



Audit of Inequalities

2026 – 2028



CONTENTS

	Introduction	3
1.	Background.....	4
2.	Methodology	5
3.	About Waterways Ireland	5
4.	Key Equality Considerations	6
4.1	Profile of Waterways Ireland	6
4.2	Equality Considerations by Section 75 Category.....	8
4.2.1	Gender.....	8
4.2.2	Dependents	11
4.2.3	Age	13
4.2.4	Disability	16
4.2.5	Religion and Political Opinion.....	19
4.2.6	Race and Ethnicity	20
4.2.7	Sexual Orientation	21
4.2.8	Marital Status	22
5.	Key emerging issues for Waterways Ireland	22
6.	Monitoring and Review Process.....	23
7.	Summary.....	24
	Appendix A – Map of Waterways Under our Remit	
	Appendix B – Organisational Chart	

Introduction

This document is presented by Waterways Ireland to support our public consultation. It reports the outcome of the Audit of Inequalities conducted by Waterways Ireland.

Alternative Format

Copies of this document are available on Waterways Ireland website and in paper format. Documentation will be made available on request in formats such as Easy Read, Braille, audio formats, large print or minority languages to meet the needs of those for whom English is not their first language.

To request an alternative format, please contact us at:

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You can also read and / or download this document from our website. Go to www.waterwaysireland.org

Consultation on this document will commence on 1 September and close on 24 November 2025.

We intend to also use other consultation methods to seek views and it may be that you will receive further communication from us in due course. We value the contribution of our consultees and hope that you will find time to comment on this document.

1. Background

1.1. What is Section 75

Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires Waterways Ireland to comply with two statutory duties: the Equality of Opportunity Duty and the Good Relations Duty.

- (1) A public authority shall in carrying out its functions relating to Northern Ireland have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity:
 - (a) between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation;
 - (b) between men and women generally;
 - (c) between persons with a disability and persons without; and
 - (d) between persons with dependants and persons without
- (2) Without prejudice to its obligations under subsection (1), a public authority shall in carrying out its functions relating to Northern Ireland have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.

1.2. Why is an Audit necessary?

The Equality Commission guidance on Section 75 recommends that public authorities undertake an audit of inequalities *“to inform the development of an action plan to promote equality of opportunity and good relations.”* The audit *“is intended to produce a more strategic picture of inequalities that a public authority may be in a position to influence, rather than examining inequalities on a policy-by-policy basis.”*¹

Waterways Ireland has undertaken an Audit of Inequalities to establish whether any of the above-mentioned Section 75 categories are or could be adversely affected or negatively impacted by the activities of Waterways Ireland and, where such inequalities were detected or suspected has developed an Action Plan to address them. While a lot of work has been done to promote equality and good relations, persistent inequalities will remain within our society.

1.3. The Action Plan

The guidance recommends that public authorities should *develop “an action plan which details action measures relevant to a public authority’s functions, to promote equality of opportunity and good relations and address inequalities for the Section 75 categories.”*

The Action Plan aims to reduce these inequalities through the identification and implementation of key strategic actions, so focus on prioritising key actions with the aim of outcomes improving over time.

The Commission also emphasises the importance of linking equality action planning to Corporate Planning cycle.² It advises that *“public authorities link the development of action plans to their corporate planning cycle, in order that equality of opportunity*

¹ Advice to Public Authorities: Approaching an Audit of Inequalities, Equality Commission NI

² Ibid, pg29

and good relations are incorporated and mainstreamed at a strategic level into the business of the public authority.”

This Equality Action Plan 2026-2028 has been linked to Waterways Ireland Corporate Plan 2026-2028 planning cycle.

2. Methodology

Given the highly specialised nature of Waterways Ireland functions the extent to which relevant research literature could be drawn upon to shed light on equality issues relating to our services was limited.

A three-stage approach was taken to developing this Audit of Inequalities and our Equality Action Plan:

- 1) Review of the Equality Scheme. The Equality Scheme was approved by ECNI in April 2013. It was reviewed and agreed by the ECNI in May 2024.
- 2) Review of evidence including:
 - a) statistical baseline data for Section 75 groups in Northern Ireland
 - b) Waterways Ireland strategies, plans, programmes, policies, complaints and research.
- 3) Review of previous audits and action plans produced by Waterways Ireland, local authorities and other statutory bodies.

The Audit of Inequalities will continue to be reviewed to coincide with Waterways Ireland Corporate Planning cycle.

3. About Waterways Ireland

Waterways Ireland is a cross-border Body, the largest of six North/South Implementation Bodies established under the British Irish Agreement of 10 April 1998. This Agreement was given domestic effect by means of the North/South Co-Operation (Implementation Bodies) (Northern Ireland) Order, 1999 and the British-Irish Agreement Act, 1999 respectively.

