

Joint Committee on Transport and Communications Opening Remarks

Joanne Murphy

As someone living with sight loss, every time you go outside your house, you are entering into a dynamic environment that is ever changing. You need to have a high level of confidence to maintain your independence and get out and around in your community. You rely on footpaths, audio signals at road crossings and contrasting steps to maintain your independence. You also rely on other people doing the right thing – not parking on footpaths or breaking red lights on bikes.

The footpaths are the space that I use to get around my area. If e-scooters are allowed to use the same space as me, the footpath, then I feel like my safety is compromised. There is no other environment where you would expect a person to interact with an electric device that has the potential to move at a great speed. I think it is important to remember that not all footpaths are the same across Ireland either, in smaller and older towns and villages, the footpaths can be quite narrow which is an issue in itself.

Similarly, shared spaces like parks are really important places for me and my family to spend time together. I really feel that e-scooters shouldn't be allowed zoom around parks without restrictions. I think they should be prevented from going into parks and technology such a geo-fencing may be one way of achieving that but it won't solve it all.

One thing that I think really needs to be covered is that for me and many other people who are blind or vision impaired, we can't see the e-scooter coming towards us so we need to be able to hear it. There needs to be a sound omitted and I agree that it needs to be researched to know what sound is best but it definitely needs to happen.

My son has a wonderful assistance dog, Polly and over the last two years there have been occasions where bikes and e-scooters have gotten very close to Polly or passed her very quickly and have stunned her. There have been days where Polly has refused to work because of the experiences she has had with bikes and e-scooters. On one occasion, an e-scooter ran into the back of Polly.

When we pulled out the jacket for Polly and she wouldn't go outside. It really impacted our independence but thankfully Polly overcame it but the fear remains that it could happen again. If that was a guide dog, it could have meant that the person couldn't leave their home. That is really worrying. And you need to think about what happens next – if the dog is too scared to leave the house, then the person may need a new dog and that means there is more training and bonding needed for the dog and there is a cost for the charity associated with that too.

But one thing that I think needs to be highlighted more is the personal cost to a person with a disability. We are already climbing a mountain because we have a disability but the introduction of e-scooters that can whizz past us at 25 km per hour on the footpath with no sound makes that mountain peak even higher.

The impact this could have on a person's independence is huge and I want to be very clear about that. It is not easy to quantify the cost it can have on a person but the effect is real and could really knock a person with a disability. Also, the increased use of e-scooters will likely lead to increases in accidents and near misses. That means you are forcing people with disabilities into situations of conflict which can be very hard for a person with a disability. Nobody wants to braise themselves for personal conflict but it may be inevitable in this situation. I have already had experiences of being shouted at or being told to leave premises because of our assistance dog. I have had to harden up to push back against that but I don't want to be in situations where I am hurt or nearly knocked over by an e-scooter rider because I could be placed in a position that leads to conflict and I don't want that.

Another thing that I think is important for the committee to consider is that when these incidents happen, in many instances there is no way of identifying the e-scooter or the rider. There needs to be proper licencing and insurance to make sure that the person who knocks into me or our assistance dog can be identified.

Also, who is going to enforce this? The Gardaí will need more resources if they are expected to enforce this too. But honestly, taking the situation where someone hits our dog on the footpath and Polly stops working, do I ring the Gardaí to ensure we get home safely? They just can't be allowed on the footpaths.

We need to have a strong public awareness campaign to ensure everyone knows the rules about using e-scooters too. I know they are a green alternative but I think there is also a perception that they are safer than bikes. I have seen lots of young teenagers riding e-scooters over the past few weeks in particular. They can be quite powerful so there needs to be training on how to use them properly and I really don't think that children and young teenagers should be using them.

You have the opportunity to be proactive now, to set the standards high to protect our safety from the beginning rather than having to be reactive and come back to this conversation in a few years' time in an attempt to make us safe after people have already been hurt.

Thank you for your time today.