

NEWS RELEASE

Ref: 2010/2101

Date: 21st January 2010

The truth behind disability and worklessness – experts tackle the real challenges for individuals and the labour market

Just under 20% of the working age population in the West Midlands are disabled, and over half of those individuals are unemployed. The reasons behind this higher than national average were debated by experts and frontline workers yesterday at a seminar organised by the West Midlands Regional Assembly.

Preventing discrimination in the workplace, responding to mental health and depression, and how social enterprises can change attitudes to employing disadvantaged individuals, were some of the topics debated across workshops at the seminar. The event was the final of six thematic seminars being held as part of the OPEN project - a pioneering new programme that works to strengthen social inclusion and protection.

“Accessing employment no doubt presents many challenges for people with long term illness and disabilities, but employers and policy makers must respond to this challenge and not ignore it.” said the Chair, Sarah Crawley, Chief Executive of iSE & Social Firms UK.

“More work needs to be done to raise awareness with employers around people with disabilities, and wider support needs to be put in place for people with disabilities to achieve and progress in the workplace. Research has proven that the vast majority of disabled people want to work or contribute to their communities but feel a whole range of barriers such as restrictive regulations in the benefit system, inflexible working conditions, and discriminatory assumptions and myths held by employers. The seminar presented a unique opportunity for disability organisations and agencies to have their voices heard and identify key issues to raise at a policy level.”

OPEN is a two year project funded through the Progress funding stream from the European Union and works with partners from Italy, Spain and Germany. The programme began with six thematic

seminars in each of the partnering countries, based around children; the labour market; family policies; health for older people; and ethnic minorities and immigrants. Recommendations from these seminars will be taken forward to policy makers at a second stage of seminars later this year.

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Notes to Editors

1. The West Midlands Regional Assembly ('the Assembly') represents a wide range of democratic, social and economic interests throughout the West Midlands Region.
2. The Assembly's membership consists of 100 nominated representatives, with 68 elected members representing the local authority, 16 representing the business sector and 16 representing other economic and social partners.
3. The Assembly provides a platform for organisations to consider matters of common concern including: regional planning, transport, economic prosperity, sustainability, culture and Europe. It also supports regional policy forums and task groups on social inclusion, faith, housing, life long learning/skills, health, rural and community safety/crime reduction.
4. The Assembly works in partnership with Advantage West Midlands (AWM) the regional development agency (RDA), the Government Office West Midlands (GOWM), Regional Action West Midlands (RAWM) the West Midlands Leaders Board (WMLB) and other regional and local organisations from across the West Midlands Region.
5. The Assembly is the Regional Planning Body.
6. For further information, visit our website www.wmra.gov.uk