



Department for
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DfC Disability Action Plan Review 2020 – 2024

April 2025



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**A hard copy of the report, or a copy in a different format, can be provided
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1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Disability Action Plan (DAP) is an illustration of the Department for Communities (DfC) on-going commitment to the promotion of equality of opportunity for disabled people and complements its Equality Scheme under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

The plan, through the completion of actionable measures, outlines the Department's proposals for fulfilling its statutory obligations in compliance

with Section 49A of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA 1995) (as amended by Article 5 of the Disability Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 2006).

To ensure that the Disability Action Plan remains a living document, DfC has completed a review of its Disability Action Plan (2020-2024). This review highlights the key outcomes and outputs achieved by the Department over this period.

2. Purpose of the Report

- 2.1 The purpose of this report is to review the implementation of the Disability Action Plan 2020-24 (DAP 2020-24), which aimed to:

- promote positive attitudes towards disabled people;
- encourage the participation of disabled people in public life.

Public authorities in Northern Ireland must carry out a review of their Disability Action Plan within five years of its publication and forward a report of this review to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI).

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

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

3. Background

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| <p>3.1 In March 2021, the Minister for Communities approved the DAP 2020-24 for publication.</p> <p>3.2 The Department carried out a public consultation on the draft DAP between 20 July 2020 and 12 October 2020. The consultation document was placed on the Department's website and a consultee letter issued to all organisations and individuals on the Department's Section 75 consultee list.</p> <p>3.3 Prior to public consultation, three pre-engagement events were held with stakeholders from the disability sector, and feedback was also received from the Equality Commission. Following these events, the DAP was amended to address as far as possible the comments received.</p> | <p>3.4 The DAP can be changed throughout its lifespan which allows public authorities to update their action measures at any time.</p> <p>3.5 Progress on the Department's DAP is reported via an Annual Section 75 Equality Progress Report return to the ECNI. These annual reports can be viewed via the following link: S75 Annual Progress Reports</p> <p>3.6 DfC supports a wide range of statutory bodies which are designated public authorities in their own right and are required to produce their own Disability Action Plans. The DfC DAP therefore relates only to the activities of the core department and more information on the arts, creative industries, museums, libraries, sport and housing will feature in the published plans of our Arms Length Bodies (ALBs).</p> |
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4. Disability Action Plan

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| <p>4.1 A new DAP is being prepared for the period 1 April 2025 – 31 March 2030. It will take account of the issues identified in this review.</p> | <p>4.2 The Department has agreed that the plan will be treated as a living document and as such the Department will periodically review and update the plan during its life.</p> |
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5. What outcomes have been achieved to date

- 5.1 Table 1 below summarises the number of actions fully achieved, partly achieved or have not been achieved.

Table 1 – Final status of actions	
Status Key	No of actions
● Achieved	10
● Partly Achieved	6
● Not Achieved	2

- 5.2 Of the 10 completed actions, the following are of particular note:

Disability Employability Programmes

DfC has a wide range of disability specific and general labour market provision to help support people with disabilities to gain and sustain employment.

- 4,375 people supported through our suite of Employability Programmes.
- £9.5 million invested through Workable NI, Access to Work NI, Condition Management Programme and Employment Support Scheme.
- We supported 1,275 more people than the targeted 3,100 with less funding.

Disability and Work

During the development of policy and strategic direction across the Disability and Work agenda, this work included extensive stakeholder engagement, co-design and conducting research to inform our approach.

This work delivered and supported a range of employment and accessibility initiatives including:

- 420 disabled people into employment;
- 100 mentoring sessions delivered for young people with disabilities;
- Installation of a changing places facility and development of a social narrative virtual walkthrough of the International Convention Centre (ICC Belfast);
- Delivered a range of careers, skills, entrepreneurship and self-employment sessions for over 100 disabled people;
- Developed and informed the Department's strategic direction for Disability and Work policy;
- Improved disability and work centric stakeholder relationships through quarterly co-hosting of an engagement forum, and over 60 hours of collaborative strategy co-design;

- Improved the Department's understanding of the NI Disability and Work landscape through commissioning research, making this evidence and insight readily available to the public, and presenting findings across multiple channels and partners.

