**NDA discussion paper on the** **setting of national employment targets for people with disabilities**

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# Executive Summary

## Background

Under Article 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), disabled people have a right to employment on an equal basis with others in an inclusive and accessible labour market. However, globally and in Ireland, disabled people are employed at much lower rates than people without disabilities. The Irish Government has previously set targets to increase the employment levels of disabled people as part of its broader equality goals. With a new National Disability Strategy in development, it is timely to consider the setting of new targets. This paper offers guidance on how these could be set.

## Current employment levels

The employment rate is a measure that tells us the percentage of people of working age who have jobs and are currently working. According to Census 2022, for people aged 15-64

* the employment rate of people without disabilities is 71%
* the employment rate for people with disabilities is 49%,
* The disability employment gap is 22 percentage points.

Census 2022 provided more detailed information about disability by asking people whether they had disability to a great extent or to some extent. It found

* the employment rate for people with disabilities to some extent is 60%,
	+ This is 11 percentage points lower than the employment rate of people without disabilities
* the employment rate for people with disabilities to a great extent is 27%
	+ This is 44 percentage points lower than the employment rate of people without disabilities

## Approach

This paper looks at past national employment targets for people with disabilities in Ireland as set out in various national strategies and plans. It describes employment trends and current levels of employment among people with and without disabilities, both in Ireland and in comparable countries. It reviews how best to measure employment levels of people with disabilities and the various sources of data available to monitor progress towards targets. The paper also examines employment quota schemes in other countries aimed at increasing employment levels of disabled people. A series of recommendations are then made relating to new national employment targets for disabled people in Ireland.

## Recommendations

**Recommendation 1:** A consistent definition of the working age population should be adopted for any future national employment targets for people with disabilities. Future national employment targets for disabled people should be set for the population aged 15-64.

**Recommendation 2**: National targets should be set for an increase in the employment rate of disabled people **and** a reduction in the disability employment gap.

**Recommendation 3**: Employment targets should be set using Census 2022 as baseline data, and progress towards these targets should be monitored using data from future censuses.

**Recommendation 4**: A target should be set to increase the employment rate of people with disabilities in Ireland from 49% in 2022 to 54% by 2027.

**Recommendation 5:** A target should be set to reduce the disability employment gap in Ireland from 22 percentage points in 2022 to 17 points by 2027.

**Recommendation 6:** A target should be set to increase the employment rate of people with disabilities to some extent in Ireland from 60% to 63% by 2027.

**Recommendation 7:** A target should be set to reduce the disability employment gap between people with no disabilities and people with disabilities to some extent in Ireland from 11 percentage points in 2022 to 8 points by 2027.

**Recommendation 8**: A target should be set to increase the employment rate of people with disabilities to a great extent in Ireland from 27% to 33% by 2027.

**Recommendation 9**: A target should be set to reduce the disability employment gap between people with no disabilities and people with disabilities to a great extent in Ireland from 44 percentage points in 2022 to 38 points by 2027.

**Recommendation 10:** Conduct more research, analysis and consultation as to the advantages and disadvantages of extending the public sector minimum target for the employment of people with disabilities to the private sector.

# Purpose and scope of the paper

Article 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) recognises the right of disabled people to work, on an equal basis to others, in an inclusive, open, and accessible labour market. Despite this, people with disabilities are considerably less likely than people without disabilities to be employed, both in Ireland and worldwide. Increasing employment levels among people with disabilities is a stated policy objective of the Irish Government, and targets for increasing employment rates of disabled people have been set out in a range of recent whole-of-government strategies. With the National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2022 (NDIS) ending in 2022, the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities (CES) concluding in 2024, and the current Roadmap for Social Inclusion (RSI) due to end in 2025, the purpose of this paper is to provide advice to Government on the setting of new national employment targets for people with disabilities. This is particularly important with a new National Disability Strategy in development in Ireland and the likelihood that this strategy will include an employment target.

This paper reviews previous employment targets for people with disabilities in Ireland as set out in various cross-government strategies. It summarises the different metrics and data sources available to track employment levels among people with disabilities and considers the merits and drawbacks of each. The paper then describes employment trends and current levels of employment among people with and without disabilities in Ireland and comparable countries, before reviewing features of employment quota schemes used in pursuit of employment targets in other countries.

