



**The Highlands & Islands Equality Forum
Submission of evidence to the Scottish
Parliament, Equal Opportunities Committee**

31st May 2005



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Making it **work together**

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A word about the Highlands & Islands Equality Forum (HIEF) and the consultation process in support of this paper

HIEF is a partnership project led by SCVO and funded by European Social Fund, Communities Scotland, HIE, UHI Millennium Institute, DTI, Tulloch plc and LifeScan Scotland Ltd. It also receives management support from various CVS (Councils of Voluntary Service) in the Highlands & Islands.

The project serves to raise awareness of Equality and Diversity issues in the Highlands & Islands, working across all sectors but predominantly with employers to ensure that they are aware of the business benefits to be gained from adopting Equal Opportunities policy as well as their responsibilities under law. HIEF highlights the discrimination faced by people over the broad spectrum of equality 'strands' including gender, disability, race, belief & religion, sexual orientation and age. Initial awareness-raising presentations are delivered at short roadshow events with follow-on support training delivered free of charge as required. A comprehensive Equality Toolkit is given away at the end of each roadshow to serve as an important reference guide for every organisation or business. The services of HIEF are open to all but are especially relevant to employers – in all sectors.

HIEF Consultation Network

HIEF's consultant network group comprises more than 1,000 groups, organisations and individuals who receive regular information and bulletins from the HIEF team, and whose comments and opinions are fed into local, national and European agendas. Within this membership are representatives from groups of people who face discrimination, employers from all sectors and those with a more general interest in the Equalities agenda. Use of the HIEF consultation network helps employers understand the needs of those who are often excluded from work and the community, and ensures that those making policy nationally understand the specific needs of our area.

Our consultation process in support of this paper

Members were asked to comment in response to key questions (indicated by the subsection headings in this paper) so that we could present their views to the Scottish Parliament Equal Opportunities Committee.

The response exceeded expectations, showing that our network is indeed truly alive.

The following paper draws on these responses and information and learning collected informally by the HIEF team in its daily communication with people in the Highlands & Islands (H&I). As such, it is not the opinion of any one person or of the collective whole, but simply a collation of the diverse views held across our membership.

A summary of the key points within this consultation paper

Part (i) General Equality issues

What we're getting right in the Highlands & Islands

- The Equality agenda is growing its profile
- Agencies are working together and learning from each other to the benefit of the local community, and useful networks are being formed
- We're improving accessibility for people with mobility impairments (in some areas)
- Women at threat of domestic abuse are learning how to get help
- We are growing knowledge of the problems which need addressing
- We are making rurality work in our favour
- Some businesses are becoming more receptive and open to change
- Initiation of new research is informing our understanding of key issues

What we're getting wrong in the Highland & Islands

- Many agencies are resisting change
- A parochial attitude to gender is condoned by some as a 'Highland trait'
- Some women's attitudes and actions undermine the work being done to promote gender equality
- Correct policy in large public authorities is not always evidenced in action
- Local media often sensationalise the negative in reporting equality issues
- We are not properly supporting people with multiple disabilities or their primary carers

Key issues in the Highlands & Islands

- A lack of regular, reliable and fully-accessible public transport is a key discriminatory factor in our communities
- The geography and rurality of the Highlands & Islands creates barriers to full inclusion in the community
- Schools are as yet 'largely untouched' by the equality debate
- The equality legislation on sexual orientation and on belief & religion causes tensions
- There is a lack of translation and interpreting services.
- There is a lack of confidence in our ability to change practice
- There is a lack of awareness of the need to change to inclusive practice
- Childcare provision is scarce and of disparate quality
- There is a lack of consultation with groups facing barriers to identify useful solutions

