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For over 30 years the primary focus of my work has been enabling people with long-standing and severe mental health conditions (and often multiple impairments and disadvantages) to live independently and access all aspects of the social and economic lives of our communities. I have pursued these endeavours via employment within mental health services (from which I retired in 2010), positions within voluntary sector and user-run organisations, as well as through my writing, speaking and involvement in local and national policy work including membership of the former Disability Employment Advisory Committee and work with the Disability Rights Commission.

Among other things, I played a leading role in the closure of the remote asylums to which so many disabled people were consigned and have developed a number of programmes to assist people with mental health conditions to access employment and pursue their careers including employment within mental health and social services.

In 2009 I was invited by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to lead an independent review of how people with mental health conditions might better be supported to gain and make a success of employment ([Realising ambitions: Better employment support for people with a mental health condition, Cm7742](#)).

Although focused on those of us with mental health conditions, my contact with organisations of and for disabled people in the course of the review left me in no doubt that many of the recommendations were equally pertinent to disabled people more generally.

To my great surprise, in 2010 I was voted Mind Champion of the Year, awarded an OBE and joined Equality 2025.

I am currently involved in a range of other areas including the Right to Control Co-production Design Group, the development of personal health budgets, the External Scrutiny Group of the review of Work Capability Assessment mental, intellectual and cognitive descriptors, the Equality and Human Rights Commission Disability-related Harassment Advisory Group and the Stakeholder Coalition on Disability and Employment.

I am also a member of the inquiry panel of Mind's Care in Crisis Inquiry and the project team of a Department of Health funded initiative '[Implementing Recovery – Organisational Change](#)' a programme designed to assist health and social care organisations and their partners to better help those of us with mental health conditions to take control over our lives and the support we receive to participate fully as equal citizens.

It is, perhaps, unusual for someone who lives with a long-standing mental health condition to become chair of a pan-disability group like Equality 2025. However, since the early 1990s I have been firmly committed to approaching mental health conditions within a social model of disability. I had seen how effective a genuine pan disability approach was in the USA where mental health activists were firmly part of the broader disability movement and recognised the parallels between the mental health service user-led recovery approach to mental health conditions and the broader independent living movement. I have written and spoken widely about a rights-based social disability approach to mental health conditions and played a leading role in writing the Disability Rights Commission agenda setting document 'Coming Together: Mental Health Service Users and Disability Rights'.

I know from my own lived experience, and the many disabled people I have had the privilege to know, that our similarities outweigh our differences. While it is important to acknowledge and embrace our diversity, our commonalities of experience are greater than that which divides us. We face common challenges and should make common cause. Together we are stronger.