

Duty to Promote Disability Equality

Interim Report

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December 2005



Leading Learning and Skills

Introduction

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 has now been amended by the Disability Discrimination Act 2005, which places a duty, known as the general duty, on all public authorities to promote disability equality. In addition, there are specific duties placed on listed public authorities including education providers and the LSC, HEFCE, Ofsted and ALI. These organisations must publish their first Disability Equality Scheme no later than 4th December 2006.

This legislation extends the DDA 1995 requirements – to anticipate and respond to the individual needs of disabled people – to a duty under which organisations must become proactive agents of change. The duty provides a framework to address discrimination and institutional barriers that prevent full participation by disabled people

Aims and Objectives of the Project

The overall aim of this project is to support organisations within the post-16 education sector to respond to the new duty to promote disability equality.

The project has four main objectives:

- To analyse the specific requirements of the duty to promote disability equality
- To develop, with partner organisations, models of how best to respond to the duty
- To draw up guidelines for organisations illustrated by case studies
- To develop a strategy for disseminating the guidelines

Project approach

The project is managed by the Consortium led by the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) including Skill and NIACE and with the support of the Disability Rights Commission (DRC).

The approach involves working in partnership with a range of organisations working in and with the Learning and Skills and Higher Education Sectors, who will participate in different ways. These include

1. Public sector organisations in the Learning and Skills sector that support providers (including the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA).
2. Ofsted and the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI)
3. Education providers in the Learning and Skills sector (including FE, sixth form and specialist colleges, and Adult Community Learning providers)
4. Providers of Higher Education in partnership with the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) and the National Disability Team (NDT)

The centrality of disabled people throughout the process is critical and the project has an advisory group to inform the development and outcomes of the project.

Purpose of this report

This report summarises the findings of the project to-date, primarily from partners that have produced an interim report.

This report is in two sections. The first section describes the aim and focus of each site's work together with the progress they have made to-date. The second section of this report examines common emerging themes and highlights key messages for organisations working in and with the Learning and Skills and Higher Education Sectors.

The aim and progress of individual partners

Organisations are at different points on their journey towards disability equality. Many have particular strengths on which to build whilst recognising areas that have yet to be addressed.

Each site identified a particular aspect of disability equality to improve, focusing on one or more of the following elements of the new duty to promote disability equality. These requirements included

- identifying improved outcomes for disabled people
- carrying out impact assessments
- gathering information to monitor progress
- mainstreaming disability equality across the whole organisation
- engaging with disabled people
- working in partnership with other organisations
- improving disability equality by tackling institutional barriers.

Each site's aim and progress are now discussed in turn

Wakefield College

Project aim

To identify and develop disability equality champions to aid 'mainstreaming' and culture change

Outline of intended activity

Implementation of DDA Part 4 at this college particularly focused on teaching and learning, and this project enabled staff to look afresh at the service areas of the college, such as marketing, student services, finance and canteen services. Equality champions will be identified from each service area to work together to raise awareness, share good practice and improve disability equality.

Progress to date

A number of briefings to staff have taken place, including Governors, the Senior Management Team and the Equality and Diversity Committee. A briefing paper has been presented to the Senior Management Team which asked for a Champion to be identified from every Service Area

Thirteen disability equality champions have been identified in each service area of the college. Training sessions have taken place. To emphasise the importance of the project, these events were held in one of the most prestigious training rooms and a professional set of delegates notes produced. Training involved a reminder of current DDA requirements, a briefing on the new duty and case studies to help staff engage with issues in their own organisation. Each champion is twinned with one of nine Learning Support tutors in the Additional Support team, who all have specialist skills and knowledge in an aspect of support, such as visual impairment, dyslexia, and ADHD. The Learning Support tutors have a supporting role, acting as critical friends and they also act as the link to the involvement of disabled learners.

Each champion has been tasked to go back to their teams, engage with disabled people and decide on the focus of a 'mini' project within their own service area, to improve disability equality. Many of these have been identified, and include improving the accessibility of written communications (exams), reviewing parking arrangements (estates), investigating more accessible signage (canteen), improving the accessibility of the website (marketing).

The project has sparked considerable enthusiasm within each support area and has raised awareness throughout the college. For example:

Within a few days a member of the Finance Team sent me a copy of a three page document she had e-mailed to her colleagues, summarising the DED and her learning from the training event. I was quite stunned by the commitment to disability equality conveyed in her communication, in fact I went home floating on air! (At last we were no longer a lone voice! Suddenly we had troops in the front line!)

There is heightened awareness of disability equality occurring and this must be because there are so many “voices” in all areas, at all levels. The DED has appeared on many agendas from Governors’ to Senior Management meetings.

