

Disability transport in Ireland: apartheid or equal?

I am delighted to present here today. I have a very rare neuro-muscular degenerative disease that I share with my twin sister. Hence the wheelchair. I am a disability rights campaigner and activist.

I do not belong to a 'group' as such, certainly not an 'organisation'.

However, I do host a facebook forum entitled: **'Wheelchair Rights Ireland'**, which has 500 followers and campaigns

for more appropriate, better, wheelchair and seating provision for wheelchair users in Ireland.

Sufficient to say provision of suitable wheelchairs is not up to standard in Ireland, and this is where equality of transport begins for many.

All disabled people are my concern. Over 600,000 citizens, the 13% of the population left behind.

We are calling for transport RIGHTS – inclusion.

Wheels are my focus.

Freedom is my focus.

Equality of participation in all areas of society, by all disabled people, depends on wheels.

Wheelchairs, scooters, (for those who need them), buses, trains, Dart, Luas (though 'tracks' probably more appropriate word here).

Getting on, going places is key to living.

Travel is wonderful, for all disabled people, whether visually impaired, deaf/Deaf, wheelchair user, learning disabled – older and frail, we love freedom.

You all rolled out of your beds this morning and the only thing you had to think of was getting here somehow.

Probably your car...

But... ah... disabled people can no longer avail of the Mobility grant or motorised transport grant, which enabled us have cars, both removed by this government in 2013 and promised to be reinstated, but never were. The money was ringfenced, so where is it?

Many rural disabled people, and severely disabled people who cannot use public transport depended on those grants.

Buses

Here are some real stories about **buses & disability access**:

1. **Brid:** Our daughter has a free travel pass, we live in co Limerick, the bus that's does our local run into Limerick city twice a day, can't be used by wheelchair users as it has steps up to it. It's a disgrace.
2. **Catherine:** My son cannot travel on the bus eireann school bus to secondary school as there is no lowering step, he has a physical

disability, and although I telephoned bus eireann and gave them plenty of notice. neither (privately contracted) school bus in 2016 or 2017 had a lowering step. I now drive him to school, but he misses out travelling with the other students.

3. **Claire:** A Bus Eirenn employee told me that all express way buses have lifts for wheelchair users, but they couldn't use the lifts as the footpaths had to be upgraded by the county councils, apparently to be completed

by the end of 2016, he says it's more likely to be 2026. People with disabilities shouldn't be restricted like this. I thought we were all supposed to be equal to others. This is separating us from society.

4. **Frank:** When I travel to Dublin from Donegal I am lifted bodily, under my arms and legs by two Bus Eireann employees, out of my wheelchair, up the bus steps, its humiliating, degrading and dangerous. Sometimes the bus staff don't want to help, so

other passengers do. This should not be happening in 21st century travel.

5. **Sorcha:** Having to only use the front door of the bus is inaccessible for many and unsafe for some. It means having to fit in a narrow hallway and turn off the bus at an angle. A powerchair like mine should not go downward at an angle, it results in part of my chair falling off the ramp and getting stuck. This is not because of me or my chair but ill-considered bus design.

So here is the apartheid, the separation in bus travel.

The causes of our transport difficulty are not our disabilities.

The cause spans across county council failings to bus design to broken ramps. It is across private and public bus travel. It affects disabled people's lives. Particularly in rural areas, Isolation, separation, frustration, danger and a sense we are simply not catered for.

It is the structure's that make us dis-abled, not our bodily conditions or diseases.

Our dis-ability is politically constructed.

The real cause is disability discrimination.

An unwillingness to sort the access issues.

An unwillingness to regard us as equal passengers.

Accessible Taxi's: We rely on accessible taxi's despite our low incomes. It can be our only transport life-line.

But there are too few accessible taxi's with too many taxi drivers not wanting the hassle of loading us on.

- **Sean:** I booked an accessible taxi five-hours in advance but after waiting one and a half hours in the

freezing cold, it didn't turn up...I made alternative arrangements.

- **Mary:** The HSE booked an accessible taxi to take me home from St Vincent's after a hospital appointment. My appointment was late, but finished at 5pm. I waited 3 hours at the doors of St Vincent's. No taxi. In the end I phoned an RTE reporter (a friend) who came over and organized an accessible taxi. (and paid for it)

Something this government needs to do is roll out a grant for us to be able to get taxi's and to improve accessible taxi numbers.

Air-travel is a nightmare too. Companies that thrash power wheelchairs in the off-loading of them, no accessible toilets and no spaces for wheelchair users.

Once I was seated in a plane and saw a head bob up by my left arm. It was a disabled man bottom-shuffling to the toilet down the aisle of the plane. The indignity and humiliation not difficult to see.

Rail travel is not much different, broken lifts, broken or switched off emergency call buttons on the DART is almost a permanent feature. Because children press them. But what if we need emergency help?

