

Minutes of the Meeting of the Disability Advisory Group held on Wednesday 6th April 2011 at 10.30am in Room 21

Present: Mr Tony Logue (Chair)
Mr Peter Wilson (Cedar Foundation)

Mr Andrew Dougal (Chest Heart and Stroke NI)
Mr David Mann (RNIB)
Ms Karen McGrath (Disability Action)
Ms Sharon Redmond (RNID)

Apologies: Lady Christine Eames (Leonard Cheshire)
Ms Paschal McKeown (MENCAP)
Ms Patricia Bray (Disability Action)

In Attendance: Mrs Nicola Shephard (Secretary)
Mr James Gilsenan (Equality Manager)
Ms Christine Watts
Ms Tracey Wilson
Ms Louise Simpson

1. Introduction

Mr Logue welcomed everyone to the meeting and invited members to introduce themselves. Mr Logue congratulated Mr Gilsenan on his temporary appointment as Equality Manager.

2. Draft Publication Policy

Mr Logue welcomed Ms Wilson to the meeting. Ms Wilson explained that as part of the Equality Scheme, she was tasked with developing a publication policy and guidelines for staff. The aim of the policy is to ensure that all Secretariat staff take a consistent and efficient approach to ensuring that information is made accessible to all users, and that the Assembly remains compliant with accessibility of information. Ms Wilson provided an outline of the document, explaining that it is in line with policies produced by other public sector organisations.

Ms McGrath commented that the policy should be integrated into the wider Communications Strategy rather than remain a separate document, and Mr Mann pointed out the importance of ensuring that all staff are fully conversant in the procedures. Ms Wilson agreed with the comments and explained that she was producing comprehensive guidelines to accompany the policy.

Action: Mrs Shephard to forward the draft Publications Policy and accompanying guidelines to members.

3. Website Update

Ms Wilson provided the group with an overview of progress to date in relation to taking forward the web project. She further spoke about the content management system and the specifications concerning the web project. Ms Wilson provided the group with visual boards showing what the website will look like and explained the reasons for the choice of graphics. She explained that most of the content will be text based and that consideration has been given to ensure that the information remains as accessible as possible.

Ms McGrath enquired as to what user testing will take place, pointing out that British standards state that formal user testing is essential. Ms Wilson explained that this hasn't yet been fully considered, but that she will be keen to include the members in user testing and will provide them with links to test sites in due course. Ms Wilson went on to explain that staff had been involved in focus groups regarding the design and content of the website.

Mr Mann commented that British standards have recently changed and that it is important to ensure that these are being met at this stage, before the project progresses further. Ms Wilson reassured the group that the requirement to meet or exceed the minimum standards was included in the contract with the design company. Mr Mann expressed concern that the design company should not prioritise an attractive design over the content. Ms Wilson explained that the designers have already prepared four 'mock' pages and she is content that the designers are prioritising accessibility.

Mr Mann emphasised that accessibility and user friendly is key and occasionally there may be preferable ways to deliver information such as text message, radio advertisements or on disc. If paper based is essential then it is paramount that thought is given to the size of the text and consideration is given to making it tactile.

Ms McGrath expressed difficulties that Disability Action have in extracting information from the NI Assembly website as the block of text are large and not indexed. Ms Wilson provided reassurance that this will be radically improved, with text being more easily searched and will be updated more regularly.

The group also discussed the importance of providing information on upcoming business as at the moment little notice is given. Mr Logue explained that this is difficult as often business is decided by committees at fairly short notice, but that the web team will look at ways to ensure that the information is made available as soon as possible.

Action: Ms Wilson to provide the group with further details on user testing.

4. Audit of Inequalities

Mr Logue explained that an audit of inequalities has been completed and development of the Equality Scheme is progressing. The audit of inequalities identified some key themes such as participation, good relations and access. Mr Logue also explained that the external audit on Good Relations is progressing and due for completion in June 2011. The audit revealed some surprising comments from staff and further work is planned in this area, including a conference in September involving representatives from Church Groups and community organisations. Other work within the Assembly has been improving engagement with the wider public including that of the youth panel, and the Northern Ireland Assembly Business Trust. The equality scheme will be developed over the coming months and subject to full consultation. Mr Logue agreed to share the audit of inequalities with the group prior to the consultation.

Action: Mrs Shephard to issue audit of inequalities.

5. Disability Action Plan

Mr Logue explained that a draft disability action plan has been completed and is currently being considered by the Assembly Commission. Ms McGrath emphasised the importance of producing qualitative information as well as quantitative. Mr Logue agreed and said that measures are being taken to improve data collection within the Assembly.

6. Tour Script

Ms Simpson provided the group with an update on the review of the tour script. She explained that they have improved their processes in a variety of ways. As tours are booked, access questions are asked meaning that requirements are known in advance. Extensive training was undertaken by RNID, RNIB and disability awareness. New whispering tour equipment has been purchased as the great hall tends to have substantial background noise. With regards the content of the tour script, Ms Simpson explained that she contacted Westminster for advice on how their script was developed, and she has decided to ask representatives from various organisations to participate in a tour and offer feedback.

Mr Mann agreed that there should be one script for everyone rather than separate scripts for different groups. The group agreed to provide representatives to participate in a tour and provide feedback.

Action: Mrs Shephard and Ms Simpson to arrange tours with the group.

7. Disability Placement Scheme

Ms Simpson explained the background behind the disability placement scheme. She explained that it was agreed that rather than run a separate work experience program for disabled students, the current work experience programme would be extended to incorporate disabled students, with appropriate adjustments. Ms Simpson explained that 24 students participated in the programme over the last term, and 3 were disabled. The program received very positive feedback. Some discussion took place around the selection criteria and age of participants. Ms Simpson explained that participants were selected on a 'first come first served' basis and that it was limited to school aged people only due to insurance restrictions. She also explained that one day programmes could be tailored for groups of young adults.

8. Access Issues

Ms Watts provided an update on progress with improving access to Parliament Buildings. She explained that the changing places facility was underway and the estimated completion date in the 5th May. The Commission have approved the installation of an access ramp at the front of the building, and discussions are on-going regarding the symmetry of the building.

Mr Mann expressed concern that he is still as yet to be security checked on entry to the building. Ms Watts said that she will raise this issue with the head of security.

Meeting ended at 11.35pm

Tony Logue
Head of Commission Support and Compliance Unit