

# **NDA opening statement: Joint Oireachtas Committee on Autism**

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## **Introduction**

The National Disability Authority (NDA) thanks the Chair and the members of this Committee for the opportunity to present on the topic of services and supports provided by the state for autistic people. I am joined here today by my colleague Mr. Dharragh Hunt, Senior Policy and Public Affairs Advisor.

The NDA provides independent and evidence informed advice to Government on policy and practice relevant to the lives of disabled people, informed by engagement with relevant stakeholders, including Disabled Persons Organisations. We also incorporate a Centre for Excellence in Universal Design.

## **Disability Strategies**

The end of 2022 saw the end of the National Disability Inclusion Strategy which had been in place since 2017. This was Ireland's mechanism to progressively realise the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

The NDA publish an independent assessment of the National Disability Inclusion Strategy annually and with the end of the current strategy, we are also developing an indicators report to try to measure the overall effectiveness of the strategy. Data limitations mean that it is difficult to evaluate whether the strategy had a

lasting impact on improving the lives of disabled people including autistic people. Work is underway to develop a new UNCRPD Implementation Strategy during 2023.

Last year we made a submission to inform the development the new Autism Innovation Strategy. We advised that it was important that the Autism Innovation Strategy should be framed within the UNCRPD and that due regard is given to Ireland's existing Government policy on disability, which has been based on mainstreaming.

## **Services and supports**

NDA acknowledges that there are improvements required across a range of public service areas to ensure that outcomes for autistic people are improved and provided in a person-centred way. We developed a number of guidance documents to support interactions of various professions with autistic people. These were part of our commitments under the Autism Action Plan.

We welcome the transfer of functions last week of specialist disability services from the Department of Health to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. This should provide opportunities to drive strategic policy development and more concerted efforts around implementation of the UNCRPD. However, with mental health and older persons services remaining in the Department of Health it will be key that there is close inter-departmental working so that services are strengthened and a human rights approach maintained. This is particularly relevant because of the high instances of mental health difficulties among people with autism.

## **Assessment of need and access to therapies**

It is clear that challenges related to Assessment of Need under the Disability Act have led to many families facing lengthy delays in receiving a diagnosis of Autism and in accessing therapies.

Both the health and education systems have been moving away from the requirement for a diagnosis to receive services. However, a diagnosis is still required to access certain supports such as Special Schools and Special Classes.

The NDA is of the view that Part 2 of the Disability Act should be reviewed to ensure that it is contributing to children accessing timely assessment and intervention. Ideally, this would have been done in parallel to the current review of the EPSEN Act, but as this is not the case the NDA advises that perhaps, it could be done in the lifetime of the forthcoming UNCRPD Implementation Strategy.

The lack of a clear publicly funded pathway for adult diagnosis also needs to be addressed.

## **Education**

The rapid increase in special class places in the education system has taken place despite the absence of evidence that children with disabilities, including children with autism, have better social and education outcomes.

The ratification of the UNCRPD, the forthcoming publication of the NCSE Policy Advice on the Future Role of Special School and Special Classes and the current review of the EPSEN Act mean that over the next few years there will be an opportunity to shape the vision of inclusive education policy in Ireland so that the system will meet the needs of all learners.

## **Employment – including lack of employment supports**

We know that barriers exist for autistic people in seeking and retaining work. The Employers for Change service funded by DCEDIY is working to support employers through peer support and information. However, this service is not embedded into the system and there needs to be commitment to a more permanent arrangement. We know from our research that where people have more contact with disabled people, such as through the workplace, their attitudes to disabled people improve.

We funded a consortium of four disability organisations including AsIAM to develop an e-learning module on inclusive recruitment and retention practices which has been widely accessed by employers.

## **Universal Design**

The NDA includes the Centre for Excellence for Universal Design. Universal Design is the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible, by all people, regardless of their age, size, ability or disability. The Centre develops guidelines, highlight good practice, and promotes the inclusion of Universal Design in curricula across the education system and through continuous professional development.

The Centre worked with the Department of Children to develop Universal Design Guidelines for Early Learning and Care Settings, which included design elements related to the needs of children with autism. The Guidelines were published in 2019 and the Centre continues to work with the Department on awareness raising and capacity building around universal design of these settings. The Centre has also engaged with the NCSE and the Department of Education

around Universal Design guidance in relation to the design of schools. The Centre is also developing a Code of Practice on accessible buildings with extensive consultation currently underway. It has also updated the existing Code of Practice on Accessible Public Services and Information to include considerations that would be relevant to meeting the needs of autistic people when accessing these public services.

## **Conclusion**

We are happy to answer any questions related to any of the issues we have raised.