The United Nations “International Day of Persons with Disabilities” (IDPWD)

The United Nations “International Day of Persons with Disabilities” (IDPWD) takes place each year on 3 December and DfC has delivered an event annually since 2019 to mark the day. On 1 December 2023, and working in partnership with the University of Atypical (UoA), DfC delivered a celebratory IDPWD event at the Ulster Museum highlighting the work of Deaf, disabled, and neurodiverse artists from across Northern Ireland. The event, titled ‘Disability, Culture and the Arts - Developing a culture of inclusion’, was jointly opened by Jayne Brady, Head of NICS and Damien Coyle, Chief Executive of the University of Atypical.

The event included a panel discussion where five local artists, with a range of disabilities, shared their perspectives of the art scene and talked about their experiences of pursuing a career in the arts here. On display was as a range of artworks from UoA as well as a superb new piece of ceramic art commissioned by DfC to celebrate IDPWD.

In November 2022, the Department delivered an event at the Public Record Office in Belfast to mark the Day using the UN-chosen theme of ‘Transformative solutions for inclusive development: the role of innovation in fuelling an accessible and equitable world’. The event explored the changing perceptions of disability. Through the use of informative, interactive panels the exhibition (titled ‘Disability on the Record: Exploring Perceptions through Time’) challenged historic stereotypes and prejudices.

The event included Irish Sign Language and British Sign Language interpreters and its original run of two weeks was extended to allow as many people as possible to attend.

The exhibition toured around all 96 branch libraries in Northern Ireland, leaving a lasting legacy from the event.

In December 2021 a virtual event was held to mark the Day. For 2021 the UN chose the theme of *‘Leadership and participation of persons with disabilities toward an inclusive, accessible and sustainable post-COVID-19 world’*.

DfC co-hosted a celebratory Zoom event with Disability Sport NI. The event focused on disability sports - celebrating the success of our elite athletes at the Tokyo Games as well as grassroots disability sports here. Information on initiatives such as the 'Disability Sports Hubs' and the 'Accessible Outdoor Spaces Guide' were provided and the 'Active Living: No Limits' online portal was officially launched. A tweet was also issued to mark the date.

Urban Regeneration

The Department continued to actively encourage disabled people and representative groups to participate in working groups established for consultation and engagement in the development, design and delivery of capital infrastructure schemes. Belfast Regional Development undertook engagement with Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (IMTAC), Guide Dogs NI and RNIB to discuss designs developed for public realm projects in Belfast City Centre during a workshop in December 2022 and site walkabout in January 2023. An access consultant was commissioned for the project to independently assess the designs in terms of the needs of people with disabilities and to produce a report. As part of this process the disability representative groups were consulted with on two separate occasions to obtain their views.

Volunteering

To encourage greater participation in volunteering by people with a disability the Department delivered a new volunteering website and database in July 2020 which provides improved access to volunteering opportunities and better information about the needs of volunteers with disabilities. This is complemented by the Volunteering Infrastructure Support Programme, delivered by the six Independent Volunteer Centres and Volunteer Now which focuses on widening participation and reducing barriers to volunteering.

The volunteering infrastructure organisations funded by the Department continue to support increased accessibility and diversity of volunteering including opportunities for people with disabilities and to provide support with their needs in this regard.

Sign Language

The Sign Language Partnership Group (SLPG) was established as a forum to bring together the NI Executive Departments and key organisations representing the Deaf community to improve access to public services for members of the Deaf sign language community.

The Department's sign language budget provides support for a variety of projects and initiatives to promote British Sign Language (BSL) and Irish Sign Language (ISL). A key part of this is delivering vital early intervention sign language initiatives to improve the life outcomes for deaf children and young

people by developing their early years' language acquisition and communication with their family through a range of sign language courses.

In 2023/24 family sign language in the home training was delivered by The National Deaf Children's Society and the British Deaf Association to over 40 families to learn BSL alongside their children.

In 2022/23 the Family Sign Language Course was provided for 50 deaf children and their families, to help them acquire, or enhance sign language skills.

