Comprehensive Employment Strategy NDA Year-end Assessment 2022

June 2023



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## List of Acronyms

| AHEAD | Association Higher Education and Disability |
| --- | --- |
| CES | Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities 2015-2024 |
| COVID-19 | Infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus |
| CSO | Central Statistics Office |
| DA | Disability Allowance |
| DCEDIY | Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth |
| DFHERIS | Department of Further Higher Education Research Innovation and Science |
| DPER | Department of Public Expenditure and Reform |
| DoE | Department of Education |
| DoH | Department of Health |
| DSP | Department of Social Protection |
| ESRI | Economic and Social Research Institute |
| FET | Further Education & Training |
| HEA | Higher Education Authority |
| HSE | Health Service Executive |
| IGEES | Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service |
| IHREC | Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission |
| IPS | Individual Placement and Support, model of supported employment for people with mental health concerns |
| NDA | National Disability Authority |
| NTA | National Transport Authority |
| OECD | Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development |
| OWL | Oireachtas Work Learning programme for persons with intellectual disabilities |
| PAS | Public Appointments Service |
| RT | Rehabilitative Training |
| Solas | Seirbhisi Oideachais Leanunaigh Agus Scileanna (Further Education Skills Services) |
| UNCRPD | United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities |
| WAM | Willing Able and Mentoring |

# Executive Summary

This paper is the NDA’s independent review and assessment of progress by government departments and agencies in implementing the actions they committed to deliver or progress by end of 2022 under the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities (CES) 2015 to 2024.

Work on a final three year action plan due to run from 2022-2024 was progressed in 2022 but was not finalised by year end. Under the coordination of DCEDIY’s disability unit it is hoped that an action plan will be agreed with all relevant Departments and agencies in 2023.

Notwithstanding the lack of an action plan many departments and agencies continued to progress CES actions. The following areas of progress occurred during 2022.

## Developments in 2022

Progress continued on some of the strategic priority areas described in the original plan. Within the strategic priority theme of ‘building skills, capacity and independence’ 2022 saw the funding of two ‘transition pilot projects’ The first project is a collaborative pilot led by the National Council of Special Education which is underway in sites in Galway and Dublin North. The second pilot project concerns school leavers with complex special education needs (SEN) and is a collaborative project between the Department of Education and WALK.

The ‘engaging employers’ strategic priority saw the minimum employment target for the public sector increase from 3% to 6% (to be achieved by 2025) through the passing in late 2022 of the Assisted Decision Making (Capacity) (Amendment) Act[[1]](#footnote-1). Placing this increased target on a statutory footing is welcomed, and should see the introduction of new approaches to increase the numbers of disabled people working in the Irish public service.

In 2022 ‘Employers for Change’ produced guidance on inclusive recruitment[[2]](#footnote-2) and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHERC) commenced work on a Code of Practice relating to provision of reasonable accommodation[[3]](#footnote-3). Both measures will improve the information gaps that currently exist for both employers and employees.

The review of the reasonable accommodation fund (RAF)[[4]](#footnote-4) conducted by the Department of Social Protection was completed in 2022. While not published yet, it was noted that Budget 2023 allocated an additional €1 million to this fund. This increased budget will be useful if the redesigned RAF programme is made more user-friendly and relevant for both employer and employee.

Further developments within DSP occurred during 2022 these include the commencement of the early engagement process targeted at young recipients of disability payment and explored options available to them

During 2022 The National Access Plan (NAP) for Higher Education created new funding of €3 million a year to 2025 so higher education institutions (HEI) can implement universal design and enhance opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities and autism in higher education[[5]](#footnote-5). This innovation within the HEI sector will create an evidence base to support new systems and practice that can lead to improved access and participation to this sector for learners with disabilities.

In late 2022, a National Policy Group was established to develop a strategic framework on Lifelong Guidance. This group comprises of five government departments who are the key departments required to address the gaps in the provision of guidance, support and information for all people including people with disabilities when accessing support guidance and critically career guidance.

## Areas requiring further development during 2023

The NDA advises that employment will continue to be a significant area where cross-departmental commitments will be required during 2023 and 2024. While the CES is coming to its conclusion the inclusion of clear, well defined and ambitious targets and associated actions relating to employment in the new UNCRPD Implementation Strategy will be crucial.

In that regard a number of development areas require additional focus during 2023. These include:

Further exploration of the provision of Personal Assistants (PA) services in an employment context. The NDA advises that this could be a key priority during the remainder of the Strategy’s lifetime.

The Cost of Disability report demonstrated significant additional costs faced by persons with disabilities.[[6]](#footnote-6) This report was referred to the National Disability Inclusion Strategy Steering Group to monitor cross-Government responses to the report in the context of NDIS actions. A precise mechanism to implement recommendations remains unclear.

No reported progress on the provision of coordinated and seamless support to people with disabilities to access employment occurred during 2023 (CES action is commonly referred to as action 5.1).

Within the strategic area of supporting a return to work there was no reported action on the delivery of a national programme of vocational rehabilitation[[7]](#footnote-7) during 2022. Vocational Rehabilitation has a clear evidence base to support people with acquired disability return to work.

The following sections of this paper describe in detail the progress and challenges for CES implementation during 2022.

# Introduction

This paper sets out the National Disability Authority’s (NDA) independent assessment of progress made regarding the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for people with disabilities 2015 to 2024 (CES) in the context of progress during 2022. This is the seventh annual assessment conducted by the NDA.

There was a lack of agreement on the final three year action plan due to run from 2022-2024. The outstanding issues are being worked on by departments under the coordination of DCEDIY’s disability unit and it is hoped an action plan will be agreed in 2023. A mainstream-first approach to disability employment policy requires all departments and agencies with relevant responsibilities to engage with stakeholders to reach agreement on a Phase III Action Plan. Unfortunately as the plan was not agreed the CES Implementation Group met once in early 2022. This gap in monitoring implementation highlighted the challenges that continue in the Irish system with regard to cross governmental working.

