Disabled people and local authority services in 1950

In this article, Pete Millington takes a look at Birmingham Corporation's Handbook from 1950. Published just two years after the National Assistance Act 1948, the Handbook attempts to set out the new duties of the local authority towards its disabled citizens:

For many decades prior to 1950, Birmingham had enjoyed a world-wide reputation for sound local government. It was a reputation which was due in no small part to the influence of Joseph Chamberlain, one of the city's most celebrated town politicians whose office and authority spanned the last three decades of the 19th century. Chamberlain and his fellow councilors were responsible for a virtual revolution in civic Administration, raising the town of Birmingham from a position of mediocrity to one of great prominence in the world of municipal government. The progressive reform brought in during the Chamberlain era included last improvements to housing, to the condition of the streets and securing a clean and sanitary water supply.

In 1889 Birmingham became a city and continued to expand, both geographically and demographically for at least the next two decades. By 1950 Birmingham's population was not much different to what it is today, if anything slightly higher at 1,107,200 people, allowing it to claim the title of The Second City of Britain. The city had played a significant role during the Second World War, being a major target for Luftwaffe bombing raids due to its extensive armament making capacity. During the war, for instance, over half of Britain's 20,000 Spitfire monoplanes were constructed at the Castle Bromwich based Nuffield shadow factory on Chester Road and towards the end of the war the factory's output was higher than any other Allied factory-producing 320 Spitfires and 24 Lancaster bombers every month.
But for all of Birmingham's great industrial achievements and its reputation for sound local government, what was the city's attitude towards disabled people during the middle part of the 20th century? Where did disabled people fit into the regeneration of post-war Birmingham? The City's Handbook of 1950 gives some interesting insights and makes for a fascinating historical snapshot of life for disabled Brummies.

In the days before the Social Model of Disability and the idea of disabled people as equal citizens (if only society was made more accessible), Birmingham was no different to any other British town in its basic response to disability. Whilst the City of Birmingham Handbook of 1950 is a veritable celebration of the new building development taking place right across every sphere of civic, public and commercial life in Birmingham, issues around physical access do not get a single mention in 280 pages of a very detailed account of the modern city at that time.

Where the diversity of our great city is placed virtually at centre stage today and our rich 'inter-cultural community' is one of Birmingham's proudest selling points as we attempt to entice the rest of the world to our international meeting place, back in 1950 diversity and access were not even minor side issues. Diversity doesn't get a mention at all, whilst disability was confined to the last but one chapter of the Birmingham Handbook, between *Weights and Measures* on page 263 and *Sewage Disposal* on 269-under the title *Welfare Services*. Perhaps it's being slightly unfair to imply that Birmingham didn't have a commitment to its disabled citizens in 1950, because the good intentions were clearly there and in fairness this was the way of the world 54 years ago, but all the same it is interesting to mark the changes.

Welfare Services in 1950 were based at 102 Edmund Street and the Chief Welfare Officer for Birmingham was F.Kimberley. The Handbook reads:

"The National Assistance Act, 1948, formed part of the new social legislation to bring the Poor Laws to an end on 5 July, 1948. On and from that date the former Public Assistance Committee was superseded by a Welfare Committee appointed by the City Council. The Council was no longer concerned with monetary assistance to persons who are without resources to meet their requirements, or
whose resources must be supplemented in order to meet their requirements, and hospital nursing and treatment of the chronic sick, responsibility and therefore, having passed to the National Assistance Board and the Regional Hospital Board, respectively, on the same date."

Perhaps this was a landmark error in the response of local authorities like Birmingham to the needs of disabled people, the philosophy of 'cure or care' being polarised within the new structure through which medical authorities would address the 'cure' bit whilst local authority welfare services would deal with the 'care' issues, and rarely the twain shall meet (or only at case conferences). The legacy of this is that even today local authorities still have a major psychological aversion to supporting individuals financially to enable them to make their own choices about things like personal assistance (i.e. Direct Payments) because it undermines a paternalistic approach dating back to 5 July 1948 - "we know what's best".

The primary strategic objective of Birmingham's Welfare Committee in 1950 was to provide residential accommodation for "people who, by reason of age and infirmity, or any other circumstances, are in need of care and attention which is not otherwise available to them". In addition to residential care, arrangements were being operated to further promote the welfare of "persons who are blind, deaf or dumb, and other persons who are substantially or permanently handicapped by illness, injury, or congenital deformity, or such other disabilities as may in future be prescribed" through instruction and "employment of methods for overcoming the effects of their disabilities" and the provision of workshops and residential hostels.

The Handbook also introduces the idea that the local authority will have discretionary power to provide its services in partnership with voluntary organisations which the Council would subsidise or even employ as their agents, provided that those voluntary organisations "are registered in accordance with the provisions of the Act". Again, here then is the root of a model of service provision which still exists today, the encouragement of a partnership between local authority and voluntary sector. What has changed though since 1950 is the
development of user led voluntary sector organisations and the call for organisations providing services to disabled people to be accountable to disabled people as well as being accountable to the local authority. In 2004 however, that is still the exception to the rule.

What also makes interesting reading is the list of Special Welfare Services which were largely aimed at people with sensory impairment. Of approximately 1,400 blind people on Birmingham's register in 1950, many were being encouraged to take up training at the Birmingham Royal Institution for the Blind in the following trades: bedding and upholstery; mat and coal-bag making; boot repairing; light engineering; knitting; brush making; basket making; piano tuning and repairing; typing. A Home Workers' Scheme was also being developed which split trades into gender specific groups with men becoming encouraged to take up a trades such as piano tuning, chimney sweeping, firewood chopping.