



DISABILITY ACTION PLAN

2022 - 2027

Equality contact details:

Lisa Cherry
Electoral Office for NI
St Anne's House
15 Church Street
Belfast
BT1 1ER

Tel: 02890 446671
Email: lisa.cherry@eoni.org.uk

This report covers the period 1 April 2022 – 31 March 2027 and can be found on the EONI website www.eoni.org.uk.

It is available in a range of alternative formats on request.

1. Introduction

1.1 Under section 49A of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (as amended by Article 5 of the Disability Discrimination (NI) Order 2006) the Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) , through the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI), is required, when carrying out his functions, to have due regard to the need to:

- promote positive attitudes towards disabled people; and
- encourage participation by disabled people in public life ('the disability duties').

Under Section 49B of the DDA 1995, EONI is also required to submit to the Equality Commission a disability action plan showing how it proposes to fulfil these duties in relation to its functions.

1.2 The CEO and his colleagues are committed to implementing effectively the disability duties and this disability plan. We will allocate all necessary resources (in terms of people, time and money) in order to do this, and build objectives and targets relating to the disability duties into corporate and annual business plans.

We will also put appropriate internal arrangements in place to ensure that the disability duties are complied with and that this disability action plan is effectively implemented. We will ensure the effective communication of the plan to staff on the disability duties and the implementation of the plan.

We confirm our commitment to submitting an annual progress report to the Equality Commission on the implementation of this plan as well as carrying out a five year review of this plan.

We are committed to consulting with people with disabilities in the implementation and review of this plan.

Responsibility for implementing, reviewing and evaluating this disability action plan and the point of contact within EONI will be

Lisa Cherry
Head of Business Support
Email: lisa.cherry@eoni.org.uk

If you require this plan in an alternative format (such as in large print, in Braille, audio, easy read or on computer disc) and/or language, please contact the above person to discuss your requirements. Calls are welcome via Text Relay.

1.3 A copy of this plan will be made available on EONI's website www.eoni.org.uk.

1.4 Functions

The arrangements for electoral administration in Northern Ireland are different from elsewhere in the United Kingdom. The system in Northern Ireland is administered centrally by the CEO who is a statutory office holder independent of Government and is assisted by the staff of EONI. The main duties of the CEO are:

- to act as Registration Officer for all constituencies in NI and to maintain the electoral register, a list of the names and addresses of all those entitled to vote;
- to act as Returning Officer for all elections and referendums in NI;

- to secure so far as reasonably practicable that the statutory registration objectives are achieved;
- each year to submit a report to the Secretary of State on how she has performed her duties and on the extent to which the registration objectives have been achieved;
- to act as an assessor to the Boundary Commission for NI;
- to act as an assessor to the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner;
- to lead and manage EONI.

EONI is the name given to an administrative structure which supports the CEO in the performance of her duties. There are four departments in EONI comprising Finance & Logistics, Operations Team, Data Services and the Business Support Unit which includes helpline, Electoral ID cards, Human Resources and maintains EONI's website.

Registration:

EONI operates a system of continuous registration allowing electors to be added to, amend their details on, or be removed from the register throughout the year. A revised electoral register is published on 1 December each year and a list of alterations to the register is published each month. The Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006 abolished the annual canvass in Northern Ireland. Instead of an annual canvass, provision is made for the Secretary of State to direct that a canvass should take place if it is considered that the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the electoral register has fallen below an acceptable level. Further it required that the CEO secure, as far as reasonably practical, registration objectives aimed at maintaining an accurate and comprehensive electoral register and provided him with new powers to require certain public sector organisations to provide him with information to enable her to carry out her registration duties.

Elections:

All EONI staff are involved in the smooth running of elections and referendums in Northern Ireland, ensuring that Section 75 obligations are taken into account when organising polling stations throughout Northern Ireland to afford all registered electors an equal opportunity to exercise their right to vote in suitable premises. EONI is required to carry out a polling station review every four years.

The Electoral Commission is an independent body from EONI and is responsible for voter awareness and reporting on elections and registration. EONI is liaising with the Electoral Commission and the sector around new accessibility requirements flowing from the Elections Act

The CEO through the Electoral Office is responsible for the implementation of the above functions, however, it is Ministers through Parliament who formulate and legislate to determine electoral policy.

