

COMMITTEE: Communities, Housing and Infrastructure
DATE: 27 August 2015
DIRECTOR: Pete Leonard
TITLE OF REPORT: Disability Advisory Group – the Future
REPORT NUMBER: CHI/15/227
CHECKLIST RECEIVED: Yes

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

Aberdeen Disability Advisory Group (DAG), a sub- group of the Communities, Housing and Infrastructure committee, acts as a consultative and advisory body to the council and other agencies on issues of interest and relevance to people with disabilities. Following an extensive review, this report presents to committee two optional models for the future of DAG.

2. RECOMMENDATION(S)

That Committee:-

- (i) Agree to the dissolution of the current Disability Advisory Group;
- (ii) Approve one model from the two options below:

- **Model 1**

As set out on page 7 of the report - Aberdeen Disability Advisory Group becomes a Disability/ Accessibility Forum, similar way to a Tenant's Forum.

- **Model 2**

As set out on page 8 - The new group remains part of the council's committee structure with a change in culture, structure and processes.

- (iii) Instruct officers to progress the implementation of the approved model in conjunction with appropriate stakeholders, to include the drafting of a new constitution incorporating the values, remit, roles and changes to ways of working, using the feedback from the engagement exercise.

3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

This proposal is centred on making the DAG more fit for purpose, effective, accessible and inclusive to all. Currently secretarial support is available for DAG through committee services, since its parent committee is Communities, Housing and Infrastructure. Given that there are strong service user, community and organisations' views that DAG needs to be more flexible and accessible regarding its current fixed meeting times and venue, there may be cost implications arising from moving to evening/ weekend meeting times and to venues other than the Town House.

Funding is available from existing community meeting budgets.

4. OTHER IMPLICATIONS

As the proposal is centred on making the DAG more fit for purpose, effective, accessible, inclusive and participatory - and a credible resource of information and expertise to the council - there will be positive implications for the environment and sustainability of the city and the health and well-being of the community.

5. BACKGROUND/MAIN ISSUES

The minute of the DAG meeting held on 1st April (Item 7), which provides the context for this paper, appears at [Appendix 1](#).

Following the approval of these recommendations and a strong mandate from DAG to progress the review, a series of community engagement exercises and a survey monkey questionnaire were carried out. The community engagement exercises were carried out by an external facilitator, Wendy Davies, and were supported by the Grampian Regional Equality Council.

Feedback from the community involvement appears at [Appendix 2](#), and from the survey monkey questionnaire at [Appendix 3](#).

The outcomes from the consultation follow:

1. There appeared to be agreement that DAG exists to:

- Bring about improvements to the lives of people in Aberdeen experiencing exclusion through disability;
- Influence change by raising issues with policy makers;
- Act as a conduit for people to influence by acting as a mechanism for information sharing.

2. There was also a feeling that they could be more effective and powerful if they had stronger links both with the communities, whose voices they speak on behalf of, and with the agencies that they seek to advise.
3. The word 'advisory' implies that the group has skills, knowledge and understanding that others need. It also requires an organisational structure for gathering information and keeping the knowledge current as well as an effective way of disseminating that information.
4. How can DAG ensure that they absolutely have the right to say "we know what we are talking about"?
Many people expressed concern about; access to the current structure, inaccessible premises, formal meeting, too many officials, not enough feedback about action taken as result of the meetings, not enough links with communities etc. People did comment more positively about the Wider Forum meetings and there appeared to be an appetite for more, but smaller, meetings as well as the Wider Forum.
5. There was acknowledgement that "disability" is a very big catch-all label, including – physical, mental and sensory impairments, caring issues etc. So there is a need for multi-points of access, multi-levels of knowledge and influence. This could be achieved through the establishment of subgroups, focussing on different aspects of disability and each one having links to that section of the disabled community and then feeding into DAG.
6. There is also the issue of membership, and the main points for discussion are:
 - Elected members – how many are there and in what role? (and a recurrent view that 5 may be too many)
 - How do we ensure that the lived experience of disabled people informs everything that DAG does?
Is the balance of individual member and organisational members' right?
(One view was that everyone should represent an organisation. But if so – which organisations? And are those organisations on the DAG steering group forever? Another view was that the group's core representative body should "consist of individuals with disabilities candidly representing their own issues by themselves, for themselves and for their fellow citizens." This is not to be confused with a view that individuals should simply attend because of personal

concern about themselves. Rather, it is a statement that challenges paternalistic views of disabled people's abilities.)

7. There were also a number of conversations suggesting that there should be development of a website and social media, and there should be creative thinking about how to use this effectively.
8. Another major issue was accountability. DAG needs to set outcomes, set an action plan – with timescales/ responsibilities etc. and the meeting should receive progress reports. This way it becomes transparent.
9. Strong suggestion of a 'Disability Access Officer' in the Council.

From the community feedback collated, it is clear that people (individuals and groups representing people with disabilities) recognise that DAG currently is ineffective and they welcome the opportunity to refresh DAG and consider alternative options for delivering positive outcomes on the disability equality agenda. For example, there were many references to the need for a more collaborative partnership approach and style of working with the council founded on a strong value statement to include:

- Commitment to equality
- A positive pro-active culture
- Openness and transparency
- Respect and courtesy
- Flexibility and approachability
- Willingness to learn and share
- Participatory and inclusive

It was suggested that there should be a renaming, branding and re-launch to show that this is a new organisation, and a recognition that in the operation of the core group in either model, that the role of office bearers is crucial to the way that the group fulfils its remit; this includes skills, experience, and supports provided.

