

How to help the ‘vulnerable’.

George Lamb, *Disability Rights Activist, Edinburgh*

This article is based on a Facebook post written in the context of the nationwide appeal for volunteers to support vulnerable people in the community.

People, can I just offer a word of caution! Firstly, let me say that I am very much one of the 'vulnerable': disabled from birth and had more than my share of loss of independence due to fighting a rear-guard action against all my health issues.

My word of caution is not to stop all this wonderful community-minded thinking and action. Many people are putting into action what we would all hope is our core society ethos. My plea is on the basis that this is going to be a long haul by all accounts - the peak, we are told, may not be until June. So, those offering help right now may want to keep in mind that this is likely to be a time-commitment of months, if not longer. The up side to this is that we may forge real friendships and get to know people properly. The down side is that right now many people like me will be fine, and so will refuse or turn down offers of help. We are not ungrateful or rude (well maybe I am a bit grumpy), it is just that we are used to fending for ourselves and, to some extent, doing it ourselves.

This leads me to my second point. Can I please urge people to allow themselves to be led by the people they seek to help! All these great ideas being shared - food-shopping, power metre top-ups and so on - are based on assumptions about who needs what. Many people *will* want that help, maybe not right now, but maybe at some point. But some people may have more need of folk to speak to, have a cuppa with, get a bit of fresh air with. Remember they may be vulnerable, but not necessarily sick! Remember too that they may take exception to having people telling them what they need. The Disability Rights movement has struggled hard over the last decades for the right to be heard - and listened to. It would be a sad irony if the national outpouring of altruism, well-meant as it is, were to make disabled people voiceless again.

It is also important to remember that many people who are classed as 'vulnerable' do not necessarily see themselves that way; in fact, they might object to being labelled as such. A social model of disability would argue that people with impairments are disabled (or made vulnerable!) by 'the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by social organisation that takes little or no account of people who have physical impairments, and thus excludes them from the mainstream of social activities' (Union of the Physically Impaired Against

Segregation, 1976). In other words, it is society rather than impairment which renders people disabled. There are certainly important questions about who is, and is not, vulnerable, but if this crisis has taught us one very useful human lesson it is that we are *all* vulnerable.

It is possible that some of 'the vulnerable', like everybody else, will need to keep feeling that they have their own independence. No one wants to be beholden to people or to be made to feel grateful. Please, people, offer your help with respect, and with patience.



Activists from Disabled People Against Cuts at a rally against austerity.