We are the cross-border navigational authority responsible for the management, maintenance, development, and restoration of 1,100 km of inland navigational waterways and over 600 km of Greenways and Blueways, principally for recreational purposes.

Our Headquarters is in Enniskillen Co. Fermanagh, with regional offices in Dublin, Carrick on Shannon, Co. Leitrim, and Scarriff, Co. Clare.

We employ c.360 permanent staff located at offices and sites close to the inland waterways who are assisted by a team of seasonally recruited staff reflecting the seasonality of the organisations remit. Waterways Ireland generates significant annual value in social, economic, and environmental well-being.

WHAT WE DO

Waterways Ireland is the navigation authority for 1,100 km of navigable inland waterways, comprising:

- Lower Bann Navigation
- Shannon Navigation
- Barrow Navigation
- Erne System
- Royal Canal
- Ulster Canal
- Shannon-Erne Waterway
- Grand Canal

In July 2007, it was agreed by the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) to include responsibility for the reconstruction of the Ulster Canal from Upper Lough Erne to Clones, and following restoration, its management, maintenance, and development, principally for recreational purposes, to Waterways Ireland's remit.

At an operational level, Waterways Ireland is responsible for a vast range of infrastructure assets including navigation channels, embankments, towpaths, adjoining lands, harbours, jetties, fishing stands, bridges, culverts aqueducts, overflows, locks, sluices, and lock houses along with buildings and archives. The current valuation of the rebuild costs of this infrastructure is estimated in excess of €1 billion.

Waterways Ireland's work programmes are critical to providing a safe and high-quality recreational environment for customers, whilst preserving the industrial and environmental heritage of the waterways for future generations.

4. Key Equality Considerations

4.1. Profile of Waterways Ireland

Waterways Ireland strives to fulfil its Section 75 obligations as an employer and as a public body delivering a service to the public. Its service to the public is to manage, maintain, develop and restore the inland navigable waterways principally for recreational use. Waterways Ireland is therefore a provider of public space for outdoor recreation, boats as a navigation authority and a wide range of water-based sports alongside walking and cycling. Whilst Waterways Ireland's remit covers 1,100 km of inland navigational waterways and over 600 km of Greenways and Blueways, just 15% of its geographical remit on the inland navigable waterways is in Northern Ireland covering the Erne System in County Fermanagh and the Lower Bann from Lough Neagh to Coleraine.

In Northern Ireland the Headquarters office is in Enniskillen and there is an operational office in Coleraine. Whilst Waterways Ireland has a total staff of 360, its Northern Ireland staff number is 97. Organisation chart at Appendix B.

Since the implementation of the 2023 – 2025 Action Plans there is a focus on sustainability and climate action which has been a key consideration when developing and implementing new plans.

In Waterways Irelands' Equality and Disability Action Plans 2026 - 2028, we will be aligning and embedding sustainability and procurement to develop social value throughout the cross sections of Waterways Ireland.

4.2. Equality Considerations by Section 75 category

4.2.1. Gender

According to the mid-year population and migration estimates for Northern Ireland which were published on 19th September 2024, Northern Ireland's population (30 June 2023) was 1,920,400. The population increased by 9800 people or 0.5 percent mid 2022-2023. Net migration was the main contributor to the population increase over the last year (+7,500). Natural change (births minus deaths) contributed to the population increase from 2022 to 2023, (+2,500) ³ (Rounding on figures).

Gender and Employment

In December 2024, there was an estimated 832,180 employee jobs in Northern Ireland which was an increase of 1,700 jobs (+0.2%) over the quarter and an increase of +12,800 jobs (+1.6%) over the year. ⁴

When the Labour Force Survey Annual Summary 2024 was published on 28 May 2025 ⁵ it confirmed that the number of people in employment in 2024 was 871,000.

Of those aged 16 to 64 who were employed in 2024, 52% (455,000) were male and 48% (416,000) were female.

The Waterways Ireland's workforce in Northern Ireland is 43% Male and 57% female. This shows a rise in female employees; however, this is only in Professional Technical Administrative staff. There is still a gap in female operations staff. The organisation as a whole, North and South, is predominately male due to the large number of operations staff. Only 21% of all staff in the whole organisation are female.

	NI	NICS	WI	Difference
Male	52%	49.8%	43%	-9%
Female	48%	50.2%	57%	+9%

Economic inactivity is defined as people aged 16-64 who are not involved in the labour market. They are neither working or actively seeking employment. This includes students, retirees, long-term sick and those with caring commitments.

Of those aged 16 to 64 it is estimated that 290,000 were inactive in 2024, 40% (117,000) were male and 60% (173,000) were female.⁶

The annual change was mainly driven by the services and construction sector. The change over both the quarter and the year was not statistically significant.

