HIE welcomes the opportunity to respond to your request for background information relating to implementation of the initiative "Removing Barriers and Creating Opportunities". The following summarises key areas of activity which relate to the recommendations most relevant to the enterprise agencies, and supplements the response made to Cathy Peattie in November 2006 (a copy is attached for your information).

HIE firmly believes that the adoption of the social model of disability is essential if we are to contribute to the development of an inclusive, modern, progressive society and has adopted this as the premise for progressing the integration and promotion of disability awareness in HIE's functions and services.

The government's new economic strategy has significant implications for HIE's role in increasing sustainable economic growth. In response to this, and in line with the principles of the Scottish Executive Equality Strategy referred to in the report, HIE is currently reviewing its Equality Schemes to ensure the most appropriate future strategic focus of resources in relation to all equality strands, including disability. HIE is taking this forward as part of the Best Value initiative, which will ensure that HIE will be able to fully integrate disability into future policies through effective implementation of the disability and other equality schemes. HIE continues to be involved in the Scottish Government's Close the Gap initiative.

An important element of the equality public duties is the promotion of equality and diversity to businesses. A key current initiative being delivered is the joint Scottish Enterprise / HIE project, Equality Matters in Business, funded by the Scottish Government. The three components (Business Adviser awareness-raising, engaging with businesses to promote the business benefits of equality and diversity and provision of an equality and diversity helpline) all aim to provide information and advice to employers on a range of equality and diversity issues, including examples of good practice. The business engagement events have included powerful and real case studies, illustrating the business benefits of employing those from non-traditional recruitment markets, many of these around the employment of people who have a disability.

The Removing Barriers and Creating Opportunities report (recommendation 16) suggests that there is a role for the enterprise agencies in promoting the rights of disabled people in employment. The Committee's initial response was that evidence suggests that the enterprise agencies do not have the capacity or willingness to deliver on this aspiration and that the enterprise agencies are not best placed to deliver on this recommendation. HIE agrees that we are not the agency best placed to deliver against this recommendation.
As well as promoting equality and diversity to the business community, HIE actively delivers a range of ongoing internal equality training for HIE’s managers, which ensures that provision for disabled people is at the core of the services HIE provides, as well as in employment. This is also a key feature of HIE’s induction programme. In order to extend the scope of training to all employees a tender is currently being prepared to introduce an equality and diversity e-learning package for all staff.

HIE incorporated employee involvement in the development of its Disability Equality Scheme to ensure that HIE’s practices reflect the needs of disabled employees. HIE continues to work with employers who actively support the employment of disabled people, e.g. COPE in Shetland.

We continue to improve the accessibility of our services and HIE has for several years sought to make its website, which contains information on all HIE services, as accessible as possible to all audiences (including those with visual, hearing, cognitive or motor impairments). Arrangements are also in place to ensure that information and services are accessible to visitors to HIE premises, including ensuring that interview and training arrangements take into account the needs of disabled people.

If you have any queries on the activities HIE is undertaking to implement the recommendations in the report please do not hesitate to contact me. Alternatively you may wish to contact Liz Scott, Equalities Manager on 01463244206, or at the above address.

Sandy Cumming CBE
Chief Executive
Highlands and Islands Enterprise
30 November 2007
7 December 2006

Ms Cathy Peattie MSP  
Convener of Equal Opportunities Committee  
The Scottish Parliament  
Room T3.40  
Committee Office  
EDINBURGH EH99 1SP

Thank you for your letter of 28th November regarding the Equal Opportunities Committee report on Removing Barriers and Creating Opportunities. The HIE Network will examine the extensive list of recommendations contained within the report and take action to ensure the services we provide to our communities are available and accessible to everyone who wishes to live, work or study in the Highlands and Islands.

Following a review of the implications of the new (and forthcoming) duties on gender, race and disability equality it is clear to us that all have the same spirit and intention behind them, requiring public authorities to take action to tackle discrimination, to prevent harassment, and to ensure that their work promotes equality in policy, service provision and employment. Given this change in focus, and the aspirations for this region that we have articulated in our strategy, A Smart Successful Highlands and Islands the adoption of the social model of disability is absolutely essential if we are to contribute to the development of an inclusive, modern progressive society.

If you wish to discuss HIE’s approach to this area of work in more detail, please let me know.