

# Disability Working Group

Wednesday, 13th March, 2024

## DISABILITY WORKING GROUP HELD REMOTELY VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS

Members present: Councillor McMullan (Chairperson); and  
Councillors R. Brooks, G. McAteer and Smyth.

In attendance: Mrs. N. Largey, City Solicitor;  
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.

### Apologies

Apologies for inability to attend were reported from Alderman Copeland and Councillor Doherty.

### Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 30th January, 2024 were taken as read and signed as correct.

### Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were recorded.

### Belfast 2024

(Ms. N. Kelly, Project Officer (Engagement), and Ms. C. Osborne, Partnership Officer, attended in connection with this item)

The officers presented the following report:

#### **“University of Atypical Partnership**

**Belfast 2024 are working with partner University of Atypical which is disabled-led and the lead sectoral organisation for arts and disability.**

#### **Background:**

**Belfast City Council Culture Unit oversee a Partnership Agreement / MoU with University of Atypical which is renewed annually subject to an agreed work package. The focus in the past year and current year has been specifically focused on Belfast 2024. Belfast 2024 have**

University of Atypical as a named partner and are including their logo on their website [www.belfast2024.co.uk](http://www.belfast2024.co.uk).

University of Atypical are devising a training programme for the Project Leads of the commissioned projects within the programme, to advise them on accessibility. This training uses a roadmap approach to providing arts organisations with information on how they can make their event more inclusive and accessible. This service provides tools and resource including an inclusive event planner/checklist.

University of Atypical have also been part of the Bank of Ideas design team to ensure that this participatory budgeting process takes into account accessibility for applicants. The process is open to all including individuals and non-constituted groups to come up with a creative idea and be in with the chance to get up to 2K to fund it. Decisions are being made at voting events where the public decide what they want to happen in their area.

University of Atypical have informed the process and are advising on creating accessible guidance notes and forms. The University of Atypical are proposing to also provide application support to disabled applicants, in line with service they provide to the likes of the Arts Council grant applications.

**Belfast 2024 programme**

**Background:**

We are delighted to have a homegrown celebration of culture and creativity throughout 2024.

Belfast 2024 is a programme of world-class spectacle events, performances, and activities across the city. We launched the programme on 29 February 2024.

The city is invited to get involved through innovative participation opportunities from January, with a calendar of exciting live events taking place across the city from May and running through to December 2024. Check out the programme on [www.belfast2024.co.uk](http://www.belfast2024.co.uk)

**Belfast 2024 Project Profile – Hear, Touch, Feel**

"Touch, Hear, Feel" emerges as an immersive and multisensory installation crafted in collaboration with visually impaired communities. This ambitious project, produced by the Belfast International Arts Festival, delves into the realm of touch through original choreography, fabrics, audio, and video narratives.

A series of co-designed workshops, facilitated by Helen Hall in collaboration with the University of Atypical, Open Arts, and RNIB, span across Belfast, paving the way for an inclusive and transformative experience. As someone with sight loss Helen is

curious as to how her experience of interacting with the world around may differ from others.

The installation, located in public spaces, encompasses four interconnected areas, each separated by textural walls made from reclaimed materials. These spaces, dedicated to Words, Identity, Sound, and Smell, offer a free-standing promenade experience throughout the day.

Accompanying the sensory journey is an audio piece featuring discussions by members of the visually impaired community sharing their responses to touch. The spaces then undergo a metamorphosis, transforming into the stage for a new dance piece exploring the theme of touch. Choreographed by Helen and performed by herself and two other dancers, the audience embarks on a journey through space and narratives that explore touch without physical contact. The performance delves into the sound of touch and utilizes words to vividly describe textures and sensations.

In a pioneering move, creative audio description is seamlessly integrated, utilizing words that vividly describe texture and feeling—a departure from the traditional method of describing visual images, tailored specifically for audiences who have never had sight. Premiering as part of the Belfast 2024 program within the Belfast International Arts Festival (BIAF) in October 2024, "Touch, Hear, Feel" stands as a testament to the power of collaborative art in transcending physical boundaries and fostering inclusivity within the vibrant cultural tapestry of Belfast.

