



**Comments from Imtac about the Public Consultation
the draft NI Executive Disability Strategy 2025-2035**

(Draft)

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About Imtac

The Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (Imtac) is a committee of disabled people and older people as well as others including carers and key transport professionals. Its role is to advise Government and others in Northern Ireland on issues that affect the mobility of Deaf people, disabled people and older people. The aim of Imtac is to ensure that Deaf people, disabled people and older people have the same opportunities as everyone else to travel when and where they want.

Imtac receives support from the Department for Infrastructure (herein after referred to as the Department).

Background

The 30th anniversary of the establishment of the current Northern Ireland Assembly is approaching. Throughout this period Imtac, and our predecessor organisation The Transport Advisory Committee, has worked closely with successive Executives, local and direct rule Ministers, MLAs, and officials from a range of Departments. The Committee was selected by the then Minister for Communities to sit on the Disability Strategy Co Design group in 2020¹ and our representative co-chaired the Group with DfC officials.

As an organisation run by Deaf and Disabled people we, uniquely for Northern Ireland, have ensured that Deaf and Disabled people's voices have been prioritised and heard at the highest levels when discussing issues that impact our lives. Given our extensive lived experience of the daily oppression faced by Deaf and Disabled people, our experience of working with Government at the highest level and our direct experience working on the Disability Strategy, the Committee believes it is well placed to judge whether the draft Strategy will have the impact that we believe is required to improve our lives.

Context to our comments

In considering a response to the draft Strategy it is important to examine the wider context including the progress that has been made by

¹ For information see <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/articles/new-disability-strategy>

Government in Northern Ireland advancing the rights of Deaf and Disabled people. In making its comments the Committee acknowledges that there have been lengthy periods during the last 28 years when the Assembly and Executive has been suspended when making progress has been difficult or impossible.

Since 1998 the Northern Ireland Executive has failed to put in place an effective strategy for improving the lives of Deaf and Disabled people. Government did instigate the Promoting Social Inclusion Working Group on Disability to identify key barriers experienced by Deaf and Disabled people. The recommendations from the Group's report, published in 2009, were never implemented. A short-term Strategy was published by OFMDFM in 2012 but given its limited three-year timeframe it cannot objectively be called a Strategy. Unsurprisingly it achieved nothing². Based on any reasonable assessment the current draft Strategy is the first time Government in Northern Ireland has brought forward a comprehensive Disability Strategy.

The issues identified by the PSI Group in 2009 have been left unresolved, in fact there is strong evidence to indicate that there has been a regression in our rights and that Disabled people's lives have become much harder in the 17 years since its publication. Westminster imposed austerity has decimated services, support and our standard of living. The COVID 19 pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities, and the subsequent cost-of-living crisis has increased high levels of pre-existing poverty for many Deaf and Disabled people.

This has been evidenced by a series of reports by the UN Committee on the Rights of People with Disabilities³ which has identified regression in the rights of Disabled people in the UK including those of us in Northern Ireland. This regression has been particularly acute around rights to an adequate standard of living, rights to live independently in the community and rights to work and employment. The lived experiences of Deaf and Disabled people since 2008 echo this evidence. Key services such as social care and SEND are in a perpetual and ever worsening state of crisis whilst poverty levels amongst Disabled people have grown to unacceptably high levels⁴.

² For background see

<https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2012/ofmdfm/2712.pdf>

³ <https://www.inclusionlondon.org.uk/campaigns-and-policy/uncrdp/uncrdp-2023-24/report/>

⁴ https://www.jrf.org.uk/poverty-in-northern-ireland-2025#_-trends-in-poverty

In the face of this regression in our rights the Executive has delivered little or nothing substantive. On many metrics Northern Ireland trails behind the rest of the UK. On employment⁵, educational achievement and participation⁶ in further and higher education Disabled people are disadvantaged here compared to other parts of the UK. Even on basic rights and legal protections Northern Ireland Disabled people have been disadvantaged for the 16 years since the passage of the Equality Act in Great Britain in 2010⁷. Time and again Disabled people have been ignored by, and are seemingly invisible, to our Executive. This includes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Executive COVID Recovery Plan⁸ failed to identify Disabled people as one of the groups hardest hit by the pandemic despite Imtac making a clear case for recognition and inclusion to the Executive Office during the development of the Plan.

