

A) SIGNO Norway (Sjohuset, Andelu, Oslo)

B) Norwegian Association of the Deaf Oslo



Team for visit:

Frank Murray Project Manager

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Dates of visits:

Wednesday 4th – Friday 6th February 09

Contacts at facility:

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International Manager of SIGNO

Secretary General SIGNO

Supervisor of the Factory

School Information Officer

Deaf Blind Centre

Director CSS Housing

General Secretary Norwegian Deaf Association

Description of services provided at the facility:



The services provided by SIGNO largely target Deaf people who have special needs and Deaf Blind people. The services are spread over a number of facilities around Norway. SIGNO have circa 900 staff of which 230 are Deaf. All staff are required to be competent in sign language after two years service. SIGNO provide chaplaincy services (12 chaplains), employment support services, sheltered employment, housing services together with actual accommodation, training services, interpretation services, advocacy service, social work services and education services. A two week full time sign language training course is provided for all parents of Deaf children which is live in. The course is funded by the government and the salary of the parents was refunded to their employer so that there was no loss of earnings. All of the products made in the workshops were sold to the general public and SIGNO have their own retail outlet.

Description of the facility itself:

The administration facility is open plan with only two enclosed offices and a number of shared meeting rooms. The residential care is mixed with a substantial amount of independent living accommodation throughout numerous complexes, including some new apartments which are centred around a shared care and living area. High level of care is also provided on the site in a separate section for old people with special needs. In the residential and administration facility a crèche / pre school is provided for Deaf children and the children of the staff. There is a Deaf / Blind facility with educational and developmental services together with independent living accommodation.

Exterior:

A variety of buildings many of which are wooden but the residential centres were surrounded by plants and gardens and the new apartment building is clad in limestone.

Interior:

Again a variety of interiors, but the most impressive was the new residential centre with large well lit rooms, very good common areas. The use of colour was very important to distinguish differences in usage. Signage was important in all facilities with the use of photographs to ensure recognition of both staff and residents.

Environment:

Given that there was three feet of snow during our visit the environment was fairytale like. Most of the facilities were in the countryside and surrounded by gardens.

Lessons for Village Project:



- Size of apartments need to be 50 sq metres
- Inclusion of crèche and pre- school
- Importance of signage and that all staff can sign
- Need for employment support services
- Size of Anne Sullivan facility if the Norwegians have a Deaf Blind population of 500
- Need for natural light in bedrooms
- Importance of sign classes for parents of Deaf children
- Need for translation services for publications to viewed in sign
- Need for assessment and information centre

Positives for inclusion:

- Importance of assessment centre especially for younger Deaf children and vulnerable adults
- Size of apartments critical
- Need for crèche and pre-school
- Need for independent living accommodation
- Need for a centre for educational excellence
- Need for interpreters on site
- Good library facility with a place for people to read and or study
- Emphasis on visual signage
- Need for open plan administration spaces

Negatives to be avoided:

- No light in bedrooms
- Special education standards for Deaf children

Summary:



Good visit with much to learn about policy areas rather than design of buildings or facilities. Major focus on Deaf people with special needs and Deaf Blind people. Very strong emphasis on bilingualism in all their operations and with the Association of the Deaf. Both organisations saw the recognition of sign language by government as critical for the future development of the Deaf community. Also the availability of interpreters (445) means that Deaf people in Norway feel supported in their work, business and health contacts with hearing society.

Other Comments from the group:



Environment:

The general feel was of a caring environment where each persons needs are catered for.

Signo appear to understand the needs of its clients, who are various and specific – Deafblind, Deaf with additional disability, Deaf with mental health issue, elderly Deaf and Deaf with learning difficulties. The fact that Signo supports Deaf community, sign language and Deaf culture, alongside its support for bilingual education and Norwegian Association of the Deaf campaign for Norwegian Sign Language, made its facilities and services to be much Deaf friendly user.

Lessons for Village Project:

A good master plan is required which is capable of variation to meet changing needs, demands and financial resources.

