



# **Disability Action**

## **Employment Advocacy Service**

Sean Fitzsimons

Employment Advocacy Coordinator

Terry Patterson

Volunteer Peer Advocate



# Mission

Disability Action works to ensure that people with disabilities attain their full rights as citizens by supporting inclusion, influencing government policy and changing attitudes in partnership with disabled people

# Our areas of work



- Information & Advice
- Workplace & Training support
- Driving Assessments and Lessons
- Door-to-door & Group Transport
- Access to Built Environment
- Disability & Diversity Training
- Equality & Human Rights
- Fundraising

# Employment Advocacy



## **Working in partnership / supporting Unions**

- Delivering information, advice and advocacy
- Promoting positive actions to employers
- Development of best practice resources and guidance
- Promoting self advocacy and empowerment
- Using a peer advocacy model...



# Why peer advocacy?

*“The Employment Advocacy service is delivered by people with disabilities – having a disability I felt that they could relate to how I felt and could understand the importance of what work meant to me”*

PH, Teacher

# Hard at Work



# Launched August 2016



# What's it about?



- Exploring the law and relevant research
- Reflecting the experiences of *local* disabled people
- Role of peer advocacy
- **Key actions** to help achieve increased equality in employment in Northern Ireland for the future





**33% of disabled people are in employment, less than half the rate of non disabled people**



**Research findings vary,  
estimating between  
20% and 50% of people  
with a disability feeling  
that they faced  
discrimination in  
employment**



# Why are there difficulties?

- Societal attitudes
- Employer perceptions
- Government policies
- Recession

# What people tell us...





# What did people face?

- **Stress** – often having a direct impact on their disability (physically and emotionally)
- **Confidence** – the situation had impacted on their confidence and self esteem
- **Employer's attitudes** – employees felt they faced negative attitudes towards disability
- **Impact of losing their job** was a very real worry in this economic climate.

# A familiar scenario?



“I was going to be disciplined for my sickness record but I had been off due to my disability. My employer had not taken this into consideration. The stress of the situation, impacted on my disability and I had to take more time off work. I just wanted to get on with my job”



# Nature of Issues

- 350 enquiries, most had 1 legal implication under DDA - many had 2
- 88% of queries related to Reasonable Adjustments highlighting lack of awareness of/adherence to this duty.
- Other issues - indirect/direct discrimination, and disability related harassment

# Breakdown of Enquiries



- More than 74% faced more than one issue
- Handling sick absence was a major concern (56% having some link)
- Performance was the second largest single issue (22% as the primary)
- Other issues – recruitment & selection, grievance/disciplinary, unfair dismissal, bullying/harassment, training & development, terms & conditions



# What did people value?



- Timely actions – quick response
- Expert advice and reassurance
- A balanced, independent perspective on the situation
- Defused the situation and put the issue into perspective.
- Service users felt supported and understood
- Help to understand the *employer's perspective*
- Advocacy –acting on their behalf
- Access to other services

# The Impact...



“My employer wanted to retire me on medical grounds but I wanted to work. I didn’t want to leave my job. The Advocate contacted my employer and a meeting was arranged with them and my union representative. Initially the employer was reluctant but through continued discussion reasonable adjustments were put in place. A year later I was promoted to head of my department.”

# What we can do for you?



- Expert advice and information
- Reinforcing your position
- **Resources:**
  - Hard at Work: Employment & Disability in NI
  - Telling an Employer about your Disability
  - Reasonable Adjustments
  - Reasonable Adjustment Plan Template
- *Getting into Work – Reasonable Adjustments & Positive Action*
- *Absence from Work*
- *Business Case for Employing Disabled People*

# What you can do for us...



- **Involve your disabled members** – avoid making assumptions, disabled people are the experts in relation to their disability. Are there opportunities to create / expand / promote – Disabled Members groups /networks? (Disability Action are happy to help)
- **Review HR policies and practices** – support employers to ensure that they not only comply with the law, but *adopt good practice* and *promote positive action* measures for disabled people
- **Reasonable Adjustments** – support employers be open and flexible to a range of reasonable adjustments. Reasonable adjustments measures are specific to individual's circumstances and should not be viewed as a collective or “one size fits all” approach.
- **Review reasonable adjustment plans** on a regular basis as individuals' circumstances can change

# Taking Action



Play your part - promoting inclusion is a principled stance

- **Change attitudes** towards disabled people and the positive contribution that they make in the workplace *and society*
- **Lead the pack** – promote and share your experience of good practice with your colleagues, the wider trade union movement and Disability Action!
- **Seek advice and support** – access the range of supports provided by disability organisations, Government departments et al

# Questions /Contacts



Sean Fitzsimons

Employment Advocacy Coordinator

Disability Action

Portside Business Park,

189 Airport Road West,

Belfast BT3 9ED

Telephone: 028 9029 7880

Textphone: 028 9029 7882

Email: [seanfitzsimons@disabilityaction.org](mailto:seanfitzsimons@disabilityaction.org)

Web: [www.disabilityaction.org](http://www.disabilityaction.org)

Twitter: [@disabilityni](https://twitter.com/disabilityni)

Facebook & LinkedIn