



Subject:	Accessibility and Inclusion Update
Date:	19 June 2026
Reporting Officer:	Sharon McNicholl, Deputy Chief Executive & Director of Corporate Services Nora Largey, City Solicitor and Director of Legal and Civic Services
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Restricted Reports	
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Call-in	
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1.0	Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues
1.1	To provide SP&R with an update on the legislative framework around disability and our strategic approach to accessibility. The eventual aim of the development of a strategic approach is to make the city more accessible to all D/deaf, disabled and neurodiverse people and to everyone who lives, works or visits Belfast, irrespective of their service access requirements. This will be a long-term strategy to place accessibility at the heart of how we design and deliver all our services.
2.0	Recommendation
2.1	<p>Members are asked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Note the update in this report; and • Note that an updated version of the Disability Action Plan will be presented to SP&R Committee in August 2026 for the purposes of public consultation.
3.0	Main Report
3.1	<p>Over one in four people in Belfast live with a disability. Disability impacts not only the individual but also members of their families, sometimes in a caring role. Now is the right time to develop a more strategic approach to accessibility. The impact of disability is different if you are young or old, having caring responsibilities or don't speak English as your first language. The need for a focus on accessibility isn't new, in the last decade it has come in from the margins as inequalities are better understood, with disabled people often highlighting the unequal opportunities that are afforded to them. Data provided from official sources such as the 2021 Census, with standardised definitions of disability as 'health impairment' are now set alongside social media, where global influencers, promote their disability as part of their identity, bringing voices to the label. Types of disability are often categorised into physical, sensory, hidden and intellectual, with legal definitions focusing on the impact.</p> <p>Over the past decade there has been a shift in understanding from the medical model of disability to the social model, which in turn has increased public awareness of the barriers faced by D/deaf, disabled and neurodiverse people in participating in everyday life. There is a clear need for an ambitious strategy which will shift the emphasis from the medical model, where disability is viewed as a problem stemming from the individual, in sharp contrast the social model highlights the environmental barriers which exclude and discriminate. Any shift in public attitudes is challenging, and the strategic approach will need to be delivered over an adequate timeframe.</p>
3.2	<p>Why do we need an accessibility strategy when we have a Disability Action Plan?</p> <p>Our Disability Action Plan, which is a legal requirement with an internal focus, and is overseen by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.</p> <p>Around 2018 Belfast City Council had addressed the limitations placed upon disability by the legal boundaries of the Disability Action Plan and shared our ambitions to develop a more strategic, external approach.</p>

ECNI explained that due to legislation the Disability Action Plan and any strategy should be separated. Frustrations with the complexity of the legal framework contributed, in part, with the prominence of diversity initiatives focused on specific groups of people. A strategic approach to accessibility will also allow us to display civic leadership on the promotion of all of Belfast's citizens, working through an evidence-based approach.

Developing a strategic approach to what is currently called the 'Roadmap to an Accessible City', will build on existing council work and contributions to accessibility within the city, we will also review our current approaches and start new work where it is needed. The strategy will bring added value to initiatives being delivered throughout Departments and aim to harmonise approaches through the city, aiming to bring together best practice and working in partnership to identify where work still needs to be done. We will listen, learn and lead bringing human stories to the statistics.

3.3 **How does Belfast City Council currently promote accessibility?**

Disability inequalities and accessibility measures are mainstreamed, led by each Director within their own Departments. Outlined below are a range of actions delivered across Council, although it should be noted this is not an extensive list.

1. Promoting accessibility through funding

- Targeted grant initiatives, including 'The Sounds Atypical Music Grant Scheme', funded by Council and delivered by University of Atypical for Arts and Disability. Schemes such as this are central to the UNESCO City of Music status, we are proud to offer some fantastic music-led grant schemes within the city.
- Funding initiatives like 'Suitcases and Skies' performed by adults with learning disabilities, coming together from groups across north, south, east and west Belfast. This was part of the Belfast Local Community Action Plan supported by Peaceplus, managed by the Special EU Programmes Body

2. Promoting accessibility through services

- In April 2024 council commissioned an external consultant to carry out an audit of play value and accessibility at all council-maintained playgrounds. The scores allocated for each playground relate to existing features, types of play opportunities available and their accessibility for a range of age groups and abilities.
- The Play Value & Accessibility Audit (2024) now informs sites selection under PIP and is used as a design guide to help deliver more accessible playgrounds going forward.
- Council's Play Equipment Supply Contract (2021-2026) allows us to procure equipment for use in playground improvement works. The supply contract will be retendered in the coming months and will include an additional five items of accessible equipment e.g. wheelchair accessible, swing, see-saw and trampolines, providing a wider palette of equipment to improve accessibility in playgrounds.
- Communication Boards, displaying symbols to help children with limited language skills express themselves, are currently being installed in all council-maintained playgrounds, work is expected to be complete by the November 2026.
- In 2020 council installed special needs swing-seats in all playgrounds with suitable swing frames. There are now support swing-seats in more than 50 council-

maintained playgrounds across the city. Installation of support swing-seats will continue to be delivered under PIP.

