

**Note of the Consultation Meeting on the Education and Library Boards'/Staff Commission's Interim Action Plan on the Disability Duties held on Tuesday, 12 June 2007 in Disability Action at 11.00 a.m.**

**Present**

|                 |                  |                  |                      |
|-----------------|------------------|------------------|----------------------|
| John Curran     | CMSU             | Patricia Bray    | Disability Action    |
| Linda McGowan   | BELB             | Rosaleen Dempsey | RNIB NI              |
| Alf Armstrong   | NEELB            | May Green        | Abode Housing Assoc. |
| Stan McIvor     | WELB             | Claire Lavery    | RNID                 |
| Helen Leith     | CCMS             | Paschal McKeown  | Mencap               |
| Deirdre Vaugh   | Staff Commission | Irene Orr        | Lisburn Access Group |
| Patricia Murray | Staff Commission | Angela Thompson  | Reconnect            |
|                 |                  | Mary Wright      | AFASIC               |

**1. Opening Remarks**

- 1.1** John welcomed everyone to the meeting and thanked Disability Action for the use of their offices and Maria Hipsley for all her work in sending out the mailshot. He explained that the purpose of the meeting was to consult on the Boards'/Staff Commission's Interim Action Plan in relation to the new Disability Duties. He said he felt the key issue was to try and change peoples' attitudes towards people with disabilities, after that everything else should fall into place.
- 1.2** Deirdre stated that she wished to highlight a number of issues before inviting consultees to comment on the approach adopted by the Boards/Staff Commission. She pointed out that not all Boards were represented at the meeting as it was felt that it would be easier to be less formal with smaller numbers in attendance. She did however confirm that all five Boards were fully committed to the Disability Duties and that the information from the meeting would be shared with the other Boards.

Deirdre explained that the Boards/Staff Commission had sought and had been granted an exemption from the requirement to produce a Disability Action Plan since they would cease to exist on the 31 March 2008. She said that In seeking the exemption the Boards/Staff Commission had outlined the actions they proposed to take in the interim period which would allow them to implement a programme of work which would pave the way for the development of a comprehensive Disability Action Plan by the new Education and Skills Authority (ESA) which was envisaged would be operational from 1 April 2008.

She said that the interim action plan complemented work already underway over the past five years in relation to the implementation of the Boards/Staff Commission's Equality Schemes and she highlighted the following areas where considerable progress had been made:-

- the review and development of policies as a result of conducting EQIAs and consultation and engagement with the community and voluntary sector;
- provision of awareness training for Board/Staff Commission staff;
- development of training materials in partnership with Focus Consultancy (Disability Action) who also provided the training for Board/Staff Commission staff;
- The organisation of a seminar in partnership with Disability Action, Mencap, RNIB and Action Mental Health on Reasonable Adjustments for People with Disabilities in the Recruitment and Selection Process;
- development of a positive action programme for people with disabilities;

- development of internal guidance for Human Resource Staff on Reasonable Adjustments; and
- the considerable investment by the Boards over the past five years to improve access to schools, public libraries and the Boards' transport fleets.

In recognising the progress made Deirdre indicated that there was an area where the Boards/Staff Commission could have done better and this was in relation to consulting children and young people.

- 1.3** John also felt that the Boards may have been remiss in not conducting an 'acid test' and asking young people, who had been through the school system, for their views on the education which had been provided for them.
- 1.4** Deirdre reported that the Boards/Staff Commission were at the final stage of drafting a report which reviewed measures already taken and/or proposed to promote equality of opportunity for people with disabilities. She explained that the structure of the report was similar to the Boards'/Staff Commission's five year review in that it identified:-
- what has been achieved;
  - what else could be done; and
  - action recommended.

She pointed out that due to time constraints the Boards/Staff Commission would not have time to implement the recommendations, however, the report would be given to the ESA to take forward and build on it.

Deirdre then invited feedback on the general approach adopted by the Boards.

## **2. Comments on the Approach Adopted**

- 2.1** Paschal supported the approach adopted by the Boards/Staff Commission and consultees also expressed their support.

In the discussion that followed consultees raised a number of points under the following categories:-

### **2.2 RESEARH**

#### **The experience of children and young people of the school system**

- The possibility of the Boards/Staff Commission carrying out research was raised.
- Irene (Lisburn Access Group) indicated that she worked with a young girl called Jennifer who had attended Fleming Fulton and mainstream education and said that she knew Jennifer was anxious to get her experience of the school system raised and she undertook to ask Jennifer if she would be willing to take part in any research the Boards/Staff Commission may undertake.

