

TRAILBLAZERS

Part of the Young Campaigners' Network

"I think disabled people have put up with taunting and abuse for so long that they think that it should be something they accept as part of their lives. I now understand that disability hate incidents are real things - not just something that you should accept as part of your life as a disabled person."

Rebecca Oughton, Lancaster

UNDER INVESTIGATION

THE TRAILBLAZERS' HATE CRIME REPORT

Report 7 of the **Inclusion Now** series
February 2012

"I was walking my dog and found some builders had parked their van over the only dropped kerb in sight. When I asked them to move it, I was surrounded by four big men who tried to lift me and my powerchair and shove me into the road rather than move their van. They verbally abused me for being disabled and called me a scrounger! I had to threaten to call the police to get them to leave me alone and move the van. It made me scared to go out again."

Kimberley Bull, Nottingham

This report has been researched, compiled and written by *Trailblazers* Ambassadors:

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Aminder Virdee – London

Michaela Hollywood – Northern Ireland

Sean Fitzsimons – Northern Ireland

Dan Rafferty – Northern Ireland

Hayleigh Barclay – Scotland

Catherine Gillies – Scotland

Lee Stewart – Scotland

Karis Williamson – Scotland

Neil Ferguson – Scotland

Lauren West – Wales

Jonathan Bishop – Wales

ABOUT TRAILBLAZERS

Trailblazers is a national network of more than 400 young disabled people who work together on a national and local level to highlight and address the issues that are important to them. We aim to fight the social injustices experienced by young disabled people and to ensure we can gain access to education, employment and the services we require. We are part of the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign, the leading UK charity focusing on muscular dystrophy and other related conditions.

ABOUT THE

MUSCULAR DYSTROPHY CAMPAIGN

The Muscular Dystrophy Campaign is the leading UK charity focusing on muscular dystrophy and other related conditions. It is dedicated to beating the conditions by finding treatments and cures and to improving the lives of everyone affected by them.

Our work has five main focus areas:

- we fund world-class research to find effective treatments and cures
- we provide practical information, advice and emotional support for individuals with muscular dystrophy and other related conditions, their carers and families
- we campaign to bring about change and raise awareness of muscular dystrophy and other related conditions
- we award grants towards the cost of specialist equipment, such as powered wheelchairs
- we provide specialist education and development for health professionals.

Foreword by Paul Maynard MP, Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Young Disabled People

While shocking, the findings of the *Trailblazers'* survey contained within this report are sadly not surprising. Therefore it is vitally important that, through various charitable groups and campaigning organisations, attention continues to be focused on where the government, the police and other relevant authorities can improve. If people with disabilities have sufficient confidence in the willingness and ability of relevant institutions and authorities to tackle hate crime, this may go some way to addressing the problem of under-reporting, which is such a concern. Fundamentally, the key message must be that the types of incidents detailed in this report are not acceptable and people should not just put up with them. There is a long way to go, but reports such as this represent a vital step in bringing about change.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2011, *Trailblazers* received disturbing reports from some of its network of young disabled campaigners. These young people had been humiliated, harassed and bullied by older, non-disabled people. In all of these cases, the offenders were people in authority, and they had harassed the *Trailblazers*, simply because they were young and independent disabled people.

These reports set alarm bells ringing and *Trailblazers* set out to find out if other members of the network had experienced similar incidents of disability-motivated harassment and hate crime. We put together a questionnaire, and surveyed more than 400 young disabled people through our website and other communications channels.

Many *Trailblazers* reported:

- being harassed and bullied by complete strangers and, in some cases, being physically abused and intimidated
- that the bullying and mimicking of disabled people had become the norm and there was nothing that could be done about it
- that they had developed coping mechanisms and would go out of their way to avoid persistent bullies
- that they had little or no faith – or experience – that school teachers, employers or others in authority would address the issues if they reported them.

This report reveals the very real issue of disability hate crime and the damage it can cause – and has caused – to the lives of young disabled people. This cannot continue and we are calling on the government, the police and all relevant authorities to take decisive measures to ensure that this behaviour is not tolerated.

KEY FINDINGS

Of the young disabled people who completed the *Trailblazers'* survey, it was revealed that:

- **eight out of ten say they have been harassed, humiliated or embarrassed by a person's attitude to them being a disabled person**
- **50 percent say they have been intimidated because they are a disabled person**
- **two out of three have been taunted or verbally abused because they are disabled**
- **62 percent say they have been or may have been the victim of disability hate crime**
- **four out of ten young disabled people who have been harassed or abused, or are currently being harassed or abused, have reported the incident to a person in authority**
- **eight out of ten think that the police do not take disability hate crime seriously enough**
- **79 percent think some disabled people may be dissuaded from reporting hate crimes because of the police's negative perceptions surrounding hate crime and disability**
- **only 40 percent are aware that harsher penalties are given for crimes motivated or aggravated by a victim's disability.**

BACKGROUND

'Safety and security, and the right to live free from fear and harassment, are fundamental human rights and the Crown Prosecution Service recognises the wider community impact of disability hate crime where it strikes at all disabled people by undermining their sense of safety and security in the community. For this reason we regard disability hate crime as particularly serious. Such crimes are based on ignorance, prejudice, discrimination and hate and they have no place in an open and democratic society.'

