**Belfast City Council:**

**Disability Good Practice Employer**

**2014 Irish News Workplace and Employer Awards**

Belfast City Council was named **Disability Best Practice Employer** for the second time in three years at the Irish News Workplace and Employment Awards Gala in Titanic Belfast on Thursday 19 June 2014. This award category was introduced by the Irish News in 2012 to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of Employers for Disability NI, a network of employers committed to good disability practice in relation to employment and service provision. Employers for Disability NI was represented on the judging panel for the award which recognised Belfast City Council’s excellent practice across three criteria:

1. Supporting employees with disabilities
2. Promoting disability awareness among employees
3. Linking with disability organisations to provide meaningful work experience and training placements for people with disabilities

**Employers for Disability NI is committed to promoting good disability practice among all employers in NI by showcasing the work done by the award winners. In this paper Belfast City Council has provided detailed, practical information on the good disability practices implemented by the organisation.**

**Belfast City Council Paper:**

**How We Implement Disability Good Practice**

**October 2014**

**1. Encouraging Recruitment of People with Disabilities**

**The council’s overarching Equal Opportunities Policy frames all our employment policies and practices. We have implemented practical initiatives to encourage and support people with disabilities to apply for and gain employment in the council:**

* we have installed an accessible ‘jobs kiosk’ located in the main council building, where applicants can complete application forms
* all our job advertisements are advertised through job-centre on-line and the jobs and benefits offices/job centres; Employers For Disability NI’s on-line Jobs Bulletin Board and in addition the council issues details of all its externally advertised vacancies to disability organisations, including the Disability Employment Service. Job opportunities are also promoted through the council’s attendance at numerous careers fairs and specifically those organised by the Belfast Special Schools Business Education Partnership
* we provide alternative accessible versions of our recruitment documentation, such as large font, Braille and audio
* our recruitment documentation states that if an individual has a disability and has difficulty with any aspect of the recruitment and selection process there is a helpline number to contact. For example, the council has offered extra time to applicants during any testing or assessment process and acquired a magnifier from RNIB to assist an applicant complete tests
* for basic grade administrative posts, we have introduced a computer based skills check test rather than asking for prescriptive qualifications in order to attract a wider pool of applicants
* all recruitment panel chairs are trained to deal with the issue of reasonable adjustments and advice is sought from the relevant organisation, as required

**Of particular note is the council’s creation of eight basic grade posts specifically ring-fenced to people with disabilities through the Workable NI Programme. This was the process followed:**

* committee approval (6 May 1997) to create four basic entry level posts (above establishment)
* posts were ring-fenced to people with disabilities and the council worked in conjunction with the Disability Employment Service , DEL to advertise the vacancies
* salaries initially paid out of corporate miscellaneous budget-initially council’s contribution based on % output. DEL reviewed scheme (now called Workable) and any new participants to the scheme are paid fully by the council
* committee approval (26 April 2014) to increase from four to eight
* simplified application form and interview process
* DEL is seeking to remove people from the scheme into open employment and as part of our Disability Action Plan 2012-2015; we have committed to agree a process and procedures for managing this
* support is given to both the individual and the manager/ supervisor
* regular review meetings take place and any advice or issues that need to be addressed are discussed and action plan put in place

In addition to this, some existing staff who have a disability are supported through ‘Workable NI’

**The council also operates a guaranteed interview scheme for people with disabilities:**

* the council operates a Guaranteed Interview Scheme under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 in accordance with the ‘Equality Commission’s Guide to Positive Action for Disabled People’
* if any applicant has a disability and meets the essential/must have criteria of the post as detailed in the employee specification, he/she will be guaranteed an interview

**In 2012/13, through our Investment Programme, we worked with our partners to ring fence five permanent Business Support Clerk posts and deliver a pre-employment programme to 45 long-term unemployed/economically inactive participants to help them compete for the five ring-fenced posts. Of these 45 places, nine were made available specifically for people with disabilities. One of the five successful applicants is disabled.**

