

Aiming High for Disabled Children

“Aiming High” is a major Government initiative requiring Local Authorities to reach high standards in their provision for children with disabilities. As part of this initiative Children’s Services are required to develop effective working partnerships with parents and carers and to include representatives in all key activities. We were commissioned to work with one London Borough Children’s Department to help them develop better working relations with parent representatives – relationships that were described as ‘like war’.

At the centre of some of the difficulties between the Council and parents of disabled children was a poor working relationship between two key people in leadership roles – one within the Council and the other the leader of a parents’ group. It was evident that each in their own way wanted to improve local arrangements for disabled children and their families. This relationship needed to change if progress was to be achieved and, with some degrees of unease, both agreed to take part in a facilitated dialogue. At the centre of this was a skilfully structured approach where each was invited to talk about what was most important to them (that they wanted the other to understand) relating to the future for all children in Newham. This dialogue process included a challenge for each to demonstrate their understanding of the other’s views: they began to explore some of the difficulties and differences they had grappled with, including their perceptions of each other, and gradually there emerged important shifts in their understandings and perceptions. From this more productive base they shared ideas about a better future for disabled children in Newham, within which parents would take on greater levels of responsibility. They then agreed to jointly present this as a ‘first draft’ vision to a wider gathering of 50 parents and Council staff. The effect of this subsequent presentation, by two people who were known to have had significant differences, proved to be a major turning point toward far more productive relationships between the Council and parents of disabled children. From that day new, shared, directions and priorities for further development were agreed.

There is now substantial understanding between parents and officers – which some parents have described as a “sea change”. While there is recognition that there will be many challenges in the future and that there will be many opportunities for disagreement there seems to be a strong commitment to the “MobiUs Model” as a way of tackling problems and building new understandings. Parental representatives have recognised that they themselves are best at managing communications across groups and individuals and are using facilities such as Face book to facilitate that. These changes from mutual disaffection to substantive agreement; parental responsibility, joint development and self support were achieved over a 4-month period.