Having a number of people trained as champions together with the influence of Additional Support acting as critical friends and a steering group led by the Principal has meant that over 30 staff are working on the project. One of the initial concerns expressed was the feeling, at times, of being the ‘lone voice’ and the project has done much to expand influence and encourage ownership

College of West Anglia

Project aim

To carry out impact assessments of learner admissions procedures and marketing activities, and staff recruitment

Outline of intended activity

Outcomes of a recent DDA Part 4 audit identified good practice in many areas but also a number of issues to address. The college decided to build on this audit by carrying out an impact assessment of learner admissions procedures and marketing activities, and staff recruitment and selection processes. This provides an interesting dual focus of the start of a journey for a disabled person at the college.

Progress to-date

A number of awareness raising events have taken place, and a steering group, chaired by the Principal, is established. In-depth training events have also taken place with some staff.

A student focus group of 13 students has been created, primarily through a successful college-wide poster campaign asking for volunteers. Questionnaires have also been used to ask for feedback on admissions processes. A number of issues have emerged, for example:

Some students felt that once they contacted the college and had initially informed staff of their disability/learning difficulty they were then passed around to too many people. They were not sure who the correct person was to talk to about issues relating to their disability/learning difficulty. They said they would have liked one particular person to talk to and also to have that person help them with any particular problems they experience when making their application i.e. completing forms – particularly with HE as there seem to be so many.

Students said they found the enrolment process confusing and again mentioned they didn't know who to talk to about issues relating to their disabilities. When they had problems they didn't feel they could speak to anyone about them as there didn't seem to be a specific member of staff for this.

Students have also made a number of suggestions for improving the admissions process such as staff, during the interview process, better encouraging disclosure by discussing the support available at the college.

New staff interview guidelines will be developed, and training for staff on interview techniques is being arranged. Admissions staff are working to improve processes following disclosure and processes informing learners on how to access additional support. The college is planning to merge with another organisation in the near future and this provides an opportunity to restructure departments to address the issues that the students have raised.

Somerset College of Arts and Technology

Project aim

To undertake an impact assessment of the college's health check provision

Outline of intended activity

The health check provision is a mini internal 'inspection' process and as such is part of the college's quality assurance process. It uses a range of evaluative approaches, including curriculum audits and the perceptions of staff and learners. The health check provision feeds into college self assessment. The health check is currently being revised against the common inspection framework and this is therefore an ideal time to review against other criteria such as the requirements of the duty to promote disability equality. The health check process has the potential to contribute to embedding disability equality across the college by embedding this within the college's quality assurance processes.

Progress to-date

A series of briefings have taken place, and a team established to impact assess the health check process. Information has been gathered to inform the impact assessment, and a draft proforma created to enable each elements of the health check process to be assessed against all six parts of the general duty to promote disability equality.

Disabled learners and one disabled member of staff were personally approached and invited to be part of the project.

Learners were invited to meet with the Equality and Diversity Curriculum Leader individually to initially hear about the project, and if they wished to be involved then we met again for an hour to go through the forms/get feedback. Some wished to take the forms and differentiated checklist away for a week to think more about their response. The Learners were very pleased to be participating.

The learners have made a number of suggestions for improvement. Their involvement has proved to be mutually beneficial:

We have also begun work to differentiate the impact assessment for learners with brain injury and/or with learning disabilities who have expressed an interest in becoming involved in the impact assessment. It is intended that this

involvement will be integrated into communication activities taking place as part of their programme and can therefore contribute to achievement of their [own] personal learning targets

The college is also working in partnership with the Somerset Access and Inclusion Network, an organisation of disabled people in the community. This has been a particularly positive step as the college hopes to build on this relationship in the development of their Disability Equality Scheme. A long term working partnership with this community organisation would enable access to a group of community based disabled consultants on a full range of disability equality related activities

Blackpool and Fylde College

Project aim

To gather information on disabled staff to meet the monitoring requirement of the disability equality duty

Outline of intended activity

The college has excellent mechanisms to gather information on disabled learners in order to monitor progress on disability equality and improve performance. However, their mechanisms for gathering information on the experiences of disabled staff are not so well developed. The college therefore chose to focus on this aspect, particularly looking at how they enable staff to disclose a disability and the perceptions of disabled staff on the support they receive at the college.

Progress to-date

The initial phase of the project involved working with personnel to establish a baseline against which to monitor progress. The baseline figure from the 2004 audit was low (2% (30 staff), compared to 25% of the local population of Blackpool declaring a disability). 27% (406) of staff at the college did not indicate whether they believed themselves disabled or not.

The following question was used in the above staff audit:

- Do you consider yourself to be disabled?
- Do you consider yourself to have a learning difficulty?
- If you have answered yes to one or both questions, do you receive help from the college for your disability or learning difficulty?

The college is in the process of re-wording this question to better encourage disclosure.

The college is also looking at how it promotes itself as a disabled friendly employer, both internally and externally. The college has updated their induction process to include an equality and diversity module that makes clear the support mechanisms for disabled staff, and revised a procedure for staff who have disclosed a disability or become disabled during employment. The following case study illustrates the benefits of these changes to one individual

John (name changed) attended the mandatory 2 hour introduction to Equality and Diversity, during this session

mention was made of the policy and procedure for staff with a disability or who become disabled and the support available highlighted. After the session John approached both trainers confident to discuss his own hearing impairment and ask for support. John explained that he was struggling in the class room and in taking telephone messages, often mishearing and giving incorrect messages, he felt this was causing friction with colleagues, John did not realise he could access support. John's request for support was passed via personnel to learning support who arranged for a technical assessment. As a result John was assigned to a teaching classroom where a loop system was installed and a telephone with a microphone put in the office. John commented on how supportive the whole process had been and how his working environment had been significantly improved.

John's situation highlighted the need for us to publicise the support available to staff in the same way as for students and where appropriate to celebrate the success of staff supported.

The college is in the process of rewriting their recruitment pack that is sent out to prospective employees highlighting the college's positive attitude and support for staff with disabilities.

Morley College

Project aim

To improve the support available for learners with mental health difficulties through the use of new mental health champions

Outline of intended activity

Morley college has a higher than average number of learners who have disclosed a mental health difficulty (12% of all disabled learners). Good support is generally provided. However, learners occasionally experience distress and there are not enough trained staff to support learners in these situations. The college has also had cases where learners with mental health difficulties have been asked to attend disciplinary panels without appropriate support. Creating new mental health champions will help address these issues and further improve the support available

Progress to-date

Job descriptions for the role of mental health champion and advocate have been agreed (the job descriptions are slightly different depending on whether the member of staff is in teaching or support). The role involves:

- Working with students in distress and crisis situations
- Providing a calming presence when needed e.g. waiting for an ambulance
- Follow up work with the student after a crisis
- Acting as a “friend” when needed, e.g. in disciplinary meetings

Three support staff and two tutors have been appointed. A day was set aside to train staff in supporting learners with mental health difficulties and to discuss the issues involved in acting as champions and advocates. The inclusion of a student mental health service user was helpful as she provided an important and useful perspective in the discussion

Several agencies have been contacted to help participate in the project, including the local mental health trust and Gateway, a local project finding work for people with mental health difficulties.

Presentations about the project have been given to 18 managers to date. Training is currently being delivered to 80 teaching and administrative staff. Discussions with staff in different areas has helped reduce staff anxiety and increase confidence in supporting learners with mental health difficulties.

A student with severe anxiety difficulties joined an access course. During the first week the student felt unable to remain in class throughout the day. By the second week we were aware that breaks were particularly difficult and arranged for a support worker to spend time with her during the lunch hour. The worker made sure she was aware of College facilities, and also walked with her to a nearby park and café, where she could spend peaceful time alone, if she wished. The student then settled well into the class, and to date no further additional support has been needed.

Working through this project has supported us in promoting a discussion of these issues within the College. It has therefore raised the profile of disability issues in general, together with knowledge of the new legislation, and the problems of students with mental health difficulties in particular

The college has also undertaken an impact assessment of the student disciplinary procedure, and identified the need for a number of revisions.

The college has acknowledged that the pacing of this work has to be handled carefully, so that the new support champions do not have unrealistic expectations of their role, either of themselves or from others. They have also recognised that work needs to be done with some tutors, as there is a danger that students could be sent too quickly to the learning support department or the student champions, before the tutor had tried appropriate adjustments to meet the students' needs.

Earlier this term one student, who was experiencing a paranoid episode, was left by their lecturer outside my office. The lecturer told the security guard, but did not leave their name. It was fairly easy to calm the student, who then decided to go home until he felt better. He subsequently returned to the class, and there have been no further problems of this nature. He has discussed with us the fact that he occasionally feels stressed and paranoid, and that it is difficult for him to remain in class at those times. We have been able to provide effective support in the following ways: additional support in the subject area (English) as he can find it difficult to focus, referral to the local refugee network, additional time in examinations and occasional meetings with one of the mental health champions to check how things are going for him.

Milton Keynes Council

Project aim

To carry out an impact assessment of marketing and admissions

Outline of intended activity

The number of disabled learners recorded on the management information system (MIS) appears low and has highlighted to need to improve procedures for informing MIS if learners disclose after enrolment. Registers for staff include a page for tutors to record any support need that is identified after the course starts but information does not appear to get back to MIS. In addition, most students attend for two hours a week and most tutors are part-time. Not all tutors are aware of the support that is available or the adjustments they can make to their teaching and learning to meet student needs. This project will help improve disability equality by addressing some of these areas

Progress to-date

A number of briefings have taken place with staff and management groups such as QIA (a quality improvement group which is a diagonal slice of staff at the organisation), ACE (an advisory group with external partners such as Connexions) and WAMT (a wider management team including curriculum leaders). These have been used to stimulate debate and ideas on the project and how to engage with disabled learners.

