

Disability Working Group

Tuesday, 10th October, 2023

DISABILITY WORKING GROUP HELD REMOTELY VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS

Members present: Councillors Doherty, McAteer and McMullan.

Also attended: Councillor Bunting.

In attendance: Ms. S. Williams, Governance and Compliance Manager;
Mr. R. Connelly, Policy, Research and Compliance Officer;
Ms. J. Beck, Sign Language Interpreter;
Mr. M. Johnston, Language Officer; and
Mrs. L. McLornan, Democratic Services Officer.

Election of Chairperson

The Working Group agreed, after discussion, that Councillor McMullan be elected to serve as Chairperson.

Apologies

An apology for inability to attend was reported from Councillor R. Brooks.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 22nd November, 2022 were taken as read and signed as correct.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were reported.

Disability Action Plan – Update

The Working Group considered the undernoted report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues

1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide a background to the work related to disability and an update to the Disability Working Group on the progress of the Disability Action Plan.

2.0 Main Report

2.1 Background

The Council is subject to a several different duties in relation to disability. As both a service provider and employer it must be compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 which outlines measures aimed at ending the discrimination faced by many disabled people.

It gives disabled people rights in:

- employment
- access to goods, facilities and services, including transport
- the management, buying or renting of property
- education

The Council, as a designated public authority, is also subject to two further inter-related duties under Sections 49A and 49B of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. Section 49A places a duty on designated public authorities to have due regard to the need to:

1. Promote positive attitudes towards disabled persons and
2. Encourage participation by disabled persons in public life

Section 49B places a duty on each designated public authority to prepare a Disability Action Plan outlining how it proposes to fulfil the Section 49A duty. The Council's [Disability Action Plan 2022-2025 \(belfastcity.gov.uk\)](https://www.belfastcity.gov.uk) was agreed in March 2023.

However, disability awareness has increased significantly in recent year with increased awareness of different types of disabilities and the need for the promotion of access and inclusion of disabled people in all aspects of life.

2.2 Key Issues

Our current approach to disability

The Council's Equality & Diversity Unit, currently with limited resources, oversees the development and implementation of the Disability Action Plan; deals with an increasing number of queries from departments due to the increasing awareness of the needs of disability which ranges from language to mobility; and co-ordinates consultation with relevant organisations through the external Equality Consultative Forum, the Disability Advisory Panel and the Sign Language Forum.

The increasing volume of work in this area will be addressed in the planned service review of the Equality & Diversity Unit which is currently in progress. Following the implementation

of this review it is aimed that the Unit will be able to dedicate more resources to the support of the work related to disability in particular the development and promotion of access and inclusion across the organisation.

2.3 Achievements to date

With limited resources, under the previous Disability Action Plan the following actions were achieved:

Promoting access to services

- SignVideo facilities in City Hall, Cecil Ward, Belfast Zoo, Tropical Ravine, and at all leisure centres (apart from Templemore Baths)
- New website which meets Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.1)
- City Matters magazine which is accessible in alternative formats
- Partnership with Accessible, the national app in place for accessibility information
- New hearing loop systems in City Hall, Malone House and Belfast Castle
- Funded a braille menu in the Bobbin Café at the City Hall
- Assisted with disability communication requests including alternative formats
- Sign Language translation videos in place at City Hall Visitor Exhibition and Tropical Ravine

Training

- Training for managers to manage stress and mental health issues
- Disability Awareness training
- British Sign Language training

Events

- Host annual 'International Day for People with Disabilities' event
- Promotion of annual disability days on Interlink

Engagement

- Disability Advisory Panel – met four times per year
- Disability Staff Network – met four times per year

2.4 Disability Action Plan 2022-25

A new Disability Action Plan 2022-25 was developed and approved by Council in March 2023 after being issued for

public consultation (Appendix 1). The plan sets out in detail what actions will be taken across the organisation over the three-year plan under the two strategic priorities of promoting positive attitudes and encouraging participation as required by the DDA. It is proposed to report progress in the plan under the following sub-headings:

1. Training
2. Raising Awareness
3. Communications
4. Encourage Others

2.5 Reporting and Monitoring

A short update report on progress in relation to the Disability Action Plan will be brought to the Working Group every quarter with a detailed update report brought every six months. The Council is required to prepare an annual report for the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI) each August.

