

Aberdeenshire Council

Disability Equality Scheme Annual Report

2006 – 2007

Background

Aberdeenshire Council, in response to the Disability Discrimination act (DDA) 2005, has produced its three year Disability Equality Scheme and Action Plans laying out how the Council will meet the requirements of the General Duty until December 2009.

As part of this legislation there is a duty to publish an annual report summarising:

- “The steps it has taken to fulfil its disability equality duty (the action plan); what has the Authority done over the past year to eliminate discrimination and promote equality of opportunity and is it meeting its targets?”
- “The results of information gathering which it has carried out – what evidence has been obtained and what does it indicate?”
- “What the Authority has done with the information gathered – what actions will be taken as a result of what the information indicates?”

As laid out in the Disability Equality Scheme this report has been produced with the guidance of the Disability Equality Group, a partnership between officers from key Services and representatives of local disabled people and employees.

This report will lay out the current position using an overview of key areas along with a Service by Service statement of progress based on the Service Action Tables from the Scheme as an appendix for reference.

Progress To Date

Aberdeenshire Council has made significant progress towards meeting the General Duty through delivery of the actions laid out in its Disability Equality Scheme while recognising that this is an ongoing process requiring a change in attitude both within the Council and throughout the wider community.

The Scheme provided for seven “Toolkit” actions common to all Services in response to priorities determined through the involvement of local people with a personal experience of disability, these were:

1. Ensure all employees have Disability Awareness Training appropriate to their duties.
2. Ensure alternative access arrangements are made at those of our premises that are yet to be updated.
3. Improve communication with our disabled residents by reviewing the quality and availability of our information
4. Form positive links with organisations of and for disabled people
5. Identify and train impact assessors
6. Prioritise existing policies, practices and functions for ongoing impact assessment
7. Reports on progress on Action Plans discussed at Management Team meetings

1. Disability Awareness Training

All new employees have, for some time, attended Corporate Induction Training. This includes a disability awareness element as part of a wider equalities section. Part of this process is the use of a DVD/booklet on equalities issues and this is being cascaded to all existing employees who did not receive it on induction via team briefings. Services such as Transport and Infrastructure and Personnel and ICT have completed this with other Services being engaged in this process currently.

Employee Development and Training are developing training tailored to the particular needs of identified groups requiring more specialised awareness training. This training development will be guided by individual Services through their training needs analysis. Awareness training for Councillors is being developed with, and will be delivered involving, a mixed abilities theatre

company with long standing experience in disability awareness training. This will be delivered in January 2008.

Services have undertaken to include the need for disability awareness training as part of the Employee Development Review Scheme (EDRS), which comprises an annual face-to-face review of employees' training, and development needs. This is a currently ongoing process that, with the equivalent scheme used within the Education Service, will encompass all our employees. Our training budget is not infinite and this process will ensure that training is targeted to those areas where it will achieve the best results in improving services for our disabled residents.

Planning and Environmental Service are extending the piloted DDA and Access Training to all Development Management and Building Standards officers. This will ensure a consistent level of knowledge of disability issues related to the work of these key officers that will translate directly into improved access to the wider built environment. This will be completed by the target date of September 08.

2. Ensure Alternative Access Arrangements

In line with the requirements of the DDA 1995 alternative access arrangements were put into place for our premises. In many cases these will remain valid, however Services have begun the process of ensuring that these are still relevant and follow current good practice.

Personnel and ICT have reviewed the access to all their training facilities. This, along with measures elsewhere to monitor the uptake of training and review materials, marks a strong step towards ensuring that vital access to training is equally available and historic cycles of low achievement experienced by many disabled people can be redressed.

Planning and Environment Service are currently auditing all their public locations, with the results being collated and available by April 2008.

These actions take place in conjunction with the prioritised improvements to the primary accessibility of our properties resulting from the comprehensive audit carried out by our Property Service.

3. Improve Communications

The cross Service action to review written materials has led to an increased awareness of the Corporate Accessible Information Policy and has had the valuable side effect of encouraging Services to consider and list their printed and electronic information catalogues.

There has been good progress in this area with the Finance Service establishing a monitoring and review procedure for their written material and

Housing and Social Work currently undertaking a review and redesign of information on their website. Transportation and Infrastructure have completed the listing of their published material prior to providing the list via the web in 2008 and are to complete the review and upgrading process by 2009.