My twin, also a wheelchair user, has Crohn's disease as well as our neuro-muscular disease. She has had several terrifying episodes where she needed to off load urgently, but the emergency buttons were locked off. What if someone had a heart attack?

Broken ramps, stations forgetting you were booked in, or worse, forgetting to get you off.

This happened me once as I travelled back up to Dublin from Limerick. It was late, around 9pm, I was exhausted, my neuro-muscular degenerative disease does not cope well with tiredness, I was flopping all over the place and I needed my bed.

But they 'forgot me'. We arrived at Heuston, everyone got off, I was left. In darkness, at the end of the platform, not a soul in sight I got really scared. About

twenty minutes later a single cleaner arrived. I was rescued.

The fear and anxiety of travel cannot be underestimated. Will they get me on, will they get me off. Will I land up in some god forsaken place, it has happened.

This is not what you experience. Is it?

This is travel apartheid – why? Because we are disabled? No- because we are not considered. This is not equality. **This is discrimination.**

Once my twin and I got on the Dart at Greystones, we had not booked 24hrs in advance. So, we rang Connolly station to

say we were on the train and needed ramping off in Connolly, about an hour later. The officious woman declared; "*I cannot guarantee to get you off*".

We were on the dart, were we to stay on it for 24 hours until 'notice was given' and we could get off? I said to her "*but we are ON the DART*". She still repeated "*I cannot guarantee to get you off*". We agonized all the way to Connolly where we were ... off loaded.

24hr notice to travel is an apartheid rule. It's a separation from non-disabled people's 'rules'.

You, non-disabled people, can arrive, hop on, hop off anytime you want. But we are 'marked' by our disability. Destined to 'need' the help so we must book in advance.

Now Minister Shane Ross declares jubilantly we will only have to give 4-hour notice, (a pilot scheme), as if that means equality.

I don't want to give any notice.

4-hour notice means I have no choice, I cannot change my travel plans on the spur of the moment. I am not free.

4-hour notice is not an 'improvement' on 24hr notice.

We don't want to give any notice. Just like you!

I want to arrive, get on, get off, enjoy my freedom. Planning every single journey is a nightmare.

This is discrimination.

It doesn't need to happen if all stations were staffed. We demand fully staffed DART stations, All Stations. So that we can travel just like you – freely. When we want to.

Why can we not be part of the travelling passenger community, go our own way with freedom and access?

Because of discrimination.

Our bodies are not accepted, we are marked as 'different' and being different we cannot EXPECT 'equality of travel'.

For goodness sake... Ireland has not even ratified the UN convention on rights for disabled people (UNCRPD) – ten years on, the last EU country to do so, Why?

An unwillingness to see us as equal – to **make** us equal.

It is Discrimination.

We cannot EXPECT things to be made easier, accessible. We cannot EXPECT humanity, or travel support.

So, we are made to deal with travel frustration, apartheid, separation, fear, anxiety, broken ramps, no station toilets, forgotten on trains, forgotten and left on freezing cold platforms, broken lifts & escalators, unstaffed train stations/DART, no wheelchair spaces, narrow train and bus design, switched off alarm calls on trains and more, as if we didn't exist.

Marsha De Cordova, a UK MP, said:

“It’s a political choice to build a transport network that’s too often inaccessible.”

A political Choice.

It’s here equality happens – here.

We are a European country, The President of the European Parliament, Antonio Tajani, has stated:

"Our commitment to improve the lives of persons with disabilities is founded in our values as Europeans, including our attachment to freedom, equality

and inclusion, of all individuals in society, these values have to be translated into concrete action to enable every person to live an independent life and to make sure our society empowers everyone”

‘Concrete action’ is urgently needed in transport provision for disabled people of Ireland. So far, we are in an ‘apartheid of travel discrimination’.

It’s got to change.

What’s broken needs fixing, what’s inaccessible needs to be made accessible.

This is a ‘political choice’. You need to **make** it happen.

This is **our** public transport too – we deserve as full citizens of Ireland, just to ‘get to the station or bus stop, get on, get off’ and travel freely; safely, and without fear and anxiety.

This is **your** ‘political choice’. I call on you to make it happen.

Thank you

Dr Margaret Kennedy

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PS a message I received on Monday morning 11th December. Another shocking example.

Catherine: Hi people my patience is very, very low my son who has a disability (in powered wheelchair) traveling home from work boarding the DART in Landsdowne road arrived in Bray and guess, what no one there to

take him off. He could not get to the emergency button quick enough, so he has to sit in Greystones till someone comes out to put him back on the DART and bring him to Bray. As everyone knows it a very, very, cold night out there.

The same situation arose yesterday evening but lucky enough the dart was only going to Bray and again he was forgotten how hard is it to remember a message from Landsdown to Bray that a passenger needs assistance. Just heard from him now he is sitting out in the cold no one in Greystones has to wait

for the Rosslare train and hope the driver will put him on and bring him back to bray. Twice in 24 hours and Irish Rail day this situation does not happen I really hope he gets home soon as it is Baltic out there.