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Voluntary Sector Infrastructure in Nottinghamshire

Report of investigations into the infrastructure support needs of groups controlled and run by disabled people in Nottinghamshire and the resources currently used by them

September 2004

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The Brief

NAVO (Networking Action with Voluntary Organisations) in Nottinghamshire approached Equal Ability Limited, in June 2004, to request assistance in investigating the infrastructure needs of disabled people's organisations in Nottingham City and Nottinghamshire. This was to feed in to the overall voluntary sector infrastructure review being undertaken. Jon North of NAVO met with Sue Maynard Campbell, Managing Director of Equal Ability Limited, to agree the project and the process, on 6 July 2004.

NAVO has an in-depth knowledge of the voluntary sector in Nottinghamshire. In the light of the available budget it was agreed NAVO would set up 3 days of interviews with appropriate organisations, and Equal Ability Limited would undertake the interviews and prepare a report. This is that Report.

The Choice of Equal Ability Limited

Equal Ability is a disability consultancy with a national profile, based in Wakefield. It has previously undertaken research work in Nottingham around the needs and experience of disabled people in relation particularly to employment. Nationally it has also undertaken research and consultancy for the British Council of Disabled People on the development and support needs of disabled people's organisations.

The company is run by disabled people and has a significant track record in working on qualitative research projects focusing on the needs of disabled people.

Equal Ability Limited has undertaken projects for organisations of disabled people, including Breakthrough UK; and for other organisations including the Disability Rights Commission, the NHS Executive and the Employment Service (now Jobcentre Plus).

The Investigation Process

Over a period from 5th August to 1st September 2004 Equal Ability Limited undertook ten interviews with representatives of organisations covering Nottingham and Nottinghamshire. Eight were face to face, and two over the telephone. For reasons of time in this brief exercise all the interviews were in and around the City of Nottingham: venues elsewhere in the County were not explored and most of the organisations were City-based. There were a total of thirteen interviewees, and thirteen organisations were represented within the interviewees - a number of organisations being represented by some individuals.

Of the organisations represented, two might be termed infrastructure or support organisations, seven were organisations of disabled people (although none were directly controlled by people with learning difficulties), one was a user-led organisation involving a large number of disabled people, two were organisations for disabled people (although both involved disabled people to a significant extent), and one was a statutory service.

The interview appointments illustrated the problems of securing appropriately accessible venues in the City. Of the facilities used only one enabled the interviewer to conveniently use their laptop to record the interview.

The interview schedule was agreed and is included as Appendix One.

The Outcome

Fragmentation

Without exception, there was agreement that the situation surrounding organisations of disabled people, in Nottingham and Nottinghamshire, was fragmented. Many commented on a lack of cohesion, the reason for which was often seen as historical, although, to some extent, it might also be seen as arising from a perceived difference of approach to disability. Some, for instance, felt that others did not have a clear view of how to operate within the Social Model of Disability. However, amongst the organisations interviewed there was a significant level of agreement.

It is, however, clear that there is a growing consensus amongst disabled people's organisations that there is a need for a CIL (Centre for Independent Living). This consensus is bringing together organisations and/or individuals who have historically not worked together.

Overstretching Active Disabled Members

The numbers of disabled people's organisations in this fragmented environment means, currently, that disabled people's time and energy is often stretched to, or past, the limit, in order to service the existing organisations. Many organisations were struggling for the essential officers to ensure their legal operation. All the disabled people's organisations interviewed acknowledged that they were currently contributing little or nothing towards the infrastructure needs of other disabled people's organisations.

Need for Representation

There was a substantial level of concern, particularly from outside the disabled people's groups, about the lack of a clear voice for disabled people in key decision-making arenas. For instance there were no disabled people's groups represented in the City Community Network leading to their not being represented in the One City Partnership or in other community networks and local strategic partnerships across the County.

Disabled people's groups recognised their lack of resources to enable them to undertake effective involvement. These could include, for example, appropriate support and transport and materials in the appropriate format. But it is as much having people available at the times when meetings are held who are personally equipped to contribute, and have the energy to do so. Many use all their available time and energy, especially where they are working, just to keep their groups going. Paid workers are the exception rather than the rule, and where they do exist their time is fully occupied delivering the key objectives of the group.

