

PEOPLE SELECT COMMITTEE

SCRUTINY REVIEW OF DISABILITY INCLUSIVE BOROUGH

Executive Summary

The aim of the review was to explore how Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council could contribute to a more disability inclusive borough.

At the outset of the review, potential outcomes included better engagement with disability groups to understand barriers disabled people faced and how best the Council could consider and implement recommendations from these groups. It was also recognised that Stockton Borough Council could champion disability inclusion in its partnership work with its public, private and voluntary sector stakeholders.

The Select Committee's key findings were as follows:

- In the UK, approximately 1 in 5 people have a disability. If disabled people face less barriers, the social and economic well-being of the area is likely to improve
- Disabled people have been one of the most disproportionately affected groups by Covid-19 and it is important they are no longer marginalized and have equal opportunities to participate in the social, cultural, and economic activities within the Borough
- The Equality Act 2010 defines disability as a protected characteristic. Therefore, an individual with a mental or physical impairment which has 'a substantial or long-term adverse effect' on their daily activities is protected from discrimination
- The Public Sector Equality Duty requires organisations, such as Local Authorities, "to consider how they could positively contribute to the advancement of equality and good relations. It requires equality considerations to be reflected into the design of policies and the delivery of services, including internal policies, and for these issues to be kept under review"
- As a Local Authority, and a service provider, Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council has a duty to comply with the Equality Act 2010 and reasonable adjustments must be made to enable disabled people to access services and functions
- Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council is committed to putting every person who needs support at the heart of all that they do and for people with disabilities and mental health needs this means being flexible and offering everyone who is eligible for social care services the opportunity to direct their own support
- SBC is committed to providing appropriate support and services to employees and residents across the Borough with disabilities. This review has demonstrated that each directorate strives to incorporate the needs of disabled people into the delivery of their services. As part of the review, a vast amount of evidence has been collated highlighting best practice across the Council
- SBC also work with external organizations and charities, such as Tees, Esk and Wear Valley NHS Foundation Trust and Middlesbrough and Stockton Mind, to provide services and support to residents and employees

- Children and young people (0-25) with special educational needs and disabilities, and their parents and carers, are supported through a variety of strategies and services, including The Stockton-on-Tees SEND Joint Commissioning Strategy 2018-2021, the Local Offer, and The Educational Psychology Service
- The needs of disabled people are also considered when new projects or schemes are devised and implemented
- The SBC Local Plan states that, for new dwellings, 50% are required to meet Category 2 standard (accessible and adaptable dwellings) and 8% are required to meet Category 3 standard (wheelchair user dwellings)
- The Council is dedicated to engaging positively with residents and values their input on planning, developing and managing the built environment. The Council's 'street charter' sets out a list of actions and commitments, which everyone involved agrees to abide by. These have been formed under different headings, which represent the main issues that pedestrians, particularly those that are blind or partially sighted people face when negotiating the built environment in Stockton-on-Tees:
 - Advertising boards and street and café furniture
 - Wheelie bins and recycling bags
 - Overhanging shrubbery and branches
 - Parking on pavements
 - Crossings
 - New Council developments: shared space
 - Consultation
- There have been reported problems with dropped kerbs for disabled people across the Borough. SBC follow government guidance, contained in the 'Inclusivity Mobility Document', to ensure that dropped kerbs are installed in the correct location and to the correct specifications. Funding for dropped kerbs currently sits within the wider budget for all Highways Asset Maintenance. Dropped kerb projects are also eligible for funding through the Ward Members Community Participation Budget and the Ward Transport Budget. Inspections have been, and can be, carried out where there are issues with dropped kerbs to identify areas for consideration if potential funding opportunities arose
- Changing Places Toilet (CPT) are larger accessible toilets for severely disabled people, with equipment such as hoists, privacy screens, adult-sized changing benches and space for carers. Currently there are only two registered CPT facilities within the Borough. Based on the current lack of geographical coverage, there is a clear need to deliver more facilities across the Borough in places of high footfall such as town centres, visitor attractions and retail parks
- The Council has a strong workforce culture and environment that supports employee wellbeing. The Council aims to attract, retain, and develop an inclusive workforce with the right values and behaviours that reflects the diversity of the community. The Council provides an accessible and inclusive recruitment process by making reasonable adjustments where required, offering flexible approaches when assessing people so disabled job applicants have the best opportunity to demonstrate they can do the job, and guaranteeing an interview to those applicants who declare a disability and meet the essential criteria for the role. SBC works alongside the VCSE to promote job vacancies with the aim of attracting and recruiting people with disabilities

