

Disabled People's Day

The first meeting of what is hoped will become a campaign group for local people with physical and sensory disabilities, was held on Disabled People's Day on Wednesday September 13th, 2023.

The event hosted by VAAC and CDC aimed to bring together individuals with a range of disabilities and offered representatives from local charitable organisations involved in disability issues the opportunity to meet and discuss issues affecting people living, working, or visiting Chichester District.

19 people attended the morning session in which individuals were given the opportunity to debate matters important to them. The discussion centred around three core areas:

- Access
- Opportunities and
- Services

Participants were asked 'What needs to change?' in all three areas and a lively debate ensued in which everyone was given the chance to voice their opinion on the ways Chichester needs to improve.

Many felt that improving access in Chichester wasn't just about helping disabled people but would be of benefit to everyone who either lives or visits the city. Improved accessibility and safer pavements, for example, would make using a walker or pushing a pushchair or pram easier and safer and enhance the look and feel of the centre to tourists.

Some of the points raised during the discussion were:

Access

- Many buildings are inaccessible due to steps, narrow entrances and cluttered interiors.
- The streets are crowded with street furniture especially with the influx of coffee shops now offering outdoor seating areas.
- There aren't enough benches or public toilets.
- Signage is difficult to read.
- There is a lack of disabled parking.

Opportunities

- Not enough training and or employment opportunities
- There is a lack of support for the disabled community and more groups and awareness is needed.
- There is no point of contact at a council level for people to voice their concerns, make suggestions or lobby for change. It was suggested that a disability or access officer be appointed.

Services

- Businesses need to consider the needs of those with visual impairments, for example accessible menus should be more widely available in cafes and restaurants.
- There was concern over the proposed closure of Chichester bus station and the nationwide move to close ticket offices at railway stations.
- There is a lack of audible information on station platforms and at bus stops.

- Shopmobility, or a service like it, is needed.

After a brief feedback session lunch was supplied and this enabled further discussion on the topics raised and for people to meet other like-minded individuals.

Those who attended the morning session were invited to stay for the afternoon section which gave them a chance to meet representatives from local groups focused on improving the lives of disabled persons in Chichester. After a feedback session by vaac CEO Jackie Sumner which detailed the topics discussed in the morning, participants were invited to write down which of the issues raised was of importance and or interest to their group or organisation. It was of little surprise that there was significant crossover on the issues in which they agreed needed urgent attention which included:

Access

- The poor state of the pavements.
- The closure of Chichester bus station and the possible closure of the ticket office at Chichester railway station.
- Access to buildings.
- The increase of street furniture.

Opportunities

- Access to employment and training opportunities.
- The need for an access or disability officer in the council.
- The need to recognise the value of disabled people.
- The need to raise awareness and the profile of people with disabilities including hidden disabilities.

Services

- The need for services such as Shopmobility.
- Fears over digital exclusion.
- Audible platform signs and transport information including audible bus stops.

At the end of the day the participants were asked if they felt as if forming an action group or forum to campaign for better inclusion, access and rights for disabled people would be beneficial. The majority of those who attended said they felt it would be worthwhile. Most of the participants asked to be kept informed of future events and discussion surrounding the formation of a group which they felt had positive social aspects as well as being a force for change.

The next meeting is scheduled for Saturday 14th of October 2023 in Coasters, Chichester College, PO19 1SB at 11.30am.