

Grampian Opportunities

Finding the way forward

“GO” Research

Employment of Disabled People – Good Practice in the Voluntary Sector

Qualitative research using case studies and telephone interviews explored three questions:

- What good practice exists in enabling disabled people to take up and sustain employment opportunities – how do we spread this practice around?
- What are the external and internal barriers that exist to prevent the offer and uptake of employment opportunities?
- How best can Grampian Opportunities and its partners improve the overall situation within Grampian?

Grampian **Delivers** Opportunities

Findings highlighted:

- Good practice does exist in Grampian and is enabling disabled people to take up and sustain employment.
- Making reasonable adjustments where needed was reported as remarkably easy to implement.
- A diverse workforce increases awareness, develops understanding and promotes good staff morale.

The majority of those surveyed find, or anticipate, that having disabled employees is a benefit. A significant proportion of the voluntary organisations interviewed had disabled people in management and professional roles. Findings also indicate a greater proportion of disabled people employed in the local voluntary sector than reported nationally. Adopting best practice, rather than seeking to implement minimum standards, emerged as a feature of the overall philosophy of the case study exemplars.

Grampian Opportunities

1 High Street

INVERURIE

AB51 3QA

☎: 01467 629675

✉: info@grampianopportunities.org.uk

💻: www.grampianopportunities.org.uk



Findings

Research confirms that good practice exists within the voluntary sector in Grampian to enable disabled people to take up employment opportunities.

Employment of disabled people

32 of the 50 organisations surveyed in the wider telephone study have disabled employees, comprising approximately 5.4% of their workforce of over 1800 people. This is a higher proportion than the 3% reported for Scotland's voluntary sector (SCVO data 2004). Interestingly, almost 30% of volunteers were disabled.

The entire case study group employed disabled people, although two of the larger organisations did not know how many. As such it is not possible to give an accurate proportion or comparison, it is certainly in excess of 9% of their workforce and as such significantly higher than the national average. This will be skewed by the fact that one organisation sought to be sufficiently proactive as to only employ disabled people, and another strove to employ service users wherever possible.

Types of employment

The roles and job types of disabled employees were very varied. A significant proportion, 32% of organisations, had such individuals in management and senior positions. In the case study group 85% had disabled people in management and professional roles.

Organisations recognised the benefits of accommodating employees who become disabled to:

- retain their skill and experience
- reduce recruitment costs
- lower staff turnover and maintain stability of workforce.

Identifying good practice

Research explored the challenges and benefits of employing disabled people with the aim of identifying any clear evidence of good practice.

Clear policies and practice guidance

Adopting best practise, rather than seeking to implement minimum standards, emerged as a feature of the overall philosophy of the case study participants. However some did indicate that ensuring effort was targeted most effectively and for greatest potential benefit was often difficult, especially for smaller organisations.

How to ensure that good practice at an individual level is reflected across an organisation and also how to ensure top down commitment is put into practice, is a dilemma many of the participants articulated. The research suggested a lack of joined up thinking about policies, processes and implementation. The suggestion was made that there may be a gap for an equalities audit type role to help organisations benchmark policies, procedures and practices.

Expertise in Recruitment and Employment

Very few of the organisations interviewed had human resource specialists or access to in-house expertise in employment issues. The nationally affiliated organisations reported support from head office, but smaller local organisations are particularly vulnerable in the area of employment law.

Accessible recruitment practices

One case study interviewee specifically requested guidance on accessible recruitment practices. This initial enquiry related to producing accessible information for people with a visual impairment.

Overall the research identified the need to consider advertising methods, clear job descriptions to ensure people know what is expected of them, and support at time of interview.

Advertising

A number of participants commented that although they do not currently have the Employers' double tick "positive about disability" standard, they would like to explore this and would view this as a public statement of commitment to good practice and equality of opportunity. The two case study organisations that hold this standard provide services for disabled people and consider adopting this quality benchmark demonstrates a public commitment to a positive ethos.



The benefit of adopting the disability symbol was reflected in a structured planning process that helped organisations focus on the needs of their disabled applicants and employees. Only six organisations in the telephone interview reported being part of the scheme but it was not always clear if the individual being interviewed understood the commitments.

Access to Work scheme

The potential benefits of the access to work scheme were highlighted, but also discussed was the difficulty accessing this support. The benefit of having a local face to provide information and advice about the scheme was considered to be important.

Supporting retention

Making adjustments in the workplace was reported to be very or fairly easy in the majority of situations where adaptations or support had been implemented.

In practice, supporting change can be fairly difficult, taking into account the needs of the disabled person, the impact on other employees and the effect on the organisation as a whole. This is particularly relevant when supporting one person in a small organisation over an extended period. Support can result in a direct financial cost but also a “people cost”. The employee’s own knowledge in how they can be supported in their work is key, but working with others and accessing external sources of support may be necessary to try and find a workable solution.

Quality information

There is an identified need for access to affordable sources of specialist employment information and support – ranging from signposting to factual information through to sources of peer support and networking.