Crown Prosecution Service, Policy for Prosecuting Cases of Disability Hate Crime, 2007

In the United Kingdom today, disability hate crime is regarded as an aggravating factor under Section 146 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003, allowing a heavier tariff or sentence to be applied in sentencing than the crime might otherwise draw. In reality, however, the use of this increased sentence is discretionary and sometimes might not be considered at all within the criminal justice process.

Prosecutors have recently claimed that because disability hate crime and harassment continue to go under-reported and under-investigated, they remain among the least recognised forms of hate crime.¹

In 2011, 12,131 cases of racial or religious hate crime were prosecuted in England and Wales. In contrast, only 726 cases of disability hate crime were prosecuted, with 483 leading to successful convictions for disability hate crimes.²

Many organisations have published evidence that consistently adds weight to the argument that disability hate crime and harassment are serious issues in the UK. The Equalities and Human Rights Commission³, RADAR⁴, Scope⁵, Mencap⁶, Leonard

Cheshire Disability⁷ are just some of the larger organisations that are running campaigns and projects to raise awareness of this issue.

By publishing the experiences of *Trailblazers* campaigners, we intend to raise more awareness of the issue of disability hate crime and help address the bullying, harassment, mimicking, intimidation, physical and mental abuse and taunting that many disabled people in 21st century Britain – inexcusably – face.

What is disability hate crime?

Disability hate crime, which can occur in many forms, constitutes a violation of a disabled person's human rights and dignity. Harassment and insults, abusive gestures or offensive letters, bullying at school or in a workplace, theft, damage to property or physical attacks could all be disability hate crimes if the offender demonstrates hostility towards a disabled person immediately before, during or after the crime is committed.

There is no official, legal definition of a disability hate crime. However, when prosecuting cases of disability hate crime, the Crown Prosecution Service adopts the following definition:

"Any criminal offence, which is perceived, by the victim or any other person, to be motivated by hostility or prejudice based on a person's disability or perceived disability."

Groups, such as the UK Disabled People's Council, define disability hate crime as:

"A criminal offence motivated by hatred or prejudice towards a person because of their actual or perceived disability. It is also a criminal offence when, immediately before, after or during the offence, the perpetrator demonstrates hostility towards a person because of their actual or perceived disability."

¹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/8437523.stm>

² http://www.cps.gov.uk/publications/docs/CPS_hate_crime_report_2011.pdf

³ http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded_files/disabilityfi/ehrc_hidden_in_plain_sight_3.pdf

⁴ <http://www.radar.org.uk/people-living-with-health-conditions-disability/disability-hate-crime/>

⁵ <http://www.scope.org.uk/campaigns/disability-discrimination/disability-hate-crime>

⁶ <http://www.mencap.org.uk/campaigns/take-action/stand-me>

⁷ <http://www.lcdisability.org/?lid=18208>

In December 2011, the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice announced that the government would be introducing amendments to the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Bill relating to sentencing guidelines. If passed, the amendments will make sentencing for murder aggravated by disability equal to sentencing for murder aggravated by the other protected characteristics of race, religion and sexual orientation. Minimum sentences will then double from the current 15 years to a more equitable 30 years.

Increased pressure on disabled people

Harassment appears in a number of forms and in recent months studies have shown that disabled people are coming under unprecedented levels of public scrutiny and criticism. The media has been accused of turning public opinion against disabled people through the significant increase in the amount of negative reporting of disability issues in the print media⁸. Certain sections of the media are also running disability benefits cuts campaigns that encourage people to report individuals they suspect to be disability benefits fraudsters⁹ in support of the Government's campaign to reduce the cost of disability welfare¹⁰. These new 'official' messages connecting disability to fraud, which follow similar lines to the government's proposals to reduce the cost of disability-related benefits, are just further examples of how disabled people in the UK today can feel harassed, undermined and undervalued.

Evidence in this report comes from:

- a *Trailblazers'* online survey disseminated through internal and external networks
- disability organisations' hate crime reports including Scope, Mencap and Radar
- the Metropolitan Police Service
- newspaper reports, as noted throughout the report
- online research, carried out by *Trailblazer* Damian Brady, as noted throughout the report.

