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Booklet 4

How to take a whole-organisational approach to disability equality

Responding to the duty to promote
disability equality in the post-school sector



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How to take a whole-organisational approach to disability equality

Responding to the duty to promote
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Christine Rose

Published by the Learning and Skills Network

www.LSNeducation.org.uk

Registered with the Charity Commissioners

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Registered with the Charity Commissioners

Copyeditor: Susannah Wight
Designers: Joel Quartey and Supertec Designs
Printer: Supertec Designs, Elephant and Castle, London

062485TK/09/06/2500

ISBN 1-84572-480-1

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This publication has been funded by the Learning and Skills Council, the organisation that exists to make England better skilled and more competitive.

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Acknowledgements

This document is part of a suite of materials from the project, The Duty to Promote Disability Equality. The project ran from May 2005 to March 2006 and was managed by the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) in partnership with NIACE and Skill, and funded by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). Individuals from more than 25 organisations were involved in the project as research sites, as advisory group members and as partners. I would like to extend my thanks to them all for their contributions and the insights they brought to the process of promoting disability equality. I would especially like to thank Christine Rose for her crucial role in leading the project and for writing these materials.

I hope you will find this suite of documents a valuable resource in helping you to produce your Disability Equality Scheme and action plan and that the materials assist you to close the 'equality gap' experienced by so many disabled staff and learners.

Sally Faraday
Research Manager
Learning and Skills Network

This is the core document in a suite of materials designed to assist post-16 education providers to respond positively to the duty to promote disability equality. These materials are derived from a research project which reports the experiences of organisations engaged in implementing the Disability Equality Duty (DED). This duty is part of the Disability Discrimination Act 2005 (DDA 2005), which comes into force on 4 December 2006. Readers should note that this was wrongly put in the Disability Rights Commission (DRC) code of practice as 5 December. The DRC has since issued an erratum saying that the correct date is 4 December 2006.

The Disability Equality Duty project

The aim of the project was to explore the implications of implementing the disability equality duty (DED) in the post-school sector, to respond positively to the new requirements. Over 25 organisations were involved, including:

- further education colleges
- sixth form colleges
- adult and community learning (ACL) providers
- higher education institutions
- Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI)
- Disability Rights Commission (DRC)
- Equality Challenge Unit (ECU)
- Learning and Skills Council (LSC)
- Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA)
- Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)
- National Disability Team
- National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE)
- Ofsted
- Skill.

The project ran from May 2005 to March 2006 and was managed by the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) in partnership with NIACE and Skill; it was funded by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). The project outcomes were disseminated through three events called 'New legislation: new opportunities', which took place between March and May 2006. Issues from these events have been incorporated within the suite of materials.

Organisations in the project were at different points on their journey towards disability equality. Many recognised strengths but also accepted areas that had yet to be addressed. All started work to implement the requirements of the duty to promote disability equality and, within the context of their own organisation and timescale of the project, many identified a particular aspect of disability equality to improve. These focused on one or more of the following requirements of the duty:

- to carry out impact assessments
- to gather information to monitor progress
- to embed disability equality across the whole organisation
- to actively involve disabled people
- to work in partnership with other organisations
- to improve disability equality by tackling institutional barriers.

You can read the reports of the organisations involved in the research on the Learning and Skills Network (LSN) website (www.lsneducation.org.uk). The project was steered by an advisory group of disabled people, which provided an invaluable forum for the exchange of ideas and advice on the direction of the project.

Implementing the duty

Implementing the duty will help close the gap between the expectations, experiences, education, qualifications and employment of disabled and non-disabled people. It will enable you to:

- create a positive atmosphere where there is a shared commitment to value diversity and respect difference
- deliver a first class service; Ofsted, for example, has found that a common characteristic of the highest performing organisations is that they have an inclusive ethos, and the best lessons take place where teaching and learning responds to the needs of individual learners

- achieve a more representative workforce, recruiting from a wider pool of applicants
- meet the requirements of funding, audit and inspection bodies better
- promote a greater knowledge and understanding of disability among all learners, which will benefit society at large.

If you are leading on the implementation of the DED, you are advised to familiarise yourself with the Code of Practice produced by the DRC, which is a statutory document. It is admissible as evidence in legal proceedings under DDA 2005, and courts and tribunals must take into account any part of the Code that appears to be relevant to issues arising in proceedings. The Code and other guidance materials provided by the DRC are available on the DRC website (www.dotheduty.org). Online guidance documents available on the DRC's website (www.dotheduty.org) include:

- guidance for the further and higher education sectors (from August 2006)
- guidance on evidence gathering
- guidance for disabled people on the Disability Equality Duty (from July 2006).

