

The information in this document reflects the situation when it was written in 2006. Please bear in mind that some contact information may since have changed.

PLAYING WITH WORDS IN THE WEST

In English, the name of this EQUAL Development Partnership (DP) represents a neat play on words. If you say “I’m beyond caring!” it can be taken to mean that you are fed up and cannot be bothered to care any more, or else it can be understood that you have moved on and have discovered that there are more things to life than simply caring. Both of these meanings can be applied in the situation of the Beyond Caring DP.



While they never actually stopped caring, some of the beneficiaries in the [Beyond Caring DP](#) had become stressed or depressed by their caring responsibilities but now the DP is offering them, and also people with disabilities, a pathway to new and rewarding activities beyond their previous life styles. Working as it does in the Counties of Fermanagh and Tyrone, the DP is based in a very rural area that is right on the most westerly periphery of the European Union. This, in turn, presents problems both in contacting potential beneficiaries and in making provision across some of the more sparsely populated districts of this region of Northern Ireland.

1. FLEXIBILITY IN STRUCTURE

At the beginning, there were only five partners in the project, the three local Colleges offering Further and/or Higher Education including [Fermanagh College](#), which was the lead partner, the [Sperrin Lakeland Health and Social Care Trust](#) and [the Quinn Group](#) that is one of Ireland’s, Northern Ireland’s and Fermanagh’s main employers. “*We quickly realised that this would not be a sufficiently broad spread of interests to meet the needs of our target groups,*” explains Anne Beattie from Fermanagh College, who is the Chair of the DP, “*and so we quickly brought on board additional training organisations, bodies that represented the interests of our target groups and the local Chamber of Commerce.*” In addition, [Disability Action](#), [Carers Northern Ireland](#), the [Disablement Advisory Service](#), the [Tesco supermarket chain](#) and beneficiary representatives are now directly involved with the project and because the “official partners” recognise the important contribution that they can make, they also attend meetings of the DP’s Steering Group. One of the reasons for this openness and understanding is the fact that the project held a residential seminar, in August 2005, to ensure that the wide ranging organisations involved with the partnership held a shared understanding of the aims and objectives of the DP. Partnership Building workshops were incorporated into this residential to forge relationships between partners, many of whom had not previously worked together. Apart from increased trust and communication between partners, the other main outcome of the seminar was an agreement on the DP’s objectives for the next two years.

Early on in its existence, the DP had commissioned a literature review from the University of Ulster to clarify the barriers faced by carers and people with disabilities in accessing education and paid work and to identify initiatives that have been undertaken to overcome these barriers. This review proved to be extremely useful in that it highlighted the need for:

- Local multi-agency participation, especially with representatives of employers and beneficiaries;
- The identification of local job opportunities and skills shortages to help determine training needs;
- Locally provided courses to overcome transport difficulties.

Thus, the DP decided to make its provision as local as possible and appointed three Project Officers in each of the largest towns in the area who also operate across the related, rural hinterlands. In addition, the work of each of these Project Officers is now supported by a local Steering Group whose composition mirrors that of the central DP Steering Group.

2. FLEXIBILITY IN PROVISION

Originally, the DP had a three stage approach in mind to attain its stated objective which is *“to create, pilot and test systems of training and support that will allow carers and people with disabilities to obtain and retain employment in keeping with their personal circumstances, abilities and ambitions.”* This approach involved a continuum starting with Pre-Vocational Preparation and then moving through Individualised Vocational Training into a Work Experience Placement. This was intended to be flexible enough to enable individuals to join at any of its three stages depending on their existing qualifications and experience and, equally importantly, on their self-confidence, motivation and aspirations.



However, the DP has had to be even more flexible in its approach. Initially, its Project Officers found that some carers were shying away from the project once ‘employment’ was mentioned. There were a number of reasons for this but perhaps the most important was that carers always place their dependants first. Carers often do not think of doing anything for themselves and if they do, they are always concerned about a lack of reliable, substitute care. In order to address this issue, the DP decided to change its approach and to start by offering recreational programmes, allied with care for dependants, in an attempt to recruit carers.