Our priorities for Scottish Parliament to address

- **A commitment to improving accessibility of public transport in the Highlands & Islands**
- **The provision of a train the trainer scheme**
- **Support in building the capacity to address inequity in the Highlands & Islands by investing in existing projects and agencies.**
 - Encourage cross agency working to provide a joined-up approach in each area and align support groups so that duplication is minimised and all resources are used to best effect.
 - More help is needed to tackle the prevalence of domestic abuse.
 - Commitment to funding key projects post-2007 is required when European transitional programme funding ends.
 - Support should be given to new technology
- **Financial support for H&I public authorities is needed to help them deliver the new public duties in regard to race, disability and gender.**
- **Government support is required for a new Single Equality Act**
- **A well-funded and nationally –accredited training programme is required to build capacity of translation and interpreting services.**
- **Financial assistance for businesses least able to afford costs of maternity leave should be considered**
- **Recognition in law of gypsy travellers as a distinct racial group**
- **Provision of a strong deterrent to those who continue to disregard the current legislation and heavily promote good practice in enterprise**
 - Continue to encourage test cases in law
 - Make it a mandatory condition of public funding that all new business start-ups or contracts give evidence of awareness of, and commitment to, equal opportunities.
 - Support a national charter award system for equitable practice
- **Commit funds to provision of good quality childcare**

Reassess support in schools for pupils with special needs

Part (ii) Focus on getting disabled people into employment

What good things have happened to disabled people in the Highlands & Islands?

- Government and MSPs are listening to us
- Public sector organisations have taken some steps to provide services appropriate to the needs of the physically disabled in H&I.
- Successful projects are currently running and developing in H&I

What companies are good at giving work to disabled people - what is it these companies are getting right?

- Case studies of good practice
- Increased requests for information to build understanding of how best to support disabled people in the workplace

What colleges and universities help disabled students - and how do they do this?

- Mixed reports of good and bad support for disabled students
- Research helpful in identifying areas for improvement
- Concerns over preparation for learning and career plans

What areas are good to live and socialise in - and why?

- Deaf people tend to congregate in Inverness

What projects and people are helping solve the things that stop disabled people getting on in important areas of life.

- Information and advice are given to employers to help them provide employment opportunities for disabled people
- Community Advocacy Officer

More detail on the key points raised

Part (i) General Equality issues

What we're getting right in the Highlands & Islands

- **The Equality agenda is growing its profile**

Thanks to the work of key agencies such as Highlands & Islands Equality Forum (HIEF) taking key information to the people in all parts of the Highlands & Islands, there is now a clearly identifiable first point of contact for information and training support to help businesses, organisations and individuals better understand the benefits to be gained from adopting good inclusive practice.

- **Agencies are working together and learning from each other to the benefit of the local community, and useful networks are being formed**

Disability issues: Inverness City Centre management listened when Inverness Access Committee (IAC) requested disability reference in the pathsforinverness guide and then took action to include this; the City Partnership is still listening regarding the City Vision and is seeking feedback on all aspects of the City Centre from the public, including IAC.

Gender issues: The Highland Wellbeing Alliance (HWA) uses a multi-agency approach to tackling major issues such as domestic abuse. Key public agencies work together to positive effect.

Race issues: Highland Alliance for Racial Equality (HARE) have this year developed an action plan to take forward a number of issues: The two most noteworthy are, firstly to introduce multi agency racist incident reporting (MARIM). This is being co-sponsored by the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service for the Highlands & Islands (COPFS), Northern Constabulary (NorCon), Highland Council and NHS Highland. COPFS and NorCon have already introduced it. Highland Council and NHS Highland are, in conjunction with Grampian Racial Equality Council (GREC), about to facilitate training for their own and other staff of members of HARE. The second major initiative is the setting-up of a lay advisory group constituted from the Black and Ethnic Minorities, communities which HARE members serve, to advise on any policy initiatives emanating from the partners of HARE. HARE is currently gathering information from throughout Scotland on what models there are elsewhere to advise the way forward in H&I, but hope to introduce a lay advisory group of some sort in the course of 2005/6 financial year. Yet another initiative about to get underway is the setting up of a procedure whereby HARE attends local events such as the local Highland games or Black Isle Show to publicise their existence and the facilities open to members of BME communities in H&I.

HIEF is managing a project funded by the Highland Wellbeing Alliance to develop an online 'Welcome to the Highlands' tool which will allow key agencies and individuals to access and print out important national and local information of benefit to people newly-arrived in the Highlands. It is hoped that this will help people better understand our culture and how they can access all the necessary services – from housing and benefits to registering their children at school and what rights they are

entitled to. Amongst other organisations, Northern Constabulary support this initiative and anticipate that it will reduce the vulnerability of immigrants .

