

**Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'Towards a barrier-free Europe for people with disabilities'**

(2001/C 144/21)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

having regard to the Commission Communication entitled 'Towards a barrier-free Europe for people with disabilities' (COM(2000) 284 final);

having regard to the decision taken by the European Commission on 12 May 2000, under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, to consult the Committee of the Regions on the matter;

having regard to the decision taken by its President on 3 August 2000 to direct Commission 5 — Social Policy, Public Health, Consumer Protection, Research and Tourism — to draw up an opinion on the matter;

having regard to the draft opinion (CdR 301/2000 rev. 1) adopted by Commission 5 on 23 October 2000 (rapporteur: Mr Brown UK/EA),

adopted the following opinion by a unanimous vote at its 36th plenary session on 13 and 14 December 2000 (meeting of 13 December).

**General comments**

The Committee of the Regions

1. broadly welcomes the Communication as an important document which will assist in the promotion of equal opportunities for all disabled persons in the European Union. The Committee of the Regions feels that the issue of mobility is a central one in combating discrimination and the promotion of equal opportunities for disabled people. The COR emphasises the need to recognise that disabled people form part of a heterogeneous group and the specific needs of the different impairment groups must be incorporated; this includes persons with sensory impairment, mental health problems as well as physical and locomotive impairments;

2. welcomes the introduction of anti-discrimination competencies in Article 13 of the Treaty of Amsterdam and the publication of a draft Directive to establish EC law in this area;

3. believes that the Community approach to factoring in the needs of people with disabilities should be further developed along the principles of non-discrimination and inclusiveness. In pursuit of the goals, the COR would request that the European Commission table a Directive which ensures that all new public buildings are suitable for the disabled and 'barrier free'. It would also outline a programme for the conversion of existing buildings to ensure disabled access;

4. feels that, while the Communication outlines appropriate actions, the proposals suffer from lack of details in terms of a budget and a time-scale for the implementation of the measures;

**Disability and EU sectoral policies**

5. believes that the quest for synergy in the fields of employment, education and vocational training, transport, the internal market, the information society, new technologies and consumer protection will assist in the promotion of equal opportunities for the disabled. The COR would like the European Commission to ensure that any new EU funded infrastructure projects are constructed with due regard to disabled people in accordance with the principles of a barrier-free environment. COR calls for explicit recognition of the access needs of disabled people to be promoted under the Structural Funds including the European Regional Development Fund;

6. welcomes the actions in support of disabled persons in past and present mainstream funding programmes such as the Leonardo, Socrates, Phare, Tacis and Daphne programmes. The commitment to disabled persons in the European Social Fund and the Equal Community Initiative which operate from 2000-2006 is particularly welcome. The Committee of the Regions feels that Member States should outline in detail the progress made to combat discrimination and promote equal opportunities for disabled people in each annual implementation report;

7. believes that the removal of physical barriers is an important step in the positive integration of disabled persons into society. However, the European Union in conjunction with Member States and local and regional authorities need to develop detailed strategies to ensure that all barriers are removed so that disabled persons can play an active role in economic, social and family life;

### **Moving the EU agenda forwards for people with disabilities**

8. welcomes the designation of 2003 as the European Year of Disabled Citizens. The Committee of the Regions believes that this will highlight the active and key role that disabled citizens can play in the European Union and help highlight the problems that handicapped persons can face. The European Year should be part of a detailed strategy to raise awareness of the needs of the disabled and ensure their integration into economic and social life;

9. believes that the Communication is an audit of past and existing activity while outlining proposals for the future. It can be seen as an embryo EU mobility strategy for the disabled, and the COR feels that it would be useful if the European Commission developed an action programme from the strategy with target dates for the proposals, a budget for actions to improve mobility and the creation of performance indicators to measure the success of the strategy. However, this method should be used in a bottom-up process involving the relevant actors at national, regional and local level. Targets should be set after this and be adjustable to take account of local and regional circumstances;

### **Disability as a Community concern**

10. agrees that the main responsibility for equal opportunities and the disabled lies with Member States. The COR agrees with the European Commission when it states that 'the European Community could make a significant contribution in fostering cooperation between Member States and in encouraging the exchange and development of best practice'. It points out that local and regional authorities play a pivotal role in the implementation of these policies. Local and regional authorities are major service providers, purchasers of goods and services, large employers, facilitators of exchange of experience, and demonstrators/disseminators of best practice. As such, it is vital that local and regional government be consulted in the design, implementation and evaluation of any actions arising from this communication;

### **Equal opportunities and the rights of the disabled**

11. strongly argues that rights for the disabled should be incorporated into the EU Fundamental Charter of Human Rights as part of the Charter dealing with equal opportunities. Improving the mobility of the disabled is an important component in the creation of human rights. The Communication statement that mobility 'should be regarded as a right to which everyone should be entitled, subject to reasonable economic and technical constraints' is unsatisfactory because such a right should not be limited in this way;

### **Transport**

12. welcomes the proposals in the area of transport, but believes that the Communication must contain some reference to time-scales in the proposals. However, the COR would like the European Commission to go further in terms of air transport and adopt some of the innovative solutions found in the USA and Canada;

### **Mainstreaming**

13. notes that the EU will promote the integration of the disabled in a number of policy areas, but would like the European Commission to carry out a 'Disability Audit' on all Community policies to ensure that Article 13 of the Treaty of Amsterdam is being actively implemented;

14. wishes to see a greater political commitment from the European Commission to ensure that disability is placed high on the political agenda for the Commission;

### **Enabling technologies**

15. strongly supports the European Commission's efforts to reduce indirect taxation on products associated with the enabling technologies which help the disabled. The COR also supports consumer protection measures to strengthen the consumer rights of the disabled;

### **Leading by example**

16. welcomes the adoption by the European Commission in 1998 of a Code of Good Practice on the employment of people with disabilities. However, the Committee of the Regions is most concerned with the statement that 'posts which can be most easily occupied by those with a disability will also be identified'. This is both patronising and misleading. It implies that people with disabilities are a homogenous group rather than unique individuals with their own skills and abilities who face different barriers to employment;

17. believes that, when given the right support and access facilities, people with disabilities are a valuable part of the labour market;

18. would like to see targets for the employment of disabled staff by the European Commission and would also like to feel that there is a more determined attempt to ensure that European Commission buildings are suitable for use by the disabled. Similar goals should also be adopted by the Committee of the Regions and all COR Opinions should take into account equal opportunities and the needs of the disabled;

18a. to this end, calls on its Bureau to establish a cross-commission working group on equalities (covering the range indicated by Article 13 of the Treaty);

19. understands the need of the European Commission to communicate through the Internet but calls on the Commission to also communicate through more traditional means. In addition, the European Commission needs to take steps to ensure access to the Internet for all disabled groups including the visually impaired. The needs of other disabled groups, such as people with learning difficulties who need simplified documents, should also be taken on board. The COR is concerned that the disabled and disabled groups may not be able to communicate with the European Commission because of the financial costs of the new Information and Communications Technologies.

Brussels, 13 December 2000.

*The President  
of the Committee of the Regions*  
Jos CHABERT

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