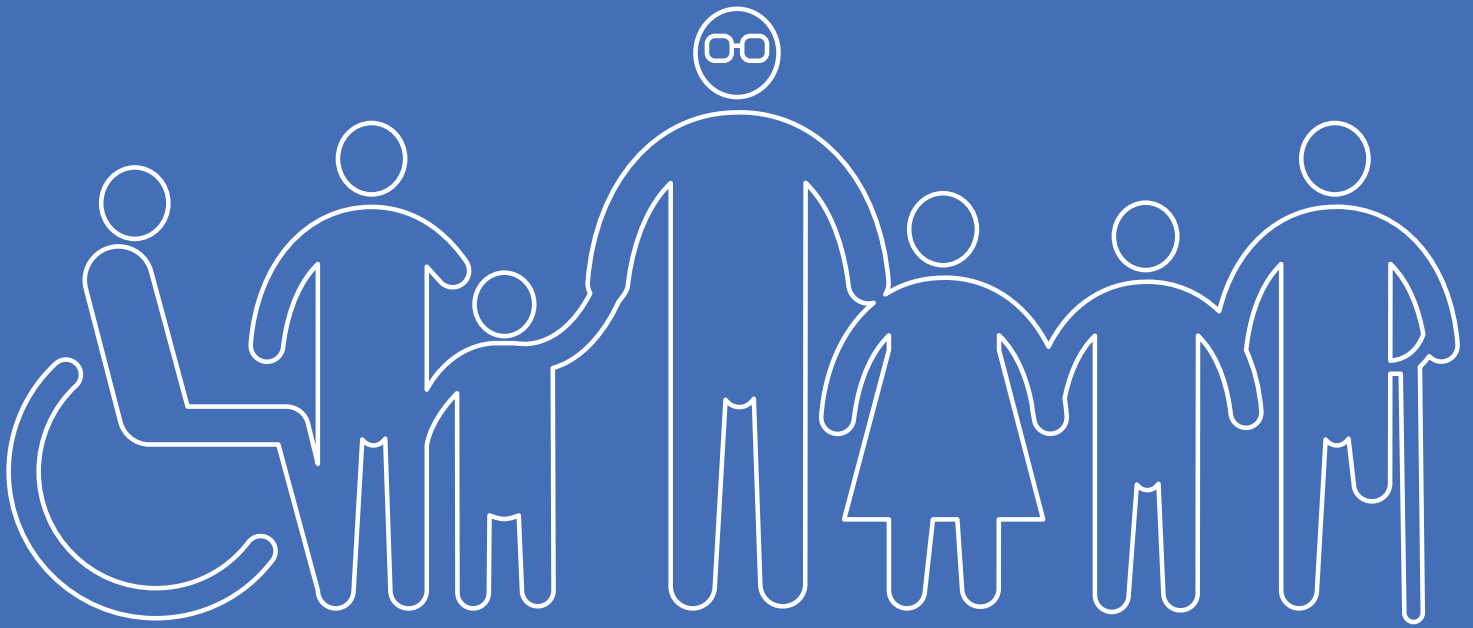




FIANNA FÁIL
DISABILITY NETWORK



The Future of Disability

Connectivity, Visibility, Recognition
& Access for All 2023 & Beyond

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Foreword

from Uachtarán Fianna Fáil
& Tánaiste Micheál Martin, T.D.

As Tánaiste and Uachtarán Fianna Fáil, I am pleased to contribute to this discussion paper on disability.

In Government Fianna Fáil has steered the country through a global pandemic; is supporting individuals, families, and businesses through the cost-of-living crisis and is delivering on our party's key objectives as set out in the Programme for Government.

Improving the lives of people with a disability is a priority for our Party. Since entering Government in 2020 we have introduced a number of measures to support people with disabilities including increases in income disregards and core weekly social welfare rates. We have recently passed the Work-Life Balance Bill which

will ensure that all workers have the legal right to request remote working from their employers. We have delivered the largest health budget in the history of the State and also provided for record increases in staffing across the health service.

We have abolished in-patient hospital charges and reduced the Drug Payment Scheme threshold. We put in place an €81 million inflation support fund to support community based voluntary organisations in the provision of health services across the country to help ease cost of living pressures. Furthermore, work is also ongoing to develop a strawman proposal for the restructuring of long-term disability payments. This will be informed by the Indecon Cost of Disability report.

While much has been achieved, it is clear from this discussion paper and its recommendations that significant challenges remain and that addressing these challenges requires a whole of Government approach. The paper rightly highlights that disability cannot and should not be siloed into one Department and that it is the responsibility of every Government Department to ensure that disability inclusion is at the heart of policy formulation and decision making.

I would like to express my gratitude to all those who have contributed to the development of this paper including disability advocates and advocacy groups, members of the disability community and Fianna Fáil members.

I also wish to thank the Fianna Fáil Disability Network for its extensive work in compiling this thought-provoking paper. I look forward to further engagement with the Network to continue the work of building a more inclusive and equal Ireland.



Foreword

from Minister of State with
responsibility for Disability,
Anne Rabbitte, T.D.

As Minister of State with responsibility for Disability, I am delighted to contribute to this discussion document. I and my Government colleagues are committed to providing services and support for people with disabilities, which will empower them to live their lives and provide greater independence in accessing the services they choose. This is evidenced in the Programme for Government – Our Shared Future and the continued cross-departmental work being carried out.

When I was appointed as Minister of State for Disability in July 2020, I was surprised to learn that the vast majority of the €2.5 billion

for disabilities had largely focused on the provision of residential places and day services. These are absolutely crucial supports and investment in these areas will continue, and indeed more is needed. But other areas need attention at the same time. Over my two budgets to date, I have tried to reorient the funding, with a particular focus on respite and the recruitment of clinicians to deliver therapies, as well as bolstering the number of Personal Assistant hours people can access.

The transfer of Disability from the Department of Health to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth in March 2023 is a turning point in how we approach disability issues. We must no longer see disability as just a health issue but a rights-based equality issue and this is key to how we develop and implement policies across all sectors.

Change, however, can be slow. It is sometimes not only the direction of the funding that needs to be looked at but, in some cases, there is a culture that needs to change. I do think this is shifting, and if we just keep persisting, we will get there. For me, it is essential there are clear pathways in place for people with disabilities, so people know what and where supports are available, regardless of diagnosis or need.