Local Equality Forums and networks: HIEF supports local multi-agency groups to come together and discuss any issues pertinent to their local community. Through its 'train the trainer' programme, they are establishing locally-based training expertise so that local forums have the capacity to direct and deliver their own agendas. Established forums exist in Shetland and in Orkney with formative forums in Islay, Jura & Argyll and in Inverness. HIEF's project partner, UHI Millennium Institute identifies local trainers from its college network.

HIEF now has a membership of over 1000 people allowing it to gather and disseminate information over a wide mix of sectorial interest.

Highland Libraries are taking seriously the issue of access to information for disabled people by responding to expressed need whenever possible as well as providing special facilities on computers. They use their network of 55 libraries to distribute leaflets for organisations and groups, either Highland-wide or for specific areas or localities.

- **We're improving accessibility for people with mobility impairments (in some areas)**

When asked informally, wheelchair users are willing to say Inverness is much more accessible than it was. The Inverness Access Committee (IAC) has an agreed continuing dropped kerb program with the Highland Council who listen when IAC specifies pavement sites. The Council has also completed the City Centre repaving specified user-friendly materials following IAC intervention several year ago.

The Eastgate II developers in Inverness listened to IAC at the planning stage and included the disabled access requests into the Shopping Centre design.

Raigmore hospital, Inverness, is listening to IAC through focus meetings: a program of disability alterations has begun including disabled accessible toilets to wards, Blue Badge disabled parking bays, signage etc.

We increasingly hear of good experiences such as when a recently married couple including a wheelchair-user reported kind and caring hospitality at a local hotel reception venue. Many other hotels are listening to IAC regarding the DDA – finally the Ramada Jarvis has a ramped entrance to Church St.; the Columba Hotel company architect has just met with IAC architect to agree improved ramped access proposals.

- **Women at threat of domestic abuse are learning how to get help**

Leaflets and stickers have been sited in public toilets to tell women that abuse is a crime and that they can escape without fear of being discovered. Confidential phonelines allow victims and their children to get advice of places of safety.

- **We are growing knowledge of the problems which need addressing**

The Highland Wellbeing Alliance is undertaking a survey in respect of in-migration with a view to holding a conference in the autumn to highlight the in-migration issues

in the Highlands. This will hopefully lead to the identification of solutions which can be developed in the course of the next few years.

- **We are making rurality work in our favour**

Being so often left 'out of the loop', local communities have had to maximise their own strengths. This means that the most enterprising can often demonstrate great creativity and innovation e.g Caithness with continuous new health methods and pathways for most vulnerable, Highland for its Health forums and help in changing policies, groups who have devised transport schemes, and Orkney for its partnership and buddy systems etc

- **Some businesses are becoming more receptive and open to change**

Whilst awareness of equal opportunities remains generally poor in the Highlands & Islands, HIEF is increasingly witness to initial defensive attitudes being replaced with an openness to new learning when businesses are reassured about the benefits and feasibility of adopting good equality practice. The key to engaging with businesses has been to adopt a flexible attitude to delivering information in a variety of ways to suit the needs of the clients, and to proactively take the message to the private sector in particular so that the relevance of the subject becomes evident in a real way, thus encouraging further contact and engagement.

- **Initiation of new research is informing our understanding of key issues**

HIEF is this year supporting two pieces of research: Barbara Peardon of Moray College, who last year completed a study on 'Learning and the dyslexic student' is now engaged in studying the 'Access to Learning Centres in the Highlands & Islands', and Audrey Milton of Inverness College is making progress on her research into 'Gender in the professions in Highlands & Islands' – a study which includes women's perceptions about their opportunities and experiences.

What we're getting wrong in the Highland & Islands

- **Many agencies are resisting change**

Public services are not yet accessible for all: There are many reports of large public buildings without lifts or access for disabled people, transport facilities being upgraded in ways that are not sensitive to disabled users, promises for changes that are made but not fulfilled, and key agencies still not consulting with groups who could help them understand identify barriers to inclusion.

- **A parochial attitude to gender is condoned by some as a 'Highland trait'**

One woman reported that, comparing her job in the Highlands & Islands to a similar one in the central belt, she felt she had 'gone back 10 years in her career by moving north because of attitudes to women'. Comments like 'You're prettier than the last person', 'What are you complaining about?, we gave you a job, didn't we?', 'Why would you want a pay rise?, you're the highest paid woman in the company' etc are the kinds of comments passed on to HIEF by way of illustrating this point. There seem to exist different values for men and women – where a woman is referred to as 'bitchy', domineering etc, men are described as 'constructively critical' and 'assertive' for the same traits.

