



# **Releasing Potential**

A learning needs analysis of the  
Disability Access Panel Network

**Research report for SDEF: January 2007**

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- **June 20** in Forfar: Andrew Kirk, Dundee; Marion Elrick, Angus; and Pauline Medd, Fife Access Panel
- **June 21** in Glasgow: Gordon Mungall and Arthur Baird, West Lothian Access Panel
- **June 23** in Stirling: Gillian Spanswick, Karen Angus, both Shetland; Henry Sherlock, Falkirk; Nick Rochford, Ross & Cromarty Panel
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- **November 8** in Glasgow: Tom Friel, East Dunbartonshire Access Panel; Gordon Hamilton, Dunbartonshire Access Panel; Roy Hayter, South Ayrshire Access Panel; Charlie Murphy, Glasgow Access Panel

- **October 26** prior to AGM in Stirling: Fiona Morrison, Oban Access Panel; Agnes Stewart, Aberdeen City Access Panel; Linda Miller, Aberdeenshire North Access Panel; Lucy MacDonald, Harris Access Panel; Ruth Sim, Deeside Access Panel; Nick Rochford, Ross & Cromarty Access Panel; Norah Wiseman, Aberdeenshire South Access Panel
- **November 23**, in Perth: Agnes Mackay, Angus Access Panel; Dennis Bethell, Dundee Access Panel; Pauline Medd, Fife Access Panel; Peter Stirling, Perth and Kinross Access Panel; Bob Bennett, Perth and Kinross Access Panel
- **November 27** via email: Jack Moodie and the Orkney Disability Forum.

## 2. Executive Summary

**Tom Skerrit:** I wish the world was a place where fair was the final line.  
Unfortunately, we don't live in that world.

**Jodie Foster:** Funny; I've always believed that the world is what we make  
of it.

**Contact, Warner Brothers 1997:  
director Robert Zemeckis, script Carl Sagan**

Our work with Panel members and those associated with their work who responded to this survey regarding the learning needs of Access Panels, shows they have the commitment and passion to make a fundamental difference for those who face barriers in daily life: they believe 'the world is what they make of it', and show this daily through their voluntary work for people with disability in their Panel's area.

On the other hand, changing things for the better is not easy: the network of Panels is widely varying in terms of age and stage as well as demographics and geography; and all have insufficient resource, insufficient inter-connection, and in some respects insufficient expertise (though there is a huge resource of skills and knowledge distributed among Panel members in many other respects) to 'release their potential' so they can do the work they would like to be able to do.

This report has found that, for the network of Access Panels:

- practical support is badly needed as many sustainability indicators are in the red: established Panel members badly need an influx of the right volunteers, and the skills to deploy them;
- the collective intelligence of the network in action has been harnessed to some extent, & could be much more so if a series of local and regional events could complement the annual conference;
- knowledge management is already underway, it just needs some help: Panels are resourceful and routinely swap good practice between each other, this needs to expand and to be supported;
- aspirations and commitment are high, as is a huge array of skills and experience: Panel members represent a vast resource of expertise which the rest of the network needs to be able to draw on.

Recommendations are as follows:

- **support and enhance existing training:** find out what training is already available within the areas of **Practical** (Access Audits, Building Regulations, the DDA, disability rights; and more / wider / deeper disability awareness); **Strategic** (how to influence policy making, how to get recognition and media space, funding applications and targeting funders); and **Supporting** (how to run a charity on few funds, how to lead / maintain / grow a team, how to attract / maintain / develop more volunteers);
- **benchmark Panel capabilities:** make a template (see section 4.4) which can gather all activities / approaches / practices which are effective and which enhance their influence, to show all Panels what they can be aiming for;
- **enable networking and communities of practice:** make it easier for people to get together in groups who can tackle the issues which some have addressed, and some have yet to meet;
- **enhance capability to coach:** give people the practical approaches and robust processes which will make these networking meetings purposeful, practice-focused, and solution-seeking;
- **reduce barriers to access:** assist Panels with practical resources, particularly those who have distance, time and support challenges in getting to local / regional / national events;
- **SDEF should further develop its proactive role:** SDEF personnel are challenged to get out and about and be hub of the network, catalysts for theme-based communities of practice.

**Nick McBain MA, FCIPD  
MAC**

**David Wills MCMI,**

## Introduction and methods used

### Background and previous work

This work took place against a background of previous work including the **SCVO Access Panels Report** carried out by Margaret Petrie with the Access Panel Review Steering Group for the Scottish Executive, March 2002. This report supported the development of a national organisation supporting access.

Secondly, the **Volunteering And Access Panels** Research Study was carried out by Volunteer Development Scotland (VDS) on behalf of Scottish Disability Equality Forum (SDEF), November 2005. This report suggested a variety of improvements:

- **in volunteer management:** via training and policies; more help to attract new members; targeted recruitment to get a more diverse and flexible membership; succession planning and wider delegation; shared skills and training needs; and clear roles and training for these;
- **in Panel promotion:** via Panels showcasing their work in the local area; and via more recognition of the individual skills and experience brought to Panels by their members on the part of SDEF, Local Authorities, individuals in the community and other organisations;
- **in Local Authority links and support:** via training in volunteers management for Local Authority representatives; and by firming up relations beyond the individual level possibly via a Service Level Agreement, detailing what both parties expect from one another as regards the level and nature of support;
- **in local support:** via local support network for each Panel, comprising other local Panels, the Volunteer Centre, CVS, Local Authority and other Disability groups; a means of updating Panels on relevant issues in their field of work; and SDEF-facilitated opportunities for all Panels to meet to share information about current work and strategies;
- **further work:** on attracting younger members to Panels; on a study of the relationship between Access Panels and elected members; and finally, on a **full training needs analysis** which this report undertakes to do.