Using the materials

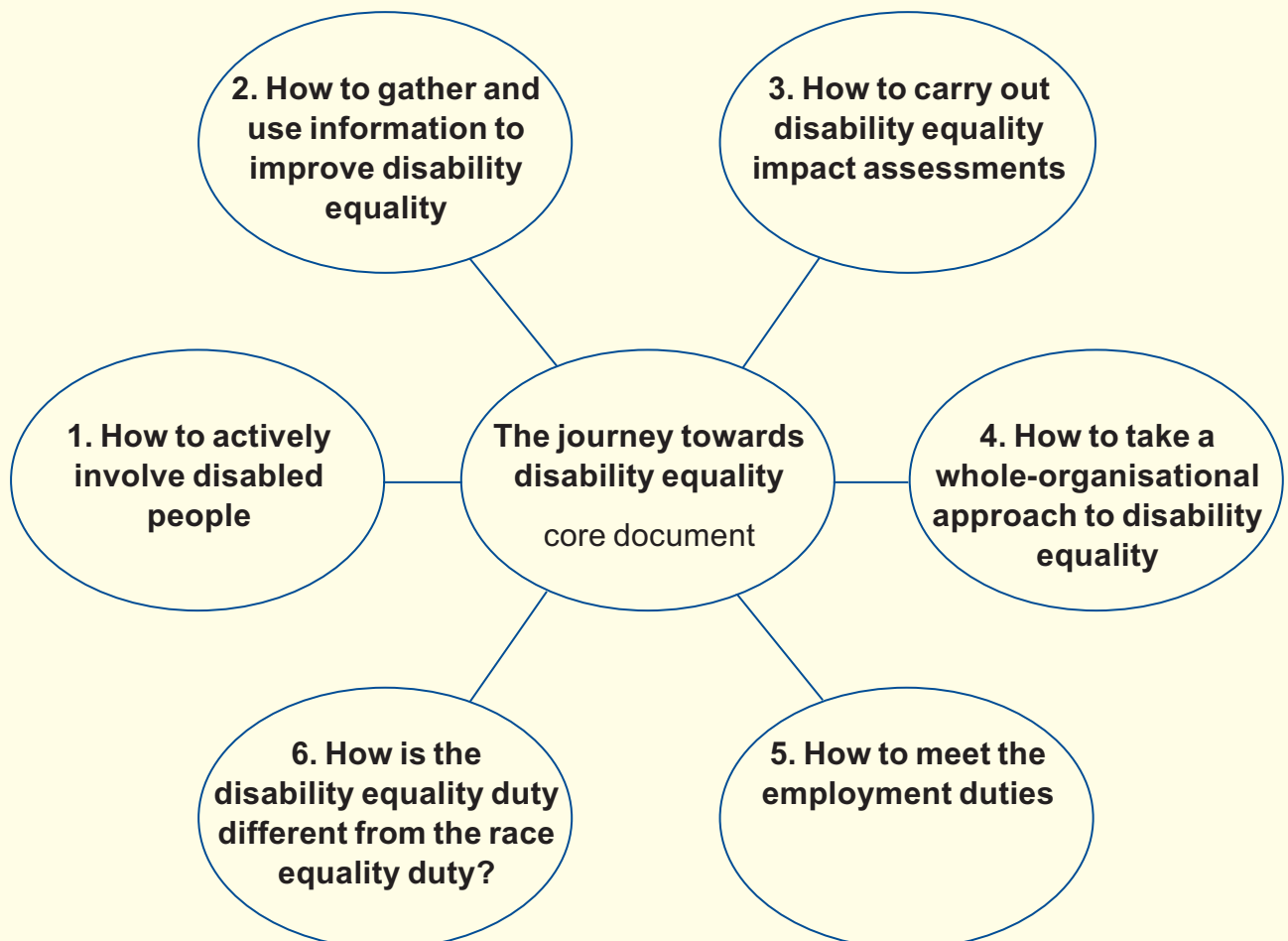
This suite of materials derived from the project is designed to provide practical advice, tools and examples drawn from practice and offers key messages about implementing the duty. Throughout the materials you will find references to and quotes from the DRC's Code of Practice and other publications. It is advisable to read these materials alongside the Code of Practice.