Notwithstanding this, I recognise the continuing need to address the bespoke challenges that people with disabilities face today in Ireland. These challenges occur at all stages of life and in all facets of life, from healthcare, to education, to employment, and other areas. We must lead by example in these areas so that nobody is left behind.

I will continue to be an advocate for people with disabilities across Government and I look forward to continuing to work with the Fianna Fáil Disability Network to build on the outstanding work presented in this discussion document.



Foreword

from Fianna Fáil Disability Network President Sinéad Lucey Brennan

As President of the Fianna Fáil Disability Network, together with Minister Anne Rabbitte T.D., our Parliamentary Party Liaison Michael Moynihan T.D., our elected representatives from the Oireachtas Disability Matters Committee and the wider membership and party, I am honoured to present this Disability Discussion Document.

When I founded the Disability Network, I committed to bringing together a diverse group of people to amplify the voices and ideas of our party members and their families with lived disability experiences. I have been truly humbled by the number of party members, their families and the wider public who have shared their personal lived experience and disability advocacy experiences with

me and I never cease to be amazed by their tenacity and courage. It is an immense privilege to hear these experiences.

I have always cared about giving disabled people's voices the megaphone they need and deserve. I remain committed to the task of furthering disability equity and inclusion so that we can make Ireland the best place in the world in which to live for everyone.

The CSO figures from the 2016 census identify that 643,131 people in Ireland have some form of disability. That is 13.5% or one in seven Irish people living with a disability as well as their families. Therefore, we must pivot our way of thinking about disability solely in the context of residential and day services, which 80% of the current annual budget accounts for, and move from a medical model towards a model where having a disability can enable more independent living. This must be underscored by a social model which places health, equality, and independence of the person with a disability at its core.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) is the gold standard in disability rights and, given its significance, we must continue to strive as a nation to reach that standard and ratify it fully. It is time to begin a real acceptance of disability as the largest minority in the world and go one step further by truly valuing and honouring the impact people with disabilities make.

This discussion document shows how bringing together the voices and ideas of our members, of advocates, of disability service providers and organisations to support furthering disability policy is a worthwhile exercise. We must now ensure that this document and its recommendations become an ever evolving sphere of influence that generates ideas to inform future disability policy for Fianna Fáil. This is a living document and I look forward to continuing to hear people's lived experiences in every part of our country to continue this work.

Core Aims of the Network

To raise awareness

We aim to educate and raise awareness about ongoing challenges for people living with physical, intellectual and invisible disabilities within Fianna Fáil locally and nationally.

To promote member engagement

We aim to establish a forum to share ideas and suggestions to engage the wider membership and encompass more broad thinking on where we stand on disability and equality issues.

To develop party and government policy formation

We aim to work with Fianna Fáil to delve into current disability and equality policy, and create forward-thinking disability and equality policy, recognising its place as a core tenet of republican values.

Background

In the last three years, since the 2020 General Election, Fianna Fáil has led Ireland through the most extraordinary of circumstances throughout the global pandemic which has shaken countries, governments, and peoples across the globe. Together with the will of the Irish people, the Government was successful in implementing many initiatives to sustain and protect communities across the country. These initiatives included the vaccine rollout where those of all ages with underlying conditions or disabilities were prioritised, and in a pivot of norms which has changed the way we live, study, work, socialise and encompassing benefits for people with disabilities and valuable lessons in this regard.

However, given the lack of knowledge of Covid-19 at the beginning of the pandemic, a difficult decision was taken to implement a restrictive lockdown. This included limiting people from travelling more than 2km from their place of residence and only essential services such as supermarkets remained open. These restrictions brought wide-ranging consequences for everyone but most acutely for people with disabilities. They had their structures and routines impacted, day services closed, and freedoms in their residential services and care homes severely curtailed. For many, the shift to full-time remote working was challenging too.

A combination of these factors subsequently led to the formation of the Fianna Fáil Disability Network by like-minded Fianna Fáil members, led by Sinéad Lucey Brennan, Dion Davis, and Tory McGlynn, who met while canvassing for the 2020 General Election. These members came together informally at first to discuss policy gaps for people with disabilities.

As the pandemic worsened and became more prolonged, they realised there was a wide gap in knowledge of disabled people's

living experiences, including how the pandemic had benefited or worsened their lives, and the little to no awareness of invisible disabilities. The Network, working together with Minister of State with responsibility for Disability, Anne Rabbitte T.D., discussed ways in which we could highlight the disability brief within the party through consultations with party members.

It was imperative for the Network that we sought input from the membership to ensure we adequately recognise the needs of people with disabilities both in the party and in society. This also involved extensive engagement with our local government representatives and the parliamentary party. Following a series of online town-hall seminars in late 2021, submissions from members and elected representatives, input from the Fianna Fáil Equality Officer and Minister Rabbitte, and respecting the Programme for Government commitments, this discussion document was born from the Fianna Fáil Disability Network was born.

It outlines the party's current disability policy preferences and provides recommendations for party and government disability policy formation. Echoing the 1996 document Meeting the challenge of equality: policy document on disability, this discussion document updates our party's thinking in one of the core policy areas which lives up to our republican ideals and that of equality in a disability context.

Notes

The Sphere of Disability



As a society, we tend to think of disability in medico-legal terms and our language has aligned that way. We have normalised classifying people as ‘mildly, moderately, or severely disabled’ rather than focusing on the level of support a that a person with a disability may need – do they have low, medium, or high support needs; how does a particular disabled community (i.e., the autistic community) prefer to be referred to (“I am autistic” instead of “I live with autism” which is identity-centric, or person-centric “I live with an acquired brain injury”); using language such as ‘special needs’ in lieu of ‘additional needs’ and; creating a sense of “the other” which is widely felt

by members with disabilities in our communities. To that end, we have used the terms “disabled person/people” and “person with a disability/people with disabilities” interchangeably throughout this document.

In line with research and information at the time, programmes were implemented in our education sector that focused on methodologies to modify the behaviour of neurodiverse individuals to help them fit in with a neurotypical or able-bodied community (for example, autistic kids in schools using methodologies such as ABA (applied behavioural analysis) This is now changing to highlight the need to move away from a medico-legal disability model to a social model where a disabled person and their needs must be placed front and centre.

