Comprehensive Employment Strategy NDA Year-end Assessment 2023

June 2024



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## List of Acronyms

| AHEAD | Association Higher Education and Disability |
| --- | --- |
| CES | Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities 2015-2024 |
| CSO | Central Statistics Office |
| DA | Disability Allowance |
| DACT | Disability Activation Project |
| DCEDIY | Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth |
| DETE | Department of Public Enterprise Trade and Employment |
| DFHERIS | Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science |
| DoE | Department of Education |
| DSP | Department of Social Protection |
| ESRI | Economic and Social Research Institute |
| FET | Further Education & Training |
| FSD | Fund for Students with Disabilities |
| HEA | Higher Education Authority |
| HEI | Higher Education Institutions |
| IHREC | Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission |
| NAP | National Access Plan |
| 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 |
| PATH | Programme for Access to Higher Education |
| Solas | Seirbhisi Oideachais Leanunaigh Agus Scileanna (Further Education Skills Services) |
| UDE | Universal Design for Education |
| UNCRPD | United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities |
| WALK | Walkinstown Association for People with an Intellectual Disability |
| WAM | Willing Able and Mentoring |

# Executive Summary

The CES is nearing completion as a national strategy, with no final action plan agreed. Ireland continues to have a high disability employment gap with almost half (49.3%) of people with disabilities of working age in Ireland at work, compared to 70.8% of people without disabilities.

Despite this, in 2023, developments were progressed that will result in more people with disabilities gaining access to education, training and employment.

Progress is being made in the inclusion of disabled learners in higher and further education and training. For example, PATH 4 Phase One saw the introduction of new initiatives applying a Universal Design for Education approach. Similarly, PATH 4 Phase Two saw funding for higher education institutions to include learners with Intellectual Disabilities in Higher Education. Additional funding has also been made available to support students with disabilities and to establish communities of practice for teachers. There are also plans to provide better career guidance to young people with disabilities and work is ongoing to improve transitions for young people leaving school.

A new WorkAbility programme has been funded that will bring disabled people closer to employment and an early engagement programme is ongoing. New enterprise routes to employment are being explored and new legislation in relation to remote and flexible working may provide more opportunities for more disabled people to enter the workforce.

Factors still requiring attention during the final two years of the strategy include scaling up support around transitions from school to post school options, access to career guidance from age 13,access to individual tailored employment supports, and measures to address the extra costs of having a disability. Supports to return to work having acquired a disability such as through a vocational rehabilitation programme are also required. From the employer’s perspective continuous availability of information, support and in particular guidance is required to support more disabled people with their journey into work.

The NDA recommend that during 2024 a final meeting of the CESIG should be convened to assess the work progressed during the CES and outline what actions need to be prioritised in the new National Disability Strategy.

# 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 2023. This is the eighth annual assessment conducted by the NDA.

The assessment is based on evidence gathered over 2023 that relates to the employment environment experienced by disabled people. This approach includes evidence gathered on the lived experience of persons with disabilities by the NDA and others, information from government departments and agencies and new data on the employment of persons with disabilities.

2023 presents the penultimate year of a ten-year approach by government to ensure that people with disabilities, who can, and want to work are supported and enabled to do so. No CESIG meetings took place, and no agreement was reached on the shape and content of the final action plan that would take the strategy to its conclusion. However, the Department of Children Equality Disability Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) began work to develop a new National Disability Strategy which will include a key pillar on employment.

# 2023 in context

In this section, the NDA highlight data and research published in 2023, relevant to disability employment policy and practice.

## Census 2022 Data

In September 2023 the CSO published its census profile 4 Disability, Health and Carers report.[[1]](#footnote-1) Some initial findings are presented here:

* In April 2022, over 1.1 million people (22% of the population) reported having experienced at least one long-lasting condition or difficulty;
* Almost half (49.3%) of people with disabilities of working age were at work, compared to 70.8% of people without disabilities;
* The employment rate of people with a disability to some extent (60.3%) was more than double that of people with a disability to a great extent (27.3%);
* the disability employment gap (that is the difference in employment rates between people with and without disabilities) was 21.5 percentage points (Ireland has historically had one of the highest disability employment gaps in the EU);[[2]](#footnote-2)
* The unemployment rate for people with a disability was 13.9% compared to 7.5% for people who do not have a disability; and
* The unemployment rate of people with a disability to some extent is 11.7%, around half that of people with a disability to a great extent.

This data illustrates that tailored responses are required to support more people with disabilities into employment.

## Higher Education, Further Education and Training

During 2023 the Higher Education Authority (HEA) published their Graduate Outcomes and Disability report.[[3]](#footnote-3) This report is based on a national survey distributed to all graduates of higher education institutions (HEIs), nine months after graduation. It found that 69% of graduates with a disability were in employment nine months after graduation compared with 74% of graduates with no disability. The proportions with and without a disability pursuing further education were similar.

