

## Opening Address

Thank you all so much for the invitation to meet with you today. It's very encouraging to see the work of this Committee who demonstrate a new approach for governments across the world in monitoring the implementation of the UNCRPD.

I speak to you today as someone who has worked in disability services in Ireland and Australia for over 30 years. The question I asked then and I still ask now is 'why are people's lives so different, just because they have a disability?.'

The UNCRPD exists because people with a disability are still experiencing inequality and discrimination. Today, in 2021, there is still a prevailing narrative of people with a disability as objects of pity; objects of charity and as a burden to their families and the state.

The Taoiseach stated in the Dáil in October 2020 that 'the system needs change and reform'.<sup>1</sup> The HSE have also committed to the reform of disability services in their 2021 to 2024 Corporate Plan.<sup>2</sup>

From my perspective, reform isn't enough. What we need is a **transformation** of the system and within society. Over the last 2 years, I have been researching systems thinking, systems change, social innovation, and the use of technology to drive transformation. I was really curious about the approaches other sectors use to transform successfully and achieve value for all.

This was a fascinating journey and it brought me to the question - 'what if we can make more use of the methodologies, tools and technologies that work in other industries, to transform the disability sector and in doing so, improve the lives of people?'

I'll share with you, three things that I think can help in this transformation.

### 1. The first is a **change of mindset**

All lives matter. Just like the Black Lives Matter movement that addresses the unconscious bias and inequality towards black people, we need to do the same in Irish society about disability.

It is not a person's disability that limits their life but rather the cumulative impact of how society sees, treats, devalues and discriminates against people. Transformation begins when we change the narrative and see people as whole, just as they are.

The reform of disability services in Australia is very instructive for us. It was propelled by the actions of people with a disability and their families in the 'Every Australian Counts' campaign<sup>3</sup>. This campaign fought for the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and won. The campaign was a call to action that gave Australians a reason to care about disability through the sharing of stories on the real social impact of living with a disability.

In line with Articles 3, 4 and 5 of the UNCRPD, I would urge the Committee to use its influence to invest in a social movement campaign that shifts mindsets and makes equality the new normal and not the exception.

---

<sup>1</sup> "I am determined that the Government will respond in a comprehensive way to the needs of the disability sector. In addition to that, we need change and reforms within the sector.... we also need to look at the model of provision into the future.... As society evolves, there is a need to modernise our approach to the provision of services..."The Taoiseach, Dail Debate, 6 Oct 2020

<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/2020-10-06/31/>

<sup>2</sup> [HSE Corporate Plan 2021-24](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Home – Every Australian Counts](#)

2. Secondly, you cannot support people to have a good life if they are not part of **creating** their own solutions. Article 4.3 of the UNCRPD is such a wonderful asset to guide us in the reform process. Partnering with people with a disability and their families is what will drive innovative solutions and shared value!

The Demonstration Project on Personalised Budgets, is one of the ways the system can learn how to do this. People with a disability, and their families, in partnership with services and community are designing the support that works best for them. They are doing this in partnership with small agencies such as Possibilitiesplus and the AT Network. The Demonstration Project and the research into the resource allocation tools, places Ireland in a position to have the potential to transform, similar to the NDIS. Individualised funding is already happening in Ireland. There are wonderful, compelling examples of co-creation, collaboration and good lives being realised by individuals and their families across the country. I suggest we invest more in these opportunities.

What is also exciting and may not be widely known, is that there is a new ecosystem emerging in Ireland where social enterprises, networks, entrepreneurs, coaches, mentors and new alliances have formed. These entities have partnered with people with a disability and their families and are achieving the kind of change, support and outcomes people want. These initiatives include: the Inclusive Living Network; Positive Pathways & the In Conversation Series; Blossom Ireland; In Charge; Humankind Coaching; Future Solutions and Codie: Communities Driving Ireland, to name just a few. Just like many 'start ups', they have the potential to scale and solve problems and open up the marketplace, but only if they are invested in.

3. The third area is looking at how **digitalisation** can positively support the transformation of disability services. The pandemic has altered life as we know it and digitalisation is transforming so many aspects of our lives – from how we shop, to how we connect and how we work.

I believe a deliberately different and innovative approach to transformation is needed. There are many ways digitalisation can make people's lives better. For example:

- Digitalisation is helping many companies around the world to be more efficient and effective. For example creating digital end to end processes and automating workflows like rosters; timesheets, payroll, purchases and payments.
- Another example is learning platforms where people with a disability, their families and staff can go to build their confidence and capacity in new approaches.
- A final example can help address the challenges in recruiting and retaining staff. A platform where people with a disability and support workers can connect based on needs, interests, location and choose who they want to work with, is from my point a view, a way of creating value for all. These platforms also have the potential to connect people to other supports such as community coordinators, mentors and natural supports in the community. They are working very successfully in other countries.

**In summary**, the three things for the Committee to consider are:

1. Investing in a social movement campaign that shifts mindsets and can bring about the societal change needed to achieve equality and non-discrimination.
2. Investing in how we grow and scale new approaches in designing and delivering services in partnership with people and their families.
3. Investing in the digital transformation of disability services in a way that keeps relationships at the heart of what we do.

I believe we are on the cusp of this transformation, especially with the transfer of disability out of the Department of Health, with the ratification of the UNCRPD and with the knowledge and expertise that exists in Ireland when we harness the benefits of partnering with people.

If we make the right investments now, we have a pretty good chance towards achieving equality. Can you imagine the time when people with a disability can be where they want to be, in their day, in their life, in their community?

Thank you

Aoife O' Toole