

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

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## AN COMHCHOISTE UM FHIONTAR, TRÁDÁIL AGUS FOSTAÍOCHT JOINT COMMITTEE ON ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND EMPLOYMENT

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*Dé Céadaoin, 17 Bealtaine 2023*

*Wednesday, 17 May 2023*

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Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 9.30 a.m.

The Joint Committee met at 9.30 a.m.

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Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Mick Barry,	Garret Ahearn,
Louise O'Reilly,	Paul Gavan,
David Stanton.	Marie Sherlock.

I láthair / In attendance: Deputy Pauline Tully.

Teachta / Deputy Maurice Quinlivan sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

## **Employment Strategy and Impact on Disabled Persons in the Workplace: Discussion (Resumed)**

**An Cathaoirleach:** Members participating remotely need to do so within the Leinster House complex, as they well know. Apologies have been received from Deputy Bruton.

Today's meeting will consider the employment strategy for persons with a disability. We have already discussed this topic; this is another session on it. Many barriers are faced by people with disabilities when seeking employment. It is, therefore, imperative that employment strategies are formulated in a way that encourages inclusivity and helps people to overcome the challenges they may face. The Government is committed to increasing from 3% to 6% the number of employees with a disability in all Departments by the end of 2024. This target was recently placed on a statutory footing in section 101 of the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) (Amendment) Act 2022.

I am pleased that we have the opportunity to consider these and other related matters further with the following representatives: from the National Council for the Blind of Ireland, NCBI, Ms Jodie McGrielle, employment, training and academia manager, and Mr. Sean Doran, programme manager and accessibility consultant; and from the Open Doors Initiative, Ms Jeanne McDonagh, CEO, and Ms Christabelle Feeney, director of Employers for Change.

As always, I will explain some limitations to parliamentary privilege and the practices of the Houses as regards references witnesses may make to another person in their evidence. The evidence of witnesses physically present, or who give evidence from within the parliamentary precincts, is protected pursuant to both the Constitution and statutes by absolute privilege. Witnesses are again reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice that they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity, by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable, or otherwise engage in speech that may be regarded as damaging to the good name of the person or entity. Therefore, if their statements are potentially defamatory in relation to an identifiable person or entity, they will be directed by me to discontinue their remarks. It is imperative they comply with any such direction.

The opening statements have been circulated to members. To commence our consideration of this matter, I invite Ms McGrielle to make opening remarks on behalf of the NCBI.

**Ms Jodie McGrielle:** I am the NCBI's employment, training and academia manager. I am 41 years old and identify as a Welsh, white female with long brown hair, who is wearing a red dress today. I am here with my colleague, Mr. Sean Doran, who is a programme manager and accessibility consultant with the NCBI.

The NCBI welcomes the opportunity to feed into the deliberations of the committee. Enabling people with disabilities to have full opportunity to participate and progress in the labour market is vital for their own financial independence, mental health and social interactions, but it also reaps dividends for companies and the economy. On a sectorial level, it was very disheartening but not surprising to find out that the European Disability Forum described Ireland as leading the "hall of shame" by having one of the lowest number of people with disabilities in employment in Europe. Yet, we know that companies that employ persons with disabilities, including those with vision impairment or blindness, are much more profitable and better performing.

The NCBI plays a crucial role in maximising blind or vision-impaired people's ability to

participate or retain their jobs in, or return to, the labour market. However, 75% of blind or vision-impaired people in Ireland are not active in the labour market. That is too much untapped potential. Issues of employer discrimination, bureaucratic and insufficient statutory support, as well as the inaccessibility of the recruitment process, remain a constant stumbling block. The comprehensive employment strategy for people with disabilities operates as a cross-departmental strategy and is the current national employment strategy guiding employment services and supports for people living with sight loss. Many of the actions in the strategy reflect a holistic and proactive approach to employment. The creation of the Open Doors Initiative is particularly welcome. However, key actions that are necessary for the advancement of people living with sight loss to obtain and retain employment have not been completed. These include the publication of the review of the reasonable accommodation fund, the creation of a strategy that promotes and supports entrepreneurship and self-employment for people with a disability, and an employer information campaign to promote the recruitment and retention of people with a disability.

The NCBI is not currently funded by the State for delivering employment services. The NCBI was fortunate enough to be awarded €200,000 from the Dormant Accounts Fund. During the span of the NCBI's 18-month VisAble initiative, which ended in 2022, overall results exceeded targets in most outputs. Some 44 individuals with vision impairment achieved employment. Furthermore, this project facilitated the creation of employment opportunities by 26 employers, specifically for people with disabilities. A further 107 engaged in employment activation activities and 114 engaged in employment skills training. Additionally, 70 individuals received assistive technology or equipment to enhance their capabilities.

In 2022, the employment team supported 340 referrals, 207 of which are new referrals to the NCBI. That was done on a mere 4.2 whole-time equivalent, WTE, nationally. Despite these factors and the absence of State support, there is significant disparity in national coverage, particularly in the western and north-western regions. Furthermore, referrals have increased by 25% this year. This is unsustainable without additional support and resourcing.

In order to bolster the NCBI's strategic position in the employment sector, we have appointed two national workplace integration partners. Their responsibility is to establish a network of exclusive partners who are confident in employing individuals with vision impairments.

The NCBI has also developed a suite of bespoke programming. The NCBI's employment skills for individuals with vision impairment or blindness, which sits at Quality and Qualifications Ireland, QQI, level 4, allows learners to fully participate in all aspects of the curriculum. Assessments were carefully considered to ensure the content was accessible, realistic and achievable for learners with vision impairment.

In addition, the NCBI holds the exclusive responsibility for conducting manual examinations for the International Computer Driving License, ICDL. However, this certification heavily relies on vision-based and automated assessments when taught in mainstream settings, which compromises its usability for learners with visual impairment. Furthermore, the NCBI has taken a pioneering step by becoming the first further education and training provider to enable learners to independently access their assessments digitally.

Inclusion & Accessibility Labs, IA Labs, conducted a review of a large number of websites in Ireland to create Ireland's first digital accessibility index report. This report provides detailed information on how inaccessible many areas of Ireland's digital landscape can be for people with disabilities. One sector highlighted in this report was employment. The report showed

89% of job search sites were not digitally accessible. Since 2020, all publicly-funded Government websites are legally obliged to be compliant with the web accessibility guidelines, but still many fall far short, including *publicjobs.ie*. This law is extending to all private sector service providers in 2025 through the adoption of the European Accessibility Act.

Despite IA Labs reaching out to more than 600 recruitment companies to provide guidance on compliance with accessibility standards, not a single company was willing to make their website accessible. This failure to prioritise digital accessibility effectively excludes individuals with disabilities from applying for jobs and participating in the workforce on equal terms.

Making the workplace more accessible and diverse by ensuring all digital platforms and digital content is compliant is not only the right thing to do, but it can also increase a business's target demographic by 13.5%, as stated by the Central Statistics Office, CSO. Digital accessibility non-compliance serves as a significant barrier to employment in Ireland, contributing to the existing disparity.

NCBI has placed importance on providing a secure and user-friendly training and design space that caters to the needs of people with disabilities, including those who are blind or vision impaired. This space aims to promote and support their increased use of public transportation through a "learning by doing" approach. The Wayfinding Centre is an incremental change within the Irish context, as less than 6% of people with disabilities utilise public transport every day to attend school or work.

Technology is the great enabler for people who are blind or vision impaired. The NCBI recommends the allocation of dedicated training and funding to ensure that all publicly-funded job websites fully comply with the Government's legislation regarding the web content accessibility guidelines. Special emphasis is placed on websites such as *publicjobs.ie* and *jobsireland.ie*, as they were legally obligated to be accessible by 2020.

The workplace adaptation equipment grant is available to employers for acquiring assistive technology resources. However, individuals who are blind or visually impaired have reported significant delays in the grant processing, which subsequently affects both the employee and the employer negatively, as cited by the National Disability Authority, NDA, in 2019. To address this, the NCBI introduced a special case funding scheme that enables service users to obtain interim funding for the required equipment. It is also worth noting that the grant is currently tied to specific roles rather than being tailored to individual needs.

The NCBI emphasises the need for greater flexibility in welfare payments or tax allowances to provide better support for individuals with vision impairments who are seeking employment, self-employment or working on a sessional or contract basis.

To succeed, NCBI must be agile and do the hard work to develop real and mutually beneficial partnerships with companies, Government leaders, other non-profits, competitors and community groups. The NCBI has the capabilities and solutions. We ask the committee to support us with funding to continue these crucial services. The NCBI asks the Government to support equity for people impacted by blindness or vision impairment rather than equality.

**An Cathaoirleach:** I invite Ms McDonagh to make opening remarks on behalf of the Open Doors Initiative.

**Ms Jeanne McDonagh:** I thank everyone for their time. I am a white woman with reddish, curly hair wearing glasses and a blue dress. I am also a CEO with an invisible disability. I have

dysphoric elation, a type of bipolar. With the correct supports put in place, I have been able to build a career and advocate for others. Without these supports, I would be in a very different space in employment, if in it at all. However, not everyone has access to these. Only 36.5% of people with a disability are in employment in Ireland.

