

ASSEMBLY PARLIAMENTARY SERVICE

DRAFT DISABILITY EQUALITY SCHEME

DECEMBER 2006 – MAY 2007

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1. This is the Assembly Parliamentary Service (APS) Disability Equality Scheme. The APS exists to support the members of the National Assembly for Wales and to ensure its successful functioning as a democratic body. This involves a broad range of activities including:

- Providing Assembly Members (AMs) with the accommodation, facilities, equipment and information they need to do their jobs
- Supporting Assembly Committees and Plenary
- Providing translation, interpretation and reporting services which ensure that the Assembly can operate in English and Welsh
- Providing information and education about the Assembly to the public
- Ensuring that visitors to the Assembly are enabled to access and enjoy the Assembly buildings and contribute democratically
- Recruiting staff to do this work

1.2. The APS is politically neutral. It operates under the guidance and direction of the Presiding Officer and the all-party House Committee. Day to day operations are delegated to the Clerk to the Assembly.

1.3. We come into contact with disabled people through the delivery of all our services including:

Those provided to AMs and their staff who may be disabled themselves and / or use our services in engaging with disabled constituents; and,

Visitors to Assembly buildings including those who contribute to the democratic process, for example, by providing evidence to Assembly Committees.

Additionally, a number of us who work within APS are disabled.

1.4. We want to achieve equal outcomes for disabled people. Here are some examples of what we mean:

A disabled AM should have the equipment and working conditions they need in order to carry out their role as fully as a non disabled AM.

The same should be the case for APS members of staff. Additionally, we want disabled people to consider us as a potential employer. This means making sure that they are aware of our organisation and values. It also means that we have to make sure that both existing and potential disabled staff feel confident enough to make their needs and views known so that we can respond to them.

Disabled visitors to the Senedd, Pierhead Building and Assembly buildings in Colwyn Bay should be able to access and enjoy the buildings and attend Assembly proceedings as easily as non-disabled visitors can.

1.5. Our Scheme will run from December 2006, when it will be published, to May 2007. Under the Government of Wales Act 2006, the current National

Assembly for Wales will cease to exist in May 2007. It will be replaced with an executive (the Welsh Assembly Government) and a legislature (the National Assembly for Wales). A National Assembly for Wales Commission will be established and it is likely that the staff of the Assembly Commission will carry out much of the work of the APS as well as additional services, particularly in relation to new law-making responsibilities.

1.6. We hope that our Disability Equality Scheme will ensure that we are working towards equality for disabled people until May 2007. We also hope it will provide the newly established Assembly Commission with a strong and well informed basis on which to base their own Scheme and established ways of working which ensure that all staff are engaged in actions to promote equality for disabled people.

CHAPTER 2: THE DEVELOPMENT OF OUR DISABILITY EQUALITY SCHEME

2.1. The key features in the development of the APS Disability Equality Scheme include:

- The Assembly's duty to promote equality of opportunity under the Government of Wales Act 1998
- The Assembly's adoption of the social model of disability and the principle of equality mainstreaming
- The ways in which we have involved disabled people in the development of the Scheme
- The development of an impact assessment process which aimed to engage as many APS staff as possible

The duty to promote equality under the Government of Wales Act 1998

2.2. Under sections 48 and 120 of the Government of Wales Act 1998 the National Assembly for Wales has a statutory duty to ensure that equality of opportunity for all people is embedded in its work. The Assembly's Equality of Opportunity Committee has a key role in monitoring the work undertaken by APS and the Assembly Government to promote equality. As a result of this duty, the impact of much of the work of APS on disabled people has already been considered and actions already taken to address any discrimination. The requirements of the Disability Equality Duty have given us an opportunity to consider what we are doing well, where we might improve and where the gaps might be.

The social model of disability and equality mainstreaming

2.3. In 2002, the Assembly adopted the social model of disability as the basis for all its work on disability. It argues that disability is about the exclusion of certain people from social, economic, cultural and political activities because their personal requirements which result from impairments have not been taken into account in the design of facilities and arrangement of activities. The APS Disability Equality Scheme is based on this approach and so seeks to remove environmental, physical, social and attitudinal barriers where possible. The APS access officer has a key role in advising APS staff as to how this can be achieved.