2.6 Update on the Disability Action Plan

A short update on the work to date from April 2022 to date is set out below.

1. Training

Complete / ongoing

In September 2023, an Autism Impact Award Champion training programme was delivered to identified staff from the City Hall, Belfast Castle and Malone House. The three venues are now developing a three-year action plan to achieve the Award.

Twenty-one staff members completed a Level 1 unit in British Sign Language in June 2023. Further training including the completion of the Level 1 course is being explored.

Planned

We are planning to sign up to become a JAM Card partner. This is an arrangement to enable staff to complete an e-earning programme and for the Council to receive marketing material to support people with learning disabilities. Arrangements are being finalised with the NOW Group.

27. 2. Raising Awareness

Complete / ongoing

We continue to promote annual disability days on Interlink.

The Disability Advisory Panel continues to meet on a quarterly basis to consult and provide feedback on council projects and programmes. The last meeting was held on 27th September 2023. Arrangements are made for the Disability Advisory Panel to visit Templemore Baths and to meet the GLL management, to provide feedback on accessibility at leisure centres in Belfast.

Planned

Plans for the next 'International Day for People with Disabilities' event is underway. The event will be held on 4th December 2023 at the City Hall.

2.8 3. Communications

Complete / ongoing

Equality & Diversity Unit continues to assist with disability communications requests including documents provided in alternative formats e.g. Braille, Audio and Easy Read.

The Video Relay Service continues to be in demand. This is a service regularly used by Sign Language users to contact the Customer Hub.

Planned

A Making Communications Accessible guide has been developed to support staff on how to carry out language and communication requests. The guide will be uploaded on Interlink. Training and support will be provided.

2.9 4. Encourage Others

Complete / ongoing

Careers/employability events/activities are targeted towards disabled people i.e. careers fairs, mock interviews, site visits, employability talks

Planned

Through the Disability Advisory Panel and the Disability Staff Network which meets four times a year, people with disabilities are encouraged to raise issues on barriers they face.

3.0 Financial & Resource Implications

This work will be covered by existing budgets.

4.0 Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Implications

The implementation of the Disability Action Plan will help to contribute to meeting the Council's section 75 duties."

A further Member stated that existing legislation did not go far enough and that the Council's Disability Action Plan should seek to go further and address the issues of access, inclusion and participation.

In response to a Member's query, the Governance and Compliance Manager advised the Working Group that a Service Review of the Equality and Diversity Unit was ongoing and she outlined that she hoped to create a number of new Equality and Disability Officer posts to ensure that the issues within the Action Plan could be adequately addressed. She explained that a staff consultation was ongoing in that regard and that she hoped that the posts could be recruited as soon as possible.

A Member asked whether it would be possible to incorporate "inclusivity and access for people with disabilities" within the recent Belfast Business Promise pledges. The Governance and Compliance Manager stated that she believed it had already been agreed and adopted by a number of large corporations within the City but agreed to investigate and report back to the Working Group in that regard.

A further Member stated that EY had recently highlighted that it had matched neurodivergent people with non-neurodivergent people within their company and that there had been significant benefits from the scheme.

She suggested that, perhaps in the future, the International Day of People with Disabilities Event at the City Hall could focus on the benefits that people with disabilities bring to organisations and that it could be sponsored by a major employer.

After discussion, the Working Group thanked the officers for the update which had been provided.

Noted.

Motion - 'An inclusive Covid-19 pandemic response and long-term recovery' – Update

The Governance and Compliance Manager presented the following report to the Working Group:

"1.0 Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues

1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide a further update on a Notice of Motion raised by Councillor Ross McMullan at Strategic Policy & Resources in June 2020.

