

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE: DISABILITY WORKING GROUP: Summary of Evidence Received

Participants included a range of disabled people and non-disabled people, as well as service providers and employers. Participants were sent an invitation and those who responded were asked to express a preference for their workshop theme.

Attitudes

It was felt by a large number of the participants on the Inquiry that to begin making changes and creating opportunities, attitudes towards disabled people need to be challenged.

In terms of relating to a disabled person on a one-to-one basis, whether this is at work, in the learning environment, or the provision of services, more needs to be done to challenge the attitudes of individuals.

There is the sense that in general, there is little consideration of the needs of disabled people in terms of delivering services and developing policy.

Disability equality training must include an understanding of different impairments as barriers and attitudes can differ depending on the specific impairment. Some examples highlighted in written evidence include sensory impairments, autism, physical disabilities and psoriasis.

As well as training, a number of participants have suggested a campaign to raise awareness, including the use of role models and celebrities, and more use of disabled people in advertising.

There is also the issue of attitudes among disabled people towards themselves. Many disabled people want to be independent but may lack confidence, and having a social life or a job could be key in tackling this.

Leisure

Some participants had been turned away from leisure centres and restaurants because they would be a health and safety hazard. There was one example of a disabled person being turned away from a club because of being alone.

Disabled people are often unsure where to access information about leisure services, and it has been suggested that there should be a central source for information.

It has also been suggested that service providers need to be more

proactive in how they provide information. For example, information should be available in alternative formats, there should be more advertising of services and activities available, and the accessibility of websites needs to be improved.

One participant referred to the Access Guides available on the website of Glasgow City Council as an example of good practice.

Employment

It is felt that many employers are scared of employing disabled people because they lack awareness of how different impairments can affect day to day working, and also because they feel there might be a huge expense to pay in terms of adjustments to the workplace. One participant indicated that the business environment is made up of small employers, and taking on a disabled person can be perceived as a huge risk.

Training should also cover the different experiences of different disability groups; for example it has been suggested that there are low expectations of people with learning disabilities, and there are different barriers to be faced depending on the individual needs of each disabled person.

As well as training, it is suggested that there needs to be some form of campaign to raise awareness among employers. This could be through a media campaign and by using role models.

Parents of young disabled people at the event in Edinburgh, questioned the suitability of social workers to facilitate young disabled people into work.

Education

There is also a need to build the confidence of disabled students and challenge their own expectations of what can be achieved. This is balanced by the view that some young disabled people are still shaped by other peoples' low expectations of them and what they can achieve.

Information

Participants acknowledged that there is a lot of information available on leisure activities, getting into further and higher education and how to get in to work. However, there are barriers in terms of knowing where to get the information from, and getting it in an accessible format.

Education

In terms of accessing further and higher education, it was suggested that there should be one central source for information and advice about courses. Also that information should be available in alternative formats and that the websites of individual institutions should provide information for disabled students.

It was also suggested that information on further and higher education should be linked to information about financial support and future jobs.

Access

A number of participants referred to the fact that it is impossible to ever be spontaneous because of the lack of suitable transport.

The following were cited as causing everyday obstruction: road crossings, car parking, pavements, dropped kerbs, cobbled streets, and street furniture.

In general it is felt that lots of facilities and events still only focus on physical access, whereas they should be able to cater for people who have sensory impairments or who require British Sign Language interpreters, other interpreters or palantypists etc.

Supported Employment

Throughout the consultation exercise a number of disabled people emphasised that they want 'real jobs for real wages' and in order to achieve this support is required to get into work and to stay in work.

Participants emphasised the need for employment that is flexible to suit their needs, and that employers must recognise that 9-5 working does not suit everybody.

The provision of support for employers is another issue. For example, employers need to know where they can get information from about making adaptations for disabled employees, or about the benefit system and how this can impact the number of hours disabled people are able to work, or how a specific impairment can affect a disabled person's day-to-day activity.

Another key issue is the transition of young disabled people from school to employment or training. There needs to be better preparation for the workplace before leaving school, and to co-ordinate support service to ease transition. This issue also cuts across to the further and higher education theme of the Inquiry.

The types of support which have been referred to during the consultation include, volunteering, work placements in mainstream settings that are matched to skills, training

on the job, workshops to increase confidence, job coaches and buddy schemes, and the early identification and provision of assistive technology and equipment.

It has been suggested that a funding mechanism is required which provides sustainable support to not only increase the number of work placement opportunities but also to provide longer term on-the-job support.

Whatever the terminology, it is clear that support to get or stay in employment is seen as a positive approach which benefits disabled people by building confidence and obtaining real work for real wages; as well as helping to break down the attitudinal barriers that employers and co-workers may have about employing disabled people.

Scottish Executive Policy

A participant at the Kirkwall event thought that in order to achieve positive changes for disabled people who want to work, there needs to be strong leadership at the top level. Such leadership would be able to put in place an infrastructure for supported employment, including streamlined services, and long-term funding arrangements.