- **Some women's attitudes and actions undermine the work being done to promote gender equality**

Part of this issue may be down to lack of confidence where women undervalue themselves and often refuse challenges, promotions etc – referring enquiries to husbands or male colleagues as though their own opinion is of no value.

In a region with a high percentage of very small businesses, women may be doing all the unseen running of their husband's business but remain unacknowledged – even by themselves.

Women themselves are openly critical of working mothers or career-focussed women. Many reports reach HIEF of workplace tensions caused by comments openly expressed such as 'She should be at home looking after the kids'. This attitude coming from women allows men to feel safe in agreeing.

- **Correct policy in large public authorities is not always evidenced in action**

Senior management are often at odds with their company's Equality Policy. In a recent testimony to HIEF, it is alleged that the five most senior personnel of a public body thought the media coverage of a local case of homophobia was 'brilliant, very amusing' and this was not challenged by other staff.

- **Local media often sensationalise the negative in reporting equality issues**

Some local newspapers do not yet understand the need to report sensitively the key issues. They often emphasise the negative attitudes of a minority of the populace when it would be more responsible to accentuate the good values of the majority. Also, when someone excels in something, the reporting dwells heavily on any barriers to inclusion that may or may not have been faced to the exclusion of the merit of what has been achieved by an individual. A disabled sportsperson wants to

see coverage of their success on the sports page and not in a social comment piece; a women gaining a top job wants her skills acknowledged as the success – not the fact that she has ‘broken through the glass ceiling’.

- **We are not properly supporting people with multiple disabilities or their primary carers**

Whilst HIEF would hesitate to draw conclusions from its limited access to evidence of this, we have received a detailed testimony from one person which seems to support more informal comments heard as we interact with various groups. The content of this testimony would suggest that well-intentioned initiatives to provide ‘Care in the Community’ are not delivering effective outcomes to multiply disabled people and their primary carers. Difficulties seem to arise in achieving a holistic medical approach because of the wide range of needs of the care recipient, and in the case reported to us, there has been a failure to appoint a Care Manager to oversee a Single Shared Assessment /Care Plan. It is always distressing to hear the following quote: “People with Multiple Disabilities are being made to feel that they are a burden to Society because of the way they way they are being treated, it is a disgrace that some of the most vulnerable people in the community who can not speak up for themselves are being treated in this way.”

Key issues in the Highlands & Islands

- **A lack of regular, reliable and fully-accessible public transport is a key discriminatory factor in our communities**

This is the single most pressing issue that appears in all of our consultations. Whilst it is a factor for all of the community, it further exacerbates the isolation and exclusion felt by disabled people who often have no access to private transport. Island communities can only reach and leave their island by public transport and if that is not accessible to all, whole families suffer the consequences.

Geographically-isolated communities do not enjoy frequent public services and this makes it difficult for a single mother to get her children to a childminder in one place and then reach her workplace somewhere else. Often this is one barrier that cannot be overcome.

The cost of public transport in areas of sparse population can prevent individuals from being active in their community.

- **The geography and rurality of the Highlands & Islands creates barriers to full inclusion in the community**

The geographic diversity of the Highlands & Islands is not often appreciated by those outside of the area. National agencies seem to consider that holding an event in Inverness somehow 'ticks the box' for having reached the whole area and this is certainly not the case.

There is a lack of awareness of the time and cost implications of attending meetings and events such that many groups are subsequently unable to participate in national agendas due to lack of resource. Many H&I agencies are required to regularly attend meetings in Edinburgh, Stirling or Glasgow, without any effort being made to seek ways of getting the information out to those who live in the remote parts of Scotland. Attending a 2 hour meeting in Stirling say, someone from Orkney would have to take at least two days off work and pay the best part of £500 to attend, with costs even higher for those in Shetland.

Geographically-isolated communities also have difficulty in accessing good quality training, education, advice, support and training.