Recommendations are made for new national employment targets for people with disabilities. These recommendations have been calibrated so as to be ambitious, achievable, and in line with Ireland’s European and international obligations.

# Background and context

Employment targets for people with disabilities, along with policy measures to achieve these, have been set out in multiple national strategy documents over the past decade. While sharing an underlying intent to realise greater employment opportunities for people with disabilities, the targets and the outcome indicators used to track progress towards them have varied in ways that are less than optimal. Inconsistencies include, for example, variation in the definition of ‘working age population’ to which different targets apply, meaning different employment rates have been reported for a given year and a given data source. The National Disability Authority (NDA) recommends reconciling these differences and taking a consistent and coherent approach to employment target setting and monitoring in future. The optimal parameters for doing so are considered below.

# Recent and current national employment targets

## The Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities 2015-2024

The Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities (1) was launched in October 2015 with the intention of ensuring a coordinated cross-government approach to supporting persons with disabilities to progress into employment. A target was set in the CES to increase the proportion of people aged 20-64 years with disabilities who are in employment from 33% in 2011 to 38% by 2024, a 15% or five percentage point increase. A commitment was also made in the CES to increase, on a phased basis, the existing requirement that a minimum of 3% of employees of relevant public sector bodies be persons with disabilities to a minimum of 6%.

## The National Disability Inclusion Strategy

The National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021 (extended to 2022 due to the COVID-19 pandemic) (2), represented a whole-of-government approach to improving the lives of persons with disabilities. The Strategy comprised eight themes, one of which was employment. While not setting a new national employment target, the strategy document outlined that monitoring the implementation of the NDIS would include monitoring of the employment rate of people with disabilities relative to that of people without disabilities over the period of the Strategy. The employment rate for people with disabilities for Ireland was reported in the NDIS text as 32%, based on Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (3) reporting of 2007 data from the European Union Survey of Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC).

In 2018, the NDA developed a set of indicators to monitor the implementation of the NDIS. Indicator 4.1a in that indicator set was the percentage of people aged 15-65 with and without a disability, by principal economic status, as measured by the Labour Force Survey (LFS). However, in both the mid-term (2020)(4) and final (5) reviews of progress of the NDIS against the indicators, the actual employment rate cited is the proportion of 20-64-year-olds in employment as measured in Census 2016.[[1]](#footnote-1) This was due to changes in the measurement of disability within the LFS and discrepancies with measurement of disability in the Census; previous analyses have highlighted considerable variation in the prevalence of disability in Ireland according to each of the two data sources (6). The final NDIS progress report also presents the difference between the employment rates of people with and without disabilities aged 16 and over for each year from 2014 to 2021, as measured by EU-SILC data. The gap grew over the period in question, from 39.8% in 2014 to 41.3% in 2021. This overall figure, however, masks that the disability employment gap fell from 34.9% in 2014 to 31.4% in 2021 for people with ‘some activity limitation’ but widened substantially for people with a ‘severe activity limitation’, rising from 50% in 2014 to 66.6% in 2021.

## The Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025

The Roadmap for Social Inclusion (RSI) (7) is a whole-of-government strategy with the ambition of reducing the national consistent poverty rate to 2% and making Ireland ‘one of the most socially inclusive states’ in the European Union. The Strategy comprises seven high-level goals, 22 targets, and 66 commitments. Among its targets, the RSI included the target of increasing the employment rate of people with disabilities aged 15 and older from 22.3% in Census 2016 to 25% in Census 2021 (delayed to 2022 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic), and to 33% by Census 2026 (2027). This target was reiterated in the Pathways to Work 2020-2025, the Government’s national employment services strategy.

In June 2023, a mid-term review of the RSI was published (8), which set out a revised strategy for the remaining years of the Roadmap. The review and revision were informed by consultation, stakeholder engagement, and consideration of progress indicators. Following findings from the public consultation, the mid-term review of the RSI revised its employment target to be in line with the target contained in the CES. In other words, the revised disability employment target in the Roadmap for Social Inclusion is an increase in the proportion of people aged 20-64 with disabilities who are in employment to 38% by 2024. It is not clear from the strategy documentation how this target is intended to be monitored.

