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TX: 18.02.03 WHY DO SO FEW DISABLED PEOPLE HOLD PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS?

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ROBINSON

Figures published this month suggest that there are very few people with disabilities serving on public bodies in the UK - around three in a hundred in fact. These public bodies are charged with delivering services and advising ministers and civil servants and they spend £26 billion of our money every year. Penny Haslam has been finding out why so few disabled people are appointed to their ranks. She spoke first to Tony Barnes, who became a non-executive director with the Cambridge Primary Care Trust. Mr Barnes, who's tetraplegic and unemployed, was getting incapacity benefit at the time and he was in for a nasty shock.

BARNES

On appointment, after settling in, I contacted the Department of Work and Pensions to inform them of a change in my circumstances and I got a letter back from them telling me that this was not permitted work and therefore they were suspending my incapacity benefit which is making life quite difficult for me at the moment.

HASLAM

Tony now has an income from the primary care trust of around £5,000 a year. But with the loss of his incapacity benefit he thinks he's no better off. The Department of Work and Pensions is demanding he pay back the benefit he was paid from the moment he started the public post to the moment he told the department of his appointment.

BARNES

The financial situation is that not only have they suspended my benefit and I'm losing something in the region of, I think it was about, £280 every four weeks, so I've lost that but they are also reclaiming just over £1600 of benefit that was paid during the period when I first took up the post. So that will mean I'll have to take a bank loan to pay that off and pay interest on the bank loan as well.

HASLAM

There are over a thousand public bodies in the UK, ranging from the Adult Learning Inspectorate, which monitors the quality of education and training for over 16s, to the Zoos Forum, which reviews the licensing of zoos. Lorna Reith of the Disability Alliance says the benefit system is deterring disabled people from applying for public posts.

REITH

There's two issues here really: one is that if you're on a public body obviously that counts as work, even if it's only a couple of days a month, and that could call into question whether or you're not incapable of work and obviously for people who are getting incapacity benefit they have to show they're incapable of work - so that's one problem. The other problem obviously is any earnings that people get - for somebody who's on income support they can only earn £20 a week before it starts to

affect their benefit, which is a pretty pathetic minimum amount of money. For somebody who's on incapacity benefit there is the possibility of earning up to £66 a week but that's time limited, initially for six months, after that it's back down to £20 a week - these are very minimal amounts.

HASLAM

Tony Barnes is appealing against the decision to withdraw his incapacity benefit, he feels he's a victim of lack of joined up government.

BARNES

Well you've got two departments of state which are taking diametrically opposed attitudes towards the inclusion of disabled people in society - you've got the Secretary of State for Health trying to encourage disabled people to come in and serve as non-executive directors on PCTs and you've got the Department of Work and Pensions putting up as many barriers as they can find to stop people doing it - it makes an absolute nonsense of the whole system.

HASLAM

Peter Mansell is chair of the Disability Advisory Group of the NHS Appointments Commission and also runs ENGAGE - a pressure group which campaigns for more disabled people in public posts.

MANSELL

I think the benefits of getting disabled people in public appointments is that you get a wider, a more diverse, opinion base and decision making base, so that any decisions that are taken by boards, advisory bodies - the groups we're talking about - would probably be more robust.

HASLAM

Lorna Reith says the problems with benefits could be removed simply by extending existing regulations.

REITH

There are already special arrangements for those disabled people who've been elected as a local authority councillor and for those who serve as a member of a disability appeal tribunal. And in both those circumstances the rules have been changed to make it possible for people to undertake that kind of public work without losing their benefit.

HASLAM

In October last year Dame Rennie Fritchie, the Government's commissioner for public appointments, launched a drive to boost the number of disabled people getting posts on public bodies. She's about to set up a working party to look at how more disabled people could be recruited and she's keen to see the Government reform the benefit system.

FRITCHIE

I'd particularly like them to look at what happens to people who are on disability benefits when they're appointed to a public body and if their disability benefit is in any way affected it's not just a question of is it the same amount that they're getting on that public body? If you lose your disability benefit it means that you're not eligible for a whole range of other things that are so important.

HASLAM

Peter Mansell points out that enabling more disabled people to take up public posts would fit in with the Government's clearly stated desire to get more disabled people into work.

MANSELL

I think it also hits the Government's Welfare to Work agenda. I'm not saying that all the people who get involved in public appointments will end up in work but if I've been unemployed for 10 years

because I've broken my neck and couldn't move my arms and legs and I'd lost confidence in getting involved it's one way that I might actually get back into work.

HASLAM

Since last summer a cabinet office working group has been reviewing the public appointments system, including the need for greater diversity. Its report is about to arrive on the desk of cabinet office minister Douglas Alexander. Dame Rennie believes that campaigners should continue to press the Government to make the changes needed.

FRITCHIE

I think the Government is committed but I think we need, in a sense, to have a 'surround the goal' strategy on this one. And all the people who are interested in this need to come together to be able to put all their efforts and attention together at the same time to be able to make an impact. So I'm encouraged but I think we need to keep the pressure up.

ROBINSON

Dame Rennie Fritchie ending that report by our own Penny Haslam.