In 2021/22, 25 families with deaf children benefited from Family Sign Language courses to provide parents, siblings and the wider family with sign language skills to develop communication as a family with their young deaf children; seven new BSL signed video stories highlighting a diverse range of deaf role models for deaf children, in addition 21 previously produced stories were transferred onto the British Deaf Association website, for ease of access; and six new signed family vocabulary videos were added to National Deaf Children's Society YouTube channel.

DfC has funded sign language qualifications from basic Level 1 to degree equivalent Level 6 enabling four families to access BSL Level 1 courses, while 12 parents of young deaf children and six professionals who support deaf children were provided with BSL Levels 3-4. This will provide the linguistic skills necessary to support their deaf children as they develop their own signing skills.

The Department has funded deaf awareness and sign language workshops in over 20 schools for up to 550 children across all school sectors to promote sign language and develop deaf-friendly learning environments for deaf children; a pilot project providing in school face to face sign language classes for three deaf children, their peers and staff, in one selected primary school; and 30 sessions of BSL signed stories and vocabulary for eight deaf children, their two teachers and two classroom assistants in one selected primary school.

Public Appointments

As of 31 March 2024, the Department continues to implement a range of activities to reach out to as wide a pool of potential candidates for public appointment opportunities:

- Offer of the Guaranteed Interview Scheme and reasonable support in each competition.
- During the year, three competitions attracted seven candidates who applied under this scheme and assistance has included the use of video-conferencing technology, as well as support to attend interviews in person.
- Continued outreach through a variety of measures, including alerting all those organisations on the Department's Section 75 consultee list (which includes disability groups) to opportunities, and a wide range of social media activity.
- Focus on diversity throughout public appointment competitions. This includes appointing a Commissioner for Public Appointments NI (CPANI) independent representative on each selection panel, who ensures the Department fully considers its diversity responsibilities.
- Regular engagement with the office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments NI (CPANI) including co-delivering workshops with CPANI to members of the public on 'Demystifying the Public Appointments Process.'

- The Public Appointments Annual Report provides statistical data relating to public appointments. The most recent available is for the period 2021-22: <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/topics/public-appointments-reports>

Move to Universal Credit

As part of the planning and development of the next phase of implementing Universal Credit - Move to UC, the Department aimed to include appropriate representation by disability groups as part of its external stakeholder engagement.

To date the Move to UC programme has directly engaged with 11 stakeholder organisations that provide targeted support to people with disabilities. This engagement will continue throughout the lifecycle of Move to UC. The Move to UC programme has utilised the feedback from these stakeholder organisations to develop a customer journey and support offer for anyone with an enhanced support need.

Communication

Education and awareness are key to creating an inclusive workplace environment. The Department's Diversity & Inclusion Steering Group published several intranet articles and features throughout the year that shone a light on a number of areas including:

- Visible and hidden disabilities
- Working carers
- Focus on ADHD
- Supporting autistic people

National Inclusion Week

Raising the profile on disability is always a key theme for the DfC Diversity and Inclusion Steering Group. Highlighting the strengths that difference can bring to both our personal and working lives, helps to break down the stigma. The Steering Group hosted a series of spotlight articles on the intranet to mark Neurodiversity Celebration Week to highlight the different ways we can process information and to provide signposting support.

Throughout the week the articles highlighted the various neurodiversities and heard from colleagues across the department about their unique experiences, including a webinar, hosted by our colleagues in the Disability and Work Branch, focusing on young people with disabilities who took part in the DfC JobStart Specialist Pathway Pilot project, providing first-hand experience from those who have since gained full time employment within DfC. Other articles designed to better support our customers and colleagues needs featured Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), autism and dyslexia.

The Steering Group wished to showcase people's differences and strengths on an easily accessible platform.

Following consultation with DfC Disability Policy Branch and Disability Action NI, Corporate Communications arranged and provided funding for the capturing of several professional photographs depicting people with a range of disabilities in a positive and active context. This was achieved by end of March 2022. Some of these images have been used in recent Personal Independence Payment (PIP) publications.

These images and others where appropriate will be used in future DfC communications both internally and externally. Due regard must also be paid to the Department depicting 'hidden disabilities' and as broad and diverse a representation of people in our society as possible.

