



**European Economic and Social Committee
Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship
Study Group on Disability Rights**

REPORT

**COUNTRY VISIT – IRELAND
The situation of persons with disabilities in rural areas**

23-25 October 2019

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AIM OF THE VISIT: to look into the situation of persons with disabilities (PWD) in rural areas, focusing on the following questions:

1. What are the main challenges for PWD living in rural areas in Ireland?
2. If there are any successful programmes and policies, what are the keys to their success?
3. What could local and national authorities and the EU do to improve the situation of PWD living in rural areas?

Wednesday 23 October–Dublin

Meetings with the Irish Disability Federation and other disabled people's organisations(DPOs): Wexford PPN, Spinal Injuries Ireland, Longford & Westmeath ETB, Laois County Council, Irish Wheelchair Association

The main issues raised:

- In Ireland, disability policy falls under the remit of the Ministry of Health. According to the participants, this means that the measures proposed often do not meet PWD's real needs, as they are focused more on health-related problems rather than social services. In particular, there is a lack of home-care support and other community-based services. This is causing delays in the deinstitutionalisation process, which remains slow and inconsistent.
- There is a lack of accountability at government level and no cohesive disability strategy.
- There is a lack of coordination and consistency among counties; the services offered to PWD differ considerably. This has led to some people moving to get the services they need.
- The disability movement is not compact and united; on the contrary, there is a sort of competition among DPOs to get funding for their individual needs. This represents a major obstacle to achieving progress in disability rights.
- The rate of PWD attending secondary education and in employment is very low. One of the main problems seems to be the lack or scarcity of accessible transport. This particularly affects people living in rural areas. As regards employment, employers are often not informed about the benefits and other fiscal advantages available.
- There is still widespread social stigma against PWD. To avoid this, many people prefer not to declare that they have a disability.
- There is excessive red tape and a lack of support for PWD transitioning through different life phases (from primary to secondary school, to further and higher education, to employment). For example,

PWD have to reapply continuously for assistive technology and transport arrangements whenever they change schools. The same disability assessment has to be repeated every year, even for permanent disabilities.

- EU funds have been useful (e.g. the LEADER programme), but here again, the red tape and the resources needed to apply exclude poorer associations and the most remote areas.
- The Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme (SICAP) is a good initiative but has an insufficient budget and is only aimed at PWD that do not receive disability benefits.

Meeting with Adam Byrne and Caroline Timmons, Housing Department

- The availability and affordability of housing is a big problem in Ireland. PWD and older people, especially those living in rural areas, are particularly affected.
- To tackle this, a national housing strategy has been designed to promote inclusion in the community and independent living, with a specific chapter for PWD. The aim is to find housing for PWD and move everybody out of institutions.
- Housing Disability Steering Groups have been set up in each local authority to listen to the needs of PWD. To try to accommodate their demands, local authorities have to prepare a housing strategy for PWD.
- De-institutionalisation (DI) is the priority. Various measures are available:
 - tenancy sustainment is on offer for people with mental health problems;
 - houses for a maximum of four people are being built and community based services enhanced;
 - social housing is also available;
 - a contribution of EUR 8000 can be given to renovate and adapt houses based on a universal design.
- According to the department representatives, the situation has been improving in recent years.

Thursday 24 October - Athlone

Meetings with local DPOs and PWD from rural areas: Spina Bifida Hydrocephalus Ireland, Research Institute for Disabled Consumers (RIDC), Epilepsy Ireland, Athlone Access Awareness, Chime

Housing:

- The participants confirmed that the scarcity of housing in general and accessible housing in particular was a problem. Another obstacle to independent living for PWD is the fact that most of them grow up in non-accessible housing and therefore rely on help to complete everyday tasks; they never learn the basic skills required to live on their own. In addition, disability allowance is often granted to the PWD's whole family, which can be an issue when a PWD wants to move out into a house of their own.
- It is hard to access to social housing; many PWD do not even apply as this would involve identifying themselves as disabled and they fear being subjected to stigma. However, being on the list of eligible candidates is a prerequisite for receiving other types of support. PWD, like everyone else, will be put at the bottom of the list if they turn down more than three proposals. This rule does not take into account the fact that the houses proposed are often not accessible or not adapted to the specific needs of a person/family.
- The housing list process does not consider either people's changing needs as they grow older or the needs of households with multiple disabilities.

Employment

- The employment rate of PWD in Ireland is one of the lowest in the EU and the gap with rest of the population is among the highest. According to the available data, 70-80% of PWD are unemployed.
- The public sector has to meet an employment quota of 3-5% of PWD, but there is no real monitoring or enforcing mechanism.

- There are various obstacles to overcome to increase the employment of PWD. Reasonable accommodation is often not provided. Employers are not aware of the support measures available if they employ PWD and are afraid of absenteeism. PWD worry about losing their disability allowance and other support measures if they start working; therefore, many are too scared to do so and prefer to live on subsidies. There are not enough lifelong learning opportunities.
- There is a lack of awareness of the mental health repercussions of not having a job for both PWD and their carers (often family members). Moreover, if a PWD passes away, carers find themselves unemployed and without any allowance, on top of grieving their loss.