Private Sector V Public Sector

³ [Statistical Bulletin - 2023 Mid-year Population Estimates for Northern Ireland](#)

⁴ <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/news/labour-market-statistics-march-2025>

⁵ [Labour Force Survey Annual Summary 2024](#)

⁶ [Labour Force Survey Annual Summary 2024](#)

According to NISRA report in August 2024, the private sector had a higher share of male employees – 58.4% and 41.6% were females. While the public sector had a higher share of female employees - 63.2% and 36.8% were males.

The breakdown of part-time workers is:

Females

A greater proportion of females worked part-time in both the private sector 46.4% and in the public sector 39.2%.

Males

A smaller proportion of males work part time in both the private sector 17% and in the public sector 12.7% males

	Private Sector		Public Sector	
	Full-Time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-Time
Male	83%	17%	87.3%	12.7%
Female	53.6%	46.4%	60.8%	39.2%

This statistic shows that in both the private and the public sectors, Females are more likely to work part time than males. ⁷

Gender Pay Gap

The Gender Pay gap is the difference in average earnings (median or mean) between women and men in a workforce.

The Gender Pay Gap should not be confused with equal pay. There are various reasons why there may be a gender pay gap, for example, women are more likely to work part-time than men.

- The report published by Northern Ireland Assembly in March 2025, reported they found that women account for 69.7% (183,101) of part-time workers, while men accounted for 61.8% (362,395) of those in full-time employment.⁸
- On average, women work fewer hours than male colleagues. Among full time workers, men worked an average of 38.9 hours, compared to 34.1 hours for women. In part-time employment, women worked 17.5 hours, compared to men's 17.9 hours.⁹

In June 2024, Waterways Ireland HR team conducted a gender pay gap analysis of staff in the North and the South. Overall, the results showed a negative gender pay gap of - 14.7% and a median pay gap of 4.9%. The positive gender pay gap attributed to the appointment of 2 more females in Professional Occupations.

⁷ [ASHE headline statistics for Northern Ireland | Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency](#)

⁸ [2023 NISRA report into the Northern Ireland Labour market](#)

⁹ [2023 NISRA report into the Northern Ireland Labour market](#)

The report outlines Waterways Ireland's commitment to deliver new and existing initiatives to improve our ability to engage and develop women and to achieve a gender balance.

Earnings

Based on the latest data from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) for 2024, on average, men earn 7.3% more than women in Northern Ireland. That equates to an extra £1.14 per hour ¹⁰.

Waterways Ireland's Gender Pay Gap Report 2024, for staff North and South, reports that the average hourly pay for females is €26.50 and for males it is €23.10.

Earnings - Adjusted Pay Gap.

Adjusted pay gap refers to factors such as age, occupation, working pattern, work location, marital status, and the number of dependent children.

In the public sector, female employees, aged 25 years and over, earned 11.2% less than male employees (the 'unadjusted' pay gap). After accounting for the same factors, the gender pay gap narrowed to 2.8% (the 'adjusted' pay gap).

How does Waterways Ireland compare?

The breakdown of gender employment roles within Waterways Ireland follows traditional gender work patterns. Staff of all roles are employed in both jurisdictions. The statistics for Northern Ireland staff groups are as broken down as follows:

Waterways Ireland						
	2024			2022		
Role	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Senior Management	1	1	2	2	1	3
Heads & Regional Managers	3	6	9	3	6	9
Professional Occupations	6	5	11	4	3	7
Professional & Technical	10	10	20	14	6	20
Administration	5	33	38	9	27	36
Personal Service	1	0	1	1	0	1
Plant & Machine Operatives	15	0	15	11	0	11
Elementary Occupations	1	0	1	3	0	3
Total	42	55	97	47	43	90

¹⁰ [Closing the gap: the state of gender pay equality in Northern Ireland - Research Matters](#)

The number of female employees has increased from 43 to 55 since 2022 which is a positive outcome from the last Audit carried out by Waterways Ireland.

What are the inequalities or potential inequalities?	Potential Action needed
Under-representation in traditional work roles	Positive targeting of under-represented groups through recruitment campaigns. Female interest and participation in Operation Roles. Male interest and participation in administrative jobs.
Under-representation of groups within the workplace	Encourage under-represented groups to join the organisation through recruitment campaigns.

4.2.2. Dependents

The 2021 Census defines "Dependent Children" as those living with their parent(s) who are either aged under 16 years, or aged 16 to 18 years and who are in full-time education, excluding children aged 16 to 18 years who have a spouse, partner or child living in the household.

Dependency can also refer to anyone who depends on an individual for care. Often this can be an adult or older person with physical or cognitive disabilities.

