**1. Introduction**

The [Community Solutions Programme](https://www.voluntaryactionnorthlanarkshire.org/index.php/community-solutions-programme/) supports the wellbeing of everyone, with a focus on groups experiencing health challenges such as disability and long-term conditions. It is therefore important to develop a shared understanding of disability and long-term conditions. The purpose of this briefing paper is to develop this shared understanding, and to highlight the importance of using appropriate language to discuss disability.

This briefing paper has been prepared by VANL staff in consultation with [North Lanarkshire Disability Forum.](https://www.nldforum.org.uk/)

**2. Disability**

**2.1 Language around Disability**

The language we use when we speak about disability is important as it reflects how we view and respond to disability at individual and societal levels. [Disability Rights UK](https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/social-model-disability-language) highlight that language is important as it reflects the way society thinks about Disability and the cultural assumptions made.

The term disability is used in different ways, with two common but contested terms:

* People with disabilities
* Disabled People

**2.2 ‘Disabled People’ versus ‘People with disabilities’**

**2.2.1** Disabled people will have their own preferences about what language is used, however, [Disability Rights UK](https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/social-model-disability-language) set out some general guidelines. They recommend the use of ‘Disabled people’ rather than ‘people with disabilities.’ This is because ‘people with disabilities’ confuses physical impairment with disability. Impairments can be physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory, and are a problem with the structure or an organ of the body, including the brain. For example, an impairment would be the inability to walk or see.

**2.2.2** Disability is the limited function to complete certain activities. For example, a person who cannot walk is disabled because society is inaccessible for them. Confusing impairment with disability implies disability is a problem of the individual, rather than society. ‘Disabled people’ reflects people with impairments who are disabled by the barriers in society.

**2.2.3** There is also an issue around how mental versus physical challenges are discussed. Whilst the mind is associated with the brain, there is a separation between the two; the brain is often considered physical whilst the mind is considered mental. Discussion of physical impairment includes problems with the brain, but often does not include the mind. Often the term ‘disability’ is used to describe physical health problems, but not mental health problems. However, a person with mental challenges can also be disabled by society.

**2.2.4** It is important to capitalise ‘Disabled’ as this emphasises the term’s political significance. Using ‘Disabled people/person’ is a [‘political description of the shared, disabling experience that people with impairments face in society.’](https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/social-model-disability-language)

**2.3 Long-term Conditions**

[Long-term conditions](https://shadesofnoir.org.uk/content/understanding-disability-impairment-conditions-and-diseases/#:~:text=Generally%20speaking%2C%20an%20impairment%20is,ability%20caused%20by%20the%20condition.&text=Generally%20speaking%2C%20a%20condition%20simply,a%20disease%20or%20a%20disorder.) relate to disability as they are a type of impairment which restrict how a person is able to function in society. Long-term conditions are illnesses which cannot be cured and are not caused by any external injury to the body. Long-term conditions include:

* Alzheimer disease and dementia
* Arthritis
* Asthma
* Cancer
* COPD
* Crohn disease
* Cystic fibrosis
* Diabetes

If you have more than one long-term condition, this is known as a ‘co-morbidity.’

**3. UK Disability Rights Movement**

**3.1 The UK Disabled People’s Movement**

The UK Disabled People’s Movement has been campaigning for equal rights for Disabled people since the late 19th century, when the first recorded organisations ‘of’ Disabled people were formed: the British Deaf Association and the National League of the Blind. These organisations ‘of’ disabled people were the first to be run and controlled by Disabled people themselves.

During the 20th century, Disabled people have organised themselves to hold protests, form groups, and lobby parliament to campaign for equal inclusion in society. By the end of the 20th century the movement had grown, to not only campaigning for Disabled people to have the same rights as non-disabled people, to also providing advocacy, training, and other supports for Disabled people.

**3.2 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**

The work of the Disabled People’s Movement over the 20th century led to the development of an international human rights treaty in 2006: the [UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)](https://social.desa.un.org/issues/disability/crpd/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-crpd). The purpose of the Convention is to ‘promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity.’ The CRPD covers long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments, which because of various barriers, prevents Disabled people from participating in society on an equal basis with non-disabled people.

