

## keynote speaker profile:

# Rob Greig

Chief Executive  
National Development Team for Inclusion  
Rob.Greig@ndti.org.uk



**M**y involvement in the world of learning disabilities (the terms used in the UK for intellectual disabilities) came about more by luck than judgement. Through circuitous routes, I found myself working for a London Health Authority, planning the closure of large mental illness institutions. After a couple of years, the Health Authority Chief Executive ‘press-ganged’ me into applying to be Director of Learning Disabilities. Thinking this could be an interesting diversion, I had no idea that this job-change was to prove life changing. My direct engagement with people with learning disabilities up until then had been limited to a cousin with Down Syndrome who had died several years previously. Just a few weeks in, it was blindingly obvious (to me, if not to services at the time) that the real issue was how society viewed and treated people with learning disabilities. Yes, efficient and effective services are important, but only to the extent that they are helping people lead good lives as equal citizens and community members. Given that politics had been my passion up to that point – work became the vehicle through which societal change could be achieved – as we (for example) developed one of the UKs first supported employment services and replaced the institutions with ordinary housing and support and real tenancies. With hindsight though, we were still operating a paternalistic service model. The voice of people with learning disabilities was largely absent. Two jobs on and a few years later, another of those life-changing moments. A call from the Department of Health invited me to be the external advisor on

the development of a new English learning disability policy – what eventually became the Valuing People White Paper. Valuing People fundamentally shifted English policy. Previously, policy was about how services could best care for people. Valuing People sought to ensure that people lived a full life as equal citizens – with the role of services being to support that. People with learning disabilities (and family carers) were central to developing that policy – the first time that had ever happened with any Department of Health policy. Voice became a national policy priority – “Nothing About Us Without Us”.

The Government created a role to head up the delivery of Valuing People, reporting directly to the Minister. I applied and one of my proudest moments was when the panel of people with learning disabilities (who were part of the process) unanimously plumped for me! There followed exciting years where, with a brilliant team and a small budget, we set about trying to change the culture and attitude that underpinned services. We had some success but our no doubt overly ambitious aspirations were far from fully met. After six years, it was time to move on as Government priority for the policy waned. Since then, I’ve headed up the independent National Development Team for Inclusion (NDTi) where we work on similar issues of rights, choice and inclu-

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sion, but across all aspects of disability and ageing. I have learnt so much from this (and other) work – too much to share in this short piece. Some brief headings though – with an underpinning theme that for every positive there’s usually a negative, and the challenge is often to manage that balance:

- There is no substitute for sound values and principles – but don’t be conned by people who spout the right words. Check out what people do in reality.
- Evidence of what works is really important, but many people (including politicians), are only really interested in evidence that supports their case.
- Government policy support is important, but on its own is not enough – local leaders are those who really make change happen. The absence of Government support can be equally important and the interest of politicians in disabled people has to be continually nurtured and campaigned for.
- Building teams of like-minded people is an essential building block of positive change. Look for allies, build connections, but also make sure you avoid ‘group-think’.
- The most important alliance of all is that with people with learning disabilities and families. They have a life-long investment in policy leading to better lives.

Which leads me to three crucial headlines for how I would urge everyone to operate:

- (1) Stick to your values,
- (2) Make sure you can evidence what you claim, and,
- (3) Always work to move more power to people and families.

For those interested in hearing more, I hope to meet you at the ASID Conference in Hobart. ●