



Cambridge City Council

Draft Disability Discrimination Bill – Supporting Disabled Councillors

1. Background

1.1 The Department of Works and Pensions presented a draft Disability Discrimination Bill to Parliament in December 2003. The Bill proposes to bring within the scope of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) new areas in which disabled people currently have no rights or limited rights: functions of public bodies, and membership of private clubs. It also proposes to strengthen existing DDA rights in the areas of:

- the definition of disability;
- transport services;
- renting premises, and
- discriminatory job advertisements.

It would also introduce:

- a new duty on public bodies to promote equality of opportunity for disabled people.

1.2 The Parliamentary Joint Committee will shortly be taking evidence on the draft bill and have expressed a particular interest in the treatment of disabled councillors by their local authorities. At the moment councillors fall into a grey area of the law as they are neither employees nor service users. This briefing note sets out the provision that Cambridge City Council is able to make to enable disabled councillors to undertake their duties as Council members.

2. Support for disabled councillors

2.1 In recent years the City Council has provided support for a number of councillors with a range of disabilities including restricted mobility, sight impairment, dyslexia and long term chronic ill-health.

2.2 The induction pack for new councillors specifically asks whether recipients have any special needs. Where this is the case the Manager of Members' Support Services arranges an early meeting to discuss and assess support needs. In the past support provided has included:

- the provision of a personal reader
- committee reports and briefing notes put on CD Rom
- supporting the use of a voice-activated computer
- composing and writing letters with a councillor

- ensuring that at least one lift is always working
- ensuring that rooms in which council meetings are held are wheelchair accessible and have an induction loop or public address system
- providing a MINICOM facility for telephone contact with the council
- providing assistance with entering and exiting council buildings as required
- conducting familiarisation tours of the Guildhall with a councillor with a sight impairment
- facilitating personal workstation assessments for councillors to ensure that home-working is undertaken safely including the provision of specialist furniture such as orthopaedic chairs
- supporting councillors with particular dietary or medical needs
- arranging transport to and from council meetings where required
- ensuring that staff are trained in the use of an EVAC chair and are aware of the appropriate procedures for the evacuation of disabled councillors and staff.

The Council may only provide support for a councillor to undertake their council duties. Any support required for canvassing or other political duties is the responsibility of the relevant political group.

2.3 The Council is currently considering whether any additional measures need to be undertaken to comply with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act. Measures currently under consideration which have particular relevance for disabled councillors include:

- altering the seating in the Council Chamber to enable councillors in wheelchairs to sit with their party group
- the provision of induction loops in the Small and Large Halls.

2.4 There are two main areas of potential support need that the Council is currently unable to provide from within the authority. These are:

- a sign language interpreter for council meetings
- specialist computer equipment or software.

However, if required, both of these needs could be met via external providers.

2.5 At present the Council does not have a specific budget to meet any additional costs of meeting special needs of disabled councillors. To date any costs have been met from existing resources. However, the Department for Works and Pensions administers an Access to Work Fund that helps to provide equipment and alterations to premises to help disabled people at work. If the provisions of the DDA are to be extended to include disabled councillors it is likely that there will be some pressure for the criteria for obtaining funding from the Access to Work Fund to reflect this change.

3. Conclusion

3.1 The City Council is well equipped to be able to respond to any change to the DDA that will bring disabled councillors within its scope. Since the

passing of the Disability Discrimination Act in 1995 the Council has never made a distinction between the need to provide appropriate support to disabled staff and disabled councillors. The Members' Services team have always striven to provide as flexible service as they are able and aim to continue to do so in the future.

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