

Opening Statement by the DSG to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Disability Matters

Thursday 23rd September 2021, 9:30am – 11:30am.

This statement is presented on behalf of the Disability Stakeholder Group by Ms. Renée Dempsey-Clifford (Independent Chair, DSG), Dr. Vivian Rath (DSG member) and Ms. Annette Costello (DSG member).

Introduction

Thank you to the Chair and members of the Committee for the invitation to contribute today.

My name is Renée Dempsey-Clifford, and I am the Independent Chair of the Disability Stakeholder Group (DSG). The DSG is a voluntary group of individuals with expertise and lived experience of disability who are appointed by the Minister of State for Disability on foot of an open invitation process. The DSG is appointed on a 3 year cycle and the current iteration of the DSG is the 5th such group.

The DSG is not established to be a lobby group. Instead, members of the DSG are appointed to work in partnership with Government Departments to monitor the implementation of the National Disability Inclusion Strategy (NDIS). Through its actions, the NDIS supports progress towards implementing the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). DSG members report regularly to the Minister on progress.

Two DSG members, Dr. Vivian Rath and Ms. Annette Costello are present here today and will elaborate on a paper that we have presented to a number of Parliamentarians over the last few months.

Policy Background

Our statement today will focus on **NDIS Action 29**, to ‘Improve Participation in Public and Political Life’ and **Action 77**, ‘Be an Active Citizen’, which both relate to **UNCRPD Article 29** ‘Participation in Public and Political Life’. The statement draws on the experiences of the DSG members in relation to accessible voting and the political representation of persons with disabilities.

There are 650,000 persons with disabilities in Ireland. Despite the size of the constituency, there is relative political silence when it comes to disability. An analysis carried out after most recent General Election offers a view of the reality for persons with disabilities accessing their franchise rights on an equal basis with others. Accordingly I'll now pass on to Dr. Vivian Rath of the DSG to present this analysis.

I. Accessible voting

Good morning, I'm Dr. Vivian Rath, a member of the Disability Stakeholder Group.

Barriers to voting

Disabled people face persistent barriers to accessing their franchise rights on an equal basis with others. For example, during the 2020 General Election, I voted in a public corridor upon finding the polling booth inaccessible to me.

My experience was not an isolated one. Following the election, I carried out a short survey, together with Maria Ni Fhlatharta from NUIG, to snapshot other disabled voter experiences. 52% of those who completed the survey reported that they faced barriers to voting, including:

- **Inaccessible polling stations:** Many disabled people were unable to vote in private as ad hoc arrangements were put in place. One respondent even reported voting in his car.
- **A lack of information in accessible formats.** Some survey respondents reported not knowing how to vote, or not being able to follow electoral debates, as a result.
- **A lack of Personal Assistant support.** As the 2020 election took place on a Saturday, some people with disabilities were unable to get PA support and were therefore unable to access their polling station to vote.
- **Postal Voting:** Of those respondents who used postal voting, 52% also reported facing barriers.

My DSG colleague, Annette Costello, has also experienced issues both with in-person voting and postal voting, so I will now hand over to her to elaborate further.

Good morning Committee members, my name is Annette Costello. When I attended my polling station during the 2020 elections, I found that the wheelchair ramp fitted at the polling station was not installed correctly. Upon reporting this to the Returning Officer as a safety concern, I received a dismissive response and

was told “You are the only person who has complained about it and three other wheelchair users have already voted”. In my experience, Returning Officers and polling station staff are not properly trained in disability equality and this is a major concern. People are also reluctant to highlight issues which distorts information in the public domain. As I recall, there was only one wheelchair accessible polling booth at my polling station.

I, and many other disabled people, have also experienced difficulties with the **postal voting** system. Postal voting is often cited as a more accessible voting option for disabled people. However, the application process is unnecessarily complicated and based on a medical model of disability and requires certification from a GP for the first application. On an annual basis, a written confirmation form must be signed and completed for your local authority. Local authorities require an original signed confirmation and will not accept it via email.

This process fails to recognise that for the vast majority of disabled people, their disability will not diminish. Disabled people can find that their access to a postal vote has been removed despite no change to their disability status and solely due to a systems failure. In addition to the administrative barriers this presents, it also demonstrates a lack of respect and dignity for disabled people by requiring us to provide proof in order to access our right to vote time and time again. The timelines for completion and return of a postal ballot prior to election date also require review.

A number of colleagues who have a vision impairment also experienced issues with the braille ballot paper in GE2020.

Progress

Progress has been made in relation to accessible polling stations. However, this progress is fragmented and inconsistent across the country.

While correct installation of a wheelchair ramp is important, it must also be understood that accessibility extends further than this. The National Disability Authority published the **Accessible Voting Checklist 2015** to provide this guidance. We understand from meeting with officials in the Department of Local Government that this is sent to Returning Officers before each election. However, as demonstrated by the experiences we’ve outlined today, problems still persist.

- Therefore it is critical that Returning Officers and all polling staff receive **training** in how to implement this guidance as well as training in disability equality.

- An **evaluation** of the effectiveness of the accessibility measures in place must be carried out after elections and a **complaints mechanism** established to further safeguard the voting rights of disabled people.

The establishment of the **Electoral Commission** is another very positive development. The DSG understands that one of its first tasks will be to carry out research into the postal voting system and how it can be reformed.

- It is vital that **disabled people are consulted** with during this process.

I will now hand back to my colleague, Dr. Vivian Rath, to discuss the issue of political representation of disabled people.

2. Political representation of persons with disabilities

Context

Thank you, Annette. Deputies and Senators, as you are aware, UNCRPD Article 29 also calls on State Parties to actively promote an environment in which disabled people can participate in the conduct of public affairs on an equal basis with others and to stand for election. The extremely low representation of disabled people in the Dáil and the Senate reflects the inaccessibility of the current environment.

Barriers to political participation:

Disabled people face many barriers to candidature including:

- **Extra costs** of disability.
- **Accessibility barriers** including unavailability of Irish Sign Language interpreters or PAs; inaccessible meeting venues, information, transport etc.
- **Failure of political parties** to select disabled candidates.
- Lack of supports for disabled people to engage with **local government** structures.

Progress

To make progress in this area, we suggest that all parties undertake a **cross-party pledge** to promote and support the election of disabled candidates. International Day of Persons with Disabilities, on December 3rd 2021, could be an opportune moment to launch such a pledge.

In addition, **reasonable accommodation** must be provided for disabled electoral candidates to remove accessibility barriers.

At **local government level** we suggest that **guidance is provided to County Councils** to support the participation of disabled people in order to facilitate their active citizenship. We further suggest that consideration be given to the provision of a small bursary to support these initiatives.

I will now hand back to the DSG Chair, Renée Dempsey-Clifford, to close. Thank you.

Close

It is our general view that no party is against progressing disability rights, but in our experience, there is not enough overt support. We are therefore very pleased that this meeting is taking place today. We hope very much that all the contributions presented today will further advance this cause and that the suggestions made, particularly regarding the cross-party pledge, may be seriously considered. Thank you once again for the invitation and we look forward to further discussion during the Q&A.