

Date: 5th March 2003

Disability and the European Union

The disability sector was the subject of a recent study visit in Brussels, in which Mrs. Ann-Marie Callus, who works for the National Commission Persons with Disability (NCPD), took part. The five-day visit was organised by the European Union Visitors Programme that gives the opportunity to people from Non-EU countries to get to know more about the Union.

During this visit, various meetings were held with members of the European Parliament and with European Commission officials working in the disability sector. These included the President of the All Party Disability Group and representatives from the Disability Unit and the Unit against Discrimination which fall under the Employment and Social Affairs General Directorate. There were also meetings with The European Agency for Special Needs in Education and with the European Forum of Disability. The latter is a Non-Governmental Organisation which incorporates various groups working in the disability sector both in member and non-member states. NCPD is a member of this NGO.

Another part of the study visit focused on the preparation of the European Parliament and the General Directorate for Enlargement for Malta`s accession into the European Union.

Issues relating to Maltese persons with disability and the disability sector in the European Union were discussed during these meetings. As regards the Maltese situation, the discussions focused on the Equal Opportunities Act, inclusive education and employment opportunities for persons with disability. As regards the European Union, the discussions centred on the ways in which persons with disability can benefit from initiatives taken by the European Union in this sector. These initiatives include the Directive Against Discrimination at Work issued by the Council of Ministers, the European Social Fund, which is part of the Structural Funds, and the Programme of the Community Against Social Discrimination.

The Directive has the aim of protecting minorities, including persons with disability, from being discriminated against at the place of work. This has to become part of the Maltese Law through the Industrial Relations Act. The European Social Fund and the Programme Against Discrimination provide funds to help member states create work opportunities for persons with disability.

These meetings served both as a means of exchanging information and as a way of building direct contacts between the NCPD and officials of the European Union. The NCPD will use the information acquired in its effort to keep improving the quality of life of persons with disability and their families.