

## Submission to the Joint Committee on Disability Matters on 'Accessibility' by Access Earth

### Contact Information:

- Name: Matt McCann
- Position: CEO Access Earth

### Reason for Submission:

Access Earth acknowledges and appreciates the Joint Committee on Disability Matters' invitation to share insights on the current accessibility situation for persons with disabilities within Ireland. Our organisation is dedicated to championing accessibility, and while we may not capture every nuance of the vast accessibility landscape, we are dedicated to sharing the knowledge and insights we have garnered through our endeavours.

The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified both the challenges and opportunities in the realm of accessibility. While certain shifts, such as the move to remote work, have inadvertently provided increased access for some, other changes have presented hurdles, underscoring the necessity of a deliberate and informed approach to enhancing accessibility.

In light of the Committee's specific areas of interest, including progress in the built environment, transport, on-street infrastructure, and bus stop accessibility, we will provide an overview based on our experiences, research, and insights from our user and customer community. Through this submission, our intention is to contribute meaningfully to the dialogue, drawing attention to areas of concern and potential avenues for improvement. We thank the Committee for the opportunity to participate in this essential conversation.

### Introduction

Established with a foundational commitment to advancing accessibility worldwide, Access Earth aims to make all businesses and services an inclusive environment for all individuals. Our dedication to this mission stems not only from our organisational goals but also from the first-hand experiences of our CEO, Mr. Matt McCann, who, while living with cerebral palsy, envisions a world that is universally accessible.

In response to the invitation from the Joint Committee on Disability Matters, Access Earth is poised to present its insights, drawing from our wealth of expertise and our unwavering commitment to the cause of accessibility.

### Current Situation for Disabled People: Facts & Figures

The landscape of accessibility and inclusion for disabled people in Ireland presents a mixed picture. While significant progress has been made in certain areas, numerous challenges persist.

As our understanding of accessibility needs and disabilities grows, so too does our understanding of the many ways individuals can be affected by the physical environment and the infrastructures we design to navigate within them.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), there are over one billion people globally with some form of disability. This number is increasing due to various factors, including demographic trends and a rise in chronic health conditions.

In countries with life expectancies over 70 years, individuals spend, on average, about eight years or 11.5% of their lifespan living with disabilities.

The 2022 census published by the CSO on the 30<sup>th</sup> of May shows a total of 1,109,557 people (22% of the population) reported experiencing at least one long-lasting condition or difficulty to any extent.

The facts and figures show that accessibility and disability experiences are a large and growing part of Irish life.

Accessibility is a very real concern that everyone will face at some point in their lives and without conscious consideration towards accessibility needs, we will fall into the trap of designing environments we may all eventually age out of and exclude others from.

As part of this submission, we wish to highlight certain areas where we believe urgent focus is needed to help further promote more equitable participation within Irish society for individuals with accessibility considerations. Namely; the **Built environment, Transportation, Digital Accessibility, Public Services and Parking.**

### **Built Environment:**

The physical infrastructure in many parts of Ireland, especially older urban centres, continues to pose difficulties. Obstructed pathways, lack of ramps, and inaccessible public buildings remain commonplace.

Great strides have been made within the Part M building regulation 2022 update, and we wish to draw specific attention to the inclusion of adult changing places toilets. This is a crucial step towards the progress we wish to see as a community as there has been a worrying lack of this essential infrastructure within Ireland for a long time.

It is our opinion, however, that further can be done in relation to Dwellings within the 2022 Part M building regulations. As the housing crisis currently being felt by the population persists, it is acutely felt by members of the Disability community who have additional considerations when attempting to find a suitable place to live. Within the latest version of Part M, newer developed Dwellings allow for...“Where due to site-specific constraints or where all entrances are on other than ground level and a suitable passenger lift is not provided, it is considered adequate to provide access by means of steps, or a stairway suitable for use by ambulant disabled people;”

It should not be considered unreasonable that the Universal Design Principles as indicated by the National Disability Authority, with regards to the approach and entrance of newer designed and constructed dwellings should be enshrined within the Part M building regulations for dwellings.

### **Transportation:**

Ireland has, over the years, made significant strides in prioritizing accessibility in its public transportation system. Transport providers have collaborated on several initiatives to enhance the travel experience for all, including those with disabilities. However, there are still several challenges that require attention.

- **Wheelchair Accessibility:** Although a significant portion of Ireland's bus fleet is equipped to be wheelchair-friendly, not all bus stops match this level of accessibility. This inconsistency can pose problems for wheelchair users, who might find themselves at a bus stop that their vehicle can access, but the infrastructure of the stop itself is a barrier.