Research into MIS has highlighted the need for more efficient recording of information once a learner discloses. It has also become apparent that support provided for disabled learners would benefit from a more cohesive approach.

A questionnaire has been sent to learners asking how the organisation can improve its publicity and enrolment procedures. Responses have highlighted a number of areas for improvement, such as the promotion of additional support

In the brochure there are clear sections about classes for those wishing to improve English, Maths and EFL, but I don't remember seeing a similar section inviting those with impairments to discuss their needs with someone from ACE [adult and community education].

Attempts have also been made to engage with prospective learners by sending out a letter via Milton Keynes Centre for Integrated Living, to 30 organisations across Milton Keynes. The letter explained the project and asked for interested parties to make contact. Although there has been little response to-date, it is hoped that a follow up telephone call will increase response and interest.

National Star College

Project aim

To improve employment rates and prospects for disabled people within the college's workforce

Outline of intended activity

The focus of this project was taken because the college has a low percentage of staff with declared disabilities working within the college. The main aim of the project is to develop an employment charter for disabled people and a multi-media resource for recruitment, awareness raising and training. The DVD will feature positive case studies of staff talking about their experiences and will enable others to learn from disabled staff about their employment experiences. The intention is also to use the DVD to explore attitudes and challenge assumptions

Progress to-date

A team has been established to agree the content of the DVD, and includes three disabled members of staff with different impairments and one disabled learner. The media department from the University of Gloucestershire has agreed to partner with the team.



A storyboard has been designed, outline content established and structured interviews filmed. Other external agencies have been approached and an interesting link has been established with Gloucestershire Industrial Services to look at the opportunities of providing work experience or a job for a disabled person via the Work Step programme. A role as part time receptionist at the college has been identified as suitable. This is an interesting and very positive development and spin off from the project itself.

Filming has taken place across the college which has provided an opportunity to increase awareness of the project and stimulate discussion. As the project progressed, the need to advertise widely to recruit staff has become apparent

We need to be aware that the usual methods of advertising for staff may not be as appropriate when trying to attract staff with disabilities. In conversations with current staff with disabilities a number of them had found out about the vacancies through word of mouth. There are some specialist publications for example the Royal National Institute for the Blind Newsletter and Guide Dogs for the Blind magazine, especially for people with visual impairments, which have sections for Job vacancies. In addition the use of the local radio is also a good method of reaching potential employees who are not yet employed. Recruitment of staff, from Black and minority ethnic groups, has been most successful when advertisements have gone direct to the community groups. We can use this experience and look at how this could be applied to the recruitment of staff with disabilities.

The DVD is reaching its final stages of production with the addition of sign language interpretation and subtitles. It is hoped that the DVD will be ready to show partners at the final briefing seminar in February 2006

A new draft employment charter and statement of intent that will sit behind the charter has been developed, and these will be discussed shortly with senior management.

City Lit

Project aim

To improve staff monitoring processes by better encouraging disclosure

Outline of intended activity

The organisation has recognised that improved disclosure rates will help ensure the engagement of a broad spectrum of disabled people in the development of City Lit's Disability Equality Scheme. Less than 3% of staff are identified as having an impairment and this is predominantly made up of deaf staff. City Lit will look at mechanisms to currently survey staff and investigate how these might be improved. They also want to identify barriers to current recruitment, employment and advancement practices.

Progress to-date

Presentations have been made to the Executive team. Assumptions that the new duty to promote disability equality simply reflected the race equality duty were corrected, and explanations of the significant differences between these two sets of legislation were provided.

Research has led to the following findings:

- Questions on disability are asked in the diversity section of application forms. However, there is insufficient explanation around the question and it does not put into context why this information is requested. The guidance notes that accompany the application form do not offer further guidance.
- Job descriptions do not give guidance to potential applicants concerning whether someone with a disability that could potentially be accommodated in the post.
- Staff are surveyed with their pay slip every two years to ensure the information held in human Resources is correct. A question asking "Do you consider yourself to be disabled?" is asked; this is their only formal ongoing opportunity to declare a disability.

In addition, there is a lack of clarity on who can be approached in the organisation in order to discuss support requirements, and whether a positive or negative response would be obtained if such a discussion took place:

One employee came forward to discuss her disability and the barriers she had faced to disclosing it. She expressed support for the approach we were taking [the project]. The employee indicated that the barriers she faced were that her disability is not easy to explain or understand, is not visible and its effects on her work are not always the same. Furthermore she was not clear about who she should talk to and was not confident that declaring the disability would make any difference to her work situation as previously anxieties and questions had been misunderstood as complaints

The organisation has identified that, on occasion, the employment of a disabled member of staff has been viewed and managed from a negative standpoint rather than a positive one, with stereotypical assumptions made

When recruiting for enrolment staff in City Lit's new building staff in the Centre for Deaf People were keen for a deaf person to be appointed to an enrolment post. There was an assumption that a deaf person would have difficulty communicating with hearing people and would not be able to use the telephone. This was despite a number of the current deaf staff having few problems communicating and some who can use the telephone.

