

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Disability Action Plan 2016 – 2021

Closure Report

Purpose of the Report

The purpose of this report is to review the implementation of the Disability Action Plan 2016-21 (DAP 2016-21), which aimed to:

- promote positive attitudes towards disabled people;
- encourage the participation of disabled people in public life, and
- identify any barriers to participation.

It was expected that implementation of the DAP 2016-21 would further increase accessibility to the Assembly and its services, thus ensuring that people with disabilities could more fully engage in the work of the Assembly.

The Plan also supported the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission (“the Assembly Commission”) in complying with section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (“section 75 duties”) and its obligations arising under sections 49A and 49B of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA)1995.

Background

On 3 March 2016, the Assembly Commission approved the DAP 2016-21. A public consultation on the Plan was held for 14 weeks, from 16 March 2016 to 10 June 2016. The actions contained within the DAP 2016-21 were grouped into 6 broad themed categories:




- 1) Staff Training

- 2) Representation
- 3) Communication, Consultation and Engagement
- 4) Outreach and Education
- 5) Structural changes to increase participation and accessibility
- 6) Awards and Accreditation

In total the DAP 2016-21 contained 54 actions across the six categories noted above.

Performance for Actions

Table 1 below summarises the number of actions completed, not completed or suspended. A status update for each actions is attached at Appendix 1 and provides the final status and narrative update for each of the individual actions.

Table 1 – Final status of actions			
Status Key		No of actions	% of actions
	Complete	49	90.7%
	Not Completed	2	3.7%
	Action Suspended	3	5.6%
Total actions		54	100.0%

Almost ninety-one percent of actions were completed within the five-year DAP 2016-21 period, more detailed information on the achievement of a number of these actions and their related outcomes are set out in the 'Achievements' section of this report.

Two actions not completed related to two individual actions within 1(a) of the DAP.

These actions were to: ***“Design or acquire online disability training for staff through the Assembly’s Moodle system”*** and for ***“Mandatory training provided to all staff following establishment of e-disability training programme”***. These actions were not completed as the Assembly Commission’s Learning and Development (L&D) team were awaiting the development of a joint e-learning module with the NICS for delivery on an electronic platform where it could be accessed by Assembly Commission staff.

This module was to be designed to cover section 75 and DDA awareness training for staff. The Equality Unit has been involved in this work since 2018, when they redrafted the NICS section 75 and DDA training content to ensure it was up to date for staff. Content revisions were issued to the NICS training working group in 2019 but system delays and the COVID-19 pandemic have delayed this work.

However, to ensure compliance, the L&D team and the Equality Unit updated a section 75 e-learning course. This was issued to all staff 1 February 2021. In addition, the L&D team procured and launched a ‘Dignity at Work’ mandatory e-learning course to all staff which built on disability discrimination awareness. The L&D team are currently exploring e-learning solutions which could be procured to meet future need. The development of an e-learning module is included in a draft DAP 2021-25.

Three actions in the DAP 2016-21 were suspended.

Action 3(a) related to: ***“Providing guidance for visitors and staff on further disability access arrangements in relation to participation in Assembly business and events, e.g., Committees, Plenary Session, seminars.”***

Witness Training was delivered prior to March 2017. However, due to the Assembly not sitting from January 2017 to January 2020 followed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant closure of Parliament Buildings to the public from March 2020 until July 2021, no Committee witness training was held. As Committee witness training was not possible this action was suspended.

Action 3(k) related to the Digital First Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA). Whilst the Digital First EQIA was undertaken and published, its content was superseded by the introduction of accessibility legislation and related standards. Therefore, the Digital First EQIA monitoring, as required as part of the EQIA process, was carried out against the standards in accessibility legislation and guidance. Feedback was sought from stakeholders and website users and from the External Disability Advisory Group.

Action 4(d) was to ***“Continue to provide support to the Assembly Charity of the Year.”*** The Assembly’s Charity Policy notes the charitable purposes listed in the Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2008, which include relief of those in need by reason of disability. The Cedar Foundation was the nominated Charity from 5 October 2016 to 2 April 2018. Due to the Assembly not sitting from January 2017 to January 2020 and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant closure of Parliament Buildings to the public from March 2020 to July 2021, this action was suspended. However, miscellaneous charity activities have taken place annually.

