

Opening Statement by Minister Rabbitte

Cathaoirleach, Committee Members, I welcome the opportunity to meet with the Joint Committee on Disability Matters today.

There is a complexity to the transport issues that I hear about because the transport needs of people with disabilities are as diverse as our disabled citizens themselves.

From the results of Census 2022, we know that approximately 1 in 5 people in Ireland reported living with some form of disability. People with disabilities are not an isolated or discrete group – they are part of all of our lives and all of our communities.

Although I am Minister of State for Disability, I don't have all of the answers on this issue, ownership of which extends significantly beyond my Department and my portfolio. Indeed no single Ministry has the scope to solve all of the different transport and mobility challenges faced by people with disabilities across Ireland.

Every Government department and every agency is responsible for implementing the UNCRPD on a mainstream-first basis.

Mainstreaming involves organisations involved in the delivery of mainstream services, including transport supports, to actively incorporate the needs of disabled people in service delivery and policy-making processes. The needs of people with disabilities cannot and should not become separated in silos within Departments, or be consigned solely to a specific Department in Government. That is not mainstreaming, it is segregation.

There is significant work ahead of us to develop properly joined up and coordinated improvements and sustainable solutions. In the first instance, this needs to involve ever more accessible public transport options. The Minister for Transport has made substantial improvements in this regard. For example, new infrastructure and services are fully accessible and older legacy infrastructure and facilities are being retrofitted through the Public Transport Accessibility Retrofit Programme.

Disabled people are supported to travel independently on the public transport network through initiatives such as the Just a Minute (JAM) Card, the provision of Disability Awareness Training to public transport staff, and through the Travel Assist Scheme.

The pilot initiative between the NTA, Local Link and the HSE in Leitrim is a good example of how joined up services can work for the benefit of everyone who uses them. The revised public transport network in Leitrim is designed to meet the needs of mainstream public transport users as well as the transport needs of passengers with disabilities and those accessing non-emergency health care services in the county.

The Leitrim example is also important as it shows that solutions can be found which work in more rural parts of the country. As a Minister from a rural constituency, I'm acutely aware that accessibility issues in Dublin can vary greatly from Athenry, for example. It's not a 'one size fits all' approach that's required, and this needs to be considered by all Departments.

Beyond public transport, we also need to broaden the range of community-based alternative transport options for people with disabilities who require more targeted supports. The Minister for Rural and Community Development operates a number of relevant schemes, such as the Community Services Programme and the CLÁR Programme, which have yielded positive examples of community-based and door-to-door transport and mobility supports that we ought to learn from and build upon.

My priority at present is to develop a new National Disability Strategy to succeed the NDIS and fulfil a commitment in the Programme for Government to coordinate a plan for the implementation of the UNCRPD going forward.

The recommendations made by the NDIS Transport Working Group are critically important in helping us to understand the way in which this issue can be addressed through the new National Disability Strategy. As I see it, an absolute key flank of this Strategy will be Transport.

The Transport Working Group recommended that we need more evidence of need and of gaps in our existing landscape of supports. Evidence is absolutely crucial to developing a holistic and joined up system of needs-based supports.

The Group also recommended that a new coherent cross-Government policy framework should be established. This is badly needed, but will take time and shared resourcing across government to achieve. Any new supports will need to be designed in partnership with disabled people themselves, which again will take a certain amount of time.

We need to get behind the Group's proposals in the context of developing the new National Disability Strategy.

In calling on my colleagues in Government to lean in to necessary next steps within their own areas of responsibility, I am of course conscious of the legacy schemes that are now within my own Department's responsibilities, following the transfer of functions from the Department of Health earlier this year.

Regarding the Mobility Allowance, I have since 2021 tried to resolve this issue but I have found it difficult to develop a new, reformed scheme which I believe would support the people it needs to.

The difficulty lies in what eligibility criteria would underpin such a scheme as I don't want to find myself back in front of this Committee explaining why I have excluded a certain cohort.

Getting the design and balance right to ensure the longevity of any new support is a genuine challenge, and it would undoubtedly include significant and long-term commitments from exchequer funds.

It must also be delivered in the context of coordinated and joined up supports, which as I mentioned will be progressed in partnership with other departments and wider stakeholders.

I don't have a solution yet to this issue, and I cannot address the challenge alone, but I can assure the Committee that I am working on it.

I am also aware that there are questions related to transport to day services which my Department provides funding to through the HSE. *Ad hoc* arrangements have developed over time in relation to transport to and from these services, and I recognise that these arrangements need to be considered more fully in the context of a holistic and joined-up approach to transport and mobility supports going forward. The Leitrim Pilot is a fantastic example of an approach being delivered jointly by the HSE and the NTA and it is something that I would like to see rolled out more broadly.

I am in full agreement with the Transport Working Group's recommendation that we need to move beyond tweaking transport and mobility supports currently in place: supports that were developed at a time when there was little to no accessible transport available for people with disabilities and at a time when the medical rather than the social model of disability guided our actions.

I am also mindful of the recommendations of the Department of Social Protection's Cost of Disability Report, which was very clear in saying that supports need to be targeted in approach to be effective, and progressed at whole of government level.

There is a real and clear opportunity to address transport and mobility issues in the context of the new National Disability Strategy, which I will be seeking to advance on an explicitly mainstream first basis. I look forward to working with my colleagues in Government, and indeed with Deputies and Senators here today, in delivering an ambitious strategy that embraces the principle of mainstreaming and that delivers meaningful positive changes in the lives of people with disabilities.

Consultations with people with disabilities and their representative organisations are a critical part of this work and this Committee will see that process advance over the coming weeks and months.

I look forward to today's discussion.