## Part 5 of the Disability Act 2005

Under Part 5 of the Disability Act 2005[[2]](#footnote-2), public bodies have an obligation to promote and support the employment of persons with disabilities and to meet a minimum threshold of 3% of employees with disabilities. The obligation will increase to 4.5% in 2024 and 6% in 2025, as committed to by Government in the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities 2015-2024 and as legislated for in the Assisted Decision Making (Capacity) Amendment Act 2022.

# Progress towards existing targets: Trends and current employment rates

## Employment levels of people with disabilities

The proportion of people with disabilities aged 20-64 in employment rose from 33% in Census 2011 to 36.5% in Census 2016, and the overall employment target for 2024 as set out in the CES and, latterly, the revised RSI (i.e., an increase in the employment rate of people with disabilities to 38% by 2024) looked set to be achieved. While Census 2022 theoretically offered the next opportunity to monitor progress towards this target, changes to the census questions from which data on disability are derived mean that a direct comparison between the employment levels of people with disabilities in 2022 and 2016 is not possible.

Data on disability were derived from answers to two questions on the Census 2022 form. In the first question, census respondents were asked to indicate if they had any of a list of long-lasting conditions or difficulties, by choosing one of three response options: ‘yes, to some extent’, ‘yes, to a great extent’ or ‘no’. In previous censuses, only two response options were provided: ‘yes’ and ‘no’. The second question asked respondents to indicate whether they had difficulty doing any of a series of daily activities, by responding that they had ‘no difficulty’, ‘some difficulty’ or ‘a lot of difficulty’. In previous censuses, respondents were only asked to respond to this question on activity limitation if they had already indicated that they experienced one of the conditions or difficulties in the previous question; in 2022, everyone was asked to respond to both questions.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In 2016, 13.5% of the population of Ireland was classified has having a disability. In Census 2022, 21.5% of the population had a disability (to any extent). Specifically, 8% of the population had a disability ‘to a great extent’, and 14% had a disability ‘to some extent’. It is not possible to say with any certainty whether this increase represents (or to what extent it represents) an actual increase in disability prevalence or instead reflects the changes to the census questions.

In 2022, just under half (49%) of people aged 20-64 with a disability were employed. The Central Statistics Office (CSO) cautions that due to the substantial changes in the Disability and Difficulties questions, Census 2022 results are not comparable with previous census data. Therefore, is not possible to judge, on the basis of Census 2022, whether the targeted increase in the employment rate of 20-64-year-olds with disabilities as set out in the CES (and now also the revised RSI) has been achieved. It is likely that some individuals who would previously have answered ‘no’ in relation to whether they experienced a particular condition or difficulty when faced with a binary yes/no choice, would have responded ‘yes, to some extent’ or ‘yes, a little’ in Census 2022. It can be assumed that these individuals would be more likely to be in employment than those who had a disability to a greater extent; the proportion of people aged 20-64 years with a disability to some extent in employment (58.4%) was double that of people with a disability to a great extent (29.2%) in Census 2022.

While it is possible to conclude that there was an increase in the proportion of 20-64-year-old people with disabilities in employment between Census 2011 and Census 2016, this increase was lower than the increase in the employment rate of people without disabilities in the same age bracket, meaning that the gap in employment rates of people with and without disabilities actually grew between 2011 and 2016.

## The disability employment gap

The emphasis in Article 27 of the UNCRPD is on the equal employment rights of persons with disabilities. All disability employment targets in recent national strategies have, as described above, related to increasing the overall employment rate of people with disabilities in Ireland. Such increases only represent greater equality for disabled people if they are larger than any corresponding increase in the employment rate of people without disabilities. Furthermore, employment rates of people with and without disabilities are subject to fluctuation depending on macroeconomic conditions, and so the actual employment rate of people with disabilities at the date targeted in a national strategy may be more likely to represent current labour market conditions than any interventions set out in the strategy itself. It may be appropriate, therefore, to establish national targets relating to closing the gap in employment rates between people with and without disabilities, commonly referred to as the disability employment gap (DEG).

The disability employment gap in Ireland has been described as “exceptionally large” (9). In cross-country comparisons using European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), Ireland had the largest DEG of all 27 Member States in 2022, at 37 percentage points. The average disability employment gap across the EU was 21 percentage points. In EU-SILC, disability status is defined as a longstanding health condition that limits daily activities, as self-reported by respondents. Employment data are collected from individuals aged 16 and over (10).