The suite of materials consists of seven documents (see figure 1).

- **Core document: The journey towards disability equality** is the starting point and needs to be read first. It provides an overview of the main requirements and key activities required when promoting disability equality. The core document also includes a self-evaluation tool to help develop a Disability Equality Scheme and improve disability equality. There are signposts in the core documents to the other booklets in the suite.

- There are five accompanying ‘how to’ booklets. Each provides more detailed information on the main themes of the duty:
 - **Booklet 1: How to actively involve disabled people**
 - **Booklet 2: How to gather and use information to improve disability equality**
 - **Booklet 3: How to carry out disability equality impact assessments**
 - **Booklet 4: How to take a whole-organisational approach to disability equality**
 - **Booklet 5: How to meet the employment duties**
- The remaining booklet is **Booklet 6: How is the disability equality duty different from the race equality duty?** This analyses the similarities and differences between the duty to promote disability equality and the duty to promote race equality, carried out as part of the project.

Figure 1 The seven documents of the DED project



Booklet 4: How to take a whole-organisational approach to disability equality

This booklet will help you to:

- appreciate why you need to take a whole-organisational approach to disability equality, and how this inevitably involves change – section 1
- understand the key principles in implementing change – section 2
- consider a range of strategies used by sites in the DED project to help achieve organisational change – section 3.

The need to take a whole-organisational approach

The new duty to promote disability equality is part of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 2005. This legislation will build on the progress already made by many providers in improving disability equality in education. However, it will extend the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 – to anticipate and respond to the individual needs of disabled people – to a duty under which organisations are expected to embed disability equality into all decisions and activities. This means that disability equality becomes central and integral to all that we do – our strategic planning, policy-making, curriculum delivery, marketing, business development, support services, employment practice and partnership arrangements, for example. This approach supports the social model of disability, an underpinning principle of the new legislation. The social model of disability recognises that it is the social, environmental and attitudinal barriers that a disabled person encounters, rather than a person's impairment, that create disabling barriers and prevent participation by disabled people (see Appendix C of the core document for further information on the social model of disability). The new duty will therefore help shift the focus away from the requirements of individuals and onto the policies, procedures, plans and practice of our organisation. It will help eliminate discrimination and dismantle barriers before these can have an impact on individuals.

Embedding disability equality across every service and function inevitably necessitates a whole-organisational approach. And this ultimately means change. The Disability Rights Commission's code of practice states that 'this new duty will help drive forward a culture change across the public sector and accelerate the pace of change on disability equality' (2005, piii). Under this legislation, therefore, organisations are expected to become proactive agents of change.

2 Key principles underpinning change

Because of differences in organisational structure, context, size and performance, no single paradigm can hold for how providers can most successfully manage the change process.

However, sites involved in the DED project identified certain factors that act as enablers to change. Often, these factors are inter-related. In practice this means that change requires a focus on all elements so that progress in one area will support and enhance the efforts of others. This will help ensure a whole-organisational approach is taken rather than isolated or marginalised changes.

The six that we will consider here are shown in figure 2:

Figure 2. Factors in an organisation that act as enablers to change



Involving staff at a senior level

The strong, active and visible leadership of senior staff gives credibility to the development of the Disability Equality Scheme and sends out a convincing message that this is important to the organisation. Their involvement ensures that the Disability Equality Scheme is not developed in isolation but aligns with the overall direction and mission of the organisation. For example, senior managers are able to make explicit the links with the organisation's strategic aims, decision-making processes and quality improvement plan. Senior staff can also help staff to see the links between different agendas such as the DED, Skills for Life and Every Child Matters.

Senior staff play a key role in helping staff across all levels to buy into the importance of embedding disability equality across all functions of the organisation. Their involvement is instrumental in helping others to embrace their responsibilities, shifting a potential mindset of 'this is the responsibility of specialist staff' to 'this is the responsibility of all staff'.

A number of reviews have taken place to evaluate progress in implementing the race equality duty, which came into force with the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000. Many identified the active commitment of senior staff to be a critical success factor. For example, Schneider Ross and CRE (2003) research found that without senior staff involvement, one of the most common outcomes was an inability to embed race equality across the whole organisation. Ofsted (2005) research found that the leadership of senior managers was a key factor in the most effective organisations in establishing a college-wide ethos of equality.