Funders' Lack of Understanding

Most of the disabled people's organisations had little or no core funding to cover infrastructure needs. None appeared to see themselves as infrastructure organisations. Much of the time of some honorary officers was clearly spent looking for funding just to keep the organisation itself going. The risks disabled members are asked to take, as a result of this lack of financial insecurity, are not well understood.

Funders seem to find it extremely difficult to appreciate the cost of essential elements in providing an inclusive organisation. The fact that many disabled people cannot use cheaper forms of public transport and need to rely on taxis if they do not have their own transport, for instance, has a major impact on the level of expenses an organisation can be expected to meet. The costs of ensuring that accessible formats are available at the same time as standard formats, and of providing interpretation and other human support, are potentially a significant budget head. The essential nature of equipment, such as high specification laptops, which would be seen in any other organisation as an unsupportable expense, is not appreciated.

Lack of Appreciation of Access Needs

In the wider community, there is a significant lack of understanding of the importance of meeting access needs. The voluntary and statutory sectors are no exception. The impact of this is potentially varied. The additional costs may be thrown on to the disabled people's organisation. The quality of their involvement in processes, or take up of services,

may be significantly reduced. They may simply withdraw from engagement because of the additional energy required to combat the barriers created by this lack of understanding.

Lack of Accessible Venues

The problem of finding fully accessible venues was almost universally acknowledged. None of the disabled people's organisations had venues with ideal access. Many had no office base at all. The issue is not solely wheelchair access. There is a very wide range of access issues that need to be considered. These include proximity to good public transport networks; a safe and non-oppressive environment; good lighting, preferably natural; good acoustics with minimal background noise; and so on. The difficulty of finding an accessible venue in the City increases with distance from the centre – accessible venues in other parts of the county were not explored because time was limited. Comprehensive information about accessible venues should be compiled and made easily available.

Lack of Information and Accessible Resources

It is clear that although there is a level of resource available, which disabled people's organisations can tap in to, not all are aware of its extent. Whether resources on offer, such as training, are accessible to those needing them is, more often than not, difficult to ascertain. In addition, an increasing amount of information and access to resources is gained through the Web. However, there is a very significant lack of access for disabled people to the Web, particularly those with visual impairments or learning difficulties.

As with the voluntary sector generally, there are a significant number of sources of resource, each with their own particular perspective on the need they are meeting and the way in which they are prepared to meet it. It is not just information about the resources, but the way in which an organisation's aims need to be moulded, in order to meet the criteria for gaining the resource. In any voluntary sector organisation this is not easy, but where there are additional impairment related access issues, including limited energy or essential technology needs, it can become an insurmountable barrier.



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It is clear that some resources have proved particularly useful to a number of organisations. However, availability can impact adversely on an organisations ability to operate such as, the introduction of charging for a service (accountancy) or the total loss of a service (printing). Other services which cannot be provided in-house, but which are essential for providing inclusion, such as brailing or interpretation can be unreliable or hard to secure, not to mention potentially costly.



Conclusions

Disabled peoples organisations are clearly struggling to acquire sufficient infrastructure resources to enable them to effectively undertake the work they see as needed on behalf of, and within, the disabled community. In this they are not alone in the voluntary sector. However, there are some key issues that perhaps make their situation additionally complex, and in need of specific consideration.

- There is a long history of disabled people's groups being fragmented, and an acknowledged need to build community and to increase the involvement, empowerment and representation of disabled people.
- There is no clear support structure to enable disabled people's groups, and indeed other groups, to provide full access.
- The resources available to the voluntary sector are not always fully accessible to disabled peoples groups because of a range of access barriers, such as, the timing of courses, the provision of accessible material, and general lack of disability awareness amongst providers.
- There are impairment related energy issues for disabled people who are combating a whole range of access barriers in other parts of their lives on a daily basis.

It is clear that there is growing consensus and cohesion around the concept of, and need for, a CIL (Centre for Independent Living). We believe that this cohesion could be built upon to develop a specific infrastructure organisation, controlled and run by disabled people, for disabled people's groups. This could be combined with, or immediately support, a CIL. To do this it could be worth considering operating a social firm or perhaps take up the new Community Interest Company form when available. We would envisage the role and benefits of this as including the following.

