



Breakthrough UK

1997 – 2007

10 years of breaking down barriers

A summary of the evaluation carried out by
Professor Alan Roulstone, De Montfort University



break through

Including disabled people

“Part of the uniqueness of Breakthrough is its adherence to the Social Model of Disability; indeed, the Social Model of Disability underpins and is at the heart of everything Breakthrough does from its mission statement, to its training and development of staff through to its everyday work with disabled clients and wider stakeholders.”

Alan Roulstone
Professor of Applied Social Sciences,
De Montfort University

“Traditionally disabled people have been seen as the problem, to be tackled by focusing interventions on the individual. These interventions have tried to either ‘fix’ disabled people so that they fit the given norms of society, or ‘compensate’ or ‘care’ for us if the fixing is not successful. Developed by disabled people themselves, the Social Model locates the problem within the structures and organisation of society, which take little or no account of what disabled people need to be autonomous and to live independently. Using the Social Model as a basis for solutions the focus of the problem shifts from the individual to the way society is organised.”

Lorraine Gradwell
Chief Executive, Breakthrough UK

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Breakthrough UK Mission and Aims

Mission

Breakthrough UK's mission is to promote the rights, responsibilities and respect of disabled people.

Aims

To support disabled people to play a full, economically active role in society by

- Working with individual disabled people to support them to be independent, to seek employment and develop their careers
- Working with employers and providers to promote best practice in recruitment, retention and progression
- Tackling the barriers and discriminatory policies and practices which disadvantage disabled people in the labour market, economy and society

Context

In Breakthrough's lifetime there have been vast and rapid policy and service changes in the field of employment and disability, with an increased recognition of the fact that social and economic dependence are not inevitable for disabled people. To date, the policy supporting activities aimed at getting disabled people into work have been based on the traditional view that disabled people need 'fixing' to make them work-ready.

There have been signs of apparent policy shift recently, including the comprehensive report on 'Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People' (Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, 2005), the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and the more recent Disability Equality Duty. However, there is still much evidence that disabled people are excluded from, or are not attracted to the contemporary labour market¹.

'Nothing About Us Without Us'

Breakthrough's emphasis on breaking down barriers alongside intensive work preparation and confidence building responds to the many challenges in supporting employment and independent living, whilst remaining true to the principles of the Disabled People's Movement. The work of Breakthrough strives to connect with current and emerging policy and practice developments through the building of networks across a variety of sectors, together with close links to the Disabled People's Movement and the availability of support from initiatives like their Policy Think Tank.

1 ONS 2002 – 2003

Achieving the Vision

Breakthrough was set up in 1997 at a time of increasing awareness of equal opportunities and disability rights, and when disabled people themselves were organising in order to challenge the 'traditional' ways of 'dealing with' disability.

In Manchester disabled people had worked closely with the City Council to change practice and service delivery, and as part of that partnership a new employment initiative was conceived. As Breakthrough's first Annual Report noted of previous employment initiatives.

Breakthrough was developed to be run by disabled people, and to provide employment support and training to promote independence and choices for disabled people in Manchester. By 1998 Breakthrough was an independent company delivering employment support in the city.

As an example of good practice in action, an average of 65% of the 40 Breakthrough staff are disabled people, as are 80% of the Board of Directors.

In the last five years Breakthrough has developed ground-breaking employment advocacy work and a recent focus on Independent Living, whilst carving out a national reputation for policy and influencing work.

“Disabled people argued that this was in fact segregated provision which maintained disabled people in low-paid work with little chance of promotion or advancement...”

Breakthrough Annual Report 1999

More About the Work of Breakthrough

With an average of 65% of its 40 staff being disabled people, and with clear examples of staff progression within the company, Breakthrough strives to demonstrate best practice in action. HR policies include flexible working, an absence policy that recognises impairment related absence and a rolling assessment of reasonable adjustments for disabled staff members.

Through its services, Breakthrough supports disabled people to find and stay in employment, and to develop work related skills through voluntary work or training. A holistic barrier removal approach incorporates mentoring, advocacy, information, practical skills development and in-work support.

This is achieved by offering

- Employment services in Manchester and Liverpool
- Work-related training in Administration, IT, Retail and Horticulture (currently operating in Manchester)
- Independent Employment Advocacy and Information (currently covering Greater Manchester)

Breakthrough also works to promote and share good practice with other organisations to support them in identifying and removing barriers.

This is achieved by offering

- An Independent Employment Advocacy Centre information service and monthly e-bulletin
- Tailored training, consultancy and research on disability issues
- Organising and contributing to conferences on key issues
- Free online resources on the website www.breakthrough-uk.com

In addition, Breakthrough influences policy at a local, regional and national level.

