

Championing Change: Richard Currie's Journey into Disability Advocacy and Policy

In celebration of the diverse work across Manchester's VCSE sector, each edition of the Policy Voice Newsletter features Just One Thing, spotlighting people who are making a difference in the sector.

For this month's article, in honour of Disability Pride Month, Ellie Eckersley (Project Worker at Macc) spoke with Richard Currie to share his personal journey of disability advocacy, research and policymaking. We highlight the lasting impact of his work at Breakthrough UK, where Richard serves as a long-standing Trustee Board Member and former service user, as well as other disability advocacy work that he has been involved within the VCSE and public sector.

Richard's Journey into Disability Advocacy and Policy

Richard moved to Manchester in 2006 to take up master's degree at the University of Manchester. This was before the implementation of the Care Act, making it difficult for him to access a social care package. He recalls *"one local authority couldn't wait to get rid of me, and the other didn't want to do an assessment."*

In search of support and advocacy around a social care package in Manchester, Richard came across the Greater Manchester Coalition for Disabled People - *"I thought surely there's got to be an advocacy group around disability rights, because, before then, I wasn't really into disability politics per se. I'd just Googled disability advocacy organisations and then they came up. It's been a close relationship where they really supported me during that time, and I got a care and support package."*

Though not previously involved in disability politics or organisations, involvement within the GMCDP marked a major shift for Richard. *"I didn't initially realise that I had moved to a hotbed of disability activism in Manchester, but this soon became clear."*

It was around this time Richard became interested in the Social Model of disability – *"the idea that disability is a social construct rather than just an individual deficit."*

Through this interest in policy, Richard began volunteering at the Policy Research Section at Breakthrough UK, working every Friday. Elaine Ashley, who led the section, was *"a fountain of knowledge on all things disability rights and policy."* Lorraine Gladwell, then CEO of Breakthrough, became a mentor, teaching Richard how to assert himself and navigate external advocacy with confidence.

This then led to Richard being commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to research the state of the third sector for disabled people's organisations, at the beginning of the austerity era. From there, he was invited onto the board of both GMCDP and Breakthrough.

Redefining Work – More Than Just Employment

Richard highlighted the impact of Breakthrough's inclusive approach to supporting disabled people not just into traditional employment, but also into volunteering, self-employment and roles in both the public and private sectors. Richard felt inspired that Breakthrough were willing to *"take people under their wing"* in this way, recognising the value in meeting people where they are and would like to be.

“Breakthrough’s position on employing disabled people is that those who want to work and are able to work should be supported into work, and one thing that’s very concerning about current legislation around supporting disabled people into work is that disabled people feel forced into work.”

Richard explained how well-meaning policies to support disabled people into employment over the past 10 -15 years have often resulted in people getting stuck on a training carousel, where training is available for a few months but there is no support to a job or extra support at the end.

One area that Richard feels must improve is how the private sector approaches employment for disabled people.

“We need the private sector to be part of these conversations,” he says. “They have a real role to play in opening up recruitment practices and giving disabled people a fair shot.”

Richard is clear, however, that this isn’t just about ethics or empathy, but about recognition. *“Employing disabled people increases the lived experience within your organisation and brings different perspectives on leadership. It brings creativity. Disabled people very often have to think around corners. That kind of thinking is an asset.”*

He highlights the important work already happening through organisations like Breakthrough UK and Pure Innovations, alongside local authorities and charities. But for employment to become a lasting and realistic prospect for disabled people, he says, *“the private sector has to be part of making that happen.”*

Richard also called for choice to be central in these conversations.

“Those that want to work should be supported into work, and I think as a society we should be totally okay if people want to volunteer or just go about their daily life – that’s totally okay too. It’s not a simple, binary choice. I think sometimes principles get misappropriated by policymakers, and people just assume there’s a ‘reserve army’ of disabled people willing to get employment. Yes, there are disabled people willing to work, but what we don’t want is a two-tier way of thinking where those that can’t work are demonised or stigmatised.”