Maynard and Smith (2004), in an analysis of 350 action research projects within the further education sector, identified the active commitment and direct support by senior managers to be a critical element in implementing change.

One site in the DED project observed: 'You must have senior management involvement. You need people who have power, who have clout.' Many sites had working groups that were chaired by either the principal or vice principal. This gives a high profile and status to developments.

The code of practice for the Disability Equality Duty makes clear that:

Change starts at the top. Strong, clear and consistent leadership is the key to achieving change in the public sector. Senior management and governing bodies need to take visible ownership of the Disability Equality Duty, for example by requiring reports on its implementation and delivering clear messages to staff about its importance. People feel permitted to do the right thing when the person at the top is saying that they want them to do that.

(DRC 2005, pp43–44)

Of all the key principles underpinning change, therefore, this is probably the most important one.

Identifying and sharing a clear vision

To help take a whole-organisational approach to disability equality, all staff need to have a clear vision and shared understanding of what their organisation is aiming to achieve. The vision should be customised to the context of the organisation so that it is seen by all as relevant and realistic. Sites in the DED project quickly identified areas that they wanted to improve in their organisation, which were achievable within the timescale of the project. Their challenge will be to extend this process to develop a demanding yet attainable vision of the improved outcomes to achieve within the three-year life span of their Disability Equality Scheme.

For example, these are the outcomes that one organisation has identified that it wants to achieve within the next three years:

- improved disclosure processes to tighten up communication channels within the organisation
- 75% of all staff to receive training on supporting learners with mental health difficulties
- 8% improvement in learner satisfaction rates by disability or learning difficulty
- all curriculum managers to analyse recruitment and success rates by disability and learning difficulty within the self-assessment process.

Once you have identified these improved outcomes, it will also be important for you to share them widely with all members of your organisation's community.

Selling the benefits of disability equality

Whenever something new is introduced or change has to be made, people will inevitably ask the question 'why?'. It is difficult to get any change embraced and embedded unless its benefits, vision and purpose are clearly identified, widely communicated and fully understood.

For example, implementing the duty will help you to:

- create a positive atmosphere, where there is a shared commitment to value diversity and respect difference
- deliver a first class service; Ofsted has found that a common characteristic of the highest performing colleges is an inclusive ethos, and the best lessons take place where teaching and learning responds to the needs of individual learners
- achieve a more representative workforce, recruiting from a wider pool of applicants
- meet the requirements of audit and inspection bodies to a higher standard
- promote a greater knowledge and understanding of disability among all learners, with a benefit to society in general.

This means that you need to 'market' the 'disability equality message' to win the support and commitment of staff, learners and others external to your organisation. Sites in the DED project used a variety of mechanisms, including:

- publicising through college 'newspapers' and intranets
- short presentations to a variety of staff, such as senior managers, governors, curriculum and cross-college managers,
- 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' on the DED to staff (the LSDA has published a short briefing paper on the DED, which has been distributed to all post-16 education providers, and is available at www.LSNeducation.org.uk)

- '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.

Communicating progress, celebrating success

In addition to stressing the benefits, you also need to celebrate victories along the way. Celebrating your successes, however small, helps maintain enthusiasm and motivation, and accelerate the pace of change.

Sites in the DED project found that regularly reporting back good news stories gave staff a sense of progress and helped maintain momentum.

Involving staff in the change process

The core document stresses the importance of involving disabled staff in every aspect of organisational response to the new duties. However, it is important that all staff are provided with opportunities to discuss and contribute to the development and implementation of their Disability Equality Scheme. People can be frightened of change, and these opportunities allow staff to express fears and concerns so that any unnecessary worries can be relieved and ambiguities resolved.

People, by and large, support what they help to create. It therefore follows that commitment to change is improved if those affected by change are allowed to participate as fully as possible in planning and implementation. As Watters, Armstrong and Merton (2004) point out: 'If people see themselves as the victims of change, they hate it. If they see themselves as change agents, they love it.'

Investing in staff development

Taking a whole-organisational approach requires everyone to embrace their role and responsibility in eliminating discrimination and actively promoting disability equality, so that promoting disability equality is not seen as someone else's responsibility, but something that everyone is responsible for.

You may already have delivered DDA awareness training with your staff, particularly in response to DDA Part 4. However, sites recognised that in many cases this training took place some time ago, and now was an opportune time to:

- remind staff about the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995
- reflect on the progress already made and areas still to address
- raise awareness of the new duty to promote disability equality, and the implications for staff.