A number of proposals have been made, including

- writing an explicit statement with the selection criteria for all job descriptions that gives positive guidance to people with disabilities who may have difficulty fully meeting one or more of the selection criteria or the job duties.
- rewriting the questions on the application form concerning disabilities to encourage disclosure
- surveying current staff anonymously to gain a more accurate picture of the number with some type of disability. This survey will explain the current review of support for disabled staff and explain that the college intends to use the social model approach to disclosure and support
- developing a positive process that will allow staff with or who develop disabilities to declare that information to an appropriate person if required.

It is hope that some or all of these will be in place by the end of the project.

Working Men's College for Men and Women

Project aim

To improve admissions procedures particularly in terms of encouraging disclosure and passing on information to relevant staff

Outline of intended activity

A number of issues and gaps in admissions procedures have been identified, including difficulties encouraging disclosure of a disability if English is not a person's first language, concerns with the accessibility of the current enrolment form and inconsistent processes for passing information to relevant staff following disclosure. The project will be used to discuss issues with disabled learners in order to improve practice.

Progress to-date

Staff in admissions have worked with staff from skills for life and staff responsible for supporting disabled learners, to review current admissions procedures and documentation

Two members of staff have met with disabled learners on several occasions for suggestions on how to improve initial assessment and enrolment procedures. Initially, learners said that they felt uncomfortable being critical as they are still in regular contact with staff members they felt had not initially helped them at the college. Reassurance needed to be given by the two members of staff that learners' privacy would be maintained if they made criticisms. Learners said that:

- additional Learning Support is good and they got the support they needed.
- the additional learning support coordinator was very helpful
- they were not too embarrassed to reveal their disability
- teachers need more training on how to identify, assess and teach students with disabilities
- when teachers do inductions and the learning agreement, they do not cover disabilities
- they would like disabled student champions sitting on the equality committee
- the college should invest in more resources for students with disabilities especially for students with visual and/or hearing impairment

The issues identified on the enrolment form include

- the enrolment form layout is not learner friendly especially for students with disabilities. For example, for a person with a visual impairment, the font is too small and there is no enlarged version available
- more clarification is needed under the additional learning support section
- there is no instruction on how to fill out the form
- an enrolment process flow chart would be helpful for disabled students. The 'what to do' if you have a disability and 'where to go' should be part of the flow chart.
- the tick boxes on the enrolment are white and not very visible

The college has identified the need to improve communication processes if disclosure occurs after enrolment

Rahma is a 28-year old student from Somalia in a pre entry level ESOL course. Rahma's teacher knows that the student has hearing difficulties and is pregnant so the teacher has made necessary changes to meet the student's needs. The student has not disclosed a disability at interview, consequently the college data system doesn't show this, and so nobody else in college is aware of this.

These issues will be addressed through revised disclosure procedures. A further beneficial consequence to the project is that a disabled learner is now a student governor who sits on the quality and standards committee.

Learners also identified occasions when their experiences were not always positive. A proposal for staff disability awareness training has been developed and approved with a target of at least 90% staff participation.

Thomas Danby College

Project aim

To carry out an impact assessment of disclosure procedures

Outline of intended activity

The college anticipates that the impact assessment will reveal a number of areas for improvement together with staff training requirements. This latter aspect will link nicely to a second LSDA project that they are involved in, on 'developing a whole college approach to DDA training'.

Progress to-date

A task group has been established to carry out the impact assessment, involving staff from marketing, advice and guidance, the tutorial manager and the disability forum. National guidance has proved useful¹. Further guidance is about to be published, and a prepublication draft was distributed to the group². This has also proved useful particularly suggestions on the wording of application and enrolment forms. The college has realised that a medical, rather than a social model approach has been taken in some of the approaches to encouraging disclosure.

Forming a disabled learners forum proved more difficult than anticipated, and meeting with learners on an individual basis has proved more successful.

People in Action, a service for adults with learning difficulties, has also been involved in the impact assessment process, making recommendations concerning the application form which has now been changed. They recommended that personal contact with learners who declare they need support, should replace the current practice which is to send out a questionnaire.

Although disclosure arrangements within admissions processes have been streamlined and improved, the college has recognised that a holistic approach to encouraging disclosure is necessary.

¹ *'Disclosure, confidentiality and passing on of information'* by Liz Maudslay and Christine Rose, LSC Oct 2003

² *"Do you have a disability, yes or no? (Or is there a better way of asking?)*, by Christine Rose, LSDA 2006.

