

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE DISABILITY ADVISORY GROUP HELD ON WEDNESDAY 25TH NOVEMBER 2009 AT 2:00PM IN ROOM 29

Present: Mr Tony Logue (Chair)
Ms Maria Bannon (NI Assembly – Equality Manager)
Mr Peter Wilson (Cedar Foundation)
Mr David Mann (RNIB)
Ms Paschal McKeown (MENCAP)
Ms Ann Madden (Chest Heart and Stroke NI)
Lady Christine Eames (Leonard Cheshire)
Ms Orla McCann (Disability Action)

In Attendance: Ms Nicola Shephard (Secretary)
Ms Marie Austin
Mr Oliver Bellew
Ms Tracey Wilson
Mr Jeff Mochan

1 INTRODUCTION AND WELCOME

Mr Logue welcomed everyone to the meeting and thanked members for agreeing to participate. Mr Logue invited the members to introduce themselves, and he introduced Maria Bannon and explained that she has recently been appointed as the Assembly's Equality Manager.

1.1 BACKGROUND

Mr Logue provided the group with some background information on the Assembly Commission. He also explained that a number of key priority work areas had been identified within the Disability Action Plan and he confirmed that the Assembly is committed to wider consultation on these areas. Additionally he hoped that the Disability Advisory Group could provide input to these key areas at this and future meetings.

1.2 SCREENING EXERCISE

Ms Bannon informed the group of the proposed timeframe for the consultation on the Commission's screening report and draft timetable for equality impact assessments. Ms Bannon explained that the consultation period would begin in December 2009, and described how and to whom the document would be distributed, and the process for interested parties to provide feedback. She also confirmed that the document would be made available in alternative formats, such as Braille, on request. Ms McKeown enquired as to the theme of the document, and was informed by Ms Bannon that the document is broken down by Directorate.

2 GUIDE FOR WITNESSES APPEARING BEFORE ASSEMBLY COMMITTEES

Mr Logue introduced Ms Austin to the group. Ms Austin introduced the document providing a Guide for Witnesses Appearing before Assembly Committees. She explained how a review of the document flagged up a lack of information for witnesses with disabilities.

Ms Austin went on to explain the amendments that have now been made to the document and invited questions from the group.

Mr Mann noted that the guide currently recommends that if the Committee is aware that an individual with a visual impairment is present at the meeting, members and witnesses would introduce themselves verbally, rather than rely only on their nameplates. Mr Mann asked could this become standard practice for every meeting. Ms Austin agreed to this suggestion.

The group discussed the introduction to the document, and comments were made that it was perhaps too technical, and that there is more detail in it than required. Ms Austin agreed to review this.

Ms McKeown agreed that the level of detail could present a barrier to some individuals; she then went on to say that she recently received the document herself as a witness, and that she had found it very useful. Ms McKeown went on to ask if there could be a process that when an individual informs the Committee of a disability, that the Committee then follow this up by providing further materials in a relevant format, rather than the individual having to go on to request this. Ms Austin agreed to review this process.

Ms McKeown also asked for clarity regarding the term 'wheelchair user' used within the document, and asked if this included individuals with mobility difficulties. Ms Bannon confirmed that it did.

Ms Austin agreed to accept further comments from the group in the days following the meeting, and asked that they be submitted through Ms Bannon.

ACTION: MARIE AUSTIN / MARIA BANNON

3 COMMISSION WEB PROJECT UPDATE AND RELATED AREAS (USEFUL TECHNOLOGIES)

Mr Logue explained that the Assembly Commission had approved funding for re-development of the Assembly website, with a view to making it more user-friendly, accessible and up to date. Mr Logue introduced Ms Wilson to the group.

Ms Wilson went on to provide further detail on the plans for the website. Ms Wilson emphasised how important accessibility to the website is, and described the tools that may be used to ensure this, such as Browsealoud, Videos, Audio and larger font options. She also informed the group that the Assembly would strive to reach AAA Standard for accessibility.

Ms Madden informed the group that the Chest, Heart and Stroke NI website had recently been redesigned to include the option of 3 font sizes, and to include more pictures and to ensure that plain English is used. She said that they had received positive feedback on the changes from users, and that it appeared to be working well.

Mr Mann said he was pleased that the Assembly were aiming for AAA compliance, but pointed out that this relates to accessibility, and that making it user friendly would be also important. Ms McKeown pointed out that AAA Standard doesn't satisfactorily take into account individuals with a learning disability, and that this would need to be looked at also.

Mr Mann explained that the RNIB has much relevant information on its site relating to accessibility, and that they can also be contacted for further guidance.