Small communities in which everyone knows everyone else provide a challenge to inclusion which is not often recognised. There is a high visibility factor of small groups in rural and island communities such that a job application is not anonymous when received and may therefore not be treated objectively and fairly. Small numbers of groups of people with shared race, disability, sexual orientation etc mean that people do feel more visible and 'different' leading to isolation within the community.

Conversely, high visibility makes it hard for women to escape domestic abuse without uprooting and relocating their family. There is a lack of women's refuges - the only ones being in Dingwall & Inverness (Wick due to open shortly).

In migration is another issue. The biggest issue for in-migrants of any kind is the lack of affordable low cost public sector housing. The Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service for the Highlands & Islands (COPFS) report specific examples of Iraqi Kurds being turned away from private housing because of their race, when the same housing has been made available to other in-migrants such as Spanish. While this is a specific example, the principle still applies. There is simply not enough low cost public sector housing for in-migrants, particularly for those whose stay in the Highlands may be short term, or those who are looking for accommodation as a group other than a family group. As a result the in-migrants require to be put up in hotels and hostels, which sets them apart from society at large, does not promote social inclusion, and creates the opportunity for them to be readily targeted by those with an agenda to discriminate.

- **Schools are as yet ‘largely untouched’ by the equality debate**

This is a cause for concern because schoolchildren need to learn to treat their peers with respect and be aware of what barriers are making life difficult (and often intolerable) for some. The present high rates of school-age suicides makes this a pressing issue. We also need to ensure that they, as the next generation of adults, are fully aware of their responsibilities in creating a community that values all of its citizens.

HIEF hears many reports of poor role model examples set by teachers who obviously are unaware of good practice. Racist comments or jokes often go unchallenged because children fear challenging the authority of the adult teacher.

This would seem to be a key area for future government investment as the present public authorities, given the enormity of the task and other public duty requirements demanding compliance, presently demonstrate the will but lack the resources and capacity to embark on the necessary education programme

- **The equality legislation on sexual orientation and on belief & religion causes tensions**

Some religious groups and individuals openly condemn homosexuals. This is often reported to HIEF as ‘narrow-mindedness’ but in reality it centres around the rights to religious belief causing difficulty when homosexuality is against a particular faith-based belief. Openly voiced comments such as ‘Aids is a plague from God’ cause pain to many. HIEF hopes to hold an event to tease out the public debate on this issue to examine what can be done to overcome differences and encourage mutual respect.

- **There is a lack of translation and interpreting services.**

While there is cover in the central belt, an area of greater population density than in H&I, we do not have the luxury of immediate access to local providers. There is a need for a cohesive strategy to identify and train local providers of translation and interpreting services in H&I. This could be achieved by facilitating access to distance learning packages for those willing to subscribe to a national standard such as that

being designed in conjunction with Stevenson College in Edinburgh by COPFS and others, for translators and interpreters in the justice system.

- **There is a lack of confidence in our ability to change practice**

Reports of this come to HIEF through various channels, the most recent being a survey done by HICCaP (a H&I Community Capacity-building project by SCVO and HIE) to investigate the barriers to building up skills in rural communities. A lack of confidence in changing to new practice came out as a key barrier to people taking up training courses. Also, those who have repeatedly faced discrimination may well have lost self-confidence and we need to provide support to encourage them to actively participate in their community. Likewise, small businesses need to be given the confidence that Equal Opportunities good practice is both feasible and easier to achieve than they anticipate.

- **There is a lack of awareness of the need to change to inclusive practice**

People often resist changes to their ways of working or socialising because they are not aware of the pressing need to include under-represented groups in their community. Putting aside for a moment the moral case for treating people fairly, the changing demographics has not become as live an issue as perhaps it needs to be to focus minds on why we need to rethink old ways of doing things and tackle discrimination.

- **Childcare provision is scarce and of disparate quality**

Whilst we are aware that this is a problem throughout the country, it is an even more pressing issue within our rural communities

- **There is a lack of consultation with groups facing barriers to identify useful solutions**

Too many decisions that affect us all are made without proper consultation with those who could advise very small amendments which would ensure that the resulting facilities and services would be accessible by all. Sometimes this is caused by lack of awareness or understanding that their actions may create barriers, sometimes because the decision-makers do not know how to contact advisory groups, and sometimes because they make assumptions of what other people's needs may be.

