



The Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Five Year Review of Disability Action Plans

2018-2023



**NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY COMMISSION
FIVE YEAR REVIEW OF DISABILITY ACTION PLANS (DAPs)
2018-2023**

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A copy of this report will be made available on the Northern Ireland Assembly's website. A hard copy of the report, or a copy in a different format, can be provided on request by e-mailing, or telephoning:

Equality and Good Relations Unit
Room 417
Northern Ireland Assembly
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
Stormont Estate
BELFAST
BT4 3XX

Telephone: 028 9041 8377

Textphone: 028 9052 1209

Email: equality@niassembly.gov.uk

Web: <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk>

1 BACKGROUND & LEGAL BASIS

- 1.1 Public authorities in Northern Ireland must carry out a five-yearly review of their Disability Action Plans and forward a report of this review to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI). If a public authority has submitted to the ECNI more than one Disability Action Plan during the five-year review period, the five-year review should encompass a review of all plans submitted during this period.
- 1.2 This report represents a five-year review of Disability Action Plans published by the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission ('the Assembly Commission') covering the period 1 April 2018 - 31 March 2023.
- 1.3 The Assembly Commission, as a designated public authority, is subject to two interrelated duties under Sections 49A and 49B of the Disability Discrimination Act ("DDA") 1995 (as amended by Article 5 of the Disability Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 2006). Section 49A places a duty on the Assembly Commission to have 'due regard' to the need to:
- Promote **positive attitudes** towards disabled people; and
 - **Encourage participation** by disabled people in public life.
- 1.4 Section 49B places a duty on the Assembly Commission to prepare an action plan outlining how it proposes to fulfil the Section 49A duty. This plan is a description of procedural and practical

arrangements that the Assembly Commission has committed itself to. This plan is referred to as a Disability Action Plan (DAP).

- 1.5 Since 2007, the Assembly Commission has submitted five DAPs to the ECNI. The current DAP covers the period 2022 – 2025 and can be viewed via this link: [Disability Action Plan 2022-25](#).
- 1.6 DAPs can be changed throughout its lifespan which allows public authorities to update their action measures at any time.
- 1.7 Progress on the Assembly Commission DAPs are reported on via an Annual Equality Progress Report return to the ECNI. These annual reports can be viewed via the following link: [Annual Progress Reports](#).
- 1.8 In accordance with ECNI Guidance (para 3.41-3.44)¹, the Assembly Commission must carry out a review of its DAP every five years and a copy of the review report forwarded to the ECNI. The previous five-year review can be accessed via the following link: [5 Year Review 2013-2018](#).
- 1.9 This five-year review covers two DAPs, the 2016-2021 DAP which closed in November 2021, and the current DAP which covers the 2022-2025 period.

¹<http://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Employers%20and%20Service%20Providers/DisabilitydutiesGuideforPAs2007.pdf>

2. PURPOSE OF THE REVIEW

2.1 The purpose of this review is to report on whether the Assembly Commission has met its statutory requirements to encourage persons with a disability to participate in public life and promote positive attitudes towards people with disabilities.

2.2 The recommended assessment criteria for the review is as follows: -

- What outcomes have been achieved to date?
- What are the future challenges and what have we learned?
- What remains to be completed?
- Conclusions.

2.3 Data sources used to inform the findings of this report were as follows:

- Annual Equality Progress Reports;
- Feedback provided from Heads of Business;
- Six-monthly updates from business areas;
- The DAP Closure report (2016-2021);
- Feedback from the External Disability Advisory Group;
- Visitor's surveys;
- Relevant papers to the Senior Management Team (SMT) and the Assembly Commission;
- Relevant equality screenings; and
- Research conducted by the Assembly Commission's Research and Information Service (RaISe).

3. WHAT OUTCOMES HAVE BEEN ACHIEVED TO DATE

3.1 In this section we record the main achievements by the Assembly Commission in promoting positive attitudes towards disabled people; and encouraging participation by disabled people in public life over the past five years from 2018 to date. This section groups the achievements into five main areas.

Staff Training

3.2 Staff receive training and guidance on disability equality legislation and disability awareness. The anticipated outcome is 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 are delivered through a range of information materials, e.g. leaflets, flyers and posters.”*

3.3 Once approved by the Assembly Commission, all staff were made aware of DAPs via direct communication and intranet links.