These recreational courses are intended to increase carers’ confidence in substitute care and make them think about progressing to further training. A number of such courses have been offered including ‘Recreational Aromatherapy’, ‘Beginners’ Computing’ and a ‘Time for Me’ class that teaches the basics of stress management and assertiveness. In the case of a pilot initiative, carers attend one recreational course whilst their dependants attend another recreational course, at the same venue. Early indications show that recreational courses have been very successful in engaging with carers. For many carers, the courses have been their first real opportunity to get out and do something for themselves. The fact that their dependants are being cared for in a familiar and safe environment close to their recreational course is a major factor in a carer’s ability to attend and enjoy these courses. Many carers feel that they are not in a position to work because of their caring responsibility. However, some beneficiaries have indicated that they are considering accessing further training due to their experiences with Beyond Caring. As one mum, Aileen put it, *“I love it! We have great peace of mind that our children are being well cared for. This lets us get on with the class at hand.”* This view is echoed by Alison Miller, one of the teachers in Sperrinview Special School, who is convinced that *“The Beyond Caring project is a great opportunity for our parents. They are thoroughly enjoying the ‘Time for Me’ class especially the topic on stress management techniques.”* Other reports have indicated that the strategy is proving extremely successful, with word of mouth proving to be the project’s best possible publicity and further carers wishing to join.



As with carers, people with disabilities have come to Beyond Caring with varying degrees of ‘readiness’ to work and once again flexibility and local delivery have been the keys to success. Two recreational based courses have been run on Health and Beauty and Health and Fitness but the DP is finding that people with disabilities are more open than carers to the idea of employment and are keen to attend courses that will increase their employability. These have included three Pre-Vocational Courses and a Course in Self-Esteem for people with learning disabilities. One participant felt that, as a result of the Pre-Vocational course, *“I’ve more confidence when meeting up with other people and I’m not shy or afraid”* while another believed that *“this course will help me get work.”* Beyond

Caring has also been able to react immediately to a request from a local group of people with hearing impairments. The DP provided a signing interpreter and as a result, 12 people have been able to complete the theoretical component of the Driving Test. In this rural area, gaining Driving Licences will not only strengthen their employment potential but also many aspects of their everyday lives will be both easier and cheaper.

Given the interest in employment amongst people with disabilities, some concerns have been raised about the possibilities of finding enough, suitable work placements, as employers are generally having no problem filling vacancies with the influx of migrant workers. So, again the project is adapting and, as well as using its partners' contacts, expertise and resources, the DP intends to work with the Northern Ireland Union of Supported Employment, [another EQUAL project promoter](#), to identify additional opportunities for placing beneficiaries with disabilities.

In overall terms, during its first full academic year of operation, the DP has:

- Engaged with and advised 231 carers and disabled people;
- Organised recreational courses for 111 beneficiaries;
- Piloted pre-vocational programmes with 21 beneficiaries.

However, the DP recognises that the carers who have been involved with the project so far are mainly those with long-term intensive responsibilities such as carers of children or young people with disabilities. There is however, a further cohort of carers whose caring role might cease in the foreseeable future. These carers are generally not associated with the local special schools and support groups that were initially contacted by the DP. However, a PR and Advertising Campaign is now being planned to reach such carers, as they are more likely to consider preparation for employment and could benefit from pre-vocational courses. As a first step towards contacting these carers, Beyond Caring offered 'Pampering Days' during Carers Week, which was 12 – 16 June 2006. Carers had the opportunity to benefit from a free de-stress treatment such as a facial or a massage, as well as the chance to meet with other carers and get invaluable information and advice from local support agencies. There was a PR launch of the concept and then, almost 150 carers attended the Pampering Days when they were held in three different locations on Tuesday 13 June. These three events reinforced the DP's findings, which had indicated that, for many carers, entering employment or returning to work is a distant prospect, as the pressures of their everyday lives and responsibilities are such that they are unable to consider a paid job as being a realistic option.

However, there may be a time in the future when financial demands mean that carers need to consider finding a job, if not a career and so, further attempts will be made at the start of the new academic year to contact such carers. This will be done by identifying those who have enrolled in the colleges' mainstream courses and by relaying information through pupils attending primary and secondary schools, as distinct from the initial campaign which was directed at parents associated with special schools for children with disabilities.