Both publications are available on the LSDA website <http://www.llda.org.uk>

Joseph is in his third year at College. Before he applied Joseph and his parents visited the College and met with the Additional Learning Needs Co-ordinator to discuss appropriate programmes and support arrangements. Joseph was accepted onto an Intermediate level programme. An individual learning plan was agreed and reviewed. Joseph successfully completed the course with appropriate support and moved on to the Advanced level programme. The tutors passed on all the relevant information to the next team and Joseph once again had a successful year. Joseph is part the way through term one of the second year of the programme and he is unhappy that he no longer has additional tutorial support to help him organise his work and break down the assignments into smaller chunks. Upon investigation I found that none of the information had been passed to the new course tutor and he was totally unaware of Joseph's support needs. It is clear that the College does not have an adequate system in place to check that information is passed on to the appropriate staff when staff leave.

This has highlighted the need to carry out an impact assessment of disclosure procedures outside of the admissions process.

King George V Sixth Form College

Project aim

To share good practice amongst partners on gathering information on disabled learner experiences

To carry out an impact assessment of various college documentation and processes

Outline of intended activity

The college has made considerable progress in gathering information on disabled learner experiences and the project provides an opportunity for this good practice to be shared. In addition, the college will carry out an impact assessment of publicity on the support available for disabled students together with the learner compliments and complaints forms

Progress to-date

Ten disabled students, including learners with physical and sensory impairments, and learners with mental health difficulties and asperger's syndrome, participate on a disabled learners forum. This has been an ideal group to contribute to the impact assessment process

Impact assessments have so far been carried out on the Disability Statement, the policy for staff with disabilities and the learner complaints leaflet. Revisions to the latter, for example, include

- a statement on the front cover stating that alternative formats are available
- a statement at the top of the form stating 'you may wish to get a friend / carer to help you [complete the sections]'
- replacement of certain words, for example 'teaching and learning' to replace 'curriculum delivery', 'try' to replace 'endeavour', 'as fairly as possible' to replace 'honest/fair/equitable way
- deletions of sections to simplify the form

Unlike a number of other organisations, the college has had little difficulty in encouraging disabled learners to participate in such a forum. The welcoming ethos and respect for diversity has played a part in this. The college also has effective mechanisms to encourage disclosure. For example, information about the support available is attractively produced and widely advertised. Open days have learners who act as ambassadors and these include disabled learners who openly talk about the support that is available and the benefits of disclosing a support requirement.

During the project, a situation arose that provided an additional opportunity to work together in partnership with an external organisation

A 16 year old student with Asperger's, in the care of Social Services, was arrested because she had become very distressed...she was handcuffed and held in the [police] cells from 9.30 pm to 9.30 am [the following day] without access to a social worker or responsible adult. When she arrived in college, very upset, I [the Vice Principal] made a number of phone calls, ending up with the Custody Officer who was very open and explained that they said

Police: 'Do you want us to contact your parents?'

Student: 'No'

Police: 'Sign here please, to say that you do not want them [contacted]'

According to police procedures, this is correct. However, the student has asperger's and takes questions literally, her parents are dead. She spent a night petrified in the cells and alarmed by loud noises.

As a result, the local police force is open to the college providing liaison and training for police officers, especially custody and junior liaison officers.

Oaklands College

Project aim

To establish disability equality champions as a mechanism to mainstream disability equality across the college.

Outline of intended activity

Much good practice exists within the college but, like many, embedding disability equality across the whole organisation remains a challenge. This project will focus on identifying, appointing and training new disability equality champions to help mainstream disability equality across the college. Curriculum and service areas will be involved. Staff will have new 'role' rather than 'job' description. The project will be overseen by the equality and diversity committee and a key remit of this group will be to establish how the experiences of disabled staff and learners can be more effectively used as a resource to promote disability equality

Interim report to be submitted

Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA)

Project aim

To carry out an impact assessment of various aspects of organisational activity including the 'events' policy and procedures

Outline of intended activity

The LSDA works with organisations in the Learning and Skills sector to improve the quality of post-16 education and training. Offering a wide selection of events ranging from high profile conferences through to regional network and training workshops is just one of the many activities that take place within the organisation. Staff attending the initial briefing sessions of this project are involved in events activities and chose to focus on improving the accessibilities of the events that the organisation provides

Progress to-date

The LSDA employs some 250 staff but disclosure of a disability is very low. Creative ways were therefore needed to establish a group of disabled people to be actively involved in the project. All staff were invited to an open session at a staff development day. This was marketed at staff who:

- were interested in disability issues
- knew or cared for someone with a disability or learning difficulty
- had a disability or learning difficulty themselves

A list of what was meant by disabilities and difficulties was attached to the invite, which specifically mentioned some areas where people might not consider themselves disabled, such as long term illness or dyslexia and related difficulties. The session was attended by 6 staff with a further 2 expressing interest.

An impact assessment of the events policy and procedure has been carried out. This policy and procedure covers access to all parts of an event from programming, marketing and registration, through to access issues on the day, such as venue and materials. The impact assessment process has been informed by

- Attendance at a Disability Rights Commission (DRC) seminar on creating accessible events.
- Consultation with external organisations, such as the RNIB, on specific access issues.

