



The Same As You? & Local Accessible Information Strategies

A report by The Scottish Accessible Information Forum on taking forward the recommendations in *The Same As You? A review of services for people with learning difficulties.*

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1 SAIF and Local Accessible Information Strategies

SAIF was established as a result of the *Enabling Information* report (1995). SAIF is funded by the Scottish Executive and supported by COSLA, the local authorities, organisations of disabled people and carers, and the national charities.

SAIF is an advisory body consisting of 21 individuals drawn from disability-led organisations and information providers. More than half of the members are disabled people or carers. SAIF's remit is to improve the provision and accessibility of information to disabled people and carers.

Three recommendations of the *Enabling Information* report were that a new national disability information service should be set up, national standards for disability information should be produced, and local accessible information strategies should be put in place with local authorities taking a lead in this development.

In 1999 SAIF produced the **Standards for Disability Information and Advice Provision in Scotland** and commissioned the new disability information service called **Update**. SAIF's role now is to encourage and assist in the implementation of the SAIF Standards and the development of local accessible information strategies.

The *Enabling Information* Report recognised local authorities as key to the implementation of local accessible information strategies. There is no blueprint - local authorities vary greatly in the way they organise services and local areas are very different. Local strategies will reflect these differences - within the essential remit, which is:

To co-ordinate the efforts of local information and advice providers in the interests of meeting the needs of disabled people.

The *Standards and Localities* section of the *SAIF Standards* outlines the strategic responsibilities of local authorities and a process of planning and review to discharge those responsibilities.

Most importantly, local authorities must involve and work with:

- **Disabled people and carers**
- **Organisations of disabled people and carers**

- **Mainstream and specialist information and advice providers**
- **Health services and other key service providers, funders and commissioners.**

The tasks for local authorities can then be summarised as follows:

- Identify an officer responsible for leading the process.
- Assess numbers and needs of disabled people in the area.
- Prepare a plan.
- Help to fund the process, and access other funding if necessary.
- Encourage the implementation of the SAIF Standards.
- Review progress.
- Collate and distribute information.

SAIF is liaising directly with each local authority and health board.

2 The Same As You? Report

In May 2000 the Scottish Executive published *The Same As You?* a review of services for people with learning difficulties. The publication followed 12 months of consultation with users, carers and professionals, and is the first review of learning disability services for over 20 years.

The report recommends a range of responsibilities for local authorities and health boards in terms of service developments.

The report also recommends that ***SAIF “should consult local authorities, health boards and users and carers on how best to provide joint, one-stop, free and accessible local information services for people with learning difficulties, their families and carers”.***

This recommendation follows on from the *Enabling Information* report of 1995, produced by the Scottish Working Group on Information Services for People with Disabilities and their Carers. That report recommended that “local authorities should be required to set up a strategy group to prepare a strategy for information and advice services in their areas. The strategy group should include representatives from the independent and statutory sectors, and involve disabled people”.

SAIF welcomed the recommendation as it takes the view that the provision of adequate local information and advice services for people with a learning difficulty should sit within the broader development of a local accessible information strategy.

3 Taking the Recommendation Forward

In February 2001, SAIF wrote to all the local authorities and health boards in Scotland. Our purposes in writing to them were:

1. To request a meeting with each authority and health board to discuss their plans or existing developments in relation to both the Same As You report recommendation and the provision of a local accessible information strategy.
2. To ask them to complete and return to us a brief questionnaire about steps which SAIF regard as key to the implementation of a local accessible information strategy.
3. To ask them to tell us about any other steps they have taken in relation to such a strategy and send us any relevant publications.

Following the deadline at the end of February, a reminder letter was sent out and elicited a number of further responses. The responses to the questionnaire and the contacts received are detailed in Appendix 1. An overview of results is included below.

4 Summary of Results from the Questionnaire.

SAIF was pleased with the response rate to the questionnaire. 84% of local authorities and 53% of health boards replied to our letter. The respondents completed the questionnaire and gave contact details for the people in each area responsible for taking forward the recommendations in ***The Same As You?*** During 2002, SAIF wrote once again to all the contacts giving them information on membership of UPDATE and requesting current email addresses.

The results themselves showed a variation in the way the recommendations had been delegated within local authorities and health boards and in the approaches taken to applying them across Scotland. This was as expected since the different geographical areas and the varying ways in which local

authorities and health boards work together throughout the country have an impact on the most effective way of implementing national policies.

5 Liaison with Local Authorities & Health Boards

Initially, SAIF planned to meet with each of these contacts to explore further what steps were being taken locally to meet the ***The Same As You?*** recommendations. Some local authorities and health boards were working together on the local perspective, in other areas local authorities and health boards were pursuing the recommendations individually.

