

# Audit of Inequalities 2025



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<b>Contents</b>	<b>Page</b>
1. <b>Introduction</b>	1
2. <b>Context - Libraries NI</b>	2
3. <b>Mission and Strategic Goals</b>	3
4. <b>Our Services and Activities</b>	4
5. <b>Organisational Structure</b>	6
6. <b>Audit of Inequalities</b>	7
7. <b>Analysis - Section 75 Categories</b>	8
8. <b>Actions Taken to Date</b>	12
9. <b>Employment</b>	12
10. <b>Equality Awareness Raising and Staff Training</b>	13
11. <b>Physical Estate and Accessibility</b>	14
12. <b>Customer Feedback</b>	14
13. <b>Conclusions and Next Steps</b>	15

# 1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Libraries NI Equality Scheme (the Scheme) contains a commitment to carry out an Audit of Inequalities and to review this in line with the Equality Scheme review schedule. This Audit of Inequalities will inform the Scheme review and production of an updated Equality Scheme spanning the period 2025/30.
- 1.2 Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (the Act) requires Libraries NI to comply with two statutory duties. The first is the Equality of Opportunity Duty:

In carrying out our functions<sup>1</sup> we are required to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between:

- persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation
- men and women generally
- persons with a disability and persons without
- persons with dependents and persons without.

The second is the Good Relations Duty, in carrying out our functions we are required to:

- have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.

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<sup>1</sup> “Functions” include the “powers and duties” of a public authority and includes our employment and procurement functions.

## 2 CONTEXT - LIBRARIES NI

- 2.1 Libraries NI was established on 1 April 2009 under the Libraries Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 to provide a comprehensive and efficient public library service for persons living, working or studying in Northern Ireland.
- 2.2 Libraries NI delivers services and operates in the wider context of the Northern Ireland Programme for Government (2025) and under the direction of the Department for Communities (DfC) Strategic Planning Framework. Our vision is to provide '**A relevant, accessible and inclusive library service making a difference to the lives of people and communities**'.
- 2.3 Libraries NI has a network of 98 public libraries and a public mobile library and Homecall Service, in addition, an Out of Hours library service is provided at seven libraries across Northern Ireland.
- 2.4 Our network of libraries provides an infrastructure of welcoming, comfortable, neutral, stigma-free and accessible community venues that people visit through choice. All libraries provide a range of reading materials, information and resources, including free access to broadband and Wi-Fi, programmes and activities.

### 3 MISSION AND STRATEGIC GOALS

#### 3.1 Our Missions and Strategic Goals as set out in our 2025/30 Corporate Plan are to:

##### ***CONTRIBUTE TO INCLUSIVE, COHESIVE, COMMUNITIES AND SOCIETAL WELLBEING.***

- Provide a relevant and accessible library service to meet the evolving needs of people in Northern Ireland.
- Promote awareness and use of library services, engage new audiences and provide an exemplary customer driven approach and experience for people who use library services
- Provide information, programmes and services that contribute to positive health and wellbeing.
- Build, develop and use the extensive library collections to illustrate and increase understanding of a shared cultural heritage

##### ***PROMOTE READING, INSPIRE, SUPPORT AND CONNECT PEOPLE THROUGH ALL STAGES OF LIFE.***

- Promote reading, literacy and lifelong learning through delivery of resources, services, programmes, activities and initiatives for children and adults.
- Provide opportunities for people to engage in an evolving digital world and improve digital literacy while promoting libraries as trusted access points and a gateway to services and information, including other public services.
- Provide library resources, services and activities to support and help children develop through their early years.