**Background:**

* Investment programme- helps boost the local economy, support businesses, create employment and training opportunities and provide important economic infrastructure
* initiative was developed by all political parties, demonstrating collective city leadership to address the key economic, social and physical challenges facing the city
* identified need to support people in all parts of the city to develop skills and experience necessary to secure jobs, particularly young people who have been badly impacted by the economic downturn
* committed to
* provide 400 work placement, apprenticeship and internship opportunities within the council (focussing on graduates, long term un employed and disabled people)
* deliver 200 employment opportunities at no additional cost to the ratepayer
* contribute £300,000 towards bursaries to help those aged 16-24 into further education, training and employment
* work with local partners to deliver targeted employability initiaitives across the city, providing pre employment support to 1200 people and helping around 400 into employment
* develop the inclusion of social clauses into council contracts
* Extended the existing Community Outreach Programme (launched in 1998) and developed new partnerships with the Department for Employment and Learning, and its lead contractors- Bryson Future Skills and Springvale Learning, the five Local Employment Intermediary Service providers and a range of disability organisations

**Pre recruitment programme**

* During initial discussions partners told us that there is a real need to ring fence posts to long term unemployed
* liaised with LGSC and ECNI to ensure legal compliance
* sought approval from elected members to progress this initiative
* initiative was first of its kind in the public sector in Northern Ireland
* campaign only open to those people who have not been in employment for six months and who have been chosen for and successfully completed a pilot pre recruitment programme to help them become ‘job ready’ to apply for the BSC posts
* delivered a two week pre recruitment programme- one week work experience and one week classroom based training
* worked closely with our departments to ensure that the one week work experience was valuable and relevant , to help the programme participants prepare for the BSC recruitment process – provided managers/supervisors with information on the areas covered by the Skill Check exercise and some examples of the type of tasks that would provide relevant experience for the placement
* one week classroom based training covering - corporate induction; equal opportunities; confidence building/ assertiveness; work planning/ time management; team working/ interpersonal skills; recruitment process and interview skills; office safety; customer care
* training included a mock interview to assist participants in the selection process
* training included a skills check tutorial
* following completion of two week programme, participants sat skills check test
* interviews followed for those who passed skills check test
* two subsequent pre recruitment programmes delivered- seasonal cleansing operatives and recycling operatives. A similar approach was adopted
* Over the 3 pre recruitment programmes, 19 places have been offered to people with disabilities

**Community Outreach**

* Launched Community Outreach Programme in 1998. Initially, activity focussed on schools, colleges, universities and disability organisations. However, as part of the Investment Programme we developed new partnerships with the Department for Employment and Learning, and its lead contractors- Bryson Future Skills and Springvale Learning, the five Local Employment Intermediary Service providers.
* Through our programme we have demonstrated our commitment to work with external disability organisations in the community to encourage work experience, training and work placement opportunities.
* We have fostered and developed relationships over the years with many disability organisations- for example Action on Hearing Loss, Action Mental Health, Cedar Foundation, Disability Action, Dr B’s, Mencap, New Horizons, Now Project, Orchardville Society, RNIB and Stepping Stones
* In addition we have a representative on the Special Schools Business Education Partnership Board and have been invited to promote our practices at events organised by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland

**Provision of work experience opportunities**

* as part of our Investment Programme, we have committed to providing 400 work experience opportunities over three years. Since April 2012, we have facilitated 526 placements
* as part of our Disability Action Plan 2012-2015, we have committed to providing at least 30 work experience placements each year to people with disabilities
* since 2012, 67 disability placements have been facilitated
* length of placements range from 1 week to 1-2 days per week over an extended period of time
* placements facilitated across all disciplines

**Training and development opportunities for young people on interview awareness skills using mock interview sessions:**

The council has a representative on the Special Schools, North Belfast and West Belfast Business Education Partnerships. As part of this work, we assist with a variety of community outreach activity and provide advice to teachers on skills/qualities etc employers are looking for:

* 35 training sessions since April 2012- six of these were for special needs schools and disability organisations
* council representative conducts mock interviews with pupils and gives advice/feedback to pupils e.g. how to complete an application form (level of detail required); communication skills, posture; appearance; detail required in answering questions at interview
* assist teachers with preparing relevant questions to help pupils prepare for mock interviews
* more recently many schools have developed their careers curriculum and are now using the assessment centre model
* pupils complete application form and are provided with feedback on its content/ presentation
* complete aptitude test
* participate in group sessions to assess skills e.g. team working, communication, organisation skills
* choose number of pupils to progress to interview stage
* conduct interviews
* appoint candidate
* provide feedback to all pupils

**We organise site visits to promote the council as an attractive employer:**

* take groups (mainly disability groups) to visit parks, recycling centres and office
* HR staff provides overview of what the council does, its recruitment process and during an office visit group members have the opportunity to use photocopier, binding machine, shredding and franking mail
* parks and recycling staff give overview of what they do/ skills required
* tour facilities

