

ULO Case Study Gateshead Access Panel (GAP)

Origins and evolution

Gateshead Access Panel (GAP) was set up around 18 years ago by a local charity. The 'Panel' was developed in response to numerous concerns raised by disabled people about the issue of access. It published guidelines on access under the title of 'Designing to Enable'. This venture was so successful that it formed a separate charitable organisation in 1997, which has continued until the present day.

Funding from the National Lottery was used to train disabled people to become trainers in disability equality and awareness and access auditing so that they could progress towards employment or continue to support GAP as volunteers. GAP then developed a consultancy service based around these skills. In the course of training these disabled people, it became apparent that they faced a range of barriers, for example in housing, welfare benefits, transport and access to social care. Good information, advice and advocacy services were needed, and GAP set about organising these. Without this basic support the disabled people found they could not progress towards independent living especially progressing towards engagement and employment.

GAP has always seen itself as a user-led organisation and a centre for independent living.

Vision

GAP's charitable objectives are to benefit the disabled community of Gateshead Metropolitan Borough by promoting equality of opportunity for disabled people, raising awareness and improving access. It also helps to educate the public about the disabled and their needs, and seeks to combat discrimination – in particular, through inaccessible buildings, services and facilities.

GAP is proud of its pioneering role as an organisation steered by service users, and its track record in working in partnership with a wide range of agencies. It was a leader in the field of disability equality training, often employing innovative methods that have been adopted by other organisations. GAP has not been afraid to take on some tough advocacy cases. It has successfully trained disabled people as volunteers, and supported their progression into further training or employment. Another area where GAP has led the way is in the use of peer advocacy and peer mentoring.

GAP fully embraces the social model of disability. It strongly advocates the use of direct payments and personal assistance for those people who want it.

Current legal status

GAP is an independent organisation and a registered charity.

Governance arrangements

All policy is decided by a management committee, known as the Board of Trustees. This currently comprises seven people, all of whom are disabled people. The Board is elected by the general membership of disabled people.

Scale and scope of services provided

GAP is involved in many aspects of disability, including:

- Access / Disability Discrimination Act auditing
- Research
- Training in disability equality and awareness
- Access audit training
- Accessible Environments Consultancy
- Volunteering opportunities
- Advocacy (including peer advocacy)
- Information and advice provision (including peer mentoring)
- Accessible design service
- Facilities testing
- Producing 'Designing to Enable' – guidance on all aspects of access

GAP also influences strategy and policy formulation. It plays an active role in the Local Strategic Partnership, and contributes to meeting key targets in the Local Area Agreement.

The GAP website is being redeveloped to enable constituents to be more involved, and there are plans to re-establish a newsletter. Lack of capacity and resources have held these back.

Resources and support

Having started in a small office with just two paid workers, the organisation moved to larger premises at the beginning of 2001. There are now eleven paid workers in post, nine of whom are disabled. GAP has six volunteer workers, all of whom are disabled or carers. Until recently GAP successfully ran a team of 32 volunteers, but funding for this has now ended.

GAP earns consultancy fees from local authorities, health authorities, businesses and other voluntary organisations. This work includes auditing, access consultancy, general consultancy and research, Disability Discrimination Act training and disability equality training.

Like many other organisations of its kind, GAP is feeling the financial squeeze and struggling to maintain the current level of service. It does not receive significant core funding or own valuable assets, and so is dependent on small grants and on winning contracts. Local authorities, health services and others are cutting back on many of the consultancy and training areas that GAP would normally be interested in supplying. The Board of Trustees recognises the need to strengthen and diversify the organisation's budget.

Partnerships and networks

Partnerships have been established with a wide range of stakeholders. GAP has developed a good working relationship with Gateshead Council, Gateshead Health Trust and also works with the North East Regional Equalities Commission, Gateshead Volunteer Forum, Gateshead Advocacy Information Network, a group of 7 other organisations with potential to form a consortia with around advice and information, and Mental Health North East. These partnerships have enabled GAP to reach more of its constituents.

GAP leads on the disability work stream for the Regional Equalities Coalition. This has provided opportunities to be more involved with work on faith, gender, LGBT, age and BME issues. This has included engaging equality advocates for the Coalition, organising training workshops on disability issues, contributing to the NE Women's Network and groups on gender and disability.

GAP is prepared to take a consortium approach, and is well equipped to lead such efforts. It regularly signposts service users to other, specialist organisations across the Region.

GAP provides support to emerging groups/Social enterprises where ever possible e.g. Gateshead Visually Impaired Forum, North East Visual Services, Gateshead CP Group.

Lessons learned

A successful bid for Wave 1 grant under the Department of Health's *Action and Learning* initiative has enabled GAP to review its ULO status and to consolidate its policies and procedures.

The funding supported GAP in attempting to reach its wider constituency and to meet the needs of a diverse community. Research, consultation and out-reach activities showed that there was a large untapped need that could not be adequately addressed with existing resources.

The importance of carers has been recognised – especially because GAP has been trying to address the needs of younger disabled people, who are often more dependent on their carers. The support of carers – to uphold their rights and the rights of the people they care for – has been an organic movement and last year the constitution was changed to reflect this.

Workshops have encouraged staff and volunteers to become more involved in decision-making. The views of staff are clearly very important, but it is also necessary to monitor what the wider disabled constituency thinks about things. GAP has done this by running a series of consultations for disabled people using focus groups.

The organisation needs to be professional and business-like, without ever losing sight of its underlying principles. It must be prepared to accept constructive advice and criticism, and to respond positively to it when appropriate. GAP has shown that it can win business and deliver effectively, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to find the right kind of opportunities. GAP has recognised that it probably needs to become a company limited by guarantee – or similar status – if it is to compete for more contracts. There are problems with regard to marketing because some public authorities regularly expect GAP to provide support, advice, training and consultancy on a free or cheap basis.

Decisions should always be based on robust evidence. It is important to research and analyse data about the wider business environment and the needs of service users on a continuing basis.

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