

Scottish Accessible Information Forum (SAIF)

Written submission to the evidence session of the Equal Opportunities Committee on 9th May 2006

Introduction

1. The Scottish Accessible Information Forum (SAIF) was established in 1997 as a result of the *Enabling Information* report published by the Scottish Office in 1995. That report resulted from the work of the 'Scottish Working Group on Information Services for People with Disabilities' which was set up by the Social Work Services Group of the Scottish Office. Its fourteen members were drawn from organisations representing disabled people and information providers.
2. SAIF is funded by the Scottish Executive Health Department, employs two part-time project workers (one full-time equivalent) and is based in the Scottish Consumer Council. The SAIF advisory body is made up of 21 appointed volunteers drawn from disability-led organisations and information providers, and of that membership at least half are required to be disabled people or carers.
3. SAIF aims to improve the provision of information to disabled people and carers and make information more accessible to everyone who needs it.
4. **The functions of the SAIF advisory body**, as recommended in *Enabling Information*, were:
 - The development and monitoring of standards
 - The promotion of local accessible information strategies
 - The development of a Scottish disability information service
 - The establishment of a forum of national information providers
 - Promotion of the sharing of knowledge and information between information providers, both national and local
 - Information technology development
 - Representing the interests of disabled people and carers in the promotion of accessible information and user-led services
 - The framing of national policy, and feedback to the Scottish Executive about matters to which accessible information is relevant.

Summary of work to date

1. The **SAIF Standards for Disability Information and Advice Provision in Scotland** were initially developed and published in 1999. They were revised and updated in 2004 and will be again in 2006. So far over 4200 copies have been distributed to advice and information providers and many more downloaded from the SAIF website.
2. In addition a range of supplements to support the Standards have been published by SAIF:
 - The Scottish Formats Resource – A guide to agencies which can produce for you information in alternative formats (106 pages A4)
 - Making Websites Accessible (32 pages A4)
 - Barrier-Free Information – A practical guide for local authorities and others on how to develop local accessible information strategies (16 pages A4).
 - A Guide to User-Led Service Reviews (20 pages A4)
 - A Guide to Part 3 of the DDA (8 pages A4)
 - A4 and A3 posters – Making Information Accessible
 - A5 booklet – What Disabled People Should Be Able To Expect From Information and Advice Services
 - A5 booklet – Using An Information or Advice Service (easy-to read format)
 - Is Your Business Attractive to Potential Customers and Employees Who Are Disabled People? (4 pages A4)
3. At least 1500 copies of each have been distributed, and in some cases as many as 5000, and again many more are downloaded from the website.
4. Feedback from questionnaires enable SAIF to periodically gain some measure of Standards implementation and provide support if appropriate.
5. SAIF attempts to incorporate key elements of the Standards into mainstream quality assurance systems such as SQMS. This is preferred to the development of a separate accreditation system which SAIF believes would potentially further marginalize the needs, rights and aspirations of disabled people.

6. SAIF has also specifically targeted key national agencies, and also the private sector even though that sector did not feature in *Enabling Information*.
7. *Enabling Information* clearly charges local authorities with the responsibility of implementing **local accessible information strategies**. The functions of SAIF are promotion, information gathering and monitoring, and the targets have been local authorities, health boards, health trusts and local voluntary sector information providers. SAIF has held a national conference, incorporated local strategies into the SAIF Standards, issued questionnaires and attended local events. SAIF has key contacts in most local authorities.
8. In 2004 SAIF published a specific guide to implementing local strategies called *Barrier-Free Information*. This year we are running two seminars for policy makers and two training events for practitioners, again mainly targeting local authorities.
9. SAIF was instrumental in the commissioning and establishment of the **Scottish Disability Information Service** which subsequently became UPDATE. Based in Edinburgh, it opened in 1999 and is now fully operational and successfully carrying out at least all the functions set out in *Enabling Information*.
10. SAIF initially promoted, convened and supported a **forum of national information providers**. However, it became unnecessary and outdated because those organisations were aware of the aims of *Enabling Information* and SAIF, were members of or had regular contact with SAIF and/or UPDATE, and accepted the aim of making information more available at a local level.
11. SAIF now works in partnership with UPDATE to encourage national organisations to share and distribute information through UPDATE, and we have produced a briefing to support and explain this initiative.

12. The promotion of **knowledge and information sharing between information providers, both national and local**, is a key aspect of all of the work of SAIF and UPDATE. SAIF has a database of almost 1000 organisations. Almost all are information providers, in the statutory and voluntary sectors, national and local. Regular mailings and email bulletins go to all agencies on the database, requests for information or assistance are regularly received and answered.
13. In 1995 *Enabling Information* made little reference to the development of **information technology**. Obviously this is now one of the most important areas of work for SAIF. The SAIF website is an example of good practice in terms of accessibility and information provision and now enjoys about 7000 visits per month, many to download publications. It is constantly being developed and improved to keep up with new innovations. In addition SAIF has published a very popular guide to *Making Websites Accessible*, of which 2500 have been distributed since 2004. It is being updated and reprinted this year.
14. SAIF is a user-led organisation which seeks to represent the interests of disabled people and carers in **the promotion of accessible information and user-led services**. These aims underpin all the work of SAIF, are central to all our policies, work plans, publications and presentations. It is a core theme of SAIF that if progress is to be made disabled people must be involved in the planning, management and delivery of services. Disabled people must make demands on service providers and get the opportunity to suggest solutions and improvements.
15. SAIF **reports to the Scottish Executive** on a regular basis through the funding monitoring procedures, by sending copies of all minutes, publications and other mailings for information, and by responding to consultations where the issue of information accessibility is relevant.