"People think it is funny to ask very personal questions and approach you merely to ask about your disability. For example, a stranger approached me in the pub and asked me how I could have sex being disabled and pointing out that it is nice that my friends bring me out! People think because you have a disability it is ok to come and speak to you about anything, without even having introduced themselves first."

Rebecca Oughton, Lancaster

"On the odd occasion I have been harassed but it's never humiliating as I feel it makes the other person look ridiculous."

Dave Gale, Carlisle

"People will sometimes come up to me and invade my space. People will often either be patronising by asking if I should be out on my own or, as has happened on several occasions, I have been hugged by complete strangers. This felt scary as I can't lift my arms up to stop them."

Hannah-Lou Blackall, Hull

"I've been spat at and had people kick my chair while calling me abusive names."

Kimberley Bull, Nottingham

"A bus driver refused to let down the ramp to allow me to get on. He laughed with his mate as he closed the door and drove away."

Trailblazer, Cambridge

⁸ http://www.inclusionlondon.co.uk/domains/inclusionlondon.co.uk/local/media/downloads/bad_news_for_disabled_people_pdf.pdf

⁹ <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/features/3093818/Stop-the-benefits-scroungers-Day-2-Readers-flood-hotline.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/dla-reform-wr2011-ia.pdf>

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

We are calling on the government, the police and all relevant authorities:

- to support the amendment tabled by Paul Maynard MP and Kate Green MP to the proposed Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Bill, which will result in the same sentencing starting point for murders motivated by hatred or hostility towards disabled or transgender victims as for those aggravated by race, religion and sexual orientation
- to ensure the police and prosecutions services always identify and log whether the victim of a crime considers themselves disabled and whether their disability was a motivating factor in the crime
- to promote and develop the reporting of disability hate crimes using telephone helpline and online reporting methods
- to organise a national awareness campaign, in consultation with disability rights groups including *Trailblazers*, that helps define disability hate crime and represents disabled people in a non-patronising and representative way
- to ensure the police inform disabled people that they should be reporting relevant incidents of bullying, harassment or humiliation specifically as disability-motivated incidents
- to consult groups like *Trailblazers* and set up and publicise a victim support programme for disabled people who have been bullied or harassed in disability-motivated hate crimes
- to improve awareness of the issues that affect young disabled people by running disability awareness training for police, and other relevant authorities, led by groups of young disabled people like the *Trailblazers*
- to consider text and email reporting options so disabled people feel they can safely report incidents of disability hate crime
- to increase the number of regional police forces developing initiatives like those of the Metropolitan Police in London to reach out to disabled people locally
- to ensure that more organisations, including the police, collaborate with groups like *Trailblazers*, to visit schools to raise awareness and educate children at an early age about disability harassment and hate crimes
- to raise awareness through the media of successful prosecutions to restore the public's confidence in the system.

"When I've been out in town with friends, people have shouted out names at me. Also, people have said, 'Get out the way there's a huge wheelchair coming through' or 'Mind out, they are having a race' (if I'm with others who also use wheelchairs)."

Hannah-Lou Blackall, Hull

"I have been excluded from school trips and when I objected to this everyone stopped speaking to me and I had to leave school. I should be going into my second year but I haven't been to school since P7 although I am enrolled there. We got hate mail and internet abuse and now I have no friends and nobody will speak to me and all because I am disabled. Those supposed to support me are just as bad and wouldn't stand up to protect me or my rights, including my social worker. A complaint has gone into the Scottish Parliament but we still haven't heard anything and I feel like someone in prison just because of the way I was born."

Karis Williamson, Inverness

INTIMIDATION

Half of the young disabled people in our survey said they had been intimidated by someone because they were a disabled person. *Trailblazers* said they had been:

- spat at
- pulled out of their wheelchairs by strangers
- sworn at
- verbally abused or harassed, without being able to escape
- physically assaulted.

Impact of harassment bullying, harassment and intimidation

The harassment and intimidation of disabled people can have a long-term impact and lead people to restructure their lives to minimise the risk of similar incidents taking place again. This leads to people having to develop coping or avoidance strategies such as leaving their jobs, dropping out of school or college, moving house, avoiding particular places or modes of transport. This should never have to be the case.

Many *Trailblazers* said they would not be intimidated by bullies who were motivated to harass disabled people. Some *Trailblazers* said they felt pity for the perpetrators of such behaviour, while others ignored insulting comments or gestures and 'got on with their lives'.

"During my time in high school, I was constantly taunted and verbally bullied by a group of boys from my year. One day, while I was waiting with my friend for my taxi to arrive, two of the bullies walked up to us and started jeering and asking my friend if she was indeed friends with me because they couldn't believe someone like me could possibly have friends. I have also been called 'spastic' and 'cripple' more than once during my time at high school."

