

Disability Working Group

Wednesday, 10th September, 2025

MEETING OF DISABILITY WORKING GROUP

Members present: Councillor Brooks (Chairperson); and
Councillors Abernethy and Brennan.

In attendance: Ms. S. McNeill, Policy, Research and Compliance Officer;
Ms. L. Dennis, Equality and Diversity Officer; and
Ms. E. McGoldrick, Democratic Services and
Governance Co-ordinator.

Election of Chairperson

The Working Group noted that it was required to elect a Chairperson for the coming year.

Moved by Councillor Abernethy,
Seconded by Councillor Brennan, and

Resolved – that Councillor Brooks be elected to serve as Chairperson to the Working Group until the date of the Annual Meeting in June, 2026.

Apology

An apology was reported on behalf of the Deputy Lord Mayor Councillor Doherty

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 9th April, 2025 were agreed as a correct record.

Declarations of Interest

No Declarations of Interest were required.

Disability Action Plan

The Working Group was informed that, in developing the Disability Action Plan, the Council would focus on activities to encourage cultural change in how disabled people were perceived by wider society and increase representation of disabled people in public life. This aim was for disabled people to play a significantly greater role in the social, economic and political life of Northern Ireland. The focus of the action measures in the Disability Action Plan should be on the two disability duties

In addition to the Disability Action Plan, the Council had a range of legal responsibilities relevant to disabled people, including its role as an employer, as a public authority and service provider. Most significantly, at present, there was a review of the effectiveness of the Council's Equality Scheme arrangements and an Audit of Inequalities. Members' ambitions for an accessible city and the International Day of

Disabilities also moved well beyond the Council's legislative remit, demonstrating clear commitment to disabled people being right at the heart of life in Belfast.

The Working Group was advised that the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland guide for designated public authorities developing a Disability Action Plan defined action measures that could be taken to fulfil each disability duty individually and also action measures that address both:

Action Measures to promote positive attitudes towards disabled people

- Review of external and internal communication policies; and
- Measures to promote positive attitudes amongst employees, office holders and others.

Action Measures to encourage disabled people's participation in public life

- Audit of public life positions;
- Recruitment, selection and participation of disabled people;
- Create opportunities for involving disabled people;
- Public appointments; and
- Consultation.

Action measures that can meet both duties

- Training and Guidance;
- Internal Structures;
- Monitor and Review;
- Procurement;
- Employment;
- Encouraging others to promote duties; and
- Sign up to Disability Initiatives.

It was reported that ECNI further advised that it was the responsibility of each public authority to determine the measures which were most effective, in light of its own particular remit, the range of its functions and the type of structures, processes and procedures that it had in place.

The Working Group was informed that, whilst the legislative boundaries of the Disability Action Plan presented some challenges in presenting an entire picture of the Council's planned activities, it also presented an opportunity to develop plans and policies in such a manner that the right people are engaged at the earliest opportunity. Engagement sessions were designed to better understand lived experiences of disabled people in Belfast, rather than focus on the specific policy area. Questions were prepared in such a manner that data gathered might contribute to the Disability Action Plan, International Day for People with Disabilities or Members' ambitions for an accessible city.

Member's were advised that two engagement sessions had been held to date: The Disability Advisory Panel; and ABLE staff network. It was highlighted that information gathered from engagement activities would be considered alongside review findings from the previous Disability Action Plan, which commenced in 2022. Knowledge gathering throughout the Council's services would be aligned and co-ordinated through the Equality and Diversity Network.

The timetable and planned actions to develop the Disability Action Plan were as follows:

- September 2025 - engagement sessions continue with identified stakeholders, including public authorities and VCSE;

- October 2025 – November 2025: Actions agreed; and
- December 2025 – February 2026: Formal consultation period.

The Committee noted the scope and timetable for the development of the Disability Action Plan.

International Day for People with Disabilities event

The Equality and Diversity Officer advised that the annual observance of the International Day of Disabled Persons was proclaimed in 1992 by the United Nations General Assembly. She outlined that the aim of the annual event was to promote the rights and well-being of persons with disabilities in all spheres of society and development, and to increase awareness of the situation of persons with disabilities in every aspect of political, social, economic and cultural life. Annual themes were often developed with the slogan “*Nothing About Us Without Us*” coming to represent the global disability movement, connoting basic requirements of participation, representation and inclusion and calls for disabled people to actively shape the conditions of their lives.

She highlighted that disabled people often had poorer health, lower education achievements, fewer economic opportunities and higher rates of poverty than people without disabilities. This was often due to the lack of services available to them and the many obstacles they face in their everyday lives. These obstacles could take a variety of forms, including those relating to the physical environment, or those resulting from legislation or policy, or from societal attitudes or discrimination. She reported that one in four people in Northern Ireland had a disability.

The Working Group was reminded that, every year since 2020, the Council had held annual events on 3rd December to mark International Day for People with Disabilities in partnership with stakeholders. Last year’s event was co-hosted with the Equality Commission. This year’s event would build on the knowledge gained from previous events, including event planning, questionnaires, resources required and creative engagement.

The Equality and Diversity Officer explained that the Council would organise this year’s event at the City Hall on Wednesday, 3rd December, with both the Great Hall and Banqueting Hall reserved. The purpose of the event would be to raise awareness of disability and develop an understanding of the barriers to inclusion and participation. The event would also be an opportunity to create new partnerships by bringing together different stakeholders.

She outlined the details of the event included:

- The target audience would be disabled people, voluntary and community sector organisations providing services for disabled people, businesses and policy makers;
- Content would include sessions of approximately 30 minutes spaced across the event, which was likely to run for a period of four hours;
- Sessions would be developed to present different perspectives from across the target audience, with a particular focus on disabled people and their everyday lived experiences;
- Work the Council was doing to improve accessibility and inclusion for disabled people would be promoted;

- Other opportunities being explored included performances and information stalls relevant to the event; and
- Monitoring and evaluating all aspects of the event to manage the increased risks and resources required, balanced alongside the opportunities an event like this creates. Learning from the event would be used as a working example for building the capacity of Council staff in 2026.

She highlighted that an internal working group had been established to oversee the arrangements of this event, with an external event management company to assist the Council in delivering the logistics and planning. She advised that the intention was to create legacy from one event to the next and that further details would follow.

During discussion, the Working Group suggested the following ideas for consideration:

- Importance to breakdown the stigma of neurodiversity;
- Importance of publicising the statistics;
- Clearly assigned staff to assist participants at the event;
- Importance of a calm/safe space;
- Signposting and a map for participants;
- Check what other events are on at the same time in the City Hall in relation to crowding to help attendees plan their visit;
- Invite representatives from the Ulster Hall/Waterfront Hall to the event to raise awareness of the accessibility ticketing at their events; and
- Link in with agencies across all sectors for the event.

After discussion, the Working Group noted the next International Day for People with Disabilities event would take place on 3rd December, and the officers would take forward the aforementioned suggestions with the internal planning group.

Chairperson