##### ***DELIVER A HIGH PERFORMING LIBRARY SERVICE, VALUED BY SOCIETY .***

- Support and develop our people to be a highly capable, engaged and empowered workforce.
- Make best use of available resources to deliver an effective and valued public library service.
- Collate, prepare and disseminate evidence to demonstrate the impact of libraries, library programmes and service offers, and contribute to debate and discussion on wider library developments.
- Shape our libraries to be attractive, accessible, and trusted spaces.
- Actively respond to the climate change challenge

## 4 OUR SERVICES AND ACTIVITIES

4.1 In support of delivering on our missions and strategic goals a range of services, programmes, events and activities are provided, including:

- Access to books and other material such as audio books, newspapers, periodicals and magazines, eBooks, eMagazines and other online resources
- supported access to computers for use by the public with free internet access for library members and free Wi-Fi, enabling library members to use their own devices
- support for the development of ICT skills and other learning opportunities
- storytimes, rhythm and rhyme sessions, school class visits and other activities for children
- family history, heritage and local studies material
- access to information from a range of sources and organisations
- access to cultural and creative experiences
- reading groups for children, teenagers and adults
- health and wellbeing information, activities and events
- social activities, such as ‘Knit and Natter’ and ‘Tea and Newspapers’, which promote community cohesion and combat isolation
- study, meeting and shared social space.

4.2 Libraries NI actively engage with a wide variety of groups, including:

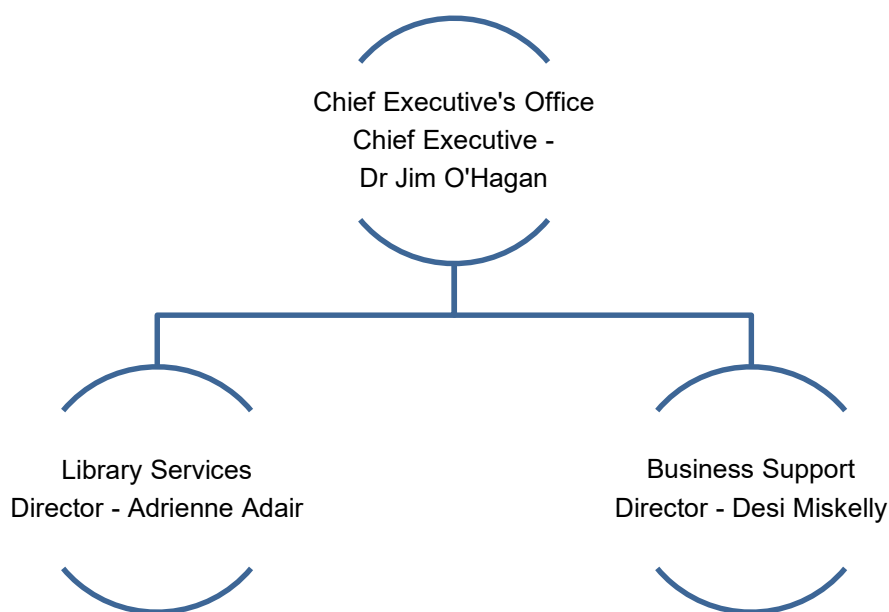
- regional and locally based organisations (Health Trusts, Councils, Community Planning Partners, Macmillan Cancer Support, Autism Awareness, Action on Hearing Loss, Macular Society, Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) and Alzheimer’s Society) to promote health and wellbeing and provide support and signposting for those with specific needs
- we consult with local action groups regarding planning and development of library facilities
- we work in partnership working with the Department for Communities, The Executive Office, and other government departments to enhance the delivery of public services.

- Libraries NI are a statutory partner in the Community Planning Process and has engaged actively with each Council and other Community Planning partners to identify long term objectives for their respective areas and to develop a collaborative approach to issues for the benefit of people and communities
- Quarterly policy screening reports are issued to consultees and published on the Libraries NI website.

4.3 This approach has enabled Libraries NI to engage with existing and potential users of its services to better understand their needs, put measures in place to meet those needs and to maintain, develop and to best fulfil its obligations.

## 5 ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE

5.1 Libraries NI is organised as follows:



5.2 The Chief Executive's Office supports and provides:

- Strategic leadership, governance and accountability
- Board Secretariat, providing administrative and secretarial support for the Board and the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee
- Internal Audit.

5.3 The Library Services Directorate is responsible for:

- the public library network, including branch, mobile, Homecall and heritage libraries
- Service Pillars – Customer Experience, Customer Groups, Online Services, Community Planning and Collections
- Marketing and Communications.

5.4 The Business Support Directorate is responsible for:

- Assets Management Services
- Finance and Budget Management
- Human Resources
- Information and Communications Technology .