We let you into our personal lives, give up our privacy and open up our lived environment in an effort to gain aid and employment, without which we cannot partake in society on our own terms. We are portrayed as heroic for fundraising for necessary supports or even holding down work, when all we want is to be treated on an equitable basis and allowed to live our working lives without having to be othered. We need supports to gain that equity, which should be standard and not have to be fought for regularly. We should not have to deal with red tape or inaccessible systems in order to gain them in a timely manner.

Disability is not a bad word and needs to be recognised as a natural part of life for billions of people throughout the world. One in seven of the population in Ireland - that is the size of Connacht - have a disability. It is incumbent on the Government and wider society to recognise societal barriers and attitudes as the disabling factors for people with disabilities. To support people who may face challenges into equitable employment, we must first recognise existing obstacles and the need for structural, attitudinal and systemic change.

It is also an economic imperative. Full employment is not achieved when so many still face unemployment and no way of accessing it. Employers' mindsets need to be changed to see people with disabilities as viable and valuable employees. All Departments have a role to play in this, especially those working directly with employers.

In this room, there is statistically another person with a disability who may not feel empowered to speak out due to stigma, past negative experiences and a lack of support. I personally know of only two other CEOs and three politicians who are open about their disability and how it forms part of their work and lived experience. This lessens the number of role models for people with disabilities whose work they look to as a career roadmap.

We need to recognise disability as an entrenched part of our society, one that can impact us all through acquired disability at any stage in our lives or that of our friends and family. Some 70% of disabilities are acquired after the age of 16, so we are all one step away from an acquired disability, be it physical, mental, sensory or otherwise. Several changes could be made through cross-Department work that would immediately alleviate the burden on people and allow them to take part in employment and create self-support.

There are some overarching points we would like to make in respect of getting people with disabilities into work. Enhanced investment in evidence-based employment supports is required to benefit individuals with a disability, the economy and broader society. All supports must be reviewed to make them work better for the jobseeker by amalgamating all the current disability supports into one grant that will cover an employee's needs, as was achieved by the UK's access to work scheme. We must remove the onus from the employer to apply for grant support and empower the jobseeker with a disability to seek work with their supports already in place. We should tie the supports to the person so they can change employment if they wish without going through the process again, as was mentioned by Ms McGrielle. We must make work pay so that people who no longer qualify for disability allowance due to employment are still eligible to receive free travel passes and medical cards thereby acknowledging that being in employment does not remove disabled persons' need to access both. Implementing these and the other changes highlighted in our written submission would make an immeasurable

difference to people with disabilities seeking work. They would also help those who acquire disabilities in their working life to retain their careers and continue to be employed.

The Open Doors Initiative, through its Employers for Change and Towards Work programmes, funded by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, can assist both employers and potential employees to find and retain work. The models to date have been successful in raising awareness among employers and assisting future employees in their job search but far more needs to be done in this space. A comprehensive and holistic approach needs to be taken across Departments to help those who can and want to work to achieve this goal. Employers need to be educated in working with employees with disabilities and the process of on-boarding and retaining them needs to be made far more manageable.

Disability is central to us all. It is not something to be ignored or treated with mere pity. It can happen to anyone before or during their working life and this needs to be acknowledged and allowed for. It is not good enough that so many are denied access to a quality of life and the benefit of employment. Speaking as someone who has been very fortunate in her career, with understanding and informed managers and supportive colleagues, I have been able to thrive despite periods of tangible instability and illness. I fully realise I am one of the lucky ones. My experience should be the norm for all people with disabilities and not just those who can access the right supports. It is beholden on the committee members, as representatives, to work towards this for the one in seven people in Ireland who have disabilities, and potentially themselves, their families and friends. There is a lot of work to be done to ensure that equitable treatment of all to access employment is carried out, that stigma is not accepted and informed understanding prevails.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** I thank our guests. I apologise in advance that I am not going to be able to stay for the whole session. I have another commitment. I will, however, review the proceedings when I get back to my office.

This is an issue on which we are engaged and hope to remain engaged on. I will take my lead from our guests, and this is not something we normally do, by saying I am a 49-year-old woman with long brown hair wearing a navy suit. It would not even have occurred to me to do even a simple thing such as that. It is not an unwillingness to do the right thing but is the result of a lack of basic knowledge. When it is pointed out, bad and all as we are, we can usually try to do better.

I will touch briefly on the commission report from 2022. Ireland has the largest disability employment gap in the European Union, which is not something of which we should be at all proud. It is not a league table we want to be top of. That is one of those league tables we want to be at the very bottom of. I will ask about the low employment rates by comparison with other EU states. What is being done elsewhere that we are either not doing or not doing enough of? Reference was made in Ms McDonagh's submission to the British access to work scheme. Perhaps we could hear a little more about that. We should not be about the business of reinventing the wheel. If people in another place are doing something right or better and if they have encountered and got past the pitfalls involved, we should learn from what they are doing, take the best bits and move on. Perhaps our guests could speak a little about where other people are getting it right and how we would be able to emulate them.

**Ms Jeanne McDonagh:** If it is okay, I will defer to my colleague, Ms Feeney, on that point.

**Ms Christabelle Feeney:** I thank the Deputy. I am the director of Employers for Change

at the Open Doors Initiative. I am a white female, with shoulder-length blonde hair and today I am wearing a black jumpsuit.

I thank the Deputy for the question and I thank the committee for having us here today. In considering where Ireland is today, I will speak a little more about the obstacles involved before I address what is happening in the UK. The first of the biggest obstacles we see around employment for people with disabilities is the lack of awareness and understanding from employers. I do a lot of work with employers and provide an employer disability information service, which is a free service funded by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. As a part of that, we see that enormous obstacles arise around people's attitudes and lack of understanding. Many concerns around what it takes to be inclusive in respect of disability in an organisation, what it means to be disability inclusive and to employ somebody with a disability are unnecessary and unfounded. That is a real barrier from the employer's side. We must get that education piece out there so people feel empowered and understand, and are not avoiding talking about disability, which can happen. People avoid using the word "disability", as Ms McDonagh mentioned earlier. People see it as a negative word, almost a put-down. There is a real lack of understanding about what disability means. It is, or will be, a natural part of all of our lives at some stage.

From the employee perspective, one of the biggest obstacles in an Irish context is the worry around losing supports, disability allowance and other things like that. The Department of Social Protection carried out a survey in 2017. Almost 50% of respondents cited, in different ways, a fear of losing different supports, including the medical card and disability allowance. There are considerable restrictions around the number of hours that people can work and still access that allowance. Those are all things we need to change.

The idea of putting supports around an individual has worked well in the UK. The idea is that a person does not have to look for supports each time he or she moves employment. Our approach stops people from thriving. Most of us do not stay in the same role throughout our lives. If somebody wants to move, that issue can act as a barrier. A person may have an opportunity to grow in another organisation. Building those supports around an individual and his or her needs has worked very well in the UK.

Other countries that did well in the most recent report had introduced things such as reporting. In the public sector, we have an expectation that reporting will be done on the number of employees with disabilities. In other countries, that has been introduced across the board. I hope we in Ireland could consider that at some point. We have seen interest in the gender pay gap as a result of the mandatory reporting that has come in. We need that kind of quota or a stick, as we like to say sometimes, to get results. There is a great deal of work to be done.

I would also say that from our perspective of working with employers, there is an appetite. Since we launched Employers for Change almost three years ago, I can certainly see a significant increase in the amount of interactions with and engagement from employers. There has been a greater understanding of the value added to organisations by people who have disabilities. We are not coming in here to say this is a legislative obligation, a nice thing to do or the right thing to do. People with disabilities have a lot to add to an organisation. They are talented and innovative people with diverse backgrounds and who can bring different expertise to any organisation they go into.

**Ms Jodie McGrielle:** I completely agree with Ms Feeney in the sense that a two-pronged approach is required, and that is what we do. There is a business-to-business piece that debunks

myths. For example, and not naming any names, yesterday I got a call from a company that was taking on a vision impaired gentleman on work experience. The company representative asked if we could provide a risk assessment. I asked what was the risk assessment for and I said if you are talking about the personal emergency evacuation plan where the person can safely egress or access the building then that is fine but what is the company seeking a risk assessment for. Is it for the stairs, the toaster and the slips, trips and falls? It is a crazy.

People are afraid to put their foot in it or say the wrong thing. It is fine to say to somebody who is blind or visually impaired, “Did you see the television programme last night?”

**Deputy Louise O’Reilly:** Yes.

**Ms Jodie McGrielle:** People genuinely worry about such things. It is that piece of education for employers on disability and inclusion, and the enrichment they could get from employing people with disabilities. We saw a massive increase in engagement around that in businesses around the Covid-19 pandemic. That time gave businesses an opportunity to take a step back and improve in that area. We definitely have seen more engagement around that.

