

DISABILITY STRATEGY



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Progress to date

Belfast City Council is making Belfast a better place for everyone.

Its vision for the city –

Becoming a better place to live, work and visit

aims to make Belfast a modern and welcoming city with a quality of life to rival the best in the world.

The four corporate objectives of

- Providing Civic Leadership,
- Improving Quality of Life, Now and for Future Generations
- Promoting Good Relations
- Delivering Best Services

shape the current and future direction of all Council services, facilities and activities and develop the Council's work in equality, community relations and cultural diversity.

The Council is committed to providing equality of opportunity in carrying out its services and functions and in the leadership it provides. It is committed to meeting and proactively seeks ways to go beyond the statutory legal requirements that includes Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the Human Rights Act 1998 and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

All work relating to disability is organised through the inter-departmental Disability Access Group (DAG) comprising of people who are responsible for policy-making, technical aids and buildings, customer service and human resources. The Disability Access Group consults annually with organisations concerned with disability issues about the Council's approach to accessibility and their responses have been included in the Disability Strategy.



Disability Strategy

The Disability Strategy represents the Council's policy on disability access issues.

The development of the Disability Strategy enables the Council to further promote its work in making its services, activities, facilities and buildings accessible for disabled people.

Accessibility

Access is about how:

- people approach buildings, get in, move around and leave
- people obtain goods, use services and facilities
- people who provide services communicate

The 2001 Census shows that almost 45% of households in Belfast include one or more disabled persons or people with a long-term health problem. It is important that all the Council's facilities are welcoming, approachable and accessible to citizens, workers and visitors. This means that disabled people must be able to access all Council buildings and services, with or without the help of friendly staff, trained in disability issues.

Legal requirements

Legal requirements mean that people with a wide range of disabilities can now enjoy access to goods, services and activities as a right. The law covers, for example, those with dyslexia, mental ill health, speech impairment and eczema, as well as those with learning and physical disability and sensory impairment.



Access Audits and Programme of Works

Extensive access audits have been carried out to ensure that Council buildings comply with the legal requirements of the DDA Act(1995). The Council has undertaken a rolling programme of work with a view to removing, where reasonably practical and within resource limitations, all physical obstacles to access.

The British Standards 8300 Code of Practice has been adopted as the Council's universal standard for the design and improvements of its buildings. This is a high standard that will more than meet the minimum requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act. All new works will be designed to this standard and the Council is currently upgrading buildings and facilities owned, managed or leased by the Council.

Alarms and emergency evacuation procedures appropriate to the needs of all, irrespective of ability, are being continually revised. Sessions covering emergency evacuation are included in general health and safety training programmes and visual alarms are fitted where reasonably practicable.

Achievements

The Council is a member of the Business Support Scheme operated by Disability Action in partnership with Invest Northern Ireland. The aim of this Scheme is to encourage good practice in disability issues within the workplace, to improve services for disabled people and to acknowledge achievements. Working in this context, the achievements of the Disability Access Group to date include:



- In 2002, the City Hall won the William Keown Trust Award for Accessibility
- Nine Council public toilets/changing facilities have won the National Loo of the Year Award.
- The Council was awarded recognition from Disability Action for completing the standards set within their Business Support Scheme.
- Waterfront Hall???

Communication

The Council is committed to consulting in a meaningful and realistic way and continues to be part of the debate on access issues with the disability sector. By discussing issues important to disabled people, the Council has made it clear that it welcomes suggestions and challenges that will improve its services.

The Council will continue to network with disability and other agencies in Belfast, use its influence to examine the processes that can cause social exclusion and address broader policy issues. Yearly conferences with Section 75 groups and regular screening of policies will highlight any factors that discriminate by making a particular service less accessible to disabled people. In this way, any policy or practice identified as discriminating will be addressed immediately.

Human Resources

Training

An essential part of the Council's vision for Belfast is the continuing development of an informed, respectful, and sensitive workforce. It is therefore committed to the design and delivery of an extensive disability awareness-training programme for its employees.

Disability Access Awareness presentations have been made to Councillors, Chief Officers, and departmental management teams. Furthermore employees are encouraged to learn and use sign language as appropriate.

Employment

The Council welcomes job applications from all Section 75 groups. In conjunction with Disability Action, the Council participates in the Employment Support Scheme for disabled people.

All permanent vacancies are notified to the Disability Advisory Officer at the Training and Employment Agency.

The Council recognises that disabled people are currently under-represented in its workforce. The implementation of the recommendations listed in the Council's workforce analysis are designed to address the imbalance. However, while the Council has extended its Community Outreach initiative to promote employment opportunities for disabled people, there are still very few job applicants from those with disabilities.