2.0 Main Report

2.1 Background

The Council is subject to a several different duties in relation to disability. As both a service provider and employer it must be compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995. As a designated public authority, the Council is also subject to two further inter-related duties under Sections 49A and 49B of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. Section 49A and B.

However, disability awareness has increased significantly in recent year with increased awareness of different types of disabilities and the need for the promotion of access and inclusion of disabled people in all aspects of life.

3.0 Key Issues

3.1 Councillor Ross McMullan raised a Notice of Motion at Strategic Policy & Resources in June 2020. The full Notice of Motion is set out in Appendix 1. An update has been provided below for each of the of the points with the exception of point 1 which is complete.

4.0 Notice of Motion

4.1 2. Create a Reference Group for Disabled People. This will provide a forum for councillors, our Disability Advisory Panel, council officers as well as other relevant stakeholders and experts from time-to-time, to discuss and progress actions on Belfast City Council's commitment to becoming an accessible city for all by 2035.

Further to this Notice of Motion, the Council agreed at Strategic Policy & Resources Committee to establish an elected member Disability Working Group in September 2022. The agreed Terms of Reference are attached at Appendix 2.

4.2 3. Create an 'Access and Inclusion' senior staff role. This role would act as both an internal focal point for council staff to improve access and inclusion in the delivery of Council services and have a key role in strategic policy making to deliver a common vision of disability inclusion. It would also act as an external point of contact for residents, disabled people and external stakeholders on day-to-day queries on improving access and inclusion in the city, working with external stakeholders to deliver a more inclusive city.

Strategic aspect

The City Solicitor is the Council's internal Equality Champion with the Equality & Diversity Unit overseeing the disability-

related work of the Council and can assume a lead as strategic Accessibility champion role.

Information and day-to-day queries

The Council has a dedicated webpage 'Supporting people with disabilities. The Equality & Diversity Unit provides support to staff who receive the day-to-day queries which often relate to specific council facilities and are dealt with by staff managing those facilities. Since this Notice of Motion was agreed, the Council has rolled out the Customer Hub which has received training and support on various disability and language communication tools including SignVideo. Further training is being arranged including JAM Card telecoms training.

The Council has also committed to signing up to become an Autism NI Impact Award Champion with training already underway for identified staff at the City Hall, Belfast Castle, and Malone House. Each venue will implement a three-year action plan to achieve this award. Other council venues will follow suit.

- 4.3 **4. Undertake an independent consultation report on models of best practice of accessibility and inclusion from other cities that will provide recommendations on how these could be applied within Belfast through this Council and its NI Executive partners.**

Following the implementation of the service review and there is a manager in post to oversee the scoping and development of this work, the Equality & Diversity Unit could scope the options and resource implications for this piece of work and bring back into the Disability Working Group for consideration. This would look at accessibility from a corporate perspective, identify what is currently place and where there are gaps, and make recommendations for a strategic approach to accessibility for the organisation.

- 4.4 **5. Develop a strategic roadmap for delivering an accessible city for all by 2035 that leaves no one behind that provides a common strategic vision of disability access and inclusion across all its strategies and plans, and outlines how we will get there.**

Based on the completion of the piece of work in point 4, an outline business case setting out a strategic roadmap could be developed for consideration by the Disability Working Group to recommend to Strategic Policy & Resources Committee to be considered in the context of the Belfast Agenda, the Local Development Plan and other strategic initiatives. Again, this would need to be scoped to set out options and resource implications.

A meeting with Cllr McMullan and the Director of City & Organisational Strategy has been arranged for later this month to discuss the Belfast Agenda and disability.

5.0 Financial & Resource Implications

5.1 Following the implementation of the service review of the Equality & Diversity Unit, most of this work will be covered by existing budgets however while some of this work can be funded through the retention of underspend in the departmental budget, further consultancy work will require a budget to be identified.

6.0 Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment

6.1 The recommendations outlined above will demonstrate the Council's commitment to access and inclusion, in addition to the legislative compliance defined for disability. Any equality, good relations or rural needs implications will be identified through the Council's screening process."