In line with this goal, our recommendation is that the full terms of the UNCRPD is fully ratified by the Irish Government to ensure people with disabilities can access their full spectrum of rights under the UNCRPD. The full implementation of the UNCRPD must form part of the National Disability and Inclusion Strategy 2024 – 2027 which needs to be owned by the Department of Children, Disability, Equality, Integration and Youth but with accountability in the Department of the Taoiseach given the intersectionality across various departments and the criticality of its implementation given the number of people living with disabilities in Ireland.

Fianna Fáil is the party that has put disability on the map, and we need to continue on that journey. Since assuming office as the Minister of State for Disability in 2020, Minister Rabbitte has consistently highlighted a major task she was assigned with, namely the transfer of functions for disability from the Department of Health to the Department for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, which was accomplished in March 2023. Before now, it was assumed that disability fell into the purview of health; however, the

Policy Recommendations

The Disability Network is very grateful to all who submitted contributions to this discussion document. Based on these submissions received, and input from the Minister, the Network divided the emerging key themes into the broad headings of health, housing, education, transport, employment, local government, and finance/social protection. Cutting across all of these areas is the pivotal idea that we must **ensure that all policies are disability proofed**. This means ensuring that all government policies, and proposed policies and legislation, are considerate of people with physical, intellectual, and invisible disabilities prior to Committee Stage (Dáil and Seanad). This too must be an aim at local government level.

The key recommendations are outlined below. It should be noted that these recommendations must be fully costed and reviewed and, where feasible, actioned into law and policy in the term of the current Government.

Health

A Universal Healthcare approach for All

Medical Card

- Issuing: A Medical Card for people with disabilities and chronic diseases to be issued just once, without the necessity to renew it after every couple of years with an increase in threshold as the current threshold is preventing people with disabilities from advancing in their careers and making an impactful contribution to the economy through financial fear that they will lose access to their Medical Card.
- Remove means-testing: A Medical Card for people with disabilities and chronic diseases, as well as congenital conditions and spinal

injuries, should be issued on medical grounds and not be means-tested to encourage those who are able to work to do so without the fear of losing their Medical Card. If a person with a disability is working, s/he still has a disability. Very few salaries can cover the high expenses related to disabilities, especially the cost of home carers, disability aids, medication, wheelchair repairs, etc.).

- **Widen the bands:** The Medical Card bands need to be widened to ensure affordability so that access to equipment such as specialist shoes and wheelchairs is simplified. The current process of raising an invoice within the HSE is currently taking too long.
- **Dental care:** A Medical Card for people with disabilities and chronic diseases should include full dental care as the current Disability Allowance is too low to afford these expenses, yet dental care is essential for our overall health. Dental care is also inaccessible for many people with disabilities, particularly for wheelchair users.

Access to healthcare settings

Every medical and dental practice must be accessible by wheelchair and accessible with signage in Braille (for blind people), have T-loop technology (for deaf people), and low sensory aids or, space permitting, a low sensory space for people with invisible disabilities. They need to be equipped with either a hoist for transferring patients from their wheelchair to a special chair and back, if necessary, or with mobile equipment so that medical professionals and dentists can perform their job while patients are sitting in their wheelchairs.

In addition, recognition of people with physical, intellectual, and invisible disabilities' challenges and their associated individual and differentiated needs in healthcare settings needs to be highlighted given the lack of training for medical professionals on the correct approach to the welfare of patients with disabilities. Currently there is no provision for people with disabilities in maternity settings or recognition of the sexual needs or orientation of people with disabilities.

Disability Awareness Cards

Implementation of essential disability cards in all health settings needs to be progressed (i.e., access to Emergency Key (Public Toilet Access), JAM Card, Sunflower Scheme, IBS Card, among others as a measure to start). People with disabilities need to have the confidence to use these cards to alert able-bodied people that they may need more time, space, or attention. This should be introduced in conjunction with the proposed European Disability Card.

Disability & Mental Health Policy

Having mental health issues or mental illnesses are invisible disabilities in themselves and impact on an individual's ability to live, study, work and be an active contributor in the community.

- Acquired disabilities: 65% of people acquire a disability between the ages of 18 & 65. We need to ensure that adults who acquire disabilities, and their families where needed, obtain speedy access following disability acquisition to mental health services and counselling supports to enable them to determine how they approach the next chapter of their life with an acquired disability.
- Families: having a new born with a disability places extraordinary pressure on families. For parents, it can be financially and emotionally difficult and there may not be a support group or information body that will support them with that particular disability nearby. For siblings, it can divert attention away from other children if the disabled child needs more attention. There needs to be more programmes such as Sibling Workshops widely adopted to prepare families if the disability is picked up in pregnancy and early year support programmes once the child is born. Recognising the enormous pressure that a family may come under if a member acquires a disability as a child or adult must also be better recognised.

Assessment of need process and early intervention

The assessment of need process and waiting lists for occupational and speech therapy are too long. The current clinical guidance developed for assessments of need for all applications needs to be kept under review to ensure adherence to the Disability Act 2005 as well as ensuring it is not taking too long to complete the assessments.

Nursing Homes for under 65s

- Nursing Home Occupation: Per Minister Rabbitte, there are approximately 1,230 adults under the age of 65 with a disability currently living in nursing homes because there was no care plan put in place to look after young people who need full-time care for their disability following an accident or aneurysm. We need to review methods of moving people back into the community.
- The Ombudsman's 'Wasted Lives' report 2021 reviewed the experience of young disabled people living in nursing homes. It found that these disabled people experienced more difficulty accessing services, such as Personal Assistance Services, employment and training, community inclusion and meaningful activities and a lack of support impacting their quality of life when living in a nursing home.

Rare Disability Drugs Policy

Long-term funding for medication/drugs for rare disabilities is needed. A new National Rare Disease Plan is being developed by the Department of Health; improving the care and treatment of people as well as better funded awareness campaigns around rare diseases are needed. There are 300,000 people in Ireland who suffer from a rare disease.

