

SOCIAL CARE AND ADULT SERVICES SCRUTINY PANEL

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY – IMPROVING LEVELS OF EMPLOYMENT FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

The Review

The overall aim of the Scrutiny investigation was to look at how the Council and its partners were working to support people with disabilities into paid and meaningful employment, to ensure that disabled people have the opportunities and support to enable them to enter the world of work. The panel recognised the wider worklessness agenda however for the purposes of this review the panel focussed its attention specifically on those people that the Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities was designed to help. That included the 2,000 people from the hardest to reach groups who had mental health problems, learning disabilities and physical disabilities.

The panel looked at the barriers that people faced, what support was being offered, areas of innovation and good practice. Panel members also considered how the Council worked with its partners in order to increase opportunities.

The panel undertook a number of methods of investigation for the review including information from officers, a visit to Ayresome Industries, discussions with North Lanarkshire Council and a debate with key stakeholders that included Job Centre Plus, Learning and Skills Council, Citizens Advice Bureau and County Durham and Darlington Primary Care Trust.

Conclusions

The panel endorsed the Council's view that people with disabilities should have the same rights to employment as any other person and that the new and innovative ways of finding people suitable jobs, such as job carving, should be supported.

It was noted that the Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities would only work if there was a continuing commitment from all the stakeholders involved.

The main concerns people with disabilities had was the fear of losing benefits and being able to find suitable employment. The panel found that in gaining employment people could be better off both financially and, with the right benefit advice and tax credits, emotionally. The job coaches were working hard to ensure suitable employment was found and employers needed to play a major role. The way forward was not forcing companies to have a quota of people with disabilities to work for them, it was getting companies to change their perceptions of disabled workers and actively look at jobs, or elements of jobs that they could do. Companies didn't need to provide a charitable service or treat people differently, but provide opportunities for people to do an honest day's work for a day's pay.

The FORWARDS Team would benefit from close working relations with the Council's Economic Development Team in order to identify potential new employers and share knowledge about companies in Middlesbrough.

The panel was impressed with the work and commitment of the staff and the employees of Ayresome Industries and thought that the organisation should be used to highlight how successful it can be to employ people with a disability and to pass on their experiences to other employers.

The panel heard how the diversification of services provided by Ayresome Industries would provide more jobs for people with disabilities. The panel endorsed this course of action.

The panel felt that the Council had targeted significant resources in order to deliver the strategy but that it must be maintained in order to secure this important service. The panel also agreed that there were a number of key issues that would ensure the strategies success such as introducing champions to each department, auditing the Council's commissioned services, enhancing the role of Ayresome Industries, introducing 'social clauses' for companies the Council worked with.

Recommendations

1. That a 'champion' be appointed in each Council department in order to push forward the initiative in the Council and improve awareness.
2. That a Councillor also be appointed as a 'champion'. Other Councillors should be made aware of the scheme in order to be able to signpost people to the FORWARDS service.
3. That the FORWARDS Team and the Council's Economic Development Team work closely to share information about new and current employers within the Town.
4. That the service returns to the panel in 6 months to discuss the progress and in particular the number of people who have been in contact with the service and the total number of jobs found.
5. That Ayresome Industries is used as an example of good practice for other employers. Employers should be encouraged to visit Ayresome Industries to see its operation in practice.
6. The Council, as an exemplar, should be seen to be leading the way in providing opportunities for people with disabilities especially in the use of 'job carving' to create appropriate work opportunities and that this should be a corporate policy.
7. That the Council ensures that the correct level of resources is directed to FORWARDS to enable its work to be carried out effectively.
8. That a press release be issued to publicise the work of the service to the public, potential users and businesses. The benefits of the mental health first aid should be highlighted and work should continue to be undertaken with employers to alter their perceptions of disabled employees and to get them to undertake the mental health first aid training course in their organisations.
9. In order to assist Ayresome Industries in being able to employ more workers, Ayresome Industries should be given the opportunity and assistance to develop their facilities to enable the organisation to recycle plastic waste.
10. That the Council also reviews its policy on commissioned services to identify services which Ayresome Industries could provide, including the internal waste destruction policy.