#### **Belfast 2024 Outreach and Engagement**

The NOW Group is supporting people with autism and learning disabilities – as part of a co-design pilot project in the run up to Belfast 2024 illustrator Elly Makem worked with the Fandom group to create their own comic book characters.

Gig Buddies is a project funded by the Culture Unit of Belfast City Council since 2017, that pairs adults with learning disabilities and/or autism with a volunteer, based on their shared interests, to build a friendship and attend monthly events together. Belfast 2024 Engagement Officer and Support Officer have delivered a 'Creative Me' session with the Gig Buddies group to promote events occurring in Belfast 2024.

- We produced an accessible version the creative citizens quiz, shortened and in simplified language, using dyslexie font, in large print with plain background, and got it embossed in braille through Open Arts.
- We had 10 info sessions including 7 people with visual impairments or blindness, one braille user; approx 40 adults with learning disabilities; 8 people with mobility impairments

**or wheelchair users; and five people with hearing loss; 5 people with autism.**

- **The launch event was held at a time of day when 2RA was accessible by taxi (note that the dept of infrastructure does not allow vehicular access to city centre in the middle of the day, even for disabled people). Public access from 2-7pm to include people with caring responsibilities, children etc.**
- **There was an Audio describer at the launch event for two visually impaired participants.**
- **We had captions on a large screen at the launch event, though this was difficult to see as the audience was standing. We developed a plan to make sure all audience members have line of sight to the captions screen or access captions on their phone.**
- **If possible we would like to ask people to sign up for events in advance, and share their access needs ahead so we can better accommodate them.**
- **We recorded the captions and audio description for the video and are passing these on to the media team to consider adding or provide alternate versions. We have requested that the media team include visual descriptions of all photos, and videos where possible, and that captions are added to all videos.”**

In response to a Member’s question, the Engagement Officer advised the Working Group that, if Members had any further suggestions of groups which the Team had not yet engaged with, to send their details onto her. The Partnership Officer confirmed that they were also working closely with the Health and Social Care Trust.

In relation to a Member’s question regarding isolated people who found reaching out hard, the officers advised the Working Group that the Council’s Corporate Communications Team would continue to promote the events as widely as possible on the Council website and its social media platforms. The City Solicitor agreed that officers would work with the Corporate Communications Team to determine the best ways of focusing on those people who were hard to reach and were not involved in community groups.

In response to a Member’s suggestion in relation to the Belfast 2024 website, the Engagement Officer agreed to look at having a dedicated section on the website outlining the accessible shows and events in one place.

In response to a further Member’s comment, the officers agreed that the Belfast 2024 Team would present its update to the Disability Advisory Panel.

The Working Group noted the update which had been provided.

## **Disability Champion**

The Working Group was informed that the Local Government Staff Commission (LGSC) for NI had written to the Council, in July 2023, requesting the appointment of Diversity Ambassadors within the Council as part of its on-going work to actively promote the equality and diversity agenda across Northern Ireland.

The Members were advised that both Members and senior Council officers had been nominated and appointed to champion other Section 75 groups. Those were as follows:

- Gender – Aine McCabe (Elected Member);
- LGBTQ+ - Micky Murray, Anthony Flynn and Séamas de Faoite (Elected Members) and Kate Bentley (Senior Officer); and
- Race – John Tully (Senior Officer).

The Working Group was advised that, at present, the Council did not have a Disability Ambassador and it was therefore being asked to make nominations.

The City Solicitor outlined that the role of a Diversity Ambassador would be to work within their Council and community to support and deliver the regional Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Strategy and to help to drive behavioural and cultural change across the local government sector.

It was reported that Diversity Ambassadors would receive regular training and support from the LGSC Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Group Secretariat, including:

- a guided review of the draft Equality Diversity and Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan;
- information on equality reports such as the Equality Baseline and Impact Study;
- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Training and updates; and
- cultural awareness and a positive attitude towards the provision of equitable services.