- A fully accessible central Nottingham meeting and office facility, and enabling access to such facilities elsewhere in the County. This would essentially need to be networked, through good use of



technology, to other accessible meeting venues around Nottinghamshire. This would reduce the need for travel, and the investment of time and energy required for those for whom a central Nottingham venue is not easily accessible.

- A single point for the provision of support, whether directly or through other organisations, to enable the provision of fully accessible services and meetings. It would provide alternative formats, including Braille and easy-read; book interpreter and other human aids to communication services; book personal assistants; maintain and update a directory of accessible venues; provide training on accessible meetings; and so on. This would not only assist groups of disabled people, but also other voluntary sector groups. It could also provide a means of income generation if made available to the statutory and commercial sectors.
- A secretariat and treasury service provided to groups of disabled people together with serviced office space. Significant responsibility, and indeed risk, could thereby be removed from those organisations to enable them to involve more disabled people, and concentrate on their aims, rather than the business of surviving. It would mean reducing the need for active officers.
- A resource for disabled people to gain more development opportunities in a peer-supported environment, and for community to be built. It would also enable more minority groups within the disabled community to be nurtured and grown. This should enable disabled people to be more effectively represented in, and on, those organisations making decisions that affect their lives, and those of their peers.

We would see it developing as a centre of excellence, enabling organisations across the sectors to better understand and meet the needs of disabled people in Nottingham and Nottinghamshire.

Appendix One - Interview Schedule – Infrastructure Needs of Disabled People’s Groups

1. Check that they are aware of the Project and Equal Ability’s role in it.
2. Explain responses will be used in writing a report but anonymised if they wish.
3. Ask for a brief description of what their organisation does.
4. Find out how the organisation is constituted – company limited by guarantee, trust, charity, self-help etc
5. Ask how disabled people are involved in the organisation.
6. *For all organisations* ask what they would say their current infrastructure contribution was towards disabled people’s organisations. Probe their understanding of this as a term. What do they see as the unmet need in this respect? Could they contribute to meeting it? How?
7. *For organisations that are a disabled people’s organisations* ask re infrastructure:
 - a. Which organisations (or who) currently meet their needs and how?
 - b. What do they see as the shortfall and how do they envisage it might be met?
8. *For all organisations* find out if they have any thoughts on the situation around disabled people’s organisations in Nottingham.
9. *For all organisations* any other comments.....

Part Two - The Interviews

Schedule below – interview texts available from NAVO

Organisation Name: Nottinghamshire Disabled People's Movement (NDPM)

Date: 18.08.04

Interviewee: Adrian Picton Position: Chair

Liz Silver Joint Secretary

Mark Sheppard Committee member

Organisation Name: Disabilities Living Centre Date: 10.08.04

Interviewee: Jo Stevenson Position: Manager

Organisation Name: Nottingham Advocacy Group (NAG)

and Experts by Experience (Experts) Date: 10.08.04

Interviewee: Mervyn Goring Position: Manager (NAG)

Development Director (Experts)

Organisation Name: Nottingham Council for Voluntary Service (NCVS) as the lead organisation for the Cascade Project (a network of and for organisations)

Date: 25.08.04

Interviewee: Jonny Gutteridge Position: Information, Learning

Development and Services Manager

Organisation Name: Self Help Nottingham Date: 5.8.04

Interviewee: Barbara Ann Walker Position: Director

Organisation Name: Parent Partnership Service Date: 18.08.04

Interviewee: Edwina Cosgrove Position: Volunteer Support Worker

Organisation Name: Disabled People's Advocacy Nottinghamshire (DPANotts)

Date: 18.08.04

Interviewee: Jo Mossman Position: Treasurer and Trustee

Nicky Green Development Worker

Organisation Name: Nottinghamshire Deaf Society Date: 2.09.04

Interviewee: George Reynolds Position: Chief Executive

Organisation Name: Nottinghamshire Coalition of Disabled People (NCDP)

Date: 10.08.04

Interviewee: Michael Hinds Position: Chair

Organisation Name: Direct Payments Support Service Date: 5.08.04

Interviewee: Fred Postles Position: Service Development Officer