The assessment is based on evidence gathered during the year that relates to the current employment environment of disabled people. This approach includes evidence gathered on the lived experience of persons with disabilities by the NDA and others, updates provided by government departments to their Disability Consultative Committees (DCC’s) relating to commitments under the Strategy, and new reports with data on the employment of persons with disabilities. In addition to this assessment paper the NDA produces a separate independent assessment of the National Disability Inclusion Strategy which contains further detailed information on inclusion matters including employment, education and transport during 2022.

In this paper the NDA contextualises CES activity during 2022 in the wider provision of mainstream employment activity, for example the launch in August 2022 of the National Access Plan (for equity of access, participation and success in higher education, 2022 to 2028) with clear targets, including ambitions for learners to progress through higher education[[8]](#footnote-8). Also, the first annual progress report from the Pathways to Work strategy[[9]](#footnote-9), which described a systematic approach, designed by the Department of Social Protection, to actively engage with young disabled persons.

# 2022 in context

## Irish figures in comparison to EU performance

ESRI research conducted in partnership with the NDA during 2021 shows that the rate of employment of disabled people in Ireland is the fourth lowest in Europe. This data is derived from the EU SILC 2018 survey. Only Bulgaria, Hungary and Greece have lower employment rates for disabled people, while Estonia, Latvia and Denmark have the highest rates. See Fig.1 for detail.

Source: Maître & Kelly (2021)[[10]](#footnote-10)

The NDA consider a more helpful focus when considering potential targets, is on the ‘employment gap’ between disabled and non-disabled people of working age who are in employment, rather than an absolute employment rate. The key benefit of this approach is that the employment rate gap is an indicator that remains equally valid as a signal of progress over time, regardless of trends in the business cycle and wider labour market.

If looking at the employment gap, then Ireland has the widest gap in the EU 27, with a gap of 41.3%, with Denmark having the narrowest gap (7.9%). See Table 2 for full detail:

Table 2: Disability Employment Gap (%) – Some or Severe Activity Limitations (EU SILC) [[11]](#footnote-11)

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **2019** | **2020** | **2021** |
| **Ireland** | 44.0 | 38.8 | 41.3 |
| **Belgium** | 33.1 | 36.3 | 38.0 |
| **Norway** | 32.6 | 34.5 |  |
| **Poland** | 33.4 | 31.3 | 34.2 |
| **Romania** | 29.2 | 30.4 | 32.6 |
| **Germany** | 26.5 | 32.4 | 30.3 |
| **Hungary** | 28.6 | 31.2 | 28.8 |
| **Croatia** | 33.5 | 32.9 | 28.7 |
| **Cyprus** | 22.0 | 23.5 | 27.0 |
| **Malta** | 28.1 | 29.4 | 27.0 |
| **Czechia** | 26.3 | 25.6 | 25.9 |
| **Netherlands** | 26.5 | 25.4 | 25.8 |
| **Slovakia** | 23.1 | 23.6 |  |
| **Austria** | 21.9 | 20.5 | 25.1 |
| **France** | 18.9 | 23.7 | 24.2 |
| **Lithuania** | 26.0 | 22.7 | 23.9 |
| **Greece** | 29.0 | 27.7 | 23.8 |
| **EU27** | 24.4 | 24.4 | 23.1 |
| **Bulgaria** | 34.8 | 33.0 | 22.1 |
| **Finland** | 20.6 | 19.9 | 22.1 |
| **Slovenia** | 18.5 | 21.7 | 21.1 |
| **Sweden** | 24.9 | 28.9 | 19.9 |
| **Estonia** | 21.2 | 20.6 | 18.7 |
| **Latvia** | 19.0 | 16.7 | 16.6 |
| **Portugal** | 19.2 | 18.2 | 16.2 |
| **Spain** | 30.1 | 21.6 | 15.9 |
| **Luxembourg** | 20.1 | 22.1 | 15.4 |
| **Italy** | 16.9 | 14.9 | 14.9 |
| **Switzerland** | 14.0 | 13.4 | 13.4 |
| **Denmark** | 16.6 | 18.1 | 7.9 |

The EU-SILC survey divides the population of persons with disabilities according to the concept of ‘global activity limitation’, which is defined as a ‘limitation in activities people usually do because of health problems for at least the past six months’.[[12]](#footnote-12) This results in a division of the population of persons with disabilities into those with ‘some activity limitation, ‘severe activity limitation’ and those with either ‘some activity limitation or severe activity limitation’.

Figure 3 displays the disability employment gap for each of these groups over the 2014-2021 period. While the disability employment gap has fallen from 34.9% in 2014 to 31.4% in 2021 for persons with ‘some activity limitation’, the gap has widened considerably for persons with a severe activity limitation, rising from 50% in 2014 to 66.6% in 2021. This divergence in the disability employment gap suggests that while employment levels have improved for persons with more moderate or milder forms of disabilities, the opposite is true for individuals that have ‘severe activity limitation’. Overall, taking the two groups combined the disability gap increased from 39.8% to 41.3%.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Source: Eurostat (EU-SILC)[[14]](#footnote-14)

To address the extent of the disability gap across Europe an Employment Package[[15]](#footnote-15) was announced by the EU Commission in 2022 to support Member States to improve labour market outcomes of persons with disabilities (see Appendix 1 for more details). This employment package is one of the seven flagship initiatives announced in the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 (Disability Rights Strategy) [[16]](#footnote-16). This EU initiative saw the introduction of a new practitioner toolkit for Public Employment Services (PES) across Europe. This toolkit was designed to combat labour market discrimination against persons with disabilities and to assist in their participation in the labour market[[17]](#footnote-17). The NDA welcome the examination and application of this Toolkit[[18]](#footnote-18) by Intreo, the Irish public employment service, in an Irish context. This toolkit outlines six action areas relevant to improving the labour market outcomes for disabled people, these action areas include:

1. Internal policies aimed at workers in the PES
2. Services
3. Active labour market measures
4. Reasonable accommodation and accessibility
5. Outreach programmes
6. Partnerships for effective services

The EU regard current PES systems across Europe as requiring systematic change to strengthen the participation of persons with disabilities in the labour market. The first area of action contains the tools for promoting the participation of persons with disabilities within the PES itself. The second and third areas of action fall under external policies aimed at persons with disabilities and employers, namely services and active labour market measures. Stemming from external policies, the fifth area of action relates to outreach programmes which identify and contact persons with disabilities and employers to provide information on how to access jobs and training opportunities. Also under external policies follows the sixth area of action, partnerships to enable the participation of persons with disabilities. In the midpoint between external and internal action areas is the fourth area of action regarding reasonable accommodation which PES and all employers must conform to.

