

ROUNDTABLE

"Early and Often": Practitioner Perspectives on Developing a Process for Consultation with Disabled Persons' (Representative) Organisations (DP(R)O) in Active Travel

Eva Cantwell¹, Adrian Carroll², Marie Gavin¹, John Lynch³, Jill McGovern¹, Robert Sinnott⁴ and Emmet Ó Briain⁵

¹ Dublin City Council, IE

² ASIAM, IE

³ Context Studio, IE

⁴ Voice of Vision Impairment Ireland, IE

⁵ Technological University, Dublin, IE

Corresponding author: Eva Cantwell (eva.cantwell@dublincity.ie)

The issue of effective consultation with disabled people regarding planning for infrastructure in the public realm, including active travel infrastructure, is a topical subject. While barriers to active travel participation for disabled individuals are beginning to receive a greater level of attention than they have historically (Cox & Bartle 2020; Inckle 2020; Larrington-Spencer 2025), the lack of access to consultation for disabled people on active travel infrastructure design is less frequently discussed.

This is a practical issue for local authority practitioners, who often carry the greatest responsibility for the delivery of active travel infrastructure. This article presents the findings of a roundtable discussion held on March 10, 2025, in Dublin City Council's Active Travel Programme Office, involving local authority and service design practitioners, as well as Disabled Persons' Organisation (DPO)/Disabled Persons' Representative Organisation (DPRO) representatives, to discuss Dublin City Council's co-designed process for consulting with DPROs in active travel. The discussion was moderated by an external researcher. It introduces Dublin City Council's motivations for and experience of developing a process for consultation with DPOs/DPROs on active travel projects, as well as identifying a number of challenges in consultation with DPOs/DPROs.

Key findings from the discussion include the following: the importance of early engagement with DPO/DPROs, flexibility around the nature of engagement and emphasis on a "living" process which allows for iterative improvements as each active travel project moves through the project lifecycle. As discussed here, the ability to conduct effective consultation on active travel projects with disabled people can be improved by developing consistency around the process for engagement with disabled people. It is hoped that the experiences discussed here in developing such a process will be useful for other practitioners and for other DPO/DPROs working on active travel in Ireland or elsewhere.

Keywords: DPO; Engagement; disabled; design; infrastructure; Communications

Introduction

The issue of effective consultation with disabled people regarding planning for infrastructure in the public realm, including active travel infrastructure, is a topical subject. While barriers to active travel participation for disabled individuals are beginning to receive a greater level of attention than they have historically (Cox & Bartle 2020; Inckle 2020; Larrington-Spencer 2025), the lack of access to consultation for disabled people on active travel infrastructure design is less frequently considered. As discussed here, the ability to conduct effective consultation on active travel projects with disabled people is often undermined by a lack of confidence and familiarity with appropriate processes.

This article presents findings from a roundtable discussion on the development of Dublin City Council's co-designed process for consulting with Disabled Persons' Organisations (DPOs)/Disabled Persons' Representative Organisations (DPROs) in active travel. It begins by introducing the Council's motivations for and experience of developing a process for improved consultation with DPOs and DPROs on active travel projects before identifying the key lessons learned from the experience, particularly the importance of early engagement with DPO/DPROs, flexibility around the nature of engagement and emphasis on a "living" process that allows for iterative improvements as each active travel project moves through its stages. It highlights how effective consultation on active travel projects with disabled people can be improved by developing consistency around the process for engagement with disabled people.

Background

Under Section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014, public bodies are legally required to consider and address how their policies and services affect disabled people, including identifying and removing barriers and providing reasonable accommodation. They must identify how their policies, services and practices impact disabled people and take proactive steps to address these issues.

While the Council was keen to deliver Universal Design public realm and active travel schemes, the previous arrangements for consultation with DPO/DPROs were largely ad hoc. Prior to the development of the dedicated DPO/DPRO Consultation Process for Active Travel, Dublin City Council (DCC) had recognised the limitations of their existing approach to consultation with DPO/DPROs generally. Councillors deciding on planning for public realm projects had been reporting concerns from DPROs, relating not only to the accessibility of design solutions but also to the accessibility of project information, which undermined their support for such projects.