3. FLEXIBILITY IN POLICIES

Whilst Beyond Caring is still at a very early stage in its work programme and whilst the main evidence for sustainable change will be collected over the next 12 months of Action 2, the DP already has both the private and the public sector in its sights. Fiona Ruddy, the Project Coordinator, says, *"in the case of people with disabilities there is a vicious circle that has to be broken. Many have the qualifications but they don't have the work experience that employers feel is necessary but how do they get that experience unless an employer is willing to give them a job or at least a temporary work placement?"* The DP feels that employers will have to adopt more flexible and friendly policies in relation to carers and people with disabilities but it also realises that it has to convince them of the business case for such policies.

The project focuses on a rural environment in Northern Ireland where the industrial profile is such that some 97% of firms are categorised as small. Penetrating this market is a major challenge and convincing employers that providing the necessary flexibility is an economic benefit could present another significant challenge. However there is evidence that many employers are unaware of the support available to them when they employ people with disabilities. For example, the Disability Employment Alliance (2004) noted that 74% of employers do not know of the existence of the Access to Work scheme which the British Chamber of Commerce has described as "...one of the best kept secrets in Government."

In order to address this issue, the Beyond Caring project will mount a major campaign in which its individual partners will contact employers in both the public and private sector to:

- Identify issues facing small firms in employing carers and disabled people;
- Identify good practice and implementation of Carers' Policies;
- Highlight government support available to employers;
- Recruit firms and public services to assist with the project through providing job placements;
- Monitor and report on experiences of both beneficiaries and employers in the work situation.

Having carried out this survey, the DP will further its work with employers, especially in relation to establishing Carers' Policies in more firms and public services.

In addition to working with employers, the DP also intends to work with organisations in its membership and with beneficiary groupings to undertake a bottom-up audit of the legislation and the benefit entitlements that are designed to assist carers and people with disabilities. Professor Roy McConkey from the University of Ulster, who undertook the literature review for the project, is convinced of *"the need for 'joined-up' working across different government departments, statutory agencies and other service partners."* The DP hopes that its activities will provide a very practical example of joined-up working that can stimulate similar forms of cooperation.

New ideas are have also emerged from the DPs participation in transnational activities. Beyond Caring is a member of the ["Chances" Transnational Partnership](#), which is exploring different methods of reintegrating disadvantaged people into the workforce focusing on the different approaches used in relation to pre-vocational training, vocational training and workplace policies and practices. The other DPs in this Transnational Partnership are: [Lavor Ando](#), Italy; [EE-NET GAME](#), Italy; [OZ DUVIA](#), Slovakia; [IT Mentor](#), Hungary.

Lavor Ando had started its work by contacting employers, whereas Beyond Caring is only now initiating these contacts and so this Italian partner had some tips and hints to pass on. Also during a recent visit to Budapest, Beyond Caring and all the other partners saw 'the Mobile Team' in action. A supervisor picks-up a team of people with disabilities every morning and drives them to a different work place each day where they all work together, so that each week they have the experience of working in five different situations and receive a full week's wages. Fiona Ruddy feels that *"even if you don't produce any joint products or outcomes, the amount that you learn from each other fully justifies the inclusion of a transnational dimension in EQUAL."* In addition, the DP made an input to the recent EQUAL Exchange Event entitled '[Holding a job - Having a life](#),' which was held in Tallinn, in March 2006. It was a little bizarre that Beyond Caring had to go all the way to Estonia to meet an English DP [Action for Carers and Employment \(ACE National\)](#) which also had a [project in the first Round of EQUAL](#). However the long trip was worth it, as the DP found out about a course that ACE National had developed called ["Learning for Living"](#), which is formally accredited, can be studied on-line and has been of real benefit to carers in terms of building their self-confidence and restoring their self-esteem. The DP is now actively exploring how this course can be applied in Fermanagh and Tyrone.

As to the future, the Beyond Caring project will continue to test methods of involvement and the content and delivery of learning programmes to determine ways that carers and disabled people can be empowered to take control of their own lives and enhance their economic and social participation in their communities. By working closely with local support groups and key organisations, all the partners are confident that the DP will make a significant contribution to overcoming those barriers that prevent people with disabilities or caring responsibilities achieving personal and vocational fulfilment.

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Link to EQUAL database description [UKni - 18](#)