Play & Behavioural Therapy

Currently there is no paygrade or package for play therapists and associated professionals in the health system to support children and adults with disabilities. Research shows that the social model of access to play, animal, music therapy has wide ranging benefits for disabled people. An agreed paygrade should be introduced for therapists which will support the goal of transitioning to a social model of disability.

Community Neurorehabilitation Teams

Minister Rabbitte has commenced the rollout of community neurorehabilitation teams, with a team in CHO2 and CHO4 due to come on stream in 2023. This funding and implementation of community neurorehabilitation teams must continue.

Monitoring and Oversight of Disability Services

Given the recent transition of the disability portfolio from the Department of Health to the Department of Children, Disability, Equality, Integration and Youth, a monitoring and oversight body with statutory authority to audit disability standards, including but not limited to residential and day services, including the transition of services that currently fall under the remit of HIQA (Health Inspection and Quality Authority) or the HSA (Health Standards Authority) to this authority should be considered.

Housing/ Independent Living

A Better Standard of Living for All

Universal Design

The Centre of Excellence for Universal Design (within the purview of the National Disability Authority) has published extensive guidance on universal design in terms of home location and approach, moving within the house, living spaces, floor plan examples, among others. We need to aspire to a standard design template which can be tweaked to suit a disabled individual's needs. We need to foster a birth-to-death approach with housing generally and make sure all net new housing built can cater for people with disabilities, ensuring wet rooms are installed, there are ramps instead of steps and are wheelchair accessible and adaptable. Current regulations dictate that houses must only be suitable for wheelchair users to visit, but do not have to be 'wheelchair liveable'.

- **Develop a Universal Design Housing Template:** In conjunction with a universal design architect, and similar to bungalow templates developed in the 1970s, significant resources and time would be saved if we prioritised a cradle-to-grave design template as a framework to future proof developments under construction and to be built in years to come.
- **Single Storey Property Acquisition:** There is a need to explore Single Storey Property Acquisition together with the Land Development Agency and establish a finance entity to ensure we finance community housing for people with disabilities.
- **Quotas:** A quota of 10% of the capacity of each new housing development must be set aside for people with disabilities, backed up by legislation.

- Training for planners: Training planners to influence design for people with disabilities must be prioritised so that there is an understanding of how the lack of disability-focused design can potentially cause harm to those living in a development, housing or apartment complex. In doing so, planners should be encouraged to be mindful of accessibility prevention by understanding the layout of a housing development (round v linear) to ensure we can maximise the number of housing units for people with disabilities.

Housing Allocation System

It is difficult to get on the housing waiting list, and a child's name needs to be placed on the list long before the age of 18. When the child turns 18, if they have not been advised to do so prior, they are placed on a long list which means they may or may not be allocated a house; meanwhile their parents are getting older and more anxious about whether their son/daughter has a home prior to their death. If the priority waiting list for those who need social housing on medical grounds still exists, it should be prioritised in reality. More data on people with disabilities currently waiting to access housing is needed to accurately deal with this problem.

- Decongregation: Decongregation involves moving people with a disability from congregated settings to homes in the community. Capital funding for decongregation needs to be prioritised as well as its integration into the county development plans.
- Independent Living must be prioritised by local and national government and the funding to accomplish more independent living must be increased accordingly.

Town Centre Living

Ensure that people with a disability, especially older people, have access to downsizing their home and living in a town centre so that everyday life is more accessible. 60% of people over 55 in Australia

live in accommodation that are complexes; as they get older and may develop physical disabilities; they are accommodated. A similar measure needs to be introduced here.

National Housing Strategy for Disabled People

The second National Housing Strategy for Disabled People 2022-2027 must ensure the housing needs of disabled people, with physical, intellectual, and invisible disabilities, are adequately being met. There is a significant need that is currently not being met. For example, there are many adults with an intellectual disability that cannot acquire adequate housing and are living at home with ageing parents. There are two main funding schemes (capital development) that can be employed:

- Community housing for intellectually disabled people funded by the Capital Assistance Scheme - this is in existence for some time providing specialist housing around the country and is now unsustainable as it is a one off allocation of funding, only meeting 70-80% of putting property in place. Sustained recurring funding to support more community housing for people with intellectual disabilities needs to be introduced.
- Capital Advance Leasing Facility (CALF) - if there is a community house developed with a caretaker unit (assisted living), this funding initiative cannot be used, meaning associations need to supplement with additional funds. If a disabled person attends day services (for example, for 4-5 days per week) - it is extremely difficult to get a full-time residential space as they are not deemed as having an emergency need. If they apply for local authority housing, they fall through a gap as they need supports to be able to live independently. A review of the funding and means-testing needs to be considered to ensure that people with physical, intellectual and invisible disabilities are not faced with a lack of appropriate supports for housing.

Employment

A Better Quality of Life for All

Disability Allowance

Many people with disabilities who have access to entitlements or benefits, often find cuts to their entitlements or benefits when they access the labour market, receive inheritances or are in receipt of pensions. People with disabilities must not be penalised for participating in the workforce. Therefore, a review of the means-test for the Disability Allowance is required so that people with disabilities are not penalised for contributing to the labour market or for receiving inheritances or pensions.

Equal opportunities for people in employment

All employers should be equal opportunity employers where discrimination based on a person's age, race, gender, disability, and religion is prohibited. However, this is still occurring in ways that are difficult to prove. Government must work with businesses to identify ways to encourage more employment of people with disabilities and on how to improve working lives for employees with disabilities. The option to work is crucial for everyone to experience self-realisation, belonging, acceptance and a better quality of life. Employers should be incentivised to recruit people with disabilities to provide more opportunities. This could take the form of additional supports to adapt workplaces or for additional equipment.

- **Sensory rooms:** In an ideal world, every workplace should have a quiet/sensory/wellness room to ensure full participation of people with disabilities in the workplace without discrimination. While we understand that not all workplaces have spaces for this, there is an opportunity to ensure that all public libraries (or other public amenities) have at least one quiet/sensory/wellness room that employees can avail of in each village, town or city in the country.