Laura Gosman, Diss

Harassment, humiliation, embarrassment and bullying

Almost 80 percent of the *Trailblazers* involved in the development of this report said they had been harassed, humiliated, or embarrassed by someone's attitude towards them being a disabled person.

Trailblazers reported being:

- removed from their wheelchair by strangers
- verbally abused and mimicked in public places
- accused by strangers of not requiring wheelchairs or adaptations
- humiliated and spoken to like a child
- insulted and harassed at work
- bullied by teachers and classmates
- asked intrusive questions about sex and disability
- harassed by neighbours.

"Because of the way I walk, I often get called names like spastic, freak and weirdo. One day on the bus, all the disabled seats were taken by schoolchildren who refused to move and there were no other seats. For most of the journey, I had to stand up and they were shouting names at me and laughing when I fell but they wouldn't help me. I hurt myself and was in pain for a few days. I now don't like going on the bus by myself and prefer to get taxis to most places. It's not nice and there is no need for it. This is one of the reasons I have agreed to start using a wheelchair when out, then at least my family will know that I am safe when out on my own."

Natalie Cobbhan, Basildon

"While waiting at the bus stop, two girls were laughing and mimicking the contractures I have in my wrists. Another time a random woman who we'd never met before came up to mum once and said, 'You shouldn't marry within the family - that's why she's disabled' (pointing to me)."

Jagdeep Sehmbi, Birmingham

Action needed

We are calling on the government, the police and all relevant authorities:

- to run a national awareness campaign, in consultation with disability rights groups such as *Trailblazers*, that helps define disability hate crime in a way that represents disabled people in a non-patronising and representative manner
- to improve awareness of the issues that affect young disabled people by running disability awareness training for police, and other relevant authorities, led by groups of young disabled people like the *Trailblazers*
- to make disabled people aware that, where relevant, they should report incidents of bullying, harassment or intimidation specifically as disability-motivated
- to run a disability hate crime awareness campaign that will clarify penalties for bullies and identify the support networks available to victims of bullying and intimidation
- to ensure that more organisations, including the police, collaborate with groups like *Trailblazers*, to visit schools to raise awareness and educate children at an early age about disability harassment and hate crimes.

"I was called a spaz and spastic by a senior work colleague."

Lisa Lancaster, Rugby

"To look at me, you might not consider me to be disabled or to have a mobility impairment, and it is this almost 'invisible' impairment that causes problems. On the bus, I am often stared at because I cannot give up my seat for an older person. This will usually lead to people saying to me that I should allow the other person to take a seat. I always feel humiliated when I am told to give up my seat just because I am not believed when I say I am disabled. It's embarrassing and humiliating because everyone stares at you as if you're a con artist, when in fact it's the complete opposite."

Krishna Talsania, Harrow, London

"On two occasions, I was leered at by men in a way that I found disturbing while I was being pushed in a wheelchair. It was as though they thought I wouldn't recognise that kind of look or that they were imagining what sex with a disabled girl might be like and weren't bothering to stop it showing on their faces. In a separate incident, I was being pushed in a wheelchair and a lady walking a dog was coming towards me. The dog came quite near my face/hands while I was sitting down and 'greeted' so I petted it and the owner said 'Oh, she's saying hello'. I thought the owner was talking about the dog and didn't react but my sister, who could see the owner, was outraged because she realised the owner had been referring to me!"

Elizabeth Bridcut, Wirral

"I once rang to apply for a job and the man I spoke to on the phone said that they don't employ disabled people because 'they're useless'."

Jonathan Ward, Bedale

"On one occasion, a car was blocking my way. The driver moved the car but his friend then shouted, 'Why did you bother? It's just a retard.'"

Lewis Haynes, Liverpool

"I was once confronted in the street by a person I didn't know, who thought I ought to be ashamed of myself'. He went on to say, 'I saw you lot on telly last night, you're an ungrateful lot.' [This was after a broadcast of a huge telethon, Children in Need or Comic Relief or some such event, taking place at least 300 miles away.]"

Trailblazer, Cumbria

"Someone has even tried to pull me out of my wheelchair by my hair, saying I didn't look like someone who was disabled and I was 'putting it on!'"

Rebecca Oughton, Lancaster

"I was verbally abused in a lift down from the bus station to the Metrolink at Bury interchange. A woman couldn't fit her buggy in with my wheelchair in the lift so she called me 'a c*' for not being able to move over. I was alone, so felt too intimidated to speak up."**

Fiona Anderson, Bury

"The main incidents where I feel intimidated are at supermarket car parks and on buses. Believe it or not, tubes are heaven compared to buses, no-one says a thing, but then it's less often that you see an elderly lady with a walking stick on the Underground. On the buses and at the supermarkets, people approach me because I don't look disabled but even after the explanation I provide they still are still not satisfied. I have had people swear at me after I have walked away, I have had people spit at me and spill and throw stuff at my car when I'm not there, all because they think I'm lying and they want to intimidate me."