### 2.1. Initial meetings to find key issues

Initial contacts were made via meetings and phone calls, to find out main themes and issues. We had the help of members of over a dozen Panels in May, June and July, who helped Nick and David to collect the main issues (meetings were in Glasgow /

Stirling / Forfar / Skye and by phone call or conference: see Acknowledgements for details).

The main themes and issues coming out of these meetings were as follows, and formed the structure of the E-survey:

**3.1.1 Main goals participants wanted for their Panels:** being the automatic first point of contact for access issues is clearly a main goal for most Panels. This means having the right relationships with the right people; having the resources, knowledge and skill to do the job; and, of course, putting into place the right marketing and promotion.

**3.1.2 What participants felt their Panels do best:** the best features were local working, good relationships with their local authority, and accessing the support and information needed without too much difficulty particularly in the area of building control and planning.

Groups' operations vary from having no premises, to operating within council premises, to having their own premises donated by the council. Most Panels have members who are council representatives. Whilst working closely with councils, all were conscious of the need to stay independent as advisors and monitors.

Similarly, there were good relationships with bodies like Health Boards, police, transport and other community organisations, although this was variable. Panel members get involved in other community initiatives or projects, which help with networking and raising awareness.

Good work reported by individual Panels included initiatives such as Access guides, setting up community forums, and presenting an annual access award to organisations who do the most to cater for disabled access in the area.

**3.1.3 What participants felt their Panels could do better:** getting the right mix of skills and knowledge is a challenge for most, as is getting everyone involved - for many Panels the same few people tend to do everything. Recruiting the right people onto the Panel, especially *young* people, was also a common problem, as was maintaining their interest.

Other issues such as running a voluntary organisation, especially on scant resources were high on most agendas. Panels which felt their relations with their local authority or other agencies were not the best, identified this as a priority to do better. Many wanted to master key fundamental “technical” issues: such as the DDA, other legislation, building regulations, access awareness or audits, what support exists, etc.

Panels well established and effective in the above fundamentals, tended to identify further priorities connected with networking and information, influencing and committee skills: they felt they had the base knowledge and wanted to extend their reach once these fundamentals had been mastered.

Other topics mentioned were fundraising, insurance, sustaining the group, leadership, motivation, advertising/selling, OSCR, disability awareness, health and safety, specific disability issues, reading building plans, other organisations’ rules, AGMs and constitutions.

The Access Audit course offered by Heriot Watt is recognised as excellent but some felt that getting volunteers to give their time for access work is challenge enough without their opting to study as well.

If there were only one person qualified in a Panel area in this key discipline or others, this person might have too heavy a workload: some participants felt coaching skills were essential, to help pass on to others the ability to support them in these key disciplines.

Other suggestions included the development of some form of online programme (certificated?) or perhaps maybe available on CD. Recognising others’ needs was also mentioned, from small shops’ financial ability, to installing proper access to local policy, to understanding the issues around a different type of disability from one’s own.

**3.1.4 Main obstacles for the Network:** lack of resources was the most common issue by far, especially financial and people resources. A need for full-time workers was mentioned but running this as an employer would be a new role for many Panels.

Clearly, changing attitudes is also a must, both within and outside of the Panels themselves: another key area was a lack of knowledge, appreciation and willingness by others outside the network to get fully involved in the Panels' mission.

**3.1.5 How the Network is doing overall:** participants felt the network is not integrated and could be working much more powerfully and effectively as a collective force. There is a lot of good *work* happening out there but something is needed to bring the loose ends together.

More needs to happen within local areas as well as nationally. Perhaps the structure could be developed to support this, with reporting from such area meetings informing the national picture.

Even those events which have happened, although useful, could be improved. One day conferences have been good but there is further need for networking, especially for those who had travelled and needed to leave to travel home, following a full programme.

Events need more variety, with perhaps more workshops in addition to speakers. Also, participants were interested in smaller, more frequent, more interactive events which would bring Panel members together - not necessarily more national conferences.

**3.1.6 Views of the future for the Network:** As well as more regional and national events, better communication and more information is wanted re other Panels, what they're doing, legislative updates, best practice, etc. Networking and sharing information and best practice are key, and SDEF seen as the provider of this co-ordinating role.

SDEF should consider enhancements to its website, with details of all Access Panels with contact details, possibly a chat room, online groups and forums, etc. Participants want to see more of SDEF: finding out more about each Panel means there is more information to share. Some Panels speak quite extensively to each other and to the media but SDEF and ALL Panels need to make themselves more visible, raise their profile and publicise their role more throughout society (TV, radio were mentioned).

There appeared to be a need for some kind of general guidance around what a Panel does or should be doing (given that needs, attitudes and external support, etc. may differ around the country). What is the baseline? Perhaps the development of some form of measurement tool would assist this.

Another suggestion was to extend the networking and benchmarking beyond our own borders – internationally perhaps but certainly south of the border (already done by some). At the end of the day, access issues are access issues.

Some big questions were asked:

- Is there a need for full time Network Officer handling information, policy and training, to do the rounds?
- What is the big picture re disabled access? A lot of organisations seem to be competing so there must be a lot of duplication.
- Should the Executive not be taking a more measured and strategic look at all this – with SDEF playing a strategic role nationally?

### **3.2 E-survey to collect detailed information**

A survey was developed from the research above and piloted during July to a number of the people who had already participated: thanks particularly to the in-depth feedback on readability and visibility issues from Henry Sherlock.

The survey was published in both on-line and plain text versions, compatible with Browsealoud and Jaws text readers, and publicised to Panel network members for response during August and September and received replies from 25 Panels. It covered seven themes:

- The network, your Panel, and individuals
- Relations and influence with others
- Things which get in the way
- Things which help make an impact
- Skills and knowledge wanted
- Skills and knowledge available
- Sharing knowledge and skills

The outcomes of this survey are outlined in detail in sections 4 below.