From the perspective of people who are blind or vision impaired, there are huge barriers from the get go. Websites are inaccessible so people cannot log on to *publicjobs.ie* to find out what jobs are being advertised. Some of the assessments used as part of the public service recruitment process are inaccessible. The assessments might be accessible using technology such as non-visual desktop access, NVDA, or job access with speech, JAWS, as a screen-reader but if a person is using an iPad or voiceover then the assessments are not accessible. Also, personal readers are not offered so it is a situation of “ask your family member” but my mum is also blind, and people are told this is the deadline and work with it. Mr. Doran can talk more about the recruitment and the index.

**Mr. Sean Doran:** As Ms McGrielle said, there is a major problem with accessing information online. It is an invisible barrier to equality because accessibility is easily understood in the built environment because it involves ramps and railings. However, when you speak to employers or owners of websites, and talk about them making their websites accessible, they know that their websites are functional. They know that someone with sight can use the site with just a click of a button. They do not understand how a person with a disability interacts with their website. If a website cannot be fully accessed using a screen-reader then a person cannot navigate their way through the website. Maybe a person with a disability can get all the information on a job but, when he or she wants to upload his or her CV, the button will not be labelled or you cannot access it or move to it.

The web content accessibility guidelines, WCAG, apply to websites. The public sector must adopt the guidelines by 2025, and with the European Accessibility Act, that means both public and private entities. We are starting to slowly adopt the guidelines in lots of e-commerce or employment websites but there is slow traction. A person’s access to information can be blocked. Let us say a video about a job is uploaded but a person who is deaf cannot hear it and there are no captions provided on the video. Another example is where bank customers are sent a multi-factor identification to the customer’s phone when he or she tries to log on to his or her account. A person with neurological or motor-skill issues will need more than two minutes to reach his or her phone, get the information and input it in order to access his or her bank account. When websites start adhering to these standards then an ever increasing number of people will be able to use them. At present there is a large number of people with disabilities throughout Ireland and Europe so there is a large demographic of people who cannot access these services.



**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** So people with disabilities are completely locked out because everything has moved online. People often say that information or a service is really accessible now because it can be accessed by phone. However, if the technology is inaccessible by persons with disabilities then that situation is akin to standing outside of a building that has its doors locked.

I wish to inquire about the role the State plays in employing people with disabilities. The need for more flexible and part-time roles in the public service, and issues with the process used by the Public Appointments Service, have been mentioned in the submission. How can the State improve what it does? We can set targets and targets are set but it cannot simply be a case of saying, "we have set a minimum target and we will have ticked that box once we have reached that target." Our guests have said that we need to embrace people with disabilities for all that they can do rather than judging how we can accommodate, so we should only consider the positive. While the State does a decent job in some areas, I want our guests to tell us ways to do more. I mean in a positive way and not in the sense of just making reasonable accommodation, ticking that box or achieving a minimum standard. To follow the positive message of the witnesses, how can we get the State to reflect that outwards to attract more people?

**Ms Jeanne McDonagh:** I know about the Oireachtas Work Learning, OWL, training programme.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** Yes.

**Ms Jeanne McDonagh:** The OWL programme is good but it is not wide enough. There could be more internships. We mean paid long-term internships for a minimum of six months. We recommend that these are paid internships because if they are not, then people cannot afford access in the form of transport, clothing or whatever the barriers may be. Therefore, paid internships are important and would mean that there are more role models within the system. It would mean you have more people talking and there are wider conversations. Work experience or an experience of the work culture helps people to show themselves in their best light.

Mentoring is also a very successful way of getting people into work. Perhaps the Deputy will not agree with me but many people want to be politicians.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** They might get turned off if they tune into what goes on.

**Ms Jeanne McDonagh:** We will not ask the Deputy to be a mentor in that case. Many people want to know more about the working life. They do not have inbuilt networks or access to certain professions. For the political system, for example, it would be helpful to have a range of mentors who could work with people, introduce them and explain how the system works as otherwise, the political system is just seen as an absolute no-go area. In the wider sense of Government, if PAS offered more part-time and flexible roles then it would make work a lot more accessible and allow people with disabilities to enter and work within the Civil Service while, very importantly, keeping their benefits that they still need. I mean people do not end their disability by entering the world of work. They still need supports like travel and medical, which is important.

We must remove the threshold of 21 hours per week to access the subsidy scheme. Some people can only work five or 15 hours so why not make work more flexible. I think that "flexible" is the word. The whole system must bend a little to allow people access and the once size does not fit all. Everyone has different needs and accommodations, which should travel with

people so they can stand there, walk there or use whatever means of transport that will get them to their workplace on their first day but fully ready to go and fully equipped yet without any barriers facing them. I think that is really important.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** That is very important.

**Ms Jodie McGrielle:** A cross-departmental approach is needed as there are so many strands. Housing is a huge issue now that impacts employment infrastructure, transportation, etc. We ask for funding to be ring-fenced for digital compliance and the education sector in the form, say, of accessible assessments. It is not okay to say, if somebody is independent in terms of digital literacy, that he or she then must have a personal reader to complete his or her assessment or exams, in a further education, higher education or secondary education facility.

On executing public awareness, even having something like a disability confidence digital badge would mean we could get businesses to invest and be really proud of that. Ensuring employers in public, private and NGO sectors make the interview processes fair, and this includes online or in-person. Also, accommodations should be available when a person arrives at the building or interview. It is the same when you get a job. It is not okay to disclose your disability and then to get to the job on the first day but assistance or assistive technology is not in place.

We ask for the Government to undertake a public awareness campaign, as promised in the comprehensive employment strategy, and to publish the review into the Department of Social Protection's reasonable accommodation fund. We recommend switching around the model of a personal employment grant in order that it is based on the person's needs as opposed to the role he or she might be in.

We would have a similar issue with the HSE technical aids grant in terms of it being a post-code lottery and people not having access to funding they need. Regarding flexibility in welfare payments or tax allowances, we found people who were self-employed and who had to quit because they were terrified of losing benefits and entitlements and were not earning enough to live. It is about being mindful that it costs on average €45 more for a person with a disability to live and all the barriers he or she encounters on a daily basis.

**Deputy David Stanton:** I welcome our guests and thank them for their presentations, which were a breath of fresh air. In order to be in line with everybody else who spoke this morning, I am a very middle-aged - probably old aged at this stage - balding, grey-haired man who wears glasses for reading and has hearing aids. There are challenges when you get a bit older. To be clear and up-front from the start, I also want to state that I am on the board of the Open Doors Initiative. It is a terrific organisation that has gone from strength to strength under the leadership of Ms McDonagh and the team.

I thank the witnesses from the NCBI for their submission. There is a lot there to take in and it packed a lot into two pages. Ms McGrielle said 75% of blind or visually impaired people are not active in the labour market. I agree with her when she says that this is too much untapped potential. Could she put figures on that for us? Roughly how many people are involved?

**Ms Jodie McGrielle:** Roughly 55,000 people in the last census identified as living with sight loss or blindness. Again, we know that a significant proportion of people do not identify as living with sight loss or blindness so that will be so much higher. When we look at the actual figures from that census - I know we are expecting the new census around employment in November - we can see that the total number of people of working age with visual impairment

or blindness in employment was 8,289. The unemployment rate for all people with vision impairment or blindness was 28%, while the unemployment rate for people of working age with vision impairment or blindness was 33%. It is huge. It is 1.8% so blindness and vision impairment is the lowest achieving group in the disability group when it comes to employment and education. Part of that is fear. It is about debunking myths and education. We also be mindful of the barriers in services and infrastructure. Digital access is a human right. Access to information is a human right rather than an accommodation. Unfortunately, we are not there yet.

**Deputy David Stanton:** If Ms McGriele is saying that 75% of blind or visually impaired people are not active in the workforce and 8,000 people are in employment, am I right in saying that 24,000 people who are visually impaired or blind could be in employment but are not?

**Ms Jodie McGriele:** Yes.

**Deputy David Stanton:** That is huge.

**Ms Jodie McGriele:** Even if you look at education, assessments are inaccessible for people. If a blind or visually impaired person goes to a further education and training college and needs to book a package holiday as one of his or her assessments, if he or she goes onto a website, he or she cannot book a holiday because there are too many drop-down menus. This person just cannot complete his or her assessment. This is why we had to write a bespoke award that was realistic for people with vision impairment to achieve independently to bring them into the labour market. Part of that was the mandatory work experience, because we found that within transition year, blind and visually impaired children do not have the same experiences vocationally as their sighted peers. They are not getting that job in the coffee shop. They are not interacting in a professional environment so those types of work experience opportunities and internships are extremely important.

**Deputy David Stanton:** I congratulate the NCBI on what it has done with the small amount of funding it got from the dormant accounts fund. Ms McGriele said the NCBI needs more funding, which is fair enough. The Cathaoirleach does not have any money but we can make recommendations to Departments in that regard. We learned last week that this is over €1 billion in the National Training Fund, which is a huge amount of money. Has the NCBI asked for funding from any Department? If so, how much has it looked for?