6.0 Additional steps

6.1 DfC Diversity and Inclusion Hub

The DfC Diversity and Inclusion Hub, launched in February 2022, is an online resource designed to signpost sources of support and information available to colleagues and to promote diversity, equality, and inclusivity across the Department. The Hub hosts a wealth of supporting information and guidance including supporting strategies and diversity action plans.

It is also a dedicated space where staff will find personal stories, awareness articles, and wider pieces involving our people, ranging from disability awareness to celebrating Pride. Understanding differences and having colleagues across the department to relate to, is crucial for people to feel accepted and creates a more harmonious working environment.

6.2 Harkin 2022

Belfast hosted the Harkin International Disability Employment Summit in June 2022. This placed an international spotlight on the disability and work agenda, building awareness and international relationships and challenging attendees to reflect on what they can do to make workplaces more inclusive for disabled people.

The hybrid event at ICC Belfast attracted 640+ in-person and virtual delegates, representing 28 countries, to highlight key issues and best practice on disability employment and inclusion, in the form of keynote presentations, workshops and mentoring sessions.

7.0 Training

7.1 Table 2 provides an overview of the formal disability related training undertaken by DfC staff.

Table 2 Staff Training April 2020 – March 2024

Course	Attendees
Positive Mental Health Toolkit for Line Managers	135
Positive Mental Health Toolkit for All Staff	449
Recruitment and Selection – Legislation	294
Recruitment and Selection – Refresher Training for SCS (Webinar)	10
Recruitment and Selection – Standards and Skills	356
Supporting Vulnerable People E-Learning	3,730
Supporting Autistic People (e-learning)	383
Intro to Section 75	296
Introduction to Human Rights	42
Policy Making & Human Rights	13
Safeguarding Children and Young People (e-Learning)	3,259
Section 75 Duties - A Focus On Screening	34
Section 75 Duties - Section 75 Duties and Equality Assessments	24
Introduction to Diversity and Inclusion	5982
Disability Awareness for frontline staff	68
Unconscious Bias	11,427
Total	26,502

7.2 As part of the ongoing NICS campaign to become a JAM card accredited friendly employer, DfC colleagues have been completing a short training package to raise awareness of the JAM card and who uses it. With over 77% of colleagues having completed the training, DfC is proud to now be classed as JAM Card Friendly employer.

The JAM Card allows people with a communication difficulty to inform a service provider that they need Just A Minute of patience and understanding and is a simple and discreet way of letting someone you want to talk to, or who wants to talk to you, know that you need a little more time.

7.3 In May 2023, DfC Work Psychology Service (WPS) facilitated a series of six online events for frontline staff on 'Supporting Customers with a Learning Disability' in partnership with Mencap. The aim of these Capacity Building Events (CBEs) included enhancing staff's knowledge and understanding of this customer group, developing appropriate communication styles, as well as increasing staff confidence in their ability to support these customers and provide an overview of support organisations to signpost customers to. Across the six events, a total of 627 staff attended and evaluation feedback was very positive.

7.4 In 2021 DfC developed a toolkit for employer facing staff that supports awareness and confidence when engaging with employers to promote the value of employing those with disabilities and health conditions. This product was co-designed with disability organisations and included a 'compelling story' narrative, myth busting, advice on overcoming barriers, and connectivity to resources and services within the voluntary and community sector.

Following the launch of the toolkit the Department co-designed, with members of the DfC Disability Stakeholder Forum, an annual programme of awareness training for employer facing staff within the Department and the disability sector. This training focused on building general awareness of disability employment, sharing lived experience of disabilities in work, setting out legislative responsibilities and good practice, and building better relationships and connectivity between Departmental and disability sectoral employer facing staff. The purpose is to better support employers to be more confident and aware in offering more inclusive employment practices. The training has been delivered annually to over 180 employer facing staff across four workshops.