# Key Developments in 2022

## Areas of progress during 2022

While the final action plan 2022 to 2024 has not been agreed, progress has continued on some of the strategic priority areas described in the original plan. For instance within the ‘engaging employers’ strategic priority the minimum employment target for the public sector has been increased from 3% to 6% through the passing in late 2022 of the Assisted Decision Making (Capacity) (Amendment) Act[[19]](#footnote-19). Placing this increased target on a statutory footing is welcomed, and should see the introduction of new approaches to increase the numbers of disabled people in the Irish public service.

In June 2022 the Department of Further and Higher Education Research Innovation and Science launched ‘Strengthening Universal Design for students in higher education, including those with autism, and enhancing opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities in higher education[[20]](#footnote-20)’ as a new strand of the National Access Plan (NAP) for Higher Education. A funding programme of €3 million a year to 2025 has been created so that higher education institutions (HEI) can implement universal design and enhance opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities and autism in higher education. This innovation within the HEI sector will put in place new systems and practice that can lead to improved access and participation to this sector for learners with disabilities. This measure will in time lead to improved employment outcomes for disabled people as shown by UK research.[[21]](#footnote-21)

SOLAS published Sectoral Guidance for Further Education and Training (FET) practitioners on Universal Design for Leaning in FET[[22]](#footnote-22). This guidance is continuing to embed UDL across this sector. Through the implementation of the FET Strategy 2020-2024 *Future FET: Transforming Learning,* all 16 of the SOLAS and ETB Strategic Performance Agreements 2022-2024, contain commitments to support inclusive practice and drive the achievement of the national *‘widening participation’* FET target[[23]](#footnote-23).

The Strategic Performance Agreements for 2022-24 agreed between SOLAS and the 16 individual ETBs provide for the rolling out of the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) across all FET provision. Previously, this Fund only applied to students on Post-Leaving Certificate Courses. All 16 agreements and the accompanying national system report are all publicly.[[24]](#footnote-24)

During 2022 SOLAS also continued to provide funding to Down Syndrome Ireland (DSI) to support the FET sector in several ways. Including; Linking with SOLAS and ETBI to support increased participation of learners with Down syndrome in local FET provision; Sharing knowledge and expertise from Down Syndrome Ireland’s experience of developing and delivering structured FET courses for adults with Down syndrome; Linking with teens and adults with Down syndrome and their families to ensure that their voices are heard and their needs considered and addressed in the FET system; Supporting SOLAS and the ETBI with disability awareness across the FET sector; Increasing awareness of FET opportunities and pathways among school leavers with Down syndrome. DSI also deliver programmes such as *Latch-On*, *(Literacy and Technology Hands- On)* and *MOTE (My Opinion, My Vote*) which focus on the development of skills useful for both life and work.

In 2022 ‘Employers for Change’ which is funded Department of Children Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth produced guidance on inclusive recruitment and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHERC) commenced work on a Code of Practice relating to provision of reasonable accommodation[[25]](#footnote-25). Both measures will improve the information gaps that currently exist for both employers and employees.

The review of the reasonable accommodation fund (RAF) conducted by the Department of Social Protection was completed in 2022. While not published yet, it was noted that Budget 2023 allocated an additional €1 million to this fund. This increased budget will be useful if the redesigned RAF programme is made more user-friendly and relevant for both employer and employee.

2022 saw the enactment of Statutory Sick Pay – Sick Leave Act 2022[[26]](#footnote-26) which put on a statutory basis paid sick leave. This Act will over time have an impact on people with disabilities who are experiencing onset of disability and allow people to remain connected to work.

In 2022, a National Policy Group was established to develop a strategic framework on Lifelong Guidance. This group comprises of five government departments who are the key departments required to address the gaps in the provision of guidance, support and information for all people including people with disabilities when accessing support guidance and critically career guidance.

Within the CES strategic priority of ‘building skills, capacity and independence’, 2022 saw the funding of two ‘transition pilot projects’ The first project is a collaborative pilot led by the National Council of Special Education which is underway in sites in Galway and Dublin North. The second pilot project concerns school leavers with complex special education needs (SEN) and is a collaborative project between the Department of Education and WALK.

## Continued challenges during 2022

Activity related to the provision of personal assistance in an employment context have remained stalled with limited progression. An ESRI report on the Irish Personal Assistance Service commissioned by the NDA and published in 2022 reported satisfaction among many Personal Assistance service users of some aspects of their service but many felt their hours allocated were insufficient. The findings suggest ”… that systemic shortfalls have a clearly detrimental effect on the functioning and capabilities valued by the participants in relation to their ability to participate in social and economic activities that many people take for granted’.[[27]](#footnote-27) As part of a previously agreed cross-departmental policy to develop a national programme of supported employment (2018), a commitment was given to further explore provision of PA services in an employment context, and the NDA advises that this could be a key priority during the remainder of the Strategy’s lifetime.