The Family Resources Survey Northern Ireland 2022/2023 published in 2024 found that approximately 7% of the population including children were informal, unpaid carers. This includes 9% of working age adults and 1% of state pension age adults.¹¹ 60 of these carers are female and 28% are full-time workers.

How does Waterways Ireland compare

In response to a staff Monitoring Questionnaire in both jurisdictions completed in 2025, 56% of staff indicated they had caring responsibilities.

This was broken down as follows:

Category of Role	2022*	2025
A child or children under 18 years old:	86.54%	76.47%
A disabled person or persons:	2.88%	2.10%
An elderly person or persons:	15.38%	12.42%
Other	6.73%	8%

**figures for 2022 do not round up due to staff selecting more than one category for caring responsibilities.*

This indicates a slight decrease in caring responsibilities among staff, particularly caring for children under 18 years of age, which has decreased by 10%.

¹¹ [Family Resources Survey - Office for National Statistics](#)

What are the inequalities or potential inequalities?	Potential Action needed
Support services for carers and those with dependents.	Continue to provide a range of workplace, work-life balance policies and flexible working for staff in the organisation.

Since the Covid pandemic Waterways Ireland has a Hybrid Working Policy. The policy was reviewed in 2023. Following a survey, staff felt the policy offered a work life balance and that consideration was given to factors such as caring for dependents.

In addition, Waterways Ireland is committed to providing and supporting flexible working patterns that will assist employees to balance personal and family commitments.

Flexibility is offered to employees through the Waterways Ireland Flexible Working Policy. This policy provides employees with flexible working patterns. It enables staff to care for children under the age of 16 or a disabled child under 18 years of age. Staff are also entitled to apply for a flexible working arrangement if they have caring responsibilities for a spouse, partner, civil partner, near relative, or an adult living at the same address.

Maternity

According to the latest report by NISRA - Maternity in the Workplace there continues to be an inequality in Northern Ireland

An Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) survey in June 2017 found 77% of mothers said they had been subject to a negative and possibly discriminatory experience during pregnancy, maternity, or after their return from maternity leave.¹²

Waterways Ireland has had no complaints raised relating to maternity issues and have policies in place to ensure that an employee's employment status is protected when on leave:

- Maternity & Paternity (North)
- Parental Leave (North)
- Sickness & Absence Management Policy
- Special Leave (North)

Older People

Providing care, particularly on a long-term basis can result in multiple disadvantages in later life. This can affect income, pension accumulation, career opportunities and the development of social networks. The consequences of this multiplies over time and impacts substantially on middle aged women.¹³

People with caring responsibilities for someone who is elderly, sick or disabled are more likely to be women aged between 50-60.¹⁴ Middle-aged women are also more likely to be disadvantaged, given the fact that 13% of carers said they were at risk of reducing their working hours or giving up work altogether if they didn't have Carer's

¹² [Avoiding pregnancy and maternity discrimination claims](#)

¹³ [KI2007_Health.pdf](#)

¹⁴ [KI2007_Health.pdf](#)

Leave.¹⁵

4.2.3. Age

Children and Young People

The latest poverty and income inequality report was released by NISRA and the Department of the Communities in March 2025. The figures released show that 23% of children are living in relative poverty. This means living in a household with an income below 60% of UK median income in the year in question. In 2023/24 the threshold was £390 per week.¹⁶

According to the Promoting the Right of Children and Young People there are 440,000 children in Northern Ireland and one in four of these are living in poverty.¹⁷

The social metrics Commission Report in 2024¹⁸ showed that there were 14.9 million people living in poverty in the UK in 2021-22, of whom 8.6 million were living in families that included a disabled adult or child, and 6.3 million in families that do not include a disabled adult or child.

It also found that, of the 14.9 million people in poverty, 4.7 million of them were disabled, 3.2 million were working-age adults with a disability, 600,000 were disabled children and 800,000 were disabled adults of pension-age.

Whilst socio-economic disadvantage is not a specified ground under the equality legislation, it is clear that the barriers and inequalities experienced by equality groups are exacerbated by poverty and social exclusion. At every stage of schooling, Northern Ireland's poorest children are likely to do worse, and make less progress than their better-off classmates, with evidence showing that the gap has been widening.

Young people and how they experience and value our inland waterways is hugely important to Waterways Ireland. Through its Equality and Disability Plans 2023 – 2025 Waterways Ireland has worked with various schools both North and South to showcase opportunities that are available in Waterways Ireland. Waterways Ireland aims to integrate the inland waterways with the learning environment and provide learning experiences which are meaningful, accessible, engaging and stimulating for all. The resources developed and programmes or workshops delivered, feed into the curriculum and compliment what schools are doing within the classroom. These are free and accessible on our website.