2.4. In July 2004 the Equality of Opportunity Committee published a report of a major policy review called Mainstreaming Equality in the Work of the National Assembly. A mainstreaming approach means that 'equality issues should be included from the outset as an integral part of the policy-making and service delivery process and the achievement of equality should inform all aspects of the work of every individual within an organisation'. The report made a total of 27 recommendations which were accepted by the Assembly Government and the House Committee, which directs the work of APS. The Assembly's Equality of Opportunity monitors the implementation of these recommendations.

2.5. Again, preparations for the Disability Equality Duty have enabled us to review the actions we have taken to ensure that barriers are being removed and equality mainstreamed throughout our work.

Involving disabled people

2.6. Disabled people have provided information, suggestions and feedback which has been incorporated into the development of the Scheme in a number of ways. For example:

Visitor feedback: Visitors to the Senedd and Assembly visitor and exhibition centres provide both formal and informal feedback on their experiences. Representatives from a variety of disability organisations have also contacted us to tell us their views. As a result we have a better understanding of what has enhanced the accessibility of the Assembly buildings, for example, the adult changing facilities in the Senedd, and the ways in which we could make improvements, for example, to the signage at the front of the

Senedd so that wheelchair using visitors are directed to the entrance ramps.

Engagement events: In April, May and June 2006 APS and the Assembly Government ran a series of engagement events in Mold, Aberystwyth and Cardiff. The aim of these events was to engage disabled people from different parts of Wales in helping us to identify priorities and to gain an indication of whether the actions we were already taking to promote equality for disabled people were effective. The voluntary sector umbrella organisation Disability Wales contributed to these events by helping us to contact disabled individuals and disability groups from across Wales to ensure that as many people as possible were aware of the events and by facilitating some of the discussions. Over 100 people attended these events. A summary report of the key themes which emerged during the events was produced and made available to all stakeholders.

Equality of Opportunity Committee's Disabled Young Persons Reference Group: A reference group of disabled young people from across Wales was established at the beginning of 2005 to advise and guide the Equality of Opportunity Committee in its review of services for disabled young people. The group has provided feedback on their experiences of providing advice to the Committee.

Staff involvement: We have attempted to involve as many staff as possible in the preparation of the Scheme, a proportion of whom are disabled. We are aware that the number of disabled staff who have identified themselves as such in APS official records is an under-representation of those who would be covered by the disability equality duty legislation. A draft of this scheme will be sent to all staff for comment alongside an invitation for staff to identify themselves as disabled if they wish. They will be invited to contribute to a focus group. By involving staff in the development of an impact assessment tool (see below), we also became aware that many non-disabled APS staff have an insight into disability through their relationships with disabled family members and friends.

Contractor feedback: We will send a copy of our Scheme to a disabled person who was hired to undertake a short project within

APS and will ask them to comment on their experiences of working within APS over that period.

The impact assessment process

2.7. As part of our Disability Equality Scheme preparations we engaged an external organisation, Inclusion21, to help us develop an impact assessment process which would enable us to identify the ways in which our work and the way we do it impacts on disabled people. This involved:

Engaging as many staff as possible in the process. This involved increasing their awareness of both anti-discrimination legislation and the new Disability Equality Duty and encouraging them to play a role in impact assessing, action planning and making positive changes to promote equality for disabled people.

Preparing 'champions' or lead facilitators across the different parts of APS. These champions will have a key role in assessing the implications of the Duty in their part of the organisation. They will also encourage colleagues to take positive action in partnership with those in APS who have a more specific equality role including the APS access and equality development officers and the HR equality lead.

2.8. Staff were encouraged to engage with the process through a competition, a questionnaire and individual and group meetings including a number held with members of the APS senior management team. As a result, the impact assessment and action planning process has directly involved over 20 members of staff, including some disabled people. We hope that the involvement of staff across the organisation will increase the likelihood that our Scheme will make a difference.