The assistive technology (AT) working group did not meet during 2022. That group were tasked with examining provisions and improvements relating to AT in the workplace. The [Global Report on Assistive Technology (who.int)](https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240049451)[[28]](#footnote-28) is an important addition to the evidence base regarding AT and work. This report published in 2022 stated that ‘assistive products open up opportunities for persons with functional difficulties to participate in employment, raise their household income, and become entrepreneurs’. The NDA is keen to see this working group led by DCEDIY reconvene noting the importance of AT in supporting employment.

The Cost of Disability report which demonstrated significant additional costs faced by persons with disabilities,[[29]](#footnote-29) had been referred to the National Disability Inclusion Strategy Steering Group to monitor cross-Government responses to the report, but the precise mechanism to implement recommendations remains unclear. The NDA advises that departments continue to implement measures to address the cost of disability in their departments and consideration be given as to how the recommendations can be incorporated in the successor strategy to the NDIS. The NDA acknowledge the work underway in DSP to examine the restructuring of long term disability supports and welcome the consultation due in 2023 regarding a Strawman proposal on same.

The SOLAS review of Specialist Training Provision (STP) which commenced in 2019 has been delayed due to the impact of Covid 19 on consultation efforts. STP remains an important part of the pathway and route from post school options to mainstream education options and employment for a person with a disability. NDA welcome the completion of the STP review is by end of Q4 2023

During 2022 there was no reported progress on the provision of coordinated and seamless support to people with disabilities to access employment, the CES action commonly referred to as action 5.1. In addition, there was no reported progress within the strategic area of supporting a return to work with actions to support the delivery of a national programme of vocational rehabilitation, although the NDA did provide an advice paper in 2021 on the matter to relevant departments for their consideration.

As part of a process of engagement and meaningful consultation it is necessary to consistently communicate with all stakeholders the decision on the future of the CES. This communication is of most importance to disabled people and to disabled peoples organisations. To support departments and agencies in their ongoing communications the NDA produced new guidance on meaningful participation that describes useful approaches to communication in 2022.[[30]](#footnote-30)

# Strategic priority areas

As described in previous NDA assessments the CES is built on six pillars of action. The 2015 strategy advocated ‘a cross-government approach that brings together actions by different Departments and state agencies in a concerted effort to address the barriers and challenges that impact on employment of people with disabilities. In tandem with that, it seeks to ensure there will be joined-up services and supports at local level to support individuals on their journey into and in employment’. These elements of the strategy are still relevant as the following assessment will outline.

## SP1 Build skills, capacity and independence

Actions to improve education, raise expectations, and expose post-primary students with disabilities to work opportunities were progressed during 2022 through the following initiatives.

The Department of Education announced two pilot projects in 2022 that will build on work to support ‘transitions’ from school for young disabled people. The first pilot project will support school leavers with disabilities,[[31]](#footnote-31) and targets pupils with Intellectual Disabilities and complex education needs in 20 post-primary and special schools in Dublin and Galway. Schools will be supported to help students and families complete a skills audit, identifying skill gaps and describe necessary supports. Each student will develop an individual transition plan with school support on the specific skills required to ensure a positive transition from school. This pilot will be overseen by the Department of Education and progress will be monitored with a view to expanding the pilot to other schools. The second pilot announced in December 2022 is a collaboration between the Department of Education and Walkinstown Association for People with an Intellectual Disability (WALK). This project will deliver the WALK ‘peer Ability programme’ to 170 pupils across 10 schools based in Louth, Dublin, Kerry, Cork and Kilkenny. This project builds on an evaluation of the WALK PEER programme[[32]](#footnote-32), which found that learners, their families and others, valued mentorships as a career support tool. The findings from this extended delivery of the WALK PEER programme will be evaluated and the evaluation will inform future policy direction.[[33]](#footnote-33) Transitions from school for all young disabled people will remain a focus for the CES, planning for same has received ongoing consideration in both education and social policy arenas. A recently developed theoretical outcomes-based framework for ‘measuring the quality of services for people with disabilities could be according to Julie Beadle Brown et al[[34]](#footnote-34) ‘useful in conceptualizing and supporting successful transition to adulthood’ is one such new approach to managing this important aspect of post school life.

2022 saw the establishment of a National Policy Group on Lifelong Guidance, to develop a coherent long term strategic guidance framework. The National Policy Group comprises of five government departments: The Department of Education (DoE), Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), the Department of Social Protection (DSP) and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE). These are the key departments required to develop the framework which is intended to, inter alia address any gaps in the provision of guidance, support and information for all people, including people with disabilities when accessing support guidance and critically career guidance. Guidance in school for all learners with disabilities remains a gap. The NDA advise that a useful understanding of guidance provision comes from the EU which describes it as “services intended to assist individuals, of any age and at any point throughout their lives, to make educational, training and occupational choices and to manage their careers[[35]](#footnote-35)”. The establishment of this national policy group is an opportunity to address the limitations identified in the Indecon report on provision of career guidance in schools, thus allowing career guidance interventions that “are concerned not with telling people what to do but with helping them acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes that will help them make better career choices and transitions[[36]](#footnote-36)”.

The CES detailed actions to ‘foster each student’s independence during their school-years’. As the CES continues to 2024 it will be important for the long-term strategic framework on guidance to include delivery of career guidance for all commencing while at school[[37]](#footnote-37). Seamless and improved coordination across departments and agencies is a necessary outcome from this national policy group. A clear example of how this can be achieved is through a statement of intent regarding supporting guidance at school within the context of planning and supporting transitions[[38]](#footnote-38). The NDA are continuing work to develop policy advice regarding the delivery of career guidance while at school. The age at which career options are placed on a young person’s agenda remains a pivotal action in creating their individual journey to employment. The NDA paper will be available in early 2023, and will be informed by a literature review on the subject[[39]](#footnote-39) and a consultation that with a Disabled Peoples Organisation and young people who attended special education provision. Equally a statement of intent regarding post school guidance for disabled people with access through Intreo Public Employment Services and or the Education Training Board is necessary. Both mechanisms can clearly and appropriately assist leaners to develop an employment goals pathway.