The Northern Ireland Equality Commission's 2020 Summary of Policy Positions Relating to Poverty and Socio-economic Disadvantage notes "mentoring, targeted careers advice and wider support for those at, or approaching, school leaving age could help match career aspirations and skills to job prospects".¹⁹

¹⁵ <https://cpe.org.uk/lpcs-and-local/locally-commissioned-services/essential-facts-stats-and-quotes/carers-and-providing-carer-support-services>

¹⁶ [Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency](#)

¹⁷ [Poverty - Niccy](#)

¹⁸ [The Social Metrics Commission - a new measure for poverty in the UK](#)

¹⁹ [Summary of policy positions relating to poverty and socio-economic disadvantage](#)

What are the inequalities or potential inequalities?	Potential Action needed
Children living in poverty have limited access to educational programmes due to cost or disability.	Continue to provide education and heritage programmes online at low or no cost to the school/pupil to eliminate the risk of cost/disability being a barrier to access or participation.
Children living in poverty have limited access to extra-curricular activity due to cost or disability.	Continue to work with local community groups, Sports Development Officers, National Governing bodies, using the waterways for recreational activity to support programmes at no or low cost, targeting children living in poverty.
Young people living in poverty are less likely to achieve educational success which affects employment prospects.	Seek to offer a range of work experience opportunities for young people from a wide range of educational achievements and background.
Access to information and services. Expand services to meet future projections.	Ensure that services including access to and content of information we provide suit the specific needs of older people. Continue to expand upon developing projects to ensure that the waterways will be as accessible as possible for older people, given the growth predictions.
Obstacles to participation in recreation/leisure. Obstacles in employment.	Work with local Sports Development Officers, National Governing bodies, local communities and other statutory bodies to support programmes providing opportunities for older people to participate in recreation/leisure.

Older People, Pensioners

In 2023 there were 287,100 people aged 60 to 84 inclusive and 39,400, aged 85 and over. In total that is 17% of the population of Northern Ireland.

In the last 25 years, there has been a demographic change in Northern Ireland's population. The over 65 age bracket has experienced the largest increase and this is predicted to continue. Projections show that by mid-2027 the population aged over 65 will increase to 377,700.²⁰

Age discrimination is reported as the most common form of workplace discrimination, with more than 1 in 10 (11%) adults in the UK stating that their age has been a factor in not getting a job they have applied for and more than 1 in 20 (5.7%) saying that they've experienced age discrimination in their workplace.

Moreover, older people are less likely to participate in sport but will require accessible exercise avenues which can also make it difficult for older people to use and participate in activities on and along the waterways.

²⁰ [Labour Market Report – January 2025 | Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency](#)

How does Waterways Ireland compare?

NISRA reported that NICS in 2025 has an older age profile with the percentage of staff from 55 and older increasing from 17.9% to 28.5% and staff aged between 16 and 34 fell from 22.1% to 15.2%. ²¹

This is consistent with WI figures

Working Age Group	WI 2024	NICS 2024	WI 2022	NICS 2022
18-34	10%	13.4%	14%	14%
35-59	76%	58.9%	69%	74.9%
60+	14%	27.7%	17%	11.1%

Waterways Ireland recognises the importance of youth in succession planning. Waterways Ireland also facilitates individuals to work past the government retirement age guidance, and can provide adjustments to an employee's job to assist them for example through reduced hours, as an individual ages.

What are the inequalities or potential inequalities?	Potential Action needed
Attracting Young People into Employment.	Develop entry to employment workforce actions within new HR "People Strategy for WI". Seek to offer a range of work experience opportunities for young people, from a range of educational achievements and background through interview skill training and student mentor programme.

4.2.4. Disability

Northern Ireland has the lowest rate of disabled people in employment in the UK, with **36.4%** of people with disabilities in employment compared to an employment rate of 80.3% of people without a disability. A gap of 43.9%. ²²

Waterways Ireland has monitored its disability figures through anonymous staff surveys. In our Audit of Inequalities published in 2022, 3.26% of staff considered themselves to have a disability. A similar survey carried out in 2025 shows that currently 12.16% of staff in Northern Ireland consider themselves to be a person with a disability.

The following table shows the type of disability and the comparison between the 2 surveys:

²¹ [Equality Statistics for the Northern Ireland Civil Service-January 2021 \(nisra.gov.uk\)](https://www.nisra.gov.uk/equality-statistics-for-the-northern-ireland-civil-service-january-2021)

²² [ECNI - Tackling issues affecting persons with disabilities in NI](#)

Type of Disability	2022	2025*
Physical impairment, such as difficulty using your arms, or mobility issues requiring you to use a wheelchair or crutches:	0%	30%
Sensory impairment, such as blindness or having a serious visual impairment, or deafness or having a serious hearing impairment:	20%	0%
Mental health condition, such as depression or schizophrenia:	20%	10%
Learning disability or difficulty, such as Down's Syndrome or Dyslexia, or Cognitive Impairment, such as Autistic Spectrum Disorder:	10%	40%
Long standing or progressive illness or health condition, such as cancer, HIV infection, diabetes, epilepsy or chronic heart disease	50%	40%

**figures for 2025 do not round up due to staff selecting more than one category.*

The comparison indicates a positive outcome as Waterways Ireland is raising awareness around disability, through training and delivery of communications. In 2024 Waterways Ireland became JAM Card partners supporting service users and staff with autism and any other disabilities helping those who require Just a Minute when accessing or using Waterways Ireland's amenities.