In response to a Member's suggestion, it was agreed that all Members of the Working Group would be invited to attend the meeting, which had been scheduled with the Director of City and Organisational Strategy for later that month, to discuss the Belfast Agenda and disability.

A Member stated that he would like to see more of a focus on City-wide improvements rather than from an internal, corporate perspective. A further Member agreed but stated that it was important to begin with Council-wide improvements. A Member stated that it was important that those with lived experience of disability were leading the conversation. The Governance and Compliance Manager stated that officers would look at best practice in other cities and, resource dependent, they would aim to use the Council's influence to highlight important issues both across the City and regionally.

The Working Group noted the work which was planned and the update which had been provided.

Draft Changing Places Policy

The Working Group considered the undernoted report with the accompanying Policy:

"1.0 Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues

The purpose of this report is to update the Disability WG Members on the development of the draft Changing Places Toilet Policy for Belfast City Council.

2.0 Recommendations

Members are asked to note the contents of this report including the draft Changing Places Policy which has been updated further following comments from officers across the council.

Once endorsed by the Disability Working Group, the next step will be for the draft policy to be brought to SP&R Committee for approval to go out to public consultation.

3.0 Main report

3.1 Background

A motion proposed by Councillor Ross McMullan calling for the introduction of a Changing Places Toilets Policy for Belfast City Council was referred to the SP&R Committee by the Council on 1 September 2021. The Committee adopted the motion and agreed that a report be brought back to Committee providing details on how it would be facilitated, resourced and managed.

An update report was brought to the Disability Working Group in February 2023 summarising the motion and the proposed approach.

A Changing Places Toilet Policy officer working group has met regularly over the past few months and their input has helped inform the various factors which the policy must consider including how it will be facilitated, resourced and managed.

3.2 Draft policy and key issues arising

The final draft policy is attached for the Disability WG endorsement. A summary of the policy is included below.

Buildings

- The Working Group will note that the requirement to provide Changing Places Toilet (CPT) facilities in all large new builds of a certain size is enforced through the amended Building Regulations rather than through this policy.
- The policy restates this requirement but goes further by adding consideration of CPTs where we extend or refurbish existing buildings, even if the provision of CPTs were not required by the amended building regulations.

Council Estate

- The policy as drafted would also commit the Council to carrying out a review of where CPT facilities could be installed on the council estate.
- When reviewing the provision of any future CPT facilities within the Council estate we will consider the existing level of provision on the Council estate and also the availability of CPT facilities in non-Council assets.
- Whilst cost alone will not be the deciding factor in any decision, the cost of installing any specific Changing Places facility will need to be carefully considered in conjunction with all of the other capital programme priorities identified by the council.
- The management and maintenance of any such CPT facility will need to be carefully considered when examining any proposal. Following installation there will be ongoing costs associated with cleaning, checking and maintaining the equipment within the facility.

Events

- The draft policy extends to events, and creates new requirements upon both the Council and external events organisers.
- When organising public events, the Council will consider if it can take place at a venue that already has a Changing Places facility or will make reasonable adjustments to ensure that customers have access to either a fixed or portable Changing Places facility as part of the design of the event.
- The Council will require external organisers of all large-scale public events (e.g. concerts, festivals) on council property to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that customers have access to either a fixed or portable Changing Places facility as part of the design of the event.
- It will be a condition of hire that any large-scale event (whether it needs an entertainments licence or not) must have a Changing Places facility. This should be included in the lease agreement between council and the event organiser. It should also be a condition of hire that event organisers must complete the Planning Checklist at Section E of the Council's 'Inclusive Events Guide' for review by the EDU team.
- As a further step we will consider the requirement to include an access audit within the Event Management Plan which is submitted in support of the event. It would then be for the organiser to justify why they would not be required to include a CPT as part of their

site set-up. An officer of the Council involved in management of the land for hire must ensure these steps are followed.