- An Accessible Signage Working Group, comprised of council officers, consultants and representatives from Council's Disability Advisory Panel was set up in January 2026 to design a fully accessible entrance sign for use in the Reconnected Belfast project (Waterworks and Alexandra Park). It is hoped this sign could be used as a template in other parks and open spaces.
- Capital funding has been secured to develop a new accessible, sensory play facility at Woodvale Park on the site of the disused bowling green. It is envisaged that this project can be used as a pilot for other projects moving forward.
- Changing Places facilities have been agreed for Waterworks and Alexandra Park as part of the Reconnected Belfast project; a feasibility study is currently underway for another Changing Places facility in proximity to the Woodvale Park Sensory Garden site.
- Capital funding has been secured to improve accessibility at Musgrave Park Therapy Garden. Improvements include installation of wheelchair accessible equipment and a sensory trail; completion is due in June 2026.
- Accessible bin lifts and braille on bins
- RADAR keys
- Zoomobile, which is an accessible buggy that can carry one wheelchair user and four non-wheelchair users, or four non-wheelchair users.
- Designing routes in our parks for wheelchair accessibility
- ICC Belfast, Waterfront Hall and Ulster Hall were one of the first venues in Belfast and Northern Ireland to receive the Autism NI Impact Award.
- The venues also hold the Bronze Diversity Mark accreditation and are on track to achieving silver accreditation.
- City Hall, Belfast Castle, Belfast Zoo and Malone House are Autism Impact Award Champions and accredited as autism-accessible, welcoming environments.

3. Promoting accessibility through Council led city-wide initiatives

- The Belfast Promise includes commitments to make your business more inclusive for disabled people, noting 'it is not only the right thing to do. It makes good business sense'.
- Our Inclusive Tourism initiative roles out in 2025 provides support for tourism businesses to help them become more inclusive. This was the first support of its kind in Northern Ireland. The funding, awarded as a voucher, could be used to improve the visitor experience in small, but practical, ways, through staff training and awareness raising, support with navigating websites or booking tickets, or to upgrade signage or marketing materials.

4. Promoting accessibility through communications

- Video relay services
- Continuing to improve the accessibility of the Council's website

- The role out of Makaton boards in play parks set out above
- Sign posting to other accessible service providers

5. Promoting accessibility through strategic partnerships

All our strategies have accessibility to promote inclusion embedded in them

- The Belfast Agenda
- Corporate Plan 2025-2028
- Local Development Plan
- Inclusive Growth Strategy
- Social Value Procurement Policy
- Resilience Strategy
- Belfast Region City Deal
- A Bolder Vision for Belfast
- Belfast Economic Strategy 2022-2030

6. Promoting accessibility as an employer

- Council holds the Silver Diversity Mark in recognition of our commitment to promoting equality and diversity within our workforce.
- Council provides reasonable adjustments through its recruitment and selection process and operate a Guaranteed Interview Scheme.
- Council holds the AAA* Disability Positive accreditation from Employers for Disability NI in recognition of our employment-related disability good practice. Members of our Employee Resourcing team are accredited as 'Disability Positive'.
- Our ABLE staff network meets quarterly and is open to all council staff who consider themselves to have a disability; as well as carers, allies or supporters of people with disabilities.

3.4 What is an 'Accessible City'?

With such emphasis on accessibility being 'for everyone; the first steps in developing a strategic approach includes defining the problem you want to solve. We have explored the need for specific focus throughout opportunities including the Disability Advisory Group and International Day for Persons with Disabilities events. From the December 2025 event the evaluation showed:

- The diversity of disability with over twenty different types listed from attendees
- 63% of attendees had experienced a barrier which excluded them, a friend, or family member from accessing work or social life in Belfast.
- An average of 85% of attendees rated the event as found the event content, usefulness, rated the event highly or excellent.
- Twenty-four different reasons were listed displaying pride at Belfast's efforts for disability inclusion and accessibility. These included going beyond legislation and hearing lived experiences.