3.4 Examples of relevant staff training covering the five-year period of the review are as follows: -

- Training on equality policy screening, which encompassed disability equality legislation, 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 Learning and Development Team continued to highlight disability awareness through a range of communications including an ongoing weekly 'Wellbeing Wednesday' E-zine.
- During the period of the 2016-21 DAP, a new Health and Wellbeing Framework was developed and associated resource pages were created on the Assembly Commission's intranet.
- 'Deaf Awareness' virtual training was delivered on 6 April 2022 and 16 staff attended.
- 'Start to Sign' virtual training was delivered on 27 April 2022 and attended by 10 staff.
- A classroom based 'Deafblind Awareness' workshop was delivered to Front of House staff on 27 September 2022 and attended by 17 staff.
- The 'British Sign Language Level 1' course commenced in September 2022 with 15 staff participating.

3.5 A range of masterclasses designed to support good mental health and increase disability awareness have been delivered including:

- Mental Health First Aider Programme (Sept 2022);
- Mindfulness (May 2022); and
- Getting a good night's sleep (April 2022).

3.6 The Assembly Commission signed up as a JAM Card Partner in June 2022. A JAM Card helps people with a learning difficulty, autism or communication barrier to tell others that they need additional time and patience when they are in busy environments such as shops, restaurants and on public transport. Awareness sessions were delivered to Assembly Commission staff as part of National Inclusion Week in September 2022.

- 3.7 The Northern Ireland Assembly Commission has a team of trained Mental Health First Aiders whose role is to signpost staff to the appropriate support.

Representation

- 3.8 The inaugural Disabled People's Parliament took place on International Day for Persons with Disabilities on the 3 December 2021. The Parliament built upon previous work undertaken to explore the concept of a Parliament for people with disabilities which included events and exploring the concept with disability groups. The event was hosted by the Assembly's Speaker, Mr Alex Maskey, MLA in the Assembly Chamber in Parliament Buildings. The event was organised in conjunction with a number of individual persons with a disability and disability groups/organisations. Participants spoke on a number of issues, including calling for 'The United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities' to be fully incorporated into legislation in Northern Ireland. The event can be viewed at [Disabled People's Parliament](#).
- 3.9 In December 2022, in the absence of a sitting Assembly, the Speaker hosted an event at Parliament Buildings to mark the United Nations International Day of Persons with Disabilities. The event involved a Question and Answer session with MLAs. Topics discussed included the United Nation Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, independent living and standards of living.

- 3.10 The Assembly Commission has continued to build and engage with the External Disability Advisory Group (EDAG), which is comprised of representatives from various disability organisations and was first established in November 2009. The group provides advice and input on the development and implementation of the Assembly Commission's Disability Action Plan and relevant disability issues.
- 3.11 Members of the EDAG met in February 2021 as part of a pre-consultation on the draft DAP 2022-25, providing valuable input to the design of the current action plan.
- 3.12 Membership of the Group was reviewed in May 2022, including a review of the group's Terms of Reference. Four representatives from the Disabled People's Parliament joined the EDAG in June 2022.
- 3.13 The Assembly Commission has considered accessibility within the context of the Refresh Programme within Parliament Buildings. For example, room layouts have been reconfigured to enable better wheelchair access and new microphones for MLAs who are in wheelchairs or unable to rise in their place.

Communication, Consultation and Engagement

- 3.14 During the period of the 2016-21 DAP, a question and answer guide was published relating to disability arrangements for visitors

to Parliament Buildings, Committee meetings and Plenary sittings. An Inclusive [Customer Service Policy](#) was also developed in consultation with the ECNI. The Policy highlights the facilities available at Parliament Buildings for customers with a disability, and includes a section on how people can engage with the work of the Assembly, including Committees and Plenary sessions.

- 3.15 The Assembly Commission has continued to provide additional equipment to MLAs who require assistance with lip reading to enable participation in Committee meetings where witnesses and other Members are participating remotely. The audio from all virtual meetings is incorporated into our induction loops to allow Members and witnesses attending in person to be able to better participate in meetings.
- 3.16 A refresh of broadcasting facilities in Parliament Buildings commenced in 2022 and will upgrade the audio and video equipment in Committee rooms and the Assembly chamber. This will include enhanced facilities such as microphones and better screens for virtual and audio-visual presentations. In addition, the use of sign language was piloted during Assembly Question Time in 2022.
- 3.17 The Human Resources Office has continued to issue an annual disability survey to staff during the lifespan of the 2016-21 DAP, to encourage staff to provide anonymous information to assist with monitoring and reporting on disabilities in the workplace.
- 3.18 The 'mystery visitors' initiative commenced in March 2022 to enable people with disabilities to provide feedback on services within Parliament Buildings. The 'mystery shoppers' questionnaire'

has been distributed to disability groups intending to visit Parliament Buildings.