- The Disability Staff Forum provides a peer support network for employees with a disability. The forum is a platform for sharing information about disability issues. Forum members are also able to champion issues affecting employees with a disability. Through the forum there is an opportunity to make recommendations regarding service delivery. The forum serves to encourage and influence better organisational support for employees with a disability and to support individuals in the workplace
- Whilst recognising the positive work across the Borough and the examples of best practice, feedback from disability groups and organisations has shown that there is no room for complacency and highlighted the need for:
 - Better understanding of the needs of the Borough
 - Improved communication and consultation including direct contact with service users
 - Better information about support
 - Increasing opportunities for individuals to become active local citizens
 - Raising awareness, acceptance and understanding of all disabilities and hidden disabilities among Council staff and the wider community
 - Educating and training staff
 - Supporting professionals to understand each need
 - Commitment to co-production of services
 - Creating a progression model for continuous steps to promote inclusion

Conclusion

The review has demonstrated that Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council is committed to putting every person who needs support at the heart of all that they do and providing appropriate support and services to employees and residents across the Borough with disabilities. The Council also works with other organisations, the VCSE and local businesses to deliver this and each directorate strives to incorporate the needs of disabled people into the delivery of their services. As part of the review a vast amount of evidence has been collated highlighting the services and support available and best practice across the Council.

However, whilst recognising this commitment and positive work, feedback from disability groups and organisations has highlighted the need for greater understanding and awareness of all disabilities and hidden disabilities as part of a continuous journey to make Stockton a disability inclusive Borough.

The review has also shown that it is only possible to ensure that equality considerations are fully reflected in the design of policies and the delivery of services where there is genuine dialogue and co-production takes place with people with disabilities.

Recommendations

1. That opportunities to share and promote good practice across the Council and wider community are identified.
2. That all Directorates be asked to review and demonstrate how disability inclusivity and co-production of services is embedded within their areas.
3. That a Disability Inclusion Charter is published to evidence the Council's commitment to being a Disability Inclusive Borough.
4. That an Equality Statement is produced setting out the Council's approach and commitment to equality and diversity.
5. That an external Equality Information Directory is developed to better inform the public and assist with signposting of services.
6. That improvements are made to the Council's website to support easy navigation to up to date information about current services and future plans.
7. That a programme of staff awareness raising is put in place to highlight the different types of disability and how to best serve those with physical and hidden disabilities in order to improve communication and customer service.
8. That additional disability training modules be incorporated in the proposed E-learning management system, due to go live in February 2022 and consideration be given as to how to make disability training procured directly by services more widely available.
9. That a publicity campaign is developed to continue to highlight the problems caused by parking over dropped kerbs with opportunities for improvements investigated subject to funding.
10. That engagement of disability groups in the VCSE Adults Forum/ Disability Task and Finish Group, facilitated by Catalyst, be kept under review to ensure that it provides a representative and effective voice for disabled people of the Borough.
11. That lessons learnt from the upcoming refurbishment of the junior/toddlers play area at Preston Park be used to inform future play provision designs with respect to inclusion and accessibility.
12. That the provision of changing places toilet facilities be progressed, where practicable, as part the Town Centre Development Programme, subject to funding through the Changing Places Fund.
13. That posters/ cards promoting simple sign phrases are adopted across customer services centres and receptions to assist communication with the deaf community.