

## **Joint Committee on Disability Matters**

**Opening Statement: 17 June 2021**

**Dr Fergal Lynch, Secretary General, Department of Children,  
Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth**

I thank the Committee for the invitation to attend the meeting today. I am joined today by my Departmental colleagues Carol Baxter, Assistant Secretary, Una Ní Dhubhghail, Principal Officer and Richard Quilliam, Assistant Principal Officer.

Our Department was established in its current format last October, and this is the first opportunity for officials to meet with the Committee since we took on the very important disability functions from what was the Department of Justice and Equality. We have also taken on other functions in the equality area, as well as matters relating to international protection and integration.

Since we became the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth our formal mission is to enhance the lives of children, young people, adults, families and communities, recognising diversity and promoting equality of opportunity. For the first time Ireland has a Department with 'Disability' in its title, illustrating that it is a key pillar of our work. It is an area that will continue to expand with the planned transfer to us of responsibility for community based disability services from the Department of Health.

I believe it is both practical and symbolic that the Department tasked with promoting equality now has responsibility for important strands of disability policy and that this responsibility is set to grow further. Taking on these functions is central to our wish to move from medical models of disability to a social and rights-based way of thinking about and progressing disability issues. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is key to how we wish to plan and deliver our work.

The breath of the new Department's remit ensures that we see our work in disability, not as a single focus area, but one that intersects with our other policy responsibilities across equality, children and young people. This encourages us to think more widely, understanding that the links between disability, gender, race and age affect people in complex ways. We need to think and work with those complexities in mind.

The Department has a pivotal role in respect of progressing disability and promoting the implementation of the UNCRPD. Since October last, we become the National Focal Point and Coordination Mechanism for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This places us at the centre of all activity relating to the progression of the Convention and the specific actions that are being taken across government departments. While we are not the implementers of the vast majority of policy relating to disability, we have key responsibilities in monitoring and coordination of that activity.

For example:

- The Department is responsible for our reporting requirements to the UN Committee. In this regard, I can report today that we are at an advanced stage in the drafting of Ireland's Initial State Report to the Committee. I am conscious of concerns to conclude this phase as soon as possible, and we are keen to do so, but we consciously took time for a meaningful consultation process first.
- The Department also has responsibility for the design of an over-arching UN Convention Implementation Plan, which we are currently working on.
- In addition, the Department coordinates the activity which takes place under two key cross-government strategies, the National Disability Inclusion Strategy and the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities.

These responsibilities are not simply administrative. In fact they afford the Department a position from which it can promote a human rights and UN Convention-conscious approach across departments and agencies. In addition to these important coordination roles, we have direct responsibilities for implementing policy that progresses the realisation of the rights of people with disabilities in particular areas.

Specifically, the Department is responsible for:

- **Establishing a Disability Participation and Consultation Network.** This is aimed at ensuring we deliver on the obligations of the Convention to include and hear directly from people with disabilities and their representative organisations when developing policy and legislation.
- **Funding the *Employers for Change* initiative** which provides a vital service in the context of the employment of people with disabilities. Removing barriers to work and employment is key to the implementation of the Convention and here the Department is playing a specific but important role.
- Continuing to progress **key legislation** relating to disability, including the ongoing work on the Assisted Decision Making legislation, which will be considered by Government next week, and the commencement of the Irish Sign Language Act. The Department is therefore providing for law that promotes and respects the rights of individuals with disabilities.
- **Delivering the Access and Inclusion Model.** AIM provides for access and meaningful participation of children with disabilities in early years education – ensuring that Ireland has an inclusive education system at all levels as required under Article 24 of the UNCRPD (Education).

When Minister O’Gorman met with this Committee in November of last year he advised that he was *‘determined that our new Department will be rooted in human rights and social justice’* and that it would *‘drive changes’* for children and adults with disabilities. I believe that the Department has begun this work by implementing the measures outlined here and by putting in

place pathways to continue the progress to full realisation of the UN Convention as outlined in the Programme for Government.

Of course we have much work to do, but I am very pleased that the Department has been given these important functions, and I look forward to working with the Committee as the implementation process continues.

Thank you.