"There was a legacy of disenchantment among DPO/DPROs ... some projects were stalling, not necessarily due to design issues, but because DPO/DPROs felt that they hadn't been sufficiently consulted in line with their UNCRPD rights. Councillors were seeking assurance that consultation had happened, and council officials were eager to get projects over the line." (JL)

DPO/DPROs highlighted that the first opportunity for meaningful input into a project usually came too late in the process to influence the design, and as a result, they felt excluded from the consultation process.

"Before the new process was developed, major projects were developed without close consultation with disabled people ... just with disability service providers, many of which are run by people who themselves are not disabled ... Consultations that were taking place were not fully accessible and therefore in our minds did not really support engagement by disabled people." (RS)

Thus, there was a need for a new approach to DPO/DPRO consultation within the Council that would provide for disabled people's full and independent participation, as well as generate greater support for future projects. Having heard the challenges DPO/DPROs experienced with traditional routes of consultation, there was also interest in exploring other non-standard and more flexible methods of engagement. The first step in this respect was a pilot public realm project for Duke Street and South Anne Street in Dublin's south city shopping district.

Developing a methodology for consultation with DPOs/DPROs

Using the Duke Street & South Anne Street Public Realm Project as a pilot, a new methodology for consultation began to be developed in conjunction with DPO/DPROs. This new approach included an early invitation to engage at project inception and pre-planning design consultation. The format of information, such as presentations and workshops, was considered to ensure their accessibility. A suite of fully accessible documentation was developed to support ongoing engagement and understanding. In addition, novel methods of engagement, including guided site walks for DPOs with visual impairments, were incorporated. DPO/DPRO feedback was actively pursued and the approach refined based on DPO/DPRO comments.

"Through the pilot we got the opportunity to really understand the challenges our DPO/DPROs consultees were facing. We realised that by engaging directly with disabled people, rather than charities, we would engage with the people directly impacted by the changes our projects would bring." (MG)

Following this pilot, it was identified that a formalised consultation process for DPO/DPROs was required by DCC, building on lessons from the Duke Street & South Anne Street pilot scheme. A co-design approach was taken, which began initially with a review of the existing approach to consultation, based on interviews with stakeholder groups, including council officials, councillors and DPOs/DPROs.

Challenges for consultation with DPOs/DPROs

The review of DCC's existing approach identified four distinct challenges, or "shared needs," in consultation with DPOs/DPROs:

(a) Ensuring that consultation is accessible to all

General comment No. 7 on Articles 4.3 and 33.3 of the United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) says that "Public authorities should give due consideration and priority to the opinions and views of organisations of persons with disabilities when addressing issues directly related to persons with disabilities" (UNCRPD 2018). This imperative creates an onus on public bodies, including local authorities, to facilitate parity of engagement for all citizens, including disabled people, and priority for disabled people on issues directly related to them. It also creates an entitlement for disabled people to expect equity in consultation on public projects that affect them.

"Taking the human rights approach prioritises those with the least support and the least resources, often those with multiple impairments. Which is a totally different model to the old approach of 'the best for the most'. ... it's not about majoritarianism, it's about Universal Design." (RS)

(b) Ensuring engagement is responsive to diverse accessibility needs

This shared need was specifically focused on ensuring that documentation, workshops or meetings relating to projects adequately accommodated the diversity of disabled people's experiences. A straightforward example of this meant ensuring that people are not excluded by holding a meeting in an inaccessible building. It also meant recognising and supporting individuals that may find lots of writing or technical information overwhelming.

"Trying to find the best ways to communicate, taking account of time and capacity constraints that DPO/DPROs have." (AC)

"One of the things we learned during the co-design process was that online engagement was a preference for most of the DPOs/DPROs, but not all". (JL)

(c) Ensuring that DPO/DPROs receive sufficient information to identify which consultations are important for them

The UNCRPD's General Comment No. 7 recognises that priority in engagement with disabled people should be given to organisations which are DPOs/DPROs, that is, organisations led by disabled persons rather than service providers.

"... the only representative organisations should be DPOs/DPROs, which are organisations led, directed and governed by disabled persons. It's like a trade union, you cannot have employers claiming to represent workers." (RS)

In practice, this shared need acknowledged the reality that DPO/DPROs tended to be volunteer-run with limited resources and have differing capacities to deal with a large volume of projects and documentation.

"One of the things that we have to consider within our organisation is our members' individual capacities to contribute to consultations. We also must identify who is interested in participating in these consultations." (AC)

"If you're talking about 70 active travel projects, it's hard to keep a tag on what stage each one of them is at." (RS)

The process for consultation with DPROs needed to be designed to reflect this.