- **Island Bus Stops:** The design of island bus stops, which are typically where a cycle track runs between the footpath and the bus stop waiting area and shelter creating, a pedestrian island at the bus stop that is segregated from the footpath, presents unique challenges. These stops often lack the necessary safety measures for the visually impaired or individuals with mobility concerns. Crossing to these stops can be daunting, as they require negotiating busy traffic from both sides. The potential for accidents is higher, especially if tactile paving or auditory signals are absent.
- **Rural Transportation:** While urban centres like Dublin, Cork, or Galway might see a greater push towards accessible transport, rural Ireland often lags. In many smaller towns and villages, the frequency of public transport services is lower, and the infrastructure might not be as up-to-date in terms of accessibility features.
- **Irish Rail Accessibility:** While many train stations have been retrofitted with ramps and lifts, there still exist stations that are not fully accessible. Moreover, booking assistance in advance, though a well-intentioned service, might not always align with the spontaneous nature of travel for many.
- **Awareness Among Transport Staff:** While infrastructure plays a significant role, the human element cannot be ignored. There have been instances where transport staff might not be fully trained or aware of the needs of disabled passengers, leading to avoidable inconveniences.

### Recommendations:

- **Consistent Bus Stop Upgrades:** A systematic audit and subsequent upgrade of all bus stops, ensuring they all meet the necessary accessibility standards, is crucial.
- **Safety Measures for Island Stops:** Implementing more tactile paving, auditory signals, and clear demarcations can significantly enhance the safety of island bus stops.
- **Enhanced Rural Transport Accessibility:** Initiatives like the Local Link bus service can be further expanded with an emphasis on accessibility to cater to the needs of disabled individuals in rural areas.
- **Ongoing Training for Staff:** Regular training sessions emphasizing the varied needs of passengers with disabilities can ensure that all transport staff are equipped to provide assistance when needed.

By addressing these challenges head-on, Ireland can move closer to providing a fully inclusive public transportation system that caters to the needs of all its citizens.

### Digital Accessibility:

The digital age has brought forth incredible opportunities and conveniences, yet it has also presented challenges, particularly in the realm of accessibility. As Ireland progresses towards a

digital-first approach in various sectors, from public services to business operations, the emphasis on digital inclusivity becomes paramount. Despite Ireland's advancements, certain gaps persist in the digital space, particularly concerning accessibility for those with disabilities.

- **Website Accessibility:** While many global platforms have started to prioritize website accessibility, many Irish websites, whether governmental, commercial, or informational, lack essential features. From screen reader compatibility to alternative text for images, there's a pressing need to address these shortcomings. Often, websites are developed without considering colour contrast for those with visual impairments or easy navigation for those using adaptive technologies.
- **Mobile Applications:** The rise of smartphones has seen a surge in mobile application usage. However, similar to websites, many apps originating from Ireland do not fully cater to accessibility requirements. Essential functions, such as voice-over features or easy-to-use interfaces for those with motor impairments, are sometimes overlooked.
- **Communication Gaps in Transport Services:** One of the pressing concerns is the lack of real-time, accessible information in transport services. For instance, passengers with disabilities might need to know if certain accessibility features, like wheelchair lifts, are operational before they embark on their journey. The absence of a reliable digital communication platform that can provide this data in an accessible format is a significant challenge.
- **Digital Literacy and Training:** Another layer to the challenge is ensuring that those with disabilities are equipped with the skills and knowledge to navigate the digital world. Digital literacy programmes, especially tailored for older people or those who might not be as tech-savvy, are essential.

### Recommendations:

- **Universal Design Principles:** Adopting and enforcing universal design approach for all digital platforms, ensuring they are usable and accessible by everyone, regardless of their age, ability, or status, is imperative.
- **Regular Audits and Feedback Loops:** Digital platforms should undergo periodic accessibility audits. Engaging with users with disabilities to gather feedback can provide invaluable insights into areas of improvement.
- **Real-time Accessible Updates for Transport:** Transport authorities can develop or upgrade their digital platforms to offer real-time updates on the operational status of accessibility features. Push notifications, SMS alerts, or even automated calls can be used to relay this information.
- **Training and Workshops:** Offering digital literacy training tailored for those with disabilities can empower this segment of the population to navigate online platforms confidently.

### Public Services:

Public services play an indispensable role in ensuring the well-being and progress of every citizen. However, in Ireland, as is the case in many nations, there exists a gap between the services offered and their accessibility to people with disabilities. From physical infrastructural shortcomings to systemic issues, the challenges are multifaceted.

- **Healthcare Accessibility:** Despite the progressive strides in healthcare, there remain barriers to accessing medical services for disabled individuals. Physical accessibility challenges, such as a lack of ramps, wide doors, or adaptive medical equipment, can impede the care process. Additionally, a lack of trained medical professionals with an understanding of specific disabilities, particularly with behavioural or other invisible disabilities, can lead to misdiagnoses or inadequate care.
- **Educational Institutions:** The importance of education as an equaliser cannot be overstated. Yet, many educational institutions, from primary schools to tertiary institutions, lack the necessary infrastructure to support students with disabilities fully. Beyond physical structures, there's a need for tailored learning materials, training for educators in inclusive teaching methods, and supportive peers.
- **Administrative Services:** Essential services like applying for permits, renewals, or accessing social welfare can be cumbersome due to the inaccessibility of government buildings, convoluted processes, or a lack of clear, accessible communication channels.
- **Training and Sensitisation:** One of the most pervasive issues in public services is a lack of awareness and understanding by staff. Many disabled individuals recount experiences where they felt misunderstood, belittled, or neglected due to staff's lack of sensitisation towards disability.

