Written response to the recommendations from Banff and Buchan College

I refer to your letter of 13th September 2007 and attach our organisation's general view of the above report and how we intend to implement the recommendations that are relevant to us.

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Principal
Banff and Buchan College
27 November 2007
A Response to

'Removing Barriers and Creating Opportunities'

- A Report from the Scottish Parliament's Equal Opportunities Committee

Banff and Buchan College

November 2007
Introduction

Banff and Buchan College (BBC) welcomes the opportunity to assist the Scottish Parliament's Equal Opportunities Committee in its work on promoting disability equality. Accordingly, the College submits this, its response to 'Removing Barriers and Creating Opportunities' - the report and related recommendations from the Committee which attempt to remove the many barriers that face disabled people.

Our response to the Scottish Parliament's recent request (13th September, 2007) offers a College view of the Committee's report followed by some organisational responses relating to the relevant recommendations documented in the original report.

Organisational View of Report

We, at Banff and Buchan College, are committed to equality of opportunity for all prospective and current staff and students. We recognise that certain social and cultural influences can lead to groups or individuals being disadvantaged for reasons relating to age, gender, status, race, sexual orientation, religious or political beliefs and disability. We continuously review our culture, core values, policies and procedures to ensure that they promote behaviours and attitudes which combat discrimination.

Banff and Buchan College considers the Scottish Parliament's Equal Opportunities Committee's report to be both important and thorough. The extensive evidence base and the detail of the report in its methodology, findings and final publication give the report and its recommendations substantial credibility.

The College also commends the report on its scope and its coverage of the many broad and significant themes for disabled people living, learning and working in Scotland. It welcomes the recommendations aimed at making Scotland a better place to visit for disabled people from other countries - an increasingly significant issue which is of particular relevance to this and other further education colleges who are enrolling ever-increasing numbers of international students.

'Removing Barriers and Creating Opportunities' highlights several areas that this College has considered as part of its strategy for addressing, removing and avoiding discriminatory practice within the organisation. Many of the themes identified in the report such as defining disability; improving access to work; mainstreaming service provision for disabled learners and improving access to education generally have been identified through existing College bodies such as the Senior and Sector Management Teams and the Diversity Management Group. These themes and related tasks have been documented in the College's Disability Equality Scheme and Action Plan and are subject to on-going review.
However, the Report has also highlighted some of the weaknesses within our own action planning processes. Accordingly, the on-going review will lead to a broadening out of the key tasks within the College's Disability Equality Action Plan beyond those already documented. Additional areas for consideration and development will include student training; careers advice; transitional support for disabled learners; information gathering including disability disclosure; promoting positive attitudes towards disability and disabled people; development of citizenship and employability strategies to consider fully the needs of disabled learners.

The Report has also allowed the College to consider its potential to address, in other ways, some of the other recommendations including promoting creativity; sharing good practice; enhancing transport arrangements and improving the accessing information for disabled people.

Finally, the College -in developing its outline business case for refurbishment of its Fraserburgh campus - has already begun to consider ways in which it can include the views of disabled staff, disabled students and disabled people generally in improving the physical access requirements for the proposed building.

The following section of this response identifies many of the specific recommendations relating to Banff and Buchan College from the 'Removing Barriers and Creating Opportunities' Report. It addresses said recommendations and identifies how they will be implemented within the College.

Responses to Recommendations

Legislative and policy context

Recommendation 3

7. The Committee recommends that all public authorities should work to the social model of disability when implementing their duties under the forthcoming Disability Equality Duty (paragraph 249).

As part of its Disability Equality Scheme (DES) and Disability Equality Action Plan (DEAP) the College is already working to the social model of disability which shows that the disadvantage and social exclusion experienced by many disabled people is not the inevitable result of their impairments or medical conditions, but stems from attitudinal and environmental barriers.

Access to Work

Recommendation 12

18. In order to ensure appropriate support to disabled people, the Committee recommends that-
- disabled people are given support into employment for a time period that is appropriately flexible to cater for their individual circumstances based on an assessment of the support they require; and
- more should be done to help disabled people sustain employment if their circumstances change (paragraph 395).

The College already offers support into employment for disabled people and will make reasonable adjustments to ensure that someone with a disability can work. Further, the College strives to sustain employment of disabled people should their circumstances change. Such mechanisms used include phased returns to work after a period of absence; adaptations to the working environment and counselling.

**Recommendation 32**

42. The Committee recommends that referral to the supported employment unit should be from any source, for example, Jobcentre Plus, GPs, health boards, voluntary sector, social work, schools and colleges (paragraph 596).

Banff and Buchan College believes that it has a role to play in allowing its disabled learners an opportunity to move into and sustain meaningful employment. Accordingly, the College is happy to participate in such Supported Employment Unit strategy and believes it has a pivotal role in doing so.

**Access to further and higher education**

**Recommendation 37**

47. The Committee recommends that specific work is done to ensure that the needs of young disabled people are fully taken into account throughout the implementation of the Scottish Executive strategy *More Choices, More Chances* (paragraph 625).