The UK agreed to follow the CRPD in 2009. By doing this, the UK agreed to protect and protect the human rights of disabled people including:

* eliminating disability discrimination
* enabling disabled people to live independently in the community
* ensuring an inclusive education system
* ensuring disabled people are protected from all forms of exploitation, violence, and abuse

**4. A New Model of Disability**

The way society views disability informs policy, attitudes, and treatment of Disabled people. For a long time, disability was seen as the individual’s problem. This view of disability says that any difficulties a Disabled person faces are caused by the physical impairment or condition they have. This view is called the ‘[medical model’ of disability.](https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/library/BCODP-workbook4.pdf) The Disabled People’s Movement challenged this view of disability. The Movement argues that people are disabled by the various barriers which prevent them from having a full and equal part in society, rather than by their impairment. This is called the ‘social model’ of disability.

**4.1 The Bio-Psycho-Social Model**

In 1977, George Engel developed the social model of disability, to include not only social factors, but also the biological and psychological factors created by society which affect people with impairments. He called this the [biopsychosocial model](https://applications.emro.who.int/imemrf/Ann_Punjab_Med_Coll/Ann_Punjab_Med_Coll_2007_1_1_11_13.pdf).

In the past, Disabled people have been described using negative phrasing which reflected the medical view of disability. The biopsychosocial model tries to replace this with more positive phrasing by using ‘Disabled people’ rather than ‘people with disabilities.’

The biopsychosocial model is used by the [World Health Organisation](https://applications.emro.who.int/imemrf/Ann_Punjab_Med_Coll/Ann_Punjab_Med_Coll_2007_1_1_11_13.pdf) (WHO) in their definition of health.

**4.2 The WHO International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health**

In 1980, the WHO published their first framework for health and disability, following the biopsychosocial model of disability, called ‘The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health’ (ICF). The ICF measures how a person can function in society.

The ICF uses the term ‘functionality’ as an umbrella term for all body functions (including brain function and mental function), activities, and participation in society. It defines disability as impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions.

The ICF is an example of the importance of language when discussing disability. The ICF was named to highlight its focus on health and functioning, rather than disability. By focusing on health and functioning, the ICF has tried to shift the focus away from the view that disability is the individual’s problem.

The 191-member states of the WHO have agreed to adopt the ICF as the standardised measure for collecting data about health and disability.

**4.2.1** [The World Health Organisation](https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/people-with-disability-vs-persons-with-disabilities) uses the terms ‘people with disability’ and ‘persons with disabilities’ rather than ‘Disabled people’ for distinct purposes. The WHO uses ‘persons with disabilities’ only in the context of the CRPD, which exclusively refers to persons with long-term impairments. This is because the term ‘disabilities’ evokes associations with specific health conditions and impairments and does not reflect a universal approach to a person’s health condition. The WHO’s mandate includes anyone experiencing disability regardless of duration, and therefore, it is an important distinction.

**4.2.2** The WHO use the term ‘people with disability’ in their capacity as a public health organisation to raise the profile of disability from a public health perspective. The use of the word ‘people’ is commonly used in public health to refer to a collective group, and therefore avoids restricting disability to an individual experience or specific group. ‘Disability’ is used rather than ‘disabilities’ as this also reflects the notion that disability is a universal human experience rather than an intrinsic characteristic of an individual.

**5. Conclusion**

The Community Solutions Programme adopts a biopsychosocial model of disability, to support the wellbeing of everyone, including groups experiencing health challenges such as disability and long-term conditions. The Programme therefore encourages the use of the term ‘Disabled people.’

**6. Sources of Key Information**

* [Disability Rights UK](https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/about-us#:~:text=Disability%20Rights%20UK%20is%20the,economic%20opportunities%20for%20Disabled%20people.)
* [Inclusion Scotland](https://inclusionscotland.org/)
* [Glasgow Centre for Inclusive Living](https://www.gcil.org.uk/)
* [Lothian Centre for Inclusive Living](https://www.lothiancil.org.uk/)
* [Perth and Kinross Centre for Inclusive Living](https://www.cilpk.org.uk/)
* [North Lanarkshire Disability Forum](https://www.nldforum.org.uk/)

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