Figure 1: Disability employment gap for EU member states, 2022

Source: EU-SILC

Figure 2: Disability employment gap in Ireland and in the EU overall, 2014-2022

Source: EU-SILC

It is important to note, however, that the magnitude of disability employment gaps in different countries can vary depending on the data source used. Examinations of the disability employment gap across countries carried out by the OECD (9) the European Commission’s Academic Network of European Disability Experts (ANED) (11), and other academics (12,13) have tended to use EU-SILC data in their analyses. However, there are issues with SILC that limit its usefulness for such cross-country comparisons (14). For SILC, countries have discretion over the final question wording to be used and over the mode(s) of data collection. For example, some countries use only in-person interviews, while others use predominantly telephone interviews. Countries also vary substantially in the extent of their use of proxy interviews (interviews completed by one household member on behalf of another who is temporarily away or incapacitated). In 2021, for example, the percentage of proxy interviews in Denmark was just under 2%, while in Ireland it was 34% (15). Question wording, survey mode, and proxy interviewing all influence reporting on health issues, and variations in each across countries are likely to limit the usefulness of any cross-country comparisons on disability (16). Other researchers have analysed the disability employment gap using data from the EU Labour Force Survey (17), in which similar issues apply.

Geiger, van der Wal and Tøge analysed disability employment gaps using data for 15 to 65-year-olds from the European Social Survey (ESS), an academically driven cross-national survey established in 2001, and compared these to gaps as indicated by EU-SILC and EU-LFS data. According to these authors, the European Social Survey “makes the strongest efforts to achieve comparability of any repeated cross-national survey”, with extensive question wording checks, no proxy interviewing, and consistent survey modes and sampling procedures across countries (16). As in the SILC and LFS, disability in the ESS is indicated by self-reported limitation in day-to-day activities as a result of a long-standing health issue.

Table 1 shows the ranking of 25 countries in relation to their disability employment gaps as measured by each of the three surveys. A rank of 1 is the highest rank and indicates the smallest disability employment gap (i.e., the smallest percentage point difference in employment rates between people with and without disabilities). For some countries, the ranking differs little depending on the data source used. For example, Italy had the highest ranking in the ESS and SILC and was also ranked fifth using LFS data. At the other end of the spectrum, Hungary was ranked the lowest, i.e., had the highest DEG, regardless of the data source used. Overall, the relationship between pairs of surveys was found to be high (intraclass correlation coefficient of 0.72, *p* < 0.001) (16).

However, for some countries the picture looks very different depending on the data used. Denmark, for example, had the second smallest DEG when ESS data were used, but had the second largest when LFS data were used. Similarly, while Ireland was ranked 19th using SILC or LFS data, Ireland had the sixth lowest DEG of 23 countries when ESS data were used. If one accepts the argument that the ESS is a higher quality survey in terms of cross-country comparability, for the reasons outlined above, then Ireland does not perform as poorly, in a relative sense, in terms of employment equality for people with disabilities as the EU-SILC or LFS surveys would suggest. While cross-country comparisons can be important drivers of policy change, the findings above show that conclusions may differ substantially depending on the data source used.

Table Country rankings in disability employment gaps across three different surveys, 2011/2012

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | ESS | EU-SILC | EU-LFS |
| Austria | - | 11 | 6 |
| Belgium | 20 | 22 | 15 |
| Bulgaria | 21 | 16 | 19 |
| Cyprus | 11 | **4** | 14 |
| Czechia | 16 | 23 | 16 |
| Denmark | **2** | 15 | 21 |
| Estonia | **4** | 14 | 10 |
| Finland | 8 | 6 | **3** |
| France | 9 | **3** | **2** |
| Germany | **5** | 9 | 11 |
| Greece | **-** | 8 | 13 |
| Hungary | 23 | 24 | 22 |
| Iceland | 15 | 20 | 9 |
| Ireland | 6 | 19 | 19 |
| Italy | **1** | **1** | **5** |
| Netherlands | 22 | 17 | - |
| Norway | 17 | 25 | - |
| Poland | 14 | 18 | 17 |
| Portugal | 18 | 13 | 8 |
| Slovakia | 19 | **5** | 18 |
| Slovenia | 12 | 10 | 12 |
| Spain | 10 | 12 | 7 |
| Sweden | **3** | 7 | **1** |
| Switzerland | 7 | **2** | **4** |
| United Kingdom | 13 | 21 | - |