- Career progression: Many disabled people are being hired at entry-level and not being afforded the opportunity to progress owing to potentially needing additional supports or general unconscious bias. It was highlighted that some probationary periods when commencing employment for people with disabilities may be longer in duration. If this is the case, this must be evidenced and legislated against to address the issue.
- Training and development: Workplaces must ensure that training and development programmes cater for people with disabilities. This may include, for example, subtitles on digital training sessions and screen readers to support all forms of physical, intellectual, and invisible disabilities.
- Diversity and Inclusion policies: Diversity and inclusion policies in the workplace are a huge positive step for employment in Ireland, both in the public and private sector. Organisations must, however, ensure that they highlight disability as a key focus for workplaces in these policies to encourage greater inclusion.
- Invisible disabilities: There is a perceived lack of access to the workplace for employees with invisible disabilities. There is an opportunity to review the defence of knowledge and the right to reasonable accommodation in Irish employment law and policy to make sure these adequately meet the needs of employees with invisible disabilities so that nobody is excluded.
- Cultural norms in the workplace: Discussion should be had between government and employers to create workplace programmes which focus on improving cultural and societal understandings of disabilities generally and invisible disabilities, specifically in the workplace.
- Key therapy areas: Employing professionals to support people with disabilities in key therapy areas is difficult as they may seek employment outside of Ireland given the minimum requirements

are too high for them to begin employment in Ireland (i.e., the requirement of 3+ years' experience). Also, specialists for invisible disabilities such as EDS (Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome) are not available in Ireland. There is potential for a work placement model to be implemented in line with a review of our entry requirements for specialists.

- **Targets for Employing People with Disabilities:** Both public and private sector organisations must have detailed targets – specific and measurable numbers (excluding percentages) and be required under law to report annually on their progress of employing disabled people.

Subsidy Scheme

Empowering people with disabilities to seek work with supports in place: increasing the subsidy scheme for people with a disability and removing the work threshold to enable more people with disabilities to access work, both full and part-time work where it suits their needs, is required.

Agriculture

Accidents on farms and in agriculture settings can lead to long-term disabilities. As farmers are typically self-employed and may not have access to sufficient social welfare benefits in the event of an accident occurring, this needs to be further analysed and addressed so that all are aware of the risks of farming and the entitlements should an accident occur.

- **Social Farming Model:** There is potential to offer Community Employment (CE) schemes/volunteer opportunities at local level through the Leader program to involve people with disabilities in social farming. This could be framed as a remodel of the Rural Social Scheme that would increase community engagement and enable people over 65 to participate where they may otherwise

Education

A Better Educational Experience for All

People with disabilities must be given every opportunity for a full education that is appropriate to their needs to make a meaningful contribution to society.

Extension of grants in exceptional circumstances

Study grants should be extended to those who have serious reasons for studying in a third level second time (for example, unrecognised diploma or disability that makes a person unable to work in his/her previous profession). It is unfair to require people with disabilities to pay the full fee for repeated third level education, forced by circumstances that were not caused intentionally by themselves.

Master's education

Grants to complete master's programmes: All kinds of master's degrees (not just in education) should be covered by study grants for those who need them. A master's degree is required in many highly qualified professions, however, many people with disabilities cannot afford these studies.

Special Education

We need to move away from the phrase 'Special Education' and find another term for it as the language is not inclusive. The review of the EPSEN Act should consider another appropriate term with a similar meaning.

Initial Teacher Education

This needs to cater for an end-to-end approach from primary, through second level and third level education, continuity of practice

from SNA, teacher, learning support, and more focus needs to be on how to engage children and adults with hidden disabilities.

Disability education module

At undergraduate level, the disability education module for teachers is currently optional. To make this mandatory would promote understanding, awareness, and more integration thereby creating a hybrid school and societal approach for children and adults in education.

Personal development

Increased personal development for students with learning disabilities is needed and should be encouraged with appropriate supports.

Vision Sports

Education on integration of disabled people in sport is required.

Dyslexia

We must do more to raise awareness of Dyslexia as a disability within the education sector. This is highlighted through the TY Program (Civil Recreation Programme) but needs to take place earlier than that in the education cycle for greater recognition of students with this disability.

Autism early diagnosis

Early diagnosis of autism must be achievable as early diagnosis is key. This is currently not happening in children and the waiting lists are too long, with the resulting impact on education being delayed access to SNAs which adversely impacts on the educational development of the child.

SPHE

Education on disability needs to play a larger part in the SPHE curriculum at second level.

Supports for educators with disabilities

Educators with disabilities need to be catered for in the classroom and be recognised by teachers and students alike. This would create a mindset shift in the eyes of children growing up surrounded by disability. More supports are needed in this regard to adapt teaching roles and school settings to enable this.

Summer Programme

We need to aspire to at least a 6-week Summer Programme with compulsory participation of schools. Currently schools can opt-out of participating in the Summer Programme and in 2022, it was challenging to get a 3-week block for the Summer Programme provision. The goal is to provide a multi-disciplinary approach and include trainee/student therapists to widen the scope of professionals and educators for paid work experience.

Alternative and Augmentative Communication

In primary education, supporting the rollout of wider AAC (Alternative and Augmentative Communication) for children who communicate in ways other than with speech must be considered.

Transport

A Better Mobility Experience for All

Access to public transport

It is well recognised that improvements in public transport are required across the board but especially for people with disabilities as the cost of adapted cars is often too high, making them unaffordable options for many. More must be done to improve access to public transport for people with disabilities so that they can live more independently, while also reducing their carbon footprint.

- Equality of access: Equality of access must also be provided regardless of if the setting is a rural or urban community.

Disabled Parking, Driving & Accessibility

- Disability Blue Badge Process: The scope of the blue badge process needs to be widened so that more people, inclusive of those with invisible disabilities, are eligible for priority parking and access.
- Stricter enforcement of fines: In public places, outside schools, shops and businesses, drivers continue to park in disabled spaces, preventing drivers with disabilities who hold a Blue Badge, and their carers, from accessible parking. There needs to be a stricter enforcement of fines for this at local authority level to prevent this practice from continuing to occur. A penalty point system for people who park in disabled spaces without a blue badge might be an effective tool to shift mindsets towards the correct behaviour.
- Reallocation of space: The provision of more outdoor dining spaces has led to a reduction in disabled parking bays which has impacted disabled people's parking needs. Local authorities

must look at redistributing space in a fairer manner so that the accessibility needs of people with disabilities is not adversely impacted upon.