## SP2 Provide bridges and supports into work

Having the correct support to access employment means different things to different people. People with disabilities experience of employment will range from full employment in the open labour market to those who avail of a few hours a week in a supported employment model of support. Providing support to remain at work can also range from initial or once off support to a more ongoing form of assistance. In their 2021 analysis of Ireland the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OCED) recommended that steps are taken to expand Intreo the Public Employment Services (PES) for persons with disabilities, suggesting that mainstream services by the PES should be more accessible for persons with disabilities. One recommendation was ‘earmarking resources and caseworkers to non-unemployment benefit recipients to ensure consistent outreach and guidance, and targeted profiling and registration of persons with disabilities in the Irish Live Register’. However, the OECD recommendation is embedded in the understanding that ‘parallel, effective supported employment programmes such as Individual Placement & Support for persons with mental health conditions should be scaled up and rolled out throughout the country and the sustainability of such programmes ensured through long-term planning and funding’.

During 2022 the Department of Social Protection continued to move in this direction with the operation of a number of schemes to support people with disabilities to get a job and to stay in work.

While DSP concluded its review of the Reasonable Accommodation Fund and Budget 2023 included a new provision of €1m to develop the fund/grants in 2023, the report findings have not yet been published. The NDA looks forward to seeing the findings from the review and anticipates reforms that will make the fund more relevant and user friendly. Including:

* Where possible fund the individual rather than the employer, thus allowing the ‘accommodation’ to travel with the person with a disability.
* By allowing the individual to ‘own’ the accommodation (e.g. equipment or assistive technology) the DSP system could better link in with the Ibec and ICTU developed ‘reasonable accommodation passport[[40]](#footnote-40)’, which has a proven track record of supporting the disabled person.[[41]](#footnote-41)
* There is evidence to indicate that the process to access these grants can often be delayed. It will be important for this process to be streamlined and sped up wherever possible. This NDA suggests that a response time of between 3- 5 days for the accommodation grant to be issued would be appropriate.
* For this grant scheme to be perceived as ‘fit for purpose’, it will be important that the process is not burdensome for disabled people. The low take-up is not a reflection that grant scheme is not needed, rather it is low awareness and perceived bureaucracy with the added challenge that many are unsure what ‘accommodation’ is most beneficial
* The NDA also advises that any revised system should incorporate accommodations in relation to provision of personal assistance at work, provision of Irish Sign Language at work and an extensive array of Assistive Technologies that can make it possible for people with a disability to be productive employees. It may also be worth considering how a scheme could be configured to be responsive to new technologies that may emerge over time.

With regard to the Wage Subsidy Scheme a review was commenced in 2022 and should be completed with a public consultation during 2023.

To assist graduates with disabilities access the labour market, DSP continued to support the Willing Able Mentoring (WAM) programme. This model of support allows graduates with disabilities to develop workplace skills in a work experience programme as described by WAM graduate Emma Barrett Wren at the NDA annual conference[[42]](#footnote-42). Under the theme of accessible employment Emma described her journey from ‘intern to employee’ which involved a 6 month, paid, mentored work placements with high profile Irish employers. This programme supports both the employee and the employer.

DSP through its engagement with their Disability Consultative Committee described an update with regard to the newly established Work Placement Experience Programme: [[43]](#footnote-43)

* In their December 2022 update DSP announced that51 clients who were on the Disability Allowance payment have been approved for the Work Placement Experience Programme, 14 in 2021 and 37 in 2022. This figure equated to 9.7% of all approved for the Work Placement Experience Programme, which DSP stated was more than twice the expected rate anticipated for the programme. Fifteen are currently active in the scheme.
* Thirty six clients with a disability have ended the Work Placement Experience Programme. Of these 27 have completed the programme and nine ended the programme early. Of the 27 who completed the course seven were employed by their host company and two were employed by another company. Of the nine who finished early, one entered employment with another company.
* This means 20% of those who have completed the Work Placement Experience Programme have entered employment.

NDA advise that WPEP is an essential scheme to assist people with disabilities access employment, as work placements continue to provide young disabled people with the environment to learn about work and the individual supports that they might need to succeed at work[[44]](#footnote-44).

### National Transport Authority (NTA)

Accessible transport increases access to education, training and employment. Transport continues to present challenges to access and participation for disabled people as evidenced in recent consultations by the NDA, including the NDA’s Wellbeing and Social Inclusion Survey of 2022, which revealed that transport concerns remain for a number of people with disabilities. In the survey respondents were asked if they have any difficulty carrying out certain tasks or getting involved in various activities. ‘Working at a job or business or attending school or college causes a lot of difficulty for 14% and a little difficulty for another 14% of respondents. Similarly, participating in other activities such as leisure activities or using transport presents a lot of difficulty for 13% and some difficulty for a further 18% of respondents’.

In parallel with this independent assessment of CES activity for 2022, the NDA have also produced a detailed analysis on a set of 58 indicators across 8 themes which were developed to monitor the National Disability Inclusion Strategy[[45]](#footnote-45) Theme 8 of the Indicators paper focuses on commitments under the Transport and Accessible Places theme and describe progress on the availability of accessible public transport.

From the NDIS report the following observations were made when the NTA reported that ‘all Dublin Bus, Bus Eireann and Go Ahead fleets are 100% wheelchair accessible. Bus Eireann’s coach fleet is now also 100% wheelchair accessible with the wheelchair lift. However, they need to have a wheelchair accessible bus stop also’. The NTA is currently trying to phase in requirements in the conditions of the licenses for the commercial buses to become wheelchair accessible. The NTA report was shared with the Department of Transport but was put on hold due to COVID-19. The NTA report that action is ongoing and will continually be implemented. In addition, the NTA reports that all new coaches purchased or funded by the NTA for public services provide for wheelchair accessibility plus visual and audio announcements and information. The Department of Transport and NTA are proposing that this part of the Action, the commercial sector accessibility, be brought forward to the UNCRPD Plan as a priority action’. In addition to this activity NTA also reported that in relation to Small Public Service Vehicles (Taxi’s):

* The number of wheelchair accessible vehicles (WAVs) in the fleet increased from its lowest point of 850 (c.4% of the fleet) in June 2014 to 3,314 (17.3% of the SPSV fleet) October 2022. While this increase in numbers is to be welcomed the NDA are aware from our work with disabled people and their organisations of ongoing difficulties in booking and accessing an accessible taxi.
* The 2022 WAV grant scheme had 128 applications up until October 2022.
* A condition attaching to the grant scheme is that all successful applicants must complete a disability awareness training programme with the Irish Wheelchair Association which is funded by NTA.

