged with improving it. It is not intended as blanket disapproval by any means. The Action Plan can be the basis for a way forward but it needs some major surgery. Get the scissors out. Get some big priorities spelled out in big letters. Have a look at the Strategy for Older People and try to come up with something that has the same simple clarity.

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Action Plan available from <http://wales.gov.uk/consultation/dhss/learningdisability/actionplane.pdf?lang=en>

