

Diversity Award Winner: Upper Hutt City Council

Video Link <https://vimeo.com/104677146>

A local council is training its staff to make sure disabled customers get the service they deserve.

The Upper Hutt City Council has many departments that connect directly with the community in many ways such as its library, traditional service desks, a swimming pool and an entertainment centre. To make sure everyone had a positive experience, it undertook to train staff to assist disabled people appropriately.

Council Community Development Advisor Frances McEwen says it resulted in DIScover, which is a resource including booklets and staff training workshops. "DIScover has also increased disability awareness among Council staff and acceptance of staff within Council who have a disability. Little training in this area had ever been provided in the past."

How does it work?

Frances explains that DIScover provides an opportunity to increase staff's disability awareness and develop ways in which to provide the best possible service to community members who have a disability. "This includes both physical access and attitudes and understanding. It also provided Council with an opportunity to promote the importance of disability awareness in-house." Funding came from the Ministry of Social development in two grants totaling about \$13 thousand. Frances says the project consisted of three activities

- Developing a training and information resource in serving customers with disabilities.
- Developing training to customer service staff using an equity and disability awareness consultant.
- Promoting the resource to other businesses and offering training to high profile Upper Hutt businesses

Frances says the DIScover resource has now been embedded in Council processes and culture by ensuring all new staff are given disability awareness training as part of their induction and this includes going over it with an advisor. "Continuous training is provided to all existing staff, not just customer service staff and that includes managers at all levels." She adds that it's also hoped the project will enhance the Council's image of an attractive place for disabled people to seek employment.

She says local businesses are also getting involved and over the next year they will be invited to free training courses and given copies of the resource. There has been national interest in the

project with 30 businesses requesting copies of DIScover including Work and Income, Hamilton City Council and Mitre 10.

“We hope the training gives all our staff and other businesses the confidence to serve disabled customers with the respect they deserve.” Frances says DIScover was developed after research with staff and disabled people. “Employees knew that its content was developed and endorsed by disabled people, so gave them a sense of trust around knowing they were being correctly informed.” Workshops were facilitated by Pam MacNeill, an equity consultant who has sight impairment. Frances says they provided plenty of opportunities for staff to review the accessibility of their own work environments and their attitudes and behaviours.

Positive staff reaction

Frances says staff are now coming up with their own ideas about how to improve the access for disabled customers. “The library has reconfigured its seating so it’s more accessible for wheelchairs, and are looking at lowering one of the self-issue machines so it’s more user friendly.”

The Council’s HR manager, Diane du Toit says it’s important for staff to recognize the barriers that exist for people with impairments. “We need to provide our staff with the skills to assist others overcome those barriers and in turn add value to the service we provide. DIScover has not only been outwardly focused but is also addressing the need for a culture shift within Council to accept and understand those on staff with disabilities.” Here are some responses from Council customer service staff: “I’ve noticed a shift in the language being used around the place. It is no longer acceptable to use words like handicapped toilet. In some cases people didn’t mean to cause offence, but they didn’t know what the right terminology was”; “You reinforced that people with impairments are experts in their own needs and it’s ok to ask if you are unsure about how to help them. This goes for staff members too!”; “It makes you think about how you can help people with everyday life and that just a few changes can have a real impact.”