- 3.19 In 2022 the Clerking and Member Support Office, with support from the Public Engagement Office, developed a paper on improving witness diversity, (including those with learning disability and people with a physical disability and carers). This paper was provided to all Statutory and Standing Committees so they can draw on its advice to promote diversity amongst witnesses giving evidence.
- 3.20 Citizen Space (online survey software) has become the primary tool used by Committees to call for evidence. Work started in 2022 on looking at all the different ways that we communicate our 'calls for evidence' including how we ensure that the needs of those with disabilities are met. Video conferencing will continue to be used by Committees, enabling a wider range of people, including those with disabilities or accessibility needs, to give evidence to Committees.

Outreach and Education

- 3.21 The Education Service worked with the Committee for Education to consult with 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.
- 3.22 At the start of each academic year, the Education Service sends out an annual mailshot to all 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.

- 3.23 Following the decision in July 2020 by the Northern Ireland 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 representative of section 75 groups in the 13 to 18 age range, including those with a disability.
- 3.24 There is on-going work with RNIB to ensure the Assembly Commission's Public Engagement team can effectively outreach with blind and partially-sighted people. This has included a World Sight Day event held on 13 October 2022 during which feedback on issues was provided, such as the accessibility of Parliament Buildings, the set-up of meeting rooms and the format of effective presentations.
- 3.25 The 'Assembly Connects' programme works to enhance connections between the Assembly and the community through education and outreach. It provides free training, information and support to local community groups, businesses and individuals. Due to COVID-19, training has been delivered virtually, in-person - and from 2021 onwards in a hybrid format. Consultation and co-design have taken place with a wide range of Section 75 groups in this reporting period including those with a disability. This work has

led to 52 training programmes being successfully delivered to just under 900 people during this time period.

Structural changes to increase participation and accessibility

- 3.26 In accordance with the provisions of the Assembly Commission's Apprenticeship and Placement Framework, the Human Resources Office facilitated the first special work placement in January 2023. The aim of this placement was to provide disabled persons with access to a working environment and ultimately encourage participation by disabled people in the work of the Assembly.
- 3.27 Web publishing training was provided to key staff to enable the production of documents and information that enables greater participation of people with communication and learning disabilities. This training provides a sound basis for content creators to produce documents and websites that enable greater accessibility and therefore potentially participation of people with communication and learning disabilities.
- 3.28 Under the 2016-2021 DAP, major accessibility upgrades were made to Parliament Buildings including ramped access from the front entrance (lobby) 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 Business Office, Reception and Office Resources. Regular quality checks take place on items, including an accessible iPad, a Braille tour map and the changing places facility.

4. WHAT ARE THE FUTURE CHALLENGES AND WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED

- 4.1 This review spans two DAPs. The first plan for the period 2016-2021 contained 54 individual actions of which 91% (49 actions) were completed within the five-year period.
- 4.2 The current DAP for the period 2022–2025 contains 39 actions, which at the time of this review has 24 actions recorded as complete, 10 actions as ongoing and a further five actions as not due to commence. We anticipate that all the current DAP actions are achievable. The DAP has its implementation monitored formally every six-months with progress reported to and discussed with the SMT. The Clerk/Chief Executive provides staff with a summary of SMT discussion points in a regular email to all staff as well as making the six-monthly report available for staff on the organisation Intranet.
- 4.3 The COVID-19 pandemic proved to be a very challenging time in relation to physical accessibility to services provided at Parliament Buildings. However, technological adjustments were made to ensure delivery could take place, these included the virtual delivery of a wide range of services to external users as well as staff. Many of these adjustments have continued to be used, for example, the use of virtual meetings which help people with disabilities attend meetings with our staff instead of attending in person. These changes to how we meet and conduct our business have been welcomed by many.
- 4.4 The Assembly Commission’s Corporate Strategy includes an aim to ensure that the Assembly and its work is accessible to all, and the

current DAP 2022-2025 continues to play an essential part in achieving that aim, helping us to prioritise disability issues across the organisation.

5. WHAT REMAINS TO BE COMPLETED

5.1 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 previous DAP 2016-2021. It is important going forward with the current DAP 2022-25 to build on achievements to date by continuing to: -

- remove barriers to disabled people's participation;
- ensure the effective communication of our DAP to all staff and continue to provide training and guidance for staff in relation to their responsibilities;
- commit to engaging effectively with people with disabilities (including staff), and their representative groups, in the consultation, development, implementation and delivery of future DAPs.

6. CONCLUSIONS

6.1 The achievements outlined in this Report demonstrate the Assembly Commission's continued commitment to fulfilling the statutory duties relating to disability.

6.2 These duties continue to be mainstreamed and the Assembly Commission will continue to work with our staff and stakeholders to have due regard to the need to:

- Promote positive attitudes towards disabled people; and
- Encourage participation by disabled people in public life.