Our priorities for Scottish Parliament to address

- **A commitment to improving accessibility of public transport in the Highlands & Islands**

In particular, push through full access for public transport by accelerating the roll-out of the Disability Discrimination Act to transport.

- **The provision of a train the trainer scheme**

A series of intensive training events covering a full spectrum of equality and diversity issues would support us in our aim to build training capacity in our local communities.

- **Support in building the capacity to address inequity in the Highlands & Islands by investing in existing projects and agencies.**

- Encourage cross agency working to provide a joined-up approach in each area and align support groups so that duplication is minimised and all resources are used to best effect.

Highlands & Islands Equality Forum, Highland Wellbeing Alliance and Highland Alliance for Racial Equality are excellent examples of this in action, with good communication and cooperation between the various groups. Their good work (and that of other agencies) is dependant on funding support that allows them to plan effectively long-term strategies. The Scottish Parliament can help provide funding and bring groups together to create a holistic pan H&I strategy to promotion of equity.

- More help is needed to tackle the prevalence of domestic abuse.

Although we share in a national problem, the H&I get less money from Scottish Exec due to our lower population. The Scottish Executive can help by acknowledging the additional difficulties women in Highland face when they are experiencing domestic abuse and help by increasing access to services & safety. A COSLA study shows that Scotland-wide we need a refuge space for women per 7500 population which means we need 26 in Highland but only have 16.

- Commitment to funding key projects post-2007 is required when European transitional programme funding ends.

In this, I would include the fate of HIEF who are deemed to be delivering a valuable service in the H&I. Presently, half of our funding comes from ESF funding which leaves the project vulnerable when this ends. Other agencies who have expressed this as a concern include the Deaf Communication Project which has 'blazed a trail' in terms of promoting the social and economic integration of Deaf people in the Highlands and Islands.

- Support should be given to new technology

In response to issues with rurality (transport, access to facilities, costs etc) there is a need to think more creatively in making use of new technology – perhaps by using village halls to set up IT facilities to allow better services to remote population. The Scottish Parliament should actively seek ways to promote and support this.

- **Financial support for H&I public authorities is needed to help them deliver the new public duties in regard to race, disability and gender.**

This is an enormous task in H & I and, tied in to this, is the urgent need to engage with key influencers such as parents and teachers. New legislation has placed a huge responsibility on the public authorities who will eventually win through because of their commitment to equality. But extra support now would allow education programmes to be initiated much more quickly – addressing the pressing need to change attitudes and perceptions ahead of demographic change.

- **Government support is required for a new Single Equality Act**

Adopting a more holistic approach to equity will help eradicate tensions between existing pieces of legislation and prevent hierarchies occurring in the run-up to the establishment of a new single Commissions for Equality and human Rights which we hope the Scottish Parliament will support. Scottish representation on this new body needs to reflect a geography that includes the diversity of the Highlands & Islands.

The Parliament could consider supporting research into any hierarchies appearing in the treatment of different disability groups. For example, are those with mental illness excluded more than those with mobility problems? Is age, ethnicity etc a compounding factor? The findings of such research would be of great benefit in identifying solutions to identified problems and further support the establishment of a single equality act.

- **A well-funded and nationally –accredited training programme is required to build capacity of translation and interpreting services.**

A well-funded and nationally –accredited training programme is required to build capacity. The programme should be well-advertised as a good career choice and could well draw on under-represented groups in the community as potential trainees.

- **Financial assistance for businesses least able to afford costs of maternity leave should be considered**

One major concern of businesses is the cost of maternity leave, leading to many (often undisclosed) cases of discrimination against women as employers make subjective decisions as to which job applicants they feel are likely to take this leave. There is a strong business case for the government to financially help businesses support maternity leave to stop this discrimination against women.

- **Recognition in law of gypsy travellers as a distinct racial group**

Another area of discrimination that often goes unreported is that against gypsy travellers. We would ask the Scottish Parliament to petition Westminster for the gypsy traveller community to be recognised as a distinct racial group deserving of protection under the race Relations Act.

- **Provision of a strong deterrent to those who continue to disregard the current legislation and heavily promote good practice in enterprise**

- Continue to encourage test cases in law

The Scottish Parliament should continue to encourage test cases in law to provide the 'stick' that focuses minds on compliance with the legislation. For existing legislation to be taken seriously we require it to be evenly enforced.

