

## **Irish Guide Dogs for the Blind Opening Statement to the Joint Transport and Communications Committee in relation to the Road Traffic and Road Bill 2021**

Presented by: Léan Kennedy, Advocacy and Policy Officer, Irish Guide Dogs for the Blind

### **Introduction**

Irish Guide Dogs for the Blind and our clients welcome the opportunity to voice our concerns in relation to the Road Traffic and Road Bill 2021 and to explain what amendments need to be made to the Bill to protect the safety of people with disabilities. We are partnering with the National Council for the Blind and the Irish Wheelchair Association on our position paper in response to the Bill. As such, I have chosen to focus my opening statement for Irish Guide Dogs for the Blind on two key areas of concern for our clients and members. These are:

- The need for clear, enforceable restrictions on e-scooter use on footpaths, shared space and pedestrianised areas
- The need for insurance requirements and age limits on the use of e-scooters.

In our more than 40 year history, Irish Guide Dogs for the Blind quite simply changes lives. In the last year we have provided 34 Guide Dogs to people who are vision impaired and 43 Assistance Dogs to families of children with autism. These highly trained, reliable, hygienic dogs allow our clients to lead independent lives, to participate in their communities and as a client recently said, “allows me to live my life on my terms”.

For our clients being independent means moving freely and safely within their communities, to their workplaces, to socialise etc. As a Guide Dog owner, I understand completely the impact my dog Higgins has had on my life.

Guide Dogs are a mobility aid and help their owner to avoid obstacles and hazards, to know when steps and kerbs are approaching, and to find important environmental landmarks, such as doorways to buildings, buses, shops and trains. Assistance Dogs have a calming effect on a child with autism, preventing them from bolting and endangering themselves. Guide and Assistance Dogs concentrate and work hard to keep their owner safe, but they can be startled by encroaching e-scooters. The quiet nature of e-scooters means the dogs are less likely to be able to pre-empt the danger and react. When this happens, they are forced to stop walking and guiding their owner as it is their only way to warn their owner of the potential hazard. This can be disorientating for blind and vision impaired people and a child with autism.

In a recent survey with our clients, we found that:

- 89 per cent of them are worried about their safety in relation to escooters. Clients said:
  - “They will make me reluctant to go out because I will feel unsafe.”
  - “They will destroy my mobility if they are allowed on footpaths.”
  - “They just appear out of nowhere and frighten my dog.”
  - “I find e-scooters to be frightening for my daughter who has autism and they can be very distracting for her assistance dog also, generally people on them drive very close and fast past you.”
  - “They will make me feel reluctant to go out because I will feel unsafe.”

- 53 per cent of our clients have had a negative encounter, including near collisions, with an scooter. An Assistance Dog owner said: “Riding on footpaths will cause problems. We have already had two collisions. Riding off road leaving my daughter crying on the footpath.”
- 90 per cent of clients said in our survey that e-scooters should not be allowed on footpaths. Under no circumstances should e-scooters be permitted for use on footpaths. The Road Traffic and Roads Bill 2021 must expressly prohibit the use of e-scooters on footpaths and include such usage as an offence.

### **Insurance and licensing**

Provision for insurance and at least a provisional license must be included within the legislation. The requirement to hold a provisional license is aligned with the provision that prevents the supply of e-scooters to those under the age of 16 within the legislation and it would ensure that they have a thorough understanding of the Rules of the Road. It is also essential that e-scooters have accessible registration plates so that if they break the rules of the road, riders can be identified, and fined or prosecuted.

### **Minimum age requirement**

The current Bill makes it an offence to supply an individual under the age of 16 with an e-scooter. It is essential that this provision is coupled with a minimum age requirement for the use of e-scooters. This is an important provision for the safety of e-scooter users and other road users.

In its current state, the Road Traffic and Road Bill 2021 will have a profound, negative impact on the mobility and independence of people with vision impairment and families of children with autism. In order for them to feel safe, and to be able to travel without the worry of colliding with an e-scooter, e-scooters must be unequivocally restricted from being ridden on footpaths or on pedestrianised areas such as dual cycle and walkways.

Many thanks for the opportunity to present to you today.