

Equality Commission response to the proposed Delivery Plan for Programme for Government Indicator 46 (Usage of online channels to access public services)

In January 2016, the Commission set out a number of priorities¹ for delivery via the work of government over the 2016-21 mandate.

We hope that this information, in tandem with our response to the consultation on the draft PfG, will be of assistance in the further development of the delivery plan.

1. Current trends in internet usage

- a. We note that the delivery plan states that 81% of Northern Ireland citizens have the skills to use online channels, and therefore 19% do not. Using May 2016 Office for National Statistics data², we note the following:
 - Northern Ireland had the lowest recent internet usage of any United Kingdom (UK) region at 82%, compared to the UK average of 87.9%
 - 16.2% of people in Northern Ireland had never used the internet compared to 10.2% across the UK as a whole.
 - Across the UK, 71% of disabled people had used the internet in the last three months, but 25% had never used it.
 - Across the UK, 38.7% of those aged 75+ had used the internet in the last three months, and 56.5% had never used it. For those aged 65-74, the figures were 74.1% and 21.5% respectively. This contrasts with 98.9% and 0.3% of those aged 25-34.
- b. The 2016 ONS bulletin states³ that: *'While we have seen a notable increase in internet usage across all groups in recent years, many older and disabled people are still not online, with two-thirds of women over 75 having never used the internet.'* If these UK wide patterns are also true of Northern Ireland, and when combined with overall lower usage patterns in Northern Ireland (as identified further above), it suggests an area for further consideration and action.
- c. The dataset also provides useful insights into use within Northern Ireland, with 86.1% of Belfast residents having used the internet in the last three months, compared to 79% of those in the East of Northern Ireland.

2. Section 75 groups

- d. While providing useful insights, the ONS statistical bulletin referred to above does not provide detail on the type of online activity being undertaken, i.e. whether it is passive such as watching online content, or more active engagement such as on social media or via interactive websites. The level of online skills and competence to engage with online government services is not therefore possible to gauge. A consideration of the relevant characteristics of the Northern Ireland population, broken down by Section 75

¹ ECNI (2016), Equality Priorities: [Programme for Government and Budget Recommendations](#)

² [ONS \(2016\) Internet users in the UK: 2016 dataset](#)

³ [ONS \(2016\) Internet users in the UK:2016](#)

group, is key to information policy and programme development and implementation.

- e. This is of particular relevance to the self service portal to access and update personal details referred to at page 9 of the delivery plan. Inputting inaccurate information within this portal has potentially significant implications for the individual. This may be a particular issue for those groups with limited online experience, and those from minority ethnic groups including Travellers for whom written English skills or experience of completing online forms may be less developed than other members of the Northern Ireland population.
- f. Further, in 2014⁴ and since, we have highlighted that a key gap in the implementation of the UNCRPD in Northern Ireland included ensuring access to Information – highlighting in particular that a lack of information in appropriate formats continued to impact on persons with disabilities ability to access educational and health services.

3. Data

- g. We reiterate our general recommendation that all data should not only be analysed in aggregate, but also across each Section 75 category.
- h. Accordingly, we suggest that the proposed measures of ‘increased use of online channels’ and ‘citizen satisfaction using online channels’ are disaggregated by Section 75 categories so as to allow meaningful measurement and to provide data that can be used to target resources more effectively.
- i. We note that a reporting template has been developed and issued to departments to report on baselines. We recommend that, if it is not already included, the template should also provide for the measures to be reported and disaggregated by Section 75 group. We believe that this will provide useful data which would contribute significantly to developing efficient and effective online services and the supports to facilitate them, as well as to identify services where traditional contact methods are accessible.

4. Service user participation

- j. We recommend that the delivery plan provides more detail on which 70% of all citizen transactions will be carried out using an online channel, and the 30% which will not. This will further assist a range of stakeholders, including the community and voluntary sector, and individuals in determining service user needs.
- k. We welcome at page 7 of the delivery plan the statement that ‘Government services and systems need to be designed from a user (citizen) perspective.’ However, the delivery plan does not explain how this perspective will be gained, for example, the extent of service user consultation and active involvement in shaping the delivery model, including via online services.

⁴ ECNI (2014), [Jurisdictional ‘Parallel’ Report on Implementation of the UNCRPD in Northern Ireland](#)

- I. We note the range of initiatives that are being taken forward to promote digital inclusion. We suggest that the initiative and any associated training is designed to meet specific needs across the full range of Section 75 categories.

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