(d) Ensuring productive sharing of ideas and perspectives in public consultations

This challenge was considered particularly relevant to active travel project schemes, where there was a shared need to reduce any potential for confrontation or conflict during the consultation process. The initial review of existing approaches to consultation within the Council identified that DPO/DPRO representatives found it intimidating to participate in sometimes stressful conversations and also that city officials found it difficult to facilitate such conversations.

Following the review of DCC's existing approach, the design team facilitated co-design workshops involving all stakeholder groups, which resulted in a first-draft process agreed

by all parties that could be taken forward to be tested, iterated based on feedback and documented. This co-designed consultation process was then refined to support DPO/DPRO consultation on active travel projects.

Applying a refined DPO/DPRO consultation process to active travel

The application of the consultation process to active travel schemes brought new challenges around consultation with disabled people specific to the nature of active travel infrastructure delivery.

In 2022, the Irish government had declared a commitment to exchequer spending of approximately €360 million per annum on walking and cycling over its lifetime, €50 million of which was allocated to DCC to support the Greater Dublin Area Transport Strategy, including 314 km of cyclist and pedestrian travel routes planned for Dublin's Active Travel Network. This led to the establishment of a dedicated Active Travel Programme Office (ActPrO) in the Council to deliver active travel project schemes in Dublin City, reflecting the scale of the investment and planned volume of schemes.

"We saw the Active Travel network as an avalanche hitting our built environment, which would have an enormous and very sudden impact on our membership, we were concerned and stated that we wanted to be consulted." (RS)

"The Active Travel Network, by its very nature, is a complex issue for disabled people. It's one of Dublin City Council's most extensive projects and we had to find a way to involve the voices of disabled people into the conversation from an early stage." (EC)

The urgency of developing a process for consultation with DPOs and DPROs on active travel projects meant that ActPrO had little opportunity to refine the process before its introduction:

"We had to start by building on past examples. We didn't get to test, we just had to immediately start putting projects through this process. There were initial stumbling blocks, but it was by working through these that we really improved." (EC)

And so, from June 2024, any active travel scheme in DCC entering public consultation proceeded through the new active travel DPO/DPRO engagement process.

The DCC active travel DPO/DPRO engagement process

Within the Active Travel Programme Office, there are multiple projects at various stages of the project lifecycle at any one time, all with different personnel and teams within each project. However, the infrastructure itself is quite repetitive; project routes have similar elements, in terms of the features that need to be accessibly described, and similar recurring challenges. In this respect, a standardised process assists both the designers and engineers delivering the projects and the DPO/DPROs who wish to engage with the design and delivery phases.

"By having a process in place, we can support the expectations of DPOs/DPROs. In terms of managing a project delivery team and resources, having this level of clarity is useful." (JMcG)

The agreed process for DPO/DPRO consultation on active travel projects in Dublin City Council consists of four stages: (1) Pre-Design Consultation, (2) Design Consultation, (3) Project Delivery and (4) Post-Project Consultation.

Based on the guiding principle of "early and often," the first stage of the process, Pre-Design Consultation, begins when a project is just a line on a drawing. Thus, before designers even start sketching, they are encouraged to seek input from relevant DPOs/DPROs. There is a principal DPO/DPRO contact within AcTPrO to cover all active travel projects, supported by an administrative team member. The DPO/DPRO contact maintains a record of all communication for each individual route, documenting every conversation, call and meeting.

Once the project has passed through concept development and the initial design has been created, but before the project enters public consultation, a preliminary Project Information Pack (PIP) is prepared. This PIP contains four elements: a one-page Plain English summary, scheme plans or drawings, written descriptions of the drawings and a Preliminary Design Rationale Report. The Preliminary Design Rationale Report outlines the reasoning behind the design decisions to help DPO/DPROs understand how their prior input was considered and how all needs were counter-balanced up to this point. The engineering teams within AcTPrO create the PIP, and then the communications team reviews it, making suggestions and checking language, format consistency and accessibility of the material.

In the event that drawings are updated, written descriptions of drawings must also be updated. The same applies to the Plain English summary and the scheme plans, and, at that stage, a Final Design Rationale Report is also issued. Engagement continues throughout the entire design process until project delivery and a final updated PIP is issued.