Additional details on DoT and NTA accessibility commitments and action plans for 2022 are available here.[[46]](#footnote-46)

The NDA advises that any essential travel schemes for disabled people should be underpinned by rights-based principles and have due regard for the additional barriers faced by disabled people. For example, barriers to employment for disabled people in receipt of disability allowance and the additional costs related to having a disability, as outlined in the Indecon Cost of Disability report need to be considered.

## SP3 Make work pay

The Make Work Pay Report 2017[[47]](#footnote-47) found that:

“While there are several transport supports available for persons with disabilities, responsibility for administering these supports is spread across a number of Government Departments and Agencies with differing qualification criteria. Some people who have significant transport needs, could, if they were to work, fall between different schemes of supports. Others may find their entitlement difficult to understand or navigate.”

To address the issues detailed in the Make Work Pay Report a working group was convened the National Disability Inclusion Strategy Stakeholder Group (NDISSG) to advance Action 104 of the NDIS in 2020. The meetings of the working group were paused due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The working group was reconvened in January 2022 at which time the Minister of State with responsibility for Disability, Anne Rabbitte, assumed the role of chair of the group. This working group discussed several key mobility and transport schemes including the Disabled Drivers and Disabled Passengers Scheme, this discussion was followed by a stocktaking exercise of all state funded mobility and transport schemes as well as a comparison of similar support schemes across the OECD. Following on from the stocktaking exercise, discussion and comparative analysis a report was drafted detailing key recommendations for changes to the current provision and governance of transport and mobility schemes.

A key recommendation in the report emphasises the need for a comprehensive and coordinated cross-Government and mainstream process which ensures that the focus of policy, planning and transport provision is on the customer’s end to end journey and advances a joined up and door-to-door approach to transport and mobility supports for people with disabilities which will likely involve the convening of a new working group.[[48]](#footnote-48) NDA advises that it will be important that work in this area is advanced.

Since the publication of the Make Work Pay report in 2017 change has occurred to support people with disabilities who want to work. Some people have exited the Disability Allowance payment scheme to take up work[[49]](#footnote-49). Others are now exploring work and training options through an early engagement process, the Department of Social Protection’s Intreo service commenced a systematic approach to actively engage with disabled persons. This initiative is based on learning from a 2019 public consultation. The process invites people on Disability Allowance aged 18-22 to engage via a call from an Employment Personal Advisor. The young person is then provided with advice and appointments made as desired / appropriate. It is welcomed that the Early Engagement project is continuing for 18–22-year-olds on Disability Allowance and engagement with 22-25 year-olds commenced in March 2022.

The NDA understand that involvement by young people with this early engagement process have been low and that further consideration is given to how young people are being informed about their options and choices. In particular there is learning from the DSP funded Ability programmes that can enhance the current early engagement offering.

Key findings from the evaluation of the Ability programme is that it supported a total of 2,195 young people with disabilities – 83% of the programme target (2,662 participants), of which 1,755 young people with disabilities were supported to either find employment (373), enter into education and/or training (778) or become better placed to look for employment (604)[[50]](#footnote-50). Importantly while on the Ability programme 861 participants gained a qualification. Finally as reported by Pobal a third of participants who were unemployed when they started Ability found employment after they exited, and a further 44% were actively seeking employment.

It is welcomed that DSP as part of its early engagement work provided the contact details of relevant DSP staff on gov.ie[[51]](#footnote-51). This information allows disabled people to directly engage with case officers in their region.

## SP4 Promote job retention and re-entry to work

The CES has emphasised the importance of action to reduce the outflow from employment after the onset of a disability and to encourage re-entry of those who have already left the workforce. It is, however, recognised that age, education, and degree of illness or incapacity means that some of those who experience onset of a disability will leave the workforce permanently.[[52]](#footnote-52)

The enactment of Statutory Sick Pay – Sick Leave Act 2022[[53]](#footnote-53) is to be welcomed. This entitlement to statutory sick pay will be calculated at 70% of an employee’s normal pay up to a maximum sum of €110 a day[[54]](#footnote-54). As a statutory requirement employers will begin to develop practices and procedures such as the NDA guidance ‘retaining staff who acquire a disability guide for employers’[[55]](#footnote-55), these procedures are key to supporting people with acquired disability to remain connected to work.

The OECD in its 2021 report on Ireland recommended that incentives to assist employers in the prevention of sickness and disability and to promote return-to-work are necessary. Therefore, while the introduction of statutory sick pay is to be welcomed, the NDA advise the further exploration of the OCED recommendation that the Irish Government should aim for an encompassing system that covers all health conditions and all types of employment, ‘to realise the largest gains for workers and the Irish population at large’. In keeping with this OECD recommendation and policy advice prepared by the NDA in 2021, it is important that the implementation of a vocational rehabilitation pathway[[56]](#footnote-56), with shared responsibilities for employers, social welfare system and occupational case management is agreed.

## SP5 Provide co-ordinated and seamless support

Implementation of the agreed cross-departmental policy in relation to a coordinated programme of supported employment (Action 5.1) was not progressed significantly. There was no reported progress on this action during 2021 or 2022. NDA advise that in order to address the disability employment gap action needs to be taken to provide a national and coordinated programme of supported employment particularly for people with high support needs.