- Make it a mandatory condition of public funding and grants that all new business start-ups, and existing enterprises and projects (including those from the voluntary sector) give evidence of awareness of, and commitment to, equal opportunities.

Furthermore, the Scottish Parliament could introduce measures that make it a mandatory condition of public funding that all new business start-ups or contracts give evidence of awareness of, and commitment to, equal opportunities. In this, they should go beyond a paper policy to one which is mainstreamed through all parts of their organisation.

- Support a national charter award system for equitable practice

HIEF have considered introducing a charter award system for good practice but lack the resource to take this forward. A government-funded initiative could provide a nationally-accredited system which local projects such as ours could link in to.

- **Commit funds to provision of good quality childcare**

Provide incentives for family members who have the trust of mothers returning to work to take on a paid role of childminder, and also draw on the resource of groups under-represented in the workforce. Reassess priorities for registration of childminders with more emphasis given to the right calibre of person for the job than insisting on environmental standards which many of the children's own homes do not possess. We shouldn't be sending out the message that grandparents are unfit to look after their own grandchildren, and undervaluing their contribution to society by insisting that they give this service free of charge whilst others are paid. Consider new initiatives in the provision of childcare. Presently, the cost of this is one that is owned by women. Other methods of sharing the cost throughout society would alleviate this discriminatory burden on women.

- **Reassess support in schools for pupils with special needs**

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Reassess support in schools for pupils with special needs by preparing personal plans that reflect the needs and aspirations of the children and their parents. For many there is a need for support by assistants, but many would do better to be helped become independent by means of technological aid. There is a concern by some that we are training up a generation to become dependant and who do not make any long-term and meaningful life plans, and so the transition to higher/further education and workplace is harder than it need be.

Part (ii) Focus on getting disabled people back to work

What good things have happened to disabled people in the Highlands & Islands?

- **Government and MSPs are listening to us**

On the employment front it is harder to know how DDA requirements are cascading through the system. However, Westminster and the Scottish Executive apparently did read the Inverness Access Committee's EYDP research in 2003 that flagged up a need for greater flexibility, interaction and support with employers and Disability Employment advisers etc. MSPs are in Highland area looking into this for the EOC.

- **Private businesses, public and voluntary sector organisations have taken some steps to provide services appropriate to the needs of the physically disabled in H&I.**

For example, the *Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service for the Highlands & Islands (COPFS)* has undertaken a comprehensive refurbishment programmes to its offices to provide facilities appropriate to the needs of those with physical impairments. Also, in relation to those with learning disabilities, COPFS have started to foster links with groups from this area of need. They have "sponsored" individuals from the community through the Corbett Centre Arts Programme and are to run training in June for Appropriate Adults which will be open to other partner agencies such as the Scottish Court Service and Highland Council Social Work Department.

IAC report that there are indications that the DDA is being addressed by local businesses. For instance, simple measures like the installation of street level bells with signs to summon assistance when premises have several entrance steps which for management/financial/listed building/structural reasons are unable to be removed.

Shop staff are reportedly becoming more friendly to wheelchair users and others with disability. For example, staff in a local card shop describe the cards to those with a visual impairment. The larger retail chains evidently have in-house staff training in disability awareness. Smaller traders are calling on the training services of HIEF and/or are accessing the DRC websites for guidance.

- **Successful projects are currently running and developing in H&I**

For example, the Deaf Communication Project, established 1997 with ESF, NHS and Council funding, has striven to improve the social and economic integration of Deaf people.

Around 40 people receive basic instruction in sign each year thereby opening up many more social avenues for Deaf people while providing them with the level of employment they should be enjoying given their normal intelligence levels.

The Project will build on this by training Deaf and hard of hearing people to become Deaf Awareness Trainers. In both cases, the Deaf people benefit from coming together regularly to support one another in these new pathways to employment.

Hard of hearing people are funded to train as Lipreading Tutors and can be awarded Project funding to begin teaching this skill.

Added to this is the work of HIEF in raising general awareness of equality issues and delivering training on the DDA.

What companies are good at giving work to disabled people - what is it these companies are getting right?