### **3.3. Follow-up meetings to probe findings**

Finally, we held a number of follow-up meetings to groups where we summarised the work so far, gave a brief summary of the survey findings, and invited participants to react to the findings and add in extra practical comments and issues particular to their Panel's area. We also discussed what particular training and learning would be of most practical use to Panels in the next 8-9 months and beyond.

### **3.4. Timescales**

Originally commissioned in March 2006 by then Access Development Officer Robert Pickles, work started with preliminary consultation calls in April, and a schedule looking towards completion in September. Staff changes meant a new Access Development Officer who took up his post in the summer; we also found members needed additional time to complete the E-survey during this period. Finally, follow-up meetings proved a challenge to arrange quickly, due to the workload of other major commitments for Panels at the time, and so were not fully completed until December 2006.

## **4 Main findings of survey and follow-up meetings**

### **4.1 The Network, SDEF, Panels, individuals**

Overall, most (75%) felt the network of Panels was making progress towards its potential at the moment; in terms of direct benefit for people with disabilities and in guiding others in good practice, most (71% and 65% respectively) felt that Panels were *so-so* or *doing well enough*.

In terms of aspirations, most agreed with the wish to be the people's automatic first point of contact for access issues. Additional detail included recognition, credibility, and being able to provide valuable guidance from a base of personal and professional experience.

Further aspirations included influence: being able to have direct input to decision-making, working in partnership with both the voluntary and statutory sectors, and one respondent was

providing training and education for disabled people who want work and further education - also assisting in benefits, guidance and job brokering.

**“Our main aspiration is to no longer exist. This will mean that we have done our job and everywhere will be accessible and everyone will be aware of accessibility solutions.**

**However, at this time, we aspire to being the first point of contact for the public, service providers, statutory bodies and voluntary organisations in dealing with accessibility issues in the local area.”**

Best aspects were seen as raising awareness, maintaining contact with the local council, and being willing to work with and giving advice on all issues of access i.e. both the built environment and open space. This sometimes involves being forceful, and targeting those who persistently fail to comply with (even minimum) standards, as well as encouragement, awareness-raising, and consistently trying to be involved with projects at the earliest possible stage.

Aspects which needed further work included the capacity of Panels to do all the work which they aspire to do, work which people felt is badly needed. Recruiting volunteers and spreading the load among the team so that individuals are not overloaded were key aspects of this. This would enable better networking which was seen as needing to expand, getting out and advertising the Panels' existence, and in turn attracting interest and new members.

**“Increasing awareness of Disability Issues across all sectors of the community. Ensuring best practice when working with the Volunteers of the Panel. Developing and completing strategies, policies and procedures in order for the work of the Panel to be completed effectively. Ensuring training is relevant and up to date across the board. Having fun.**

**The bit to be kept up? Ensuring that all involved are enjoying the work and having fun, even though the project is a serious one.”**

Challenges over the short, medium and long-term can be characterised in two parts: raising profile and membership, then

gearing the Panel up to cope with the increased demands which a higher profile would attract. Both are interdependent.

In the medium term, Panel members want to see full integration of Access Panels into the whole planning and development system. Long-term, challenges are high and include more local and central support, training on planning or other relevant matters, and having in place a full time 'Disability Access Officer' with on street offices and being one of the leaders in the field of inclusive environmental access and design.

**“A plane cannot fly far on one engine alone. It can if it’s a single engine plane, a small Cessna perhaps. One may have much enthusiasm, however if this is not met with equal support from those within the panel it becomes much harder to carry out the work swiftly and successfully.”**

A key quote from initial meetings about the Panels’ own resource to do all this was: **'Panels should be able to rely on more than individual enthusiasm to carry out their work'**. This statement prompted some heartfelt responses: involvement was stressed, not just of Panel members, but also of the local partners and of the community as a whole.

More support is needed from the Scottish Executive, and from agencies which are funded to help the Panels, to meet volunteers’ access requirements Local authorities need to contribute over the long term, in support of their Panel: this means policy support as well as financial help. Enthusiasm was seen as important but also accompanied by accurate and reliable expertise in the key technical aspects of a Panel’s work. Direction from SDEF was mentioned as potentially helpful, with the proviso that this should be encouraging and should not come across as prescriptive.

**“I am a person who never gives up on anything. When I start on something I will stay with it until I get a result.”**

Individual strengths and skills which respondents felt they were contributing can be summed up in two words: empathy, and effectiveness. Most people felt that at the top of the list came commitment to, and understanding of, the issues confronting people with a range of disabilities.

**“I think we work well together- one member has a very disabled daughter who uses a power-chair, and also has learning disabilities- they have been through the systems... One member is a full-time wheelchair user another member has a progressive visual impairment. I feel we can bring our experiences together & see a 'larger picture' when looking at issues. Together we can help the non-disabled members understand problems.”**

Alongside this and enabling effectiveness, came skills in negotiating, building influence and partnerships, committee skills, being able to listen to other points of view, and the ability to stick with something despite indifference or obstacles. Technical expertise in how the 'system' works, access auditing, inclusive access and design, and Building Regulations, were also offered.

People saw their team working well together and complementing each others' strengths. One or two Panels have had difficulties in recruiting members with a disability, which affects the understanding among the network that a minimum of half the Panel should have direct experience of this.

**“We should all recognise that the diverse nature of Scotland brings different issues for panels. e.g. urban vs. rural. Focus groups dealing with separate areas should be set up e.g. rural transport, inner city parking and access routes between points of interest in an area.”**

Questions 11 and 12 asked about the role of the SDEF, and what people would like to see as a target for future funding applications which would most benefit the Panel network.