## 6 AUDIT OF INEQUALITIES

- 6.1 An audit of inequalities is described as ‘*a systematic review and analysis of inequalities, which exist for service users and those affected by a public authority’s policies*’. This audit of inequalities gathers and analyses information across the Section 75 categories to assist in the identification of any inequalities that may exist for our service users and those affected by our policies.
- 6.2 The Guide for Public Authorities on the implementation of the Section 75 duties recommends that “In order to effectively demonstrate that a public authority has paid due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity and regard to the desirability of promoting good relations through the implementation of its equality scheme, a public authority should develop action measures/action plans to promote equality of opportunity and good relations”.
- 6.3 In conducting this Audit of Inequalities, Libraries NI has examined an extensive range of internal and external information sources. In particular, internal and external data relating to the functions of the Public Authority was compiled and assessed to identify those activities which most directly targeted the Section 75 groups and any relevant formal or informal partnerships and targets or objectives in relation to Section 75 groups. Research was also carried out to identify examples of best practice and gain awareness of key publications from the Equality Commission.
- 6.4 Sources of statistical and other information, both internal and external, to inform the audit included:
- Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA)
  - Continuous Household Survey 2023/24: Experience of the Public Library Service by Adults
  - Library Management System membership database
  - Workforce database
  - Customer Feedback information
  - Internal reviews, customer surveys, consultations, Equality Impact Assessments and Rural Impact Assessment
  - Libraries NI Business Plans and Service Plans
  - Equality Commission for Northern Ireland: Statement on key inequalities in Employment in Northern Ireland, 2018.

## 7 ANALYSIS - SECTION 75 CATEGORIES

- 7.1 Considering the nine Section 75 categories in relation to the functions of Libraries NI and the services it delivers allows us to identify existing or potential inequalities and to develop actions to better promote equal opportunities and/or good community relations.

We have also examined inequalities that may exist internally for staff at recruitment and throughout employment. Whilst these have been considered on the basis of the Section 75 categories, for the purposes of this document, they have been reported on collectively.

The following section details the findings under each Section 75 category.

### 7.2 Religious Belief

Libraries NI does not itself collect service user data for this category. However we can draw on the 2023/24 Continuous Household Survey outputs<sup>2</sup> which indicate there is no significant disparity between the percentage of respondents who have used the public library service and identify as either Catholics, Protestants or other/none: 21%, 22% and 27% respectively (30% of survey participants chose not to respond).

It is reasonable to conclude from this that public libraries continue to be viewed as neutral venues, accessible to all communities, without perception of religious affiliations, neither advantaging nor disadvantaging any particular religious belief grouping.

A similar distribution is seen in the profile of employees when examined against the same categories of Catholics, Protestants or other/none (community identity) with 38.7% identifying as catholic, 38.8% as Protestant and 22.5% as other/none. Again, it is reasonable to conclude that the public library service is viewed as a neutral employer with employment opportunities open to all communities.

### 7.3 Political Opinion

Libraries NI does not collect data relating to this category for either our service users or employees.

Anecdotal evidence would suggest that in common with the view held of the library service as a neutral service accessible to all community's political opinion is not a barrier to use or employment.

### 7.4 Race

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<sup>2</sup> 'Used the public library service, 2023/24' - <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/experience-of-public-library-service-by-adults-in-northern-ireland-202324.xlsx>

Libraries NI does not collect service user data for this category.

While the opportunity to provide data relating to ethnic background is offered as part of the staff recruitment processes there is no mandatory requirement to do so, and the majority of employees (66.7% of the workforce) opt not to provide this data. Of those who did respond some 98% identified as 'White' while 2% identified as Asian/ Mixed Ethnicity broadly reflective of the makeup of the Northern Ireland population (96.5%, White, 2021 Census data).

## 7.5 Age

Libraries NI records active members age profile in three broad categories, Junior (0-15 years), Adult (16-59 years) and Senior Citizen (60 years and over). 2024/25 data indicates that Junior members accounted for some 35.6% of the overall active membership while Adults represented some 47.6% and Senior Citizens made up the remainder at 16.8%.