In 2025, Waterways Ireland further enhanced staff training requirements to focus on Neurodiversity and the different behavioural traits and brain function that affect how people communicate with the world around them.

The increase in the staff percentage from 10% to 40% in the last 4 years, demonstrates the commitment of Waterways Ireland and the Equality Unit in embracing diversity and inclusion and celebrating how these different ways of thinking, processing and learning make us unique.

Sports and Disability and Inequality – Northern Ireland.

Approx 24% of the NI population are disabled or have long term health conditions ²³

Sports NI identified the need to work in this area and developed a three EDI Engagement and Delivery plan 2021 – 2026 to address the issues for disabled people and underrepresented groups.

Culture arts heritage and sport

A survey was carried out by the Continuous Household Survey on the wellbeing and engagement in culture, arts, heritage and sport by adults in Northern Ireland. This was carried out face to face or over the phone and interview modes which was different to the 2021/2022 reported on in the last audit. This was due to the Covid pandemic and may not be directly comparable due to closures etc.

²³ [Equality, Diversity and Inclusion | Sport NI](#)

The survey asked a question on Health. The results show that for adults who are engaged in culture, arts, heritage and sport, 77% rated their health a very good or good. This is an increase of 2% from 2022/2023 figure of 75%. ²⁴

How Does Waterways Ireland Compare

A marketing consultant agency on behalf of Waterways Ireland carried out a survey in 2025. The research highlights a number of areas which show differential performance where improvements can be focused on improving the overall visitor experience and broadening the appeal of the waterways.

Despite higher awareness, the 45+ unconstrained and rural category are less likely to be considering visiting an inland Waterway. The question of whether accessibility or safety concerns are driving this should be addressed.

Research showed that 55% visit the greenways for walking.

Accessibility for service users

The survey carried out by the marketing consultant on behalf of Waterways Ireland showed that 32% of respondents (1,301) have a living experience of some form of disability.

Of these replies, 60% consider our waterways to be accessible. The main barriers reported are availability of amenities and physical access.

Two different anonymous surveys carried out by the Equality Unit in Waterways Ireland to their consultee list and their staff, mirrors the feedback of the survey carried out by the Marketing Consultant, highlighting accessibility issues.

What are the inequalities or potential inequalities:

What are the Inequalities or Potential Inequalities	Potential Action Needed
Barriers facing unrepresented groups and people with a disability.	Continue to work on enhancing the waterways and adjoining towpaths to make our facilities accessible.
Constraints on service users with a disability.	Continue to make information more accessible in all formats including promotional material.
Low participation in recreation and leisure.	Encourage the participation of women in recreational activities. Encourage the participation of individuals from deprived areas.

Accessible facilities and services

Waterways can present many challenges for visitors and particularly for visitors who have a disability. People with a range of disabilities experience difficulty in accessing waterway crafts, movement on grass, loose surfaced pathways, uneven ground and on-site facilities such as parking, WC facilities, jetties, piers, fishing stands, floating

²⁴ [Wellbeing and engagement in culture, arts, heritage and sport by adults in Northern Ireland](#)

pontoons and to various waterside locations from which boating activities take place. Waterways Ireland must continue to ensure that people with disabilities can access information about our services and enjoy the facilities which we provide on and along our waterways.

Results from a 2025 survey carried out by a marketing consultant on behalf of Waterways Ireland cited that people with disabilities (32% cited some living experience and issue) rated the waterways well overall (60%), but did highlight the need for greater access, ramps, improved facilities and amenities, as well as more information points.

What are the inequalities or potential inequalities?	Potential Action needed
Obstacles to participating in leisure / recreation	Continue to apply the principles of Universal Design in the design, upgrade and development of facilities on and along our waterways to ensure these are accessible and

What are the inequalities or potential inequalities?	Potential Action needed
Obstacles to employment.	Affirmative action measures to attract more applications from people with disabilities for vacancies across all areas of our organisation. Improved information about applicants for jobs / our staff to enable us to take appropriate action and make improvements by attracting, recruiting, retaining and progressing people with disabilities. Actively promote a positive attitude to encourage and support staff declaring a disability. Successfully achieve the actions set out in our Disability Action Plan.
Access to information and services.	Develop an accessible information policy along with procedures to highlight the organisation's commitment to communicating effectively with everyone.