A number of suggestions for the kind of help wanted from SDEF included: collecting good practice to set standards or a 'benchmark' for all Panels to aim towards; getting funding for training including in-depth Access Audit skills, and for attending network events; relating the network to European legislation and with other countries to identify best practice; providing lists of avenues to explore for funding different areas of work; and researching i.e. someone with the skills to share information across the web, or by e-mail from relevant external bodies.

Regarding the next round of funding priorities, the highest scores (55% and 50% respectively) came for **more funding for networking events among Panels**, and to a slightly lesser extent, **more funding for basics like admin & transport**. The **more funding for a network development officer** item was next with 41%.

**“[In the next year our aim is to] work on a Best Practice Guide in partnership with Building Control to inform anyone carrying out building work to comply with best practice other than just Building Standards.”**

Suggestions on a **national policy officer post** and a **national training officer post** were third with opinions divided: some felt these should be *‘a very high priority’* (13% and 24% respectively), others that it would be *‘definitely useful’* (18% and 32%). A high proportion were less enthusiastic on these two ideas: *‘might be of some use’* had a high response (59% and 36%) and there were some (9% for each) who felt these posts would be *‘of no real use at all’*.

To sum up, participants felt that future for Panels’ work looked good, on condition the clear support needs of the network were recognised and some concrete practical action is taken, soon. The quality of the network’s people and their individual skills is not in doubt: this section gave a strong picture of a network populated by committed and purposeful people who want to get results which will make life better for disabled people.

**“[Within five years we aspire to] full integration of Access Panels into the whole planning and development system.”**

In answer to the final question ‘What future do you see for the network of Panels across Scotland in assisting people who face barriers in daily life?’ we collected the following quotes:

- We have to have more help from government to make our job easier
- If we continue to combine our efforts we will eventually get results which will make life a lot better for disabled people.

- If we can resolve the current issues of a National Tier, resource and funding, then the future for the network of Panels should be good. However, if the enthusiasm within the communities drops and we cannot get volunteers, the future will be shaky.
- I can see the Network growing stronger, as Panels meet and share ideas and swap email addresses! Meeting face-to-face is very good - being able to put faces to names makes you more likely to get in touch!
- The future is potentially bright if Panels become an integrated part of the community and recognised nationally for the positive work they do to help bridge the gap towards equal access. This will not be possible without continued funding and support.
- Funding is always a need
- We must present information to Parliament and local councils and remove as many barriers as possible
- A positive future if Panels are trained and are seen as reliable
- It's going to take a long time - very slow
- I feel optimistic that real changes can be made. Changing attitudes in individuals can then influence organisations to address the issues for those with disability. These matters could then rise up the agenda to become priority matters.
- Access Panels must be a focal group in the community so that they can be consulted for their expertise and advice
- It would be great if there was a Best Practice Guide throughout Scotland and all Council areas, even in areas that do not have Access Panels.
- Depends on who is doing what and who is taking the lead. SDEF should consult and listen to its members to secure the network.
- Networks are essential until awareness of issue is universal and inclusion automatic.
- The need to draw from local grass roots activity.
- As the profile of Panels increases a more diverse group of people will try to use their expertise causing an increase in the time, commitment and knowledge required to carry out a good service.
- There will soon be a real difference.
- There will, hopefully, be progressive improvement.
- Panels need to promote themselves more and make the general public aware of their existence

- Support and funding for local groups/Panels. But, without change and more understanding of the problems that disabled people face on a daily basis, there will be no future.
- Hopefully learn from one another.
- A bright future! Once the local authorities / health boards / local businesses get their act together.

## 4.2 Relations and influence

Questions 14 – 23 dealt with the relations and influence which Panels, and others associated with their work, felt were important in getting work done to help people who face barriers in ordinary life. Relations and influence with the principal contact, the local authority, were examined first.

**“Our influence over the past four or five years has been substantial but can be a lot better. It is imperative that we have regular contact with designated officers in every department in the Council.”**

Most frequent and most helpful contacts were, as expected, the local authority **building control** and **planning departments**.

**Transport and road services** were next, with a mixed range of usefulness recorded (18% for each of *not applicable*, *very limited use*, *of some use*, *very useful*, and *central to our work*.)

Apart from these departments however, Panel members noted very limited contact with other parts of the local authority: this includes **education**, both on the **schools** and the community education side.

**“We could be of great influence but contact is made only when it is deemed necessary.”**

Some contact and some assistance from other departments was registered including **housing and social work, community care services, culture and leisure services, property and architectural services (the councils’ own properties), corporate HR including training and staff policies, development and regeneration, and the countryside ranger service if this was council-run.**

**“Very little contact [with other groups], except in new initiatives where contact with disabled groups is part of executive remit.”**

Most critically, was a mixed score for **contact with those involved in the community planning process** (26% for each of : **no contact, contact happens when it needs to, and they are regularly in touch**. There were similar scores for usefulness of these contacts. This could reflect a limited ability to maintain a wide range of contacts and possibly have strategic impact. Similar scores were recorded for **contact with other Policy, Planning & Strategy groups**.

Panels work hard to maintain a balance with the local authority, so that it can be a key advisor whilst retaining its monitoring and checking role. This can result in tensions, and though success was registered by some, many Panels recorded that it was an ongoing struggle to keep the access agenda at the forefront of the council’s thinking and planning:

- We need to improve contact, with the DED coming into force public authorities will have obligations to consult with organisations such as ourselves.
- Despite cordial relationships with local council they are a target for criticism on occasion
- We get on very well
- I feel we manage to keep the balance very well.
- I have just taken it over, so unsure
- Don’t know have not been party to any discussion.
- Poorly....as the flow of traffic is very much from Panel to Council.
- Could do better!
- As well as can be expected.
- We try very hard but sometimes meet a brick wall. We keep trying though

Panel members recorded difficulty in engaging with potential partners outside the immediate partnership with the local authority: at the top were disability groups and umbrella bodies, seen as a worthwhile way of networking and making connections in the area around similar issues.