- Consultation on the draft document with internal colleagues and external organisations working with disabled people, such as Access Unlimited and Skill

In addition, LSDA's Customer Services staff all attended a half-day interactive seminar focused on areas of disability awareness. The session was designed to stimulate thinking around disability issues, focus participants on the barriers that disabled people might incur, including access to events, and start to build awareness of the positive difference that everyone can make to ensuring a fully participative delegate experience.

The project has highlighted the need to improve methods to encourage staff disclosure

One emerging message for staff concerns methods of communication around disclosure ...By openly celebrating the diversity of LSDA staff we can go a long way towards creating an environment where staff feel comfortable about disclosure. In addition we currently give only one chance to disclose a disability (before appointment) and make no other request for this once staff are in post. We need to develop multiple opportunities for staff to disclose and be clear about why the information is important.

The project has provided a mechanism to raise awareness and stimulate enthusiasm to improve disability equality, although staff recognise that mainstreaming this enthusiasm across the organisation will be a challenge.

The events policy will shortly be signed off by the LSDA executive team. Dissemination will be supported by an internal communication plan and a training programme is planned in early 2006 to ensure all those involved in events are aware of their duty, are able to meet that duty and know how to access further support.

Three national conferences on the requirements of the new duty to promote disability equality will take place between March and May 2006, as one of the strategies identified to disseminate the findings of this project. The LSDA events team will play an important role in these conferences and the sessions will be an opportunity to test out the accessibility and improvements of the new policy and procedures.

Emerging themes and key messages

Radical culture change is at the heart of the new duty to promote disability equality. Kotter (1995) identified a number of important steps or factors in effecting change, including the need to

- establish a sense of urgency
- create a vision
- communicate the vision
- form a powerful guiding coalition
- ensure leadership from the top
- build on strengths, plan for short term 'wins'

These have relevance as we reflect on the key themes and messages that have emerged from the sites' work as part of this project. Three other aspects are also worth reflection:

- invest in staff training and development
- engage effectively with disabled people
- focus on customer service, not disability

These are now each discussed in turn.

Establish a sense of urgency

All the partner sites recognised that they were working not only to a number of project deadlines but also to a deadline date of December 2006 when their Disability Equality Scheme must be in place. That these are new legal duties provide an important lever to raise the profile of improving disability equality. These helped focus staff energies, which is particularly important in a sector with a range of competing priorities.

Create and communicate the vision

Each site had a particular focus for their project depending on the outcome they wanted to achieve. Discussions at the first briefing day and subsequent discussions via email and telephone calls provided an opportunity to clarify and articulate the vision of the improved outcomes for disability equality that each organisation wanted to achieve. Each recognised the need to communicate this vision widely within their own organisation

Mechanisms to communicate the vision of the project, and the forthcoming duty to promote disability equality included

- publicising through college 'newspapers' and organisational intranet's
- short presentations to a variety of staff, such as curriculum and cross college managers, senior managers, governors
- writing and distributing short briefing papers to staff
- individual meetings with heads of department
- regular agenda items at meetings such as the equality and diversity committee
- distribution of the 'blue briefing'³ on the DED to staff
- presenting information to managers who were then responsible for disseminating the information at their team meetings
- 'hijacking' team meetings with an agenda item on the project
- Regular discussion of project progress with college teams to keep up momentum and profile
- Training and awareness sessions on the DED and the project

A key message from the project is to use every vehicle possible and to keep communicating with everyone, both internal and external to the organisation

Form a powerful guiding coalition

A strong theme running through the interim reports was the need to engage with staff in order to tackle the project as a team. Many recognized that the formation of such a team will facilitate the longer term requirement to develop the Disability Equality Scheme. With this longer term responsibility in mind, many of the sites chose to use existing forums and committees that would logically be involved in Scheme development.

Groups such as equality and diversity forums, and subcommittees of academic board, have been identified. In some sites, considerable numbers of staff are involved, for example Wakefield College has a team 30 strong. Thomas Danby has a Disability Forum attended by the Director of Learner and Enrichment Services, Inclusive Learning Manager, Additional Learning Needs Co-ordinator, Director of College Development, College Secretary, Human Resources Manager, Facilities Manager, Marketing Manager, Professional Development Officer and a Community Education Manager. This Forum reports to the Equality and Diversity Group which is chaired by the Vice Principal. This group is also attended by the Learning Centre

³ The LSDA has published a short briefing paper on the DED which has been distributed to all post 16 education providers. This is available on the LSDA website www.lsda.org.uk

Manager, the Information, Guidance and Tutorial Manager, a Curriculum Manager and a Community Education Manager.