Krishna Talsania, Harrow

REPORTING CRIMES AND HARASSMENT

The reporting of bullying and harassment is one way that disability-motivated crime can be addressed. However, in our survey only 48 percent of people said they had reported an incident to the police, a teacher, an employer or another person in a position of authority, and in only 28 percent of these cases, did the people report the incident to the police.

Of those *Trailblazers* who did not report an incident, many said they didn't know how to report it or to whom, and were scared they would not be believed because they had been alone when the incident had taken place. Others were worried this would lead to repeat occurrences and nothing would be done about it anyway. Some of the most depressing responses stated that disability harassment and hate crime had just become part of everyday life and that when people had reported things in the past they had seen no redress and now saw no point in going through the same experience again.

However, 60 percent of people in our survey said that in the future they would report a disability hate crime. They felt the situation they were facing had to change and bullies and perpetrators of hate crime needed to be stood up to and held to account for their actions. Many *Trailblazers* also said they did not want other disabled people to go through the same experiences as they had.

"I think it's people's attitudes and the general approach towards disabled people that affects the way in which crimes against them are viewed. As a society in general, it is very important that we review the manner in which disabled people are thought of, included, promoted and involved in society. Also, society and the government need to re-evaluate and ask themselves if they are really doing enough to support and positively promote disabled people, their lives and their views. By doing this, as a society we are more likely to ensure that disabled people are treated with the same dignity and respect as those without disabilities."

Krishna Talsania, Harrow

Action needed

We are calling on the government, the police and all relevant authorities:

- to ensure the police and prosecutions services always identify and log whether the victim of a crime considers themselves disabled and whether their disability was a motivating factor in the crime
- to set up a helpline for people to call and report incidents of disability hate crime (this would need to be done in consultation with disability rights groups including *Trailblazers* and the number publicised well)
- to ensure the police inform disabled people that they should be reporting relevant incidents of bullying, harassment or humiliation specifically as disability-motivated incidents
- to consider text and email reporting options so disabled people feel they can safely report incidents of disability hate crime
- to increase the number of regional police forces to develop initiatives like those of the Metropolitan Police in London to reach out to disabled people locally.

DESCRIBING DISABILITY HATE CRIME

Before this survey, many *Trailblazers* had said anecdotally that they thought the term 'disability hate crime' might not be the best way to describe harassment, bullying and humiliation motivated by disability. This was because some disabled people would not consider the incidents they experienced as being a *hatred* of them, as disabled people. However, our survey showed that 69 percent of *Trailblazers* would not be deterred from reporting incidents of harassment and bullying. There were concerns, however, that some disabled people might not report an incident of bullying as they would not think it serious enough and perhaps if more appropriate phrases were used, such as 'disability-motivated crime' or 'disability harassment crime', they might be more inclined to report such incidents.

THE POLICE AND OTHERS IN AUTHORITY

We found that 83 percent of survey participants said the police and other authorities did not take disability hate crime seriously enough. A similar proportion of 80 percent said that some disabled people might be dissuaded from reporting hate crimes because of perceptions of the police's attitude towards hate crime and disability. The reasons given for this included:

- thinking that the police would not understand the issue or the impact the harassment had on the individual concerned
- having a lack of faith in the willingness of the police to challenge disability-motivated bullying, taunting and abuse
- having fears that the police or someone in authority would not understand the sensitivity of the situation and potentially make the situation worse
- worrying that the police or someone in authority would not believe them and would therefore take the side of the perpetrator.

"The current widespread animosity towards disabled people has been caused primarily by the government and this has had a ripple effect on society and authorities such as the police who are now sceptical of disabled people instead of taking them seriously."

Krishna Talsania, Harrow

"I know people who have told the police what happened to them, again and again and again, and they do nothing about the issues."

Sarah Croft, Exmouth

Action needed

We are calling on the government, the police and all relevant authorities:

- to ensure the police and prosecutions services always identify and log whether the victim of a crime considers themselves disabled and whether their disability was a motivating factor in the crime
- to set up a helpline for people to call and report incidents of disability hate crime (this would need to be done in consultation with disability rights groups including *Trailblazers* and the number publicised well)
- to organise a national awareness campaign, in consultation with disability rights groups including *Trailblazers*, that helps define disability hate crime and also represents disabled people in a non-patronising and representative way
- to ensure the police inform disabled people that they should be reporting relevant incidents of bullying, harassment or humiliation specifically as disability-motivated incidents
- to consult groups like *Trailblazers* and set up and publicise a victim support programme for disabled people who have been bullied or harassed in disability-motivated hate crimes
- to consider text and email reporting options, so disabled people feel they can safely report incidents of disability hate crime
- to increase the number of regional police forces developing initiatives like those of the Metropolitan Police in London to reach out to disabled people locally
- to ensure that more organisations, including the police, collaborate with groups like *Trailblazers*, to visit schools to raise awareness and educate children at an early age about disability harassment and hate crimes.

