

# **Disability Advisory Group Meeting Notes**

**10am, 23 September 2016**

**Mencap Centre, Newtownbreda, Belfast**

## **In attendance:**

Maria Bannon (Chairperson)	Northern Ireland Assembly
Roisin Mooney (Secretary)	Northern Ireland Assembly
Gillian Kirk-Lyness	Northern Ireland Assembly
David Lynn	Northern Ireland Assembly
Marina McConville	Northern Ireland Assembly
Rhona McAuley	Cedar Foundation
Andrew Murdock	Guide Dogs NI
Thomas Quigley	Jordanstown School for Deaf and Visually Impaired Children
Charlotte Cardy	Assistant to Thomas Quigley
Elaine McGarrity	Leonard Cheshire Foundation
Fiona Cole	Mencap
Dr Jacqueline Witherow	Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB)

## **Opening and introductions**

Maria Bannon welcomed everyone to the meeting, and thanked Mencap for hosting the meeting. She introduced two new members, Andrew Murdock from Guide Dogs NI, and Dr Jacqueline Witherow from the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB), who joined the group after invitations were issued to a number of disability organisations in June. Maria sought members' agreement to publish the updated membership on the Assembly website.

Maria congratulated the Cedar Foundation on being selected as the Assembly's Charity of the Year. Rhona McAuley said they were delighted to be chosen, particularly as the foundation had marked its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year.

## **Action points from January Meeting**

Maria updated the group on actions arising from the January 2016 meeting, some of which have been completed, while others have been included in the Disability Action Plan; for example, the provision of training on specific disabilities for front-of-house staff, and provision of additional signage around the building to promote available services. Maria thanked the group for their input to the action plan, and reminded the group that it is a fluid document to which further actions can be added. She said that the Assembly Commission would be considering the final action plan at its September meeting and that she would send the group a link to the plan when approved.

*Action: Link to final Disability Action Plan to be issued to group when approved.*

In relation to disability parking at Parliament Buildings, Maria said that plans would be put in place to monitor usage and that an update would be provided at the next meeting.

## **Update on works in Parliament Buildings**

David Lynn, Head of Building Services, updated the group on disability access works under way in Parliament Buildings. He said that work on some measures had already been completed: lowering of the counter in the Members' Bar, the Business Office and the Office Resources office (Stationery), and the conversion of two offices on the ground floor to house the café (incorporating the gift shop and post office), which had been relocated to accommodate ramped access to the Great Hall.

David said work was progressing on longer-term measures, although there had been delays with some aspects due to technical issues and issues around compliance with the building's listed status. The work on ramped access was taking longer than initially planned but is expected to be completed in eight weeks, and a temporary ramp is in operation in the meantime. A contractor has been appointed to upgrade one passenger lift in the building to fire evacuation standard, while the appointment of a specialist supplier to install automatic opening corridor doors on the ground floor is currently subject to tender.

David offered to bring group members around the building to show them the adjustments when the group next meets in Parliament Buildings. Maria said that, in the meantime, new members were welcome to come to the building to see the facilities on offer, such as Changing Places, the Quiet Room, and the Braille tour.

*Action: Link to facilities to be issued to group.*

<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/visit-and-learning/autism-and-the-assembly/pb-video/>

<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/visit-and-learning/autism-and-the-assembly/>

## **Role of Education Service**

Marina McConville, one of the Assembly's education officers, gave an overview of the work of the Education Service. The role of the unit is to support young people in their understanding of the Northern Ireland Assembly and democracy, and encourage them to get involved. It comprises four education officers, all of whom are trained teachers, and two clerical support staff.

The Education Service provides free education programmes and resources for all young people, teachers, youth leaders, schools, including special schools, or anyone who wants to learn about the role of the Assembly. As the age range is from primary school level to young adults, the visits and activities can be tailored to meet the young people's needs; for example, the visit may include watching a plenary debate or Committee meeting from the public gallery, or meeting Committee Clerks and fun

activities such as mock elections. The visiting young people have an opportunity to meet elected representatives as MLAs often stop by to greet them. Education officers can also deliver their programmes in schools, arranging for local MLAs to attend where appropriate. The Education Service has also helped Committees to consult young people as part of Committee inquiries.

Marina asked members to look at, and give feedback on, the resources available on the Education Service's website, which was developed in conjunction with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessments (CCEA). Fiona Cole said that she had found the 'Race to Stormont' resource very useful in the run-up to the Assembly elections – this resource was designed to provide young people with information on the Northern Ireland elections and voting system.

Andrew asked how the groups could link in to the work of the Education Service. Marina said that they could do so in a number of ways; for example, through participation in focus groups as part of Committee consultations; and through involvement in Let's Talk events, which give young people an opportunity to debate and question MLAs on topical issues. She said that the service had recently delivered a youth engagement project to increase young people's participation in democratic life. Participants chose mental health as an inquiry topic and produced short films, conducted focus groups with young people, and presented to Assembly Committees. Marina said that, unfortunately, a recent bid for funding for a further project had been unsuccessful but that she would contact the group should any future opportunities arise.

Marina said that the Education Service is keen to engage with more special schools and disability organisations and welcomed any feedback and suggestions for new resources. She said she would contact the group to let them know about any forthcoming activities or events that may be of interest to them.

*Action: Link to Education Service website and contact details of the Education Service to be provided to group*

<http://education.niassembly.gov.uk/>

## **Overview of Parliament for People with Disabilities**

Gillian Kirk-Lyness, one of the Assembly's engagement co-ordinators, provided an overview of the work of the Assembly's Engagement Service, which is divided into three broad areas: parliamentary engagement; the Northern Ireland Assembly Business Trust and Assembly Community Connect; and Speaker's events and Committee events.

Gillian highlighted some recent and upcoming events, including a 'Bake Off' event to be held in November in conjunction with the Committee for the Economy and involving regional colleges, four special schools, the Speaker and the Children's Commissioner. She also outlined the role of Assembly Community Connect (ACC), which works to enhance connections between the Assembly and the community and voluntary sector, providing free training, information, and support to the sector. She said the 'How the Assembly Works' sessions, delivered as part of the ACC

programme, give a useful introduction to the work and role of the Assembly. The ACC strategy focuses on engagement with three groups: persons with a disability, women and the black minority ethnic sector.

*Action: send group the link to Assembly Community Connect*

<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/visit-and-learning/connecting-with-community/>

Gillian said that it is likely that the Parliament for People with Disabilities will be held as part of Assembly Week, which is expected to take place in February 2017. It will be a formal event, similar to the Pensioners' Parliament that was recently hosted in Parliament Buildings. Participants will be given the opportunity to put statements and questions to the MLA Committee Chairs. The Committee Chairs will answer formally and a call for action can be also requested. Fiona asked whether this would be a one-off event, and Gillian said they were open to holding further meetings of the Parliament. She said that the Engagement Service is keen to meet with disability groups to discuss ideas for the Parliament, for example, which Committees to invite and which motions to table.

*Action: Gillian to be provided with contact details for members of External Disability Advisory Group.*

*Action: Gillian to keep the group informed of any Engagement Service events that may be of interest to members.*

## **AOB**

Maria informed the group that the Assembly Commission is looking into signing up to the Equality Commission's mental health charter as well as its Every Customer Counts initiative, and that she would bring details to the next meeting.

### **Tour of Mencap Centre**

Fiona Cole and Ian Mackrell