There have been positives. The retention of the Independent Living Fund in Northern Ireland and mitigations against benefit cuts have offered some protection for Disabled people against the worst impacts of austerity. Imtac as an organisation has been successful in securing progress in making travel, transport and places more accessible. Examples include progress in extending rights to cover transport services, improvements to the accessibility of public transport services and challenging existing cultures through the adoption of Disability Equality Training. However, this progress has been partial and slow to happen, often involving exhausting campaigning and activism by Deaf, Disabled people and others including carers.

Our comments on the draft Disability Strategy are set within a context of successive Governments in Northern Ireland failing Deaf and Disabled people, overseeing regression in our rights and cuts to essential support and services. The key question for Imtac is whether this Strategy represents the sea change in approach required from the Executive, a move from indifference and inaction, cuts and regression to a genuine

⁵ <https://factcheckni.org/articles/employment-in-ni-does-northern-ireland-have-the-largest-disability-employment-gap-in-the-uk/>

⁶

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/disability/bulletins/disabilityandeducationuk/2019#country>

⁷ <https://www.equalityni.org/Delivering-Equality/Addressing-inequality/Law-reform/Research-investigations>

⁸ <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/publications/building-forward-consolidated-covid-19-recovery-plan>

commitment to improve and an ambition to deliver progressive realisation of our rights.

Comments on the process

The active and informed participation of Deaf and Disabled people in issues and decisions that affect our lives is a central tenet of the UN Convention on the Rights of Disabled People (CRDP)⁹. Imtac believes that the co-design process initiated by the previous Communities Minister Hargey was a genuine attempt to coproduce the Disability Strategy in partnership with Deaf and Disabled people. This process included the establishment of Expert Advisory Panel which reported in December 2020¹⁰ and Co Design Group which met to discuss the Panel's recommendations. Both promoted the active participation of Deaf and Disabled people.

The reality, however, was that the co-design process was not an easy one. The process took a significant commitment from Group members during a global pandemic, some of whom were unpaid. Often discussions, over many meetings, were difficult with officials and members often seemingly pulling in different directions. Members of the Co Design Group worked effectively together articulating that the Strategy should be rights based, centred on the articles of CRDP. Ultimately agreement was reached with the DfC Minister and officials on a vision and eight outcomes for the Strategy, reflecting this rights-based approach.

Whilst progress had been made when the Executive collapsed again in 2022, significant work remained to complete the detail of the draft Strategy including Departmental commitments to compliment the outcomes and an action plan to deliver them. Engagement between Departments and the Co Design facilitated by EY in 2021 had illustrated the scale of the challenge involved in completing the Strategy. There was a yawning gap between what Co Design Group members felt was the minimum required and what Departments felt they could deliver.

Co Design Group members had realistic expectations, recognising that resources would always be a limit on the pace of progress. What was

⁹ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/general-comment-no7-article-43-and-333-participation>

¹⁰ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/report-disability-strategy-expert-advisory-panel>

sought was a commitment to improve the current situation on key issues during the duration of the strategy – essentially a progressive realisation of our rights. The fact that even modest improvements to our lives were seen as steps too far is extremely disappointing, reflecting a lack of commitment and ambition.

More disappointing was the delay to progress caused by the two-year suspension of the Assembly. Restoration reignited hope of progress, quickly extinguished by the decision of Minister Lyons to end the Co-Design process. The repeated refusal of the Minister to meet with or engage with Deaf and disabled people who contributed so much time and work to the Co Design process left many of us feeling devalued and disrespected.

With the ending of the co design process Deaf and Disabled people lost the opportunity to influence and shape the detail of the draft Strategy. The Minister did eventually commit to share the draft Strategy with the Co Design Group with members prior to publication, but it was made clear to us both in correspondence and at a meeting held with Minister prior to the launch of the consultation that he would not take feedback or discuss the content of the draft Strategy. The result is a strategy that was largely written without the input of Deaf and Disabled people, the opposite of what is required by the CRDP.

Regardless of the content of the draft Strategy the process in its development has been flawed and is counter to the requirements for coproduction in CRDP. The process has undermined the confidence of Imtac members and others and we question the commitment from the Executive to the active and informed participation of Deaf and Disabled people in issues and decisions that affect our lives.

Comments on the draft Strategy

Prior to commenting on the content of the draft Strategy, Imtac notes there are three major omissions from the document.

