

Disability Duty – Involving and Empowering Disabled People.

On 6th June, ESW and the Southwest Disability Equality Network hosted a regional conference on the forthcoming Disability Duty. Over 85 people attended - Disabled people interested in the new legislation and disability equality workers from the public, private and voluntary and community – to discuss how the Duty will push forward the equality agenda within the Southwest.

The Duty comes into force in December 2006 and will require all public sector bodies – including local authorities, health trusts, universities, police, fire authorities and the BBC – to proactively promote disability equality.

The Duty, if implemented effectively, will require public bodies to change their culture and tackle institutionalised discrimination. They will have to involve Disabled people in reviewing their policies and practices. All public bodies will be required to publish a Disability Equality Scheme (DES) demonstrating what positive steps they are taking to:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination;
- Promote equality of opportunity;
- Eliminate disability related harassment;
- Promote positive attitudes towards Disabled people;
- Encourage participation of Disabled people in public life;
- Take steps to take account of disabled people's disabilities even where that involves treating disabled people more favourably.

Speakers from Bristol City Council, highlighted how the local authority had involved Disabled people in the city, in producing its Disability Equality Scheme. By using face-to-face interviews, a citizen's panel, focus groups and visiting local Disabled people's community groups, over 1200 Disabled people have been involved so far. It will also involve Disabled people in the monitoring of council department's Disability Equality Scheme Action plans. There was a workshop on how Bristol's Deaf community had been engaged in developing policy and its DES, taking into account their specific needs as a cultural and linguistic minority.

There were further workshops on how Disability community groups can work with their local public sector bodies, best practice principles on involving Disabled people, improving the recruitment and retention of workers with learning difficulties and how the Duty will affect schools and colleges.

Further information

Conference papers and presentations available on www.equailitysouthwest.org.uk

Statutory Code of Practice and supplementary guidance on Disability Rights Commission www.dotheduty.org

Several Disabled people's organisations in the region can offer advice and support on the new legislation including:

Cornwall Disability Forum 01736 756655

Living Options Devon 01392 445666

Somerset Access & Inclusion Network 01823 282823