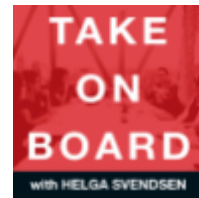


Take on Board



Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take On Board podcast, I'm speaking to Helen Freris about the board's role in developing your disability action plan. First, let me tell you about Helen. Helen is a community sector professional with key strengths in capacity building, training, delivery, program design, and coordination. She's currently the Health Services Manager at women with disabilities Victoria. Helen is also a fellow of the Williamson Community Leadership Program. Welcome to the Take On Board Podcast, Helen

Helen Freris 0:33

Thank you. Helga It's very nice to be here.

Helga Svendsen 0:35

It is fabulous to have you. And shout out to Olivia ball, actually, who introduced us many years ago. And I'm so pleased. So Helen, before we talk about the board's role in developing disability action plans, as always, I would love to dig just a little bit deeper about you tell me what young Helen was like, and maybe a story about young Helen, that tells us a little bit about where you got to today?

Helen Freris 1:05

Well, I hate to think what she was like, but fortunately, life has moved on. But in terms of stories, I guess I had a range of experiences, we talk with disabilities, about intersectionality. And that resonates a bit because I grew up and still have a disability. So I experienced the education system with a disability and the implications that that had for being an outsider, socially in that system. And I also grew up in a situation where my parents spoke a language other than English, which wasn't quite such a disadvantage, but they also had particular ideas about gender roles, which as I grew into adolescence, you know, there was a little bit of conflict there about what different genders should be doing with their lives. So I quite early on developed an interest in things that brought people together in society in situations where people were perhaps feeling apart from the rest of society. And that led me to study humanities and then social work. And fairly early on in a tertiary education when there were some accessibility issues around getting access to texts and materials at the same time, and at the same proportion as other students. And that wasn't happening. I along with some others, joined an advisory committee for the library at the time, who was subsea needs from the particular blindness organization that it was. And we were able to do a little bit of policy development and advocacy around the needs of the recipients of that service, and how we thought

that that should look like. And hopefully that brought about a bit more responsive service for students and other people who use to the library.

Helga Svendsen 3:14

Fantastic. I did not know, like Helen, I've known you for I think, five years or thereabouts. I did not know any of those things. It's part of what I love about this podcast, I get to know more about people as well. Wow, that is fantastic. And I have no doubt that your advocacy sounds like from quite a young age, possibly some advocacy within the home there as well. I suspect that that quite got the outcomes that we were talking about measurable outcomes in advocacy and don't know that the outcomes could be really measured. But, yeah, we also love each other. Well, that's a pretty good measurable outcome, to be honest, Helen. No, because it doesn't always happen in that way. And you know, you are a strong woman, shall we say? Who advocates not just for yourself, I suspect on almost a daily basis, but for others as well. So yeah, that is fantastic. And I'm interested, you said your parents spoke a language other than English. What language and do you speak the other language? I didn't know that either.

Helen Freris 4:20

So they spoke Greek, Greek. I don't really, it's not. It's not a very strong part of my identity.

Helga Svendsen 4:28

Right. Right. There you go. Oh, I love it. I'm getting to learn new things about people as well. Thank you. So Helen, today, I wanted to talk about disability action plans and what boards need to know. There's gender action plans. Now for those organizations in Victoria. There's reconciliation, action plans, disability action plans, and you've been involved in the development of these for various organizations. And I think it would be a really useful thing for boards to know What is a disability action plan? And what's their role in it? So in fact, let's start there. What What is a disability action plan?

Helen Freris 5:08

Yes at the outset, and we think about the role that boards have in organization. And accessibility Action Plan, which is the the terminology that is most commonly used now for that sort of document is an outward sign, public sign of an organization's intention to eliminate discrimination, remove barriers, and it outlines. It's a plan really, for how an organization will go about thinking through and resolving barriers to access, and then documenting how the progress towards the removing of barriers will be measured.

Helga Svendsen 5:48

Lots of organizations do these and I'm, I'm glad that you've picked me up on the terminology there and accessibility action plan. Is there a requirement? The third organization's do it? Or is it just a just inverted commas a good thing for organizations to do?

