Disability Action Plan for Northern Ireland

2027-2032

Draft revised version

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1. Overview

Disability Action Plan for Northern Ireland

Communications services have never been more important. Ofcom's mission is to make communications work for everyone. We want people across the UK, regardless of their circumstances, to benefit from and enjoy these services.

This Disability Action Plan shows how Ofcom as a regulator and an employer will seek to support disabled people in Northern Ireland, in line with our duties under the relevant legislation.

We have had a Disability Action Plan in place in Northern Ireland since 2007. We review our Plan every five years, and this updated Plan runs from 2027 to 2032.

2. Introduction

2.1 Under Section 49A of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA 1995) (as amended by Article 5 of the Disability Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 2006), Ofcom is required when carrying out its 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').

2.2 Under Section 49B of the DDA 1995, Ofcom is also required to submit to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI) a Disability Action Plan (DAP) showing how it proposes to fulfill these duties in relation to its functions.

2.3 Ofcom is committed to implementing effectively the disability duties and this DAP. We will allocate all necessary resources in terms of people, time and money, in order to effectively implement this plan and, where appropriate, build objectives and targets relating to the disability duties into corporate and annual operating plans.

2.4 We will also put appropriate internal arrangements in place to ensure that the disability duties are complied with, and this DAP is effectively implemented. We will ensure effective communication of the plan to colleagues and provide all necessary training and guidance for colleagues on the disability duties and the implementation of the plan.

2.5 We confirm our commitment to submitting an annual report to the ECNI on the implementation of this plan as well as carrying out a five-yearly review of this plan.

2.6 Ofcom is committed to full and meaningful consultation on its DAP. Our consultation has been carried out in line with Ofcom's established consultation principles, as well as the ECNI's guidance.

2.7 Responsibility for implementing, reviewing and evaluating this DAP and the point of contact within Ofcom will be:

Jonathan Rose
Northern Ireland Director
Landmark House, 5 Cromac Quay
The Gasworks
Ormeau Road
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BT7 2JD
jonathan.rose@ofcom.org.uk
028 90 417500

2.8 If you require this plan in an alternative format, please contact the person above to discuss your requirements.

2.9 A copy of this plan, our annual progress report to the ECNI and our five-year review of this plan will be published on our website.

3. About Ofcom

Ofcom's functions

3.1 Ofcom is the UK's independent regulator and competition authority for the communications sector. We regulate telecommunications, wireless communications and spectrum, television and radio broadcasting, video-sharing platforms and postal services, and – following the enactment of the Online Safety Act 2023 – we have taken on significant new responsibilities to help make the internet a safer place. Ofcom is accountable to Parliament but operates independently of both government and the industries it regulates.

3.2 Operating at the forefront of the UK's digital communications landscape, Ofcom has a statutory duty to further the interests of citizens and consumers, promote effective competition, and balance freedom of expression with appropriate protections for audiences.

3.3 We regulate broadcasting across the UK, including oversight of the BBC, and ensure that news is reported with due accuracy and impartiality.[1] In the telecommunications and postal sectors, Ofcom protects consumers, oversees universal service obligations, supports the delivery of new network infrastructure, and has responsibilities for the security and resilience of communications networks.[2] Ofcom also ensures the effective use of radio spectrum and the availability of a wide range of electronic communications services, including broadband and mobile telephony, and exercises a broad and growing set of duties under the Online Safety Act 2023.[3]

Our work in Northern Ireland

3.4 Since its inception in 2003, Ofcom has had a presence in all the UK's devolved nations, meeting our statutory duty to have regard to the different interests of persons in the different parts of the UK. Our presence in Northern Ireland has grown significantly over recent years, with more than 20 colleagues now based in our Belfast office and working across Ofcom's remit.

3.5 Our Northern Ireland team in Belfast represents Ofcom in Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland in Ofcom. They ensure that we keep in touch with the views and opinions of citizens and consumers, the regulated industries and stakeholders more generally in Northern Ireland and put these at the heart of our decision making.

Ofcom's statutory duties

3.6 Ofcom operates under a number of Acts of Parliament. Section 3 of the Communications Act 2003 states that our principal duty in carrying out our functions is to further the interests of citizens in relation to communications matters and to further the interests of consumers in relevant markets, where appropriate by promoting competition.

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[1] We also have new media duties under the Media Act 2024.
[2] The Telecoms Security Act 2021 also gave us new telecoms security duties.
[3] Video-sharing platforms are also now regulated under the Online Safety Act.

3.7 Ofcom has a duty under the Communications Act to have regard for the needs of disabled people when making and implementing regulatory decisions. As a result, Ofcom requires communications providers to provide a range of services designed to benefit disabled people. Some examples include:

- Access to approved text relay services and video relay services (the latter for emergency calls)
- Priority fault repair
- Accessible formats for bills and correspondence
- Third-party bill management
- Accessible TV programme listing guides
- TV programming quotas for access services – subtitling, sign language and audio description.
- Free post for blind and visually impaired consumers on eligible items

3.8 Ofcom also publishes a range of annual reports on industry compliance with its obligations to disabled people.

3.9 As a public body operating in Northern Ireland, Ofcom is subject to Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998), which requires us to have a Northern Ireland Equality Scheme. Alongside our Section 75 duties for Northern Ireland, we also have general duties (known as 'public sector equality duties') under section 149 of the UK's Equality Act 2010.

3.10 Our Diversity & Inclusion Strategy addressed all these duties and shaped the way we work, both as an employer and as a regulator. The strategy was published in 2021 and covered the period until 2026.

3.11 In June 2026, Ofcom published a new Diversity & Inclusion Strategy for the next two years. It is focused on our role as an employer, providing a clear framework for improving the experience and outcomes of our people, while our regulatory work continues to be progressed through the relevant policy and regulatory functions.