**Ms Jodie McGriele:** How much have you got? At the moment, we are robbing Peter to pay Paul. We have a service level agreement with the HSE that funds the life-cycle model. That involves people from the cradle to the grave. As a response over the last strategy, we realised that employment was a major priority for our service users so we developed the employment, training and academia team in response to this. We have pulled resourcing from what would have been the working age functional assessment vision rehab services to co-fund this. We processed 340 referrals last year on a 4.2 working equivalent. We are talking about an OT grade salary but we do not have coverage in some areas.

**Deputy David Stanton:** To be clear, my question relates to whether the NCBI made an assessment as to how much money it would need. Has it developed a business plan to present to Departments with regard to that?

**Ms Jodie McGriele:** I would not have the information to hand but I can certainly get back to the Deputy.

**Deputy David Stanton:** That would be useful. Perhaps the NCBI could come back to us at

some stage. Could Ms McDonagh give us an overview of the two programmes she mentioned, namely, Employers For Change and Towards Work?

**Ms Jeanne McDonagh:** Employers For Change has been in operation for three years under Ms Feeney's direction. It is very much a resource for employers to raise their awareness around disability matters, the employment and retention of people with disabilities and best practice in the field, for example, auditing websites, publications and training of employees in leadership and research into various issues around the employment of people with disabilities.

Towards Work is a more recent development that came through Pobal funding and is now being funded by the Department as well. That is aimed at people with disabilities to make them more confident when it comes to applying for work and help them with all the work skills they need, such as CVs, interviews, internships, placements and mentoring, which we found to be very important. Basically, anything that gets them on the ladder to work. We work with the companies who are members of Open Doors to build that bridge between the potential employee and openings these companies may have. We ask them to do it in an accessible and flexible way, to have inclusive recruitment practices put in place under our training and to work towards building up the number of employees they have with disabilities who are there on merit. It is not tokenism. They are there because they can do the work and do it really well. We want to imbue companies with that type of thinking.

**Deputy David Stanton:** It is useful for people watching to know about this. That is why I asked the question, to give the Open Doors Initiative the opportunity to put the information out there. The Open Doors Initiative will also run soon a third programme for entrepreneurship for people with disabilities with Technological University, TU, Dublin. Will Ms McDonagh say a bit about that, please?

**Ms Jeanne McDonagh:** Yes, we had two rounds of that programme over two years. We started it the year before last with TU Dublin. We got funding to run an entrepreneurship programme specifically aimed at people with disabilities. In the first round, 20 people took part in a very intensive 12-week programme which took an idea they had and worked towards building a business plan. From those 20 people, six developed a very viable business plan. It is up to the same standards we would apply to any entrepreneurial business plan. Will it succeed? Does it have possibilities? One person got seed funding during the course, so successful was her idea. This led us to gaining funding from AIB to fund three more years of this course. The second course ran in September, and the course runs every September. The level of interest and of skills involved and the amount of development people achieve from taking part in the course, which is the only one of its type in the country, is just phenomenal. It is something we very much want to see grown and developed because it allows people to work on their own basis and with their own skills, vision and idea, and, it is hoped, retain other people with disabilities to work in the companies that come from these programmes.

**Deputy David Stanton:** I thank Ms McDonagh, that is excellent. To get back to the witnesses from the NCBI, one thing that jumped out at me was when they said not a single company was willing to make their websites accessible. That is not one company from more than 600 recruitment companies. Could the witnesses speak to that, please? Did the council reach out to all of them and did the companies respond and say they would not do it? Is that what the witnesses are saying?

**Mr. Sean Doran:** We reached out to all of the recruitment companies in the country and told them about legislation around web content accessibility guidelines, WCAG, and told them

about the European Accessibility Act of 2025 and how people with disabilities cannot use their services, and they did not want to engage. We are in a carrot-and-stick situation where it is currently a nice thing for people with disabilities. There is no hard stick saying they must do this, so they are not willing to spend the time and energy updating their web services or digital documents to allow someone to access them. There is a change in other areas. Government websites have completely improved over the past five years and have become more digitally accessible but private organisations are not willing to adopt these guidelines yet.

**Deputy David Stanton:** We might have to look at this as a committee at some stage to see if we can do something about that. I agree with Mr. Doran that recruitment companies form a huge part of employment at the moment. If somebody has a disability, particularly if he or she is visually impaired, that person cannot access those websites easily. He or she might have someone who can access the websites for him or her, but that is not the point. That person should be able to do it him or herself. It is a huge barrier.

**Mr. Sean Doran:** It must be inclusive and people must be able to do it independently.

**Deputy David Stanton:** Will the witnesses tell me more about the Wayfinding Centre that was mentioned?

**Ms Jodie McGrielle:** The Wayfinding Centre is due to open in quarter 3 of this year. It is funded by the National Transport Authority, NTA, and is a training space. It is just up from our head office and is a training space for people with disabilities, so there will be all different types of public transportation within the building - trams, trains, planes, automobiles - where we can simulate emergency evacuations and can desensitise people. We can travel-train people with disabilities to confidently use public transportation. The second prong of that is also to train transportation companies themselves around awareness of people with disabilities and how they might respond to somebody with a disability or be able to assist somebody with a disability on public transportation.

**Deputy David Stanton:** It is very difficult for any of us who are sighted to understand what it is like to be unsighted, to be blind.

**Ms Jodie McGrielle:** Absolutely.

**Deputy David Stanton:** I was in a restaurant at one stage that was run by people who were blind. It was completely black and dark and we could not see anything as our food was served to us. It was a surreal experience for us. As we mentioned public transport, there is another place in France that is an enclosed environment where sighted people can go in and are led around by people who are blind and they simulate trams, trains, and buses as being close by, dogs barking, and all this kind of stuff. It is a whole different world so I get that. I thank the witnesses.

**Senator Marie Sherlock:** I thank the Chair for continuing these important hearings on disability and employment. They are very important. I thank our witnesses from the Open Doors Initiative and the NCBI. The NCBI talked about the shame of Ireland having the highest number of jobless disabled persons when compared with the whole of the EU. The other thing that stands out to me is that, when we look at potential labour supply in this country, and while we have different metrics of unemployment, when we look at the largest measure of unemployment and potential labour supply, it stands at approximately 12.5%. Therefore 12.5% of the potential labour force want to work but cannot work because of structural barriers in their lives.

It is not solely those with a disability but a large chunk of that number is made up by those with a disability. There is enormous work to be done so it is fantastic we are having these hearings.

One of the things I want to pick up on, and Ms McDonagh in particular talked about it, is the importance of paid internships in terms of opening that door, and the Open Doors Initiative has done a fantastic job in making that bridge between companies and those who need employment opportunities. I want to understand a little more about the share of disabled people who have never had work experience and those who were in the workplace and have come out of the workplace because of their disability. There is obviously a very large spectrum of disability but I would like to hear the experience of both organisations regarding that because in the context of the measures required, and I am thinking in particular about flexible and remote work, we know those with disabilities were excluded from the Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Act which has now offered remote and flexible working opportunities. I want to hear more from the witnesses about the challenges faced by those who have never had work experience and the different challenges for those who have had to leave the labour market because of their disability.

**Ms Jodie McGrielle:** Within the national employment team approximately 75% of our referrals relate to retention, which is people staying in their jobs. We prioritise those people. We see those as our high-priority factors because we want to keep those people in their jobs and we want to work with the employers. We have a team of national employment advisers who are also occupational therapists, OTs, functional vision assessors. We assist with functional vision assessments so we can get a clear level of what the person can see or how their sight has changed. We provide orientation, mobility and access to the built environ if that is an issue. We can provide a workplace audit. We can work with the employer around accommodation and have a look at that task analysis of the job role, what needs a tweak to keep the person in a job and whether there is any other role the person might be able to fulfil. I completely understand, in terms of remote working, that it has given a bit of a level playing field in that it has taken away the barrier of accessing the built environ or that orientation or route training that person might have to undertake physically to get into work. However, we do not want people to lose out on engaging in a workforce and having that social interaction with people. During Covid, some of our blind or vision impaired service users who were in work found that, due to firewalls, their assistive technologies sometimes did not work when they were at home. Rather than trying to fix the problem, their employers told them to choose training they wanted to do for the next six months. That is devaluing for the individual.

Employing someone with low vision or no vision on a work experience or internship basis comes down to each business's confidence. We often receive phone calls from people who, after taking on transition year students, suddenly realise the students have no vision and wonder what they should do. It is a question of working hand in hand on education.

We find that, for a number of reasons, our transition year students are at a disadvantage when entering the labour market. In secondary education, there is a lack of what we call the expanded core curriculum, namely, independent living skills, compensatory skills, etc. Our blind or vision-impaired students often need a bit of extra training in that respect to become independent if they are leaving for university, further education or employment.

If we can secure some funding, we hope to open a barista-style coffee dock in the entrance of the Wayfinding Centre to serve visitors. We hope we can use it as a source of work experience and paid internships for people with disabilities and provide them with barista-style training, with vision rehab or another type of rehab, thereby giving them opportunities they might

not have had with their sighted peers.