CHAPTER 3: THE IMPACT OF OUR WORK ON DISABLED PEOPLE

3.1. The impact assessment process has enabled us to identify the main ways in which the work we do and the ways in which we do it impacts, or has the potential to impact, on disabled people. The key areas of impact are as follows:

Assembly Members and their staff

Provision of accessible accommodation, facilities and equipment within Assembly buildings

Provision of information and research to help Members carry out their role, for example, within Assembly Committees and within their constituencies. Ensuring that the information and research provided takes account of the experiences of disabled people

Provision of support in Assembly proceedings such as Plenary and Committees. For example, advising Members on who they might wish to invite to Committee to provide evidence about a policy area from a disability perspective

Provision of financial advice, including that relating to adaptations to constituency offices to make them accessible

Supporting Committees to publicise their work through the media, including that which focuses on service delivery, policy and legislation which impacts on disabled people

APS STAFF

Provision of accommodation, facilities and equipment within Assembly buildings

Ensuring that internal communication is accessible to all staff and effective in communicating information about disability related issues

HR policies. Ensuring that APS HR policies do not discriminate against disabled people but promote equality in recruitment, development and working practices

THE PUBLIC

Ensuring that Assembly buildings are accessible and safe

Provision of accessible information and education about the Assembly

Do our external contractors meet the same standards as APS in

terms of their equality policies?

Feedback from disabled people

3.2. The following issues have been identified as important by disabled people. Our response is incorporated into our action plan which can be found in chapter 4.

Building Accessibility

Generally, Assembly buildings and external buildings used by the Assembly are physically accessible. The disabled parking spaces are valued and used and where a space has not been pre-booked staff are usually able to provide one. The adult changing facilities in the Senedd are valued. However, some problems have been reported:

A disability equality duty engagement event had to be postponed because of access problems which arose from poor communication about the needs of those attending. The APS booking procedure has now been adapted to ensure that anyone booking a room is prompted to provide information about requirements. The meeting was successfully rescheduled.

Some wheelchair users and people with impaired mobility have experienced difficulties in moving through the Assembly Office due to the weight and handle position of the doors

There is a need for clearer signage around the public entrance to the Senedd so that people can distinguish between disabled access ramps and graduated features which do not lead to the entrance

Some of the comments we have received have prompted us to consider whether we need to communicate more effectively to explain why there are occasions when an accessibility compromise has been reached. For example, some disabled people expressed disappointment that the Chamber was not entirely flat which necessitated the incorporation of a moving platform to ensure accessibility for any Members with mobility impairments. The original decision was made in order to ensure that broadcasting from the Senedd is as clear as possible.

Engaging with Assembly Members

The general physical accessibility of Assembly buildings and external buildings used by the Assembly and the provision of British Sign Language and other translation services and alternative formats is an encouragement for disabled people to engage with the Assembly as a democratic institution and with their own Assembly Members. However, disabled people suggested that these areas could be improved:

Not all constituency offices are accessible.

Awareness of regional and subject committees should be raised so that disabled people have a better opportunity to engage with the Assembly and shape the political agenda.

The Assembly's Equality of Opportunity Committee established a disabled young person's reference group to help them in their review of services for disabled young people. The young people reported that, whilst they had enjoyed being part of the group and felt they had a better understanding of the Assembly, there was room for improvement in that:

They often found it difficult to follow Committee proceedings because of the complicated language used and the fact that several questions were asked in one go before any answers were given.

They were unsure how their views and comments were being used to support the Committee in their policy review.

In response to these comments:

The young people were invited to make their comments first with any questions asked one at a time

They have used some imaginative ways to make their points including the use of video, puppets and a chat show format

A summary of the Committee's final report will be made available in easy read format, Braille and BSL and the young people of the reference group will be asked for their comments.

Working in the Assembly

The equipment needs of staff within the Assembly are regularly assessed and we have had positive feedback from staff who require specific equipment or adaptations so that they can carry out their job effectively and in safety. We are aware from the informal involvement of staff in the preparations for our Scheme that a number of staff who would be covered by the disability equality duty legislation have not identified themselves as such. Whilst this is a matter of choice, we want to make sure that all disabled staff feel able to identify themselves as such and feel confident to make any requests relating to equipment or conditions and to speak up if they feel they are being harassed or bullied because they are disabled.