



Inside the February edition

- Election campaign
- Sustainable funding for the community sector
- What has happened to an Ordinary Life?
- Health checks
- Inclusive education stars wanted
- Concerning special education
- Making the schooling system work for every child
- Initial teacher education review
- Employing disabled people
- Ratifying UN Disability Convention
- Declarations of inconsistency
- In passing

Election campaign

From taggers to taxes, the election campaign got off to an early start this year. Along with all the usual issues, the Government says that now is the time for a national discussion on how to have a growing, fair and sustainable (in the widest sense) economy.

So what is there for the disability sector?

Sustainable funding for the community sector

The large funding increase and a different model, including full funding, for the community sector providing certain contracted essential social services to children, young people and families are welcome. But there was nothing for the disability sector and no promise of extending this new model, which the community sector has sought for many years. The disability sector continues to be ignored in terms of addressing severe workforce problems, low wage rates and budget shortfalls within the Ministry of Health (as evidenced by the freeze in increases in funding for disability services late last year). We are also concerned that MSD only part-funds vocational services that IHC and others provide to increase the participation of disabled people in their communities.

For information about this funding, go to www.msd.govt.nz/media-information/press-releases/2008/pr-2008-02-12.html.

What has happened to an Ordinary Life?

As we said in the last issue, government agencies have little to say about what they've done or plan to do about implementing the recommendations of the National Health Committee's 2003 report *To Have an Ordinary Life* for adults with an intellectual disability. These are often the people who came out of the institutions – they deserve a better deal to live in the community. The NHC made 23 recommendations to the Minister of Health and the Minister for Disability Issues. Three priority areas for action it identified as requiring fundamental changes in thinking and policy were:

1. Changing the focus of needs assessment, service coordination and service purchase
2. Ending the custodial ownership model of service delivery
3. Improving poor health and prescribing practices.

Health checks

Among the recommendations the NHC made to urgently address the systemic neglect of the health of adults with an intellectual disability was for primary health care providers to have comprehensive health tools. IHC has led the way by funding a health assessment tool in our own services, which has found that almost three quarters of people had previously unidentified health needs that required action. Based on a health assessment tool the Australian government is funding for people with an intellectual disability, IHC is now pressing government to fund an annual health assessment for all adults with an intellectual disability here. Having received a positive response from Minister Dyson, we envisage an announcement soon.

Inclusive education stars wanted

To further the debate and change attitudes about inclusive education, IHC is producing a 30-minute DVD showing examples of best practice in inclusive education in New Zealand schools. The DVD will be used in presentations to principals and teacher groups and at meetings and conferences. A longer version will be a training resource, eventually to be included in the NZ Index for Inclusion, another project that IHC is working on.

Please contact advocate Marguerite Vanderkolk marguerite.vanderkolk@ihc.org.nz with names of primary and secondary schools where inclusive education is happening and names of teachers and principals who are committed to inclusive education, who could appear on this DVD.

The next meeting of the Inclusive Education Action Group is on 4 March in Wellington.

Concerning special education

The Education and Science Select Committee's financial review of the Ministry of Education expresses concern that children with special needs are not having these met at school. The committee is concerned that there are not enough places in some special schools or enough specialists available to support these children in mainstream schools. It says it will continue to monitor how adequately these children's needs are being met. The Ministry states it does not intend to have more special schools. Instead it says it is working with special and regular schools to create a continuum of provision to enable students to attend a school that best meets their needs. The committee has asked the Ministry to collect data on the educational achievements of students with special needs to improve its planning and delivery of services for them.

Making the schooling system work for every child

Interestingly the same committee's report on its inquiry into making the schooling system work for every child barely touches on children with disabilities despite its focus on achievement, or rather underachievement. How can this be excluded when it says in the middle of the report that if the schooling system is to work for every child, teachers must be able to constantly improve the achievement of their students, regardless of age or ability?

The Principals' Federation and the PPTA point to resourcing being the key, which the two-year inquiry largely did not address. To enable all children to flourish we say the education system needs to:

- Resource teachers and schools to do their best work
- Resource schools to be inclusive
- Reduce class sizes to improve quality teaching and learning.

Initial teacher education review

Nor did the Ministry of Education's review of initial teacher education policy include disability education or inclusion. Special education/inclusion/disability advocacy groups made submissions on its *Becoming a Teacher in the 21st Century* discussion paper. The summary of submissions notes that they want assurance that the content of initial teacher education programmes will be revised to ensure that all graduates have the knowledge and skills to teach all children regardless of their disabilities or learning needs. We promote graduating standards as a way to improve inclusive education practices and expect the Ministry to include this in its recommendations to Cabinet in March.

Employing disabled people

While New Zealand is experiencing a time of high employment and employees are hard to find, disabled people are still one of the most underemployed groups of society. How best to promote and support disabled people as employees and to assist employers to recognise the strengths disabled people bring to the workplace are questions that are particularly relevant to the post-DPEP environment.

Therefore it is very timely that the partnership of Workbridge New Zealand and the UK Employers' Forum on Disability has produced a new resource for employers here. IHC welcomes the resource and hopes that the information will be used to assist employers to recruit and retain more disabled people as employees, including people with an intellectual impairment.

For a copy of the Manager's guide: A best practice approach to working with disabled employees, contact your local Workbridge office by phone on 0508 858-858 or email NigelJ@workbridge.co.nz.

Ratifying the UN Disability Convention

Disability groups including IHC were invited to a session with the Office for Disability Issues in February for an update on progress and feedback on issues. Responses varied from wanting to ratify the Convention as soon as possible to wanting key matters fixed beforehand. Memories endure of the inaction after the Human Rights Commission's Consistency 2000 exercise was halted, leaving inconsistencies identified still unaddressed. A formal assurance to address these outstanding issues progressively within a committed timeframe is likely to be needed in order to be able to ratify the Convention with integrity. Government agencies are informing the Office for Disability

Issues on their legislation, policy and practice consistency with the Convention, with a cabinet paper on next steps expected in May.

As of 25 February 17 countries have ratified the Convention, with three more to go before it comes into force.

Declarations of inconsistency

The replacement mechanism to the Human Rights Commission's consistency exercise in the late 90s and early 2000s is the ability since 2002 to ask for a declaration of inconsistency using the anti-discrimination standard in the Bill of Rights Act and the Human Rights Act. This was intended to be an accessible and transparent process for people to challenge government's actions – or inactions. However in the very few cases initiated to date the Crown has sought to prevent any claim from even getting an airing in the Human Rights Review Tribunal. Does the government not wish to engage in a dialogue with its most disadvantaged citizens, including people with disabilities, as another element of a participatory democracy?

In passing

We end on a sad note and invite reflection on the recent tragedy in Invercargill which left a young woman with intellectual disability and her father dead.

We hear often about the stress and pressure many parents experience when trying to plan for the future for their family member. That stress and pressure is compounded when families are distanced from the support of other family, friends and community when trying to plan ahead.

We hope that the legacy of this tragedy is that we all do better in facilitating the development of support networks so that families are not alone when dealing with day-to-day issues or planning. We also hope that the tragedy causes us to reflect on how we can do better to include people with intellectual disability in our families and communities.

We're sending this issue of Hot Issues to people we think will be interested in receiving it – we're certainly interested in you reading it each month, and to hearing from you. Please pass this on to others also. Those not on our list can specifically subscribe below.

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