#### **Experience of Bullying**

- The issue of children with disabilities being bullied in schools was raised and it was noted that the following research had recently been published and may be helpful to the Boards/Staff Commission to draw on:-

|        |                              |
|--------|------------------------------|
| Mencap | Disablist Bullying           |
| RNIB   | Eye Matter;<br>In our sights |
| RNID   | Big D and Wee d              |
| NIDYA  | The Right to Learn           |
| NICCY  | Children's Rights            |

In discussion It was highlighted that while the Boards and the schools had done considerable work in relation to the problem of bullying it was still a major problem.

It was suggested that contact be made with young people from the various disability groups to gather information on their experience of the school system and in particular whether they had experience of being bullied.

It was noted that AFASIC, Disability Action, RNIB, RNID, and Mencap had either young peoples' forums or young people on training programmes and that arrangements could be made to contact these young people to ask if they would be willing to take part in any proposed research.

## 2.3 **TRAINING**

### **Teachers**

- It was highlighted that disability awareness training should be provided for teachers and should involve teachers' examining their attitude to children with disabilities.
- It was stressed that there was a need to ensure that the understanding which trained staff in special schools have in relation to the problem of bullying was not lost.

*Deirdre indicated that the Boards/Staff Commission had passed on the views of the community and voluntary sector to the Teacher Training Colleges that diversity training should be part of the training programme for teachers and had been informed at that time that diversity training was optional and was not part of the training programme. She referred to the new citizenship programme being rolled out to schools and said that teachers had to go through diversity training in order to deliver this programme.*

### **Staff in Boards**

- To ensure maximum understanding and awareness of problems facing people with disabilities the training should be delivered by someone who has a disability.
- Disability awareness training should be moving to a 'rights' based approach.

*Deirdre indicated that she agreed with this view, however, she pointed out that due to the large numbers requiring awareness training the Boards had conducted this training in-house and had arranged that disability awareness training for frontline staff was delivered by facilitators from disability organisations.*

## 2.4 **Transition Officers**

- It was noted that the Boards, the Department of Employment and Learning and the Department of Health and Social Services employed Transition Officers/Careers Officers who provided specialist advice for children with disabilities on making the transition from school to employment. RNID indicated that they would be keen to work

with the officers from all three organisations with a view to combining resources for the benefit of children and young people with disabilities.

## **2.5 General Comments**

- Concern was expressed that there appeared to be a hierarchy of disabilities which focused on visible disabilities;
- The need to ensure that the good practice and progress made to date was not lost was stressed;
- It was highlighted that some architects were more interested in achieving a good design for a building rather than ensuring easy access for people with disabilities and it was emphasised that it was important to achieve the right balance;
- The increasing number of parents who have a disability was highlighted and the need to ensure that reasonable adjustments were made was emphasised, for example, providing Signer/Interpreter services for deaf parents of children in schools to facilitate parental involvement in transfer arrangements, teacher/parent interviews etc.

## **3. Way Forward**

Arising out of the discussion the following action points were agreed:-

- The need to make contact with the Education and Training Inspectorate to make them aware of consultees' comments and ask them to review how they assess pastoral care in schools.
- Contact the Northern Ireland Anti-Bullying Forum to find out if they are doing any work in relation to children with disabilities and obtain an update on the work that they are currently undertaking.
- Contact the Department of Education to get an update on the research carried out by the University of Ulster and check if this research included children with disabilities.
- Put a proposal to the Department of Education to conduct research into the problem of children and young people with disabilities being bullied at school.
- the Boards/Staff Commission to work with the disability groups to agree the structure for the research questionnaires.
- Consultees to forward to Patricia Murray any questions they would like included in the questionnaires.

## **4. Closing Comments**

**4.1** Deirdre reported that the Boards/Staff Commission's Interim Action Plan and Review Report would be placed on the agenda for the next Joint Consultative Forum (JCF) meeting to be held in October 2007 to ensure a broad based discussion. She explained that the JCF was a body comprising representatives from the community, voluntary and trade union sectors and the education public authorities and she asked those consultees not already on the JCF's mailing list to let Patricia know if they would like to be included on the list to receive the Forum's Quarterly Updates and notification of Forum events.

**4.2** John thanked everyone for taking the time to attend the consultation meeting and for their valuable contributions.