- **Disabled Drivers Scheme:** The Disabled Drivers Scheme application process is difficult and does not cater for people with invisible disabilities. There needs to be a symbol (such as the Sunflower Symbol in the UK) that highlights the need for an aisle seat for an invisibly disabled person, along with elderly, pregnant, physically vulnerable people. The Network welcomes the assessment of this scheme in the NDIS Transport Working Group review and believes the scheme needs to be updated to be more inclusive.
- **VRT exemptions:** Along with VRT exemptions on vehicles for people with disabilities, there should be a reduction in insurance for vehicles that have to be specially adapted for people with disabilities in line with this.
- A number of local authorities have incorporated a more accessible approach to the provision of disabled parking spaces through the use of a mobile phone app. This should be rolled out on a national basis.

Mobility Allowance

Mobility allowance should be reinstated for wheelchair users.

Assessment of yield management

An urgent assessment of yield management is needed. For example, bus companies tend to think of revenue per seat. However, this fails to serve the need for more accessible spaces on public transport for people with disabilities, especially when we think of space for wheelchair users needed, and also impacts Local Link services in rural areas.

Wheelchair Tours

There is a lack of accessible buses with ramps for tourists which is damaging to our international reputation as a tourist destination, but also negatively impacts on holidaying in Ireland for locals.

Rail services

Many DART/Commuter/Intercity Rail services are not accessible owing to the gaps between the train and platform. While wheelchair ramps can solve this issue, people with disabilities must ring ahead to use them as often there is no member of staff present to assist. Many lifts are also regularly out of order in rail/bus stations. This is not acceptable. People with disabilities have enough to grapple with and should not continuously have to call ahead to ensure that the job of the transport companies is correctly carried out. Transport companies must ensure that accessibility in stations is prioritised, coupled with adequate training for all staff so that there is never a time when a person with a disability cannot be assisted or cannot independently access a service.

School transport

Transport is available to some but not to all schools. There is a reluctance to invest in transport as it is not deemed commercially viable to invest and then for the service not to be required. A urgent review of this model is needed.

Notes

Local Government

A Better Community for All

Local Development Plans

All local area plans, and county development plans need to be disability proofed (including retroactively) to ensure they are designed to accommodate people with all forms of disabilities.

Local Government Disability Forum

Provision of a platform for disability should be at the core of local government and the development of local plans. This would enable quick problem-solving and proactive policies to make local communities more inclusive for people with disabilities.

Levelling of footpaths

For people with severe mobility issues or wheelchair users there are issues in urban areas where footpaths are not levelled. This makes accessibility in town and city centres impossible for such people. This is also an extensive problem in private housing development areas that are owned by a county/city council and is an urgent matter that must be addressed.

Ringfence funding for public rest and play amenities

Finance should be ringfenced annually in each local authority budget for the installation of proper seating, benches, swings, piers, playgrounds, etc., that are inclusive for everyone.

Public space design

As we move towards a green agenda, we must ensure our public areas and spaces cater for people with disabilities. For example,

greenways should be fully tarmacked so wheelchair users can enjoy full use, more benches should be installed in local communities to allow for resting time, and a greater number of public sensory trails should be designed to provide calm spaces in busy urban spaces. Similarly, outdoor dining and seating areas need to have enough space to accommodate a wheelchair which has a doubly positive effect in allowing parents with buggies or people travelling with suitcases to navigate effectively.

Elections

Often polling stations do not cater fully for people with disabilities and can be difficult to access. This needs to be addressed urgently so that a person's right to vote is not infringed upon. In addition, all Fianna Fáil and political party events must be inclusive and provide for people with disabilities.

Notes

Finance & Social Protection

A More Inclusive Society for All

Abolish tax on Carers Allowance

This should be addressed for anyone receiving carers allowance in lieu of their full-time employment. Many full-time carers had to give up their jobs to care for loved ones and are upset at the carers allowance being taxed. Legislation needed to abolish this tax.

Access to finance

It is often difficult for people with disabilities to access finance owing to lower incomes. Access to funding and relevant schemes should be identified through one central system to help solve this problem.

Accessibility

There is a need to legislate for banks and financial services institutions to provide physical and digitally accessible facilities for people with disabilities.

Financial enablement

Given banks and financial institutions are becoming more digitised, training and enablement must be designed for people with disabilities must be implemented.

Carers

Continued improvement of care services

Prioritisation of the role of carers

There is a lack of emphasis placed on the role of the carer, as evidenced by their lack of prioritisation during the Covid-19 vaccine rollout. This meant that if you were a carer of an elderly relative or carer of a child with complex disability, there was little thought to who would be able to mind children/older people if a carer contracted Covid-19 and these were not prioritised. There is a need to change how our society views carers: there needs to be a shift in the perception of their role which needs to be viewed as that of a key worker or essential worker. In line with this, greater access to respite for disabled people and carers is needed.

Supports for carers

There is a need to establish counselling and psychology supports for carers as often their self-worth can be impacted owing to:

- potentially having to relinquish full-time employment to care for a disabled person,
- grieving the loss of the person with disabilities (whether they have passed away or are suffering from an illness that prevents them from fully engaging in everyday life), and
- stress or demands of caring for a person with disabilities full-time.

Carer recognition and remuneration

There is a need to recognise financially the service that carers provide to the State. Currently Carer's Allowance is not sufficient to cover the level of service provided and care given. An urgent review of this is needed, reflecting the hugely positive impact that

Conclusion

Fianna Fáil has committed to making disability a priority, both in opposition and in government. Fianna Fáil was the first party to prioritise disability policies and legislation to promote the rights of people with disabilities in our society which aligns with our democratic republican values of fostering equality and inclusion in everyday life.

Our clear objective should be to continue the work of being the most representative, inclusive, and active political organisation in every community and ensure we better our society to ensure individuals with physical, intellectual, and invisible disabilities can make an active contribution and achieve equity. It is clear that major change is underway. This needs to be coupled with a strong focus on reframing some of our budgetary spend to include therapeutic interventions and earmark monies for invisible disabilities while maintaining our residential and day services for the disabled people that need them, among other things as highlighted throughout this discussion document.