A key finding was the disparity in pay whereby ’Graduates with disabilities were more represented in each of the lower salary bands up to salaries of €20,000-€24,999. In each band thereafter graduates with no disabilities had a higher share of their total group than those with a disability’.

The HEA and AHEAD held an online event on experiences and challenges faced by Disabled Postgraduate Students. [[4]](#footnote-4) In 2023, disabled postgraduates represented only 3% of the total postgraduate population, showing that they are under- represented across higher education. This compares to 8.1% representation at undergraduate level (AHEAD, 2023).[[5]](#footnote-5) Recommendations from this discussion and included in the event report include the following measures for disabled students:

* transition pathways to postgraduate study
* financial supports
* a whole of institution and holistic approach to supporting students with disabilities.
* flexibility in academic practices and supports
* a review of supports for disabled students
* greater policy coherence
* career progression pathways, post-postgraduate study, and research
* research into best practices and better data on postgraduate students with disabilities

The work between the HEA and the National Disability Postgraduate Advisory Committee falls within the aims of the National Access Plan: A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022-2028 (NAP).

In 2023 Solas published their data on Learners with Disabilities in 2022 in their further education and training (FET) programmes. [[6]](#footnote-6) They found that 12,704 learners reported having at least one type of disability, constituting 6.8% of all learners enrolled. Of the learner enrolments that reported a disability, 42.2% were men and 57.8% were women. The majority (62.5%) were older than 25 years of age, which illustrates the importance of re-entering learning for those who are either re-skilling or upskilling.

Most disabled learners (91.6%) partially or fully completed a course in 2022. The certification rate increased from 52.1% in 2022 to 61.3% in 2022. That increase is welcome and may be a feature of FET post Covid.

**Future Provision of Special Education**

The Department of Education (DoE) has commenced work to future proof the provision of education needs and supports, with a focus on planning and coordination of special educational needs. To inform these developments DoE has utilised its Geographic Information System (GIS) with data and information that will support a strategic and coordinated approach to planning and delivery of special educational needs. This includes “real-time” data on capacity across the school system, and work to produce updated technical guidance for building projects involving special educational needs provision which will include guidance on reconfiguration of existing accommodation. It is also intended to include the incorporation of four special classes in all new 1,000 student post-primary schools and other large-scale projects and pro-rata for medium to smaller schools. The NDA welcome the work underway and advise that universal design principles[[7]](#footnote-7) inform all future developments, including built environment[[8]](#footnote-8).

## Consultation with disabled people

Consultations were conducted by the NDA on social inclusion in early 2023 and on a new National Disability Strategy in late 2023 and early 2024. Both were done in collaboration with DECDIY.

In the survey report on wellbeing and social inclusion, access to education and training for disadvantaged groups was the most selected option to improving social inclusion (selected by 39% of respondents), followed by measures to improve access to employment for disadvantaged groups (37%).[[9]](#footnote-9)

Many of the participants in the follow up social inclusion consultation felt that the CES was not being rolled out effectively and that its aims were weak. They also felt that the number of people with a disability in employment was not being recorded correctly, although details on why they felt this way were not captured during the discussions.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Employment was a frequent topic raised during the consultation on the new National Disability Strategy. This consultation was conducted at the same time as consultation on the Green Paper on disability payment reform was occurring. Therefore, to some extent the NDS consultation was informed by disabled peoples view of the Green Paper (see more on the Green Paper below). An important feature of this consultation was recognising that some disabled people will not be able to work and must not be pressured to do so. However, specific concerns raised were the need for:

* Improved recruitment processes to ensure accessibility;
* Improve disability awareness and competencies among employers;
* Enhanced incentives for employers to hire disabled people;
* Making reasonable accommodations more accessible and more flexible;
* Continued improvement to the return to disability allowance if employment does not work out;
* Allowing retention of secondary benefits such as the medical card and free travel pass when people with disabilities take up employment;
* Specific, measurable targets for the employment of disabled people and a closing of the disability employment gap;
* Provision of employment supports, including support to find suitable employment and in-work supports such as personal assistance and ISL interpretation
* Supports to return to work following the acquisition of a disability; and
* Raising the public sector minimum employment target and extend to NGOs and the private sector.

Together these consultations provide concrete views from disabled people about what is necessary to support their social inclusion and employment opportunities. People with disabilities have clearly articulated that supports to access employment are not tailored or readily available and that a fear of losing secondary benefits are a barrier to work. The NDA advise that further effort is required to ensure these areas of action are delivered.