**INFORMATION FROM THE VIOLENT CRIMES
DIRECTORATE AT THE METROPOLITAN
POLICE SERVICE**

Trailblazers recently attended 'Combating Hate Crime', an interactive workshop run by the Metropolitan Police Service in London at a major disability event. The workshop was a clear and good example of this police force trying to learn from disabled people and get to the root cause of why disability hate crimes continue to go under-reported and to look at how to improve the situation.

Below are some examples of the work being carried out by the Metropolitan Police Service's Violent Crime Directorate (VCD). They hope that these activities will give disabled people greater confidence to report incidents of disability hate crime.

The VCD has set up an initiative called 'Safely Together', to bring disabled people together with police officers and representatives from local disabled people's organisations. This is an opportunity to report hate crime, and incorporates 'Keep Safe', a national scheme which identifies places of safety for disabled people.

The VCD has also developed a booklet for victims of hate crime, with guidance and advice on the criminal justice system, as well as helpful contacts. There is a bespoke section for disability-motivated hate crime, with an easy-read version for people with a learning disability.

For their 'Values into Action borough hate crime' days, the VCD arranges for a member of a disabled people's organisation to visit various boroughs and meet with patrol officers and Community Safety Unit investigators.

In the borough of Newham, for example, the VCD took a group of disabled people to visit Stratford Magistrates Court in June 2011 to meet with witness services, the police and the Criminal Prosecution Service. There are plans to broaden this scheme to include other boroughs, following very encouraging feedback from those who went.

The police in London have also developed a number of schemes where they are working with local communities, bus companies and disabled people's charities to help improve the confidence of disabled people using public transport.

To find out more about these initiatives contact the *Trailblazers*.

"I think it's been normalised. The police and people in authority probably made fun of disabled people when they were young. They just don't get it."

Catherine Gillies, Glasgow

"My neighbours have been harassing my family for more than 15 years. We've made numerous phone calls to the police and the situation has only worsened. The police have confronted the bullies in a way they think will resolve the situation, but in reality it does the exact opposite when they leave."

Trailblazer, London

"I think disabled people have put up with taunting and abuse for so long that they think that it should be something they accept as part of their lives. And that they don't think the police would understand what effect these taunts can have on a person's life. I now understand that disability hate incidents are real things - not just something that you should accept as part of your life as a disabled person."

Rebecca Oughton, Lancaster

"I am aware that what happened to me is now considered a hate crime and it needs to be stamped out. If I go to the police, it encourages others to do the same. The more people that report these problems, the more chance there is of greater awareness. It is this, I believe, which will prevent these types of incidents occurring and the mindsets from forming."

Sean Fitzsimons, Downpatrick

"At the time, I thought that as it happened that regularly there was no point in bringing it up. I think I experienced disability hate incidents rather than crime - although the physical attack I experienced was a disability hate crime."

Rebecca Oughton, Lancaster

"If the police don't seem like they care to pursue a conviction, then we cannot be bothered reporting it if we're not taken seriously. It's like rape convictions."

Catherine Gillies, Glasgow

"Through Twitter I've realised that I'm not the only one experiencing more abuse. To stop this trend, we all need to start to report these incidents. However you can end up feeling more victimised when you report things and they aren't taken seriously. It makes you feel you're wasting your time and nobody cares."

Kimberly Bull, Nottingham

"I would report it because it's not fair, but nothing ever gets done about it."

Karis Williamson, Inverness

“Well, firstly, what is really going to be done about it? Let’s say for example that I did report an incident to the police or anyone else; what kind of punishment would the perpetrator really get in comparison to the victim? Many times just one incident can leave a disabled person too scared to leave their homes and in comparison what is really going to happen to the perpetrator? A caution? A slap on the wrist? If I had the least bit of confidence in the authorities, then maybe I’d consider reporting hate crime or any other incident, but until then I really wouldn’t waste my time. Are the authorities really going to take you seriously?”

Krishna Talsania, Harrow

“I would now report bullying or intimidation because that is my right; I deserve to be treated properly even if I’m scared to report it.”

Vivek Gohil, Leicester

IN A COLLEGE CLASSROOM

*Beth, a *Trailblazer* from West Yorkshire, was studying at a local college of further education. She experienced numerous incidents of abuse and humiliation at the college from students and staff members during 2008 and 2009. She suffered as a result of her experiences, described by West Yorkshire Police as hate incidents. Beth had sleepless nights, needed counselling and was also so badly affected that she failed to meet the criteria for the next level of her college course.