**We attend careers fairs:**

* 48 careers fairs attended since April 2012- 2 of these were at special needs schools
* provide information on range of jobs and placement opportunities council has to offer
* provide information on where we advertise vacancies and our recruitment process

In addition to this, we have met with the LEMIS providers on 22 occasions to provide information on basic entry posts that are to be advertised. Education includes specific information on the jobs and the council’s recruitment and selection process

**2. Supporting Current Employees**

**We are raising awareness of disability-related issues amongst staff, including awareness-raising events, use of the council’s intranet and staff publications and dissemination of best practice material:**

* + host bi-annual disability event
  + include disability features in internal publications and on intranet- e.g. therapy garden at Musgrave Park; disability/diversity awards
  + installed a number of computers and large screens at remote sites to help promote our best practice policies and procedures to staff who do not have access to a personal computer
  + disability awareness raising clips (provided by Employers for Disability NI)

**We are building internal capacity and knowledge on disability issues. In 2012/2013 this has included a pro-active programme of health and well being initiatives, with a particular focus on mental health:**

* delivery of Positive Mental Health awareness training- 593 employees trained to date
* stress management training for managers- 394 managers trained to date
* aimed at assisting staff in dealing with personal stress or mental health issues and helping managers support employees and manage any resultant workplace issues effectively
* in 2013, we implemented a three year employee Health and Wellbeing strategy. Many of the actions within this strategy link directly to the councils Disability Action Plan
* twelve members of staff have been trained by EFDNI to deliver disability awareness training within Belfast City Council
* developed a pilot mindfulness programme
* a new corporate Health and Wellbeing Strategy and associated action plan was developed covering 2013-2015, with one action dedicated to developing and piloting a workplace based mindfulness programme.
* mindfulness is not just useful for people with specific health problems; it can be used by anyone to enhance their overall quality of life, improve their health and wellbeing and ability to live life to the full.
* in the House of Commons an all-party parliamentary group on mindfulness was launched on 7 May and the NHS now offers information about how to practise it.
* the eight week course of mindfulness involves meditation, some simple yoga and stretching and some discussion within a group setting of the principles of cognitive behavioural therapy. The aim of the programme is to introduce participants to regular mindfulness practise, initially using audio tapes and group contact time to guide them.
* the eight week mindfulness pilot programme to twelve staff is being developed and when delivered, and, following a comprehensive evaluation, deemed successful, will be rolled out to 150 council staff over the next twelve months.
* it is anticipated that the rolled-out programme will be delivered to a diverse range of staff, which are based in both office and non-office locations and carry out an assorted range of job roles.
* the council will also examine how a variation of approaches to promote and support mindfulness throughout council locations can be introduced if the evaluation has been deemed successful.
* the BCC initiative links in directly with the NI Executive’s NHS “Transforming Your Care” agenda which focuses on the prevention of ill health as opposed to the treatment of it.

**We are providing advice and support to employees in relation to reasonable adjustment requirements:**

Line managers made aware of the need to consider reasonable adjustments through disability and attendance management training

* absence policy has a clear statement and accompanying process of how to deal with disability related sickness absence
* phased returns to work following periods of absence
* homeworking
* flexible working
* retraining
* redeployment
* signposting to support organisations/ Disability Employment Service

**The Council is delivering disability awareness training for front line staff and managers:**

* training on disability is part of our mandatory training for all employees
* people managers and supervisors receive more detailed training on their specific roles
* in 2013/14 we trained:
* 140 employees in disability awareness
* 22 in disability awareness for managers and supervisors
* 915 in diversity for employees
* 97 in diversity for managers and supervisors
* 392 employees completed the diversity e-learning programme
* The general diversity training includes a strand on disability
* provided specific training for a staff team on autistic spectrum conditions, following the appointment of new team member- delivered by Orchardville Society

**Staff are becoming up-skilled in sign language techniques:**

* to date, approximately 50 front line staff trained in sign language techniques
* Disability Action Plan includes a target of three people to be trained each year

**3. Key Successes:**

* roll out of diversity e-learning programme
* successful roll out of health and well being training
* launch of Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2013
* development and delivery of pre recruitment programmes
* shortlisted (2014) for Irish News Work-life Health and Wellbeing Award
* shortlisted (2014) Irish News Disability Best Practice Award
* 2014 winner of Business in the Community’s Employability Champion Award
* Runner-up of Irish News Disability Best Practice Award 2013
* winner of Irish News Disability Best Practice Award 2012 and 2014
* EFDNI Member of Excellence accreditation- 2012