

Community Engagement Workshops on Disability

Introduction

Consultation around the future of Aberdeen's *Disability Advisory Group* (DAG) focussed largely around three sessions held on 29th and 30th June which discussed ways of improving the lives of people with disabilities in Aberdeen. These were held in the North, South and Central areas of the city at different times to encourage maximum participation.

The specific aims of the sessions were to:

- Explore ways of making sure that the DAG is fully inclusive and accessible to the disabled community in Aberdeen;
- Identify ways of making sure that the DAG is as effective and influential as it can be.

People were asked to think about four questions:

In a perfect world...

- *"What would DAG's role be?"*
- *"What would DAG look like?"*
(in terms of the make-up of the group, the structure of the group and how often and when it meets)
- *"How would disabled people, and their carer's, bring issues to the attention of DAG?"*
- *"How would the leadership of DAG report back to the wider disabled community?"*

People discussed the questions in small groups and wrote their responses on flipcharts. These were typed and the key themes grouped and summarised – to avoid repetition. If there are apparent contradictions, it is therefore because not all groups came to the same conclusions.

Purpose of DAG

The current constitution states that the aims of the DAG are to:

- Work towards the removal of environmental, attitudinal and organisational barriers which impede fair and equal participation by people with disabilities in the economic, social and political life of the City;

- Work with appropriate Scottish Disability Organisations to inform national policy on issues of relevance to people with disabilities.

Comments from those present did not contradict the aims to:

- Counter/ challenge the barriers that disabled people face in Aberdeen;
- Help resolve the disability issues for the people of Aberdeen;
- Make things better for people with a disability;
- Make disabled people's lives less different and barrier free – more dignified and fulfilled.

Values and principles of DAG:

- DAG should have an explicit value statement
- Meaningful
- Influence
- Transparent
- Open
- Honest
- Demonstrable action/delivery
- Representation of disabled communities – equally- flat structure
- All views, voices and opinions to be welcomed
- Equality/access/inclusion/ socialisation/be part across all aspects of life
- Self-empowerment – by disabled people for disabled people

Role of DAG

To influence, by;

- Feeding into the council the lived experience of disabled people;
- Getting the council to listen and act;
- Promoting equality across all communities;
- Promoting integration.

To be a critical friend to the Council, by;

- Holding council to account in a constructive way.

To educate, by;

- Breaking down stereotypes/challenging attitudes and perceptions;
- Taking an educational/ awareness raising role;
- Identifying and evidencing barriers;

- Requesting and suggesting solutions .

To advocate, by;

- Advocating on behalf of people with disabilities

To do this effectively DAG needs to be representative and accountable, by;

- Being an organisation which covers all disabilities;
- Representing all disabilities;
- Representing all age groups and families and carers.

Big Question:

- Do we need DAG?
Would a small committee (empowering disabled people) and a big forum that meets twice a twice per year be more effective?
- Should DAG be renamed and rebranded?

Membership

The Wider Forum:

- Need to ensure that the “disabled community” is fully represented and that all forms of disability are considered (including physical, learning, sensory and mental health).
- The wider forum also needs to take account of other forms of diversity and ensure that younger disabled people, disabled people from different ethnic backgrounds, including the Traveller community, are represented and/ or able to access DAG.

The DAG group:

- The DAG group will be more diverse if the wider group, from which the leadership is drawn, is more diverse;
- We need a cross-section of the community;
- Better representation of different age groups;
- More people from minority ethnic backgrounds;
- People in DAG need to share common purpose / passion;
- Service providers such as First Group/ Taxi Drivers’ Federation to be invited to meetings as appropriate.

Composition of the group:

Currently - according the constitution it is 5 elected members, 7 representatives of groups and 7 individual members.

Elected members:

- Is 5 still appropriate? Should the number reduced/ should they be there at all? Should they come by invitation for specific/ relevant topics?
- There would be more space for people with disabilities if no, or fewer, councillors attended;
- If they are there, then they should not be party political in their contributions.

The balance of representatives and individual members:

- Is this still the right balance?
- Members - must understand the issues and/or have experience of the issues;
- Some groups agreed that a set percentage of the membership should have to be disabled (self- identified);
- No need for positive discrimination. Members need to be credible;
- All groups of disabled people need a voice and representation;
- Priority should be to people with disabilities, and then their advocates and carers;
- One view that people should be there as a representative of a group or an organisation, instead of people being independent;
- A gap identified – the representation of families and carers.

Other issues:

- Membership should be time limited;
- No guaranteed membership.

Structure

- Constitution needs to be reviewed –too formal. It needs to be more fluid;
- Themed sub-groups of DAG doing the work of gathering information on issues/needs/views, feeding back to the main group who take action on it;
- Themed sub-groups could include sensory, physical learning disability-wheelchair users;
- These sub-groups should have objectives, action plans and should report on their progress;
- Flat line structure – with everyone getting equal respect;
- Clear roles with job description for roles e.g. chair and vice-chair to ensure participation, show respect and make space for divergent views;
- Both chair and vice-chair should have disabilities;
- Training for steering group and wider on their roles – and the role of DAG;
- Have a central hub for information/ resources – website (who updates - Council? Resources?) – other resources (see communications section);

- Strong links with as many people as possible - especially those whose organisations provide services / develop policies etc.