Research Rooted in Experience

Drawing on his own experience, Richard has long championed the value of user-led approaches in both research and service delivery. During a period when he stepped back from his roles on the GMCDP and Breakthrough boards, he worked at Manchester Metropolitan University on research projects focused on disability and migration. This academic involvement deepened his understanding of how lived experience can shape and inform meaningful research and further shaped his career within research and advocacy.

Returning to his trustee roles, Richard noticed this change in attitude within the third sector, with growing emphasis on user-led organisations and co-production, something that was central to Richard’s subsequent research projects.

For example, one project involved working with a mental health charity to design research around people's experiences with social care support plans.

"So, for example, someone with experience using adult social care, would come in after a budget was agreed. The local authority and social worker would then advise them on how to use it, so they could live in the community and live a gloriously ordinary life."

He also led research into how peer support and advocacy works on the ground, looking at how session structure, leadership and location impacted their effectiveness. Alongside this, he co-authored papers in *Disability & Society* and contributed to *Approaches to Mental Health Research*, advocating for inclusive, experience-led methods in research and policy.

The Power of Co-Production

Now Co-Production Lead at Stockport Council, Richard works directly with people who have lived experience of adult social care through the Making it Real Board. Although there is much more work to be done, he is proud to work for an organisation that *"takes co-production and disability issues so seriously."*

Richard explained that co-production is more than policy reform but instead a culture shift in how institutions work alongside communities. Authentic co-production requires government and local authorities to listen to disabled people as partners in shaping policy.

"In social care, the government is keen to improve things. But traditionally, disabled people and communities from the Global Majority have had things done to them, rather than with them. It's time we turned some of that rhetoric into reality and truly involved disabled people in policymaking."

While it's not always tidy, he sees the "messiness" as part of what makes it meaningful. True co-production needs resources and recognition.

"Institutions need to put something behind it. This could be funding, but it's also about genuine commitment. And people with lived experience should be paid for their time. It's their expertise."

Championing Intersectionality and Nuance

Richard also touched on the importance of an intersectional approach in order to avoid silo working. For example, *"what we call a pan-impairment or cross-impairment approach to disability issues."*

"There's an understanding within society, particularly when it comes to the allocation of resource, that there needs to be an understanding of people's issues. One way to do it is to get everybody in a room and empower and enable them. So, as well as the need for group specific approaches, we also need space for an intergenerational, intersectional approach to co-production."

A perspective that continues to drive his work at Breakthrough – *"as a user-led, pan-impairment organisation, we're uniquely placed to deliver real outcomes for the people we support."*

Looking Back (and Forwards)

Reflecting on his journey across Manchester's rich landscape of disability and poverty activism, Richard is grounded in gratitude.

"I'm really proud of the work that I've done and the work that I do. I wouldn't have been able to without the great people at Breakthrough UK; through the team at GMCDP; and working with such a passionate, committed group of colleagues at Stockport to be able to try and make a difference."

Working for both a local authority and within the third sector, Richard feels as though he has a useful insight into both areas of public policy. *"I'd say the difference is we both agree on the destination. Sometimes there's a difference on how to get there, but broadly the third sector and local authorities are on the same page."*

Self-Care is Part of this Work

Richard closed the conversation with a reminder for anyone drawing on lived experience in their work.

"Only share lived experience if you feel it's not going to harm you or others. If you're going through a tough time, it's okay to step back. Take care of yourself. Make sure your experience doesn't become something that's emotionally or physically harmful."

List of Organisations

If you'd like to read more about some of the work Richard has been involved with, please see the organisation's webpages below:

Breakthrough UK – <https://breakthrough-uk.co.uk/homepage/>

Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People – <https://gmcdp.com/>

Stockport Council – <https://www.stockport.gov.uk/landing/support-for-adults>