Helen Freris 6:04

Yes, there may be, I guess, legislative reasons why organization might choose to do it, it's not compulsory, certainly not in the not for profit sector in which I predominantly work. It's not compulsory, organisations can choose to lodge their accessibility action plans with the Human Rights Equal Opportunity Commission Commonwealth, because that's, that becomes a very public statement of their intentions to recognize and eliminate barriers, and it's a really good sign for people to see those action plans and know that an organization is serious, regarding its obligations under Commonwealth and state disability legislation. small organizations might choose not to do that, but can still publicly should they wish, display their accessibility action plan on their website or make it otherwise known to their customers and stakeholders. So it's

Helga Svendsen 7:02

a good thing for them to do. And indeed, you know, reflecting on your opening, when you were talking about the library and the some accessibility issues there, perhaps if that organization had done their accessibility action plan, there wouldn't have been a need for you to join the committee, although maybe that wouldn't have been such a good thing?

Helen Freris 7:20

Well, it's interesting, because they were a disability specific service. So their whole business was accessibility. And because it for a number of reasons, and things have changed, obviously, in that context now, from where we were in the early 90s, to where we are now, there are a number of reasons why students didn't have complete an equal access to study materials. And although we haven't achieved that, currently, we were even further back then than we are now.

Helga Svendsen 7:49

Yes, there are good things for organizations to do. So that, you know, we can ensure that they're really inclusive, and people aren't experiencing those sorts of barriers in whatever way they might be.

Helen Freris 8:00

Yeah, I guess, to really think about the role of governance, what a board does in an organization, it fits really well within the board's mission. Because, you know, I guess boards of directors, you know, we manage the branding of an organization, and it's public presentation to the world, we manage its reputation, where we also do a lot of work around risk management. So there is a risk if an organization does inadvertently have barriers to access that the people can make claim legally against that organization. And the exist ability action plan is, I guess, a written statement about recognizing and removing barriers. But I guess boards also do responsible for overseeing an organization's overall policies, which is where, you know, an action plan sits. And it's, I guess, most importantly, directors model best practice, you know, cultural change is achieved through leadership and directors, obviously, the highest form of that in an organization, and it can then hopefully, model the practice to the senior leadership and to the staff of the organization itself.

Helga Svendsen 9:18

Such a great summary right there in there about what the board's role is in this. So, you know, it takes a number of boxes for boards and their roles around the leadership of the organization around risk around the policy framework and so on. So presumably boards can you know, prompt maybe that this happens or support it if the executive team bring it to them? And then what what's their role? Is it inverted commas just saying, hey, organization, get on and do your disability action plan, and then bring it back to us once you've done it. What's the board's role?

Helen Freris 9:49

Well, you know, directors and boards as a whole can, obviously offer guidance in that process and may choose to be part of working groups or subcommittees. where some of the work is done or certainly oversee the working groups who take on that role. Of course, because of the board's role is strategic rather than operational, there may be some delegation involved. But certainly taking an interest in that process and championing it through the organization isn't where can be a vital sign of the organization's commitment to the process.

Helga Svendsen 10:25

And then, as they are championing that through the process, and you know, even seeing it come back, what should they be looking for both in the development of the plan, and when the plan comes back to them? What should boards be looking for?

Helen Freris 10:40

Okay, we can see we think about what the plan does, or how it appears, it's a description of the barriers that an organization recognizes, and the how those barriers will be removed. And it's a proactive way of removing barriers. So it's policy informs the organization, how it acts, it's also a

public statement. So if a board is working in that framework, they can actually ensure that it has the elements that are going to make it useful for the organization. So when they're checking it through, or big part of the process, developing it for the first time, they can just check to make sure that the organization is actually making sure that spaces and services are accessible. So thinking really, strategically and closely about what does this organization do? Where are we going strategically, how can we link the accessibility action plan to overall organizational strategy. So it's not a reinvention of things, it's an elaboration of what's already going on. It can also be about just checking the targets that are set, realistic, and achievable, and can actually be monitored and reviewed in a useful way. And that doesn't just sit there and become something that looks nice, but may not achieve very much for the organization. So I think boards have a key role as I do with reviewing other organizational policies, business plans, to keep those ideas in mind when reviewing the accessibility action plan as well. Yeah, so it keeps it alive. Yeah, as you say, directors also have a role in promoting it to the organization's stakeholders. So it's about improving services to people who engage with the organization, whatever capacity, but also enhancing the image acquiring new stakeholders. It's a great lever for funding as well. If that's an issue for revenue, or for funding, if it's a nonprofit organization,

Helga Svendsen 12:48

As in once you once you've got your accessibility action.