Education

The main problems identified:

- Support for students with disabilities stops after they have completed compulsory education; this makes it difficult for PWD to progress to higher education.
- Many schools are not accessible, in terms of either the built environment or the activities proposed. Students with disabilities do not attend or drop out because of this lack of support.
- There is a lack of transportation, especially in remote rural areas.
- Classes are overcrowded and schools understaffed, with teachers lacking appropriate training.
- At preschool level, there is a shortage of speech and language therapists. As the communication skills of PWD are assessed before they are granted access to mainstream schools, the absence of speech and language support causes PWD to end up in special schools, which affects their further access to quality employment.

Transport

- The lack of transportation is a big problem in rural areas. Funding from the government has been stopped. Free transport is no longer available for PWD to go to medical appointments or similar.
- There are not enough accessible public transport options or accessible taxis available in rural areas. This prevents PWD without their own car from taking up education, training or work.

Healthcare

- The procedure for getting certification attesting disability on a permanent basis (Primary Medical Certificate) is outdated and the certificate is very difficult to obtain (it requires being unable to use either arm or either leg). Applicants must go through continuous assessment on a yearly basis, which proves tiring and humiliating.
- The assessment of needs is not individualised.
- There is not enough consultation with people on the ground to listen to their needs.

Friday 25 October - Dublin

Meeting with Kevin Doyle, Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport

- The National Transport Authority manages transport on behalf of the government. An accessibility officer was appointed and DPOs were consulted for the design of the new national transport plan.
- New connections will be built and old ones will be revamped. Accessibility is a problem because of old infrastructure. Two thirds of railway stations are accessible, but bus stops and taxis also have to be adapted.
- Buses: the Local Link bus network is 80% accessible for wheelchair users. Pilot projects are being run to find solutions and fill the gaps in rural areas with small populations (e.g. community cars).
- Trains: assistance does not need to be requested in advance for intercity trains, as specialist staff are on hand on every train. For local trains, four hours' notice is required.
- The department is trying to work together with the Ministry of Health to map out needs and come up with individualised solutions for transport for PWD in rural areas.

- They are also mapping existing transport to identify gaps in view of the report to the UNCRPD.

Meeting with David O'Connor, Department of Health

The Disability Service Unit deals with disability within the Department of Health. Health services all around the country are provided by the Health Service Executive through service providers.

Among the services they offer are:

- Respite services, providing alternative family or institutional care for a PWD to enable their carers to take a short break or holiday, or to rest.
- Mobility transport scheme: this was a sum of money given to PWD to use on transport. It is currently being reviewed by the ombudsman and applications have been suspended – many PWD in rural areas are without support and isolated.
- Tax incentives to adapt cars.
- Disability allowance: this is a weekly amount of money (EUR 203 a week) and gives entitlement to free transport, but in rural areas, this is not very useful as there is almost no public transport. The department is carrying out an analysis of needs of PWD in rural areas. One proposal is to provide bus connections to daycare centres.
- Deinstitutionalisation: around 2000 people are living in institutions; efforts are underway to move them to houses of no more than four people.

Meeting with Paul Hill, Department of Social Affairs and Employment

The employment rate of PWD in Ireland is among the lowest in the EU. There are various measures to tackle this:

- activation measures for jobseekers
- fast-track procedure for reapplying for disability allowance in case PWD lose their job
- recommendations for early engagement of PWD
- quota in the public sector to be increased to 6% by 2024
- subsidies for private companies that employ PWD
- programmes that support the transition from university to employment.

CONCLUSIONS

PARTICIPATION

- DPOs should be more involved at all levels and should speak with one voice.
- More structures need to be put in place for PWD to be heard at macro level.
- Improve government accountability with regard to the implementation of legislation and the UNCRPD obligations.

EMPLOYMENT

- For a more cross-cutting approach, consider moving disability policy to the Department of Social Protection.
- Look into the possibility of adopting a system similar to that of France: private companies can decide to either employ PWD or pay a sum of money that goes towards funds to support PWD.
- Improve the information available to employers on the existing measures and the support they can receive.
- Facilitate access to work with a programme similar to the "Access to work" programme for young people.

HOUSING

- Better tailor funding allocations to the needs of individuals.

- Reduce red tape and simplify application forms.

EDUCATION

- Introduce mandatory disability awareness training for teachers in mainstream schools.
- Ensure that schools are accessible in terms of transportation, the built environment and the activities offered to students.

TRANSPORT

- Put in place transport systems that are accessible across rural Ireland.
- Offer a provisional travel pass for people who have recently acquired a disability and a travel pass for young people.

HEALTHCARE

- Reduce red tape to make it easier to obtain a disability certificate and review the continuous assessment of disability.
 - Ensure that the assessment of needs confers the right to the services and support that the assessment highlights.
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