The Council will continue to make positive efforts to increase the number of applications from candidates with disabilities and will investigate the reasons that prevent people from taking this opportunity. The Council will also continue to contribute to careers events targeted towards disabled people and work closely with further education colleges.



Accessible information

The Council is committed to producing clear, concise and user-friendly information. The Council endeavours to Crystal Mark public documents for easier understanding. This is reflected in publications like the Rates leaflet, City Matters, and the Good Relations Strategy.

Alternative formats

The Council provides information in alternative formats, for example, in Braille, disc, large print and audiocassette on request.

Accessible website

The Council is committed to ensuring that its website is accessible. The Council's website is being redeveloped to conform to the most up to up to date disability guidelines.

The following changes and improvements are being progressed:

- external validation at the early stages of website design. The Council is promoting good practice by compiling and circulating guidelines on developing accessible websites to all appropriate staff. The Council is developing an accessible text-only alternative to its website as an easy-access channel for disabled people.
- maximising digital inclusion and implementing Browsealoud, a subscription service that provides a speech-enabled website. The client-side program required to use this service will be downloaded free of charge from the Council's website.

The way forward



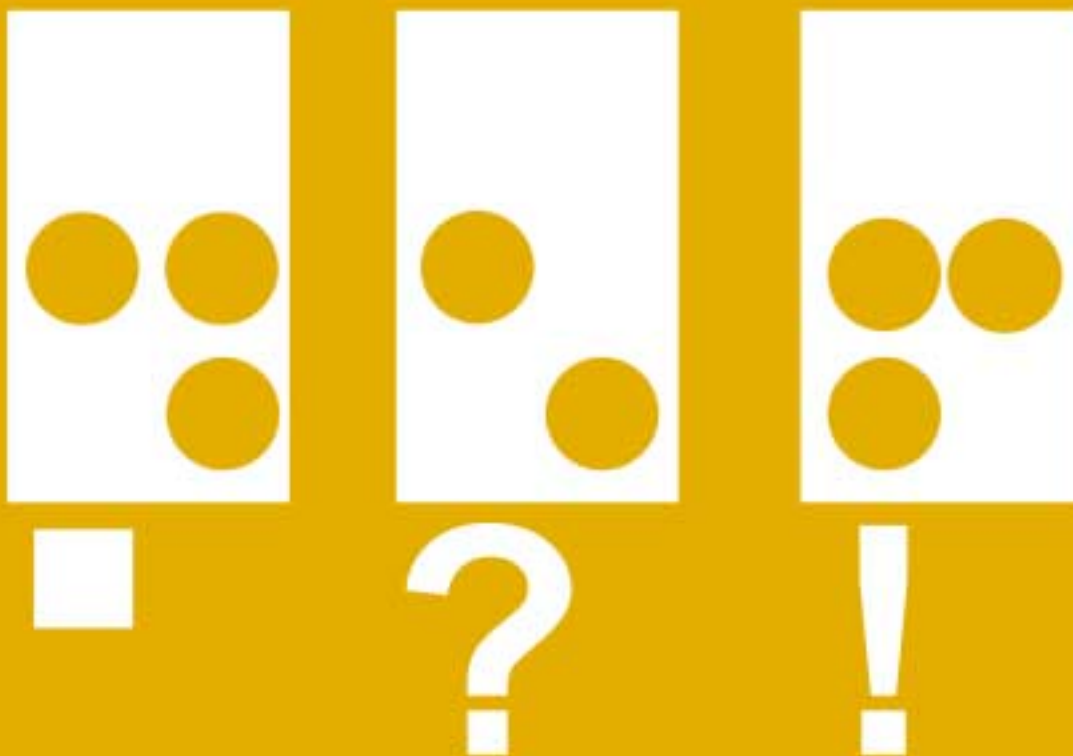
Belfast City Council is proud of its record in delivering services and offering facilities in ways that make it easier for disabled people, together with their families and friends, to have the same opportunities as people who do not have disabilities. The Council will continue to monitor accessibility and update and improve its services ensuring that disability access issues are integrated into the culture of the organisation.

The Council is committed to putting physical access and disability-friendly attitudes at the heart of service provision and facilities. It seeks to build on the achievements to date and appreciates there is always room for improvement. It intends to tackle the social exclusion often experienced by disabled people and provide leadership by:

- adapting and being responsive to change
- demonstrating best practice
- setting standards
- working towards a truly representative work force that seeks to respect, value and harness individual differences
- acting as role model for public services in managing diversity
- promoting equality of opportunity and adhering to international standards of human rights
- tackling unjust discrimination through strong and effective laws

Future work: choices and implementations

Identification of equality issues and adaptations for the future will continue to impact on resources - human, financial and buildings. The benefits will, however, be worthwhile.