As the largest party in the Oireachtas and at local government level and holding the key Departments that address the main social priorities for Ireland, we must ensure that we continue our focus to be the most representative and ambitious party for the future of Ireland. As the party with a dedicated Minister of State with responsibility for Disability in Minister Rabbitte, we have a unique opportunity ahead of us to improve lives, create social progress, retain, and attract new members with innovative ideas, appeal to young and old, to help shape the lives of people with disabilities for the better, and truly create an inclusive Ireland for all.

It is clear that the membership is the lifeblood of this organisation. It is clear our members want to have an active say in policy development and to carve out the identity of this party. It is clear

they believe that online workshops, webinars, and activities between elections is the way to ensure we retain our existing members and create a space where new members will want to become politically involved and active. It is also clear that member-led networks such as the Women's Network and LGBTI+ Network, among others, are successful in keeping members engaged and the Disability Network aims to be similarly successful.

The Fianna Fáil Disability Network is proud to present this discussion document in the hope of igniting further conversation, debate, and policy changes for the betterment of all in society. While we understand that these recommendations will need to be evaluated and costed to ensure they are viable, it is our intention that this discussion document will form the bedrock for the future of disability and the Minister can use this discussion document as a springboard to form policies and legislation that will enhance our republican ideal of delivering genuine equality for people with disabilities in Ireland.

Acknowledgements

Our sincerest thanks to everyone who generously provided their time to the development of this discussion document, and in doing so helped us to shape it around the voice, expertise and lived experience of disabled people. In particular, we would like to thank all the Fianna Fáil Party members who responded to our request for participation around women's health and the menopause in early 2021 which offered us valuable insight into their personal experiences of accessing healthcare. We are immensely grateful to the wide range of individuals and organisations who met with us to discuss disability and provided their input to earlier drafts of this discussion document:

- Access Earth
- Disability Federation of Ireland
- Economic and Social Research Institute
- Fianna Fáil Disability Network Committee
- Ibec
- Inclusion Ireland
- Irish Wheelchair Association
- Minister Anne Rabbitte T.D.
- Noel Byrne, Special Advisor to Minister Anne Rabbitte, T.D.
- Oireachtas Committee on Disability Matters
- Rethink Ireland

We are also grateful to the Fianna Fáil Parliamentary Party and our councillors for their input and participation throughout this process.

Appendix I – Methodology

Our Work

The Disability Network met informally in April 2020. We sought the views of the Spokesperson on Disabilities at that time, now Minister of State, James Browne T.D., whose advice and mentorship helped us believe we were on the right track to creating awareness on disability issues and we thank him for his input. Minister Rabbitte was appointed in July 2020, and we held a number of constructive meetings with the Minister. Minister Rabbitte understood the value of the network and provided her full support to help us. We then collaborated with her team on the best route to progress. Her knowledge on the brief and advice is invaluable.

In 2021, we extended our reach to the wider party. We collaborated with the Department of Children, Disability, Equality, Integration and Youth, the Minister, and Fianna Fáil Headquarters to set up a ‘Community Connected’ online seminar which was attended by over 100 members of the party.

Following this series, four regional sessions (Munster, Leinster, Connacht-Ulster, and Dublin) were set up in late 2021 to enable all members, including elected representatives, Ógra Fianna Fáil, and the party organisation, to provide their views in a more intimate and engaging setting. Over 90 party members, including elected representatives, attended these group sessions and provided a wide-ranging set of views which led us to create the graphic below to contextualise the breadth of the sphere of disability.

Gathering Feedback

From the callout contained in Pillar 2 of Our Priorities: Ongoing Policy Development, it is clear that Fianna Fáil’s members have a desire to contribute more actively to policy development and that

we have to seek new ways of broadening policy development to achieve this. Members also want meetings which are more focused on the substance of policy rather than solely organisational matters. In addition, *Fianna Fáil Towards 2026: Strengthening our Party*, highlighted one of the key factors regarding the electorate's difficulty in understanding Fianna Fáil's differentiator – it may have been a strategic error not to develop our own policies on this topic and communicate them at that time

These lessons informed the work of the Disability Network in creating this discussion document to examine what we believe Fianna Fáil needs to do to accomplish our identified goals. Our core mission was to give Fianna Fáil members a voice in this process. We hope that in turn, this will provide greater clarity for the wider public on understanding Fianna Fáil's views in this area.

To establish a key chain of advocacy, it is important to reflect the needs of people with disabilities and their families by providing a platform where their views can be heard through effective consultative frameworks. It is our mission that we formalise this Network and establish a national network that analyses and provides input to the Minister on key issues regarding disability.

We also want to ensure this document remains live so that as time progresses, people with disabilities together with disabled persons' organisations, the Fianna Fáil parliamentary party and wider membership play a key role in shaping disability policy and highlighting future opportunities in the area of disability.

In doing so, we engaged the following groups to generate policy ideas and hope to build on these in the future:

- Fianna Fáil members
- Elected representatives

- The wider party organisation
- A number of selected disabled persons organisations (DPOs).

Appendix II – Programme for Government

The Programme for Government – Our Shared Future commitments as they relate to disability are as follows:

Disability

The Government believes in delivering health care in a manner that promotes patient empowerment, improves quality of life, and increases life expectancy. Ever since Ireland ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, we have signalled to those with a disability that we are now serious about making a difference – a difference that will make things better. The ratification raised awareness of the lived experience of people with disabilities, but we have much more to do. In doing more, we now need to improve the services available through better implementation and by working together across Government in a better way. We want to empower and give those with a disability the ability to choose the supports that most meet their needs.

Reflecting this, we will:

- Prioritise early diagnosis interventions and access to services.
- Improve and change services through better implementation and collaboration.
- Strengthen rights through the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCPRD).
- Raise awareness of the lived experience of people with disabilities.

- Ensure that the most effective interventions are provided for each individual, to guarantee the best outcomes.
- Seek to reduce the waiting times for assessment of need under the Disability Act 2005, through the full-year provision of additional therapy posts.
- Fully implement the new standard operating procedure for assessment of needs for all applications.
- Fully complete the establishment of the Progressing Disability Services for Children and Young People (0- 18 years) Network Teams.
- Integrate access to mental health supports as part of disability service provision.
- Resource the National Disability Inclusion Strategy, with an emphasis on close collaboration between state agencies and civil society.
- Continue with the successful decongregation programme and complete a further move of more people with disabilities from congregated settings to homes in the community, with the necessary supports.