3.12 Ofcom has an Accessibility Working Group (AWG) which meets quarterly. AWG is a multidisciplinary group that champions the progress of focused interventions that benefit disability inclusion within Ofcom. This places the needs and experiences disabled people at the forefront of designing policies, processes and practices and ultimately delivery of our Diversity & Inclusion Strategy.

3.13 Our SOUND employee network is made up of a range of Ofcom disability stakeholders. These include disabled colleagues (both physical and neurodiverse, whether diagnosed or not), colleagues who want to be allies or those who already support a family member or friend with their own condition(s). The network exists to advocate for disabled colleagues and consumers and to help and improve outcomes in all areas. There are regular panel events, workshops and newsletters the network provides to all colleagues.

Public life positions

3.14 Ofcom is responsible for a number of non-executive appointments to boards and committees which contribute directly to Ofcom's work, or the work of a regulated body.

3.15 In Northern Ireland, our statutory Advisory Committee provides us with advice on the interests and opinions of people in Northern Ireland. National interests are also represented by members of our Content Board and the Communications Consumer Panel (CCP), both of which are non-executive, UK-wide, bodies which help shape Ofcom's policy making.

3.16 The CCP pays particular attention to the needs of vulnerable people, older people, people with disabilities and micro businesses. The CCP has cross-membership with Ofcom's Advisory Committee for Older and Disabled People.

3.17 Since 2022 we have had an Ofcom Board Member for Northern Ireland to represent Northern Ireland's interests. They are appointed by the Northern Ireland Minister for the Economy, in consultation with the UK Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport.

4. Action Measures

4.1 Outlined below are the Action Measures Ofcom proposes to take over the period from April 2027 to March 2032, together with related timescale and performance indicators or targets.

4.2 We have split the measures into those we carry out as a regulator and those we carry out as an employer.

4.3 We will report on how we are getting on with each Action Measure in our Section 75 Annual Progress Report to the ECNI, the latest version of which is available on our website.

Ofcom as an employer

No.	Measure	Timescale	Performance
1	Promote our non-executive role vacancies through disability stakeholders and guarantee interviews for disabled candidates who meet the essential criteria.	Recruitment is expected to take place throughout the DAP period.	% increase in disabled people applying for public roles.
2	Publish our disability pay gap report.	Annually	Demonstrates transparency and Ofcom's commitment to be a fair, diverse and inclusive employer.
3	Continue to raise disability awareness among staff through a mix of mandatory e-learning courses for all colleagues, and workshops for managers, focusing on disability issues such as neurodiversity and workplace adjustments.	Annual mandatory courses for colleagues and managers.	Improved staff awareness of issues faced by disabled people in the workplace.
4	Publish diversity profiles for senior management and non-executive roles.	Every July in our Annual Report & Accounts.	Demonstrates transparency in relation to Ofcom's commitment to being a diverse, fair and inclusive employer.
5	Maintain Level 3 of the UK Government's Disability Confident scheme.	Reapplication in 2027/28.	Demonstrates Ofcom's commitment to being a diverse, fair and inclusive employer.

Ofcom as a regulator

No.	Measure	Timescale	Performance outcome
1	Understand the issues facing disabled people with their communications services through structured engagement with representative organisations, relevant research, and complaint monitoring.	Ongoing throughout the period of the DAP.	Ofcom gains a better understanding of the issues of concern to disabled people, enabling regulatory resources to be directed where they can have the most impact, leading to improved communications services for disabled people.
2	Continue to publish our annual report on Equity, Diversity & Inclusion in Broadcasting.	Annual publication.	The UK's TV and radio industry better represents and reflects UK society.
3	Introduce and enforce a new Accessibility Code and Guidance for how connected TV interfaces give access to on-demand television apps.	Throughout the period of the DAP.	People with disabilities impacting their sight or hearing will be able to navigate connected TV interfaces in the same way as anyone else.
4	Publish our annual Electronic Programmes Guide (EPG) Accessibility report – for traditional TV guides and connected TV interfaces.	Annual publication.	Show how traditional TV guides and connected TV platforms are accessible to people with sight and/or hearing impairments.
5	Introduce and enforce a new Video-on-Demand Accessibility Code to set standards for the largest streaming services, similar to those on traditional TV channels.	Throughout the period of the DAP.	People with disabilities impacting their sight or hearing will be able to stream their favourite films and TV shows.
6	Publish our TV Access Services report on broadcasters' compliance with subtitles, signing and audio description – for traditional TV and streaming services.	Annual publication.	Show how traditional broadcast television and catch-up or on-demand services are accessible to people with sight and/or hearing impairments.
7	Work with mobile providers to ensure reasonable measures are in place to protect customers throughout the switching-off of 2G networks.	2G due to switched off by 2033.	Customers, particularly those more vulnerable, experience minimal disruption and are protected from harm during the switchover.
8	Work with consumer organisations to help publicise the latest information on social tariffs or similar products, especially to vulnerable consumers.	Throughout the period of the DAP.	Qualifying disabled consumers can take advantage of cost savings for their phone and broadband services.

No.	Measure	Timescale	Performance outcome
9	Engage with public, voluntary and academic bodies to understand any online safety issues that are particularly relevant to disabled people in Northern Ireland.	Throughout the period of the DAP.	Ofcom's UK-wide online safety policymaking and media literacy work is better informed and to the benefit of disabled users.
10	Engage with public, voluntary and consumer bodies to understand any postal services issues that are particularly relevant to disabled people in Northern Ireland.	Throughout the period of the DAP.	Ofcom's UK-wide postal services policymaking is better informed and to the benefit of disabled users.



Sir Ian Cheshire
Chair



Dame Melanie Dawes
Chief Executive Officer