

SENTW USER GROUP MEETINGS – THE TRIBUNAL’S PERSPECTIVE

Regular user group meetings provide an important and useful discussion forum between the Special Educational Needs Tribunal for Wales (SENTW), its customers and other stakeholders.

Background

SENTW was established from September 2003. The Tribunal’s primary function is to consider appeals about children who have special educational needs. An appeal is made by a parent about their child’s education and against a decision made by a Welsh local educational authority. The Tribunal also hear claims about disability discrimination in Welsh schools.

The Tribunal’s customers and stakeholders, in common with many tribunals, are drawn from a wide range of groups. In the main these are: officers and representatives from local authorities, parents, independent parental helpers and support organisations, voluntary organisations and the legal sector. However, there are less obvious, but no less important stakeholders, such as tribunal members, specialists from within the field of education and the health and of course AJTC members! Furthermore, whilst SENTW is completely independent of the Welsh Assembly Government, the Tribunal and ultimately its customers, are nevertheless affected by policy decisions made by the Assembly. It is in this capacity that Assembly officials can also be said to have an interest.

Format of meetings

Regular user group meetings with representation from the groups mentioned above, have provided an important and useful discussion forum for SENTW, its customers and other stakeholders. Meetings take place twice yearly at three regional locations across Wales. The format is informal but structured, meetings are chaired by the SENTW president, Rhiannon Ellis Walker, with notes of the previous meeting and relevant papers circulated in advance. Participation is encouraged through an invitation to put forward agenda items and by facilitating open and fair dialogue at meetings. To support this, we have an agreed Terms of Reference which clearly sets out the scope and purpose of the meetings.

Most importantly though, and not to miss a good networking opportunity, we always provide lunch.

Benefits of engaging with stakeholders

Informal feedback the Tribunal has had from attendees is that there are benefits to be realised from participating in user group meetings. Without naming any names and avoiding going into too much detail, covering the following topics at meetings has been particularly useful:

- **Presentation of Tribunal's Annual Report.** Making available accurate and up to date generic information about the numbers and types of appeals and how this compares to previous years figures. This information has been used by stakeholders to analyse trends and benchmark performance;
- **Discussing statutory requirements of the Tribunal's regulations and the consequences of non-compliance.** The duty is clearly on parties to ensure compliance with the Tribunal's Regulations. However to be helpful and where it has become apparent that stakeholders are consistently falling short in some respect, user group meetings have provided a useful forum for highlighting the issue;
- **Discussing and relaying Tribunal policy decisions and presidential directions.** User group meetings have been used as an additional means of communicating with stakeholders to ensure that important decisions are relayed and that stakeholders have been given an opportunity to discuss implications;
- **Update of policy development within education, provided by Welsh Assembly Government Officials as well as clarification of some existing government policies.** This has also led to the Assembly issuing additional clarification for important statutory duties where it has become apparent that stakeholders would benefit from having this information. Also the Assembly has drawn on representatives from our user groups to establish working groups to consult on new policy developments.
- **Updates of relevant UK Government regulatory changes affecting the work of the Tribunal.** User group meetings are always a useful opportunity to flag up and discuss such matters.
- **Feedback through informal networking.** The less formal networking opportunity outside of the appeal process afforded by user group meetings has established a mechanism by which our customers and stakeholders can give the Tribunal valuable feedback. This has resulted in changes to some of the non-statutory elements of SENTW's processes to make the system clearer and more user-friendly.

It is not always easy to achieve balanced representation of the various groups at user group meetings and parents are an under represented group. One of the ways in which the Tribunal is attempting to tackle this is by inviting parents in a customer satisfaction evaluation form, issued after the case has closed, to tell us whether they would like to become involved.

In conclusion, I hope it is evident from the information provided above that SENTWs experience of user group meetings is that they can ultimately contribute towards wider benefits and all round improved performance as well as facilitating the delivery of an efficient and helpful tribunal service.

Sian Mills
Secretary (acting) for the
Special Educational Needs Tribunal for Wales