People may need additional skills to deliver the requirements of the duty, such as carrying out impact assessments and gathering information on disability equality progress and performance. Morley College, for example, has trained 20 managers to carry out disability equality impact assessments. Somerset College of Arts introduced the requirement to carry out disability equality impact assessments within its most recent phase of mandatory equality and diversity college training. Unfortunately this session did not give adequate explanation on what disability equality impact assessments actually meant in practice:

We learned a valuable lesson from the reaction of the College staff attending this event; they were highly challenged by the concept of impact assessing. We failed to clarify the clear process within which impact assessment exists. The seven steps identified at the second briefing seminar on 3 November 2005 will be a valuable beginning for our preparation of College impact assessment.

(See the accompanying booklet 'How to carry out disability equality impact assessments' for an explanation of these seven steps)

You may want to explore creative ways to deliver training events, for example:

- using learners in training sessions; one site trained learners with Asperger Syndrome to talk to staff about the barriers that they had experienced
- using DVDs, such as the DRC's Talk (2004), or LSDA's Learners' experiences (2004)

- using disability equality 'champions' to deliver training, targeted at different groups such as marketing, admissions, student services and teaching staff
- linking up with other organisations to share and exchange training.

You may need therefore to provide guidance, training and support to help departments develop appropriate approaches, not just in response to this legislation, but to the DDA in general. Sites in the DED project found that staff can sometimes take the attitude 'We've done that – we've delivered DDA awareness training.' However, all sites were able to identify further training requirements, such as:

- supporting learners with mental health difficulties
- supporting learners with Asperger Syndrome
- ensuring that all staff are clear about the legal requirements and implications of disclosure and confidentiality.

It is therefore likely that you will require an ongoing rolling programme of staff development activities across the institution to achieve a 'critical mass' of knowledgeable, confident and skilled staff. It will also be important to embed disability equality into all staff development activities so that it becomes an integral part of the culture of the organisation.

3 Strategies for achieving organisational change

Sites in the DED project identified a number of different strategies for achieving organisational change. This section of the booklet looks at some of them.

Using champions as change agents

‘Champions’ can work with different teams, helping to identify appropriate strategies within different departments to eliminate discrimination and promote disability equality. They can act as a source of advice, disseminating good practice and supporting less confident staff. For example they can facilitate discussions at team meetings, challenge and change perceptions and mindsets and respond to requests for guidance. Meeting together as a group can help ensure that champions are able to support one another, boosting confidence and sharing good practice.

Within the DED project, a number of sites used champions to facilitate a whole-organisational approach to disability equality. For example, Morley College decided to use ‘mental health champions’ to take a more holistic cross-college approach to the support of learners with mental health difficulties.

Case study: Morley College

Morley College has relatively high numbers of learners disclosing a mental health difficulty (12% of disabled learners). They have made progress in supporting learners with a mental health difficulty, for example providing specific training on mental health for teaching and support staff. However, they wanted to take a more holistic cross-college approach to the support of these learners. Staff were invited to express an interest in the role of a 'mental health champion'. As a result, three support staff and two tutors were appointed. Their role includes:

- providing support for students experiencing distress or a crisis in relation to a mental health difficulty
- acting as a 'supportive friend' when needed, such as during disciplinary panels
- supporting other staff to work with learners who have mental health difficulties.

A small additional remuneration is paid for staff to carry out this role. The champions are making an important contribution to promoting disability equality and the college recognise that 'the number of people who are feel able to "own" the way forward has been significantly widened'.

A key message from the work so far carried out is 'the importance of working with staff to reduce their anxiety and increase their confidence in working with learners with different requirements, including those with mental health difficulties'. An example of how this is working in practice involves supporting tutors who are less experienced, to observe tutors confident in supporting learners with mental health difficulties. The humanities department agreed to pilot this approach and the process has facilitated staff development and the sharing of good practice.

The following are notes from a classroom observation that took place within the department.

Notes from class observations

The focus of these observations was on how the tutor worked with students with challenging behaviour. We recognise that most students with mental health difficulties will not exhibit this behaviour, and that such behaviour can be associated with other issues. We were, however, interested in analysing the interactions of the tutors concerned, in order to support less experienced tutors where reasonable adjustments need to be made.