The implementation of the Disability Strategy signals to employees, citizens and visitors that the Council takes access for disabled people seriously.

It will help to realise the Council's vision for a 'stable, tolerant, fair and pluralist society, where individuality is respected and diversity is celebrated in an inclusive manner'. Therefore, the Council has proposed areas of improvement in disability access that includes the following commitments.

Disability Strategy

- A Council-wide Strategy and commitment from Chief Officers, undertaking to provide access for disabled people, will be agreed and communicated to all workers.
- The Disability Access Group will manage the implementation of the Disability Strategy.
- Disability access will be considered for every service, facility and activity the Council offers, or intends to offer.
- The Council will plan and anticipate the need for adjustments in policy.
- The Council will test and challenge the notion of 'reasonableness' with regard to the need for adjustments in policy.
- All department budgets will reflect accessibility adjustments and alternative format costings.
- Internal Staff focus groups will be established for employees with disabilities to address relevant issues.



Access Audits and Programme of Works

The Council will test and challenge the notion of 'reasonableness' with regard to the need for adjustments in how services are provided and facilities are offered to employees, citizens and visitors.

The Council will plan and anticipate the need for adjustments in how services are provided to employees, citizens and visitors.

All tendering documents will request contractors to be aware of our Good Relations Strategy which outlines our commitment to Equality and Good Relations and our obligations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

The Corporate Signage Group was established to plan and implement a policy about signs that indicate use of rooms and provide

directions. The group continues to research best practice and improve service. New guidelines are being developed and will be incorporated into the Signage Technical Design Guidelines for the Council.

Communication

The Disability Access Group will continue to consult with disabled individuals and disability organisations in order to understand preferences and requirements.

Improving customer focus generally has been identified as a priority for the Council. We are particularly keen to improve our service where a member of the public has identified it as less than satisfactory. The Council will be looking at ways to make it easier for people to complain when they are dissatisfied with the service they receive.



Customer feedback and the complaints systems will be made available and accessible to disabled people. This type of communication will make use of the existing corporate complaints system and the equality complaints system.

We will consider and seek out solutions from the disabled community in relation to improving services provided the Council. Employees will be encouraged to provide feedback on the effects of access improvements and identify gaps for the Disability Access Group.

Contact will be maintained with sources of advice and information about disability access. For example, the Employers' Forum on Disability, Disability Action, Shopmobility, AbilityNet, Mencap, Royal National Institute for the Blind, Royal National Institute for Deaf People and other regional, national and international organisations.

Promotion of the Council's progress

The Council will promote its work in accessibility through:

- the Open Doors and Minds campaign by using community centres to display posters and disseminate leaflets
- the involvement of the media in promoting the Council's achievements to date and plans for the future
- consultation with health and social services trusts
- existing events like Information Day, induction training, Disability Discrimination Act audits and other initiatives
- improving access on web site
- informing disabled people and disability organisations of changes made to policy and services
- sharing good practice with other agencies
- outlining improvements and progress in the Council's Corporate Plan.



Human Resources

Disability awareness training programmes, geared towards the needs of Council employees is ongoing.

The Council will actively promote employment opportunities for disabled people and continue its efforts to resolve the problem of under-representation of disabled people in its workforce.

Employee monitoring will be developed to assist us in analysing the composition of our workforce.

Accessible information

In order to demonstrate its commitment to website accessibility, the Council plans to draft and publish its written statement of intent on its current website.

The Council will consider a range of alternative formats for accessible information, for example: subtitling and sign language interpretation for video and television, text-to-speech, text-to-Braille and computer-enhanced or enlarged text for discs and email.

Thought has been given to the way the Council presents information to young people and those with a learning disability. Alternative formats that make use of pictures, symbols and diagrams are planned.

The Council's website will be up-dated periodically to include more user friendly information.



Implementation of the Strategy

Monitoring and Evaluation

The effectiveness of policy and accessibility of services, activities, facilities and buildings will be monitored and reviewed with disabled employees, citizens, visitors and disability organisations and findings acted upon.

Detailed action plans, identifying targets, will be produced to ensure the delivery of the strategy. In order to increase the number of disabled employees, the Council will monitor and evaluate its employment selection procedures on an ongoing basis.

Continuing consultation with representative groups will ensure that:

- that we are reporting and reviewing the progress of the Disability Strategy on an ongoing basis
- information is monitored and reviewed for accessibility



For further information contact:

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Information contained in the Council's
Disability Strategy is available in accessible
formats

– Braille, Large print, disc, audiocassette and
minority languages.

Belfast City Council welcomes your
comments on our Disability Strategy. Please
contact the Council with any suggestions
for improvement in the way disabled people
access services, facilities and buildings.

Thank you.