Source: Adapted from Geiger et al. (2017)

It should also be noted that the disability employment gap can be deceptively low in some countries due to a low overall employment rate for the population (18). Examples include countries such as Italy and Spain, whose total employment rates are lower than the EU average. While the disability employment gaps in these countries may be relatively small, this does not negate the fact that the employment rates for people with disabilities in these countries are low (as they are also relatively low for people without disabilities). Italy had a disability employment gap of 14.9 in 2020, but also had one of the had one of the lowest overall employment rates in the EU, at 62.6%; in the Netherlands, the disability employment gap was larger, at 25.4%, but in the context of an overall employment rate was 80.0%. Whether the employment landscape for persons with disabilities is better in Italy or the Netherlands is open to debate. A sole focus on the employment rate of people with disabilities or a focus on the disability employment gap in isolation will not provide a comprehensive picture of the employment opportunities for disabled people in any given country. Examining (and setting targets for) both in combination is advisable.

### Employment of persons with disabilities in the public sector

The National Disability Authority has a statutory role in monitoring compliance with Part 5 of the Disability Act 2005 (19). Between 2007 and 2010, the minimum requirement that 3% of public sector employees would be persons with disabilities was not met. For every year since 2011, the 3% threshold has been met. In 2021, the most recent year for which data are available, the proportion of public sector employees reporting that they had a disability was 3.6%. Overall, 87% of public sector bodies met or exceeded the 3% requirement in 2021.

As previously mentioned, the minimum statutory obligation is to double to 6% in 2025. In 2021, 28% of public bodies reported that at least 6% of their employees were persons with disabilities.

# Considering parameters of future employment targets

The setting and monitoring of targets in relation to Article 27 of the UNCPRD involves making several technical decisions, including how disability status is identified, which employment metrics are targeted, whether cross-country comparisons are important, and the availability of suitable data at target dates. Here, important parameters for these decisions are considered and a recommended course of action outlined.

## Defining and measuring disability

As a multidimensional, complex and dynamic concept, disability is difficult to measure. When nationally representative information on disability is collected, this is typically through non-dedicated measures (surveys or censuses) rather than dedicated measures that would allow for an extended set of questions to be used to identify disability in a nuanced and comprehensive way. Instead, compromises are required, and pragmatic decisions are made about how disability will be measured. These compromises and decisions have meant that disability is measured in different ways in different surveys across countries, in different surveys within a given country, and even across different surveys in a series (e.g., across different EU surveys) (10).

Internationally, current approaches to identifying disability tend to be broadly based on the definition of disability in the UNCRPD and the WHO’s International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) (20), wherein disability can be defined as the interaction between a person’s health-related functioning and their environment. To classify an individual as having or not having a disability in line with this definition, it is necessary to ascertain whether they have a functional limitation and whether their circumstances lead to a restriction in their daily activities or their participation in society.

### The Washington Group on Disability Statistics

The Washington Group (WG) on Disability Statistics is a voluntary working group established under the United Nations Statistical Commission with the mission of promoting and coordinating international cooperation in generating statistics on disability (21). With representatives of 135 national statistics offices, the WG addresses a need for population-based measures of disability that are cross-nationally comparable.

The most widely used WG tool is a set of six questions that allow self-reporting of functioning in a range of domains. In acknowledgement that disability is not a static, dichotomous (Yes/No) state, but rather a complex, dynamic and multidimensional process, each question has four possible response options: ‘No, no difficulty’, ‘yes, some difficulty’, ‘yes, a lot of difficulty’, and ‘cannot do at all’, (22). People are identified as having a disability if they respond that they ‘cannot do at all’ or that they have a lot of difficulty to at least one of the six questions. Limitations of this short WG question set include that it does not assess mental health difficulties and cannot reliably identify disabilities in children under the age of five. Advantages include that this method of identifying disability has been widely tested and validated internationally, including in low-, middle-, and high-income countries, can be used for monitoring and evaluation in relation to the UNCRPD and sustainable development goals (SDGs), and is easy to administer and analyse (22).