This is achieved by

- Contributing to various government reports such as 'Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People' (Prime Minister's Strategy Unit 2005)
- Participating in policy making & influencing bodies including
 - Local Strategic Partnerships
 - North West Equality and Diversity Group (regional)
 - Disability Employment Advisory Committee at the Department for Work and Pensions (national)
 - Small Business Council at the Department for Trade and Industry (national)
- Hosting a Policy Think Tank of disabled people who are experts in a range of fields
- Organising and contributing to conferences on key issues

Breakthrough as an Employer and Provider of Employment Services

As a result of the already successful Manchester Employment Service, in 2002 Breakthrough was invited to set up an Employment Support Project in Liverpool. It has since become one of the most successful providers of employment support services in the city.

The Independent Employment Advocacy and Information Service, set up in 2003 with a Community Fund grant, came from recognition that 'traditional' sources of employment support can often themselves (unintentionally) become barriers to disabled people getting and keeping jobs. The Advocacy Centre puts disabled people at the heart of the service and supports them to achieve their own employment related goals.

The following statements were made about Breakthrough's employment practices and services

"I am learning spreadsheets and word processing, power point, the web and emails...the experience has given me much more confidence and in the distant future may help me move towards paid work... Breakthrough have helped me go forward... if I compare it with college – that took my confidence away... here I can go at my own pace – and that way I am not being set up to fail"

Client²

2 When Breakthrough asked those who use their services what they would like to be called, they said they wanted to be known as clients.

“Breakthrough, as a Social Model organisation, treats everyone fairly. They know that employers need... to understand that people have needs through no fault of their own. Breakthrough have been fantastic in now building confidence and helping me progress in a very supportive way. I don't know where I would be without Breakthrough's help”

Client

“They have an amazing knack of bringing clients, disabled people and employers together....they know they cannot make a difference without having employers on side to work with disabled people”

Services commissioning stakeholder

“Breakthrough has a different value base, for example disabled people are at the centre of everything, they both support disabled clients and employ disabled people – that is the ultimate sign that they take their clients' futures seriously – they frequently employ them. They put emphasis on moving people forward, whatever their starting point”

Services commissioning stakeholder

“I was a client from September 2002. It was a really good experience, a relaxed atmosphere; I was on the employment programme and in the IT training suite brushing up my IT skills. I enjoyed myself so much I decided to stay here and apply for a job. Previously I had been very shy and bullied, but Breakthrough staff...they really understood my needs and helped me to get employment. It is so important that they accepted me as a disabled person, you don't get much of that out there (wider labour market)”

Staff member and former client

“I think a key thing is that we don't just think about specific needs disabled people have and tell us they have... we look at supporting people into employment as our core business in the employment team (paid or unpaid) but we also take into account wider barrier reduction to employment which takes in things like housing, for example the location and suitability of housing and how clients are getting to work (transport). That joined-up approach involves working closely with our advocacy service and also outside agencies such as Connexions, Jobcentre Plus, Leaving Care Services and Barnardos”.

Staff member and former client

Breakthrough as an Innovator

The 'Trailblazers' and 'Landing a Job' projects were both funded through the European Social Fund. They not only achieved jobs for disabled people, but also resulted in changed and sustainable ways of recruiting and retaining disabled staff by several large employers, including Manchester Airport. In addition to this, the projects were successful in promoting positive images of disabled people at work.

The Liverpool Independent Living Skills (ILS) project delivered an independent living skills course to disabled people at a former day centre, but also trained local disabled people as trainers. The ILS course was then mainstreamed into a local FE college, with a disabled trainer commissioned to deliver the course.

In 2005 Breakthrough established a national disability Policy Think Tank of 18 disabled academics, practitioners, activists and lobbyists with a range of policy experience and a common understanding of, and commitment to the Social Model of Disability. This developing initiative is in direct response to the recognised lack of a national body of disabled people who can advise and comment on disability policy and activities from a Social Model perspective.

The following statements were made about Breakthrough's innovative ways of working

“They are unique in the use of the Social Model, one interesting and unique thing is that they never speak about, ask about or categorise people in terms of impairment – ever.”

Policy based stakeholder

“...we certainly turn to Breakthrough as having currency and clues as to how to anticipate the latest ideas coming from Whitehall...”

Policy and service commissioning stakeholder

“Breakthrough gave us a real sense of what we should be saying (in an Equality scheme) – not that many organisations are that positive and energised by the idea of change in organisations... Breakthrough can make these things happen and contractors are always rightly impressed at the extent of their employment of disabled people... that’s really important in supporting disabled clients and sensing the right signals... they walk the walk and talk the talk”

Service providing organisation

“The sense of shared purpose and a Breakthrough identity are very strong when you work with their staff... I am a disabled person and I have been upfront about that with Breakthrough from the outset....working with Breakthrough is one of the few contexts where I feel I have been accepted unconditionally”

Service providing stakeholder

“They have a robust business approach which is very focused and effective and this sits alongside the disability perspective... that is an unusual mix...”