Achievements

Of the forty-nine completed actions, the following are of particular note:

DAP 2016-21 category - Staff Training

Action 1(a) related to **“Ensuring staff receive training and guidance on disability equality legislation and disability awareness.”** The planned outcome was that *“All staff are made aware of the revised Equality Scheme and Disability Action Plan through e-learning training and direct communication to staff via intranet and email. Key awareness messages delivered through a range of information materials, e.g., leaflets, flyers and posters.”*

Training on section 75 duties and an introduction to screening was delivered to all Heads of Business in December 2018 and January 2019. Masterclasses on reasonable adjustments and autism awareness were delivered to staff in 2018. The L&D team continued to highlight disability issues through a range of mediums including the Well-being Wednesday E-zine. During the period of the DAP 2016-21, a new Health and Wellbeing Framework was developed and associated resource pages created on the Assembly Commission's intranet.

The Equality Manager, L&D team and Head of HR provided quality assurance on all equality training courses. Evaluation data was collected from all courses to support further development.

The Assembly Commission has seventeen staff trained as Mental Health First Aiders to recognise the symptoms and signs associated with mental health problems and to signpost staff to the appropriate support. Additional training was offered to all Mental Health First Aiders in relation to the psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specific virtual training opportunities were also highlighted to staff as part of the Health & Wellbeing E-Zines. These were across a range of well-being areas including physical, psychological and social.

A Masterclass was delivered in 2017 by Brain Injury Matters and was aimed at staff who wished to improve their skills in working with people who have communication difficulties. The session focused on the needs of people with Acquired Brain Injury (ABI), it reviewed a range of ways in which people communicate and raised awareness to improve the effectiveness of communication with individuals with ABI.

DAP category - Representation

Action 2 (a) related to **“Continuing to hold meetings of the external Disability Advisory Group.”** The external Disability Advisory Group comprises representatives from various disability organisations and was established in November 2009. The group provided advice on many issues affecting disabled people, particularly about improving access to Parliament Buildings and the services provided by the Assembly Commission.

Members of the External Disability Action group met in February 2021 as part of a pre-consultation on the draft DAP 2021-25. A meeting was also held in April 2021 to brief group members on recruitment to the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly.

During the period when the Assembly was not sitting from January 2017 to January 2020 meetings did not take place. However, the Equality Unit continued to engage with individual group members on policy issues as required. Membership of the group was reviewed in September 2016, when a number of new bodies joined the group, bringing the total number of member organisations to fourteen.

DAP category - Communication, Consultation and Engagement

Under action 3(a) which related to **“Providing guidance for visitors and staff on further disability access arrangements in relation to participation in Assembly business and events, e.g., Committees, Plenary Session, seminars”**, a planned outcome was to *“Develop Q&A guide for disability arrangements for visitors to*

Parliament Buildings, covering events, Committee meetings, Plenary sittings, Gallery rules.”

During the period of the DAP 2016-21, a question and answer guide relating to disability arrangements for visitors to Parliament Buildings including to events, Committee meetings and Plenary sittings was developed. An Inclusive Customer Service Policy was also developed in consultation with the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. The Policy highlights the facilities available at Parliament Buildings for customers with a disability, and includes a section on how they can engage with the work of the Assembly, including Committees and Plenary sessions.

Action 3(b) related to **sign language**, with a planned outcome to *“Develop proposals to progress a sign language policy”*. Sign language guidance was developed 2016.

Action 3(h) was to **“Conduct an annual exercise to encourage staff to provide anonymous information to assist with monitoring and reporting on disabilities in the workplace.”** The Human Resources Office issued an annual disability survey during the lifespan of the DAP 2016-21 to encourage staff to provide anonymous information to assist with monitoring and reporting on disabilities in the workplace.