Firstly, despite the process of developing the Strategy having started 6 years ago there is not yet a published action plan, only a promise to publish one at a later unspecified date. In recent statements the Minister has indicated that there are no plans to consult on any action plan. The current draft Strategy is incomplete. Asking people to comment on a partial Strategy, without much of the significant detail about how and

what will be delivered is unacceptable and runs counter to established principles about the purpose and value of consultation.

Secondly, despite it being a key recommendation of the Expert Advisory Panel and the Co Design Group there is no indication in the consultation that there will be any additional resources made available to help deliver the Strategy. A Strategy without resources cannot deliver any meaningful improvements to the lives of Deaf and Disabled people, only offer more of the same.

Finally, there is no timeline set out in the consultation for the development of an action plan and publication of a final Strategy. Given the urgent need for change and the previous delays to the process, certainty is needed as soon as possible as to when a final Strategy will be published.

In relation to the content of the Draft Strategy, Imtac supports fully the vision and the eight outcomes. As previously indicated, these were agreed between the Department and members of the Co Design Group and reflect a rights-based approach to delivering change. Both vision and outcomes for the draft Strategy reflect both the general principles and key articles of the CRDP.

There is, however, a huge disconnect between the ambition set out in the vision and outcomes and the 58 commitments proposed in the draft Strategy. The overwhelming majority of the commitments lack quality and any concrete outcomes in terms of being SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant or time-bound).

Imtac has assessed each of the 58 commitments. In doing so we have identified the following:

- Commitments to continue with existing policies such as the Blue Badge scheme
- Commitments to continue with the support currently available to Deaf and Disabled people
- Commitments to meet existing legal requirements such as Building Regulations and Statutory Public Sector Equality Duties
- Commitments to involve Deaf and Disabled people on planned Executive projects and priorities such as initiatives aimed at ending violence against women and girls
- Commitments that are not strategic but very specific in nature, more suited as actions rather than commitments

In our assessment all but a handful of the commitments are about doing things that Government already does, are required to do or have existing plans to do. The Strategy remains silent on many of the key issues for Deaf and Disabled people including:

- Commitments to tackle existing high levels of poverty amongst Deaf and Disabled people
- Commitments to improving access to social care and other support to enable Deaf and Disabled people to live independently in the community
- Commitments to improving support and outcomes for Deaf and Disabled children and young people including tackling existing barriers in our education system
- Commitments to improving access to transport services and our built environment
- Commitments to tackle barriers to work and employment
- Commitments to improving access to health and other services

This demonstrates several major problems with the draft Strategy. Firstly, it demonstrates a lack of commitment and ambition on the part of the Executive. Secondly, it demonstrates a lack of knowledge and awareness of what matters to Deaf and Disabled people. Finally, it demonstrates the lack of engagement with Deaf and Disabled people in developing the 58 commitments. Overall, the failure to include meaningful commitments in the draft Strategy devalues the lives of Deaf and Disabled people.

There are a handful of commitments in the draft Strategy that have potential merit and that in someways reflect the priorities set out by both the Expert Advisory Panel and Co Design Group. This includes commitments around establishing a Regional Disability Forum, reform of legislation, improving data collection and mainstreaming inclusive design guidance in future procurement.

The proposed Regional Disability Forum is broadly welcomed by Imtac. It is essential that Deaf and Disabled people have a central role in the design and delivery of the Disability Strategy and wider policy and service development. Whilst the principle of a Forum led by Deaf and Disabled people is welcome, significant further detail is required around how the Forum will work. Clarity is needed as to whether the Forum will be an effective “critical friend” to Ministers or whether it will be a toothless “Aunt Sally”. Given the current Minister for Communities has to

date rejected co-design, further information and reassurance is required to demonstrate the Forum will be allowed to be an effective body that can constructively challenge the Executive. There are also questions around how effective any Forum can be given the very limited commitment and ambition in the draft Strategy. As a preexisting advisory body, Imtac is well placed to inform this process.

Legislative reform to strengthen rights and legal protections for Deaf and Disabled people in Northern Ireland is long overdue. Deaf and Disabled people have been disadvantaged in comparison with their counterparts in GB since 2010. A commitment to look at the issue is welcome but there is a significant degree of ambiguity created by the current wording of the commitment. The Committee believes a smarter, clearly time bound commitment is required to reflect the importance of the issue. A similar approach is needed for an amended commitment around data collection.

Using inclusive design guidance in procurement was a key ask of the Co Design Group. It is again welcome there is a commitment that reflects this ask but it is caveated with where reasonable. Caveats demonstrate a lack of commitment to inclusive design, either inclusive design is a good thing, or it is not. Imtac recommends that caveats to the use of the inclusive design guidance in procurement be removed.