**Ms Christabelle Feeney:** I will be brief. I agree with all of Ms McGrielle's points. Many of the obstacles are similar irrespective of whether an individual has experience or is starting out in employment. At some stage, every single one of us has gone for a job. We read that we needed three years' experience, five years' experience or whatever and decided we would not apply for those jobs because we would not get them. With our Employers for Change service, we are trying to get companies to be much more flexible around those applications and to understand that it is okay if people's CVs look different, as people do not have to do the job in the same way for them to be successful.

From the perspective of individuals with disabilities, we do a great deal of work on CV skills and confidence building under our Towards Work project. Confidence is a major issue for someone who has faced multiple barriers in every aspect of life or who has had a negative experience when applying for a job. Maybe someone applied for 100 jobs and no one even had the courtesy to respond.

Ms McGrielle and Senator Sherlock spoke about remote work providing opportunities. The research we conducted on that matter is on our website for anyone who would like to access it. I will give a brief example of something that arose during the research. It presents a significant obstacle and has to do with the public sector. The reasonable accommodation fund is available for private sector employees. It is not available to entrepreneurs – the question of what supports are available to entrepreneurs with disabilities needs to be examined – but it is also not available to public sector employees. There is an assumption that people will be provided with reasonable accommodations in the public sector, given that it is the public sector, but when we conducted our research around remote working during Covid-19, we found a shocking example. A participant in the research who was working in the public sector had requested a reasonable accommodation. Management had made the assumption that the individual's home life was set up for work, but that was not the case, as the individual needed certain assistive technologies. Since the reasonable accommodation fund was not available, it was suggested to the individual by someone in management that the individual might consider getting a credit union loan to buy a piece of assistive technology. This example is a slight aside to the topic the Senator raised, but it is important as these are the genuine scenarios that people are facing every day when they just want to get up and go to work. We must understand that reasonable accommodations are important and that the offer of remote working should be taken into consideration as a reasonable accommodation, not as an alternative to same.

There is an obligation on employers to support people and ensure they can do everything they want to do in their working lives while also including them in the social aspect. The social element of work is particularly important for disabled people. It is their connection to the rest of society, from which they can sometimes be othered.

Those were my key points on the Senator's questions. I am sorry if I took up some extra time.

**Senator Marie Sherlock:** That is fine. I will contribute again in the second round.

**An Cathaoirleach:** No bother.

**Senator Garret Ahearn:** I am Senator Garret Ahearn. I am a 42-year-old white male. I am wearing a dark suit, white shirt and dark tie. I have black hair that is rapidly going grey, in

many ways like the Chair's.

**An Cathaoirleach:** Very grey.

**Senator Garret Ahearn:** Yes. I thank the witnesses for their enlightening presentations. Some of the challenges that people have include understanding the sector and what needs to be done, being nervous about asking the right questions and feeling they cannot have a bit of fun about it as well. A colleague in our party, Senator Conway, makes fun about it all the time and is very easygoing. I was with him two weeks ago at the National Learning Network in Tallaght. When we came out of the building, he went to the wrong side of the car. We joked about how he thought he was driving back to Leinster House. It is about having a bit of fun with it. A challenge for businesses is their unease or nervousness about how to manage these situations.

I wish to ask a couple of questions, the first of which Deputy Stanton picked up on, that being, digital accessibility in the 600 recruitment companies that have not changed their ways, particularly the two that were meant to by law, which I assume are Publicjobs.ie and Irishjobs.ie. What exactly was their response? They have a responsibility-----

**Mr. Sean Doran:** Publicjobs.ie began to engage very recently, so it has started on the journey of accessibility, but all the rest claim they do not have the time to do it yet, they will road-map for it in a year or two's time, etc. It is never a complete "No". It is always some sort of platitude of "We will get to it eventually".

**Senator Garret Ahearn:** The claim about not having time is not acceptable.

**Mr. Sean Doran:** It does not cut it.

**Senator Garret Ahearn:** I do not know what the committee will do, but the Department or the Minister needs to write to them telling them they have an obligation. It is not down to whether they feel like they have enough time to do it. That is unacceptable.

Ms McGrielle mentioned that the NCBI now had two people working as national workplace integration officers. Will she outline their role in building up relationships with companies and how she sees that progressing?

**Ms Jodie McGrielle:** There are two workplace integration partner officers, or WIPOs, as they like to call themselves. Their roles were set up as part of the funding we received from the Dormant Accounts Fund. The idea was for us to take a two-pronged approach – make companies disability confident and work with service users on pre-employment supports, for example, mock interviews with real employers, CV skills and all the other bits and pieces people need. In speaking to employers, we tell them that if people are not looking them in the eye, it is because they are using eccentric viewing.

We have a WIPO embedded in Dublin and another embedded in Cork. They have been successful in, for example, following up. They might secure an employer that is vision impaired-confident. It might be a large employer like a pharmaceutical company or a global company like Meta or Amazon. The WIPO places someone in an internship and then engages in some lunch-and-learn exercises so that people understand vision impairment. They might use VR headsets to simulate that. We have found this approach works well in terms of people's longevity in companies, levels of understanding and having confidence that companies will re-employ someone. The entire organisation is then engaged. It is not just one good experience in one department. We ensure it is cross-departmental and nationwide. Given the success of the two



WIPOs, we have now funded them under the NCBI. They have been very successful.

**Senator Garret Ahearn:** My next question is for both of the organisations present. There was always a challenge in getting people with disabilities into the workforce. We are by far the lowest in Europe. We are at approximately 30% in respect of visually impaired people, but we are low in every category compared with the European average, which is 50% or so. From speaking to people in the sector, I know that when we get people into the workforce, one can get them in for an internship for a period of time where it is being subsidised by government or by someone in some way, but once that ends the employment ends. How can we go about improving that, from the witnesses' perspectives?

**Ms Jeanne McDonagh:** There are numerous ways. Ms Feeney might also pick up on this. There is no longevity in funding and there is no longevity or long thinking in terms of employment. It is seen as bitty and it is seen as internships where people are told, "You got your internship. That is you done. Away you go." They are not looking at retention and they are not looking at the fact that so many people with disabilities are very loyal employees who want to stay with the company that has given them the chance. As Ms Feeney pointed out earlier, they do not bring the supports with them. On the flip side, it is very hard to change jobs. Again, it is about othering and seeing them as people to be pitied or who are stigmatised or who are not quite at the races when it comes to jobs. That is absolute rubbish. They may have whatever sort of disability but they work twice as hard to overcome that. They overcome stigma and they overcome whatever barriers are in place and presented by their disability. They work twice as hard as any other employee. It does not make sense to me that people would think in such a short-term way. Also, how can one build experience and better oneself and one's skills, and all that goes with it within the work environment, if one is not given that opportunity?

**Ms Christabelle Feeney:** A big part of there not being longevity when people get in to do internships is that individuals have not been correctly utilised in the first place when they were brought in. Some organisations are excellent and then others are saying, "We are doing this, we are great for doing it and we all get a lovely feeling about it", as opposed to understanding that the person is coming in to do a job and we need to make sure it is meaningful for the person.

On the practicalities of providing reasonable accommodations in employment - leaving aside the funding - if the organisation does not have the correct process for that when they bring the person in what ends up being flagged are performance issues. They are not performance issues: the person has not been appropriately accommodated.

It is really good that we are having this conversation but I would encourage all the Departments as well. We have set it down in three or four different strategies that each Department and all public representatives would be provided with disability awareness training. That is a core positive action. It is very hard for people to write policy if they have not actually been educated on that.

**Senator Garret Ahearn:** That is a very good point. We did some training in autism last week. It was a very interesting one and half hours, discussing autism and learning about it from AsIAM, to become a parliament that is autism aware. We should be doing that if we are developing policy.

On long-term employment, an initiative that has been quite successful in Scotland is to reserve contracts for companies that employ a certain percentage of people with disabilities. There are contracts reserved for those companies. It encourages the companies to keep people

with disabilities on long-term contracts rather than internships. We do not do enough of this in Ireland. What are the witnesses' views on this? Do they believe it could enhance companies to keep people on longer contracts?

**An Cathaoirleach:** I ask the witnesses to be quick in their responses, please.

**Ms Jeanne McDonagh:** One would need to look at procurement and good practice, and whether it is allowed. Obviously, there are some barriers in that. Can one just siphon off jobs for particular people? Perhaps a quota system needs to be brought in around that, or allowance made, so jobs can be put aside specifically for people with disabilities

**Ms Christabelle Feeney:** Positive action would need to be looked at in the context of legislation. At the moment it is very restrictive. I will not say anything else. Perhaps Ms McGrielle would like some time if she would like to respond.

**Ms Jodie McGrielle:** Quotas are great but-----

**Senator Garret Ahearn:** It is not so much quotas, it is more about public sector procurement could be reserved for companies that have, for example, 30% of employees with disabilities. It works really well in Scotland.

**Ms Christabelle Feeney:** The EU legislation is not being correctly used around procurement, including who we are going to with our procurements and who we are taking on. It would be really good if we could do that to begin with. We have different pieces of legislation that are just not being utilised.