The Members were advised that a training programme had commenced, with the first workshop having already been completed. The second workshop, 'Delivering for the Community – Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and Service Provision', would take place on Thursday, 21st March, 2024, 1pm - 5.30pm at Lagan Valley Island, Lisburn. The third and final workshop would take place on 19th June, 2024, 1pm - 5.30pm. There would also be a 'Best Practice' Event on 10th October, 2024, 1pm - 6pm. The City Solicitor explained that at present, at least two Council officers represented the Council at each workshop.

During discussion a Member stated that he felt it was important that senior Council officers be nominated to the role, given the lack of a strategic approach towards disability in the City, and suggested that the Language Officer, Mr. M. Johnston, from the Council's Equality and Diversity Unit and the City Solicitor be put forward as the Council's Disability Ambassadors.

A number of Members expressed enthusiasm about the role and stated that they felt it was important that Elected Members would participate in the role of Ambassador as well, in order to provide political direction.

After discussion, the Working Group agreed to nominate the following four persons to be Disability Ambassadors, on behalf of Belfast City Council:

- Councillor Ruth Brooks;
- Councillor Geraldine McAteer;
- Ms. N. Largey, City Solicitor; and
- Mr. M. Johnston, Language Officer.

Given the interest in the training programme, and at the suggestion of the City Solicitor, the Working Group also agreed that she would approach the LGSC to enquire if all 6 Elected Members of the Disability Working Group could avail of the LGSC training workshops.

### **Disability Action Plan 2022-25**

The Language Officer advised the Working Group that, under Section 49B of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995, the Council was required to submit a Disability Action Plan, showing how it proposed to fulfil the duties in relation to its functions, to the Equality Commission.

The Members were advised that Section 49A of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (as amended by the Disability Discrimination (NI) Order 2006) required the Council, in carrying out its functions, to:

- promote positive attitudes towards disabled people; and
- encourage participation by disabled people in public life.

The Language Officer outlined that the Council's Disability Action Plan 2022-25 provided list of action measures under the aforementioned two functions. He highlighted that the Disability Action Plan would enter its final year in the next financial year (2024-25).

It was reported that a draft Annual Report for 2023-24 would be presented to the Disability Working Group in June 2024, with a view to the finalised Annual Report being submitted for approval by the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee in August/September 2024.

The Language Officer explained that an exercise would commence in September 2024 to draft and develop a new Disability Action Plan, covering 1st April 2025 to 31st March 2028. It was hoped that the draft Disability Action Plan for 2025-28 would go out for public consultation in early 2025.

Noted.

### **Changing Places Toilet Policy - Consultation Update**

The Policy, Research and Compliance Officer provided the Working Group with an overview of the response to the Consultation on the Changing Places Toilet draft Policy.

The Members were advised that 85% of the 63 respondents to date either agreed or somewhat agreed with the contents of the policy.

The Policy, Research and Compliance Officer explained that only a few of the responses were from stakeholder groups and that they were seeking to contact those who organised large scale events in the City for their feedback.

In response to a Member's suggestion, he agreed to engage with the Council's Events Team regarding contacting the Belsonic organisers.

A further Member stated that they would contact those who used Boucher Playing Fields to host large events and would ask them to respond to the consultation. She further added that it would be useful to engage directly with the Waterfront Hall and St. Comgall's Multi-use Community Hub.

The Working Group noted the update which had been provided.

### **Youth Council Meeting Update**

The Language Officer reported that the Youth Council had suggested meeting with the Disability Working Group on 8th April or 6th May, 2024. During discussion, it was agreed that, unfortunately, neither date suited the Members and that a date in September would be better.

It was further agreed that the meeting be combined with the Language Working Group, which was also keen to engage with the Youth Council. A mutually convenient date would be agreed with the Chairpersons of the Working Groups and circulated in due course.

### **'Not every disability is visible' signs - Cllr McMullan to raise**

At the request of Councillor McMullan, the City Solicitor agreed to liaise with facilities to place "Not every disability is visible" signage on all accessible toilets throughout the Council estate. She further agreed to submit a report to a future meeting in respect of extending the signage beyond the Council estate.

Chairperson