Meetings

Running the meetings:

- Open and inclusive- everyone welcome;
- Skilled chairing;
- Opportunities for participation;
- It needs to be safe for people to raise issues and then they have to be heard;
- Work with council to challenge constructively and change things;
- Work in partnership rather than being confrontational;
- Being a critical friend to council, can be challenging but not adversarial;
- Maximum term of 3 years for positions;
- Elected annually for a period of 12 months period which may be extended for a further 12 months, then not eligible to stand again for a further 24 months - so that there are opportunities for new ideas, sharing, learning, development and responsibility.

Location:

- Committee room – formal structure needs to be reviewed;
- Townhouse not accessible in terms of parking;
- Service users forum could meet in informal settings;
- Venue – time for a change – bit out of reach.

Timing:

- Real barriers having DAG meetings on a week day;
- Hold events at different times;
- Frequency of meetings to be able to deal with all issues;
- Plan meetings a year in advance – action plan, minutes, progress;
- Keep the formal meeting at the same frequency and supplement with smaller meetings.

Accountability:

- Meetings should have proper agendas and relevant focus;
- Action points from meetings with outcomes and a note of who is responsible;
- Council should report back to DAG;
- DAG should have a work plan and report on this.

How DAG communicates

- Better promotion of DAG to raise its profile and develop lines of communication;
- Better communication between DAG and the wider group (forum);
- More visibility of chair and vice chair so that they are approachable and people can take issues to them.

Website, email, social media:

- Develop a DAG website that links to other relevant groups and signposts people to information;
- DAG agenda and minutes etc. could be posted on the website;
- People could feedback to DAG;
- Targeting specific groups by email;
- Also information zoom etc. for electronic communications;
- Social media works for some, but need to keep in mind that not everybody is digital;
- Make use of virtual forums /social media;
- Website could have potential to link to health/ social care partnership;
- I-connect – signposting;
- Needs to be available in many forms (Facebook, Twitter etc.) Social media can get younger people engaged.

Gathering the information:

- All organisations with an interest in disability feed info on their services into DAG (or I-connect);
- Need to find out the role of the organisations in community that provide services to disabled people;
- Identifying the needs of disabled people in Aberdeen;
- Identify the care provision in Aberdeen;
- Get the information, know what's out there, keep it up to date.

Relationship with the council:

- There needs to be good communication between councillors and council officers and DAG;
- Feedback – when DAG raises issues, they need to know what happened as a result;
- Need to know how issues are channelled/dealt with and where they stop;
- Reporting to the policy section of the council is important;
- Does DAG want to continue to be a “Council Advisory Group”?

Setting the agenda:

- Send a note out to ask for agenda items;
- DAG to identify issues (beyond city council) and lead on them;
- Initial approaches with issues should be taken to chair or vice-chair in order to prioritise;
- Making community councils and other networks (all disability charities) aware of how they can get disability related issues raised via DAG.

Communicating back to people:

- Individual organisations could disseminate DAG issues using their own networks;
- Newsletter people can subscribe to;
(this could be electronic and paper-based. Need to think about issues such as size of fonts and paragraph length etc. Make Arial standard - Times new roman is difficult to read.)
- Information available in a range of formats;
- Make use of contact Scotland app/interpreter service;
- Tackling barriers – ensure people can access information and meet people's needs e.g. hearing, language;
- Collation of database? Cascading info to everyone;
- Need to get good information out to service users;
- Newsletters with pictures to feedback info in electronic format.

Big question:

- How do we improve feedback from DAG to the communities?
- Real issue – need feedback about what happens as a result of DAG. What happens to the issues raised?
- DAG makes statements – but what happens after?
Make clear your expectations and get feedback;
- Structure and processes for feedback are not there and need to be put in place;
- DAG is not a social event;
- Needs people who will do work and contribute to meetings rather than a minute;
- Action speaks louder than words;
- Commitment and set deadlines from decision makers for a feedback and plan for action. Even if nothing could be done it's always good to know.

Big Idea:

- Need a Disability Access Officer in the Council.

Outreach:

- Outreach leaders to meet the people where they are at – go to their meetings;
- Communicate with DAG groups in other local authority areas to share best practice;
- Communicating more with people from minority ethnic communities.

Partnership working:

- DAG – issues can go beyond the areas where council has control – can work in partnership for change;
- Identify the allies;
- Be active participants in Community Planning Partnership and processes;
- Partnership with Grampian Regional Equality Council (GREC);
- Partnerships –promote access/positive and respectful/ relationships, trust etc.;
- Joint meetings with Cornerstone/ Inspire;
- Co-ordinated approach across groups – DAG and Connect and others;
- Don't want an overlap with AAD/ Access Panels – need to be clear who does what.

Rights based approach

- **Participation**
- **Accountability**
- **Non-discrimination and equality**
- **Empowerment**
- **Legality.**