## Proposed disability payment reform

The Department of Social Protection (DSP) published a Green Paper on disability payment reform in September 2023, with proposals to replace the existing long-term disability payments with a new scheme, the Personal Support Payment.[[11]](#footnote-11) It proposed that for people who work, a new Working Age Payment would replace the current system of employment supports. The proposed Personal Support Payment would have three tiers:

* Level 1: High support – Very low capacity to work (very unlikely to be able to take up any kind of paid employment for at least 2 years);
* Level 2: Medium support – Low to moderate capacity to work (a disability that is expected to limit capacity to work for at least 24 months but may allow some limited types and durations of work); and
* Level 3: Low support – Moderate to high capacity to work (incapable of the type of type of work they were doing before acquiring their disability but capable of taking up other forms of employment and to do many types of work activity).

The NDA understood that the Green Paper was a series of proposals or suggestions to ‘encourage a focused debate around key design issues to reform disability payments in Ireland.’ However, the considerable gaps in information about how this new system would work caused significant unease among disabled people. While the simplification of payment schemes and supporting people to work is worthwhile, the proposals did not adequately address the extra costs of disability and the proposition of a work capacity assessment linked to a payment level was unpalatable for many. The NDA recommended that these proposals would have benefited from following a United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) approach that actively involved DPO’s in both the design and communications regarding the proposals. It is important to note that this paper was withdrawn in 2024 and the NDA encourage that the learnings from the submissions received, and consultations conducted are used to inform future reforms.

# Key Developments during 2023

This section contains activity directly related to the CES six pillars. The original CES 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.

## Strategic Priority1: Build skills, capacity and independence

Under this strategic priority actions to improve education, raise expectations, and expose post-primary students with disabilities to work opportunities were progressed during 2023 through the initiatives outlined below.

### Transitions

The Department of Education (DoE) are operating a CES Transitions Pilot Programme. The pilot project, which is currently running in 20 schools (10 in Dublin/10 in Galway) since late 2022, provides an opportunity for Education and other key stakeholders to work together to provide wraparound supports and joined up thinking. The target group are young people with intellectual disabilities or complex educational needs in our post-primary and special schools. The programme aims to builds capacity in schools to meet the transition needs of young people thus preparing them for greater independence and participation in society after school.

The work is overseen by the National Council for Special Education. The progress of the target young people is being tracked over 2.5 to 3 years starting initially with students who are aged 16 in special school settings and those in 5th year in post-primary schools. These students have access to supports over the two-year timespan that they are in school, and also in the 6-to-9-month period post school in whatever pathway they choose. The first tranche of students will be exiting school during 2024.

The NDA advise that the learnings from this programme will inform a national roll out so that disabled students can be supported to transition to the post-school options which suits them best.

The DoE are also leading on a second ‘transitions’ pilot programme, funded with Dormant Account Funds. DoE have partnered with the Walkinstown Association for People with an Intellectual Disability (WALK), an NGO experienced in this area. WALK is delivering their existing Peer Ability programme in 10 schools based in Louth, Dublin, Westmeath, Cavan, and Cork The programme is designed to support young people over a period of five years, both in school and post transition to mainstream opportunities. Each partner school facilitates a WALK careers and employment facilitator (one per school) to engage with students and their parents and collaborate with teachers in complementary activities such as mini-companies, work experiences and transition planning. The partnership operates as an ‘open collaboration’ with on-going communication between the school staff and WALK project staff in support of the students. Formal meetings are held in line with the Memorandum of Understanding (signed by each of the participating schools) which outlines terms of the partnership. The project is primarily focused on the student’s career aspirations and dreams and facilitates them in experiencing the world of work in the open labour market and sustains transitions to mainstream post-school pathways to employment.

The NDA advise that transitions programmes need to be inclusive and delivered across secondary and special education provision. These pilot programmes need to be scaled up and available as a mainstream aspect of education and should be linked to provision of career guidance and transition year experiences.

### Career Guidance

The lack of a consistent approach to the provision of career guidance has been identified in both research and through consultation with disabled people. The original CES described actions to improve career guidance provision including commencing the conversation about careers as early as age 13. While the Lifelong Guidance action plan is welcomed, there are critical elements career guidance that need to be implemented.

During 2023 the NDA issued a policy advice paper to DoE officials on the development of a career guidance approach that is inclusive of all learners with disabilities including those who are in special education and or in a special class in mainstream school. The paper was informed by a literature review that examined career guidance for learners with disabilities in second level education.[[12]](#footnote-12). It was also informed by consultation with two groups of young disabled people who had recent experience of mainstream post-primary school, special classes within mainstream and of special education schooling. Wider stakeholder engagement through focus groups and roundtable discussions also informed the paper.