**“[Connections include the] local disability organisation - we are a key part, our part-time worker is managed through them, & funded by Comic Relief /now Quality of Life funding. Local umbrella group provides offices & support.”**

Panels have to ‘cut their cloth to fit their resources’ in this: for a range of potentially helpful groups, most responded **we have had a little contact, or we have contact when we need to** (as distinct from **they are an important partner, or they are central to our work**).

**“[My most valuable contributions are] local knowledge, being willing to work with others, being able to listen to other points of view.”**

The groups quoted were: **Health Boards, NHS Trusts or Primary Care Trusts; NHS Local Health Care Co-operatives (LHCC's) or the new Community Health (& Care) Partnerships in some areas; the Scottish Health Council (for getting views to NHS Boards); and the police.**

Other groups were: **transport bodies whether private, public, or community groups; local or area Community initiatives and groups; national or local charities that campaign for change or who provide services; the media whether radio, television or newspapers; the Volunteer Centre for the area (a potentially key source for new volunteers); and Scottish or Highlands & Islands Enterprise.**

**“I feel optimistic that real changes can be made. Changing attitudes in individuals can then influence organisations to address the issues for those with disability. These matters could then rise up the agenda to become priority matters.”**

The kinds of activity which have been most helpful in gaining and maintaining influence were: **working together, publicising what each others’ group does at local level, networking and exchanging knowledge, making contacts and attending joint meetings with other bodies.**

**“Little contact has been made with other organisations unless they concern an access issue.”**

All this work takes time, which is in short supply. Sometimes the effort pays off, and sometimes key people leave - and relationships then have to be built up again from scratch.

**“[Panels] need to promote themselves more and make the general public aware of their existence.”**

With the local authority, strategic partnership working seems to consist of finding ways to help councils to achieve their key Performance Indicators, when they are also what panels want for their membership and for people who have a disability.

In an era where partnership working is king, and building alliances across formal boundaries is the main means for growing influence, Panels acknowledge that their main aspiration is to ‘get out there and change hearts and minds’.

This section shows that at present, they do not have the resources to do as much of this as they would like. This lack of resource limits Panels’ ability to make a broad range of contact across their communities, with a wider range of actual and potential partners, and is one of the key factors limiting their ability to make a bigger impact.

#### **4.3 Obstacles to effectiveness**

This was a short but important section: questions 23 – 27 dealt with obstacles which participants felt were getting in the way of Panels achieving as much as they would like.

**“Lack of finance is our biggest obstacle - it causes bad feelings within the panel - we have the people who travel on panel business and the people who cannot see why they should be given allowances for this - no assistance is available towards e-mail or phone bills.”**

Lack of resources is clearly seen as the principal obstacle preventing Panels from making the impact they would like to, together with its main result – lack of recognition by others of the Panels’ work, and indeed many see the lack of resource as a threat to some Panels’ survival.

This is not shared by any means by all of the respondents however – **lack of financial resource** was seen as a bit of an obstacle by a significant 21%, whilst in contrast it was seen as a major obstacle by 14% and absolutely a key issue by 29%.

**Lack of people resource** was clearer across the board – in each case 23% saw this as either a regular obstacle, a major obstacle, or absolutely a key issue.

**“Lack of resources and people power severely halts progress being made.”**

Lack of resource in terms of their **own expertise, transport or premises** came out much lower down the scale depending on the Panel’s own situation; they were quoted as a bit of an obstacle or quite an obstacle by a total of 42%(expertise), 58%(transport), and 50%(premises) of those responding.

Others were seen as an obstacle in three respects. Those responding pinpointed as either a major obstacle or absolutely a key issue: **others’ lack of resource, low understanding or lack of recognition of the work of Panels** (38%, 44%, and 50% respectively for these three factors).

**“[Another obstacle is lack of] first hand knowledge of real coal face disability issues by the people who are at a national level.”**

Lack of recognition came up once again: the numbers who highlighted **lack of national recognition of the Panels’ work** were 36% for quite an obstacle, 21% for a major obstacle and 14% for absolutely a key issue.

**“The biggest obstacle is lack of members with sufficient knowledge of access issues to be able to carry out the work.”**

As highlighted in the previous section, ‘low recognition’ means most Panels have a problem in getting out there enough to change hearts and minds as much as they would like to: most of those responding to this survey agree that this is a key factor limiting Panels’ impact.

**“[Most effective have been] regular meetings with Planning, Building Control, Roads, Regeneration. At these we discuss any planning issues and go through these area by area.”**

Finally, a high proportion highlighted **lack of a benchmark of good practice** as a problem: 57% was this as either a major obstacle or absolutely a key issue. Panels would welcome a description of what their colleagues do which constitutes effective and good practice, so that they have something concrete to aim for in their plans for development.

#### **4.4 Things which help us make an impact**

This section comes close to a ‘benchmarking of what Panels do’ - things which are effective and which enhance their influence - one of the items most clearly highlighted by respondents in the section above.

This benchmark was achieved by a simple one hour’s trawl through all Panel Websites listed in the SDEF directory and a look at a number of representative Panel leaflets describing their services. Perhaps this is a first example of the kind of benefits which can be achieved by combining the collective experience which Panels across the country already have.