As part of a number of steps aimed at improving uptake and access to training Employee Development and Training have reviewed their training and presentation materials to ensure they conform to the Corporate Accessible Information Policy

4. Form Positive links with Organisations of and for Disabled People

The opening of dialogue and links with organisation of and for disabled people is making steady progress with the levels of contact reflecting the nature of individual Services. Our “outward facing” Services have a history of engagement and involvement which means that often this has been a sharpening and extension of existing procedures and outlook. For some of our “inward facing” Services, with their function of internal Corporate support or statutory regulation, the principal of involvement is fully accepted even where the mechanisms and scope for direct contact have been less obvious.

As a Council we have a history of strong contact and partnership working with local disability organisations. These have, in many cases, been revisited, revitalised and improved in response to the Action Plans while links have been formed with organisations not previously contacted such as the Banff Network, a group of young people with disabilities and a recently convened north area based Disability Forum.

The Housing and Social Work review of the “Challenging Physical Disability Strategy” is under way with a strong presence from local organisations of and for disabled people on the Strategy Group. This Service also supports the development of Aberdeenshire Disability Action’s (ADA) Information Service. They support ADA’s work with the Education Service on disability awareness in schools, and have developed a new service level agreement with the Disabled Person’s Housing Service. The “Armchair Group”, enabling people who find physical participation in involvement difficult to put forward their views, is continuing its development.

Within the Chief Executive’s Service the Consultation Action Plan is being redeveloped to guide our engagement processes. The current membership of the Citizens Panel having a disability has been determined (17%) and this will be used to inform the makeup of the refreshed Panel due in 2008.

The productive partnership between the Planning and Environmental Service and Aberdeenshire’s four Access Panels continues with increasing use of the Panel’s input to public access applications. The Service’s Structure Plan Team have updated their list of groups to be involved in the development of

the Structure Plan to ensure broader planning takes into account disability issues.

Roads Managers from the Transportation and Infrastructure Service have worked with the Aberdeenshire South and Deeside Access Panels to prioritise works related to disability issues. As a result of this the Aberdeenshire South Access Panel contacted local wheelchair users and produced a document highlighting problems with dropped kerbs in the Stonehaven and Laurencekirk areas. This information was passed to the Roads Manager at a meeting of the Panel and has directly resulted in improvements to the dropped kerbs and other access improvements in this area, improving the quality of life for residents. Both parties consider that this exercise has been valuable and will be repeated. The Deeside work involves disabled parking provision in the Aboyne area.

5. Identify and train Impact Assessors

All services have undertaken this Action and identified a number of trainees appropriate to the workload of policies associated with that Service.

Numbers of Assessors trained in 2007 (by Service) are:

Chief Executives Service -----	18
Personnel and ICT -----	11
Planning and Environmental Service -----	15
Transport and Infrastructure -----	17
Housing and Social Work -----	19
Finance -----	1
Law and Administration -----	2
Education, Leisure and Learning -----	12
Total -----	95

Trained employees are currently involved with the Impact Assessment of the initial group of policies as outlined in the Scheme or have been trained in preparation for Assessment of new or further existing policies.

6. Prioritise existing policies for Impact Assessment

Services have undertaken initial prioritisation of existing policies, practices and functions as part of a broader process addressing this requirement as it

relates to all strands of equalities performance. For some Services this process is ongoing but will be completed so as to enable finalisation of the next annual selection.

As laid out in the Scheme, Impact Assessment of an initial group of Policies, selected across Services, is being undertaken to pilot the Impact assessment process itself. The prioritised list of existing policies, practices and functions will be the subject of an annual selection process involving disabled people and their organisations which will select those seen as most relevant for Assessment in the coming year. This selection, due August 2008, will be repeated annually as the process works through our existing policies, practices and functions.

The formation of the Disability Equality Group puts in place the mechanism by which disability related complaints are monitored by this partnership group to identify any pattern that may relate to a particular policy. Such policies may be raised as a priority, if needed, to ensure that Impact Assessment is directly related to the experience of local disabled people in their dealings with us as well as to the prioritisation process.

7. Reporting on Action Plan Progress

Services have put in place arrangements for the regular progress reports on the implementation of their Action Plans to be discussed by their Service Management Teams. This will enable the Management Team to consider their progress and redress areas where implementation may be falling behind. All the seven Services covered by this report have prepared reports, six will have been presented to Management teams by December 2007 and the remaining one will have the initial report for their Service on the Agenda for a meeting in Early 2008. The Services who have already prepared their Reports include all those main frontline Services who are responsible for the majority of our Public provision and have the greatest impact on the experience of dealing with the Council for our residents.

These reports have also been considered by the Disability Equality Group, the partnership group set up to monitor implementation of the Action Plans and guide the production of this report.

Further information about these and Service specific Actions can be found in Appendix 1. This follows the same table layout as the Scheme Action Tables and references this report directly to the Scheme.