The NDA advised that the Departments and its officials consider:

* Underpinning the guidance with UNCRPD principles;
* Establishing an oversight body specifically on Career Guidance in schools that would have due regard to provision of guidance for learners with disabilities;
* Ensuring that learners with disabilities, including those in special schools have equal access to career guidance, transition year, peer mentoring or work placements; [[13]](#footnote-13)
* Introducing a Universal Design for Education approach; and
* Improving policy integration and coordination between government departments and agencies, for example, within the context of planning and supporting transitions, better access to Intreo Public Employment Services, and a clear employment goals pathway.

The publication of a [national strategy and action plan for lifelong guidance[[14]](#footnote-14) in late 2023 addressed some of these issues, with actions to](https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/470e6-national-strategic-framework-for-lifelong-guidance-and-strategic-action-plan-2023-2030/) be implemented including:

* Provide guidance delivered by appropriately trained professionals for students in the country’s 130 special schools;
* Establish new short courses for Transition Year students to help them with work-experience and, career management skills;
* Provide more work-shadowing and work-experience placements for people with disabilities to improve their employment opportunities;
* Develop transition year micro-modules that support teaching and learning in areas such as career exploration and work experience; and
* Run more regional career fairs and workshops for students, parents and teachers.

There are actions set out in the plan which the NDA advise should be universally designed and informed by user testing, these include:

* 2.1 Develop mechanisms to generate greater public awareness, visibility and clarity of lifelong-guidance services in tertiary education and for the workforce generally, access routes and supports including, wherever practicable and appropriate and feasible, facilitating greater access and inclusion and championing a universal-design approach;
* 2.2 Advance work on the establishment of a careers-information portal to provide access to careers information and proactively engage users in an accessible format;
* 2.9 Develop supporting guidance material to embed the learnings from existing programmes in special schools and post-primary schools to support transition planning and positive transitions to further education, employment or disability day services, as appropriate;
* 3.4 Seek to support all individuals including those who are marginalised or have disabilities to access person-centred opportunities such as work-shadowing/work-experience;
* 4.4. Explore means of potential to ensure high-quality standards and consistency to strengthen guidance provision in post-primary schools;
* 6.1. Advance work to support access for diverse cohorts and those at greatest risk of disadvantage to appropriate, meaningful and person-centred guidance services; and
* 6.3 Continue to ensure information on pathways to and within education and to the world of work are delivered impartially through a range of accessible formats, consistent with a universal-design approach.

The NDA welcome these positive developments, however more detail is required regarding the definition of appropriately trained professionals. The provision of new short skills course provides a significant new development in mainstream education for disabled learners and their inclusion in these courses is essential.

### **Synergies in Effective Teaching Approaches**

Also allocated funding by DoE in 2023 under the Dormant Account Action Plan, was a project to develop Synergies in Effective Teaching Approaches for Students with Additional Educational Needs through communities of practice involving clusters of mainstream and special Schools. Currently staff in one type of school rarely have opportunities to learn about teaching approaches being used in other school types to support students with similar needs. Similarly, students who attend special schools have limited opportunities to engage with their peers in mainstream schools and vice versa. This project is in line with the principles contained within Article 24 of UNCRPD on inclusive education and the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004)

The scheme is intended to establish closer links between the mainstream and special school systems to focus on the provision of optimal teaching and learning experiences. The scheme will establish four regionally based communities of practice, clusters of local mainstream and special schools collaborating to ensure the adoption of the most effective teaching methodologies and provision of learning experiences At the end of the project, each school will be expected to share evidence and outcomes from its involvement in the project.

### PATH 4

The Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH)[[15]](#footnote-15) is a strategic funding programme, established in 2016, to support the delivery of the objectives of the National Access Plan (NAP). It provides ring-fenced funding to higher education institutions (HEIs) to deliver innovative measures to improve participation and student success from the NAP priority groups.

PATH 4 is a two-phase programme supporting inclusive, universally designed higher education environments and course provision for students with intellectual disabilities. During 2023 the Department of Further and Higher Education Research Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) and the Higher Education Authority (HEA) rolled out two separate strands of PATH 4.

* **Phase 1** supported the embedding of Universal Design (UD) approaches and inclusive practices in HEIs which aimed to benefit all students, in particular autistic students, and enable the building of capacity in HEIs for greater participation by students with intellectual disabilities in higher education. All HEI project plans under Phase 1 were approved in 2022 and are now in implementation stage.
* **Phase 2** (2023-2025) was a call for proposals for course provision for students with intellectual disabilities. The funding will support a series of three-year pilots to support an enhancement of course provision for students with intellectual disabilities and to inform future policy considerations in respect of students with intellectual disabilities.