Further and Higher Education

During the consultation there have been a number of examples where disabled students are placed on courses with little thought to what happens at the end of the course and future employment. As one participant put it, 'is it entertainment or education?'. There is a perception that some disabled people are placed on certain courses because it is the 'path of least intervention', i.e. that they will be occupied for a period of time, whether or not it is worthwhile.

One person identified how colleges and universities can make it easier for disabled people to access courses:

'Better realisation by tutor and college authorities about what I CAN do; realisation that they are discriminating against a person with a disability; and open-mindedness by tutors and college authorities as to what can be possible. Better funding of places for students with high support needs would mean I might have been able to attend college.'

Support

Support can include: mentoring, personal assistants, buddy system, familiarisation exercises, digitising information, scribes and interpreters. Some students may need an escort to travel to and from college, other students may need personal care while at college.

Equipment is a significant part of support, and the need for it must be identified early, and followed by assessment and provision. Participants at

the Edinburgh event highlighted that delays can cause problems in keeping up with the course. If equipment is provided, staff may require training to ensure, for example, that they can use hoists.

There is also the suggestion that institutions need to be more creative in how they deliver training and education, for example, distance learning, although it is recognised that this would not be suitable for everyone.

Skill Scotland (written evidence) indicated that not only do disabled students need support, but they need to know their rights under disability legislation and education. 'This lack of awareness means that disabled students are often not empowered to get the services and equipment that they need in order to have an equal experience.'

Mainstreaming Disability

It was felt by some that support staff and disability co-ordinators are undervalued by their institutions, when in fact they should be taking part in management meetings.

Some participants felt that institutions are better at working with those who are referred from a relevant agency, rather those that approach the institution as an individual.

Transitions

A number of participants raised concerns about the transition from school to adult life in terms of further or higher education, employment, and from college or university to employment. It was felt that planning for the future could be improved in terms of matching skills to future education with a view to getting work at the end of it, as well as planning for equipment provision. One suggestion was to link courses with supported employment providers.

Another area identified for improvement is the level of support that is available in terms of information and advice, and in terms of increasing the confidence of prospective students. In general it was felt that transitions should be seamless with partnership working between the young disabled person, their family, schools, college or university, and potential employers.

Some parents of disabled young people felt that the special school curriculum was not geared towards further and higher education, indicating that more vocational qualifications should be available to enable pupils to attend college.

Sally Mackintosh from the DARE Foundation explains that disabled young people leaving education and seeking employment do not have sufficient knowledge or experience to reach informed decisions relating to future

careers and employment. She states: 'Many disabled young people leaving school or FE/HE are frequently inexperienced and ill prepared; and they often lack confidence and self esteem is low, further contributing to the serious difficulty they have in getting a job or knowing how to go about getting a job.'

One individual describes the situation she found herself in at the age of 17 which reflects the experiences of a number of participants at transition from school to further or higher education: 'I was very worried about leaving school, I did not know what I would be doing and I was worried that I would not have any say in what I could do, I knew my mum and dad would support and help me but I also knew I would need help from other people and I sometimes feel that people don't really listen to me or even my mum and dad. I was worried that I would have to go to an adult training centre and I knew I would not like that. I also felt that people just assumed I would do what they felt was appropriate for a young person with as many disabilities as I have and I should be happy or even grateful that I could attend a college and do subjects they felt I should do even if I didn't like the college or would not enjoy the classes or more importantly feel I was achieving something.'

Shewent on to receive advice and support through a method of person-centred planning from the Edinburgh Development Group. With the support of a member of staff, she was able to plan how to reach her goal of working with disabled children.

In spite of the work of the Beattie Committee on transitions, and the requirement for planning and partnership working as a result of the Education (Additional Support for Learning) Scotland Act 2004, it was felt that there is no strategy on transitions. Getting some external agencies to engage with schools and vice versa was cited as a major obstacle.

Leisure, Arts, Recreation –a social life

Many of the barriers to accessing leisure and having a social life relate to the cross cutting issues of attitudes, information provision, accessible transport and physical access.

There is a need for more personal assistants, more buddy schemes, specialist support workers for sport activities or for specific impairments, and for a network of young people to provide company and support. The support available also needs to be flexible in order to be able to go out in the evening as well as during the day.

A social life and being independent can be especially important to young disabled people who are experiencing new freedoms, but care packages and other support needs to be flexible to do things like stay out late.

It was suggested that preference for either type would depend on the person and where they felt most comfortable. Certainly it was felt that there should be a choice between mainstream and specialist provision, and that all activities/classes should be available in

comfortable surroundings. For example, it was reported that young disabled people often have difficulty accessing youth groups such as the Brownies, Scouts, Girl guides etc.

It was suggested that more information and publicity is required about where good practice exists, so that disabled people know where to go to guarantee good access and support.