

15 Sept 2008

## P R E S S   R E L E A S E

### **New Council Initiative Launched to Promote Disability Rights**

Mayors, councillors and senior officers from councils across Northern Ireland attended the launch of a new initiative aimed at encouraging people with disabilities to participate in public life through election or employment.

The Disability in Local Councils initiative was launched at the Ramada Encore Hotel, Belfast, by the Local Government Staff Commission in partnership with the Equality Commission, Employers for Disability NI, SOLACE, Disability Action and NIPSA. The event was organised to promote greater disability equality in local government and to create a network of disability 'champions' throughout the local council sector. These champions will have the role of actively promoting the agenda of equality for people with disabilities, both in employment and in access to services.

Delegates were addressed by Evelyn Collins, Chief Executive of the Equality Commission, Monica Wilson, Chief Executive from Disability Action, Kate Nash of Ultimate People Networks and Brian Hanna, Chairman of the Local Government Staff Commission for NI. They also heard from Ian Lawther and Neil McMurtry, who gained supported employment through Disability Action with Belfast City Council and the Department of Regional Development.

Evelyn Collins, said: "It is most encouraging that Councils have expressed interest in this new initiative. By working with the Equality Commission, Local Government Staff Commission and associated partners we believe Councils can make great strides in improving the representation of disabled people in their workforces.

Almost one in five persons of working-age are disabled in Northern Ireland, however, in many areas of public, political and civic life, disabled people are underrepresented. For example, in 2006 only 3% of public appointments were people with disabilities. We hope this new initiative will encourage a greater number of disabled people to stand for election and contribute as elected members to local government."

Adrian Kerr, Chief Executive, Local Government Staff Commission NI said: "We are delighted to launch this new initiative, Disability in Local Councils. Councils are going through a major period of change as we move towards the 11 new councils in 2011. It is important at this time for councils to continue to promote equality of opportunity and to strive to make councils, in their make-up as well as in the manner in which they provide services, more representative of the community which they serve.

We are delighted to support councils with their work in this area and we encourage the steps which local government is taking to remove the barriers which prevent disabled people making the most of their talents and potential; thus creating a culture where all have the opportunity to succeed."

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