Action 3(i) was to **“Ensure that customer satisfaction surveys are carried out that allow for a review of findings by disability.”** Additional questions were added to the visitor survey which asked respondents about physical access to and within Parliament Buildings. Any compliments/complaints on any issues raised in the survey responses were fed back to the relevant business areas.

DAP category - Outreach and Education

Action 4(a) related to **Education for Special Needs Schools**. With planned

outcomes to “*continue to engage with special schools through focus groups*” to “*continue to advertise the Education Service to every special school in Northern Ireland and encourage an increase in the number of special schools participating in the Education programme each year*”.

During the period of the DAP 2016-21, the Education Service worked with the Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights to consult young people on the issue of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. Three special schools were invited and two participated in focus group sessions. The Education Service also worked with the Committee for Education to consult young people on the Impact of lockdown and the emotional well-being and mental health of children and young people. Senior pupils from two special schools participated in this consultation exercise.

At the start of each academic year, the Education Service sent out an annual mailshot to all schools, including special schools, inviting them to participate in the Education Programme. In December 2018, an additional mailshot was sent to special schools to encourage greater participation and highlight the bespoke service which was available to cater for different needs within the sector. A September 2021 mailshot informed all schools about the resumption of visits to Parliament Buildings for small groups; the availability of virtual sessions to all groups; and new resources available on the Education Service website. A virtual education programme has been available since Autumn 2020.

During the DAP period, the Education Service sought to increase the numbers of special school groups participating in programmes. In September 2016, the Education Service attended a meeting of the External Disability Advisory Group at the Mencap offices in Belfast to meet with representatives from disability organisations and to promote the Education Programme. Following this, the Education Service provided Mencap with information about the Assembly and the 2016 election, to support Mencap’s youth education programme. In December 2018, a targeted mailshot was sent to all special schools to encourage participation in the programme.

Action 4 (b) related to a **Northern Ireland Youth Congress**. Following the decision in July 2020 by the Assembly Commission to establish a Youth Assembly, considerable work was done to deliver a new Northern Ireland Youth Assembly, which sat virtually for the first time on 2 July 2021. The membership of the Youth Assembly is fully representative of all section 75 groups in the 13 to 18 age range.

DAP category - Structural changes to increase participation and accessibility

Action (5d) was to provide “**Web publishing training for staff**”. Training was provided to Assembly Staff on the use of a content management system used to publish to the Assembly website. Part of this training included accessibility issues. All staff involved in web publishing were provided with training either virtually or in person. Video guides, advice, and guidance were made available on the Assembly intranet for all staff and were updated annually or as was required. Staff were alerted to any new information through internal communications.

Actions 5(h), 5(j) and 5(k) related to new ramped access which was installed from the front entrance (lobby) in Parliament Buildings to Ground floor level. Automatic door opening was provided at the Basement, Ground and First floors in Parliament Buildings and alterations were made to the counters in the Members Bar, the Business Office, Reception and Office Resources. Regular quality checks took place throughout the DAP period on items, including an accessible iPad, the Braille tour map and the changing places facility.

Challenges and lessons learnt

The COVID-19 pandemic proved to be challenging in relation to physical accessibility to the services provided at Parliament Buildings. To demonstrate our commitment to mainstreaming disability issues and placing them at the core of what

we do, a number of adjustments were made to ensure delivery could take place. This included the virtual delivery of a wide range of services to external users. The Assembly Commission's Corporate Strategy includes an aim to ensure that the Assembly and its work is accessible to all, and the DAP 2016-21 played an essential part in achieving that aim, helping us to prioritise disability issues across the organisation.

Next Steps

Much has been achieved in terms of addressing disability related issues within the Assembly Commission, and for service users, through the implementation of the actions in the DAP 2016-2021. It is important to maintain this focus and momentum going forward with the new DAP 2021-25 and to build on the achievements to date by continuing to:

- remove barriers to disabled people's participation
- ensure the effective communication of the DAP 2021-25 to all staff and continue to provide training and guidance for staff in relation to their responsibilities
- being committed to engaging effectively with people with disabilities (including staff), and their representative groups, in the consultation, development, implementation and delivery of future Disability Action Plans.