7.5 The DfC Diversity & Inclusion Steering Group are a group of volunteers who regularly come together to discuss all things related to diversity and inclusion across our Department and identify a number of key issues to take forward within the yearly Action Plans. Chaired by the DfC Diversity Champion, the group meet regularly throughout the year with the aim of creating and maintaining an inclusive workplace culture within the Department, where we each understand and value differences and gain insight through different perspectives. Additionally, group members have the opportunity to contribute to the development of staff communications, offering insight on topical issues and promoting awareness events.

The Steering Group was instrumental in the development and launch of 'Neurodiversity: NICS Line Manager's

Toolkit'. The concept and toolkit were developed by the Steering Group initially for use by line managers in DfC. However, recognising that it could support line managers across the NICS, the Steering Group engaged with NICS People & Organisational Development colleagues throughout 2023-24 to ensure the toolkit was launched as NICS-wide guidance. The toolkit launched on 17 April 2024 and will support line managers to better support neurodivergent colleagues and maximise the skills they have to offer. The Steering Group are now planning how best to disseminate the guidance across the Department to ensure everyone is aware of it and it is used particularly as we bring neurodivergent colleagues into the office more as part of the DfC Hybrid Working Review.

8.0 What remains to be done?

- 8.1 The Department committed to keep disability legislation under review and to introduce new legislation as appropriate.

To date, the existing disability legislative framework has not been formally reviewed. Stakeholder engagement as part of the Disability Strategy co-design process confirmed a demand for the existing disability legislative framework to be reviewed and consideration to be given to potential reform to ensure that the disability laws here are fit for purpose and robust. Ensuring that deaf and disabled people in Northern Ireland enjoy the same rights as everyone else is a key priority for the Minister, and he has instructed officials to take forward work in relation to the development of an Executive Strategy. This work will include consideration of the need for review, and reform, of disability legislation here. Any plan to conduct such a review and timings for cross-cutting legislation will be subject to Executive agreement.

- 8.2 The Department for Communities (DfC) was responsible for the rollout of the Uniting Communities through Sport and Creativity programme, one of seven headline actions included in the Executive's Together: Building a United Community (TBUC) strategy.

One of the aims of the T:BUC Uniting Communities programme was to raise awareness of, and encourage involvement from, young people with disabilities, using sport and creativity to engage in activities that support increased participation in public life.

The COVID-19 pandemic proved to be a very challenging time in the early days of the programme but by 2022/23 of the 316 young people engaged with the Uniting Communities Sporting Programme, 20% indicated they had a disability.

Due to significant budget constraints a decision was made in June 2023 to close the programme.

9.0 How to meet the challenges identified?

9.1 One of the main challenges will be to sustain the improvements achieved in face of increasing budgetary pressures.

9.2 While substantial steps have been made in increasing staff knowledge and awareness of disability, it is acknowledged that more can still be done. We must continue to train and inform staff and stakeholders about relevant issues and to report progress. Continued high level commitment and good communication are central to building on the successes of our previous Disability Action Plan.

9.3 To promote awareness and understanding of difficulties faced by people with a disability and to ensure their voice is heard there needs to be continued engagement and interaction with the sector.

Both formal and informal consultation processes have always involved close contact with stakeholders, the public and end-users.

However the development of the co-design process helps further embed and structure this process.

The Department has acknowledged this, adopting the models of co-production and co-design in the development of the social inclusion strategies and it is essential we ensure our policy development process involves partnership with stakeholders, with those who are most likely to be impacted by the implementation, including those people with a disability.

9.4 The Department will also continue to ensure that our services and information remain accessible to both staff and customers with a disability and are improved wherever possible.

9.5 As lead Department with responsibility for developing the Executive's Disability Strategy the next steps in this work will provide the opportunity to set out an ambitious programme of work which will aim to improve the lives of deaf and disabled people living in Northern Ireland.

10.0 Conclusion

- 10.1 The Department has made good progress during the period of this review. In a difficult financial climate, the challenge is to maintain and build on our achievements to date in order to ensure that we are meeting the needs of people with disabilities. The Department remains committed to working with our staff and stakeholders in the fulfilment of the two disability duties:
- promote positive attitudes towards disabled people; and
 - encourage participation by disabled people in public life.
- 10.2 This review will help to inform the development of the new Disability Action Plan for 2025-2030.

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