Banff and Buchan College is already involved in the strategy promoted in the Executive's 'More Choices, More Chances' document and is presently reviewing and refining its learning and support packages for all young people, including those with disabilities. Furthermore, the College has, for many years developed excellent links with many partner schools and has, as a result, delivered effective programmes for young learners with disabilities who remain at school or who have recently left.

**Recommendation 39**

50. The Committee recommends that all further and higher education providers seek stakeholder feedback in relation to the services that they provide and respond where appropriate (paragraph 645).
The College already gains stakeholder feedback from a variety of sources. Learner satisfaction surveys, liaison panel meetings, focus groups and student progress meetings are just some of the methods used. However, the advent of a pilot student participation strategy looks to herald a new age in developing the 'learner voice'.

Over the course of this year Banff and Buchan College aims to test out new mechanisms to gauge the views of all learners, including those with disabilities, on their experience at college. These include the employment of a Student Support Officer to help facilitate greater levels of student participation, create more direct learner participation in Course Team Meetings and develop better communication mechanisms between the Student Representative Body and the College Staff. Once these have been implemented, monitored and evaluated, it is hoped that these and other strategies aimed at enhancing learner engagement, will be 'rolled out' to all areas of the college.

**Recommendation 40**

51. **The Committee recommends that further and higher education providers should develop mechanisms which allow them to go beyond the minimum specifications in the Disability Discrimination Act with regard to informing disabled students about their legal rights** (paragraph 653).

The College, through the Sector Manager responsible for Diversity and Equality, has already formed positive links with the Student Representative Body and is working in conjunction with its President and the Student Support Officer to create a greater awareness of the legal rights of all learners including those with disabilities.

**Recommendation 41**

52. **The Committee welcomes the toolkit developed by the funding council to ensure that further and higher education providers comply with their duties under the Disability Discrimination Act and recommends that further and higher education providers make full use of it and other resources available to them** (paragraph 655).

The SFC's toolkit for self reflection was used by the College when developing its Disability Equality Scheme and Action Plan. The principles therein continued to be used by the College today when reviewing the plan's progress. The College continues to access additional resources from disability and equality organisations e.g. Equality Forward in an attempt to improve disability equality within the organisation.

**Recommendation 44**

56. **The Committee recommends that all providers, in conjunction with their disabled students, carry out a taking stock exercise of the**
information they provide to ensure it is appropriate and meets the needs of disabled students (paragraph 687).

The Sector Manager responsible for Diversity and Equality, in collaboration with the Student Representative Body, its President, a focus group of disabled students and the Student Support Officer will conduct an audit on information available for disabled students by the end of this academic session. This will subject to on-going review.

**Recommendation 49**

61. The Committee recommends that there must be systematic planning from schools, the careers service and colleges or universities to ensure that the support a disabled student receives whilst in transition is seamless. The Committee notes that the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 may have the potential to achieve this. The Committee considers that the Scottish Executive should commission research to establish best practice in this area (paragraph 754).

The College has developed effective systems for communicating information to allow relatively 'seamless' transitions for disabled learners progression through the various educational institutions. Such systems have been particularly effective for disabled students with quite complex needs e.g. Adult Foundation and Extension course students. Much of this work is supported and guided by the "Partnership Matters" initiative which the college has used to strengthen already existing links with other key services. The partnership meets regularly and has made effective progress College processes have also worked well when allowing disabled learner progression from partner schools to the College and from the College to partner universities.

**Recommendation 52**

65. In order to encourage more disabled learners to take advantage of early starts and familiarisation visits to acclimatise and to access and identify any additional requirements for support, the Committee recommends that-

- further and higher education providers should consider how best to provide early starts and familiarisation visits to disabled people as a matter of course, before students commence the academic year;

This recommendation will be considered, within this academic session, as part of the dialogue between the Sector Manager with responsibility for Equality and Diversity, Client Services, the Student Representative Body, its members and a focus group of disabled learners.
Recommendation 54

68. In order to remove the potential barriers caused by professional occupational standards, the Committee recommends that-

- the careers service, colleges, universities and the Scottish 'Qualifications Authority should develop clear and appropriate guidance to ensure that students in every situation are in a position to make informed and considered career choices; and
- professional bodies and government agencies work in partnership with the careers service and further and higher education providers to provide regular up-to-date information on how specific impairments might affect a person’s ability to be considered for a particular career; and

Presently, the College has positive links with Careers Scotland who are regular attendees within the College. Its representatives offer careers guidance to students routinely. However, there has been little evaluation done of the effect of careers advice for disabled learners. Accordingly, the College will enter into a consultation with disabled learners and the staff of Careers Scotland in order to evaluate and monitor the appropriateness and effectiveness of the careers advice given.

Recommendation 55

69. In order to remove the barriers to disclosure and to ensure disabled learners receive appropriate services, the Committee recommends that-

- all further and higher education providers should develop and foster suitable procedures and environments to encourage students to disclose a disability; and
- further and higher education providers share techniques which will support a disabled person’s choice to disclose (paragraph 809).

The College understands the importance of disclosure but recognises that it is at the discretion of the individual to choose to disclose his or her disability. The College will build on its success at encouraging applicants and learners to disclose and will work closely with its partner schools and universities when sharing best practice in doing so.