DFHERIS and the HEA with guidance from the NDA ran a significant consultation exercise over the course of April 2023 that informed the Path 4 Call for Proposals. The NDA also supported the development of the ‘Call for Proposals ‘which utilised the 4 pillars of Universal Design for Education (UDE) to guide this funding stream. [[16]](#footnote-16) Underpinning this call with UDE ensured PATH 4 was transformative, and encourages the changes required to ensure inclusion and participation of students with Intellectual disabilities and autistic leaners in HEI. It will also support the future sustainability of these programmes.

### Establishment of the National Tertiary Office

The creation of a National Tertiary Office was one of the priorities of the DFHERIS, as outlined in its Statement of Strategy 2021 to 2023.[[17]](#footnote-17) The aim of the Office, established in 2023, was to develop more diverse and progressive pathways for learners that would enabling them to progress across and between different institutions. The Office will develop collaborations across the FET and higher education sectors resulting in new options and ways of learning for school leavers and those returning to education.

### Increased funding

The purpose of the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) is to provide funding to higher and further education institutions to assist them in offering supports and services to eligible students with disabilities so that they can participate on an equal basis with their peers. The fund is administered by the HEA. [[18]](#footnote-18) An increase in funding of €2 million to help expand the scope of the FSD in Further Education was announced in Dec 2023. The NDA welcome the extension of the FSD to the FET sector which commenced in 2021/22 that also allows access to funds for disabled students who are on part time courses of a years duration. It is through access to this fund that the FET sector can respond to an individual’s support needs.[[19]](#footnote-19)

To ensure that the National Council for Special Education is fully resourced and equipped to continue to meet the current and future needs of the special education sector, its annual budget has been increased by 55%. This increase will allow for the provision of an additional 161 staff.

## Strategic Priority 2: Provide bridges and supports into work

The statement of intent for this strategic priority published in the original CES stated that‘people with disabilities will be provided with individualised bridges and supports to secure jobs in the open labour market’.

### WorkAbility

Launched in 2023, WorkAbility is a DSP and EU funded inclusive pathway to employment that ensures people with disabilities are fully supported to find and maintain employment. [[20]](#footnote-20) This is the third such employment support programme funded by DSP, with the Disability Activation Project (DACT) and Ability Programme being earlier programmes. WorkAbility projects will provide funding to local, regional, and national projects that focus on achieving improved employment outcomes for people with disabilities through a range of support measures. Successful projects were announced in January 2024 and funding will run to 2028.

As with similar programmes, it is vital that these programmes inform mainstream employment supports for disabled job seekers. Lessons from the following programme goals must be introduced to mainstream practice.

1. To improve the employment prospects of people with disabilities who are currently distant from the labour market;
2. To build the capacity of employers to recruit, retain and progress people with disabilities within their workforce; and
3. To facilitate new partnerships amongst stakeholders (people with disabilities, disability services, employment services and employers) and new approaches to providing employment supports to people with disabilities.

Intreo’s Designated Disability Employment Personal Advisors are delivering an early engagement process whereby contact is made with young people on disability allowance to determine their desire and need for supports for employment (see more under Strategic Priority 3). [[21]](#footnote-21) It will be important that the WorkAbility Programmes establish and maintain links with Intreo to share learning and to inform mainstream supports. The learning from the Ability Programme Evaluation should also be shared and incorporated into WorkAbility.[[22]](#footnote-22)

### The AHEAD WAM Programme

The AHEAD Willing Able Mentoring (WAM) initiative is a work placement programme that promotes access to the labour market for graduates with disabilities and works to build the capacity of employers to integrate disability into the mainstream workplace. In 2022 a ‘route to permanency’ for the WAM programme was piloted. A panel was formed, and 17 applicants (80% of the cohort) secured permanent roles. In 2023, 20 new candidates started placements and are now eligible to go through the route to permanency process, which will take place this summer.

### Enterprise routes to employment

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE) have worked with employers and the enterprise sector over the course of 2023 to promote the benefits of employing people with disabilities. DETE acknowledges that enterprise routes such as entrepreneurship are increasingly important employment options for people with disabilities. In December 2022, the Department published a report it commissioned the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development to undertake to assess inclusive entrepreneurship training and provide recommendations. Based on the report DETE have identified three priority actions to be taken to strengthen entrepreneurship training for people from under-represented groups. These are:

* Creating a referral system for entrepreneurship training courses that are targeted at specific groups;
* Adapting the content and method of delivery of the Local Enterprise Office entrepreneurship training and mentoring programmes to suit the needs of different social groups, in consultation with representative bodies; and
* Developing standardised training for trainers and mentors on diversity and working with under-represented groups.

