

Inclusion, Disability, Equality and Action for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (IDEA for SMEs)

Leonard Cheshire's IDEA for SMEs works with for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises in the West of England area to increase their capacity, knowledge, and understanding of disability, supporting them to proactively employ disabled people more actively, confidently, and successfully.

The brief

Leonard Cheshire delivered Workforce for the Future on behalf of the West of England Combined Authority (WECA) in collaboration with other regional partners. Workforce for the Future provides free tailored, in-depth support to help organisations ensure their employees have the access to the training and support the business needs to thrive. Organisations receive free support from expert partners to ensure their business can identify ongoing skills needs, attract and retain talented people, access the right training and development, and invest in the current and future workforce.

The West of England Workforce for the Future programme received £4m of funding from the European Social Fund as part of the 2014-2020 European Structural and Investment Funds Growth Programme in England. The Department for Work and Pensions (and in London the intermediate body Greater London Authority) is the Managing Authority for the England European Social Fund programme. Established by the European Union, the European Social Fund helps local areas stimulate their economic development by investing in projects which will support skills development, employment and job creation, social inclusion, and local community regenerations.

Office of National Statistics data from February 2021 found that around half of disabled people aged 16 to 64 years (52.1%) in the UK were in employment compared with around 8 in 10 (81.3%) for non-disabled people (July to Sept 2020). Reporting on the “disability employment gap” also gives a good indicator of the difficulties disabled people face when trying to find work. IDEA for SMEs aimed to address this ongoing disability employment gap, which across WECA stood in 2019 at 16.2% in Bath, 53.6% in Bristol South, 16.4% in North East Somerset and 35% in North West Bristol.

In 2019, whilst generally increasing, the numbers were still relatively low for organisations signed up to the Disability Confident scheme. According to the Department of Work and Pensions statistics in 2019, in Bristol (including all “BS” postcodes) there were approximately 280 businesses signed up to Disability Confident, from an estimated 50,000 businesses (according to the Bristol Business Index). Likewise, there are just 143 out of 8,500 businesses signed up to the Disability Confident scheme in the BA postcode area, equating to less than 2%.

The solution

The level of support was intensive and immersive. SMEs partner with Leonard Cheshire to examine every aspect of their business in terms of disability and equality.

SMEs were provided with training and resources (delivered in-person, virtually or via e-learning) on various topics including disability awareness, recruitment, and workplace adjustments.

The support Leonard Cheshire provided was flexible, and we designed an interactive and engaging training and support package around each SMEs' needs.

Leonard Cheshire offered training and resources on a range of topics including:

- Disability awareness
- Barrier-free recruitment
- Workplace adjustments
- Language and accessible communications
- Access to Work

Leonard Cheshire deployed a combination of subject-specific skills development as well as more informal debate/discussions to develop confidence and awareness in wider disability matters, such as the social model of disability. Leonard Cheshire also supported SMEs to achieve Level 1 and 2 in the Government's Disability Confident scheme.

The delivery mechanisms included:

- Online engagement platforms
- Face-to-face meetings
- E-learning
- Specific sessions for team members and management
- Webinars for employees

Whilst physical limitations remained, we delivered via online engagement platforms, with specific sessions for team members, management, and all team members, as agreed with the SME.

The support and resources we offered were adapted to all businesses and their unique circumstances. For example, an employer who already employs disabled people but just wished to have assistance to sign up to the Disability Confident Scheme, would need a different manner of engagement, over a different timeframe, to an employer who wanted to improve their overall disability awareness as well as employing or retaining disabled people.

Leonard Cheshire also created an e-learning course on disability in the workplace called "Disability Means Business". The e-learning equips people with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to understand disability in the workplace and work in an inclusive way with disabled colleagues. The e-learning utilises a variety of interactions, scenarios and is graphically rich to create an engaging learning experience and bring the training to life. The e-learning was co-produced with disabled people to ensure it is grounded in lived experience. The accessibility of the e-learning has been review against WCAG 2.1 to level AA.

The outcomes

- Delivered 75 training sessions
- Reached 589 training delegates
- Delivered 86 workshops
- Reached 588 workshop attendees
- Delivered to 27 organisations
- Engaged 271 organisations
- 10 SMEs moved upwards in the Disability Confident scheme to either Level 1 or 2 following our support
- 75 people with access to Disability Means Business e-learning
- 340 hours of support delivered

IDEA for SMEs will have a legacy of improving disability awareness, confidence, and practices with SME employers across WECA, directly improving the employment prospects and quality of life of disabled people, through becoming more inclusive in their practices.

Through building capacity, understanding and system change within SMEs, the project will leave a lasting legacy, boosting social mobility, bringing about social change and improving the diversity of the workplace.

Leonard Cheshire anticipate all employers supported to have an improvement in their disability awareness and confidence in addressing how to remove barriers faced by existing and prospective disabled employees.

As culture and process change within SMEs is allied to building networks with the local disability provider community, a longer-term legacy of the project will be an increase in numbers of disabled people employed across the area and a reduction in the disability employment gap.

When disabled people are prioritised within a business, it creates an inclusive environment for all employees, and we know that employees of a business working to improve its culture speak about it with friends, family, and contacts. Reputation and good press build a larger and more loyal customer base, and once employers have experienced the benefits of working in an inclusive way to their business and workforce the changes become permanent.

For more information on Workforce for the Future, please contact the West of England Growth Hub. The Growth Hub is the West of England Combined Authority's dedicated business support service which offers free, one-to-one advice and guidance for SMEs. The West of England Workforce for the Future programme has received £4m of funding from the European Social Fund as part of the 2014-2020 European Structural and Investment Funds Growth Programme in England. The Department for Work and Pensions (and in London the intermediate body Greater London Authority) is the Managing Authority for the England European Social Fund programme. Established by the European Union, the European Social Fund helps local areas stimulate their economic development by investing in projects which will support skills development, employment and job creation, social inclusion and local community regenerations. For more information visit: www.gov.uk/european-growth-funding