People with disabilities and their families have been impacted by the pandemic in many ways, whether from a move to delivering services online, or a reduction in services, to feelings of isolation. A renewed focus on how we provide services is needed. We will:

- Work with all stakeholders to see how services and resources can be delivered.
- Reduce and provide a pathway to eliminate the practice of accommodating young people with serious disabilities in nursing homes.

- Expand and enhance the in-school speech and language pilots to improve the delivery of therapies in schools.
- Ensure that students with additional needs get the right assistance, at the right time, building on the learnings from the pilot currently underway, and subject to further consultation.
- Work towards implementing the most recent Disability Capacity Review.
- Support the Dialogue Forum, working with voluntary organisations to build a stronger working relationship between the State and the voluntary healthcare sector.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD)

We will enshrine disability rights by finalising the legislation required following Ireland's recent ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD). The legislation will:

- Double the target for employment of people with disabilities in the public service to 6%. • Reform the Mental Health Act 2001.
- Improve protections for people with disabilities against hate crime and hate speech.
- Improve access for people with disabilities to jury service.
- Remove outdated references to 'persons of unsound mind' from the Statute Book.
- Commence the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015 to abolish wardships.
- Develop an implementation plan to coordinate implementation of the UNCRPD.

- Implement a consultation and participation model, in line with the UNCRPD, to enable people with disabilities to participate in the policy development process.
- Ratify the Optional Protocol to the UNCRPD after the first reporting cycle.
- Work with other parties in the Oireachtas to establish a Joint Oireachtas Committee to assist in monitoring and implementing the provisions in the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

Raising Awareness and Lived Experience

We will:

- Develop programmes promoting awareness, among the general public, of the lived experience of people with disabilities.
- Enable people with disabilities to participate in cultural and heritage-related activities and programmes.
- Work towards physical accessibility to all government departments, local authorities and agencies providing services.
- Include the consideration of disability in all housing policy reviews.

Cost of Disability

In December 2021, Indecon International Research Economists (Indecon) published a report, *The Cost of Disability In Ireland*, commissioned by the Department of Social Protection. We will use the report and its findings to properly inform the direction of future policy. We are committed to the introduction of personalised budgets, improving the provision of services for people with disabilities through a range of options, including service brokers, and empowering people to choose the supports that most meet their needs. This will be based on the experience of the pilot schemes.

Employment Supports

We will:

- Promote an awareness and support programme for employers to support the recruitment and retention of people with disabilities.
- Develop initiatives that improve employment opportunities for people with disabilities living in rural areas, including through remote working options.
- Fast-track the return to Disability or Invalidity Pension for people where employment opportunities do not succeed.
- Fine-tune and expand targeted employment schemes, such as the Wage Subsidy Scheme (WSS) and the Ability Programme, to help more people with disabilities stay in the workforce.
- Commit to the social farming model, recognising the value of offering farming and horticultural work experience to people availing of health and social services, including disability services.
- Conduct an audit of equity of access to Further Education and Training (FET) for those with disabilities.

Residential and Respite Care

We will provide:

- Additional residential places and new emergency residential placements.
- Additional appropriate residential places for people currently living in respite care, as an emergency response to their needs.
- Further intensive transitional support packages for children and young people with complex/high support needs.
- Additional respite nights for people with disabilities.

Day Services and Supports

We will:

- Work to expand adult day services and supports, throughout the country, for adults with physical and sensory disabilities, intellectual disability, and autism.
- Deliver increased home support and Personal Assistance hours.

Autism Spectrum Disorders

We will:

- Implement the National Autism Plan and keep it under regular review.
- Ensure that there is effective cross-departmental implementation of the National Autism Plan, with reports made to the relevant cabinet committee.
- Implement a programme of awareness-raising to provide a better information resource for children and parents about available supports.
- Deliver a campaign to create awareness of the challenges, needs and experiences of people with autism spectrum disorder.
- Build capacity and competence amongst key professionals working with people with autism, including a national training programme for clinicians.

Expanding into New Areas

We will:

- Expand the Equality Budgeting Initiative, looking at outcomes of expenditure, as they relate to people with a disability.
- Build on the work already undertaken to ensure that all public transport services are accessible to people with a disability.
- Continue to work with all government departments and their agencies, to ensure that a disability perspective is integrated into mainstream policy development.

Safeguarding Vulnerable Persons

- We will review and improve the national policy document Safeguarding Vulnerable Persons at Risk of Abuse, National Policy and Procedures.

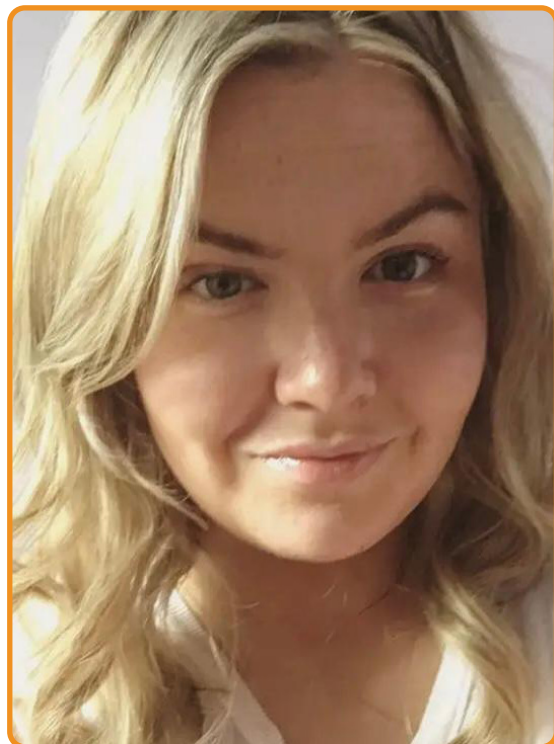
Notes

Fianna Fáil Disability Network Committee Membership

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President



Rachel Naughton
Secretary





Dace Lazdina
Policy Officer



Tom Cullen
Events Officer



Fintan Bray
*Membership
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Adam Smyth
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