Signo appears to be at a cross-roads and the current sources of funding may be drying-up.

Signo Foundation Trust structure could be a good example of governance for Deaf Village and Centre of Expert

Signo's good working relationship with Norwegian Association of the Deaf, which CIDP, Deafhear.ie and IDS can replicate

With the decline of Deaf schools in Norway in the last five years that one prospered with bi-lingual education policy in 1980s and 1990s due to growing number of cochlear implantation, it would be important to link and work with Beaumont Hospital to convince parents that cochlear implanted children are welcome in Cabra schools and prove these to be better place for them. In other words, we should have Beaumont Hospital involved as our collaborative partner.

Excellent independent living system for Deaf people with mental health issues, low literacy function, learning difficulties

Great Deafblind facilities and support service system

Also great residential facilities for aged Deaf as we need to draw line between those who need a 24/7 nursing care service and those (particularly elderly Deaf with sound mind) just need a home and can live independently

Excellent model for sheltered employment support for the most vulnerable Deaf with consideration for their culture and language

Services we visited that could be considered as inclusive in the Deaf Village and Centre of Expertise include:

- Deaf school
- Deafblind Centre
- Norwegian Association of the Deaf
- Residential Centre for elderly Deaf and vulnerable Deaf
- Internal and external employment for vulnerable Deaf
- Accommodation for vulnerable Deaf
- Mission for Deaf (Chaplaincy)

However, personally I do believe that we have the potential to do better and create such a world class facilities and services for Deaf, hard of hearing and all related stakeholders.

Positives for inclusion:

Remember that the Project is about people.

Policy where all hearing staff must learn sign language – it is vital that policy is extended to Deaf Village and Centre of Expert

Many Deaf are employed there – over 200

Deaf-orientated services – supporting Deaf community, sign language and Deaf culture

We could consider something for the most vulnerable Deaf people such as Deaf with mental health issues, learning difficulties, ethnic minority Deaf (immigrants/refugees) and low literacy function through internal employment and adult education

I would say AKS Centre, Centre for employment/business and Conrad Svendsen Centre to be most advanced example for consideration with the Deaf Village

Negatives to be avoided:

Lack of light into buildings (some of them).

Deafblind Centre and school for the Deaf are far outside the capital city of Oslo. It wouldn't suit the Deaf in Ireland, who would be better served in the city like Dublin

While sheltered employment is good for vulnerable Deaf but there could be danger of their permanent dependence on the social pension (like DA as it is happening among some Deaf in Ireland. Those in receipt of DA have some perks like allowance to earn extra €120 in employment without losing DA, free travel pass under CIE anywhere in Ireland, medical card, fuel allowance, rent allowance. If they are in employment, they would lose all perks, which would make any low pay employment unworthy for their lifestyle that they may enjoy with DA). However, with the economic climate in Ireland, their choices would be limited for reduction of state dependence.

While it is good to see Deaf employees but out of 930 staff, only 230 are Deaf (25%),. Perhaps this ratio could be increased to provide employment opportunities for the Deaf. However, their options may be restricted due to staff necessary to have HSE or Dept of Education recognised qualifications in nursing, care and teaching, which not many Deaf people have. Maybe we could negotiate with authorities to allow Deaf employment on the basis of service needs through sign language, peer advocacy and empathy, etc.

Summary:

This trip was more beneficial to those interested in how the organisation works, is funded and how it copes with change.

From a buildings perspective there was nothing new here.

I would rate 10/10 of our visit to Norway, which is worth every cent spent. Norwegian Deaf services are quite advanced and there is a good example of collaboration between the Deaf community, agencies, service providers and stakeholders that caused the successful facilities that meet the needs of various Deaf groups. However, Norway does have similar problems as Ireland with the decline of Deaf schools due to cochlear implantation and mainstream education. In fact it is a global problem that we are facing. Therefore, I would like to say that Deaf Village proposal will provide a lifeline for the future survival of the endangered Deaf community.