**Deputy Pauline Tully:** Good morning. I thank all of the witnesses for the presentations. I am the spokesperson on disability for Sinn Féin. I am not a member of this committee but I am a member of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Disability Matters. Every week I hear from people sharing their lived experience. A lot of the issues being raised here today I have heard from those witnesses as well. I am a white female with short dark hair wearing a white jacket and a black top. I will leave out the age if that is okay.

An issue that is brought up with us regularly, and the witnesses have alluded to it here, is that the supports do not follow the person and they have to reapply every time. A disability passport has been brought up many times and I believe this would be a good idea. I come from the education sector. If one receives supports in primary school they automatically follow into second level school. Something similar needs to be happening here.

Reference was made to the attitude of employers. We are aware that in the public sector there is a quota of 3%, which will increase to 6%. The National Disability Authority, NDA, will monitor that. The NDA point out that career progression within the public sector is very poor and this will be looked at as well. Many people enter at clerical assistant level and do not progress. With regard to the private sector, I recently engaged with an employability service. They said that when they tried to get work experience for people with disabilities the attitude of one particular area was very poor. Do the witnesses have any ideas on how we actually change the mindset of employers on a large scale?

The witnesses also spoke about the reluctance, or the refusal, of companies to upgrade websites to be accessible, which is terrible. There are guidelines. Do these need to be reinforced and made stronger than just guidelines? Again, the NDA has looked at all of the local authorities' websites and the NDA graded them on how accessible they were. The NDA published

these results on their website. The next thing they were getting calls from local authorities asking what they needed to do to improve in order to move up the rankings. When they were called out on how poor their website accessibility was they were willing to change. I am aware that this is a much bigger process when considering private companies but is there something that can be done there to incentivise them to improve?

**Ms Jeanne McDonagh:** It is about creating a situation where it is okay to talk about disability. As I said earlier, it is not a bad word. One can have open, frank, compassionate and empathetic conversations where the person asking the question is not called out for asking the questions that are coming from the right place.

It is funny that in five days' time it will be the anniversary of the marriage referendum and the Yes Equality campaign. I am reminded that this is what the campaign did. It created a space to ask questions and to ask for information to help people make up their minds around what was a very important decision. It allowed people to have those conversations without it being a situation of, "Why are you asking this question?", and without it descending into a negative thing. It is about creating a very positive environment. People and employers need to be informed. They need to get over their fear. It is easier to walk away and say, "We will not hire someone because they are going to cause problems or I will be before the Workplace Relations Commission", or all of the worst-case scenarios that people imagine. It is very important that such a space is created.

The awareness-raising campaign the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth is talking about will go a long way towards helping that, if it is done correctly. It will start that conversation and it will start people thinking about it. It needs to be wider. It needs input from other Departments and from people with lived experience into that campaign to make it the best it can be. It would at least create and spark the occasion where people could start having those conversations. An employer might ask, "Why do I not have somebody with a disability on my team? If it is one in seven and there are seven of us, what are we doing wrong, what are we doing right, what do we need to do, and what practices do we look at?" Much of our work through Employers for Change and the Open Doors Initiative involves informing people, helping them on that path and imbuing confidence in them and potential employees.

**Ms Christabelle Feeney:** The biggest thing is that we need to explain the reason for all this. If I get my foot in the door of an employer's organisation for three minutes and can explain to them why they need to learn about disability, they will always come back and look for disability awareness training. Once they do the initial disability awareness training, they will say they found it interesting and ask whether we do any other training. The training opens their eyes and makes them aware that there are so many people living with non-visible disabilities or that, statistically, there are many people already within their organisation who have disabilities. Like in so many areas of life, the biggest barrier is getting our foot in the door to have those conversations.

The point on websites is an interesting one. Through Employers for Change, I have worked with various organisations in respect of their websites. Some of the reluctance in that regard probably comes from lack of knowledge. More can be done to subsidise those changes. There is a lot of work done in retrofitting houses and so on and there is scope to consider whether employers can be encouraged to overhaul their websites with some type of incentive. Ms McGriele may wish to comment.

**Ms Jodie McGriele:** I agree that education is key. There is a need to educate businesses.

We can do it in a fun way, such as by using virtual reality. There are many ways of engaging people and debunking the myths. Our advocates wrote a guide for employers and it makes the point that people have a sense of humour and it is fine to say certain things. All of that stuff is important. Accessibility is key. There was reference to the fund and the NCBI having to respond to the lag in applying for the fund. Applying for the fund is not accessible. One has to get a scribe to come in and fill in a hard copy to be posted. Many people cannot do that independently. It is the same with the personal reader grant. It can then take several months for the person to get the equipment or the funding for the equipment. As Ms Feeney stated, some people have to go to a credit union to get a loan. The NCBI has stepped in to create a pot of money in order to give people independence through equipment but a cross-departmental approach is needed on this issue. Education is key.

**Mr. Sean Doran:** The Deputy referred to the fantastic report by the NDA. It considered websites but not internal systems. Whether an employer's in-house software, HR, clocking in and out, email and document access systems are accessible is not being checked. People who go for these work placements focus on their disabilities rather than their abilities because the systems that are in place are not inherently accessible. If an employer concentrates on having inclusive software and making sure the in-house systems are accessible, that allows people in employment to stay longer. Those people will not do an internship and then decide it was an awful experience they do not want to repeat. It allows them prove they can work in these environments. There is an onus on employers to ensure their in-house software and systems are accessible. There are no reports monitoring that aspect currently; it is mainly employers' external websites that are monitored.

**Ms Jeanne McDonagh:** It is also about the way we all look at the world. This is me sort of grandstanding. We work with the Crann centre in Cork. It is a remote working centre that was built fully accessible for people with all disabilities. It has a quiet room, raisable desks and space. That thinking was present from the start, when they started raising funds and building it. Many of the other remote working centres are not accessible. It is about having a mindset of looking at the built environment and wider society through a more inclusive lens and deciding that, if a website is being built, maybe someone who knows how to make it accessible from the get-go should be brought in. There is no point in doing the retrofitting. We all know it costs more and is more difficult. People shy away from it. We need to do this from the beginning. New houses are being built but how many of them will be built for people with disabilities? I bet that is not even in the thinking at the moment, although I hope I am wrong in that regard. There is a need to come at everything on which we are working, including employment, from the lens of making it accessible. People with disabilities should not be considered as people who will cause trouble, be a drag or a problem or a drain on resources but, rather, as employees who needs a step up to be equitable with other employees. They should be treated like all other employees are treated, as people who bring something to the organisation. It is about more than the nuts and bolts of tools and equipment; it is about how we look at that and people with disabilities.

**An Cathaoirleach:** We will now move to the second round of contributions.

**Deputy Pauline Tully:** The issue of self-employment has been raised. Reference was made to entrepreneurs and supports. An issue regularly raised with me is that employers who employ a disabled person can access the wage subsidy scheme but it cannot be accessed by those who are self-employed. Could that easily be changed? Ms McDonagh referred to the access to work scheme in the UK. Are there supports for entrepreneurs or self-employed people

within that scheme? Is this something that needs to be seriously addressed? As Ms McDonagh noted, many disabled people have brilliant ideas but may not follow up on them due to the fear of losing secondary benefits such as a medical card, travel pass or even a basic payment. It may take time to set up a business. People who work on commission, such as artists and musicians, are-----

**Ms Jeanne McDonagh:** They need assistance and supports.

**Deputy Pauline Tully:** They need support. They make a yearly return rather than that being looked at on a weekly or monthly basis. If they lose their payment, it takes ages for the payment to be restored and so on.

**Ms Jeanne McDonagh:** There is no flexibility in the system.

**Deputy Pauline Tully:** Yes.

**Ms Jeanne McDonagh:** Much of it is paper-based and that does not make sense. Those who are self-employed have to fill in the hours worked weekly. It is time-consuming, wasteful and inflexible. It does not allow entrepreneurial spirit to thrive and prosper. The Deputy can correct me if I am wrong but, as far as I am aware, the self-employed do not have access to supports such as screen readers and so on.

**Ms Christabelle Feeney:** It probably depends on the Intreo office, the person to whom one speaks or how one writes the application but the rule of thumb is the reasonable accommodation supports are applicable to employers for employees. There is definitely a gap on the entrepreneur or self-employment side of things that needs to be filled. There is an opportunity for more supports for people with disabilities to go into local enterprises and come at it from that aspect rather than it all being under the Department of Social Protection. It is important that the funds for individuals who have disabilities who are entrepreneurs come from the same stream as funding for other entrepreneurs. The wording that is being used is poor in terms of uptake. We recommended that the wage subsidy scheme be increased from 50% of the minimum wage to 70%. As we are all aware, there is a cost-of-living crisis. That is a big thing. Even the wording of that subsidy scheme is demeaning. An employer has to sign off that the employee has a lesser capacity to work than others within the organisation. Nobody wants to do that. Employers have told me they will not do that to the person in question as he or she will have to look at the form and agree to it and it is often not true. I do not think that would be applicable to a person who is self-employed or an entrepreneur. I am not 100% sure on the entrepreneur side in terms of the UK model but it is something we could consider.