SAIF advisory body members – April 2006

| Name | Work place/area based |
|-------------------|--|
| Jean Alcock | Various (Glasgow) |
| Marie Burns | Glasgow Association for Mental Health |
| Nikki Cameron | Argyle and Bute Council |
| Grant Carson | Disabled Persons Housing Service Centre for Inclusive Living in Glasgow |
| Jean Dunlop | Various (Kilmarnock) |
| Ben Forsyth | Welfare Rights Officer Midlothian Council, Edinburgh |
| Andy Groves | Grapevine Information Service, Edinburgh |
| Margaret Hurcombe | Family Advice & Information Resource, Edinburgh |
| Lionel Long | UPDATE, Edinburgh |
| Kim Main | RNIB, Glasgow |
| Mike McCarron | Various (Glasgow/Edinburgh) |
| Lucie McKenzie | Citizens Advice Scotland, Edinburgh |
| Linda Miller | Grampian Accessible Information Taskforce |
| Nicola Noon | Scottish Council on Deafness, Glasgow |
| Marilyn Slavin | Common Knowledge, Glasgow |
| Robert Sneddon | Wigtownshire Coalition of Disabled People |
| Sheila Williams | Capability Scotland, Edinburgh |
| Sandra Wilson | Fife Employability Network |
| Carolyn Wyper | NHS Ayrshire and Arran |
| Vacancy | - |
| Vacancy | - |

A summary of the *Enabling Information* report (1995)

The existing pattern of information provision for disabled people and carers in Scotland was summarised as:

1. Varied. Special reference was made about the extent to which and the manner in which local authorities were attempting to meet their statutory duty to provide information to disabled people.
2. Poor relationships amongst information providers.
3. Concern about the quality of information and services.
4. Not enough cooperation within the statutory sector, and between the statutory and independent sectors.
5. A need for a national agency to distribute information to local service providers, and to be an authoritative source of Scottish information.
6. Concern that too much time was spent collecting information and not enough distributing it effectively.

The proposals for improvement were:

1. Disabled people need access to both generalist and specialist information:
 - At a local level.
 - Without physical, attitudinal or accessibility barriers.
2. Services should be designed to meet the needs of disabled people and carers.
3. Ideally, disabled people should be involved in providing and managing services.
4. The dissemination and provision of information must be improved at a local level by:
 - Removing the barriers and producing information in appropriate formats and languages.
 - Improving the provision of specific disability information.
 - Improving the awareness of disability issues among all service providers.
 - Improving collaboration, multi-agency working and networking.
 - Ensuring that national standards are met.

The recommendations were:

1. Each local authority should set up a strategy group to prepare a local accessible information strategy. The group should include representatives of the independent sector and disabled people.
2. National standards should be developed and overseen by an advisory body comprised of disabled people, carers, their representatives, and others with appropriate experience.
3. The advisory body should develop an overview of information services for disabled people at national level.
4. National disability information to local service providers should be improved to meet the needs of those services and their users.
5. A national disability information service should be established under the auspices of the advisory body.

The fundamental principles on which *Enabling Information* based its proposals were:

1. The social model of disability.
2. Services should be user-led and accountable to users.
3. There should be quality standards towards which all information and advice providers should be working.
4. Training in skills, disability equality, and standards, is vital.
5. Dissemination and publicity at local level are key.
6. Independent advice must be ensured.
7. Collaboration at local level is vital, helping prevent people needing to go from pillar to post.

The functions of the recommended disability information service were listed as:

- To provide a central source for a wide range of disability information provided by national organisations.
- To act as a channel for the distribution of information to local service providers and information services.
- To provide a screening service to ensure that all national information is applicable in Scotland.
- To act as a channel for government information.
- To provide training in support of local information services in relevant areas, especially where this cannot be provided at local level.

- ❑ To provide a current awareness service about legislation, government policy and research and articles.
- ❑ To refer enquirers to sources of expert advice or local advice services.
- ❑ To provide and develop databases using user-friendly software.
- ❑ To provide information in a flexible form which allows for output in a range of formats and languages, including ethnic minority languages.
- ❑ To fill gaps in existing provision, for example by providing sign posting guides or directories of local providers.
- ❑ To provide feedback to government and local strategy groups, through the advisory body, about the effects of government policy.

The report goes on to state that it must be a second tier information service, that existing national information providers must support it, use it as a channel for the dissemination of material they produce, and co-operate with it in order to improve information provision.

Steve Harvey
SAIF project worker
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