The College of West Anglia had a DDA action group which carried responsibility for implementing the requirements of DDA Part4. This group will take on the overall responsibility for developing the Disability Equality Scheme, and is particularly effective as it is chaired by the Principal and consists of cross college managers 'who are able to make things happen'

The most successful sites, in terms of project progress and outcomes, recognised the need and were able to form strong teams, which included senior staff, from the outset. The least successful sites found difficulty in encouraging other staff to take responsibility, or had difficulty in persuading senior staff to be involved, and found themselves relatively marginalised or isolated.

Ensure leadership from the top

Everyone recognised the need to gain commitment and support from senior management. Many have groups that are chaired by either the Principal or Vice Principal.

A number of the partner site representatives are senior managers in their own right and this has been a significant factor contributing to the success of this project. As one site noted

'As my substantive post is as a senior manager with a strategic role this has enabled me to take the project to all strategic and management meetings. It has also meant that I have included the project in strategic plans such as the Adult Learning Plan 05/08 and the Three Year Development Plan updates. Also I am using quality improvement measures such as the SAR and Student and Tutor questionnaires to inform the consultation for the project'.

Two others noted

'Having the commitment and leadership from her [Principal, Helen Sexton] has been pivotal in enabling the project to move forward successfully'.

'A top down approach to driving this work is absolutely central to its success,

Build on strengths, plan for short term 'wins'

Although at different places, every organisation has made progress on their journey towards disability equality and many identified strengths on which to build, as well as areas to address, as they respond to the requirements of the DED.

Organisations making considerable progress with their project were able to communicate this widely and celebrate success with many. This was extremely motivating for staff and helped maintain the momentum, commitment and enthusiasm. Visible improvements provide an opportunity to celebrate, which helps accelerate the pace of change

Invest in staff training and development

Many organisations recognised the need to invest further time and resources to train and equip staff. This has taken many forms, including

- brief awareness raising sessions to a range of staff, such as managers, senior managers and governors
- In-depth one day training events on the requirements of the DED
- targeted training for particular staff carrying out specific activities such as impact assessments
- development activities for new job roles such as the role of a disability equality champion
- clarification of the significant differences between this new legislation and the duty to promote race equality
- attendance at external seminars such as a DRC seminar on creating accessible events

Staff development motivates people and helps them to work effectively and confidently. For some, staff development can build on existing skills and experiences, while for others, it can help move staff out of comfort zones, adding new areas of knowledge and understanding. Both are essential aspects for organisations to consider as they implement the new duty to promote disability equality.

Engage with disabled people

Success in engaging with disabled people has been mixed. Many experienced greater success in engaging with disabled learners than staff,

perhaps because as a sector we already have mechanisms in place to gather learner feedback to improve performance.

Taking a personal and direct approach seemed more successful than indirect approaches, such as asking for volunteers through newsletter articles or by email

Engaging with disabled people rests on the premise of knowing who they are. A related theme to engaging with disabled people, therefore, is the issue of disclosure. Some organisations were struggling to identify disabled staff that they could approach directly. Many recognised that simply asking staff the question 'do you have a disability' is unlikely to be an effective mechanism for encouraging disclosure. Some staff, for example, may not recognise that they have a disability, some may see no benefit in disclosing, some may be concerned at levels of confidentiality in place, and some may be concerned at the potential consequences of disclosure, real or otherwise.

An organisation which has an atmosphere where diversity is celebrated and a culture where learners are actively encouraged to feel safe to disclose is more likely to have staff feeling equally safe to disclose. Other aspects that encourage learners to disclose a disability that are also likely to encourage staff to disclose include

- An explanation of what is meant by 'disability'
- Questionnaires that take a social rather than medical model approach to disability, focusing on providing support and removing organisational barriers, rather than focusing on an individual's impairment
- An explanation of how confidentiality will be preserved
- The benefits of disclosure

Engaging with disabled people is a key underpinning requirement of the new duty to promote disability equality. Disabled people should be involved from the start in designing the framework for impact assessments, identifying the nature of data collected and prioritising relevant functions, for example. The involvement of disabled people throughout the process of the production and development of a scheme must be clearly evidenced in both the scheme and subsequent reporting processes. This will be clearly an important challenge for organisations as they move forward in implementing the requirements of legislation

Focus on customer service, not disability

The new duty provides a framework to tackle institutional barriers. A comment made by a disabled person at the second briefing day had an impact on more than one person attending

During a workshop discussion on the second briefing day a statement was made which had huge significance for me in being involved in work of this nature. It related to an issue about anticipatory duty or making a reasonable adjustment and the statement was that this was a 'customer service issue and not disability issue'. This sums up for me the challenge of embedding disability equality into College activity so that it ceases to become the role of the few and becomes the responsibility of all.

Final comments

The staff involved in this project have given considerable amounts of time and energy to improving disability equality in their own organisation. Many have demanding job roles and multiple responsibilities. It has been a pleasure to work with staff who have displayed such professionalism, dedication and commitment and I look forward to continuing to work with everyone for the remaining duration of the project and beyond.

References

Kotter J. (1995) Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail, Harvard Business Review, March- April