4.2.5. Religion and Political Opinion

The 2021 Census reports 42.3% of the population were from the Catholic community and 37.9% were from the Protestant community.

In 2025, the religious make-up of the Northern Ireland Civil Service is 50.5% from the Catholic community and 49.5% from the Protestant community. Catholic representation for the economically active population is 51.6%. Staff whose religious background could not be determined are excluded from these figures.

How does Waterways Ireland compare?

In 2022 the religious breakdown of Waterways Ireland staff in Northern Ireland was 63.2% from the Catholic community and 36.8% from the Protestant community.

In 2025, the staff based in Northern Ireland, 32% are from the Protestant community while 61% are from the Catholic community. 7% of staff prefer not to state whether they have a religion or not.

Due to this, it appears that there is a drop of 4.8% in numbers of a Protestant community within our workforce. However, it is difficult to determine whether figures from other religions

or no religions make up some of Waterways Irelands employees that were born into a protestant community.

When compared with FODC census population figures in 2021, Waterways Ireland's religious breakdown is closely aligned with the community that many of its Northern Ireland employees are drawn from.

It continues to be a barrier for monitoring religion of new staff who do not wish to disclose a religion.

Waterways Ireland will continue with the affirmative action to attract a wider applicant pool from the Protestant Community.

Determination	NI 2021 Census	FODC NI 2021 Census*	WI 2021	NICS 2021	WI 2025**	NICS 2025
Catholic	42.3%	64.2%	63.2%	49.8%	66%	50.5%
Protestant	37.9%	30.7%	36.8%	50.2%	34%	49.5%

*Other religions 0.92% No religion 4.1%.

**Figures adjusted not to include staff members who do not hold or have not stated their religion.

FAIR EMPLOYMENT MONITORING FORM JOB APPLICATIONS				
Year	2024		2022	
Determination	Applicants	Percentage	Applicants	Percentage
Catholic	102	52%	69	51%
Protestant	39	20%	42	31%
Non-Determined	54	28%	24	18%

Potential Inequality	Potential Action Needed
Proportion Protestant representation in Waterways Ireland's employees.	Affirmative action required to attract a wider applicant pool from the Protestant Community.

²⁸ [EqualityStatisticsfortheNorthernIrelandCivilService-January2021\(nisra.gov.uk\)](https://www.nisra.gov.uk/equality-statistics-for-the-northern-ireland-civil-service-january-2021)

4.2.6. Race and Ethnicity

NISRA Census 2021 shows 3.4% of the population belonged to an ethnic minority group. The number of people living in Northern Ireland who were born outside the United Kingdom and Ireland has grown from 81,500 people in 2011 to 124,300 people in 2021.²⁵

Over 96% of the population identifies as 'white'. In Waterways Ireland 2021& 2025 Monitoring Questionnaire, 100% of staff indicated their race, colour or ethnic or national origins as 'white'.

It is recognised that many migrants face difficulties when accessing public services, especially where English is not their first language. While some important information services may be available in a wide range of languages, this service is limited, and for many government services are provided more as a welcoming gesture. Some migrants have also faced varying degrees of racism, prejudice and hostility.

In 2015, the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities identified a number of barriers to employment for people from ethnic minority groups, including:

- Recognition of qualifications.
- Work experience and voluntary work overseas being discounted.
- The importance placed on references from NI employers.
- Language proficiency.
- The reliance on job application forms (something that many people are unused to).
- Employment agencies have no capacity to translate documentation needed to support applications.

What are the Inequalities or potential inequalities?	Potential Action needed
Language and communication barriers.	Provide language translations of other information when asked to do so.
Under-representation in decision-making processes.	Actively seek to increase engagement with organisations representing the interests of people from minority ethnic backgrounds.
Under representation in workforce.	Affirmative action – Equality Training in the workforce to focus on Race and Ethnicity will be a focus in 2026 – 2028 plans.

²⁵ [Census 2021 | Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency](#)

4.2.7. Sexual Orientation

Figures published in March 2023 from Census 2021 was the first time Northern Ireland collected sexual orientation statistics. It showed that 2.1% of adults in Northern Ireland identify as LGBT+. ²⁶The survey was broken down as follows: -

Sexual Identity	NI
Heterosexual/Straight	90%
Gay/Lesbian	1.2%
Bisexual	0.7%
Other sexual orientation	0.2%
Did not say/prefer not to say	7.9%

Waterways Ireland conducted a staff survey (North and South) in 2022 and again in 2025. It broke down as follows:

Sexual Identity	2022	2025*
Heterosexual/Straight	98.77%	100%
Gay/Lesbian	0.62%	0%
Bisexual	0.62%	0%

*13 staff skipped this question in 2025.

