

The Northern Ireland Assembly



Purpose of the Assembly

- The Assembly Commission and its Secretariat serve and support the Assembly in its role of representing the interests of the electorate
- Making effective legislation;
- and influencing the Executive and holding it to account.

Equality

- The Assembly is committed to promoting good practice with regard to its S75 and DDA duties
- This led to us deliver a range of diversity training to ensure that our employees are aware of their obligations.
- This has included training on disability equality legislation and disability awareness which has been delivered to all staff over the last five years.

Accessibility and the Assembly

- Building Services Branch has been working continuously to make Parliament Buildings as accessible as possible to as wide a range of people as possible for several years
- This has included major physical works including extensive disability access work in 2005/2006 and the installation of ramps across the front entrance to Parliament Buildings in 2012

Access and the Assembly

- The Assembly has also worked to attain the Louder than Words accreditation from Action on Hearing Loss, being the first UK legislature to receive the award;
- We also produced a braille tour of Parliament Buildings and a signed tour of the building in British and Irish sign language which is available on line or can be accessed by visitors via a tablet.

Autism and the Assembly

- Most recently the NI Assembly has received the National Autistic Society's Autism 'Access Award' for ensuring that the building is a welcoming place for anyone on the autism spectrum
- This started in October 2011 when we invited a group of adults and parents of children on the autistic spectrum to visit Parliament Buildings on a 'mystery shopping' exercise.

Autism and the Assembly

- We met with this group to listen to their opinions on the visit and their recommendations for any improvements;
- The National Autistic Society (NAS) explained their existing accreditation process and what they would like for public buildings.
- The Northern Ireland Assembly Commission became the first organisation to agree to work in partnership with NAS to formulate an award and to seek accreditation.

- The entire process took approximately 1 year with the Assembly receiving accreditation on 14th November 2012
- The then Speaker, Mr William Hay, received the award on behalf of the Assembly Commission and held a small ceremony to mark the achievement

Presentation of Autism Award



- When work started in November 2011 staff from Building Services Branch along with the autism working group tried to make the building more welcoming for people with autism.
- This included some physical changes to the building such as setting up a 'Quiet Room' behind the reception area and specific signage

Quiet Room



Sensory Items



Adding 'autism friendly' signage



HAND DRYER



Autism and the Assembly

- We worked with the autism consultation group to produce a video showing how to access the Stormont Estate and Parliament Buildings. This video has been a great benefit for any other visitors who have a disability or special access needs;
- <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Visit-and-Learning/Autism-and-the-Assembly/PB-Video/>
- A dedicated page was also developed on the Assembly website which includes useful guidance and information.
- <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Visit-and-Learning/Autism-and-the-Assembly/>

The New Website



What workload did this involve for the lead person to implement?

- The work was undertaken in addition to an existing busy workload
- The website, video and regular consultation with NAS and Autism NI took up the most time
- This there were a number of other business areas within the Assembly who were able to help with the project - for example staff training was arranged through our training branch, our communications team helped put the information onto the webpage and arranged filming of the access video

What was the hardest/easiest thing to implement?

- The hardest thing was the webpage ensuring that all of the necessary information was captured in an accessible way.
- 90 frontline staff volunteered for training immediately and in addition there are 13 trained autism champions.
- Hopefully you will have the same response as so many people have been touched in some way by autism

Could you identify any quick wins?

- There were no radical changes to the building required
- Setting up a 'Quiet Room' was a very useful starting point and has made a significant impact.
- Any area regardless of the size could be made into a 'Quiet Room', This could be a dual purpose room e.g. a waiting area.

What budget is required (apart from accreditation costs)?

- The cost to implement the changes were nominal.
- Staff training costs paid to NAS and Autism NI. This has more than paid for itself in terms of ensuring staff buy in
- The project the access video was filmed by our internal broadcasters free of charge and our own communications and IT staff helped with the webpage.
- To set up the 'Quiet Room' all that was required was some decoration and a few signs. Ear defenders and sensory toys for the quiet room were also reasonably priced.

Is there anything you would change ?

- We would still like to encourage more people with autism to come to the building. If there is a debate about autism or if NAS or Autism NI hold a function here we are able to record the information, however to date we do not get many 'ad hoc' visitors with autism coming in 'off the street' that identify themselves as having autism
- The Autism Access accreditation has been a great success for the Assembly however it will become more significant when other places become part of it, such as leisure centres, cinemas, public transport – places that people with autism would visit more frequently than our Assembly.

Did you encounter any difficulties?

- Working closely with the NAS, Autism NI and in particular the working group of people with autism made everything very straightforward
- We tried to implement as much as possible of what the working group suggested to ensure that we stayed on track.
- Listening to people with autism was one of the most important parts of the project and if you can invite an autism group to your organisation it will make a real difference.

Next Steps

- Since receiving the Autism Access award the Assembly Commission is looking at new ways to integrate practices that make Parliament Buildings more accessible
- A range of work is planned for the next year so watch this space.....

- Any Questions??