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## SP6 Engage Employers

The original CES advocated quite clearly for a strong employer engagement structure within the Irish system. The strategy outlined actions from dissemination of ‘information to employers on the supports that are available to facilitate the employment or retention of people with disabilities, to hosting peer networking actions’[[57]](#footnote-57) The OECD report Disability, Work and Inclusion in Ireland: Engaging and Supporting Employers[[58]](#footnote-58), stated that many employers have misconceptions about employing people with disabilities that can be a barrier to their employment. This report stated that ‘employer engagement and support for employers are critically important for the improvement of the labour market situation for persons with disabilities in Ireland. Effective strategies for employer engagement are critical, to overcome disability-related misperceptions and discrimination and to raise awareness about available support programmes and subsidies. Yet, Ireland has an underdeveloped employer engagement structure with respect to information and support for the employment of persons with disabilities’. However progress within mainstream employer engagement continued with the DSP Employer Relations Division conducting 668 events with the participation of 4,393 employers during 2022. These events included employer roadshows, careers fairs, information sessions as well as other recruitment events. Attending employers receive information on all DSP schemes including those for people with disabilities.

It is specific questions on disability matters including recruitment, onboarding and supports that employers have which are addressed by the Employers for Change service. During 2022 this project was continued to support employer engagement through the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth allocation to the Open Doors Initiative (ODI) to operate the ‘Employers for Change’ service. This service is addressing the gap in information and support and in doing so works ‘to enable employers with all the information and advice needed to hire, employ, manage and retain staff with disabilities[[59]](#footnote-59)’. In 2022, Employers for Change worked with 95 employers through 185 interactions. Employers they worked with included Brown Thomas / Arnotts, Coillte Ireland, Dell, EY and Salesforce. The service also published an employer’s toolkit[[60]](#footnote-60), research findings on inclusive recruitment and prepared advice on six key themes. These include:

* Reasonable Accommodation Passport
* Inclusive and Accessible Communication
* How to Write an Inclusive Job Description
* How to Run an Accessible Online Event
* The Guiding Principles of Disclosure
* Next Steps (Post Training)

In 2022 Enterprise Ireland (EI) signed a partnership agreement with Open Doors[[61]](#footnote-61) to further develop awareness campaigns and programmes that will utilise success stories of self-employed and entrepreneur role models with a variety of disabilities.

The Employers for Change service also worked with the employer liaison unit in DSP and with job coaches in the EmployAbility Service. The NDA advise that in future delivery of the CES and of measures to improve employer awareness that this service or a similar remains available to Irish employers. The OCED work on engaging employers in Ireland states that ‘information and guidance should be made available to employers on how to put reasonable accommodation into practice for workers with disabilities, with a focus on different and customised types of accommodation which are often not very costly, including the provision of assistive technology, the adaptation of job requirements, and if needed the provision of personal assistance. Promotion of disability awareness training can help for more inclusive corporate cultures’.

Also during 2022 the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment reported that IDA Ireland have worked in partnership with Generation Ireland to launch a Pilot Programme designed to widen the talent pool and attract people from diverse backgrounds to avail of employment opportunities. This initiative has led to individual discussions to progress this offer with IDA client companies. IDA aims to have a significant number of companies engaged with Generation Ireland and accessing the wider talent pool in place by 2025. This is a welcome addition to the employment landscape.

As mentioned the Government commitment to increasing the statutory employment target to a minimum of 6% of employees in the public sector was enacted through the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) (Amendment) Act 2022. This legislation outlined that the statutory employment target will be increasing to 6% by 2025**.** In the Part 5 report for 2021, the NDA noted that, 78 (36.5%) public bodies reported that at least 6% of their employees were persons with disabilities. This was an increase from 2020, when 61 (28.4%) public bodies reported that at least 6% of their employees reported a disability.

The increase in the public sector employment target to a minimum of 6% will require inclusive recruitment practices and alternative routes into the public service, as estimates indicate approximately 2,000 additional disabled people will need to be working in the public sector per annum to 2025 if this target is to be reached[[62]](#footnote-62).

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### Alternative recruitment strategies

The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform approved two paid Disability Internship Schemes that continue to enable people with a disability to gain paid and mentored work experience with civil service employers. During 2022 the following developments took place:

* **OWL Programme** – A panel was formed following the confined competitions held in December 2021. Six graduates from the 2019-2021 programme were supported to take up new permanent part-time positions in civil service departments and offices. A new training programme with 10 new trainees commenced in the Houses of the Oireachtas Service in September 2022. These students will graduate in June 2023 and will be eligible to participate in a confined competition to be facilitated by PAS on completion of the training programme.
* DSP funded **WAM Programme** – 2022 saw a total of 23 paid full-time placements for third level graduates commencing during the year with the assistance of AHEAD. DPER has successfully worked with AHEAD and other stakeholders to develop a pilot civil service recruitment competition for permanency undertaken by PAS, which is confined to graduates that successfully complete their WAM placement in January 2023. The pilot concluded in 2022 with a confined competition and a panel was formed with 19 successful candidates. It is expected that a significant proportion of the placed candidates will secure permanent roles within the civil service, a landmark new development

As the public sector employment target has increased the NDA view these internships as important pathways to civil service employment for disabled workers. The NDA also advise that to ensure that these internships and the posts that they lead to are successful for the employer and employee ‘on-boarding’ arrangements include smooth access to reasonable accommodations. Successful experiences for both employer and employees will necessitate that these reasonable accommodation arrangements are in place prior to commencement of post.

During 2022, new evidence and guidance was published by Employers for Change and others. This body of work highlights the opportunities that exist to include more people with disabilities at work while acknowledging that challenges continue to exist. One such example was discussed at the NDA annual conference by Professor Kim Hoque in his presentation entitled ‘addressing disability employment disadvantage: the Disability Employment Charter’[[63]](#footnote-63). The nine elements of this Charter are described in Appendix 2.