### **Recommendations:**

- **Infrastructure Revamp:** A thorough audit and subsequent revamp of public service buildings to ensure they adhere to international accessibility standards is imperative. This includes not just ramps and lifts but also tactile paths, auditory signals, and accessible restrooms.
- **Training Programs:** Regular training sessions for staff across public services to sensitise them about various disabilities, and the best ways to assist, can greatly enhance service quality.
- **Accessible Communication Channels:** Establishing clear, accessible communication channels - be it digital platforms, helplines, or in-person counters - that cater to people of all abilities will ensure everyone can avail of services without undue hardship.
- **Collaboration with Disability Groups:** Engaging with organisations and advocacy groups working in the disability sector can provide insights and feedback on making public services more inclusive.

### **Parking:**

Parking, a seemingly routine task for many, becomes a pivotal accessibility point for disabled individuals. The ability to find and use suitable parking facilities can greatly affect one's autonomy, freedom, and quality of life. While Ireland has taken measures to improve the parking scenario for disabled individuals, challenges persist, underscoring the need for further refinement and consideration.

- **Blue Badge System:** The introduction of the Blue Badge (Disabled Parking Card) system in Ireland has certainly been beneficial. It permits cardholders to avail of designated parking spaces closer to their destination, ensuring better accessibility. However, issues arise when these spaces are occupied by non-cardholders or when not enough spaces are available to meet the demand.
- **Location & Quantity of Spaces:** While there are mandatory regulations for the provision of accessible parking spaces, they are sometimes not strategically located. Their placement at significant distances from entrances or in areas with uneven terrain negates their purpose. Moreover, in bustling areas or during peak times, the number of allocated spaces often falls short.
- **Design and Size of Spaces:** Not all designated parking spaces accommodate larger vehicles, which might be modified for wheelchair users. Furthermore, some spaces lack adjacent 'buffer' areas which are vital for those who need extra room to transfer from a vehicle to a wheelchair.
- **Signage and Information:** Proper, clearly visible signage indicating accessible parking is essential. In its absence, spaces may be inadvertently occupied by those who don't need them. Furthermore, there's a need for clear information on fines and enforcement measures for misuse.
- **Street Parking:** In many areas, especially within city centres, on-street parking dominates. The nature of such parking, combined with narrow footpaths or uneven surfaces, can be particularly challenging for those with mobility impairments.

### Recommendations:

- **Audit & Revamp:** Conducting a comprehensive audit of existing parking facilities to ensure they genuinely cater to the needs of disabled drivers and passengers. This would include assessing the number, size, location, and design of spaces.
- **Enforcement:** Strengthening the enforcement of regulations concerning the misuse of disabled parking spaces, ensuring that those who genuinely need these spots can access them.
- **Public Awareness:** Launching public awareness campaigns highlighting the importance and purpose of accessible parking spaces, fostering a collective respect and understanding.
- **Technology Integration:** Employing technology, such as apps or digital signage, to inform users in real-time about the availability of accessible parking spaces, thereby reducing search times and frustration.
- **Engage Stakeholders:** Collaborate with disability advocacy groups and individuals with disabilities to gain insights into the specific challenges faced and integrate their feedback into solutions.

**Conclusion:**

In an era defined by rapid technological advancements and evolving societal needs, Ireland stands at a pivotal juncture. The journey towards creating a genuinely inclusive environment, where all citizens can participate and contribute meaningfully, is imperative. We hope that the insights provided today underscore the multifaceted nature of this challenge.

From the physical domain of our built environment and transportation systems to the digital realm, Ireland has displayed commendable progress. Yet, gaps persist. While the strides made in public transportation are notable, the persistent issues, such as non-wheelchair friendly bus stops and challenges posed by island bus stops, remind us of the road yet to be traveled. The digital world, with its vast potential, remains partially untapped as many platforms still lack comprehensive accessibility features. The importance of accessible online services has been magnified in recent times, and Ireland must ensure that all its citizens can engage with this digital revolution seamlessly.

Our public services, the very foundation of our society's well-being, must be readily accessible to all. It's not just about physical access but also about understanding, empathy, and adequate support systems that can make a world of difference. And while on the subject of physical accessibility, parking, a fundamental aspect of mobility, has its set of challenges that need addressing to ensure that every individual has the freedom to move and access spaces without hindrance.

To truly realize our goal, a cohesive and integrated approach is required. Solutions need to be rooted in robust research, informed by real-life experiences, and continuously iterated upon. Collaboration with stakeholders, especially those from the disability community, will be essential in crafting solutions that are both practical and impactful. As we step into the future, let our actions be guided by a vision of an Ireland where inclusivity isn't an afterthought but the very foundation upon which we build our communities and societies.