

**Editorial**  
*Peter Bates*



Back in early March, the Labour Minister for Social Exclusion and Equality, Barbara Roche, announced a new project to address social exclusion among adults with mental health problems. The Social Exclusion Unit is looking at 'how to help the many people with mental health problems who want to work to enter and retain employment and examining the broader issues of social participation and access to services'. After a year of research, it will publish a report in spring 2004 containing recommendations for action across a whole range of Government departments.

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This project includes a major public consultation, and the unit is eager to hear what can be done to tackle exclusion, whether from employment opportunities or any aspect of social and community participation. This ranges from access to decent housing and primary health care through to legal rights, education or informal community activities.

This adds up to the biggest opportunity in years. Everyone in mental health services seems to have a story about the way in which things just fail to make sense at present. One person wants to move into employment, but the welfare benefit system blocks progress at every turn. Another person is willing to serve as a school governor, but guidance notes exclude anyone 'liable to be detained under the *Mental Health Act*' (that's all of us, isn't it?). A third finds that

the only available tenancies are in the roughest part of town and mental health centres are two bus rides away. A fourth person wants to do a college course that starts at 9am, but bus passes are only valid after 9.30.

Many of us have spent years trying to find practical ways around this bewildering maze of false trails and dead ends. The Social Exclusion Unit invites us to think differently. *If* we could change policy, what would we want? I have been opening conversations with people by offering them three wishes to change policy or practices. Most people I have spoken to found it hard to think of practical, workable recommendations for the future. Of course, it is easy to think of changes that would cost hundreds of millions of pounds or require key individuals to undergo a personality transplant. The trick is to think of straightforward things that appear reasonable and would actually make things better.

For years, mental health services have been a hotbed of innovation. Pioneers have found out how to make the most of current arrangements and create exciting projects and opportunities for themselves and others. But the world is changing and we need some new activists – those who can see how to transform current arrangements.

Please let the Social Exclusion Unit know what should be done. Contact it at: Social Exclusion Unit, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 7th Floor, Eland House, Bressenden Place, London, SW1E 5DU.  
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