## Disability Justice Strategy for Tasmania Project Meetings

22 March 2016

Communiqué

Government and non-government representatives met on 22 March 2016 for the first meetings of the Disability Justice Strategy for Tasmania Steering Committee and Community Reference Group. The Steering Committee and Reference Group are both chaired by the Anti-Discrimination Commissioner, Robin Banks.

The Steering Committee includes representatives from the following Government Agencies and non-Government organisations:

* Community Corrections
* Department of Police and Emergency Management
* Disability and Community Services, Department of Health and Human Services
* Guardianship and Administration Board
* Law Society of Tasmania
* Magistrates’ Court
* Mental Health and Correctional Health Services, Department of Health and Human Services
* Mental Health Tribunal
* Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions
* Office of the Secretary, Department of Justice
* Premier’s Disability Advisory Council
* Supreme Court
* Tasmanian Law Reform Institute
* Tasmanian Prison Service
* Victims Support Services
* Youth Justice Services, Department of Health and Human Services

The Community Reference Group involves individuals with relevant experience as well as representatives from the following organisations:

* Brain Injury Association of Tasmania
* Flourish Mental Health Action In Our Hands Inc
* Guide Dogs Tasmania
* Mental Health Council of Tasmania
* ParaQuad Association of Tasmania
* Premier’s Disability Advisory Council
* Sexual Assault Support Service
* Speak Out
* TasDeaf

The Project Plan and timetable were discussed. The first stage is well underway. It is an audit of current services, supports and approaches by key participants in the justice system.

The Steering Committee and Community Reference Group considered responses from participants to the audit questions.

Participants recognised work that is already in place to address issues facing people with disability in the justice system, including among other things:

* the Witness Assistance Service provided by the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions;
* the Magistrates Court’s Mental Health and Cognitive Disability Diversion List;
* work in the Tasmanian Prison Service to improve communication skills for inmates;
* increased use of pre-recorded evidence and other strategies to facilitate the participation of vulnerable witnesses in Supreme Court proceedings; and
* action undertaken by the Guardianship and Administration Board to ensure that information about its services are accessible, including the preparation of Easy Read fact sheets and related materials.

Issues identified for focus during the project include:

* limited capacity to identify people with disability as they come into contact with the justice system that affects our capacity to ensure services and supports meet their needs;
* access to and collaboration with support services to address the needs of those who have entered or are at risk of entering the justice system;
* education and training of professionals working within the justice system to ensure strong awareness of disability and the implications for people with disability as victims, witnesses, defendants and respondents;
* the impact of the National Disability Insurance Scheme on services, particular prison-based and post-prison re-integration services; and
* access to legal and advocacy support across a range of aspects of the justice system.

The meetings also heard about the work being done by the Tasmanian Law Reform Institute to review access to justice for Tasmanians with complex communication needs. This includes considering the feasibility of instituting an expert intermediary scheme aimed at supporting people with complex communication needs in the justice system. The Steering Committee and Community Reference Group acknowledged the importance of this work to the development of the Disability Justice Strategy for Tasmania.

Equal Opportunity Tasmania will now begin work with Steering Committee members on reviewing the audit results and identifying positive approaches already in place and options to address gaps. Work will be undertaken by the project team within Equal Opportunity Tasmania with stakeholders to develop new initiatives. Research on Australian and international approaches and public consultation will also inform this work.

Further meetings of the Steering Committee and Community Reference Group will be held throughout 2016. It is anticipated the draft Disability Justice Strategy for Tasmania will be presented to the Attorney-General in early 2017.

For more information about this project, please contact Leica Wagner, Senior Policy and Project Officer, Equal Opportunity Tasmania.