



Subject:	DfC Disability and Work Strategy – Consultation Response		
Date:	14 January 2026		
Reporting Officer:	Damien Martin, Strategic Director of Place and Economy		
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<b>Restricted Reports</b>							
<b>Is this report restricted?</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>X</b>				
<b>Please indicate the description, as listed in Schedule 6, of the exempt information by virtue of which the council has deemed this report restricted.</b>							
<b>Insert number</b>							
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Information relating to any individual</li><li>2. Information likely to reveal the identity of an individual</li><li>3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the council holding that information)</li><li>4. Information in connection with any labour relations matter</li><li>5. Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained</li><li>6. Information showing that the council proposes to (a) to give a notice imposing restrictions on a person; or (b) to make an order or direction</li><li>7. Information on any action in relation to the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime</li></ol>							
<b>If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?</b>							
<b>After Committee Decision</b>		<table border="1"><tr><td></td></tr><tr><td></td></tr><tr><td></td></tr><tr><td></td></tr></table>					
<b>After Council Decision</b>							
<b>Sometime in the future</b>							
<b>Never</b>							

<b>Call-in</b>			
<b>Is the decision eligible for Call-in?</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>No</b>

<b>1.0</b>	<b>Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues</b>
1.1	The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the Department for Communities' (DfC) draft Disability and Work Strategy for Northern Ireland and seek agreement on a Council response to the public consultation.
<b>2.0</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
2.1	<p>It is recommended that the Committee:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Notes the main highlights of the DfC Disability and Work Strategy; and</li> <li>• Approve the consultation response, attached at appendix 1 (subject to council ratification).</li> </ul>
<b>3.0</b>	<b>Main report</b>
3.1	<p><a href="#"><u>Disability and Work: A Strategy for Northern Ireland</u></a> sets out the Department for Communities' (DfC) commitment to achieve better employment outcomes for disabled people, people with health conditions, and people who are neurodivergent.</p> <p>The 2023/24 employment rate for disabled people (43.4%) was approximately half the employment rate for people without disabilities (83.7%). The difference between these two rates is known as the “disability employment gap”, and in 2023/24, the NI disability employment gap was 40.3 percentage points. This is the largest gap of any of the UK nations, and despite the number of disabled people in employment here increasing, the gap has changed little over the last decade. (Note: the 2024 Labour Force Survey Local Government District tables were released in July 2025 and report a disability employment gap of 48.8pp in Belfast).</p> <p>The key outcome of the Strategy is to get an additional 50,000 disabled people into work by March 2036, and to achieve a disability employment rate of 50% and growing. The Strategy also aims to get more disabled people into better jobs, helping to reduce the disability pay gap; reduce underemployment; and support more disabled people into self-employment.</p> <p>The Strategy is aimed at supporting people in Northern Ireland to prepare for work, obtain work, remain in work, and progress in work. It aims to support people who are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• deaf or disabled, and/or</li> <li>• have health conditions, and/or</li> <li>• are neurodivergent.</li> </ul> <p>The Strategy's scope includes people from the above groups who are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• of working age and not currently working, or</li> <li>• already in work, or</li> <li>• young people who are about to transition out of school, further education, or higher education.</li> </ul> <p>The sub-outcomes for the Strategy are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To increase the disability employment rate for all age groups</li> <li>• To increase the disability employment rate for males and females</li> <li>• To increase the disability employment rate for people with different types of disability</li> <li>• To reduce the disability pay gap</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To reduce levels of underemployment of disabled people</li> <li>• To increase levels of self-employment for disabled people</li> </ul> <p>The key themes of the strategy are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personalised support</li> <li>• Inclusive Skills, Careers, and Educational Transitions</li> <li>• Supporting and Enabling Employers</li> <li>• Strategic and Structural Enablers</li> </ul>
3.2	<p><b>Key highlights from the draft BCC response</b></p> <p>While the full response is attached at appendix 1, overall, the council welcomes the Strategy. It is a useful starting point in joining-up support to address key challenges in helping disabled people into meaningful employment (those who can and want to work). We welcome the provisions made for disabled people where they can voluntarily opt in for employment support as this approach is proven to be more effective than mandating participation.</p> <p>While the Council welcomes the Strategy's themes, guiding principles and outcomes, the response states that budget availability against each element of delivery would be beneficial to plan ahead for service delivery and workforce planning. We note this consultation is taking place while there are severe funding cuts to disability specialist organisations supported through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. Cuts will have a major impact on delivery of the Strategy; on disabled people, organisations and staff that deliver much needed employment services.</p> <p>We welcome a flexible and responsive approach, particularly where delivery gaps emerge and additional support is required to increase the employment rate for disabled people. However, Belfast may have different needs as a predominately urban area. For example, there are areas within Belfast such as Oldpark (18%) and Court (17%) that have male long-term sickness or disability rates that are closer to one-fifth of the male population compared against 8% for NI.</p> <p>Furthermore, the response highlights the imbalance that exists across Northern Ireland council areas (evidenced by the 2024 Labour Force Survey Local Government District tables) and identifies that the greatest need is within Belfast. The employment rate for disabled people ranges from a high of 59.7% in Ards and North Down to a low of 33.4% in Belfast. We therefore recommend that the Department consider implementing a sub-regional balance approach, tailoring and prioritising actions where the greatest inequalities exist.</p>
3.3	<p><u>Financial &amp; Resource Implications</u></p> <p>There are no financial implications attached to this report.</p>
3.4	<p><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u></p> <p>There are no equality, good relations or rural needs implications contained in this report.</p>
4.0	<p><b>Appendices – Documents attached</b></p>
	<p>Appendix 1: DfC Disability and Work Strategy - Belfast City Council Response</p>