1.5 Public Life Positions

Although the CEO has no direct responsibility for appointments to public life positions she will, within the boundaries of the statutory framework under which she operates, do what is possible to ensure that people with disabilities are not disadvantaged when standing as candidates in elections for which she has responsibility.

2 Previous Measures

Outlined below are the key measures which the CEO has already taken to promote positive attitudes towards disabled people and encourage the participation of disabled people in public life.

- Recommendations to NIO to amend the law to make it less difficult for those with a disability to engage in the democratic process.
- Legislation introduced for circumstances where, because of blindness or other disability, election candidates are unable to sign a nomination paper, home address form or consent to nomination they may instead make their mark, which must be witnessed.
- Accessibility initiatives to improve access to office premises, polling places and website.
- Provision of forms and guidance documents in various accessible formats.
- Engagement and consultation with organisations representing various disability groups and outreach initiatives.
- Reasonable adjustments and revised working practices including revision of recruitment policy.
- Equality/Diversity awareness training for all permanent staff.

The EONI have created a virtual counter for those members of the public who are unable to attend in person. This was developed during the pandemic but is available to the public when required and the political parties were made aware.

The EONI delivered the first polling station programme of its kind in the UK to assist those with sight impairment with a phone line service outlining all the candidates and parties the voter could choose from. We continue to work with RNIB to deliver further accessibility in polling stations

3. Action Measures

Outlined below are the measures which we propose to take over the period of this disability action plan, together with performance indicators and targets.

Draft Disability Action Plan 2022 - 2027

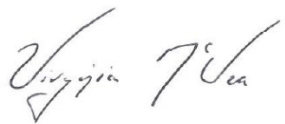
Action measures to promote attitudes to disabled people and to encourage participation by disabled people in public life.

Intended Outcome	Measures	Performance Indicators	Timescale / Responsibility
Encourage participation in public life	Continue to develop links with disabled people and their representative groups to develop ongoing communication and engagement in relation to the work of the Electoral Office.	Effectiveness of improvements made following feedback from disabled people and their representative organisations. Extent to which it influences decision making and incorporating into EONI's corporate and business planning.	Annually CEO/BSU
	Work with young people in schools through CCEA collaborative projects with packages of materials for teachers and pupils	Increase in attainer registration rates	2022 – 25 SMT
	Changes in relation to polling stations and count centres	Decrease in level of complaints in relation to accessibility of polling stations. Developments for those with disabilities	2023 – 25 SMT

	Digital and system enhancements to enable access to all services	Website developments and reviewing virtual counter by 31 December 2023.	2022-24 BSU/IT
	Work with the Department of Education and parties following on from our new data analysis programme tracking levels of registration per schools	Number of pupils in schools who should be registered against actual.	2022-25 Data Services BSU
	Work with young people not in work or education with voluntary bodies such as start 360 providing registration support and information on voting explanations	Increase in registration rates	2023-27 BSU Operations
	Providing more material on social media explaining how voting works and taking the public through any forms to be completed line by line	Number of videos produced for website	2023-27 BSU
	Increased sharing of information on polling day	New system and tools to track turnout per polling station and the plan is to track election to election, using new technology.	2023-25 Data Services
	The new Elections Act 2022 and requirements around accessibility	Roll out of measures in polling stations such as pencil grips and signage	2023-27 Finance & Logistics

Promote positive attitudes	Reviewing and developing the design and roll out of eLearning to integrate disability training for polling station staff	Improve poll staff performance and accessibility of voters	2023-27 BSU
	Supporting staff who require reasonable adjustments and their managers	Improve staff well-being	2023-27 SMT
	New legal administrative tool to collate all electoral legislation and create a new accessible learning package	Develop accessible AEA accreditation	2023-27 SMT
	Work to support those in residential care and projects with RQIA	New data analysis to track registrations per facility	2023-27 SMT
Promote positive attitudes and encourage participation in public life	To invite all disabled job applicants who meet the essential criteria to an interview for permanent vacancies.	Increase in applications from candidates with disabilities.	2023-27 BSU

Signed by:



Virginia McVea
Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland