

The Lone Ranger' is the sobriquet ascribed to the National Director for Learning Disabilities, Rob Greig, by the Minister for Care Services Ivan Lewis because, as he said at a recent conference, he is a lone voice going round government departments "shouting about learning disabilities".

Though this may describe his actions, his demeanour is more that of a country vicar disappointed that his flock has failed to live up to the good practices he has been preaching for the last six years.

Asked if it was a source of frustration that some local authorities had chosen to ignore the first Valuing People, he said, "That's putting it politely!"

During our hour-long discussion that was the strongest expression of his feelings about what some people have said is the failure of Valuing People to live up to expectations.

To be fair, the achievements of the Valuing People team should be seen against the background of what services were like when Rob took up his post. Examples of bad practice stand out more starkly because there are many more examples of good practice around today.

The first Valuing People was in essence a statement of principles and recommendations. Valuing People Now has set some firm targets and built in a system for monitoring results. The message seems to be: "We can't force you to do this but we'll damn well make sure everybody knows about it if you don't".

Rob confirmed that he is quitting his post in April although he thinks it likely that his co-Director Nicola Smith, whose two-year contract also ends in April, will be staying on.

So when the Lone Ranger rides off into the sunset, will there be a structure in place to ensure that learning difficulties is more than the concern of a small office in the Department of Health?

Rob is fairly confident this will be ensured by a cross-government board chaired by Ivan Lewis with permanent representatives from four Departments: Work and Pensions; Children & Families; Innovation, Universities & Skills and Communities & Local Government.

"We are in the process of establishing a mechanism to pull together these four departments concerned with what people do during the day".

Work – or more exactly – the absence of properly paid work for most people with learning difficulties, is one of Valung People Now's five main concerns.

Rob believes the biggest obstacle for people getting into work is the belief by professionals as well as by people themselves that it is not possible.

“It is less of an issue for employers”, he says. “My experience is that employers are much more willing to offer people a chance to have a paid job than professionals assume. The starting point is to believe that work is possible, particularly for young people”.

He thinks we have more success with the ‘place and train’ approach rather than the ‘train and place’ one. “Get someone a job and put the support and training in place rather than spend a lot of time and resources in training which may not result in employment“, he says.

It is important to have a positive strategy for working with employers, he says. “A discussion we have had in the Employers Forum on Disability is how to approach employers – the advice is not to say that employing people with learning difficulties is a socially worthwhile thing to do. “Make the economic case for employing them which is that they are very hard-working and conscientious and because staff-turnover is very much less than with other workers their training costs are reduced“.

Of course, to carry out any sort of worthwhile work you need to be healthy – and as recent reports have indicated, people with learning difficulties have a shamefully unequal experience of using health services. Valuing People Now has identified this as one of its most urgent priorities.

The historical and complicated mechanism for transferring money from the NHS to local authorities for social care has now been formalised (in some 20 per cent of local authorities the NHS retained a commissioning role for care services with unfortunate results in the case of Cornwall and Sutton & Merton). The NHS will in future be responsible only for commissioning specialist learning disability health services, funding continuing care and, crucially, for mainstream hospital and primary care services.

Do we therefore need as many learning disability nurses? Rob thinks it is important to keep the nursing qualification.

“All the evidence is that health outcomes for people with learning difficulties are much worse than for the population as a whole. I think there are two reasons for that. The first is that mainstream health services are not well enough equipped to work with people with learning difficulties, particularly those with severe disabilities – partly for historical reasons but also because of attitudes. We need to overcome that with education and training. The second issue, at least as important, is that learning disability health professionals have in the past discouraged other health professionals from getting involved.

But he does not believe mainstream health professionals will be able to overcome the limitations of their knowledge skills and competence without the support and advice of specialists, particularly nurses.

The low take-up of the Learning Disability Qualification is another problem identified in Valuing People Now. He thinks this is because the emphasis by government and employers has been on NVQs which are specifically based on demonstrating performance in the workplace while vocational qualifications are focused on a knowledge base. Employers have been reluctant to fund both types of training.

“Over the last two years we have been working with the Skills for Care Accreditation bodies to integrate the LDQ and the NVQ to achieve a greater overlap between the two”, he says.

Getting a job is easier if you have a home you can call your own. In Valuing People Now authorities are urged to make home ownership or assured tenancies easier for people to access while recognising this will require a major shift in the culture of care management. A joint project between the Department of Health and the Department of Communities and Local Government will promote this process.

Rob sees this joint programme as one of the most positive commitments in the consultation paper. “We are still in negotiations about how this is going to work but it is centrally about making sure the government supports initiatives for increasing housing for people with learning difficulties”.

Community Living has been running a campaign for people trapped by what is known as the ‘ordinary residence rules’ – people who move away from the area where their support is funded and cannot get support where they wish to live. This has been the cause of great unhappiness for individuals. Rob agrees this is a problem but sees the solution in the expansion of the Individual Budget concept which he says is bound to lead to a review of these rules.

Individual Budgets are central to the In Control programme now being ‘rolled out’ across the country – 13 authorities are pilot sites which Ivan Lewis says are not pilots to decide whether Individual Budgets go national but to discover how.

Over 100 authorities are working on In Control projects. So, be warned, whether you like them or not, Individual Budgets are coming your way.

I suggested they would need to do a lot of work convincing families to take on the responsibility.

“For some families it will not be the answer”, Rob says. “But the families who have got involved are very good sales people for In Control”.

“There’s a lot of organisational and cultural changes that need to take place as part of the Individual Budget programme,” he says. “Just giving someone a

budget and letting them spend it is not going to solve their problems. People will need support and advocacy. And for their part staff will need to do different things in different ways to ensure people have a range of things to buy into”.

Can partnership boards be effective in bringing about change? The consultation paper hints at some kind of requirement on statutory bodies to consult them but Rob admits that, although they are exploring this, there is no guarantee it will happen.

“I hope that under the Local Government Act, requiring Local Area Agreements to be produced, that Partnership Boards will be included in the framework for everything that local authorities do”.

Rob says about a third of boards are working well, another third are having some impact but the remaining third do not justify the investment in resources and time.

Why are some boards failing to achieve anything at all? Because, says Rob, they are not following the good practice advice they have been given.

“Although it is important that the boards operate inclusively, some have placed so much emphasis on that that they never actually make anything happen. It’s a question of achieving a balance”.

Partnership isn’t something that just happens at board meetings, he says. It happens every day of the week. The board is a point in time when partnership comes together to review what it is doing. “So it should be focusing on the issues and what is happening to change things“, he says.

This issue brings into sharp focus the conflict between central government policy and local autonomy. No government is going to ring-fence money for services for which local authorities have lead responsibility – they can only preach, chide, persuade. Valuing People Now has set out a detailed blueprint for the future of services which, if it could be brought to fruition, would transform people’s lives.

What role will the National Directorate have under a more cross-government remit? Although the DH has confirmed that Rob will be replaced, its future role is still under discussion.

At the time of this interview, Rob did not have another job lined up. We wish him well, whatever his future holds. It will be three years before we can assess what Valuing People Now achieves. Let’s hope the Lone Ranger has not ridden in vain through all those government departments.

Valuing People Now - from Progress to Transformation, DH 2007.