SAIF staff began liaising with a small number of these and it soon became apparent that the project did not have sufficient resources to actively engage at a local level effectively with groups set up purely to look at the needs of people with learning difficulties. At the same time the SAIF Local Strategies Working Group was trying to find ways in which to promote the issue of accessible information for all disabled people in a strategic and practical way in order to support the many agencies working locally across Scotland.

The SAIF Local Strategies Working Group realised that the most effective way of promoting accessible information for all disabled people and for people with learning difficulties in particular was to identify opportunities where our message could be put across at a local level to as many people as possible. SAIF would then concentrate on providing resources and support for the local contacts identified. The support offered would range from a variety of good practice guides to fill knowledge gaps, increased use of technology to facilitate information sharing between local practitioners; and advice and information given on an individual basis by telephone or email.

6 The Scottish Consortium for Learning Disability

One of the key recommendations contained in ***The Same As You?*** was that:

The Scottish Executive should set up a new Scottish centre for learning disability. This would offer advice, training and support to agencies, professionals, people with learning difficulties and parents to bring about the changes we have recommended in this review. The centre will also support the further development of advocacy. (Recommendation 6)

The Scottish Consortium for Learning Disability was set up in 2001 and SAIF considered it a priority to meet with this new agency to explore ways of working together to further both organisations' aims and objectives.

The SCLD will focus on the following main areas of work:

- training
- information
- public education
- research
- consultancy, advice and support to local and national organisations
- national network of profound and multiple disabilities

Since the establishment of the SCLD, SAIF has attended a number of meetings with its staff in order to identify the most effective ways of working together on areas of common concern. The SCLD network can provide a number of opportunities to SAIF. It is a community of interest that SAIF can usefully circulate information, advice and guidance to on the specific topic of accessible information. In addition it is a network with expertise and experience that SAIF can draw upon to inform its work and ensure the needs of people with learning difficulties are fully addressed.

7 Conclusions

What are the key conclusions from SAIF's work with local authorities and health boards since the publications of *The Same As You?* Firstly, it is still the case that local authorities and health boards vary considerably in their approaches to improving provision for people with learning difficulties. It is also apparent that the locus for responsibility for this improvement varies between authorities and health boards and the extent of health boards and local authorities and health boards working together and with other agencies locally is inconsistent.

As mentioned above, SAIF recognises that local areas are very different and varied approaches potentially offer a range of solutions that all areas can learn from.

However, *The Same As You?* has achieved a major objective in encouraging public bodies to highlight the needs of people with learning difficulties, bring together different service providers working locally and review the extent to which these services are co-ordinated and meeting the needs of users.

Crucially, it has allowed smaller agencies with specific local expertise to begin to feed in their concerns at a strategic level.

8 The Way Forward

Having acted on the recommendations in *The Same As You?* and consulted with a number of key players who are attempting to take this forward locally, SAIF is now able to suggest how existing networks can be further developed and supported.

There are a number of ways in which SAIF can continue to support the implementation of the key issues identified in *The Same As You?*

Provide a mechanism for information sharing

SAIF now has a database of key contacts who are taking forward *The Same As You?* agenda locally. We can use this to share examples of good practice across Scotland and to allow these key people to network with each other to identify gaps and avoid duplication.

Provide guidance and support from a central source

SAIF can act as a conduit for ideas and initiatives on how to provide accessible information to people with learning difficulties. Our network of contacts actively pursues accessible information in a range of ways, including by electronic means. It is important that the variety of approaches being taken across the country and in relation to people with multiple disabilities is made available to people working locally so that they can make informed choices as to the best way to make their information accessible. People with learning difficulties are not a homogenous group and there are many initiatives developing communication tools in new and innovative ways. It is important that the lessons they learn can be effectively transferred to people working in other geographical areas.

Incorporate best practice guidance on learning disability issues as an integral part of the SAIF promotion of local strategies

As part of its' work, the SAIF Local Strategies Working Group takes a proactive approach to promoting the idea of local agencies working together to co-ordinate local information and advice. The needs of people with learning difficulties should be an integral part of this process. Where guidance is

offered, strategies for communicating with this group of people can be backed up with practical ideas and examples.

Work in partnership with SCLD

It is important that SAIF and SCLD continue to meet on a regular basis and share expertise. SCLD is the natural place to collate and disseminate current research and good practice in the area of learning difficulties whilst SAIF provides a resource where people can get practical help and support when trying to improve and develop their information for disabled people and carers. The two organisations should continue to work together to find opportunities where both aims can be met.