A key recommendation from this UK example is described in action nine of the Charter stating that the UK government ‘should take into account increasing disability prevalence in calculating the disability employment gap, and use the ‘prevalence corrected’ employment gap measure in monitoring national progress on disability employment’. The NDA advise that this might be a useful mechanism for monitoring the change in employment circumstance for disabled people in Ireland.

# Conclusion

An agreed action plan for the final phase of CES activity is essential. This plan requires an outline of implementation and monitoring mechanisms to ensure that CES impact is measured. An announcement governing the final action plan would benefit from a statement regarding the post CES environment to improve the disability employment gap for people with disabilities. While specifics may emerge over this final phase, mainstream and targeted delivery of employment supports and services is necessary. As the CES completes its 10 years in 2024 the NDA advise that a clear vision of mainstream and coordinated approaches to improving employment outcomes for disabled people are also incorporated into a new UNCPRD implementation strategy.

**Appendixes**

# Appendix 1: EU Disability Employment Package launched in 2022

The Package is focused around six action areas, of which their deliverables will serve as practical tools and guidelines to implement the pre-existing legislation on employment and will be published during the next two years. These include:

**Strengthening the capacities of employment and integration services –**through the publication of [**guidance**](https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&newsId=10387&furtherNews=yes) for Member States to improve the accessibility and inclusiveness of employment services which was published on 25th September 2022.

**Promoting hiring perspectives through affirmative action and combating stereotypes** -through a catalogue of positive actions to facilitate hiring of persons with disabilities involving employers (planned for Q1 2023).

**Ensuring reasonable accommodation at work**– by preparing guidelines for employers,– of which one deliverable is to prepare guidelines for reasonable accommodation at work addressing employers (planned for Q3 2023).

**Preventing disabilities associated with chronic diseases –**by issuing a manual for managing chronic diseases and preventing the risk of acquiring disabilities through the publication of a manual issued by the European Agency for Health and Safety at Work (planned for Q4 2023).

**Securing vocational rehabilitation schemes in case of sickness or accidents-** by issuing guidelines for effective vocational rehabilitation schemes covering frequent diseases and types of accidents (planned for Q1 2024).

**Exploring quality jobs in sheltered employment and pathways to the open labour market –**through the launch of a study on improving the employment for persons with disabilities through alternative employment models, including recommendations for fair working conditions and career development in alternative forms of employment and pathways to the open labour market that comply with the UNCRPD (planned for Q1 2024).

# Appendix 2: Disability Employment Charter UK

## Accessible Employment theme at NDA annual conference 2022

Kim Hoque, Professor of HR Management King’s Business School, London ‘Addressing disability employment disadvantage: the Disability Employment Charter’

The labour market disadvantage disabled people encounter is demonstrated by a large and enduring disability employment gap, and disability gaps in pay, job satisfaction, and work-related well-being.

This charter outlines the action the government needs to take to address the disadvantage disabled people encounter in their working lives.

**1. Employment and pay gap reporting.**

The government should require all employers with 250+ employees to publish data annually on: the number of disabled people they employ as a proportion of their workforce; their disability pay gap; and the percentage of disabled employees within each pay quartile.

**2. Supporting disabled people into employment.**

The government should: increase disabled people’s access to employment programmes and apprenticeships; increase the scale, quality and awareness of supported employment programmes and supported internships; and increase the provision of tailored careers advice to disabled people.

**3. Reform of Access to Work (AtW).**

The government should: remove the AtW support cap; ensure application/renewal processes are efficient, personalised, and flexible; entitle disabled job-seekers to ‘in principle’ indicative awards; facilitate passporting of awards between organisations and from Disabled Student’s Allowance to AtW; and increase awareness of AtW support.

**4. Reform of Disability Confident.**

The government should: require all employers at Disability Confident Levels 2 and 3 to meet minimum thresholds regarding the percentage of disabled people in their workforce; and remove accreditation from employers that do not move up within 3 years from Level 1 to Levels 2 or 3.

**5. Leveraging government procurement.**

The government should: ensure award decisions for all public sector contracts take into account the percentage of disabled people in the workforce of tendering organisations; require government contractors to work towards a minimum threshold regarding the percentage of disabled people in their workforce; and take failure to achieve this threshold into account in future contract award decisions.

**6. Workplace adjustments.**

The government should: require employers to notify employees on decisions regarding reasonable adjustment requests within two weeks; make the option to work flexibly from day one the legal default for all jobs; introduce stronger rights to paid disability leave for assessment, rehabilitation and training; and fund an increase in Statutory Sick Pay to the European average.

**7. Working with disabled people and their representatives.**

The government should: require employers to consult and negotiate  
with disabled people and their representatives on disability equality matters; and provide trade union equality representatives and disability champions with statutory rights to time off to perform their role.

**8. Advice and support.**

The government should create a ‘one stop shop’ portal to provide information, advice and guidance to employers on recruiting and retaining disabled people, and to disabled people on their employment rights.

**9. National progress on disability employment.**

The government should take into account increasing disability prevalence in calculating the disability employment gap, and use the ‘prevalence corrected’ employment gap measure in monitoring national progress on disability employment.

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4. https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/fd2e9-reasonable-accommodation-fund-consultation-easy-to-read/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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6. [The Cost of Disability in Ireland – Research Report (www.gov.ie)](https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/1d84e-the-cost-of-disability-in-ireland-research-report/) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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8. file:///H:/Downloads/232979\_61217619-ccca-4336-84b8-e6038ce57f09%20(2).pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
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11. Includes EU27 as well as Norway, Switzerland and Luxembourg. Most recent UK data is from 2018.

    Available: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/HLTH_DLM200/default/table?lang=en> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
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    Available: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Disability_statistics_-_poverty_and_income_inequalities&oldid=561947> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. NDA (2023) Final Review of Progress on Indicators of the National Disability Inclusion Strategy - forthcoming [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
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16. European Commission (COM(2021) 101 final): Union of Equality: Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&newsId=10387&furtherNews=yes> [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
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