- **Case studies of good practice**

These are still a bit thin on the ground although HIEF can report that Touchwood Social Enterprise on Skye and Bruichladdich Distillery on Islay are known for proactively employing people with a range of physical and mental impairments.

- **Increased requests for information to build understanding of how best to support disabled people in the workplace**

Numerous traders and service providers have approached Inverness Access Committee (IAC) for information, and in some instances, an access audit.

What colleges and universities help disabled students - and how do they do this?

- **Mixed reports of good and bad support for disabled students**

HIEF has received little evidence on this topic although there is a general awareness of a lack of support in this regard. On the positive side, however, the UHI Millennium Institute has formed an Equal Opportunities Committee to look at the issue and identify where improvements can be made.

Presently, there is a minimal amount of support for deaf people provided at Inverness College but it is felt that higher all-round standards are required. Deaf Action (previously the Edinburgh and East of Scotland Deaf Society) has recently established a new Communication Service for the Highlands - making available qualified, registered Sign Language/English Interpreters for the first time in Highland. Their awareness-raising work and training/funding of local people will hopefully make service providers more aware of the need to use qualified Interpreters.

Conversely, we also had a report of Inverness College being helpful to a disabled student by moving her class from an upstairs room to one on the ground floor which was more accessible to wheelchair users.

- **Research helpful in identifying areas for improvement**

Moray College research from last year will help inform new practices in providing support to students with dyslexia and this year's research into the accessibility of Learning Centres should also help establish where improvements can be made.

- **Concerns over preparation for learning and career plans**

There is concern that disabled people are entering college as an alternative to going straight onto benefits when leaving school. They often have no real career plan in place. Many have difficulty in adapting socially as they begin to interact more with their peers and distance themselves from parental support, and there is a lack of general support to help the students cope with this change in culture.

What areas are good to live and socialise in - and why?

- **Deaf people tend to congregate in Inverness**

For deaf people, the high population of Inverness and environs is the best area within H&I as it gives more opportunity to socialise using British Sign Language. This city-centric concentration is similar to what used to happen when deaf children left home to go to specialist schools in Edinburgh and Glasgow and then remained in these cities where they found it easier to communicate with their peers. The situation is changing now, both because of mainstream schooling being a preferred option for many parents and through the pioneering work of the Deaf Action project in improving the signing skills of the general population. Deafness is an isolating condition and those who live outside Inverness-shire can go significant periods of time before meeting another person with whom they can hold a conversation. The Deaf Action project is looking into the possibility of setting up a Befrienders Scheme to put advanced Signing students in touch with isolated Deaf people.

What projects and people are helping solve the things that stop disabled people getting on in important areas of life.

- **Information and advice are given to employers to help them provide employment opportunities for disabled people**

HIEF work hard to get their message out to as many agencies and individuals as possible but have adopted a strategy to focus on raising awareness with employers. Between October 2004 and March 2005, we held 27 General Awareness-raising Roadshows throughout the length and breadth of H&I. These were supplemented with specific training on the DDA with clients including large commercial concerns, business associations, dental nurses, swimming pools, housing associations etc. We supply all beneficiaries with a comprehensive Equality Toolkit to help them put in place good Equal Opportunities Policies.

The Inverness Access Committee have circulated hundreds of leaflets to planning applicants with DDA information and contacts for further guidance.

- **Community Advocacy Officer**

The British Deaf Association (BDA) has recently appointed a Community Advocacy Officer (funded through Community Fund) to help Deaf people in Highland make their opinions better known to service providers. This Project offers (currently free to the consumer) Deaf Awareness training which helps all parties realise that deafness is merely an impairment that can be worked around – deaf people have a wide range of skills which can greatly contribute to society and both employers and deaf people themselves need to be encouraged to think beyond menial tasks to the full gamut of professions.

Organisations like HIEF are invaluable in bringing relevant training to the Deaf Community and to organisations like the project and BDA. The BDA will hopefully facilitate the formation of a Deaf People's Forum in the Highlands and will be a strong mover for change in provision of services. Highland Council has already done a sterling job in addressing the issues faced by people who have a sensory impairment. It is producing an Action Plan "Talking Sense in the Highlands" in partnership with a range of relevant agencies. This addresses key areas of difficulty faced by sensory impaired people and actions to resolve these.