Most Panels (64%) have **a leaflet describing their work** - but many agree that this has had a moderate impact: 33% said it has been a lot of effort, not sure about the impact. **Websites** appear to be having limited or unknown success: though most have a website (or are in the process of building one), 50% of those responding said not yet applicable when asked how helpful they have found this to be in their area.

Importantly, websites are widely quoted by other volunteer engaging organisations as the principal means by which young volunteers and the IT-capable find out about volunteering opportunities - two groups which many Panels have said they seek to recruit.

**“Fundraising events enabled us to raise our profile while raising funds for general admin costs. We have distributed leaflets detailing the panel’s work and are in the initial stages of developing an access guide and website.”**

By far the single highest score for effectiveness (36% said one of the best things we have done) came from **carrying out Access Audits on an informal basis** (as distinct from doing formal Access Audits which you charge for - which 81% said was not yet applicable).

**“Advertising the existence of the panel could help raise local awareness of existing access problems, and highlight others we are not made aware of?”**

A telling finding: the highest response in this section, for a variety of services, activities or approaches which are listed below, was not yet applicable. These potential services include:

- Presenting award(s) for good practice
- Issuing a leaflet describing the Panel's work
- Having a website about the Panel's work
- Posters about the Panel and how it works
- Website featuring recent projects undertaken
- Setting up community forums or groups
- Setting up briefings for local business owners
- Carrying out Access Audits on an informal basis
- Doing formal Access Audits which you charge for
- Doing fundraising events for the Panel
- Doing other awareness-raising events
- Getting access stories into the media
- Writing feature stories for local/region media
- Issuing a 'How To' Access Guide for buildings
- Producing a Guide to how accessible premises are in the area
- Issuing a list of local and regional access links
- Issuing a list of national access links
- Summarising Disability Rights for people
- Giving contact details of Panel members
- Making Panel Minutes available to people
- Website links to a route planner to help travel.

**“Feedback limited, not obvious what value these are.”**

Very low scores came up for a large number of these items - 75% or more responded not (yet) applicable when asked if they had considered or set up the following from the above list:

'How To' Access Guide for buildings, Writing feature stories for local/region media, Doing fundraising events for the Panel, Doing

formal Access Audits which you charge for, Setting up briefings for local business owners, Setting up community forums or groups, Presenting award(s) for good practice, of local and regional access links, Summarising Disability Rights for people, or even doing Posters about the Panel and how it works.

#### 4.5 Skills and knowledge wanted

Panel members are very clear about which areas they must not fail to have really strong skills and knowledge in: over 80% felt that it was an absolutely crucial issue to **understand a wide range of disabilities** (and not just their own!), and to **know the Disability Discrimination Act**.

**“Training is crucial to gain qualified skills in order to give correct guidance and carry out work with competence.”**

Just under this level were two responses which recommended that Panels should make sure they know what support exists locally (67% an absolutely crucial issue); and know about other disability rights legislation (the same figures).

Pretty much universal agreement was registered that Panels have a strong skills base in most of the areas needed for their work: most questions, apart from those below, registered the largest response in the: **we feel pretty competent** or the **we have well-developed skills** column.

**“The main parts [wanted] are [items about] the maintenance and evolution of the panel [itself].”**

However, a clear area where most agreed they would like more skills and knowledge is **influencing**, particularly of policy-makers. Most responses on current skill levels were **we have a bit of an idea** or **no idea on this at all**, and most felt these **skills could be very helpful, for:**

- **Knowing how local/regional policies are developed**
- **Knowing how to influence local/regional policies**
- **Knowing how national policies are developed**
- **Knowing how to influence national policies.**

Alongside this were skills in **publicity**. Most assessed current skill levels in their Panel as **we have a bit of an idea or no idea on this at all**, and most felt these skills would be **useful, very useful, or absolutely crucial**:

- **Skills to do briefings for local business owners**
- **Skills to get access stories/features into the media**
- **Expertise to get and grow an influential network**
- **Skills to develop a website about the Panel's work**
- **Expertise in overall marketing and promotion.**

Another important range of issues, where skills were assessed as needing some work, can be grouped under skills for building a sustainable Panel:

- **Expertise in doing funding applications**
- **Expertise in insurance covering the Panels' work**
- **Expertise in doing the finances of a voluntary body**
- **Expertise in committee chairing and cohesion**
- **Expertise to maintain and develop Panel members**
- **Expertise to recruit the right people for the Panel**
- **Expertise to run a voluntary body on few resources.**

Also registered was a mixed attitude towards most of the items in the three groups above (17% in **the Not one for us, thanks** column) Either some Panels already have a good range of expertise, or some feel these areas are not of great importance in building a Panel which can be effective in the long term.

**“[It is] obvious [that we] need more expertise and training and study. [this is] very difficult with disabled people who are unable to devote [themselves] full time to the matter.”**

Two items scored very high on the **Not one for us, thanks** column, and people felt it would be **very hard to see how we could** achieve them:

- **An online or CD programme in doing Access Audits**
- **Expertise in coaching others to audit, once trained.**

Optimism was fairly high across the board on how achievable these skills would be for Panel members, apart from the two individual items above. Most scores across the board were that these skills would be **Pretty straightforward**, although many recognised that some would **take some work** or be **a large item to take on**.

**“Mostly we haven’t got the time or energy for most of these functions, however desirable. Not unlimited funding etc.”**

#### **4.6 Skills and knowledge available**

The flow of skills is not by any means one-way: it is clear that Panels have a great deal to offer each other in a wide range of skills and knowledge. In the areas not covered by the three groups of learning needs in the above section, Panels have a lot to offer others whether by networking, swapping experience and approaches, or coaching if the item is a skills issue.