### European Union Disability Statistics

Disability statistics are currently collected in two broad population-based EU surveys: the European Health Interview Survey (EHIS) and the EU SILC (10). Both surveys currently measure disability through the concept of general activity limitation; that is, “Limitation in activities people usually do because of health problems for at least the past six months”. Data are collected through the Global Activity Limitation Indicator (GALI): “For at least the past 6 months, to what extent have you been limited because of a health problem in activities people usually do? Would you say you have been … severely limited / limited but not severely or / not limited at all?” While the GALI is useful for harmonising data due to its ease of administration and widespread use, it should be noted that it also has limitations. For example, the focus on ‘health problem’ in the question is more in line with a medical than a social model of disability, the question does not define ‘activities people usually do’, and there can be wide variability in how the question is understood, both within and across countries.

The EU Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) collects data from individuals aged 15 and over via a quarterly household survey. A dedicated module assessing the employment of persons with disabilities was included in the EU-LFS in the years 2002 and 2011. This was the main European data source available at European level to assess the participation of people with disabilities in the labour market and in education and training. From 2022, this module will no longer be used, and instead the GALI (Global Activity Limitation Instrument) will be included in the LFS every two years (10). In Ireland, information on disability has been collected more frequently, with the timing and method of collection changing several times in recent years.[[4]](#footnote-4)

To allow for regular monitoring of the situation of people with disabilities in different areas of life (education, health, independent living, equality, participation, etc.), the GALI will from 2022 be included in all social surveys of the EU, including the Labour Force Survey, Adult Education Survey, Household Budget Survey, Time Use Survey, and the Information and Communication Technology Survey. This development will be further complemented by a SILC module on health to be undertaken every three years from 2022 and which will include the Washington Group Short Set of questions.

### Census of Population Ireland

Changes to Census 2022 as described above have brought the disability questions in the Irish census more in line with the Washington Group approach, by moving away from a dichotomous ‘yes/no’ response scale to one that involves consideration of the extent of any difficulties and/or activity limitation. The census is undertaken every five years in Ireland.

### Other cross-national surveys

#### The European Social Survey

The European Social Survey is a cross-sectional survey on attitudes, beliefs and behaviours carried out every two years in more than 30 European countries. The goal of the study is to provide researchers, policy makers and the public with the highest quality survey data that are comparable across European countries and across time. Data are representative of the population aged 15 and over in each participating country. In Ireland, the ESS is funded by a grant from the Irish Research Council. Data are collected through face-to-face interviews and no proxy interviews are permitted. Respondents are asked: “Are you hampered in your daily activities in any way by any longstanding illness, disability, infirmity or mental health problem? And, if yes, is that a lot or to some extent?” Information on labour force participation is also collected.

## Defining the working age population

Analysts can use different age groups when examining employment rates. International organisations such as the OECD define 15-64 years of age as the working age population and report the employment rate for a country as the proportion of 15-64 years who are employed[[5]](#footnote-5). In Ireland, the CSO also defines the employment rate in this way: “The employment rate for the State is defined as the share of persons in the total population of persons aged 15-64 years who are in employment.” (23).

It has previously been suggested that using this age range in Ireland is less appropriate, given that children aged 15 are still in education and that the qualifying age for the state pension is higher than 64; as a result, it has been suggested that an age range of 18 to state pension age (now 66) would be more appropriate when setting national employment rate targets for people with disabilities (24) However, the employment target set in the CES, RSI, etc. relates to employment rates as measured by the Census, and the CSO typically reports age breakdowns in five-year age bands (e.g., 15-19, 20-25) in order to protect confidentiality. This means that the employment rate for the population aged 18-66 cannot be calculated from publicly available data. Consequently, the CES target was set for the population aged 20-64. As mentioned above, targets and indicators in other strategies used other definitions of working age, such as the population aged 15 and older and the population aged 15-64.

**RECOMMENDATION 1:** A consistent definition of the working age population should be adopted for any future national employment targets for people with disabilities. In line with the official definitions adopted by both national and international entities, future national employment targets for people with disabilities should be set for the population aged 15-64.

## Labour market statistics

### Labour force participation rate

The labour force participation rate is a measure of the active workforce of a country. It can be defined as the proportion of the working-age population that is engaging in the labour market by working or by looking for work. As such, it is an indicator of the size of the supply of labour available relative to the working age population (25). Categories of people not counted as part of the labour force include individuals looking after home or family, students, retirees, and those who cannot work due to disability (26).

### Unemployment rate

The unemployment rate is the percentage of the working age population not working but available for and seeking work, i.e., the percentage of the labour force who do not have a job.