The bullying began when students, a support worker and a teacher told Beth that they were not paid to be with her during break times. She was shocked and upset that the students saw her not as a person but as a responsibility. What was more shocking for her, however, was that the teacher and the support worker were encouraging the dehumanisation. Beth cried for a long time after this first incident.

Beth tried to persuade the students that even though she was blind, she was no different from them, and shouldn’t be treated any differently.

Things got worse later in the year when, without any notice, Beth was ordered to a meeting with her teacher and other staff members. She had no time to prepare, and no time to arrange for somebody to go with her. In the meeting, her teacher deliberately intimidated her and she was forced to submit to an agreement which banned her from leaving the college campus to go to shops or town at breaks. She was told that if she refused to accept the agreement, she may be withdrawn from the course. She was told that if she wanted to appeal the decision, she’d have to find out herself how to do that. Beth had never thought that a college could ban somebody from going to the local shop just for being blind. This was an abuse of her human rights.

Beth decided to take legal action against the college and appeal the decision. Six weeks later, the college reluctantly agreed to lift the restrictions.

Though the unfair restrictions had been lifted, Beth was still being socially excluded by students because of her blindness. One student admitted that her hostility to her was because of her blindness.

At the end of the second term, this same male teacher carried out a blatant and deliberate public humiliation against her in front of the class. A student asked Beth how she read letters and she explained that people read letters for her. The student then asked her how she counted money. She explained that because of a learning disability (which the teacher knew about), she had difficulty counting money. The teacher then asked Beth if she'd count some of his money in front of the class. Beth said no and said that she would have difficulty counting the money. The teacher then poured money on to the table, before ordering her to count it.

As she counted it, the teacher stood over her. When Beth made an error, one student laughed and a support worker confirmed that the teacher was grinning. Beth felt humiliated, and burst into tears when she got home. Soon afterwards, she asked the support worker to help her report this incident, but the support worker was worried about her job and said she couldn't do so.

Beth lodged a complaint and the head of department spoke to the teacher about the incident. His response was to refuse to speak to or even acknowledge Beth and to refuse to describe visual content such as diagrams that he was showing to the class. He even refused to go near Beth when she requested help, while he was willing to help all the other students.

Throughout this time, Beth was bullied online by other students. Her class put together a petition which was signed by all of the students saying that they shouldn't have to take her out during lunch breaks, because she had personal assistants.

Later in the year Beth contacted Stop Hate UK who asked the police to investigate the comments made on Facebook by some of the students in her class. However the police refused to let Beth make a statement until after the academic year had finished, and they refused to speak to the students before or after Beth had made her statement. The Independent Police Complaints Commission criticised the police for their handling of the case in 2011.

At the end of the academic year, a senior teacher sent Beth the conclusions of an investigation, on the bullying that had begun in April. This teacher said to Beth, "Some of your issues with the students are as a result of not clearly understanding when behaviour is discriminatory and when it is not".

In response to Beth's accusations against her teacher, the senior teacher said that she 'firmly' believed that 'there was no malicious intent in her teacher's actions' and that 'we do need to treat people with disabilities differently in some ways in order that they might be given equal opportunities'. After being dehumanised by students and staff, Beth didn't feel equal.

Beth's case against her college was eventually settled in 2011, when the college was finally willing to pay Beth compensation to avoid being taken to court. The college did everything it could to defend staff, even stipulating in the final legal settlement that Beth couldn't take action against staff such as her teacher. The college also insisted on Beth having a gagging order relating to the discrimination, bullying and intimidation she suffered.

Beth is concerned that the college hasn't changed its attitude towards disabled people and if another disabled person were to study at the college and be treated as she was by staff and students, the people who discriminated against, bullied and intimidated her would not be punished. It is for this reason, and because of the potential suffering of other students who speak out, that this information has been released by Beth's husband.

Since leaving college, Beth has been volunteering and taking part in work experience and employment schemes, but has yet to re-enter education.

* Not her real name.

The experience of a *Trailblazer* at university:

When I was at university, I used an electric wheelchair to get around, and it was stored and charged in an old security office every day. Every time I needed my chair, I had to ask the security guards to open the room. I used to get a lot of grief from two night guards in particular. They were often rude to me and would bully me emotionally and mentally. This went on for about a year from the end of March 2010, and I tried to forgive and forget in the hope that it would stop. However, at the beginning of December 2010, I experienced a really frightening incident, which was the last straw for me.

It was about 8pm, it was snowing and the temperature was below freezing. I had been out in town working with our university charity, RAG, and helping elderly people with their Christmas shopping. I had noticed that my wheelchair was running out of power, so I went back to university to charge my wheelchair.