To assist designers, a Style Guide setting out the best language for describing schemes through text has also been introduced, and this now forms part of the AcTPrO document repository associated with DPO/DPRO engagement. This helps designers explain the infrastructure in a way that is clear, without losing the technical accuracy. There is a dedicated document repository which includes a step-by-step document which outlines the DPO/DPRO process along with sample Briefing Notes, PIP and the Style Guide.

Learning from the DCC active travel DPO/DPRO engagement process

Experience of the active travel DPO/DPRO engagement process has highlighted a number of lessons for stakeholders, particularly around (a) the benefits of standardisation, (b) the importance of flexibility around the nature of engagement and (c) the value of iteration in a "living" process.

(a) The benefit of standardisation

The principal benefit of standardisation is that it clarifies the task for design teams while also making it easier for DPO/DPROs because information is presented in the same format for each project or scheme.

Standardisation is also inherently sustainable, creating an organisational resource which is independent of the individuals staffing the active travel projects. As personnel come and go, the process left in place will continue to develop. In this way, the DPO/DPRO engagement process is no different from other mandatory protocols, such as health and safety assessments, etc. Standardisation around DPO/DPRO engagement simply represents another essential layer to any project. At which point, it becomes normalised:

"It's about internalising a system. When something is internalised, it becomes built in, just as any safety checks or fire regulations would. This is similar. Practice makes perfect and having a template system to follow is really useful." (RS)

In DCC's experience, the standardisation of engagement also helped create and formalise organisational language around the process, which also represented a big step towards its adoption.

"In the same way people say: 'Have we done a DPIA?' for GDPR. How much simpler is life now for a new team engaging with this process? Instead of saying: 'Gosh, where do we start?' They now just say: 'Have you got an example of a PIP?' Now 'PIP' has become a word, even though it wasn't designed that way. To meet a new stakeholder and hear that word told me something had taken hold here". (JL)

Another lesson from the co-designed development of the DCC active travel DPO/DPRO engagement process has been the importance of flexibility.

(b) The importance of flexibility

The ethos of co-design means that standardisation of the consultation process and consistency in its implementation have not prevented the active travel team from maintaining flexibility around the nature of engagement. This flexibility can be ad hoc and contingent. For example, the active travel team had been corporately tied to using one platform for online engagement but, due to occasional technical and accessibility difficulties for the DPO/DPROs, established a dedicated active travel contact, which facilitated greater engagement. Again, the priority is given to disabled people on issues directly related to them.

"I'm also non-neurotypical and can get a bit swamped by emails so it's useful when somebody sends an email, they then call. Not every DPO/DPRO will be looking for that ...". (RS)

The active travel team has also discovered that small accommodations can make a big difference.

"If the briefing note goes out, and any DPO/DPRO say: 'We want to talk about this project', we might set up on-site meetings with the engineers or an online meeting if that's more accessible. The notes from those conversations feed into the briefing for the project. And subsequent meetings and conversations feed into the design and become part of the iteration of the design. Even as the project is delivered on site, the conversation continues." (EC)

This last point speaks to one of the key principles of the co-design approach, which is that, through its practice, the consultation process is continually being refined and improved.

(c) The value of iteration in a "living" process

"These are all live documents; they are updated as we improve on them each time. So, we're only as good as our last Briefing Note or our last Preliminary Design Rationale Report." (EC)

As noted earlier, the ethos of co-design entails continuous improvement as the consultation process is applied. From project to project, the active travel team is looking to see if there are improvements that can be made. One example is improvement to written descriptions of scheme drawings:

"The feedback we received on the early written descriptions of drawings was that they were difficult to understand. Active Travel routes are long, sometimes 10km or more, there are so many elements of the infrastructure to be explained: widths of footpaths, levels, access to bus stops, access to accessible car parking spaces. We have to strike a balance between explaining things in a comprehensive way and producing a 50-page document that's not useful to anyone." (EC)

Feedback from the consultation process and the experience of co-design have also led to broader changes in procurement processes around the delivery of active travel schemes, ensuring that the needs of DPOs/DPROs are recognised throughout the project lifecycle, rather than just during consultation.

Thus, the lessons from the experience of the co-designed process have been for all stakeholders, for disabled people who wish to engage with consultation around active travel projects as well as for the teams delivering the individual schemes. The growing experience of the co-design process has also enhanced the deeper organisational understanding of DPO/DPRO issues and the reach of awareness around such issues within the Council.