Research focused on the needs of employers but it was also identified that information and support is needed for the employee, their colleagues, line-manager and governing body.

The value of outside contacts, particularly within the specialist sector or local area, to discuss issues with and from whom practical examples could be sought was emphasised by all who had benefited from such support. Finding that a situation was not unique, and something similar had been dealt with by another person was immensely helpful and reassuring.

A number of organisations identified that they subscribed to business services such as the Royal Bank of Scotland mentor services. Reference was also made to the Aberdeen Council of Voluntary Organisations’ (ACVO) Health and Safety specialist service which voluntary sector organisations can buy into. A number of people suggested replicating this to provide a similar scheme for employment information, support and advice.

Networking

Constant reference was made to the need for some form of network or contact system that voluntary sector employers could access without incurring significant costs in terms of not only finances but also time.

Participation in a local network of managers or personnel from similar organisations was cited by case study organisations as immensely helpful in supporting ongoing development and change. Sharing experience and knowledge on the practical implementation of their employment activity, and working together on policy development leading to shared action plans such as pilot standards on diversity

issues, clearly benefited a number of organisations. Talking to peers, drawing on the knowledge and experience of others through networks such as the Grampian Employment Network is felt to be particularly useful.

Particularly supportive have been local meetings which can involve speakers. Meetings and email communications, also promote discussions on relevant topics. Where joint working had been possible it was deemed cost effective, personally and professionally stimulating, and the benefits derived were perceived to be long lasting for the individual and organisation.

Raising awareness and Planning for inclusion

Acceptance of inclusion as an ongoing process and the need to avoid unrealistic expectations on the part of both employers and employees was raised by a number of participants. Very few organisations reported providing disability equality awareness training to staff.

A number of organisations demonstrated a proactive approach in the use of environmental access audits to plan how to make the buildings they use more accessible. The desire for a fuller disability audit of their service was identified by some of these organisations, to enable them to benchmark current activity and prioritise any changes needed to improve their service.

Organisations require information about where and how to access high quality training and information on disability issues.

Recommendations

The research proposal aimed to identify how Grampian Opportunities and its partners could improve the overall situation within Grampian.

It would appear that there are certain key factors in the process of achieving diversity:

- listen and communicate with people
- use an inclusive approach into strategic planning
- ensure that policy translates into good practice
- increase knowledge and understanding of the issues
- seek funding to improve access
- ensure that the ethos is promoted throughout the organisation at every level

Quality Information

- ⇒ Organisations need to know where they can go to access quality information.
- ⇒ Legislation requires to be summarised and presented in a simple, non threatening format because it often needs to be applied by non specialists.
- ⇒ Organisations should have policy documents written in 'Plain English'.

Planning and Training

- ⇒ Adopting a proactive approach to planning and training will enable organisations to develop inclusive employment practices.

Monitoring and evaluation

- ⇒ Organisations should have systems to measure their performance and the effectiveness of their policies, procedures and practices.
- ⇒ Benchmarking current practice will support organisations to plan for change.
- ⇒ There is the potential to develop an equalities audit type role to help organisations evaluate their services.

Support Agencies

- ⇒ Organisations require access to specialist employment advice consequently it would be useful to identify who can provide this and explore the benefit of setting up an employment support agency for the voluntary sector.
- ⇒ Organisations require information on where they can access disability equality awareness training and advice on environmental access.
- ⇒ There are specialist organisations which can offer advice and information on specific topics and organisations would benefit from a greater knowledge of how to access this expertise.

Mentoring/ Peer support and Networking

- ⇒ Organisations require information on existing employment related support networks, events and training open to them.
- ⇒ The importance of access to a local forum involving people in similar positions where workers from different organisations can share experience and knowledge on the practical implementation of their employment activity can not be highlighted enough.

Further research topics

- Further research is needed to identify audit tools to benchmark and monitor good employment practice in the employment of disabled people. Twenty two organisations reported having achieved liP (Investors in People), 4 had achieved Investors in volunteering, and 6 were recognised under the Job Centre Plus positive about disability scheme. How do these quality measures impact on the organisations ability to support disabled people in the workplace?
- Further research is necessary to identify effective support mechanisms for a disabled employee, their colleagues and the organisation. This raises the question of how disabled people can share their knowledge and experience with organisations and individuals having to cope with disability in the workplace. Providing or signposting to information, acting as an advocate, peer support for disabled employee or line manager, coaching and mentoring have all been suggested as options to explore.
- Grampian Opportunities is particularly interested in employment for disabled people. Three areas have been considered: disabled people into volunteering, disabled people into paid employment, and volunteering as a stepping stone to work. How effective is volunteering as a stepping stone into employment for disabled people?
- Self employment and agency working was not covered by the research - How do recruitment agencies, place and support disabled people into work? Is there a need for a specialist recruitment agency?
- The findings indicate a greater proportion of disabled people employed in the local voluntary sector than reported nationally. Research into other sectors and other geographical areas may assist in identifying the basis for this apparent trend.



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Registered office: 1 High Street, Inverurie AB51 3QA