*With student **A** mental health difficulties are involved, and he also struggles to be understood as English is his second language. Moreover the topic of the class (politics) involved a discussion connected to his political beliefs. With student **B** the student is not currently disruptive, but his presence in the class does require adjustments.*

Are there any obvious signs of students who are distressed or have challenging behaviour in the class and how is this displayed?

Student A

One student was passionate about the subject (politics), and at certain points his enthusiasm required skilful management from the tutor. He occasionally interrupted other students. They were generally tolerant.

Student B

One student is very isolated. He sits alone recording the class (philosophy). He is reluctant to communicate with others. They respect the fact that he does not wish to communicate with them and treat him with respect.

What is the tutor's strategy for helping the student? Could you give an example?

Student A

The tutor had negotiated ground rules with the student at the beginning of the course for managing his contribution to discussion and debates. In particular, the student had been assured that he would be listened to, but had agreed that the tutor could interrupt him if he was taking more than his share of time. He also agreed that if the other students did not understand the student's English the tutor could help to clarify what he was saying.

The tutor was careful to defend these ground rules: 'I must insist on the polite rules of debate' – but without challenging the student individually. The student appeared to feel respected, and accepted the boundaries. The tutor had a calm and confident presence.

Student B

The tutor allows the student to work on his own as he has indicated that he is uncomfortable doing group work. The rest of the class respect this. She asks him the occasional question to ensure he participates. Her presence is very calming. The tutor talks softly, in a very unthreatening manner. She is excellent in involving the class in discussion and uses an appropriate use of humour. Student B attends consistently, and clearly feels comfortable in this class.

Wakefield College also decided to use champions as a strategy for achieving organisational change. They recognised that much work had been carried out within curriculum areas but this was not equalled within the service areas of the college.

Case study: Wakefield College

Wakefield College has established 13 disability equality champions within the different support areas of the organisation. These areas include finance, marketing, IT support, human resources, refectories and student services and so on. Each champion has received training and is twinned with a learning support tutor in the additional support team, who all have specialist skills and knowledge in an aspect of support. Each learning support tutor has a supportive role acting as a 'critical friend' to their champion.

A three-hour training event for the Champions and Critical Friends was offered over two separate half-day sessions in two separate weeks to take into account the availability of staff and those who work part time. To emphasise the importance of the project I ensured we were able to use one of the most prestigious training rooms (within our COVE), provided tasty refreshments and lunch, as well as a folder for each participant to store the training materials and future project work.

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!)

Each champion has been tasked with identifying a 'mini' project to promote disability equality within their service area. For example, the champion from finance has decided to focus on the accessibility of documentation used within the department. Another champion, following feedback on the project to her team, discovered that her colleague was diabetic. As a result, her mini project will focus on the accessibility of staff meetings and the need for regular breaks.

Having a number of people trained as Champions, together with the influence of our Critical Friends and a Steering Group led by the principal, means we have thirty staff working on the project and expanding our sphere of influence. There is heightened awareness of disability equality occurring and this must be because there are many 'voices' in all areas, at all levels. The DED has appeared on many agendas from governors to Senior Management meetings.

Changes have already taken place. For example:

I provided a copy (of the following case study) with a paper on the Project to our Equality and Diversity Committee, chaired by the principal. During that meeting she decided that we would cease to have any tabled papers at future meetings of the Committee, as we needed to set an example. The colleague on whom the case study is based was actually in attendance when this decision was made and she beamed at the success we had achieved.

Case study

John is an educational interpreter working in a college. Part of his role is to support a profoundly deaf colleague by communicating in British Sign Language during meetings.

The chair of one of the meetings his colleague attends has agreed a feedback system where John advises her of the accessibility of the meeting which helps her to improve her practice and make 'reasonable adjustments'. At a recent meeting John feeds back to her that when papers were distributed during the meeting it was very difficult for him to interpret and also for his colleague to understand.

He recommends that papers are sent to him and the deaf colleague before meetings and the manager agrees to this.

However, the manager also realises that there may be other staff attending who have undisclosed issues like dyslexia, and who may benefit from seeing the paperwork beforehand. Sending out papers before meetings becomes embedded into the practice of this team.