The skills and knowledge available for helping the rest of the network were seen as:

- **Understanding a wide range of disabilities**
- **Understanding some disabilities in depth**
- **Knowing about a wide range of disability aids**
- **Knowing about some disability aids in depth**
- **Knowing about the Disability Discrimination Act**
- **Knowing about other disability rights legislation**
- **Knowing how to do formal, paid Access Audits**
- **Skills to write leaflets and posters**
- **Skills to set up community forums or groups.**

The highest single positive score (over 50% said **we could advise others**), not unexpectedly, came for **understanding a wide range of disabilities** and for **knowing about the Disability Discrimination Act**. These are, after all, core work for all Panels.

**“Under no circumstances should one day courses be set aside to train people to carry out access audits/surveys or the like. This is a very complex and professional area of work and some of us do hold university qualifications in this field. Our expertise and professionalism must not be diluted.”**

In all the areas outlined in the previous section as learning needs, the response in this section - again not surprisingly - largely highlighted that progress was in the in its infancy column. (The other columns were we have learned the ropes, we have well-developed skills, we could advise others, or we have a complete model to offer).

**“[We need] advice on recruitment and management of younger members.”**

Skills in the middle ground, where there was a mix of responses indicating a variety of levels of expertise – i.e. some Panels could help others - were as follows:

- Knowing about Health and Safety legislation
- Knowing about the benefits system
- Knowing about building regulations
- Knowing how to read building plans
- Knowing how to do informal Access Audits
- Knowing what support exists locally
- Knowing what support exists nationally
- Skills to do access awareness talks
- Skills to do fundraising events for the Panel
- Skills to write a 'How To' Access Guide for buildings
- Expertise in coaching others to audit, once trained.

Finally, respondents were asked if they could comment on outside sources of expertise which have been of value (i.e. a college, a group, a particular trainer, practitioner or expert) and in what area: this information has been forwarded to help inform work on current training provision for the network.

#### **4.7. Sharing skills and knowledge**

The highest single score in this section came in favour of having, across the network, **General guidance on what a Panel does, or should be, doing.**

As mentioned in a previous section, knowing what to aim for in the short, medium, and long-term would help Panels to target their efforts and make connections with others who have travelled the same route so that no-one has to ‘re-invent the wheel’.

Whilst doing this it is worth acknowledging however that good practice has to be constantly reviewed and updated, or it risks becoming stale and out of touch with best practice. Referring only to work within the Scottish network would also risk losing the benefit of good practice which has developed elsewhere in the world. Panels are well aware of this.

This guidance needs to be advisory and not compulsory, however. Respondents were not keen on a 'measurement' tool, however: responses for **The development of some kind of Panel measuring tool for all aspects of their performance** were mainly under **not sure how it would help** or **this needs exploring in more detail**: very few felt the idea has **definite potential to work for the network** or **this idea would help enormously**

High approval (over 50% saying **definite potential to work for the network** or **this idea would help enormously**) was also registered for a series of measures to make sure that Panels, and those associated with their work, can stay updated and can inform each other about good practice:

- More regional events
- Better communication via SDEF website
- Better communication via champions on particular issues or topics
- Issue or topic-specific online groups
- SDEF raising its profile with Panels and others

Appointment of a full-time network development officer was seen as a more helpful step than either of Appointment of a full-time training officer for the network or Appointment of a full-time information & policy officer for the network.

There was comparatively less support for More national events and for Extend the networking and knowledge beyond our own borders, although overall those responding were in favour of these.

Comments for this section (though by this point the numbers filling in the lengthy survey had declined somewhat) were important:

- As mentioned before, there needs to be an awareness of demographic differences. Particularly in remote areas some members cannot or choose not to travel out with the area. Therefore I believe more on a local level should be implemented. SDEF members or trainers going out to panels, in rural areas may encourage members to take part in events. Support should also be available to individual panel members who may lack support from their panel.
- Keep up the good work
- This will only work if officer well prepared and informed.
- SDEF should be more proactive than reactive

- SDEF should be asking the panels/groups what they can do for the groups/panels. SDEF must listen more however; it must also take cognisance that because of the demographics of Scotland each panel/group is different and must be treated as such. Hence the doubtfulness of a full-time training officer - to train what?
- Only problem is the cost of travel to events from our island, and time taken for travelling / attending.

Clearly, the sharing of good practice or 'knowledge management' as it is known by some these days, has to be able to take place on an area and local basis, and use the benefits of IT and the internet as it suits individuals to use this, and not rely solely on large national get-togethers. Though these undoubtedly have a role and allow debate and discussion of key issues, a large number of the membership may not be fully engaged because of travel and time issues.

#### **4.8. Follow-up meetings**

The follow-up meetings represented a varied profile of panels and showed the wide range of age and stage, as well as the demographic spread covered, by the Panel network. For example, Our contacts in one meeting ranged from East Dunbartonshire which just been set up the week before the meeting, to South Ayrshire which is well established, and Glasgow which is also big enough to have a paid member of staff.

**“The art and craft of building and maintaining a volunteer team is crucial to every Panel’s survival.”**

A briefing which covered the salient points of, firstly, the VDS report of November 2005 (to set the context) and more specifically the recent online survey, concluded that, largely speaking, the main issues had been identified.