**Deputy Pauline Tully:** Employment is not just about getting people into jobs; it is how to get them there and support them. Reference was made to the fact that only 6% of the cohort use public transport. There have been no personal transport support schemes since 2013. Those who were in receipt of those prior to 2013 continued to receive them but since then there is only the disabled drivers and the disabled passengers schemes, which are extremely difficult to access. That actually rules out many people particularly in rural areas, or even in urban areas if they cannot get to a bus stop or a train station. It needs to be cross-departmental for supports to be put in place in order to give people the dignity of being able to go out to work without having to fight for everything they require. As mentioned, many people have hidden disabilities. In my former job there was a confidential survey on disability and many people were reluctant to fill that out, especially if they had issues around mental health, because they feared they would be stigmatised. We have many people in the workforce who are working without the supports

they need because they are afraid to admit that they have a disability.

**Ms Christabelle Feeney:** I am interested in the Deputy's point about people's reluctance to respond to those types of surveys. That is probably a huge obstacle in terms of reporting within the public sector. I tried to work with a number of semi-State bodies on this around the language they use when collecting data on the number of individuals or the percentage of individuals within the organisation who have disabilities. As things stand, it is quite medical and clinical because the surveys that are shared literally just take the Disability Act 2005 definition of disability, which is very short and does not really encompass all of the disabilities that people might be living with or how they might self-identify. Even within the public sector much work is needed around the language being presented to our employees in order to encourage them and give them the confidence in the organisation to share that information and not just be a box-ticking exercise so that people feel that this information is being requested because we want to create a more inclusive organisation.

**Ms Jodie McGrielle:** I would like to add a point about transportation and access to work particularly for people living in rural areas. Access can be hugely challenging. Rural bus stops could be just a bus pole in the middle of a busy road with no island bus stop. Even if there is a good access route, with the advent of shared spaces and micromobility, navigating is becoming extremely challenging for people who are blind or vision impaired. There are no tactile markings between a cycle lane and a pedestrian pathway. There might be an island bus stop in between scooters or electric skateboards flying past or other things that are not audible or might make an unusual noise that people might not recognise. These are all additional challenges facing people.

**Ms Christabelle Feeney:** An episode of RTÉ's "Prime Time" programme about disability aired recently. For anybody who has not seen that, it is an important programme to watch on RTÉ Player. Within that, as Ms McGrielle just mentioned, it included a young woman who lost her sight at about ten or 11 years of age. She talked about the State examinations. The leaving certificate examinations only allow an extra ten minutes for each of the examinations. It struck me immediately. How is she meant to reach her full potential in terms of qualifications to get into the type of work that she might dream about getting into? That is as far back as we need to go. We need to think about our young people. It is at that point we are forming as adults and understanding what our abilities are and what obstacles we will face as we move into the workforce later in life.

**An Cathaoirleach:** I thank the witnesses and Deputy Tully whose time is up. I call Deputy Stanton.

**Deputy David Stanton:** I am actually dealing with a constituent, a young lady who has a serious disability and needs more time. She does not want to use a scribe or assistive technology. She wants to write stuff herself but the extra ten minutes are not enough. The State Examinations Commission said "No". There is a battle with the commission every time, so I know what Ms Feeney is saying.

Ms Feeney mentioned that when companies engage with her and do the course they want more. Change is happening through what she is doing, which is good. Are there companies which exhibit best practice in this area? I do not need the names but if she wishes to mention them she can, of course. Has she seen a shift? She mentioned large companies earlier. I know some large companies that have the resources for this have subcommittees in areas such as diversity and inclusion in particular, which includes disability. Will Ms Feeney talk to that?

**Ms Christabelle Feeney:** There are but I will not name them because I do not want to get into trouble with any of the companies that I do not name. There are some. I do not know that there is somebody doing absolutely everything right. To be honest I do not know if that is humanly possible for all of us. This is an evolving area. Among the examples I have is a large organisation that has what is called an employee resource group. It has multiple such groups. One represents people with disabilities or allies people with disabilities with the organisation in the same way as there might be an LGBTQI+ network. It utilised its internal network to look at the processes it has in place. Instead of just utilising its employees to come out on awareness days and say, “We have this event on. Is the organisation not brilliant?”, it actually says let us get feedback, a real critique of people who have come through the process and understand the barriers that exist. That is something that companies are not often comfortable with doing but it gives the best results.

The other organisation that comes to mind is not as large. It is a retailer. The work it has done in this area is exceptional. It implemented the reasonable accommodation passport which we relaunched last year with IBEC and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU. With the passport the company ensured that it had a clear process for employees within the organisation and new recruits who come into the organisation who might need a reasonable accommodation request. The person can ask for that and a process exists and a document is filled out. It is agreed what will be put in place. A scenario arose from that whereby an individual who was neurodiverse had only started working on the shop floor and a customer came up to that person but they walked away. The customer took great umbrage at this and made a complaint that the individual was rude. What had actually happened was that the individual had not been correctly trained and did not understand what the expectation was if a customer came up. When something like that arises, in many organisations the organisation considers what other job it can give the person. Organisations may consider giving the individual a back-room job instead of addressing the issues that came up. In this case the company is really good. It sent its director of operations down to the shop to do a role-play scenario with the individual and to go through what to do if a customer comes up and a conversation takes place. It was just that social element that was a barrier for the individual. That was it, and the person has got on really well within the organisation since then.

There are organisations that put in place the correct processes in order that managers support employees and utilise their staff actually to impact company policy and they have an open mindset about the individual needs of people and are not afraid to ask the person what barriers exist. The biggest issue we find is organisations that want to do the right thing but that talk to everybody in the organisation around that individual and not ask the person involved what it is that he or she needs. That is a huge problem.

**Deputy David Stanton:** Open Doors now has more than 70 organisations involved.

**Ms Jeanne McDonagh:** There are actually 125.

**Deputy David Stanton:** I am sorry, 125. I am behind the times.

**Ms Jeanne McDonagh:** We will have words.

**Deputy David Stanton:** I was right when I said more than 70. Obviously they are engaging. Are they all businesses?

**Ms Jeanne McDonagh:** The majority are businesses with some NGOs also. We all work

together with Departments to create the pathways to education, employment and entrepreneurship.

**Deputy David Stanton:** Ms McGrielle mentioned something called the disability confidence digital badge. Will she tell us more about that?

**Ms Jodie McGrielle:** They have disability-confident badges in the UK. As part of our provision for the workplace integration partners we took on vision impairment, VI, confidence. We train businesses on the different types of vision impairment, how they might impact a person, what barriers might look like and we might simulate different types of vision impairments in order that people can understand. We might do additional training on such things as accessibility, and how to create an accessible PowerPoint or document. Then, once we have engaged with that employer, we give it a digital badge to say that NCBI would recommend it as a visually impaired-confident employer. We would be confident then to promote that company or business to our talent pool of job-ready candidates.

**Deputy David Stanton:** That is happening here at the moment.

**Ms Jodie McGrielle:** It is.

**Deputy David Stanton:** How many companies have received that badge so far?

**Ms Jodie McGrielle:** We have on our books more than 40 companies that we call visually impaired-confident and they all have different levels of engagement with NCBI. Some give us job specifications that we can provide to our talent pool in an accessible format. Others give us mock interviews. We might engage around some corporate social responsibility, internships or work experiences. In some cases, we have found some really nice pieces of best practice whereby a company might call us and say, “We have this job in this area or under this umbrella - what candidates do you have on your books?” We can then make a referral or an introduction. Then that company has aligned a job specification to that person as opposed to the other way around.

**Deputy David Stanton:** Ms Feeney mentioned the reasonable accommodation passport. Is that progressing? How many companies are involved in that?

**Ms Christabelle Feeney:** What we have found is that a lot of companies have taken it and are using it but have not necessarily directly engaged with us. It has worked very well, however, for the companies with which we have directly engaged, and we are building and delivering training around that at the moment. It is one thing to have the document; it is another thing to educate the managers to actually implement it. More recently, we have done this with the national lottery. There are a number of different pilots we are trying out, particularly with the training piece, to make sure that it is being implemented.

In line with what the Deputy asked Ms McGrielle, we are at the very start of carrying out research on the disability confidence model that has been used in the UK. It was a great idea in theory but there were just a couple of pitfalls with it. We hope to implement something similar here but base it very much on the outcome of that research. It would not be just the digital piece, which is really good, and on which Ms McGrielle and the team are working; it would look at a pillared system whereby an employer would sign up and would have to go through multiple different steps to retain the champion badge and that there would be an assessment and so on. It is just to note that it is something we are examining at the moment.