To support their work DETE maintain a Mapping of Supports document which includes information on both State and non-State supports. The Mapping document is regularly updated to include information on inclusive entrepreneurship supports. To further this work and in conjunction with the Local Enterprise Offices, a working group is currently exploring options for the development of a bespoke programme for new entrepreneurs. Inclusiveness will be a key feature of any new programme.

### Transport progress during 2023

Affordable and accessible transport is essential to get to college and work. Those with sight, mobility or intellectual disabilities are most likely to cite transport as a barrier to employment.[[23]](#footnote-23) In consultations disabled people frequently mention the lack of accessible, reliable, and connected transport as a challenge to participation in society and work.

The National Transport Authority (NTA) reported progress in the following areas over 2023.

* Since 2020, 47 rail stations had their lifts upgraded/replaced with mechanical improvements on lifts carried out in 12 other stations;
* Since 2023, Irish Rail have installed a video security system on 55 lifts to reduce the amount of lift faults caused by vandalism;
* New footbridges over the railway lines and lifts have been installed in Little Island and Banteer in 2023 whilst more stations ~~and more are going~~ are proceeding through detailed design for installation. This will improve accessibility for all passengers;
* New signage has been installed in 110 rail stations to date to allow customers navigate to the facilities within it more easily;
* A Changing Places facility has been installed in Connolly and Heuston Stations and plans are under way for Changing Places facilities in 2024 in Limerick, Waterford and Galway stations;
* Wheelchair accessible bus bays, for high floor coaches, have been completed in 17 stations, three more in construction with the remaining four locations in the process of being designed;
* All Dublin Bus, Bus Éireann and Go Ahead city fleets are wheelchair accessible and 88% of Dublin Bus fleet have a dedicated wheelchair space and a separate buggy space;
* All regional coach services for Transport for Ireland are also wheelchair accessible and the NTA are purchasing low floor coaches for longer journeys also which now have a dedicated wheelchair space and audio/visual announcements;
* New town services have been launched in Clonmel, Kilkenny and Carlow with low floor wheelchair accessible buses with audio and visual information displays; and
* Connecting Ireland is a major five-year public transport initiative developed to increase connectivity outside our major cities and towns. They provide scheduled timetable services and demand responsive services. Over 100 new or additional services have been introduced since the beginning of Connecting Ireland, in mid-2022. Over 95% of TFI Local Link services in rural areas are wheelchair accessible.

## Strategic Priority 3: Make work pay

### Information on employment options

An early engagement process, a recommendation from the Make Work Pay 2017 report,[[24]](#footnote-24) is underway in Intreo. This is an important measure in supporting young disabled people in receipt of disability-based payments who may wish to work or avail of training. This process provides information and guidance in relation to careers and FET to ensure that young disabled people are making choices based on available options. Designated Disability Employment Personal Advisors located in Intreo offices provide the service. As of March 2024, 23,874 people have been contacted and 1,8929 expressed an interest in the employment services available. It is important that links between the early engagement process and FET options are carefully outlined in order to reflect the needs of the individuals engaging in this process.

### Low Pay Commission

DETE has over the course of 2023 continued to put measures in place to make work pay. The Low Pay Commission made recommendations to the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment on the rate of the National Minimum Wage.[[25]](#footnote-25) Government approved the recommendation of the Low Pay Commission to increase the National Minimum Wage by €1.40 to €12.70 an hour in the context of Budget 2024. The increase came into effect 1 January 2024. This increase can be considered the second phase of a four-year transition to 2026, at which point the Living Wage will replace the National Minimum Wage.

### Remote and Flexible working

The Right to Request Remote Working Bill was integrated into the Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2023, which was enacted in April 2023. In March 2024 the Minister commenced Part 3 of the Act, which provides all employees with the right to request remote working arrangements. The Act includes obligations for the employee and the employer with regard to requests for remote working arrangements.

The Workplace Relations Commission drafted a Code of Practice for Employers and Employees on the Right to Request Flexible Working.[[26]](#footnote-26) The introduction of this legislation may facilitate more people with disabilities into work.

## Strategic Priority 4: Promote job retention and re-entry to work

The CES emphasised the importance of reducing the outflow of people from work due to ill health or acquiring a disability who often are then in receipt of long-term disability benefits. It is widely accepted that some people who acquire a disability or health condition can return to work if employments support are in place. The Reasonable Accommodation Fund and the Disability Awareness Support Scheme have been reviewed and the implementation of reforms is anticipated as an important restructuring measure to assist returning to work.

