

# **NDA Opening Statement: Joint Oireachtas Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment**

## **Introduction**

The National Disability Authority (NDA) thanks the Chair and the members of the Joint Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment for the opportunity to present on the topic of **Employment Strategy and how persons with a disability in the work place are impacted.**

The NDA provides independent and evidence informed advice to Government on policy and practice relevant to the lives of disabled people, informed by engagement with relevant stakeholders, including Disabled Persons Organisations. We also incorporate a Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, promoting the design of the environment, services and systems so they can be accessed, understood and used by everyone, regardless of age, size, ability or disability.

## **Key data and information**

According to the Census figures of 2016, only a third of working age people (16-64 years) with disabilities were in employment. This compares with two-thirds of those without disabilities. An EU comparison shows that Ireland has the fourth lowest employment rates for people with disabilities in the region. It also has one of the largest employment gaps between people with and without disabilities. Fewer young people with disabilities have third-level qualifications compared to their non-disabled counterparts. Research highlights that a lack of adequate career guidance and transition support between education and training or employment are persistent issues.

Disabled people experience poverty at a much higher rate in Ireland than their non-disabled counterparts, while there are many who also experience higher costs in their daily lives as a direct result of their disability, something highlighted in the Indecon Report on the Cost of Disability prepared for the Department of Social Protection in 2021.

## **The Comprehensive Employment Strategy**

The Comprehensive Employment Strategy 2015-2024 (CES) is a whole-of-government commitment to addressing some of these systemic barriers to employment for disabled people. The NDA has provided seven independent assessments of progress under the Strategy to date. While good progress was made in the first half of the Strategy's life-span, the NDA notes with concern that an action plan to guide activity in the final years of the Strategy has not yet been agreed. This gives rise to a danger that earlier achievements will not be built on, and that learning gathered will be lost to the system, for example:

- Work to test approaches to pre-activation through the Ability programme
- Testing and scaling supported employment as per an agreed cross-departmental policy
- Putting an information and advice service for employers on a long-term sustainable footing

The initial stages of the CES were valuable in putting necessary foundations for systems and processes in place, developing a knowledge base, and testing solutions to some of the key challenges in the employment space. In order to build on this work, the NDA advises that future commitments should be focused on moving to the next phase of implementation – where relevant Departments and agencies commit to embedding these approaches in their day-to-day operations, monitoring and measuring outcomes for disabled people in

employment as they go. This could be done under the banner of a UNCRPD Implementation Strategy which will be developed over the remainder of 2023.

## **UNCRPD**

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) sets out obligations for the State with regard to realising the rights of disabled people. Article 27 of the Convention relates to the right to employment on an equal basis with others, and highlights that workplaces should be inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities.

The UNCRPD also includes obligations with regard to supporting self-employment as a viable option for disabled people, as well as employment in the public sector. It aligns to several of the Sustainable Development Goals, and in particular Goal 8 - Decent Work and Economic Growth.

Part 5 of the Disability Act sets a minimum target for the employment of disabled people in the public sector of 3%. Public bodies also have obligations under the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty (2014) and Our Public Service (2020), to create equitable and inclusive work environments.

The NDA's most recent statutory monitoring report for 2021 shows that the current level of employment of disabled people across the public sector is 3.6%. However, 27 (12.7%) out of 213 public bodies did not make the minimum target, and all public bodies will be required to comply with a new minimum target of 6% by 2025. The NDA advises all public bodies to give early and focused attention to ensuring that this new target can be met, as an additional approximately 2,000 disabled people will need to be working in the public sector over each of the next three years in order to do so.

## Supports for employment

The role of employers in closing the employment gap is of particular relevance to the work of this Committee. There are still many employers who are apprehensive about employing disabled people, yet the current tight labour market offers an opportunity for employers to fill roles from a valuable source of talent in the working-age population. We have advised that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment can collaborate with other relevant departments to provide necessary supports and information for employer bodies and employers in this regard.

Reasonable accommodations to support disabled people in the work-place are often simple and practical adjustments in the work environment that enable access to employment. The switch to blended and remote working fostered by the pandemic has offered many disabled people the flexibility to work that was not previously available to them, and shows how an adaptable approach by organisations can support increased labour market participation. Where more extensive accommodations might be required – such as adaptations to the physical environment or provision of Assistive Technology – there are grants available through the Department of Social Protection. The NDA understands that the Department is well advanced in a review of this grant scheme. We have advised the importance of ensuring any funding provided can be quickly and easily drawn down – whether by employer or employee. Consideration of the accommodations funded is also necessary to ensure they reflect the most recent advances in technology and other ways of accommodating different needs in the workplace. It is also important that the supports can be carried seamlessly from job to job.

Entrepreneurship is frequently favoured by disabled people as it allows them flexibility over hours worked and pacing of work. We welcome work underway

in Enterprise Ireland to embed disability supports in its programmes for entrepreneurs operating in the export market, but we also advise the importance of relevant Departments considering what supports are necessary for those disabled people who wish to be self-employed in the national or local market.

We also welcome developments in the area of legislation and policies to support flexible working, the right to disconnect, blended working and statutory sick leave. Each of these initiatives can help to make employment and entrepreneurship viable options for disabled people, as well as other groups in society who are under-represented in the labour market. Increasing participation can benefit Ireland in creating a more innovative and adaptable environment for local, national and foreign enterprises.

## **The impact of employment down-turns on disabled workers**

The Irish labour market has experienced severe shocks in the last 15 years. The NDA notes that the impact of the recession in 2008 was particularly felt by disabled people, and that the recovery enjoyed by the rest of the economy since then was not felt equally by this group, and it is likely the pandemic further compounded this situation. It is important, therefore, that the State gives sufficient consideration to likely future developments in the labour market, including anticipation of where these developments may impact people with disabilities to a greater extent than their non-disabled peers. OECD research conducted with the NDA in 2021 shows that people with disabilities are more likely to work in professions that are at increased risk of automation in the coming years. We suggest that work should commence early to mitigate this transition and help support disabled workers into viable alternatives, and in general to disability-proof any initiatives designed around the Irish labour market.

## Summary

The Comprehensive Employment Strategy has given rise to some benefits for disabled people who wish to work. As the Strategy nears the end of its term, however, there are still gaps in the system, and still challenges in achieving the cross-departmental cooperation necessary to effect further change. The NDA advises the importance of ambitious goals in relation to employment of disabled people being incorporated as a key pillar in the new UNCRPD Implementation Strategy. For every area targeted within this Strategy there will be actions for a wide variety of government departments and public bodies. The NDA suggests that this Committee may wish to consider the areas within its remit where a proactive, and rights-based approach to employment and enterprise could be encouraged and overseen and encourages active engagement in the delivery of the UNCRPD implementation Strategy.

THANK YOU