Meaningful comparisons with the equivalent 2021 Census data are problematic due to different age groupings being utilised however in broad terms some 22% of the Northern Ireland population as identified in the census data can be considered as Junior (0-15 years), some 55% as Adults (15-59 years) and 23% as Senior Citizens (60 years plus)

Comparing the relative ratios of Junior/Adult/Senior makeup of the Northern Ireland population produces a ratio of 0.4/1/0.4 while a similar comparison of library members produces a ratio of 0.7/1/0.4 for Junior/Adult/Senior respectively. Adult/senior membership broadly correlates with the ratios seen in the general population while junior membership of libraries is notably higher than the equivalent population ratio.

In relation to employees of Libraries NI and in comparison to the working age population of Northern Ireland there are notable variations between the age profile of employees and the age profile of the population as a whole. Fewer employees fall within the lower 18 – 34 age category than might be expected given that this category represents almost 32% of the population while significant more employees are 50 or over than are represented in the population profile.

Age Grouping	18-34	35 -49	50 - 64	65+
Libraries NI Workforce	10.80%	24.70%	51%	13.50%
NI Population	31.70%	29.70%	29.80%	8.80%

## 7.6 Marital Status

Libraries NI does not collect data from its users or employees for this category. However, the 2023/24 Continuous Household Survey indicates that 24% of married/cohabiting people, 24% of single people, 15% of widowed people and

16% of separated or divorced people said they had used a library in the previous year.

Comparison to the general population of Northern Ireland where the marital status makeup is 46% married/cohabiting, 38% single, 6% widowed and 10% separated or divorced suggests that a greater proportion of library users are drawn from the single/widowed/separated population than might be expected. Conversely less of the married/cohabiting/single population avail of public library services than are represented in the general population's distribution. It is thought that this profile is influenced by wider social trends and life style/stage choices.

## **7.7 Sexual Orientation**

Libraries NI does not collect data for this category.

## **7.8 Gender**

The gender profile of active members in 2024 was 33% male, 52% female, 0.4% Other/non-binary (14.6% of members opted not to disclose gender information). In contrast to the 2021 census data for Northern Ireland where the gender profile of the population is summarised as 49% male and 51% female it would appear that we continue to see an under-representation of males in the active membership.

Analysis of the Libraries NI workforce, 74.5% female and 25.5% male reflects the historic profile of the organisation as having a predominately female workforce.

## **7.9 Disability**

Libraries NI offers the opportunity for service users to indicate whether they have a disability, either on becoming a member or in the course of their use of our services.

In 2024 some 1.4% of active members had indicated that they considered themselves to have a disability. While this percentage is notably lower than the general Northern Ireland population profile, the 2021 Census records that 24.3% of the population consider themselves to have day-to-day activities limited by long-standing health problems and/or disabilities, this may be influenced by the nature of individual interactions with the public library service and the perceived need to or benefit of making disabilities known to the service.

A similar variation from the Northern Ireland population profile is seen in employee data relating to disabilities with 1.8% of the workforce declaring a disability. Again a range of factors may be influencing this data, staff may be less inclined to declare disabilities in the workplace or alternatively the working

environment may be sufficiently flexible as to accommodate disabilities without the need for formal declaration and adjustment.

## **7.10 Dependants**

Libraries NI does not collect data for this category. However, the 2023/24 Continuous Household Survey indicates that adults with dependents (29%) were more likely to have used the library in the past year than those who have no dependents (18%).

No comparable data is available in relation to the workforce.

In carrying out this analysis it was noted that inequalities may exist that cut across the Section 75 categories and that individuals and group have the potential to experience inequality as members of more than one category. In addition, it was recognised that inequalities exist that are beyond the reach of Libraries NI to meaningfully address. As such this audit has sought to identify where multi-layered and far-reaching inequalities exist and within the scope of our operations and services to identify actions which will help alleviate and address these.