Understanding the legal obligations regarding reasonable accommodation is being progressed by Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) with the production of a Code of Practice on Reasonable Accommodation (yet to be published). In addition, IHREC are preparing guidance to offer practical information to employees and employers on requesting and providing reasonable accommodation. This information must explain how to apply reasonable accommodation at each stage of the employment process including: recruitment, on-boarding/induction, returning to work and career progression can be provided. This guidance points to the usefulness of the reasonable accommodation passport developed and promoted by Ibec and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. [[27]](#footnote-27) The NDA look forward to the publication of this guidance during 2024.

## Strategic Priority 5: 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 during 2023. The need for such support was highlighted as part of the consultations on the new National Disability Strategy so the NDA would encourage that an appropriate objective and actions in relation to this are included.

## Strategic Priority 6: Engage Employers

DETE and its enterprise agencies, Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland, as well as the Retail Consultation Forum, worked with the DSP to implement *Pathways to Work*.[[28]](#footnote-28) In particular, the Department and its agencies continued to raise employer awareness and take up of employment supports such as the expanded JobsPlus subsidy scheme and Work Experience Placement Programme, including through support for the strategy’s series of employer roadshows. In addition, DETE partnered with the DSP on the hosting of 130 job promotion events for jobseekers and employers and two national Intreo Work and Skills Weeks annually.

### Monitoring Part 5 of the Disability Act

The Report on Compliance with Part 5 of the Disability Act 2005 for 2022 was published to the NDA website during 2023.[[29]](#footnote-29) It reported that over the course of 2022 the number and percentage of employees reporting a disability increased to 10,631 (**4.1%**), an increase of 1,620 (+18.0%) from the 2021 figure which was 9,011(**3.6%**). In addition, **103** (48.4%) public bodies reported that a minimum of 6% of their employees were persons with disabilities. The NDA acknowledges the progress made by public bodies and recognise that further progress is required in order for all public bodies to achieve the minimum 4.5% target by 2024 and the minimum 6% target by 2025.

Based on recommendations contained in a 2020 review of Part 5 the NDA are continuing to progress the recommendations. During 2023, the NDA consulted with key stakeholders including disabled people to draft new survey questions that will capture more in-depth information on disabled employees in the public sector. The revised questions will be rolled out in Q1 2024. The NDA has also been exploring options to move Part 5 reporting from a paper based to an online system in line with the Government’s Digital and ICT Strategy 2030.[[30]](#footnote-30)

### Oireachtas Work Learning (OWL) Programme

The Public Appointment Services continued to deliver the recruitment process for the OWL programme, and there are now 17 OWL graduates in permanent jobs in the civil service. Ten new trainees commenced in the Houses of the Oireachtas Service in September 2022 and graduated in June 2023. The 10 trainees were eligible to apply for a confined competition on completion of the program. A panel was created and six were successful in securing permanent roles. In September 2023, eight new trainees joined the training programme. They are now completing their second work experience rotation and will be eligible for a confined competition on completion of the program.

An OWL programme Hiring Managers Network was also set up last year. This provides an opportunity for managers of OWL graduates to discuss and share any learning from the programme. In 2023 the Network, along with the City of Dublin Education and Training Board, helped to develop and pilot a training programme for OWL graduates to support the development of practical, job-related skills. This training will begin in 2024.

### Wage Subsidy Scheme

This scheme, run by DSP provides financial incentives to private sector employers to employ people with a disability. The basic rate of subsidy is €6.30 per hour. The scheme was reviewed in 2023. One key reform that resulted from the review was to reduce the weekly threshold for employers to avail of the scheme from 21 to 15 hours. Some disabled people dislike the scheme as it requires an acknowledgement of their lower productivity rather than being strengths based. However, some service providers feel it is a crucial support to incentivise employers to employ people with more significant disabilities. NDA welcomes the review of the CES and advises that further reforms to the scheme make it more aligned with UNCRPD and that the criteria for describing reduced capacity is redesigned.

### Employers for Change

The Open Doors Initiative, Employers for Change delivered awareness training to over 2000 business personnel during 2023. Employers for Change continues to operate on an annual funding cycle. This or a similar service requires a continuous source of funding with clear targets for delivery.

# Conclusion

As the CES completes its 10 years in 2024, the NDA advise that a clear vision of what is required in mainstream and coordinated approaches to support disabled people who want to work are blended into the new National Disability Strategy. Also of importance is that a key mechanism to ensure the progressive realisation of employment issues relevant to UNCRPD Article 27 will remain a whole of government activity.

Ireland are poor performers when compared to our European neighbours in two areas; the disability employment gap and the levels of poverty amongst disabled people. While a route out of poverty can be employment, this can only be achieved if the system is responsive to those seeking employment. Unfortunately, the current system is not responsive enough to individual support needs. Until the bridge between what an individual needs to access employment is addressed the disability employment gap will remain high.