Helen Freris 12:52

Yes, yeah, it can be a real asset to the way the organization functions and appears,

Helga Svendsen 12:59

Those in the take on board community probably know that I'm on the board of the Royal Women's Hospital. And I know in one of the reports that we got around our accessibility action plan, one of the things that was such a simple and you'll see the irony of that in just a moment, thing, one of the things that was communicated to us was around having simple communications, I think it was you'll correct me if I'm wrong here, Helen, but around using simple English, and oh, my goodness, I just wish Simple English was used everywhere. It's an accessibility thing for those of us who do speak English as a first language as well, because it just gets rid of weasel words.

Helen Freris 13:35

Yes, that's a key point how you're not just about the over generalization of language in society. But it's, it's a really key example of how an accessibility action plan can highlight fairly simple changes. But changes have a profound effect on the way that the organization operates and appears, one of the really important aspects of a just an accessibility action plan is that it allows for changes to be

planned. So there's a recognition of what might need to change when to do it and how to do it. But it's also a managed change. So incremental progress can be targeted, and documented. And then from that progress, new goals can be set that link to the previous ones. So over time, anyone who has dealings with the organization, from directors, to staff, to stakeholders to just members of the public, can see change happening.

Helga Svendsen 14:37

What's the period of time for a disability action plan? Is it normally a 12 month plan or a three year plan or a 10 year plan?

Helen Freris 14:44

Well, I guess it can be as long as the organization thinks it requires to make change. And people who have legal knowledge can perhaps correct me and we might leave this out. At an organization really being clear about what needs to change, and how long realistically will it take to bring about changes that are meaningful? Yeah.

Helga Svendsen 15:09

And, you know, my guess is that that's an ongoing process. It's not like you all of a sudden is like, Whoa, you're accessible. Yeah, it's an ongoing process, I'm guessing,

Helen Freris 15:18

Because needs change, strategy changes, life changes, we saw, you know, 2020. Last year, nobody predicted what was going to happen in 2020. And we're still reeling from that, of course. And we found actually, what a lot of disability organizations found was that somehow people with disabilities weren't part of the broader conversations about how we respond and implement policy around the pandemic that we've had. Somehow, there was a lot of discussion and discourse about us being vulnerable, but not a lot of involvement by people with disabilities in the response. Interesting. And that, of course, led to some quite unintended consequences for people just around not being able to access goods and services, services changing in their delivery, and that being positive in some instances, and not so positive in others.

Helga Svendsen 16:20

And then, you know, that also says to me that an accessibility action plan, it's not only about are the signs in Simple English that everybody can understand is, the documents you're providing that are able to be read by a screen reader are their ramps and lifts. It's not just actual, those sorts of

accessibility, but also, are we engaging people in the policy framework of what we're all of the people in the policy framework, and doing with not for.

Helen Freris 16:46

Yes, having a sense of who the stakeholders are in an organization, engaging them at the outset, in any planning, it also has a lot to do with employment within organizations, whether that be not for profit, government, or private business, employment is a huge issue for people with a huge barrier for people with disabilities, because the unemployment rate is higher. And organizations have a really positive chance of setting some targets and some strategies around employing people with disabilities in their accessibility action plan, linking it to their other employment frameworks, too.]

Helga Svendsen 17:26

There's the accessibility in terms of some of the physical makeup of things, engaging your stakeholders as well, so that we're not leaving the voice out in the work that you do. And some of the practical, maybe things around making sure you're employing people as well, which also links back to the other things about stakeholders too, doesn't it? Like if people can see themselves in the workforce of an organization, then they're more likely to be engaged in the work that they're doing as well?

Helen Freris 17:56

Yes, and if they're seeing themselves in the people who work for the organization, there can be a greater likelihood of relating to the organization. Yes, yeah. And relating to people at different levels of the organization.

Helga Svendsen 18:10

And so does that mean, I like part of the employment at different levels of the organization as well how to accessibility action plans deal with that?