The Committee wishes to make one further comment about the presentation of the Draft Strategy. The strategy makes frequent reference to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Disabled People (CRDP) but fails to understand or to adhere to the Convention – which places an obligation on State parties to progress the rights of Deaf and Disabled people – by the omission of concrete commitments to drive forward improvements in our lives.

Evaluation and recommendations

Imtac were hopeful for a Disability Strategy with ambition, with quality and substantial commitments aimed at progressing the rights of Deaf and Disabled people in Northern Ireland. What has been produced to date is huge disappointment.

An incomplete draft strategy written without meaningful engagement with Deaf and Disabled people, without any indication of resources and with totally inadequate commitments has left our members feeling

disillusioned and devalued. Given the time we have waited for this Strategy, and the context of wider regression in our rights and access to support and services, this is unacceptable and must be challenged.

We are calling on the Minister for Communities and the wider Executive to urgently review and revise the current draft Strategy. In doing so, we would like to highlight the experience of other devolved administrations¹¹ where Government listened to concerns being expressed and has worked with Deaf and Disabled people to address them.

Our key recommendation is that Executive Departments re-engage with Deaf, Disabled people and our organisations with a view to addressing widespread concerns about the draft Strategy.

It is our further recommendation that this dialogue should focus on the following as a priority:

- Embedding coproduction between Government and Deaf and Disabled people as a core commitment of the Disability Strategy
- Agreeing a commitment that ensures the Regional Disability Forum provides an effective and constructive body that can challenge Government (with broad agreement on the role, remit and make up of the Forum)
- Agreeing a clear, unambiguous commitment to deliver legislative reform as a priority within the first few years of the new Strategy being published
- Agreeing clear, unambiguous commitment to deliver improvements to data collection
- Agreeing clear commitment to introduce an ambitious and innovative programme across Government to address attitudinal change and awareness raising such as the commitment to mainstream Disability Equality Training (adopted already by the Department for Infrastructure) across the NICS or embed the Social Model of Disability like the approach adopted by the Welsh Government
- Agreeing SMART commitments in the Strategy, aligning with priorities for Deaf and Disabled people and key articles of CRDP (including access to independent living, access to housing, access to an adequate standard of living, access to transport and the build

¹¹ For details see the briefing paper compiled by Imtac about the Disability Strategy - <https://www.imtac.org.uk/disappointment-draft-disability-strategy-updated-briefing-paper>

environment, access to education at all levels, access to health services, and access to work and employment).

Imtac has already engaged with Minister Kimmins, discussing a key commitment that should ensure that future investment in transport services and infrastructure delivers for Deaf and Disabled people. Similar dialogue needs to take place with all Executive Ministers.

Without additional resources it is unlikely any Strategy can deliver the changes required to match both the vision and the outcomes set out in the draft Strategy. The Committee does recognise the severe limitations on resources and is realistic about what can be achieved. We are clear, however, that unless a draft Strategy can commit not only stop the current regression in rights, support and services but offer hope of improvement, it is not worth the paper it is written on. This will require resources, suggesting otherwise is disingenuous.

Imtac recommends that commitments and action plans connected with the Strategy be resourced appropriately. Often resources required are not significant in relation to overall budgets. Examples of actions that could make a difference include:

- The expansion of Independent Living Fund to new applicants in Northern Ireland as they have done in Scotland
- Introducing free travel for Deaf and Disabled people in parity with the rest of the UK and Ireland
- A dedicated fund to increase provision of Changing Places Toilets in Northern Ireland
- A dedicated funding programme to encourage the development of Deaf and Disabled People's Organisations (lead by Deaf and Disabled people)

As well as resources the Strategy must commit explicitly to rule out further regression of our rights either through further cuts to existing support and services or the introduction of measures that make our lives more difficult. This includes, for example, introduction of charging for domiciliary care services suggested recently by the Minister for Health. Charges introduced in England and Wales have driven many Deaf and Disabled people into debt and further poverty.

Conclusion

Imtac cannot be clearer about our disappointment with the draft Strategy. Having waited so long for change, we, and Deaf and Disabled people in general, deserve so much better. We are calling on urgent dialogue with the Minister for Communities and the wider Executive Ministers to address our concerns and develop a Strategy with an ambition to improve our lives and progress our rights.