Recommendation 56

70. The Committee considers the issue of communication support to students to go much wider than British Sign Language interpretation and recommends that the Scottish Executive, the funding council and further and higher education providers should work together to investigate ways of increasing the availability of a comprehensive range of communication support to disabled students, such as Deafblind
communicators, Palantypists, Makaton, graphic symbol charts, speech-to-text reporters and British Sign Language interpreters (paragraph 815).

To date the College, through its Learner Development Team and Special Education Managers, has been very committed, responsive and successful in offering a wide range of communication support options to its learners. It will continue to do so.

Recommendation 64

79. In order to ensure that the barriers, such as those presented by "pretendy" courses, are removed, the Committee recommends that-

- the Scottish Executive should consider and address the perception that colleges are becoming day centres. The Committee notes that this situation may conflict with the social inclusion agenda, but considers that it must be dealt with more effectively to ensure appropriate choice and service provision to disabled people;
- the Scottish Executive, the funding council and further and higher education providers develop solutions to ensure that students are not forced to study life courses as a means of keeping occupied, as an easy option for social services, or to get colleges extra funding; and
- if a disabled person is placed on such a course, then it must be as a result of personal choice and as part of a structured programme of evaluation and development (paragraph 883).

Banff and Buchan College expresses its deepest concern at the use of and inferences made by the term 'pretendy' courses within the original report. For some considerable time it has offered structured courses aimed at meeting the needs of its most vulnerable learners. It shall continue to develop, implement, monitor and evaluate such provision and is about to embark on a review of its special education programmes to ensure that the correct course structure is in place for all its learners with complex needs. Presently, it offers a wide range of Access units to those on the Adult Foundation and Extension programmes and is exploring, in conjunction, with another rural College, the best way to ensure that the most appropriate educational choice and experience is extended to its disabled learners.

Recommendation 67

84. The Committee recommends that colleges should review existing provision with a view to developing courses and facilities appropriate for students with complex needs (paragraph 918).

See recommendation 64.
**Recommendation 69**

87. In order that all future students benefit from the Teachability Project, the Committee recommends that-

- the funding council should provide renewed and increased funding for the Teachability Project to enable it to be rolled out as a condition of funding to all higher education providers; and
- a similar scheme to the Teachability Project should be developed and piloted in the further education sector (paragraph 932).

Banff and Buchan College welcomes and supports the proposed extension of the 'Teachability' Project to FE colleges.

**Recommendation 94**

117. The Committee recommends that-

- all Equality and Diversity Training programmes should contain an element of Disability Equality Training;
- the Disability Equality Training element of Equality and Diversity Training programmes should be devised and developed by disabled people or, at the very least, in consultation with disabled people;
- all high-level Disability Equality Training programmes should be devised, developed and delivered by disabled people with the appropriate training skills, experience and/or qualifications;
- high-level Disability Equality Training should be included as part of training programmes aimed at those who work or intend to work with disabled people. As well as professionals, such as those who work in the fields of medicine and health, in social care or in education, this training should be delivered to all those who work in the care industry; it should be included as a required element in all courses leading to qualifications in these fields;
- high-level Disability Equality Training should be a required element of the training and development of all staff with policy development responsibility, including senior staff, throughout the public sector in Scotland, particularly within the Scottish Executive (paragraph 1136).

The College understands the significance of all Equality and Diversity Training Programmes in what is becoming an increasingly complex working and learning environment; one filled with a range of issues and complexities relating to a variety of equality strands. The College seeks to ensure quality improvement in all its equality developments. As an employer and trainer, the College recognises its duty to ensure that appropriate training is given to ensure an ever-increasing awareness of equality and diversity issues is developed amongst its staff and students.
Banff and Buchan College has outsourced its Equality and Diversity Training from several specialist agencies e.g. Grampian Racial Equality Council (GREC) and Equalities Forward and believes that it is the duty of these external training providers to satisfy the above recommendations. When in-house training is offered as part of staff development the College will attempt to adhere as closely as practicably possible to the recommendations noted above.

Recommendation 101

125. The Committee further recommends that teaching staff who are responsible for the delivery of structured programmes in the areas of personal and social development should attend focussed continuing professional development courses in the area of equalities to foster effective inclusion of equalities issues, including disability equality, in those areas of the curriculum (paragraph 1167).

This recommendation seems, in the context of the Report, to refer to teaching and learning within schools. However, Banff and Buchan College believes that diversity and equality matters should be mainstreamed throughout all educational courses and that the discussion of disability issues - in the context of the citizenship agenda - is not the sole responsibility of schools. Accordingly, an on-going review of tutor-student communication will also consider disability equality matters and the elimination of discrimination as part of students' tutorial course time.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Banff and Buchan College wholeheartedly supports the ethos of the 'Removing Barriers and Creating Opportunities' report and welcomes the focus it provides in attempting to address disability equality and discrimination. For its part, the College strives to be an equal opportunities service provider and employer and will work towards satisfying the recommendations and tasks detailed in the Scottish Parliament Report and its own Disability Equality Action Plan.