

Interim report on

## Exploring the experiences of disabled people within the workplace.

One of the milestones for the Big Lottery funded **Count Me In** project involved a piece of research exploring the experiences of people with disabilities within the workplace in the South Hams area of Devon.

### Methodology

It was decided to draw up a questionnaire to ascertain the experiences of local disabled employees. The parameters of having been employed within the last 10 years were placed, to ensure that the issues were ones that were not being addressed by the Disability Discrimination Act (2004) or the Equality Act (2010). The brief was extended to include people who are volunteering or have undertaken voluntary work within this period, as the same issues apply, whether being paid or not.

The questionnaire was sent out to people on South Hams Lifestyles mailing list. It was distributed and people given assistance in filling in the survey at our regular drop-in groups. Copies were also held and distributed by South Hams Council for Volunteer Services, the Disability Employment Advisor at jobcentre Plus, and Totnes Work Club. The survey was placed on our website, powered by survey monkey and advertised widely in our newsletter. Ivybridge Work Club was made aware of the website questionnaire, as were Dartmouth Work club. The questionnaire was discussed at local meetings and forums such as Living Options Devon Disability Network meeting and the South Hams Voluntary Voice Forum. Finally the survey was distributed at a Welfare Reform information day 20th March, Follaton House.

### Interim Findings

Of the respondents, 15% were currently in work, and 85% were no longer able to work. 28% saw the most important benefit of work as financial, whilst 71% prioritised the social contact. One respondent felt

that all aspects mattered, but the social side of work was slightly more important.

Most people found the attitudes of other people affected them in the work place. Some in retail based jobs had to contend with the negative attitudes of some customers, but this just added to the job satisfaction when the customer left happy. One respondent felt strongly that they do not allow the attitudes of other people to affect them.

66% of people felt that their most recent boss had been a good employer, with 44% finding their employer not supportive. However 100% of respondents stated their colleagues were helpful and supportive.

When asked about adaptations to the workspace, none of those questioned needed specialised equipment for work, but 75% required flexible working arrangements, such as a shorter working week, and 25% needed their workspace adapted in order to work.

75% of people felt they had needed to make practical adaptations themselves in order to remain in employment, and 25% had changed their attitude.

When asked about barriers faced, feelings ran high. Comments such as “I feel I wasn’t given a chance” “I’m not appreciated” and “I wasn’t given a fair chance to show what I am able to do” were reported. However, one respondent feels that “disabled people need to be firm and outgoing at work” to combat such barriers. 40% of people had experienced prejudice at work, and for 20% of people that had resulted in leaving the employment.

People felt the qualities of a good employer was “awareness of problem”, “sensitive manner”, “willingness to help”, “contact after injury”, “humour” and “I could always talk to him”. There were also ideas given about how to improve the lot of disabled people within the workplace. “Mix disabled and non-disabled people” was one suggestion, “accepting people for who they are”, “increase awareness of the employers of their disabled employees’ disabilities”, “allow them just to be workers” and “give and take and listen to what the person needs”.

## Conclusion

It seems that disabled employees across the South Hams area have had a mixed experience of employment. All people contacted in the survey had had a good supportive relationship with their colleagues, although the same cannot be said for their boss. Communication seems to be vitally important to a successful work placement, and flexibility on both sides is key. Sadly, people still experience prejudice because of their disability, and some people are still finding that access issues to buildings are a barrier. People with disabilities value work and recognise the wider importance of social contact and relationships with colleagues as being more important, in some cases, than the wages.