

# New help offered to disabled folk to work from home

AN INNOVATIVE project that could give disabled people in the Highlands and Islands the chance to work from home was launched yesterday.

The Think - Towards Handicap Integration Negotiating Knowledge - project is based on a successful European pilot scheme in Portugal.

It is being developed for the Highlands and Islands by a wide-ranging partnership in-

cluding public bodies and the private sector.

The European Union-funded project aims to set up a profitable business that would allow disabled people to use their skills and abilities to deliver home-based technical helpdesk and virtual call centre services.

It will involve a total of 30 students from the Inverness area, Orkney and the Western Isles.

Each will be given the computing, software and communications infrastructure to undertake their initial eight-week training, which will cover teamworking, communications, stress management and project and quality management.

This will be followed by further study under the Training for Work programme. They will, if necessary, get further

training so they can carry out specialised work.

Its hoped 20 will get full-time employment at the end of the course in either helpdesk functions, transcription and translation, web design, marketing or computer programming.

Those involved in the project include Highlands and Islands Enterprise and Omnitech, the main project manager, which is also providing specialised IT

training. The Employment Service and Thus, which provides voice, data, call centre and internet services, are also taking part.

Ken Abraham, of Omnitech, said the information technology should offer a platform for equal opportunities in both a social and work setting.

He added: "It can overcome some of the other issues that create barriers for disabled peo-

ple. This project is an attempt to work together, building on this platform, to make the most of the opportunities it offers."

Calum Davidson, HIE's head of knowledge economy, said the project promoted social inclusion, allowing disabled people to access high quality training and employment opportunities.

He said: "Their skills will contribute to the wider eco-

nomie development in the area. It may also be a pilot project in another sense.

"One of the potential employment opportunities for these trainees would be working together, but from home, as part of a virtual call centre linked by the telecommunications infrastructure.

"If this develops and proves a success, it may be a model we could employ elsewhere."