### Employment rate

The employment rate is the number of people in employment expressed as a percentage of the total working age population.

### Disability employment gap

The disability employment gap can be measured in percentage points, i.e., by calculating the difference between the employment rates of people with and without disabilities as a percentage of the total working-age population. Alternatively, the DEG can be measured in percentages relative to the total employed labour force. Taking the former approach, the DEG can be interpreted as the percentage of the total working-age population with disabilities that would need to be employed to close the employment gap with people without disabilities, and this is the approach advocated for here (13).

**RECOMMENDATION 2**: In line with Ireland’s obligations under the UNCRPD and in line with calls from the European Commission under the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030, national targets should be set for an increase in the employment rate of people with disabilities and for a reduction in the disability employment gap.

## Trade-offs when using various data sources to set and monitor progress towards employment targets

As mentioned above, disability is measured differently across different programmes of data collection. Different national employment rates for a given year are also reported based on how the working age population is defined and as a result of issues like sampling error. The setting of targets requires first determining a baseline value, and so decisions on the data source to be used need to be made at the outset.

Setting and monitoring disability targets based on census data has the advantage that a census is a full enumeration of the population rather than a survey. Surveys involve sampling (and therefore sampling error). Population surveys typically exclude individuals living in collective households or institutions, where disability prevalence might be expected to be particularly high.

Because of the time and cost involved, the census is carried out much less frequently than surveys, meaning progress towards a target based on census figures can only be measured every five years. Because achieving employment equality for persons with disabilities is likely to be a medium- to long-term project, this may not in itself be problematic. However, issues arise when question changes occur between censuses, as this is highly disruptive in terms of monitoring trends. While changes to the questions from which disability status is derived in Census 2022 can be seen as improvements, bringing the questions more in line with internationally accepted approaches to measuring disability, the revision has disrupted the time series and prevented the assessment of whether previous national employment targets for people with disabilities have been met. However, it can perhaps be assumed that the census questions, having been changed so recently, are unlikely to be revised again in the short- to medium-term.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Ireland’s census data on disability are not directly comparable to data from censuses in other countries, which each take different approaches to the definition and measurement of the concept of disability. EU disability statistics are collected more frequently and theoretically offer the ability to make such cross-country comparisons. However, in practice, the relevant major EU surveys are subject to substantial cross-country differences in data collection that mean the actual comparability of the disability statistics is limited. Further, of the two main surveys which could be used to monitor progress towards disability employment targets, EU-SILC collects information on employment only for those aged 16 and over, meaning if the definition of working age advocated for here (15-64) were to be adopted in national targets, SILC would not be an appropriate data source to use. This is before taking into account cross-cultural differences in how disability is construed and reported that would also affect the validity of any cross-country comparisons.

It is argued here that cross-country comparability is not the primary concern in Ireland’s pursuit of employment equality for disabled people, and that, in any case, the ability to make these comparisons is limited based on existing data sources. While the opportunity offered by European surveys to more frequently monitor progress towards employment targets could be beneficial, it is argued here that this does not outweigh the other drawbacks of relying on a survey rather a full enumeration of the population.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**RECOMMENDATION 3**: Employment targets should be set using Census 2022 as baseline data, and progress towards these targets should be monitored using data from future censuses.

# Determining the magnitude of overall targets

In addition to decisions around the technical parameters considered above, decisions must be made about the magnitude of employment targets, which should be ambitious enough to move the dial towards equality for persons with disabilities as outlined in Article 27, but realistic enough so as to be achievable. As a first step in setting or revising national targets for the employment of disabled people, the ILO recommend an initial step of gathering up-to-date information on the number of persons with disabilities who seek employment (27).

According to Census 2022, people with disabilities comprised 20% of the working age population (15-64 years) and represented 15% of people at working age who are in employment. Due to the nature of some disabilities, some level of underrepresentation in the overall workforce is to be anticipated. This underrepresentation is more pronounced among those who report disabilities ‘to a great extent’, who represent 6.5% of the working age population but just 2.7% of those in employment. This can be contrasted with those with disabilities ‘to some extent’, who represent 13% of the working age population and 12% of those of working age who are employed.