Meeting the Requirements of the General Duty

The Action as laid out in the Disability Equality Scheme form the basis of demonstrating that the Council are exercising due regard to meeting the Six strands of the General Duty. Actions underway or completed to date impact on all six strands of the General Duty. Some ways in which this is achieved are summarised below. Many of the Actions impact across more than one strand but will appear under the strand they have most significant influence on.

A more complete picture of the work in each strand can be obtained by referencing the tables in the appendix of this report with the directly matching Action Tables of the Disability Equality Scheme.

1. Promote Equality of Opportunity Between Disabled Persons and Other Persons

The Finance service Action Plan calls for the targeting of benefit take-up amongst disabled people. In a joint working exercise with the Pension Service in the Buchan Area, one of six Council administrative areas, £41,428.40 in annual income in respect of disabled persons over 60 years has been secured. Other benefits have been claimed, e.g. Pension Credit, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit. Other benefits of the process include information sharing with visiting staff to allow them to increase awareness of disability entitlements and promote taxi cards and other services. This exercise is to be extended to the other 5 areas of Aberdeenshire and represents a significant positive impact on opportunity, choice and lifestyle for many disabled residents.

Awareness training reflects into every aspect of how we carry out our work and this creates a steadily developing climate of opportunity for our disabled employees, potential employees and residents.

Actions in the areas of access, housing, monitoring of employment and training data and communication all contribute to improved opportunity.

2. Eliminate Discrimination that is unlawful Under the Act

This strand is fundamentally linked with the first but is particularly relevant in the achievement of improved employment/training/development opportunities which will result from the preparatory actions in this initial year in the areas of the monitoring of employment and training and the reviews of access to training facilities and materials.

Access improvements in the built environment through actions from Transportation and Infrastructure and the Planning and Environment Service, with ongoing involvement from local Access Panels, play strong roles in this area for the wider community.

3. Eliminate Harassment of Disabled Persons that is Related to their Disabilities

As with all strands, awareness raising as well as more specialised training, although not an end in itself, is a vital tool in identifying and tackling harassment.

Work underway in partnership with Aberdeenshire Disability Action to raise disability issues in schools, involving disabled people in delivering the program, directly addresses this in an area identified by our involvement process as a significant source of harassment.

Partnership work is being progressed in our role as part of the Community Safety Partnership will develop ways of addressing this issue at community level.

4. Promote Positive Attitudes Towards Disabled People

Actions to raise awareness for employees, schools and Councillors contribute to the promotion of positive attitudes in their own right. Delivery of these by, or in partnership with, disabled people places people with disabilities in the role of provider of valued information and expertise where many participants have only experienced disabled people as receivers of service.

Work in partnership with the Planning and Environment Service has resulted in Access Panels, experienced disability led community groups, being seen by local architects in the light of a developing respect and value for their knowledge and comment.

Actions to ensure that disabled people are seen as visible, productive and valued by the Council and the wider community are seen as the key thread in meeting this strand of the General Duty.

5. Encourage the Participation of Disabled Persons in Public Life

2007 has seen a marked increase in the involvement of disabled people and their organisations in developing and monitoring strategies and functions. These include the Challenging Physical Disability Strategy, Autism Strategy and the Disability Equality Group set up to monitor the DES. This is being driven by improved access, information and understanding within Services

and the Disability Community of the need to involve and the value of doing so.

Disability Awareness Training for Councillors, delivered in partnership with a mixed ability training provider, will not only directly benefit Councillors but, as leading figures in the local democratic process, they in turn will carry this back to the wider political organisations most are associated with.

The Law and Administration Service has initiated contact with Aberdeenshire's Access Panels to input to their ongoing work on access to polling places

6. Take Steps to Meet the Needs of Disabled Persons' Disabilities, Even Where That Involves Treating Disabled Persons More Favourably Than Other Persons

This strand is responded to on a Service by Service basis and by its nature is often closely linked to personal requirements. The Roads Service continue to provide dedicated domestic parking bays outside disabled person's residencies. We continue to implement our guaranteed interview system where applicants with disabilities who meet the criteria for a post will receive an interview. Better monitoring of our adapted housing stock and of adjusted housing as part of our new stock assists Housing and Social Work in meeting particular needs. ICT have put in place procedures to prioritise disability related requests for new IT equipment and service responses.

Information Gathering and Use

A number of the Actions in individual Service Plans are aimed at improving the quality and breadth of information available to decision makers on disability issues. Many of these were longer term undertakings targeted on identified information gaps, with the development and initial stages falling into year one with the expectation of useful returns and subsequent remedial actions taking place through the following two years of the Scheme's life.