Oaklands College also decided to focus on the use of disability equality champions. Oaklands is a large FE college, with significant provision for learners with disabilities and learning difficulties. There is a strong commitment by senior managers to disability equality. However, senior managers recognise that there is insufficient understanding and commitment to disability equality across the organisation. They were also concerned that the Equality and Diversity Committee had become a 'talking shop'. Yet they were aware of pockets of excellent practice, with some staff across the organisation committed to and enthusiastic about promoting and improving disability equality.

They have appointed nine champions across the organisation, who have a key role to:

- raise the profile of equality and diversity
- work in a team to find solutions to issues
- undertake a project relating to improving disability equality in their area.

Using 'moments of change'

Sites in the DED project recognised that 'moments of change' provided an opportunity to promote the new duties. For example:

- one site is in the process of restructuring job descriptions, and this provides an opportunity to embed disability equality into job roles and responsibilities
- one site is undergoing a restructuring following a merger, and this provides an opportunity to look afresh at the ways in which support is provided, addressing some of the concerns that disabled learners have expressed at a focus group
- one site 'piggy backed' disability equality onto a planned staff development day on race equality
- one site is in the process of revising its strategic planning processes and this has provided an excellent opportunity to ensure that equality and diversity is embedded in all the organisation's activities.

Mainstreaming equality through impact assessment

Impact assessment provides an important mechanism for embedding disability equality in all decision-making and activities, and as such is an important tool to embed disability equality across the whole organisation. This is because the process investigates the impact of a policy, procedure, plan or practice on disabled people, in order to eliminate any unintended discrimination and promote disability equality better. Staff from across the organisation must be involved in the process.

Carrying out disability equality impact assessments helps shift the focus from the individual requirements of learners and staff to the policies, procedures, plans and practice of the organisation. As we have seen in section 1, this is the thrust of the new duty. For further information see the accompanying booklet 'How to carry out disability equality impact assessments'.

Forming strategic alliances

Identifying and nurturing allies is another means to facilitate a whole-organisational approach to disability equality. This helps spread the message, raise awareness and increase the number of staff who are willing to take a lead in improving disability equality across the organisation.

For example, Plymouth University recognised that marketing staff are experts at 'promoting' and planned an awayday with staff in this department. The day started with a 'pub' type quiz, and staff were given an information pack, which included a range of publications on equality and diversity and articles on improving accessibility for marketing units and events teams.

Staff were charged to produce an action plan as a result of the day. Key priorities include checking the design and accessibility of marketing materials, ensuring that alternative format statements are included in all publications, and exploring the use of case studies to promote the student experience.

We have seen earlier how Morley College is using champions to support change. As part of this process, they have developed strategic alliances with several agencies, including South London and Maudsley (SLAM), their local mental health trust, Lambeth Early Onset Services (LEO), Gateways, a local project to find work for people with mental health difficulties and Pathways to Learning, an organisation based in Westminster. These alliances have strengthened the work of supporting learners with mental health difficulties and have provided a number of benefits. For example, quoting from a site report:

SLAM currently run a trauma clinic to support their staff after difficult incidents. Our contact in SLAM is currently seeking permission for college staff to use this if necessary after incidents in the college. There have been a few occasions when this would have been useful. We provided SLAM with case studies to support our request.

Somerset College of Arts and Technology has formed a strategic alliance with Somerset Access and Inclusion Network (SAIN). This is an organisation of disabled people in the community whose mission is to enable Somerset's disabled citizens to secure unrestricted access to and inclusion in any service, premises or facility in the county. The site report states:

The opportunity to commission SAIN has been a very positive step, not only because they are an independent group of disabled people in the community but also because this relationship can then be built upon when the Disability Equality Scheme develops. A partnership agreement to ensure their ongoing participation to implement the new duties has been provisionally discussed.

Embedding disability equality into quality assurance and development planning processes

Through inclusion to excellence, the strategic review of planning and funding provision for learners with learning difficulties and disabilities, recognised that:

better ways need to be found to assess the quality of experience of these learners [learners with learning difficulties and disabilities], the majority of whom are in mainstream rather than discrete provision.

(LSC 2005, p5)

Self-assessment, when effective, is carried out across all curriculum and support areas, involves all staff at all levels, and is an integral part of all management processes. It is used to improve performance continually – not just to prove quality but to improve quality. Self-assessment therefore provides an important mechanism for embedding and improving disability equality across the whole organisation.

Embedding disability equality into self-assessment and other quality assurance processes also helps to ensure that there is focused planning and improvement at department level. It allows for ‘bottom-up’ ideas and concerns to be identified and used by senior managers.