- The Council when organising smaller public events, will encourage small scale events organisers to undertake an accessibility audit and provide a Changing Places facility where possible.
- The Council's 'Inclusive Events Guide' has been updated and includes a new Small Scale Events Checklist (see Appendix 2)

Responsibility

- Legal & Civic Services Department will be the corporate lead for this policy however actions will be required across different departments including Place & Economy and City & Neighbourhood Services.

It is proposed that an application is made to the Department for Communities' Access and Inclusion Programme in 23/24 to secure funding which could contribute towards the purchase of a mobile changing places unit which could be used at events.

3.3 Financial & Resource Implications

There are there are potential resource implications associated with this policy and its implementation may result in the need for future capital funding by Council.

3.4 Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Implications

A Changing Places Toilet Policy may have potential equality, good relations and rural needs implications and will be subject to our normal screening process as appropriate.

The introduction of such a policy will present an opportunity for the council to promote positive attitudes towards disabled people and to encourage the participation of disabled people in public life."

The Governance and Compliance Manager explained that large scale events were classified as those with over 5,000 people attending and that there were approximately ten per annum held within the Council's estate.

She pointed to an error within the report, at 3.2, and clarified that it was planned that an application would be made to the Department for Communities' Access and Inclusion Programme in 2024/2025 to secure funding which could contribute towards the purchase of a mobile changing places unit for such events.

In response to a Member's question regarding the potential purchase of mobile changing places units for use at smaller scale public events, the Policy Research and Compliance Officer explained that it was his understanding that it could be problematic to determine which of the hundreds of small-scale events would be provided with the mobile units and which would not.

During discussion a number of Members stated that the legislative requirements were minimal and that the Council had to be ambitious and lead in order to make progress on the issue.

In response to a further Member's question, the Governance and Compliance Manager agreed to provide information to the Working Group in respect of the recently refreshed "Inclusive Events Guide", particularly who had been involved in the consultation and what changes had been made.

The Working Group thanked the officers involved for their hard work on the issue and adopted the recommendations within the report.

Disability Advisory Panel - Update

The Governance and Compliance Manager outlined that the Disability Advisory Panel (DAP) had been established in 2017 to advise, guide and support the Council in responding to the needs of Deaf and disabled people who lived, worked or visited Belfast. The Panel was made up of individuals with knowledge and personal experience of different types of disability.

She explained that the Panel met quarterly, where key Council consultations were presented to it by the relevant officer. As a result, the Panel could provide feedback based on their personal experiences and of other people with disabilities, thereby enabling officers to take away ideas and recommendations to identify solutions to accommodate the needs of people with disabilities.

The DAP had requested that Council officers would consider how best they could engage directly with Elected Members. It was suggested that the Members of the Disability Working Group be invited to attend the first item of the next meeting of the DAP, scheduled for Monday, 4th December at 2pm in 9 Adelaide. The meeting would follow an International Day of People with Disabilities event at the City Hall, to which both Disability Working Group members and the Disability Advisory Panel would be invited.

It was also suggested that a standing agenda item be added to the Disability Advisory Panel's agenda to allow for its members to raise any disability-related issues in the City. Officers would then follow up on those issues and would provide a summary and update to the Disability Working Group.

The Governance and Compliance Manager explained that, if Members were agreeable to the above two suggestions, a proposal would be made to amend the DAP's Terms of Reference.

During discussion, the Working Group agreed that it would be pleased to accept the invitation to join the Disability Advisory Panel for the item at its December meeting and that perhaps it could do so twice per annum going forward. A number of Members stated that it was also important that the Panel would retain its right to meet privately to discuss the rest of its agenda, without any elected Members present.

In response to a Member's question, the Language Officer explained that while no theme had yet been chosen for this year's International Day of People with Disabilities event in the City Hall, there would be a mix of presentations and performances and that they were working in conjunction with Disability Action to create another fantastic event.

In response to a further Member's question, he confirmed that he had useful data in relation to disability across the City and that he would share that information with the Members of the Working Group in advance of their meeting with the Director of City and Organisational Strategy on 16th October.

After discussion, the Working Group adopted the recommendations within the report.

Chairperson