The recent survey shows that from the number of respondents that answered the survey 100% are heterosexual.

What are the Inequalities or potential inequalities?	Potential Action needed
Obstacles to participation in employment / Recreation.	Ensure awareness of LGBTQ is part of Waterways Ireland ongoing staff equality training.
Potential Discrimination /Harrassment Discrimination/ Harassment	Raising awareness of the appropriate policies and the disciplinary procedures in place to deal effectively with actions of discrimination or harassment.

²⁶ [Census 2021 | Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency](#)

4.2.8. Marital Status

The 2021 Census advised that just under half (45.6%) of the population aged 16 and over within Northern Ireland were married, while over a third (38.1%) were single. The number in civil partnerships is just 0.2% with approximately 10% of the population either separated or divorced.²⁷ This showed that single adults rose with married couples declining with an increase in divorce figures.

Staff monitoring questionnaires completed by Waterways Ireland staff in both 2022 and 2025 indicates that Waterways Ireland is following this trend.

Marital Status	2025	2022
Single, never married	22.07%	21.84%
Married or civil partnership	69.04%	70.69%
Widowed	0%	0.57%
Divorced	7.39%	4.02%
Separated	2.4%	2.87%

5. Key emerging issues for Waterways Ireland

This Audit of Inequalities identified similar outcomes to the Waterways Ireland's Audit of Inequalities in 2022.

Following the Audit of Inequalities in 2022 our Disability and Equality Action Plans were implemented with key performance measures and actions identified. Noticeable progress has been made through those plans with positive outcomes such as raising awareness among staff, the disability percentage of staff increasing and collaboration with various stakeholders to achieve goals and develop and maintain relationships both externally and internally.

While considerable work has been delivered to date, this Audit of Inequalities has identified the requirement to work within our key themes to further deliver on our commitments under our Equality Scheme and also our responsibility to implement the Public Sector duty in the Republic of Ireland.

Four themes have been identified for the Equality Action Plan:

1. Promote awareness of the Equality Agenda among Waterways Ireland staff.
2. Provide a working environment where employees are treated with fairness, dignity and respect.
3. Attract, recruit and retain a diverse range of employees in a culture which celebrates diversity and inclusion.
4. Deliver services that are accessible, inclusive and responsive to visitors to our property and waterways.

²⁷ [Census 2021 | Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency](#)

Two themes have been identified for the Disability Action Plan:

1. Promote positive attitudes towards disabled people
2. Encourage participation by disabled people in public life.

6. Monitoring and Review Process

The Action Plans will be monitored on a bi-annual basis by the Senior Management Team. The Senior Management Team will review the progress in implementing previously agreed actions together with consideration of any new developments in the intervening period. Where appropriate, the Action Plans will be revised to reflect any new developments, consultations, the outcome of any new Equality Impact Assessments or any additional information not previously available.

Waterways Ireland will prepare an annual report on progress made over the previous year. This report will form part of the Annual Review of Progress on Section 75 implementation which is sent to the Equality Commission.

The collation of information on progress will allow for regular and ongoing review of the initial action plan to ensure that it remains effective and relevant to Waterways Ireland functions. Any changes or amendments to the action plan will be reported to the Equality Commission.

Summary

During the Audit, Waterways Ireland has identified inequalities or potential inequalities as summarised in the table below. These inequalities have actions, key performance indicators with desired outcomes which are addressed and incorporated into our Equality and Disability Action Plans 2026 – 2028.

Waterways Ireland is committed to the monitoring and review process and will continue to report annually on the progress of actions to the Equality Commission.

What are Inequalities or Potential Inequalities?
➤ Under-representation in traditional work roles
➤ Under-representation of groups within the workplace
➤ Support services for carers and those with dependents
➤ Children living in poverty have limited access to educational programmes due to cost or disability
➤ Children living in poverty have limited access to extra-curricular activities due to cost or disability
➤ Young People living in poverty are less likely to achieve educational success which affects employment prospects
➤ Access to information and services
➤ Expand services to meet future projections
➤ Obstacles to participating in recreation and leisure
➤ Obstacles to employment
➤ Attracting young people into employment
➤ Barriers facing unrepresented groups and people with a disability
➤ Constraints on service users with a disability
➤ Low participation in recreation and leisure
➤ Obstacles to participation in leisure and recreation
➤ Access to information and services
➤ Language and communication barriers
➤ Under representation in decision making processes
➤ Under representation in the workforce
➤ Obstacles to participation in employment and recreation
➤ Potential discrimination and harassment

Appendix A – Map of Waterways under our Remit



Appendix B - Our Organisational Structure