It is therefore important to ensure that improving disability equality is not marginalised or seen as a stand-alone activity, but is clearly embedded in self-assessment and other quality improvement activities. A number of sites in the DED project identified this as a main area for development. For example, one site acknowledged that monitoring within the self-assessment process in terms of disability equality is reasonably robust. However, using this information to improve performance and inform the development plan is an area that requires attention. Another site recognised the need to provide more explicit guidance to staff:

The director of quality sat on all the validation panels for both curriculum area and service area self assessment reports and this gave her an opportunity to question colleagues on where disability equality featured in their self assessment and how they intended to address any barriers to access. This highlighted the need to provide much more explicit guidance on how to approach the self assessment of equality and diversity and consequently this will be built into the revised guidelines for completing the 2005-06 Self-Assessment Report.

King George V College has successfully embedded disability equality into self-assessment and other quality assurance processes. Information is gathered and used to inform planning and identify strategies for improvement.

Case study: King George V College

King George V College is a sixth form college with 1300 16–19 year-old students following Level 2 or Level 3 courses. 15% of students have a disability or learning difficulty. Each department has its own equal opportunity policy, covering disability, race and gender equality. Disability equality is an integral part of department and faculty reviews. Recruitment, achievement, success, value added and destination data is routinely disaggregated by disability or learning difficulty and the information is used within each curriculum area to inform its self-assessment report and development plan. Qualitative information is also collected, including feedback from:

- focus groups of disabled learners
- the student council, which has representation by disabled learners
- one-to-one interviews with disabled learners
- learner satisfaction surveys, with information disaggregated by disability or learning difficulty
- evaluation forms completed by disabled learners annually
- evaluation of feedback on support in exam arrangements.

In spring 2006 the college conducted a disability equality review, involving parents, carers, disabled learners, Connexions staff and external agencies, to improve services and further promote disability equality.

Priorities are set each year, which feed into equality and diversity impact measures (EDIMs). For 2002–2005 the college focused on improving support for learners on the autistic spectrum. For 2005–2008 it is focusing on improving the support it gives learners with mental health difficulties and has organised a mental health awareness day and planned staff development activities. New partnerships have been established with adolescent mental health services, Church Street Clinic and Mersey Care.

Embedding disability equality within self-assessment processes has helped staff at King George V College to adopt an inclusive approach where they see themselves as facilitators of learners' aspirations. David has benefited from this is. He said:

For the first time, people believed in me – they asked me what I needed rather than telling me I couldn't do it.

(Learner on the autistic spectrum who was turned away by other colleges and told that gardening was the only appropriate course for him. He has successfully completed his course at King George V and is now at university.)

For further information on using information to improve performance, see the accompanying booklet 'How to gather and use information to improve disability equality'.

Aligning disability equality to strategic priorities

Disability equality must be tied in to the strategic priorities and business planning to ensure a holistic and coherent approach is taken throughout the organisation.

One senior manager who was involved in the DED project has ensured that at her college the Disability Equality Scheme clearly features within the funding and planning strategic documents that are required by the Learning and Skills Council. These include the three-year development plan and the business plan.

A member of Blackpool and the Fylde College observed:

Fundamental to embedding any equality work into the college has been the clear link of equality and diversity to the college strategic plan and the chairing of the Equality Committee by the principal. This establishes a genuine commitment to this work from the outset.

The new duty to promote disability equality requires a social model approach to disability equality, dismantling barriers before these can impact on individuals. Embedding disability equality across the whole organisation inevitably means change, and it will be important for organisations to consider strategies to facilitate this change process.

Change will not happen overnight. It is based on a partnership with disabled people to tackle the structures, behaviours and attitudes that contribute to or sustain inequality and discrimination. It will require increasing dialogue with disabled people, raised awareness among staff and the development of explicit strategies to achieve organisational change. Most importantly, it will require active leadership and commitment by senior staff. As sites in the DED project observed:

[The] active support and commitment of the governors, principal and senior management team is essential. This has ensured that disability equality is central and not peripheral.

To implement disability equality successfully within an organisation there must be the buy-in and support from the most senior managers.

The work of senior management in this project has been invaluable. Progress depends on their involvement.

A top-down approach to driving this work is absolutely central to its success.

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This publication is commissioned by the Learning and Skills Council, the organisation that exists to make England better skilled and more competitive.

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ISBN 1-84572-480-1