## **8. ACTIONS TAKEN TO DATE**

8.1 Since the last review of the Audit of Inequalities Libraries NI has continued to deliver and participated in a wide range of activities aimed at increasing and improving service delivery to the public, including those with particular needs and from many of the Section 75 categories. These actions include:

- Offering welcoming, free and inclusive spaces to our diverse range of customers, helping combat loneliness and social isolation.
- Implementing systems to support digital inclusion through fast and reliable Internet and free Wi-Fi in 96 libraries, assisting people to develop the necessary skills to access, evaluate and use appropriate information and increase the use of social media
- Providing free access to Public Access Terminals (computers) and investment in online resources to make library services and information accessible 24/7
- Creation and accreditation of the first Library of Sanctuary at our Ormeau Road, Belfast branch
- In partnership with The Executive Office we developed and implemented a programme to deliver universal access to free period products through the library network.
- Programmes and events such as Refugee Week and Good Relations Week have taken place aimed at highlighting the diversity of our communities, breaking down barriers and building more inclusive communities

8.2 Libraries NI continues to deliver inclusive activities, programmes and services to increase understanding and respect for other cultures, traditions and beliefs. Libraries are ideally placed in communities offering neutral, welcoming spaces accessible to all whether for social interaction, learning a new skill or exploring different cultural traditions.

## **9. EMPLOYMENT**

9.1 Libraries NI complies with its equality obligations under the various anti-discrimination legislation and its Equal Opportunities Policy applies to all applicants and employees. The Employment Monitoring Questionnaire in use is as recommended by the Equality Commission and information gathered from applicants is used to measure the effectiveness of its policies and practices.

9.2 Libraries NI provides a range of opportunities to assist staff coming back to work after prolonged absence and to remain in work. Libraries NI is also committed to providing staff with Work Life Balance and a range of initiatives are in place. Libraries NI also has a proactive approach to Health and Wellbeing and offers support, advice and guidance to staff in a variety of formats.

## 10. EQUALITY AWARENESS RAISING AND STAFF TRAINING

10.1 Libraries NI has a range of training and awareness measures in place to make sure that all staff are aware of their responsibilities and obligations in relation to Equality and compliance with the Libraries NI Equality Scheme. These measures include:

- Libraries NI Equality Scheme and Summary are available to all staff on the staff SharePoint site
- Awareness raising of the Libraries NI Equality Scheme takes place as part of local and corporate induction.

10.2 In addition, Libraries NI has engaged in a range of training activities for all staff aimed not only at improving awareness of equality issues but also at improving service delivery to the public, including Section 75 categories. This includes:

- Equality Awareness training, using e-learning modules covering topics such as Unconscious Bias and an Introduction to Human rights
- Safeguarding (Child Protection and Vulnerable Adults) training.

Other training has been targeted at first-line, middle and/or senior managers including:

- Managing Customer Service training
- Community Development training
- Goods, Facilities, Services: An Overview of Equality Law and How it Applies to the Library Service
- Equality Screening training
- Target Group Awareness including input from Autism NI, Alzheimer's Society, as well as information on Refugees
- Designated Officer (Safeguarding Children and Vulnerable Adults) training.

10.3 Libraries NI has also provided opportunity for designated staff to attend a variety of workshops, external training events and conference in order to improve their understanding of the needs of a range of Section 75 category members.

## **11. PHYSICAL ESTATE AND ACCESSIBILITY**

- 11.1 Library venues are neutral environments and as such are community places accessed by people of all ages and backgrounds for information and leisure as well as meeting and sharing ideas through reading groups, family, community activities and road shows. As is required by Section 49A of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA)1995, Libraries NI gives due regard to
- the need to promote positive attitudes towards people with disabilities and
  - the need to encourage participation by people with disabilities in public life ('the disability duties').
- 11.2 A Disability Action Plan showing how we propose to fulfil these duties has been drafted, is reviewed annually, submitted to the Equality Commission (Section 49B of the DDA 1995) and made available to staff and customers.
- 11.3 Within this context Libraries NI recognises that many barriers to access can exist within the physical environment and that these can prevent or inhibit the ability of library customers to avail of a full range of services provided. Consequently, Libraries NI works to ensure the properties from which public library services are delivered are easily accessible to as wide a range of users as possible.
- 11.4 In managing our estate, planning developments and upgrading of buildings we take cognisance of the requirement to accommodate customers with a wide range of needs and aim to incorporate measures which ensure:
- easy access to our buildings (ramps, automatic doors, lifts etc.)
  - clear circulation routes – providing visual contrast, signage in appropriate mediums/heights and adequate lighting
  - facilities for the hearing impaired (induction loops)
  - accessible and sufficient toilet facilities
  - easy interaction with staff (reception desks at appropriate heights etc.).
- 11.5 Where appropriate we consult with our customers in planning our developments and utilise information provided by organisations representing specific user groups, such as RNIB, to ensure our facilities meet the needs of all. Libraries NI also works in partnership with other organisations in providing information to prospective users. Audits of our accommodation are undertaken and where deficiencies are identified, remedial actions are incorporated in our estates planning cycle.