Two models are therefore outlined below for consideration by committee. Given the importance of a change of culture for DAG as it is now, both models provide means of setting out expectations in terms of behaviours and styles of working and provide a Code of Conduct for membership.

Model 1:

Aberdeen Disability Advisory Group becomes a Disability/ Accessibility Forum, similar to a Tenant's Forum - with no, or less, elected member involvement and independent of (but supported by) the council. There is a Code of Conduct for the Tenant and Resident Forum (see Appendix 4.) which could form the basis of a Code of Conduct for the new forum.

This new Disability/ Accessibility Forum would:

- 1.1 Promote and uphold the rights and interests of people with disabilities in Aberdeen, in areas such as housing, infrastructure, planning, community regeneration, the environment, community safety and any other related issues that affect the lives of people with disabilities in Aberdeen.
- 1.2 Work with Aberdeen City Council and other relevant agencies, in pursuit of the interests of people with disabilities and to achieve the aspirations of people with disabilities in Aberdeen.

2. Membership would be open to not only all groups who represent the interests of people with disabilities, but also individuals who share a common interest in the aspirations of the forum.

The forum will:

- 3.1 Promote the interests of people with disabilities in Aberdeen

- 3.2 Welcome any representative from groups and individuals who harbour the same aspirations of the Forum.

- 3.3 Welcome any representative of any group who represent the interests of people with disabilities within the Aberdeen or any individual, who wishes to attend meetings, of the forum, as an observer.

- 3.4 Always strive to make decisions by consensus. Where this is not possible a majority decision will stand.

- 3.5 Will uphold equal opportunities and work towards good relations in Aberdeen and do all it can to promote equality and diversity.

Model 2:

Aberdeen Disability Group remains a sub-group of the council's Community Housing and Infrastructure committee; however it would be renamed and rebranded. This new sub-group would have a looser structure with changes to the current numbers of independent, group representatives and elected members to reflect the feedback from the community engagement exercise.

The suggestions from the feedback are that any new group operates with small task groups to reflect themes such as:

- (1) Accessibility, Education, Community Safety etc. or;
- (2) Learning Disabilities, Mental Health, Physical Disabilities, Wheelchair Users, Sensory Impairment.

The new group would have a clear line of accountability to the committee and to the communities it serves. Since this group would be a working group of the council, all external members would be required to sign up to the Councillor's Code of Conduct.

To address the issues raised around the present ineffectiveness of DAG, both new groups in Model 1 and 2 would set and follow a work plan to deliver SMART actions and positive outcomes for the communities they serve.

As much of the feedback on the current DAG centres on it being exclusive, rather than inclusive, both models offer the opportunity for a culture change, so that the new group becomes more accessible and welcoming and creates a positive, open, welcoming, respectful and learning environment. There is a recognition that a change in culture will not happen if it is not accompanied by explicitly tackling the role and operation of the core group/office bearers.

This draft report was circulated widely for consultation with disability groups, contacts and those who had participated in the community engagement exercise. The deadline for responses was extended to Monday 17 August to allow for late responses. Appendix 6 of the final report shows the responses from that consultation with views on the preferred model, so that elected members can take this community feedback into consideration as they make their decision on the preferred option from Models 1 and 2. Members will see that from the thirteen responses received, there are nine which explicitly mention the preferred model. There are two responses in favour of Model 1 and seven responses which prefer Model 2.

6. IMPACT

Corporate:

This report fits within the Council's Equalities Outcomes which have been developed in line with the Council's vision; *Aberdeen - the Smarter City*. We will ensure all citizens are encouraged and supported appropriately to make their full contribution. In order to address this, we will challenge inequalities wherever they exist and bring our communities closer together.

The Equalities Outcomes are aligned to fit in and support the Outcomes identified within the Single Outcome Agreement, which have the underlying principles of:

- Targeting the most in need
- Reducing isolation of minority communities.

The Equality Outcomes, since they are all about improving services and access to services for the citizens of Aberdeen, offer positive opportunities for joint working with partner organisations on projects/ activities - a new and fit-for-purpose DAG can be a positive way of demonstrating this.

Public:

This report is highly relevant to ensuring that the council meets the General Equality Duty.

The EHRIA ([Appendix 5](#)) indicates that the proposal for DAG's future will contribute positively to all three parts of the General Duty; to eliminate discrimination, to advance equality of opportunity and to foster good relations.

The EHRIA demonstrates a positive impact, particularly on people with disabilities, older people and families with young children. A pro-active partnership group acting as a "critical friend" can act as a catalyst for positive change. If life improves for people with disabilities, then it improves too for older people and parents/ carers pushing prams and buggies.

7. MANAGEMENT OF RISK

Delivering on the published Equalities Outcomes will help public authorities comply with their legal duties under:

- a. Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 (the public sector equality duty), and;
- b. The Equality Act 2010 (Specific Duties) (Scotland) Regulations 2012

This proposal, and the work around its development, seeks to address the feedback received and perceptions about the current ineffectiveness of DAG, and how it has been operating. The proposal aims to turn these around making DAG fit for purpose by involving a wider range of people with disabilities, their views and experiences, and also of organisations representing people with disabilities who currently feel excluded and unrepresented.

This juncture marks an opportunity for DAG. The new DAG can act as a credible sounding board for council plans and policies and signal their impact on people with disabilities in the city. A revamped key group, which is task and outcome focused can add value and make a difference, whilst to keep DAG as is, maintains the current risks of its lack of credibility and standing.

8. BACKGROUND PAPERS

Community Engagement Feedback – June/ July 2015.

9. REPORT AUTHOR DETAILS

Sandra Bruce,
Equality Strategist,
Email: sandrab@aberdeencity.gov.uk
Tel. 01224 523039