**“If Panels know better what each other does, then each can learn from the others.”**

Some of the comments and suggestions recorded were as follows and to a large extent echo the findings of the VDS report mentioned above and summarised in an earlier section of this report:

- developing the Panel itself is a priority across the board, including the recruitment of new volunteers from a wider range of backgrounds and including younger people;
- the recruitment, management and development of younger volunteers is an issue many Panels feel they will need help to attempt;
- SDEF could be more proactive and do more to help access panels to set up and get going, although it was accepted that it needs money to do this;
- perhaps a book or some other form of guidance from those who have set up access panels, i.e. – best practice from those who have been there (“An idiot’s guide to access panels”!);
- a key question from a very new panel is simply “What do I need as a new access panel?”: new Panel need comprehensive guidance which established Panels do not – but could supply;
- people generally feel the political climate, even among recalcitrant councils, is moving forward – applying pressure to local authorities to get partnership working in practice;
- if Panels increase their degree of recognition, they will then need to be able to respond just as professionally, but will have a much greater workload – hence the need to develop;
- the task of employing a member of staff, and also of having their own premises, is a step up for many Panels who have not yet had this degree of responsibility;
- very rural and island Panels have particular difficulties in recruiting members, in the age profile of their membership, and in battling the difficulties of time and travel to events;

**“Communication is the key point – without it we cannot go forward.”**

Of a more general nature, the most significant feeling from the Glasgow meeting in particular was that best value will come from focusing resources on developing the network and sharing information. There is a well of success stories not being told at the moment and the belief is that the network could and should provide such an opportunity.

Other key issues that were raised during the meeting included:

- the need to change and influence attitudes – both from a resource and “how to” point of view – both within the Panels and to others outside;
- access to buildings is fine but what about when people are in, can they get around inside? Is there sufficient knowledge to deal with this?
- disability awareness for disabled people and recognition of a wider range of disability – i.e., what about awareness of the challenges faced in mental ill-health, and HIV/Aids?
- finally an interesting suggestion: perhaps the flagship panels could get together and come up with some kind of training package.

In summary, the meetings generally confirmed the survey and the VDS report findings but highlighted extra points: in particular, support and guidance for new panels and the importance of using the experience and knowledge which is already available within the panel network, but presently not as accessible as it could be.

#### 4.9. Key themes overall

- **The team:** Panels would like to get more and a wider range of volunteers, want to be able to spread the workload more, and would like to be able to maintain and build long-lasting and flexible teams to help get the job done for people who face obstacles in daily life;
- **Recognition:** Panel members want to build influence more effectively with a carefully-targeted range of local / regional partners, mainly in the local Authority, including the main teams (Building Control, Planning, Transport) ... but also others (Community Planning, Education) ;

- **The obstacles:** Many Panel members feel that with current resources it is hard enough just doing basic admin or transport to events, without attempting to go beyond this; if they were freed up enough to get out and change hearts and minds, their Panel could do much more ;
- **Sharing the skills:** there are a lot of skills and good practice already out there; Panels could benefit just from knowing what other Panels are up to, and by developing their own versions of others' best initiatives; more resource would help to support regular regional meetings ;
- **Getting new skills:** Panel members felt that there was a clear group of issues which more people needed to learn about:
  - **Practical:** doing Access Audits, understanding Building Regulations, the DDA, rights; more / wider / deeper disability awareness for themselves;
  - **Strategic:** how to influence policy making, how to get recognition and media space, doing funding applications and targeting funders;
  - **Supporting:** how to run a charity on few funds, how to lead / maintain / grow a team, how to attract more volunteers.

A Training Plan for the network should provide a range of opportunities for both formal and informal learning on the topics above, and look for suppliers from among those already operating and supplying good-quality learning in these areas. An outline Plan is as follows:

## **Brand New Panel**

No premises, volunteer led, no employees, limited resources.

**Basic -** expertise across the board – via coaching from established panels, or from courses

### **Practical**

doing access audits, understanding building regulations, the DDA, rights more / wider / deeper disability awareness for themselves.

### **Strategic**

how to influence policy making, how to get recognition and media spaces, doing funding applications and targeting funders.

### **Supporting**

how to run a charity on few funds, how to lead / maintain / grow a team, how to attract more volunteers.

## **Growing Panel**

Maybe premises, volunteer led, employees soon, resources

**Intermediate-** expertise across the board – via coaching from established panels, or from courses

### **Practical**

doing access audits, understanding building regulations, the DDA, rights, more /wider / deeper disability awareness for themselves.

### **Strategic**

how to influence policy making, how to get recognition and media spaces, doing funding applications and targeting funders.

### **Supporting**

how to run a charity on few funds, how to lead / maintain / grow a team, how to attract more volunteers.

## **Established Panel**

Premises, volunteer led, one or more employees, more resources

**Advanced** - expertise across the board – via their own learning and passed to the other panels

### **Practical**

doing access audits, understanding building regulations, the DDA, rights, more /wider / deeper disability awareness for themselves.

### **Strategic**

how to influence policy making, how to get recognition and media spaces, doing funding applications and targeting funders.

### **Supporting**

how to run a charity on few funds, how to lead / maintain / grow a team, how to attract more volunteers.

### 3. Recommendations

Recommendations are as follows:

- **support and enhance existing training:** find out what training is already available within the areas of *Practical* (Access Audits, Building Regulations, the DDA, disability rights; and more / wider / deeper disability awareness); *Strategic* (how to influence policy making, how to get recognition and media space, funding applications and targeting funders); and *Supporting* (how to run a charity on few funds, how to lead / maintain / grow a team, how to attract / maintain / develop more volunteers);
- **benchmark Panel capabilities:** make a template (see section 4.4) which can gather all activities / approaches / practices which are effective and which enhance their influence, to show all Panels what they can be aiming for;
- **enable networking and communities of practice:** make it easier for people to get together in groups who can tackle the issues which some have addressed, and some have yet to meet;
- **enhance capability to coach:** give people the practical approaches and robust processes which will make these networking meetings purposeful, practice-focused, and solution-seeking;
- **reduce barriers to access:** assist Panels with practical resources, particularly those who have distance, time and support challenges in getting to local / regional / national events;
- **SDEF's role needs to be proactive:** SDEF personnel are challenged to get out and about and be the hub of the network and catalysts for theme-based communities of practice.