## **12. CUSTOMER FEEDBACK**

- 12.1 Libraries NI welcomes feedback, including complaints, from our customers about their experiences of our services. Feedback allows Libraries NI to identify and repeat what is good, attempt to correct any problems with our service and helps us improve what we do and how we do it. Feedback which includes a comment, compliment and/or complaint on an equality matter is



brought to the attention of the Equality Working Group as well as senior Services managers.

### 13. CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

13.1 Libraries NI does much to meet its obligations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Staff are made aware of their duties and responsibilities with regard to equality and equality considerations are embedded in planning and delivery processes. Libraries NI consult extensively with a wide variety of Section 75 representative groups and responds positively to information gathered. Positive action is taken to ensure that all sections of the community, including Section 75 categories, can access a wide variety of services. Libraries NI partners extensively with a large number of other statutory bodies, charities, other service providers and Section 75 representative bodies and community groups in facilitating and delivering services to the public.

13.2 This analysis of potential inequalities demonstrates that Libraries NI has already adopted an inclusive ethos in developing and delivering its services and that there appears to be no overt barriers to access to or benefiting from its service. There is, however, scope for reflection on how the lessons learned to date might influence approaches in the future and shape our equality and disability action plans. Following on from this Audit of Inequalities it is proposed the following steps are taken.

a) **Conduct a ‘5-year Review’ of our Equality Scheme**

Based on the Equality Commissions review template this review in essence responds to the question *‘To what extent has your public authority’s approved scheme provided a workable basis for mainstreaming the need to promote equality of opportunity and good relations into policy making over the past five years?’*, it identifies lessons learned and points to what more, if anything needs to be done to achieve outcomes.

A formal 5-year Review Report will subsequently be submitted to the Equality Commission

b) **Review and update the Libraries NI Equality Scheme**

Following completion of the 5-year review exercise a review of the Libraries NI equality scheme is proposed. It should be noted that from the perspective of the Equality Commission the original ‘approved’ Equality Scheme remains in place unless substantive changes are made/proposed, the Commission’s guidance states.

- **‘Non-substantive’ changes** to an approved equality scheme (e.g. updating organisational structure, functions or contact details) do not require a new scheme to be submitted to the Equality Commission for approval. Such changes should be communicated to consultees (including the Equality Commission).

- **‘Substantive’ changes to an approved equality scheme** would be treated as a wholly new equality scheme with a requirement to consult on it and to submit it to the Commission for approval. Substantive changes are changes to any ‘arrangement’ - e.g. consultation, assessment, monitoring or publishing the impact of policies, staff training, or ensuring access to information and services.

In the case of Libraries NI this means the original 2011 Equality Scheme is the de facto approved Scheme for the organisation although it was updated in 2019 to reflect changes in organisational structures, corporate plan updates etc.

I do not envisage a 2025 review will result in substantive changes although there will be a number of non-substantive revisions, and the Equality Commission has recently issued supplementary guidance on the management of version control for Equality Schemes which will be taken on board in applying these updates

- Equality schemes must retain their original approval date on the front of the scheme, even when non-substantive changes are made.
- The date(s) of any non-substantive amendments can be noted on the front cover below the original approval date e.g. ES Version 2.
- Any amendments should also be listed, referenced and dated, using a version control appendix to the scheme.
- Date ranges e.g. 2025 -2030 are NOT appropriate for equality schemes (only Section 75 Action Plans should have a start and end date)

c) **Review and update Section 75 Equality Action Plan and Disability Action Plan**

Having conducted the Audit of Inequalities, the 5-year Review of our Equality Scheme and updated our Equality Scheme, the next step in the process will be to review and update our Section 75 Equality Action Plan and Disability Action Plan