The night guards were on duty and I asked one of them (guard A) to open the old security office for me. I went into the room with him, and he suddenly turned cold towards me saying that I could not charge my wheelchair in the office. He knew I had done that since I'd been at the university. He said I had to go and find another socket somewhere else and charge it there. I showed him that I could hardly move my chair because of the low battery, but he showed no concern or sympathy and asked me to leave the room, and he went away.

My charger was taken out of the room and was put somewhere without me knowing. As I struggled to make my way out of the room on very low battery, I asked the other night guard (guard B) where my charger had gone. He said, "You're not getting it," and started laughing.

I asked him a few times, but each time I got no response. Luckily I managed to find my charger on a windowsill, found a socket and started charging my chair. While I was doing this, he came and stood next to me and started bullying and abusing me mentally, saying, "What are you gonna do now? What are you doing at university, you're a worthless piece of s***. I know what you're like, I hate helping you, and I don't want to talk to you or know you."

I felt shocked and intimidated; low, worthless, imprisoned and tortured. I couldn't move because of the low battery on my wheelchair and I just couldn't do anything. I felt so vulnerable; he had me right where he wanted me and there was nothing I could do.

I reported this to the Disability Service Manager, my Principal and the Director of Student Experiences. The Director of Student Experiences took on the investigation of my case. After a month of investigations, she wrote a report saying that she had interviewed staff members, my friends and my note-takers to see if there were any witnesses to any incidents regarding that night. She said she was unable to find any solid witnesses or evidence of the guards' bullying and abuse of me, even though two of my friends told her – and had handed in a written statement saying – that they had witnessed a previous such incident.

With the support of *Trailblazers*, who expressed their disgust at the situation, this student received both a written and a face-to-face apology from the security guards involved in the incident, in front of their company manager and the head of the university. As a consequence, she also was given access to a designated room, with a fitted number padlock, to store her wheelchair. She graduated in the summer of 2011.

SUMMARY

This report reveals that many *Trailblazers* feel that harassment and bullying is a normal experience for many young disabled people. This is a depressing reality that as a society we should be embarrassed and ashamed of.

In addition, many of the people who helped produce this report had little or no faith that people in authority, such as teachers, employers or the police, would protect them. They also had little or no faith that such authority figures would facilitate redress in cases where they had been humiliated or harassed, because they were disabled people. *Trailblazers* believe that for young disabled people to live their lives with confidence and independence, the government, the police and all individuals in positions of authority need to work together with disabled people to address and overcome the prejudices that, sadly, still fester within our communities.

USEFUL LINKS

Crown Prosecution Service

www.cps.gov.uk

CPS exists to ensure that wrongdoers are brought to justice, victims of crime are supported and that people feel safer in their communities.

Disability Hate Crime Network

www.disabilityhatecrime.org.uk

A website dedicated to information and materials about disability hate crime.

Disability Law Service

www.dls.org.uk

Provides information and advice for disabled people.

DisabledGo

www.disabledgo.com

Lists accessible facilities around the UK.

The Equalities and Human Rights Commission

www.equalityhumanrights.com

The home of campaigning for equality in the UK.

Find your Assembly Member

www.assemblywales.org/memberhome/member-search.htm

If you live in Wales, search here for your Welsh Assembly Member.

Find your MLA

www.niassembly.gov.uk/members/constmap_res.htm

If you live in Northern Ireland, search here for your Northern Ireland Assembly Member.

Find your MP

www.findyourmp.parliament.uk/commons

Search here for your Member of the UK Parliament.

Find your MSP

www.scottish.parliament.uk/msp/membersPages/MSPAddressPostcodeFinder.htm

If you live in Scotland, search here for your Scottish Parliament Member.

Mencap

www.mencap.org.uk

National disability charity focusing on learning disability.

Metropolitan Police Community Safety Units

www.met.police.uk/csu/hatecrime.htm

Dedicated staff members who receive special training in community relations, including local cultural issues in London.

The Police

www.police.uk

Find information on your local police service.

RADAR

www.radar.org.uk

RADAR is the UK's largest disability campaigning organisation, with a membership of over 800 disability organisations.

Scope

www.scope.org.uk

National disability rights charity.

Stop Hate UK

www.stophateuk.org

Provides independent and confidential support to people affected by hate crime.

True Vision

www.report-it.org.uk

A police funded website where victims of hate crimes can report incidents online.

Voice UK

www.voiceuk.org.uk

Promotes justice and wellbeing for vulnerable victims.

GET INVOLVED

Take action, campaign, learn skills, make friends. Interested in becoming a *Trailblazer*? We always welcome people to join our thriving campaigning community.

Contact Bobby Ancil on 020 7803 4807, email at b.ancil@muscular-dystrophy.org or visit www.muscular-dystrophy.org/trailblazers

To find out more about the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign call **0800 652 6352** (freephone), email info@muscular-dystrophy.org or visit www.muscular-dystrophy.org

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