Considerable progress has been made in the area of employee monitoring with new forms being developed that will yield improved disability data. This improvement is allied with the increased uptake of monitoring disclosures from 85% to 95% over the year and will enable the appropriate remedial actions to be made. Initial results of personnel information gathering will be available by February 2008.

The timely availability of the Equalities Reports derived from the results of the extensive Residents and Employee Surveys informed the development of the Scheme. They provide a useful benchmark at the start of the Scheme, giving a measure of satisfaction levels for these two major stakeholder groups. These comprehensive surveys will be repeated in 2008 and, along with

improved dialogue with organisations of and for disabled people, will be central to evaluating the impact of the Action Plans in generating noticeable improvements to our performance over the life of the Scheme.

As noted in the Scheme much of our information gathering takes place at Service level where it is close-coupled with needs led service provision or Service strategies. As reported above, involvement and information gathering from disabled people as part of developing strategies by Housing and Social Work and direct action addressing information gathered from disabled residents regarding disability access issues the Roads Service are examples of this integrated information gathering and direct use process at work in our day to day provision of service to our disabled residents.

Evaluation of our housing stock to enable better use of adapted premises again has direct linkage to provision of adapted housing for disabled applicants. The audit of new build affordable houses in the area identified that 20% of the total were adapted for disabled residents, 13% for older people, and 3% for people with learning disabilities. The intention is to raise the figure for properties adapted for disabled people to 25%, which, although higher than the accepted incidence of mobility impairment related disability in the community, will work towards redressing the lack of accessible affordable housing provided by the commercial build market.

Challenges and Responses

This initial year of our first three year Disability Equality Scheme has identified a number of challenges. A majority of Actions are completed or showing solid progress however a minority have not been progressed within their proposed target dates.

There are a number of reasons identified for this:

For some of our Services this is an area of work in which they have no previous experience to guide them. This has led to some projected timescales proving unreasonably short in light of the changes to practice and outlook required on top of their already considerable workloads. This is especially true of those Services with duties related to facilitating the transitions resulting from the May Local Government Elections and their associated impact on the systems of the Authority.

A number of Actions relate to partnership working, with both local and regional organisations. By their nature these Actions can only progress as far and fast as the capabilities of all partners allow.

Delay in producing our Disability Equality Scheme due to the commitment to carrying out the true involvement needed to produce a credible and widely accepted Scheme. This in turn, due to organisational considerations around the May Elections, meant that many Action start dates had passed before the

Scheme was approved by the Policy and Resources Committee. Service representatives decided to hold to the timescales as planned as many of the Actions were seen as so fundamental to good practice as to be an inevitable part of any finally approved Scheme. This has resulted in the good progress on most Actions in spite of the “short” first year of implementation.

A number of the above challenges are directly related to issues unique to this first year of implementation.

We will work with our partners to ensure consistent progress on partnership related Actions and take all steps open to us to maintain this progress.

The Actions relating to ensuring that reports on progress of Service Action Plans are discussed at Service Management Team meetings are underway for the majority of our Services and those remaining will complete this by December 2007 or at the beginning of 2008. This mechanism will put evidence of achievement or slippage of Actions before those with the ultimate responsibility for their implementation and with the authority for the allocation of resources.

The Disability Equality Group with its partnership structure between officers of key Council Services, representatives of local disability organisations and employees with disabilities, has met twice to date. These initial meetings have, by their timing, concentrated on the state of current progress and the production of this report. Subsequent meetings will be timed so as to allow the Group to receive copies of four-monthly Service reports on Action Plan progress, monitor that progress and act as a “watchdog” to comment in support of the implementation of the Scheme as needed.

In light of the unique first year nature of many of the challenges noted above and the imminent implementation of the monitoring Actions laid out as part of the Scheme, Aberdeenshire Council remains confident that the provisions of the Disability Equality Scheme will be delivered within its three year life.

Conclusion

The initial year of the Aberdeenshire Council Disability Equality Scheme has seen good progress on the majority of the Actions laid out to meet our duties under the Disability Discrimination Act 2005. We have experienced some slippage in the implementation of a minority of Actions and fully expect this to be redressed by remedial Actions as they come into play.

Had we been able to report an unblemished record of achievement in implementing our Actions in this initial year this would most likely be the result of our Scheme having been insufficiently challenging.

The purpose of the Scheme is to facilitate a noticeable and sustainable improvement to the experience of our disabled residents and employees both in their dealings with us and their wider lives. Many of these improvements will only be measurable in the longer term, as changing house or job are not things done on a weekly basis. We look forward to the returns from new and existing information gathering processes both to assess the effects of current Actions and to inform those we will take in the future.