A whole new attitude

**DPA Submission on the Otago Regional Council’s Draft Significance and Engagement Policy**

**Introduction**

DPA is a pan-disability advocacy organisation representing people with physical, sensory (i.e. Deaf, Blind) and learning impairments and people with experience of mental illness/distress and their families/whänau.

We have approximately 1,000 members nationwide and 20 individual and 10 corporate members locally. However, with our reach into the service provider/corporate membership, we represent up to (approximately) 2,000 people with disabilities (on an indirect basis) locally.

In the Otago area, it is estimated on the basis that with 20% of the population reporting some form of disability in the 2013 Disability Survey conducted by Statistics New Zealand. According to the Survey, the Otago disability community could be comprised of up to 52,000 people with physical, sensory, and learning impairments and experience of mental illness/distress at any given time.[[1]](#footnote-1)

## Definition

We define disability for the purposes of this submission as that contained in the New Zealand Disability Strategy which states in its introduction “*disability is a process which happens when one group of people create barriers by designing a world only for their way of living, taking no account of the impairments other people have*.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

# For convenience, in this submission the use of “disabled community or disabled people” includes the Deaf and Blind communities as well as all others who define themselves as disabled.

Within this submission, DPA will be making reference to relevant articles of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD). New Zealand is a signatory to this Convention. This means that both central and local government are duty bound to implement all its clauses. The Convention centrally informs DPA New Zealand’s work at all levels. We would also like to see the Dunedin City Council make this a living document at the local level. This submission will mainly focus on the methods of engagement.

**Main submission**

DPA Dunedin is very pleased to make this submission. The Government’s passing of the Local Government Amendment Act has afforded us this opportunity to comment on the Otago Regional Council’s engagement with the disability community.

Historically, the Council’s engagement with the disability community and, in particular, with DPA has been difficult. However, we have (surprisingly) witnessed a new attitude abroad recently at the ORC which seeks to bring stakeholders more into the discussions around policy and process. We have particularly welcomed the Council’s positive engagement on public transport access issues which have been, traditionally, a source of contention between ourselves and the Council. This has been due to, in part, the arrival of new personnel at Council management and governance levels. However, there is a need to further strengthen this relationship and make it more permanent. That is why we would like to suggest the establishment of a Strategic Disability Advisory Group based on the DCC Disability Issues Advisory Group but on the hopeful proviso that it will meet more regularly than the DCC group does. The group’s focus should be on transport issues but there are other aspects of the Council’s activities that may benefit from our input such as, for example, access to our wonderful Otago environment. We would be happy to further discuss the composition and make-up of such a group which, in our belief, should be comprised in the majority of disabled people (with all main impairment based groups mentioned on the first page) represented alongside family/whanau and service provider representatives.

Also, as we have pointed out in a similar submission to the Dunedin City Council on their engagement policy and to their Draft Annual Plan, that we would like to see the following changes made to ensure that all Council communications, information and services are fully accessible to all people, including disabled people:

* Information be available in Braille, large print and non-text (i.e. Word) documents for Blind and vision impaired people.
* That information be made available on the Council’s website in New Zealand Sign Language.
* That all significant Council meetings and events have a New Zealand Sign Language interpreter present wherever possible.
* That all major Council documents should be made available in Easy Read versions (heavily reliant on use of plain language and illustrations) for the benefit of people with learning disabilities – People First New Zealand and its local Dunedin branch has experience and expertise in this area.
* That people should also have the option of being able to make submissions via phone as this would benefit, in particular, Blind, vision impaired, mobility impaired and older people. Also this would benefit people without access to the internet or mobile phone technology.

Following recent discussions with the Dunedin City Council, it seems that they are open to making these changes there and funding/resourcing them appropriately. Currently, background work is being done by your DCC colleagues on these proposals and we are hopeful of seeing them come to fruition. In saying this, we recall the ORC’s willingness to make its bus timetables and transport information available in a wider range of accessible formats and the engagement processes used in achieving that as a model for what we would like to see. Therefore, we hope that the Otago Regional Council will follow the DCC’s lead and make the changes we would like to see. For this reason, we are happy to engage in further discussions on how to improve the ORC’s engagement with the disability community in line with the UN Convention. In this respect, we point the Council to Article 21 of the Convention (on freedom of expression and opinion and access to information) as a starting point.

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1. Statistics New Zealand, *Disability Counts,* May 2001 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Page 3, Minister for Disability Issues, *New Zealand Disability Strategy,* April 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)