**Senator Marie Sherlock:** Ms Feeney mentioned EU procurement a few minutes ago. I do not know if it was with regard to the general EU procurement directives or is there a directive that makes specific reference to disability. I do not know whether she has the detail there, or we might pick it up afterwards, but-----

**Ms Christabelle Feeney:** I can pick it up afterwards. Off the top of my head, is it EU directive 26? I will have to double-check. I have it written here somewhere. Within that, it states that it is important that companies that are procured have a 30% representation of employees from a marginalised background, including people with disabilities, and it is certainly not something that has been utilised.

**Senator Marie Sherlock:** There has been very poor transposition of the procurement directives in this country-----

**Ms Christabelle Feeney:** Yes.

**Senator Marie Sherlock:** -----so it is something I will certainly need to look into, but I thank Ms Feeney for that.

I wish to pick up on the conversation earlier about the issue of hidden disability and the stigma and the issue surrounding disclosure or having to notify an employer. Perhaps Ms McDonagh might comment on the conversation about it being much harder to retrofit systems into a particular organisation when we should be mainstreaming accommodations from day one. In the construction world, there is the concept of universal design. How can that be applied to the world of work? What is that? Is that a flexibility within the workplace?

I should clarify that earlier, when I was talking about the work-life balance Bill, what I meant to say is that disabled persons are excluded not from the right to request remote work but from the right to flexible work. Is flexibility the key there or is there something else? Obviously, there are a number of things, but-----

**Ms Jeanne McDonagh:** It is about laying out one's stall. When someone applies to a company, I would presume he or she does some sort of due diligence as to what sort of environment it is and what sort of company it is. Is it welcoming? Is it a good employer? Does it have a reasonable accommodation passport? What sort of job spec is there? The job spec is the very first thing someone sees. Does it have a reasonable accommodation? Is there a contact number, name, email or phone number that someone can ring to talk about disclosing? Disclosure is very personal to the person. I have no qualms about talking about it, but that is me and I am different. I have a big mouth, but other people find it very personal and very intrusive and do not want to disclose it because they think it will work against them. That first point of contact with the company is vital and something we really preach to all our companies. If employers are not setting out their stall and talking about all the things they do, and then doing it well and properly, to best practice, they are sending out a very bad message to people applying to them - and they have friends and families. They are going to talk. They are going to say, "I applied to X and you will not believe what happened to me." It is, therefore, reputational as well.

In addition, if they are doing that from the get-go and if they have the ethos that they want to be inclusive and want to help people from marginalised backgrounds, be it people with disabilities, migrants, the Traveller community, the Roma community, whatever it may be, they have to be upfront and say it, but they also have to live the ethos. It is not just a tick-box exercise; it really has to permeate the whole organisation and be imbued. It is an element of corporate

social justice and it is what companies should be doing, and without even thinking about it. It should not be a nice to have; it is a must have. That comes across to anyone applying for work and going through a company's processes: what accommodations are put in place and what help is given to make it an equitable process. Again, I am not saying that a company should hire someone just because they have a disability. They should be hired because, given equability, they can do the job as well as anyone else. That is the basis on which the company should hire. I think anyone would want that. They do not want to be put in a job where they are moved to the backroom or put in a corner and told to do one thing because it is believed that is all they are able to do. They want to be in a job in which their skills are valued and best use is made of them because then they thrive and progress and so on.

Sorry, that was a very long answer to-----

**Senator Marie Sherlock:** Not at all. First and foremost, it points to organisational culture.

**Ms Jeanne McDonagh:** Very much so.

**Senator Marie Sherlock:** That is the most critical point to us as legislators. In my head, I ask what the State can do to try to push that on and-----

**Ms Jeanne McDonagh:** The State has to do it itself.

**Senator Marie Sherlock:** Absolutely. As the largest employer in the country, of course it has to take that lead. From a legislative perspective as well, however, what pushes it and-----

**Ms Jeanne McDonagh:** We can see change happening in the public appointments system. It is happening.

**Ms Christabelle Feeney:** A good example is that the Public Appointments Service recently advertised some clerical officer roles. We have done a good bit of work with the service, in fairness, and I have done a good bit of training with staff internally. Prior to that, for clerical appointment roles it always used testing, like psychometric testing. It actually removed that. That was one of the first times that had happened, so there are changes being made. It comes back to the outward communication of what they are doing. There are lots of companies doing things but they may not be as effective at outwardly communicating it. That comes back to that confidence building for people to share that they have a disability. One of the things we always say to companies is that they have to welcome reasonable accommodations and provide opportunities to share at every stage from the job spec to the shortlisting to the interview to the onboarding into the job. It should be everywhere within the organisation. Companies are obliged to do that under the Equality Acts but they do not seem to understand that a lot of the time. There was research carried out by, I think, Ability Focus, by Stephen Kelly, on the number of organisations that included a reasonable accommodation on their job advertisement and it was very close to 0%. Again, it is about getting organisations to understand their legislative obligations as well.

**Senator Marie Sherlock:** My last question touches on - it has been touched on already to a certain extent - the interaction between disabled persons, the social welfare system, the world of work and then other employment supports. The witnesses talked about the fear of losing supports if people take up employment, but also how certain supports are structured. Separately, we are seeing at the moment with the basic income for artists, disabled artists are losing a large share of their disability allowance, which should not happen if we want people to stay in the arts or, indeed, in other sectors.

One of the points from the Open Doors Initiative was removing the onus from the employer to apply for grant support and empowering the jobseeker with a disability to seek work with the supports in place. Could the witnesses talk through that a little more? In some ways, that envisages a kind of transformation of the system that is already there. It was said that the employer has to sign off on the wage support and the point was made about even the language around all that. How could that system be transformed so that a person is able to go to a job with the supports in place and there is very little for the employer to do then? That would help in changing the barriers within organisations to taking on people with a disability.

**Ms Jeanne McDonagh:** It requires a change of mindset in the Department of Social Protection. It is true that not all people are out to game the system. If someone has an amputated leg, it will still be amputated. Why does a person have to prove it has not grown back? I am being extreme, but there is a constant need to prove a disability. It beggars belief sometimes. As Ms Feeney mentioned, it depends on what Intreo centre people go to as to what help they get. There needs to be a systemic change in attitude and training within the Department. Some people are brilliant and they do their job so well and they are so helpful, but others have a very different mindset and that raises all sorts of problems. It is not a huge change to move the supports from the employer to the person. It would actually be a better change and it would be more efficient. It would cut down on paperwork, not that there should be paperwork, as it should be a fully accessible system, and it means that the person has control over their own work, career and accessibility.

**Senator Marie Sherlock:** Perhaps the witnesses could give me some detail on the application process an employer faces that the individual should be going through, and that he or she will bring with him or her.

**Ms Christabelle Feeney:** As things stand, all the applications for supports are on paper, so someone cannot actually apply online, even if a person wanted to right now. Some of them have four different forms, which is excessive. To get the disability awareness grant scheme, organisations are asked if there is an employee with a disability. Our thinking around it is very important.

If we were to think about a scheme that works well in this country, where the uptake is very high, surely we would come back to the Covid-19 supports that were put in place and how easy that was made in terms of the online application. People just had to go onto the social welfare app and apply for it. If that is what we are talking about, we should not be using this as an opportunity to say: "Well, there has been very little uptake, so actually that is a success." No uptake is not success. In 2021, there was zero uptake, based on the figures I received for the employee retention grant. Are we really saying that no employee in this country acquired a disability in 2021? Absolutely not. We have to move it to an individual basis where a person can go onto the *welfare.ie* app and apply for an individual support, which is assigned to them and they receive it once they are in employment, irrespective of where they are employed.

**Senator Marie Sherlock:** To clarify-----

**An Cathaoirleach:** I am sorry, but the Senator is way over time.

**Senator Marie Sherlock:** I know, but this is an important question.

**An Cathaoirleach:** In fairness, they are all important questions. The Senator can proceed.

**Ms Jeanne McDonagh:** We can follow up with information.

**Senator Marie Sherlock:** This is my last question. To be clear, in terms of the retention grant and the awareness grant, are we talking about converting those in cost-of-disability supports or something else? We are doing different things in terms of what the State is subventing at the moment and if we are to give it to the individual.

**Ms Christabelle Feeney:** For the individual specifically, we are talking about measures such as the reasonable accommodation fund. As it stands, there are four different grants within that. The individual usually tends to apply for two of them and the employer applies for two. It would be much easier if it was left to the individual. Let us take away the wage subsidy scheme. For example, a person could apply themselves for assistive technology as part of the reasonable accommodation fund. It makes absolutely no sense that people have to go through the employer to get a piece of assistive technology that, technically, they can bring with them when they leave, but that never happens. They then go to another place of work and have to apply all over again, plus they have the embarrassment of having to follow up with the employer, chase them and ask if they managed to apply for it. Nobody wants to do that. It is really hard starting a job on day one, without that extra stress.

**Senator Marie Sherlock:** I thank the witnesses very much.

**An Cathaoirleach:** That concludes our consideration of this matter. I thank all the representatives for assisting the committee with its consideration of this important matter. The committee will further consider this matter as soon as possible.

I propose that we go into private session to consider other business. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee went into private session at 11.25 a.m. and adjourned at 11.35 a.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 24 May 2023.