Helen Freris 18:18

Yes, I guess, again, identifying that as a target is something that the organization wants to work on and change. There have been, you know, initiatives at different times over the years that have offered employment. And some of those initiatives have provided, I guess, employment at certain levels in an organization where people perhaps might not be visible. And they might be, you know, in the mailroom, which is fine, except that some people might actually want to have other skills and might want to exercise those skills in another way. There might be people who would like to be

directors. And that is also an option that's should be equally available. And so an organization's thinking about how they will proactively engage with people with disabilities, to ensure that they can find a place within an organization, as an employee, as a director, as a consumer, as a volunteer, possibly in hospital context, as a patient, there might not be a lot of choice about when someone becomes a patient. But when they if they do, then that they have as positive experiences that can be

Helga Svendsen 19:32

So I'm wondering if there is an example or a case study that you can provide for people about an organization that's done it well.

Helen Freris 19:41

I'm probably the other way organizations who are doing it really well. But one that I have worked with his name, I won't release because I don't have their consent, but there are not for profit organization, non government organization who work around And policy and advocacy for women. And they do it. They're their regionals. So they do a lot of work in the region, around women, issues affecting women prevention of violence, access to health services, access to other services, and ensuring that the rights and perspectives of women affected into that particular region, they've engaged with my organization, employing organization around, you know, becoming more disability inclusive in particular, which is the prevention of violence against women. There's a recognition that the rates of violence against women disabilities are higher than across the population. And that when that violence occurs, it's longer duration, in more settings, and probably with more perpetrators as well. So the work that they did was engaged with us and think really closely about, you know, what are the areas where they could make immediate changes. And so they were able to do that quite practically, by whenever they held events, when you know, back in the old days, we were still having face to face events, they thought they could easily update their registration processes so that if accessibility requirements were mentioned, they could proactively do something about them before people turned up at events and found the barriers to their attendance, thinking more longer term about what was happening. They recognize that because they were doing some renovations to their premises, where would you it might be well to think about accessibility of the premises in which they operated, and actually factor that into the renovation plans. And some practical aspects that came out of that was automatic doors, so that people can actually enter the building independently.

Helga Svendsen 21:59

So it can be, you know, obviously a very proactive process around some of these things, but also opportunistic guys, what I'm hearing there is like if things are happening anyway, help to guide

Helen Freris 22:09

and this is I think, what was key what's impressive about that work is that they linked the accessibility and they are actually developing an accessibility action plan, I believe, based on some work that we did with them. But they're thinking about what's already happening in the organization, how can we build inclusion and accessibility into that process? And then thinking about the renovation, and how that could be an opportunity?

Helga Svendsen 22:33

Oh, Helen these conversations always go too quickly. And it is, as always been, you know, a mine of gold. What are the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Helen Freris 22:44

Look at some key points are that although it sounds overwhelming, and accessibility action plan isn't as difficult as might be first perceived, because it fits well within the remit of directorship around managing risk, reputation, overseeing policies and modeling. What happens in an organization, and if done well, and thoughtfully, it should link very closely into the organization's strategy and existing plans.

Helga Svendsen 23:19

Again, the key role of boards is to keep that strategic direction. And this fits perfectly with that.

Helen Freris 23:27

Although there is a process involved of thinking through and managing the likelihood of discrimination claims, it can be beneficial to think of accessibility action plans as a positive and proactive step to seek to reducing barriers and engaging more people with the organization then.

Helga Svendsen 23:51

Absolutely. It's a much broader approach, isn't it and much more supportive of inclusivity. We're a big fan of diverse boards here at take on board and having people with a disability in the boardroom is just as relevant as any other part of it. And I suspect if there was more people with a disability in the boardroom, then there will be more accessibility action plans being done as well, which would be a good thing. Is there a resource you would like to share with the take on board community?

Helen Freris 24:16

Yes, a fairly basic one, the the website of the human rights and equal opportunity Commission has a section on disability or accessibility action planning, and action plans that have been launched with the commission by organizations. So anyone who is thinking about the process, not sure what it involves what action plans look like, can view them for themselves and determine what best works for their organization?

Helga Svendsen 24:43

That is a fantastic resource one, thank you. I will definitely make sure that's there and people can get a bit of a look about what the outcome will be, but that will give them an indication of what the process is all about as well. Oh, fantastic. Helen. Thank you so much for coming, and demystifying accessibility action plans for us and giving us some really practical tips about what boards need to think about and how they might be able to get it moving along. incredibly valuable. So thank you for taking the time to share your wisdom with the take on board community today.

Helen Freris 25:15

Thank you. Helga and I hope we'll see more accessibility action plans soon.

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