The NDA advise that a final meeting of the CESIG is held to assess what worked well during the 2015 to 2024 timeframe and what elements of activity must be carried forward in the New Disability Strategy.

1. <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpp4/census2022profile4-disabilityhealthandcarers/keyfindings/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Eurostat (2023). Disability employment gap by level of activity limitation and sex (source EU-SILC). <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-datasets/-/tepsr_sp200> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://hea.ie/2023/02/23/hea-publishes-graduate-outcomes-and-disability-report/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2023/12/ONLINE-v2-NDPAC-2.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://irelandseducationyearbook.ie/downloads/IEYB2023/Irelands%20Yearbook%20of%20Education%202023%20-%20Higher%20Education-14.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/dfa32cd975/disabilities-fet-report.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://universaldesign.ie/education> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. https://universaldesign.ie/built-environment/building-for-everyone [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. [How’s it Going National Survey - National Disability Authority (nda.ie)](https://nda.ie/publications/hows-it-going-national-survey) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. [Narrative Analysis of Wellbeing and Social Inclusion Consultations - National Disability Authority (nda.ie)](https://nda.ie/publications/narrative-analysis-of-wellbeing-and-social-inclusion-consultations) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Green Paper on Disability Reform (2023) [270938\_7c444ddf-acfc-4d28-ad82-c7b1baa37cc1.pdf](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5Ctammingr%5CDownloads%5C270938_7c444ddf-acfc-4d28-ad82-c7b1baa37cc1.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <https://nda.ie/education/career-guidance-for-students-with-additional-needs> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This advice was based on the recognition that the Indecon Review of Career Guidance (2019) was limited in terms of its recommendations and exploration of the issues affecting learners with disabilities. <https://assets.gov.ie/24951/dffde726604b451aa6cc50239a375299.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. <https://assets.gov.ie/279196/ac7dfa38-00fb-4dcf-8285-0f187b76469c.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. PATH 1 supported access to initial teacher education, Path 2 was a 1916 Bursary Fund for socio-economically disadvantaged students, Path 3 supported institutional capacity for increasing access to higher education. Path 5 will support Traveller and Roma Students in higher education. <https://hea.ie/policy/access-policy/path/> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. <https://universaldesign.ie/publications/universal-design-in-education-and-training-policy-landscape-in-ireland> [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. [National Tertiary Office (hea.ie)](https://nto.hea.ie/) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2018/06/FSD-Guidelines_2022-23-Final.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. [Fund for Students with Disabilities | Funding, Governance and Performance | Higher Education Authority (hea.ie)](https://hea.ie/funding-governance-performance/funding/student-finance/fund-for-students-with-disabilities/) [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. <https://www.pobal.ie/programmes/workability-inclusive-pathways-to-employment-programme/> [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/b9ede-designated-disability-case-officers/> [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Quality Matters (2022) Ability Programme Evaluation 2018-2021 [Ability-Progamme-Evaluation-Report-2018-2021-Final.pdf (pobal.ie)](https://www.pobal.ie/app/uploads/2018/06/Ability-Progamme-Evaluation-Report-2018-2021-Final.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. National Disability Survey (2006) Vol. 2, Table 7.30 [National Disability Survey 2006 Volume 2 - CSO - Central Statistics Office](https://www.cso.ie/en/statistics/health/nationaldisabilitysurvey2006volume2/) [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. <https://assets.gov.ie/207521/8644347b-8f0c-4910-bbf5-b7950fd7f869.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. [gov - Low Pay Commission Annual Report 2023 (www.gov.ie)](https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/76eb9-low-pay-commission-annual-report-2023/) [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. <https://www.workplacerelations.ie/en/what_you_should_know/codes_practice/code-of-practice-for-employers-and-employees-right-to-request-flexible-working-and-right-to-request-remote-working/code-of-practice-for-employers-and-employees.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ireland’s largest lobby and business representative group [www.ibec.ie](http://www.ibec.ie) [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Pathways to Work 2021-2025 is the government’s national employment services strategy; the government’s overall framework for activation and employment support policy. [gov - Pathways to Work Strategy 2021 - 2025 (www.gov.ie)](https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/1feaf-pathways-to-work-2021/) [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. [NDA Annual Reports on Compliance with Part 5 of the Disability Act - National Disability Authority](https://nda.ie/publications/nda-annual-reports-on-compliance-with-part-5-of-the-disability-act) [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. [gov - Connecting Government 2030: A Digital and ICT Strategy for Ireland’s Public Service (www.gov.ie)](https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/136b9-connecting-government-2030-a-digital-and-ict-strategy-for-irelands-public-service/) [↑](#footnote-ref-30)