Service providing stakeholder

Breakthrough as a Policy Influencing Organisation

Government bodies that Breakthrough has directly fed into include

- the Disability Employment Advisory Committee (DEAC) at the Department for Work and Pensions
- the Small Business Council at the Department for Trade and Industry
- the National Employment Panel's 'Employers' Working Group on Disability' which was convened to inform the employment recommendations of the 2005 'Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People' report of the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit
- The initial Advisory Group on a Single Equalities Commission
- The User Led Organisations Working Group at the Department of Health

In March 2007 Breakthrough hosted a Centre for Independent Living (CIL) conference designed to illustrate the work of three existing and successful CILs, as well as the Department of Health plans to roll-out the user-led organisations recommendation from the 'Life Chances' report and at which Anne McGuire MP, Minister for Disabled People was a keynote speaker.

The following statements were made about Breakthrough's role in influencing policy

“The Social Model has been the starting point of their critique of current policy and an analysis of what needs to change. These ideas have certainly been at the heart of their work with us on our Equality and Diversity strategy”

Policy based stakeholder

“...they are seen to lead by example and it is important for them to keep ahead of the field in independent living as it fits well with the new push to a CIL in each area. Also, it’s no surprise that local authorities are approaching Breakthrough to advise on how to interpret and adopt individual budgets”

Policy and service provider based stakeholder

“When we commissioned Breakthrough to do disability training with our staff I was hopeful it would have a strong impact but I wasn’t ready for what happened. Members of staff started coming up to me in corridors or emailing me to say it was the most worthwhile and best training we’d ever done (and some of them could go back 30 years when they said that!). I joined a session myself and found it hugely rewarding. The sheer quality of this training has inspired our staff to think seriously and creatively about how they as individuals and teams can contribute to our Equalities Duties.”

Policy, commissioning and service provider stakeholder

Lessons Learnt and Future Options

Clients, staff and stakeholders were consulted about Breakthrough and were asked to make some 'warts and all' comments so that Breakthrough could learn lessons.

This is what they said

- **Local, regional or national?** Some felt that that the scope of Breakthrough's 'reach' was not always clear and there were differing views as to what level of local, regional or national work Breakthrough should aim to deliver
- **Working in partnership** – the possibility of greater engagement with larger providers was suggested, with opportunities and benefits to both potential partners and Breakthrough cited
- **A change of focus** – there was recognition of Breakthrough's developing work around User-Led Organisations and Centres for Independent Living. This was balanced by the observations that Breakthrough needed to be clear about any change in direction or focus, and the impact that may have on existing work
- **A fine and difficult line** – Breakthrough strives to be seen as unique and fully engaged with the Social Model of Disability and also as part of mainstream service environments. The balance between 'vanguard ideas, the Social Model and the need to present a concerted front with other organisations in the same market segment' was cited, with a view expressed that Breakthrough needs to give further thought to where and how it positions itself
- **The value base** – the 'bums on seats' approach to commissioning services can be at direct odds with efforts to deliver an ethical, value-driven service and there were cautions about the need to continue to deliver numbers as well as the value service
- **Keeping the Social Model alive** – some gave a view that it is a challenge to get people to share a common understanding of the Social Model, and that Breakthrough could benefit by making sure that it refreshes understandings of the Social Model to avoid a gap developing in its use across the organisation

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- **The Chief Executive** – the high public profile of the CEO, Lorraine Gradwell, was seen as a great benefit for Breakthrough, although some felt that the organisation had become synonymous with, and perhaps overly dependent on, the CEO. People pointed out that the organisation needs to be prepared for eventual changes.

So What Happens Next?

Breakthrough is currently preparing and consulting on its next five year strategic plan. The lessons learnt from the stakeholder review will be used to inform the plan and therefore enable Breakthrough UK to develop further as an ethical, leading edge organisation.

Summary of Stakeholder Comments about Breakthrough

- **Breakthrough is unique** because it uses a barrier removal approach in all its activities as an employer, as a service provider, as an educator and as a catalyst for change.
- **Breakthrough is a role model.** 65% of staff are disabled people. This has been achieved through fair and open recruitment practices and the removal of barriers in the workplace. Clients, staff and stakeholders are inspired by what Breakthrough has achieved in this area.
- **Breakthrough is unusual** because most of its Board are, and constitutionally have to be, disabled people.
- **Breakthrough services see the whole picture.** Services see the person in context, addressing wider employment barriers such as housing, transport and financial issues through advocacy, information, training and mentoring.
- **Breakthrough goes above and beyond.** Breakthrough staff approach their work in a broad and inclusive way. They are as much concerned with ‘moving clients forward’ as with ‘hard’ outcomes.
- **Breakthrough works effectively** with a range of stakeholders and impacts on policy and practice nationally, regionally and locally.
- **Breakthrough has a great Chief Executive**, who is widely known and respected, and who has guided the organisation through ten years of development.

About This Document

In October 2007, Alan Roulstone, Professor of Applied Social Sciences at De Montfort University, undertook an independent stakeholder review of Breakthrough UK Ltd in which he explored the views of stakeholders about the work of the organisation and its achievements and impact over the 10 year period from 1997 to 2007.

This document is a summary of the review and contains quotes taken from the full review document.

Breakthrough UK would like to thank all those who participated and who gave their kind permission for the use of their quotes in this document.

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