Ms McCann suggested that user testing should be carried out during the process. Ms Wilson explained that market research would be carried out initially and Ms Bannon confirmed that the Disability Advisory Group's clients will be included in this.

Mr Wilson suggested that a website separate from the corporate site may be useful, as it could be made more interactive, as the current site contains a lot of information.

Ms Wilson explained that the Assembly now has informal pages on Twitter, Facebook, etc that allow for feedback. She went on to explain that the aim is to make the procedural business more accessible and to include more captioning to make it clearer to users. She also said that making the site interactive, with methods for feedback from the user, is a priority.

Lady Eames asked if consideration would be given to the ages of user groups. Ms Wilson explained that the education service was developing a sub site for students and that this would include extra videos, pictures, etc. Lady Eames went onto to enquire as to the timescale, and Ms Wilson explained that it is hoped that the new website will be operational by September 2010, with the Education Service site going live some time before that. The group responded positively to this timescale.

The group discussed the budget for the project, and Ms Wilson explained that much of this would be spent on training key staff in each directorate to update the site.

ACTION: TRACEY WILSON / MARIA BANNON

4 TV SIGNALLING PROJECT UPDATE

Ms Bannon explained that Mr Brendan O'Neill, Head of the Information Systems Office, had asked for her to provide an update to the group regarding the upgrade of TV signalling. Ms Bannon explained that a further update on the project would be provided at the next meeting. Mr Mann commented that some bigger screens may be beneficial.

5 FRONT OF HOUSE PROJECT

Mr Logue provided an update on the changes introduced following a review on security. He explained that there were some limitations in the area of parking and that responsibility for this lay with the Department of Finance and Personnel.

Mr Mochan informed the group on the current progress of the Front of House Project, and explained that the aim is to have established a Front of House/Reception service by February 2010. He explained that this has arisen from the Engagement Strategy and Security Review and following feedback from visitors.

Mr Mochan clarified that this project relates to the inside reception area of the building and Mr Logue explained that access to the front of Parliament Buildings would be addressed separately.

Mr Mochan explained that the project is at a very early stage, and that he would welcome comments from the group. The group went on to discuss staff training and Ms Bannon discussed furniture and signage.

Mr Mann said that the RNIB recently held an event in Parliament Buildings, and said that attendees had praised the staff for their assistance. However he went on to explain that on arrival to the Building today, he had not been subject to the normal security process on entering the building, which caused him concern. Ms Bannon said that she would raise this concern with the appropriate Director.

Mr Mochan informed the group that he would keep them updated and ask for input as appropriate.

ACTION: JEFF MOCHAN / MARIA BANNON

6 CUSTOMER FEEDBACK FORM

Ms Bannon invited comments on the customer feedback form.

Mr Mann explained that the form being a PDF version wasn't suitable, and that it should be available as a Word document and in alternative formats.

Ms McCann commented that consistency needs to be applied throughout, with regards capital letters, etc.

Ms Madden suggested that highlighting be used to emphasise parts and that perhaps more pictures could be used where appropriate. She also suggested that perhaps a more aphasia friendly option could be made available as an alternative to include more graphics. She went on to say that Chest, Heart and Stroke NI have previously used a website called UK Connect (www.ukconnect.org) that is very useful for information on communications.

Ms McKeown expresses concern that parts are rather 'wordy' and that some questions could be shortened. She suggests that question 9 and question 10 could be reviewed and as could the introduction.

Mr Mann asked if all the questions were necessary, such as country of residence. Ms Bannon explained that the Assembly is striving to improve their data collection systems, with a view to making the services more accessible to all.

Ms McKeown suggested that a question be included asking if the visitor has a disability.

Ms McCann asked if the Assembly website contains information on visiting Parliament Buildings. Mr Mochan said there were directions on the

website, and information regarding bus routes. Ms Bannon agreed to review this to see if more information could be included.

ACTION: MARIA BANNON

7 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Mr Mann said that he had received feedback regarding the Assembly Road Shows. He explained that documentation was distributed to attendees on arrival, but it wasn't available in any alternative formats. He requested that if there should be any more such events in the future, that this should be given consideration. Ms McKeown said that she would welcome more of these events in the future. Mr Mann said that perhaps further ways of encouraging attendance could be explored. The group discussed 'themed' road shows for particular groups. Ms Bannon agreed to raise this with the Director of Engagement.

8 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The group agreed to hold the meetings quarterly. Ms Bannon said that members are welcome to at any time, suggest future agenda items. The next meeting was agreed to be held in March 2010. Ms Bannon agreed to circulate dates to check availability.

The meeting ended at 3.20pm

Tony Logue
Clerk to the Assembly Commission