- There are knowledge gaps on disability inclusion and accessibility, including engaging with people with lived experience of disability, economic benefits of inclusion and ableism.
- Barriers being addressed through our departments include:
 - o Communication
 - o Attitudinal
 - o Physical/Architectural
 - o Technology
 - o Systemic/Policy

Defining what we mean by Belfast as an accessible city will be key to the success of the strategy through clear communication as well as establishing data baselines. If not defined 'accessibility' becomes a new buzzword for good customer service. Emphasising the impact of the process, the Centre for Ageing notes:

Accessibility can mean a variety of different things, from wheelchair access to comprehensive information. For the historic city of Chester, becoming an accessible city has been a careful, long-term process - with real rewards.

A common framework for definition is provided by the European Commission, who organizes the Access City Award, to reward EU cities that are prioritizing accessibility for persons with disabilities. Although Belfast was a past recipient of an award for the sensory garden at Musgrave Park, we are no longer eligible to enter. Nonetheless, the Access City Award provides a vision:

Accessibility is a master-key that opens the door to the city's services, buildings and spaces, so persons with disabilities can take the lead of their lives, live independently and fully participate in the community.

Cities are key actors to ensure accessibility, as they have a direct impact on our everyday life and needs as citizens. A city is accessible when persons with disabilities can, for instance:

- go around the streets and enjoy public areas, such as parks and playgrounds.
- get in public buildings like hospitals, town halls, libraries, and sports halls.
- get the bus, tram and metro to go to work or meet friends.
- communicate with the local administration in person, by phone or online.
- get information in ways that they can read and understand.

The Royal Town Planning Institute recognises the increasing lack of accessibility in sustainable design, with climate change becoming prevalent vulnerable people are being left behind. Transport is again listed as a key concern highlighting the role of barriers in excluding disabled people.

3.5 **Next steps - how is the strategy being developed?**

Legal and Civic Services will lead the overall development, delivery and monitoring of the accessibility strategy. This cannot be achieved without the co-operation from all

departments. Collaboration between departments was key to the success of the International Day for Persons with Disabilities (IDPD) in 2025. A meeting of Directors nominees for the IDPD 2026 Planning Group will be held in the coming weeks.

Commitments towards accessibility are actively being delivered and the development of a strategy for changes in education, culture and service delivery must be done in tandem with business as usual.

As a response to the IPDD 2025, training with an Accessibility Consultant was organised and delivered to P&P and CNS. An output of this training has been the inclusion of new Accessibility requirements within the appointment of all integrated design teams on behalf of the council.

The new requirements will see the appointment of an Accessibility Consultant with a view to promoting inclusive design and access for disabled people and incorporate their recommendations. The Accessibility Consultant will be registered with the National Register of Access Consultants (NRAC) and should will undertake a review of the designs at each applicable design stage.

The aim is to ensure that capital projects delivered by the Council are providing inclusive design and access that exceeds the regulatory requirements and minimum standards. Council departments are working together to truly strive toward making Belfast a more inclusive and accessible city for all.

Key 2026 milestones:

- Autumn - Public consultation for the Disability Action Plan including external engagement on a strategic approach to accessibility with key stakeholders
- November: launch of Disability History Month on the theme 'Disability, Politics and Democracy
- December: International Day for Persons with Disabilities event

These milestones align with the 2027-28 programme of actions reported to the Disability Working Group and further updates will be brought back to SP&R in due course.

Members are asked to note the contents of this report and that an updated Disability Action Plan to reflect the Council's strategic ambitions will be presented to Committee at its meeting in August.

3.6

Financial and Resource Implications

Disability and accessibility, like all equality and good relations matters are mainstreamed throughout Council, meaning that the Director of each Departments is responsible for development actions within their remit. As the SRO for disability, City Solicitor and Director of Legal and Civic Services has oversight of the legislative framework for disability and accessibility as well as strategic direction.

Members will be aware that there is an ongoing service review in the Council's Equality & Diversity Unit. This review has been focussed on ensuring there are sufficient resources to drive the Council's ambitions in relation to accessibility and to better co-ordinate the work that is being undertaken across the Council.

The outcome of this review will be presented to Committee in the coming months.

3.7	<u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u> As an employer, a civic leader and provider of goods, facilities and services Belfast City Council is bound by a legal framework around anti-discrimination and the promotion of equality and good relations. Our current approach satisfies the legal requirements, and the development of an accessibility strategy will display commitment as a civic leader representative of all our citizens.
4.0	Appendices - Documents Attached
	None