"The more we work through this, and the more projects that we deliver through it, the broader the knowledge base becomes, and the wider the reach of that knowledge. Something we never could have imagined as an outcome of this process was that we might educate construction teams about the importance of considering the impact of their building work on DPO/DPROs." (JMcG)

Conclusions: the practical and principled value of enhanced consultation with disabled people on active travel schemes

As a starting point, the experience of DCC's Active Travel Programme Office suggests that local authorities should not be afraid of leaning into a more proactive, immersive level of engagement with disabled people on consultation around active travel schemes. The new approach to consultation by the Council has been well received by DPOs/DPROs and has provided a collegiate basis for tackling challenges around accessible communication.

"There is a positive knock-on effect of all this work. Now when we see general public consultations, we're now seeing DPO/DPRO-specific stuff too, which is fantastic." (RS)
 "From my own perspective and experience, one of the things this has helped with is identifying how different individual communities and DPO/DPROs communicate in the first instance." (AC)

On a practical level, the development of the new consultation process has resulted in more productive and useful engagement with the DPO/DPROs by the Active Travel Programme Office. It has created new ways of working with DPO/DPROs, which have resulted in better information-gathering and, by extension, better scheme designs, which results in better active travel schemes for everyone.

"If you're designing for disabled people, your final design will be better for everyone. For children, for older people, the improvements we have made for DPO/DPROs will benefit everybody." (MG)

"Perfection can be the enemy of the good but Universal Design should be the cornerstone of all projects. Everybody here hopefully will live well into the 80s and 90s, and with age they will experience limitations to mobility etc. if projects are designed to accommodate disabled people, they should benefit everyone." (RS)

Finally, the development of the new consultation process has also led to a change in the principles of consultation with DPOs/DPROs on active travel schemes, reflecting a more collaborative approach, which also speaks to the greater level of appreciation for the challenges disabled people face that can be engendered by deeper engagement and consultation on those issues.

"Collaborative planning and meaningful citizen engagement are critical to the success of Local Authority projects. In the past, we were presenting solutions, whereas now we're talking, we're listening and learning, and anything we do is for discussion, rather than being the final product." (MG)

"The process really helped us think about the accessibility of information we are publishing for our projects and think about the challenges disabled people face when they are trying to engage with that information. If you can't find it, see it, read it, understand it, how can you comment on it?" (JMcG)

It is hoped that the experiences discussed here in developing such a process will be useful for other active travel practitioners, particularly local authority practitioners, as well as any DPOs/DPROs interested in improving consultation with local authority active travel schemes.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

Author Contribution

The roundtable participants were: Eva Cantwell (EC), Active Travel Programme Office, Dublin City Council; Adrian Carroll (AC), Senior Policy Officer, ASIAM; Marie Gavin (MG), Senior Executive Engineer, Dublin City Council; John Lynch (JL), Director, Context Design Studio; Jill McGovern (JMcG), Senior Executive Architect, Dublin City Council; Dr. Robert Sinnott (RS), Coordinator, Voice of Vision Impairment Ireland; and the discussion was moderated by Emmet Ó Briain (EÓB), Technological University, Dublin. All people named in this article have consented to be named, but the content of the article is the responsibility of the authors.

Author Note

The following is an extract from the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014, referenced in this document:

Section 42. (1) A public body shall, in the performance of its functions, have regard to the need to

- (a) eliminate discrimination,
- (b) promote equality of opportunity and treatment of its staff and the persons to whom it provides services and
- (c) protect the human rights of its members, staff and the persons to whom it provides services. The following are extracts from the UNCRPD referenced in this document:

Article 4(3): "Any decision-making processes concerning issues relating to persons with disabilities, State Parties shall closely consult with and actively involve persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities, through their representative organisations."

General Comment 7, Paragraph 23: "Public authorities should give due consideration and priority to the opinions and views of organisations of persons with disabilities when addressing issues directly related to persons with disabilities."

A Note on Language

For the purposes of this article, we note Disabled Persons' Organisations (DPOs) are also referred to as Disabled Persons' Representative Organisations (DPROs) and the terminology is interchangeable. For clarity, DPOs/DPROs are led, run, directed, staffed and mostly membered by disabled people, as per United Nations Convention on Rights of Disabled People (UNCRPD), General Comment 7. DPOs/DPROs are human rights-based and distinguished from a disability service provider.

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