Expressed another way, the employment rate of people aged 15-64 without disabilities was 71% per Census 2022, while the employment rate for people with disabilities was 49%, representing a disability employment gap of 22 percentage points. The gap between the employment rate of people without disabilities and that of people with disabilities to some extent (60%) was 11 percentage points. The employment rate of people with a disability to a great extent was 27%, or 44 percentage points lower than the employment rate of people without disabilities. As described above, however, these figures relate to proportions of the total working age population and not just to the labour force.

Overall, in Census 2022, 43% of working age people with disabilities were outside the labour force, compared to 22% of working age people without disabilities. As shown in Table 2, the labour force participation rate was much lower for people with disabilities to a great extent (35%) than for those with disabilities to some extent (68%) and those with no disabilities (78%).

The unemployment rate of people with disabilities was 14% in Ireland in Census 2022, compared to 7.5% for people without disabilities. The unemployment rate was 12% for people with disabilities ‘to some extent’ and 22% for people with disabilities ‘to a great extent’. As described earlier, the unemployment rate refers to the proportion of the population that is without work but available for and seeking work; it does not include the proportion of the working age population who are outside the labour force (students, retirees, individuals looking after home or family, individuals unable to work due to disability).

Article 27 of the UNCRPD articulates that persons with disabilities have the right to work, on an equal basis to others. It is argued here that to reach its obligations under Article 27, Ireland must target a reduction in the unemployment rate of people with disabilities to equal the unemployment rate of people without disabilities. This would mean that persons with disabilities who are in the labour market, i.e., those who are able to and looking to work would be equally as likely as persons without disabilities to secure employment.

It is highly probable that a proportion of the people with disabilities who are currently report that they are outside the labour market, including individuals who currently report that they cannot work due to disability, might be able to and wish to become employed under different conditions, with the removal of particular barriers, or with the provision of certain supports. Because of the nature of some disabilities, however, there will always be a proportion of people with disabilities who will not participate in the labour market. At present, there is a lack of available data to accurately estimate this proportion. The 2006 national disability survey found that 37% of adults with disabilities who were not already in employment (those who described themselves as unemployed, retired early, unable to work due to permanent illness or disability, looking after family/home, or not in employment for another reason) were interested in starting work, under the right circumstances (28); however, these data can now be considered dated. In 2015, the Department of Social Protection conducted a postal survey with a random sample of disability allowance recipients (29)[[8]](#footnote-8) which included a question on work ambitions. Of those who were not currently employed, 57% indicated that they were unable to work, 35% indicated that they would be interested in part-time work, and 8% indicated that they would be interested in full-time work, under the right conditions. As the question format did not allow for the selection of multiple responses, this survey does not provide insight into the proportion of people with disabilities who said that they could not work due to disability but may also be interested in work in the right circumstances.

It is argued here that there is not a strong enough evidentiary basis for setting national employment targets for the subpopulation of people with disabilities who are outside the labour market. Collection of up-to-date, nationally representative information on the preferences, support needs, and health status of people with disabilities who currently indicate that they are unable to work due to their disability, for example through a dedicated national disability survey, would allow estimation of the proportion of people with disabilities who might feasibly enter the labour force. This would facilitate the setting of such targets in future. In the absence of these data, it is argued here that targets should focus on equality for persons with disabilities who indicate that they are willing, able and wanting to work, i.e., among those who report that they are unemployed and seeking work.

As previously mentioned, as part of the EU Disability Strategy 2021-2030, the European Commission calls on Member States to establish, by 2024, targets for a) increasing the employment rate of persons with disabilities b) reducing employment rate gaps between persons with and without disabilities. The current unemployment rate of people with disabilities is 13.9%, compared to 7.5% for people with no disabilities. If the unemployment rate of people with disabilities was equal to the unemployment rate of people without disabilities in Census 2022, this would equate to an increase in the employment rate of people with disabilities from 49% to 54% and a reduction in the disability employment gap to 17 percentage points from a current 22 percentage points. Based on Census 2022 numbers, this would equate to an increase of 24,177 persons with disabilities in employment.

The next two opportunities to monitor the employment of people with disabilities through the census will occur in 2027 and 2031. Achieving a five-percentage point increase in the employment rate of people with disabilities by 2027 may be difficult to achieve; however, targeting a five-point increase by 2031 may be considered insufficiently ambitious. Scotland is targeting a 50% reduction in the disability employment gap between 2016 and 2038, from 37.4 percentage points to 18.7 percentage points (30). If progress towards this target were linear, this would equate to a change of just under one percentage point annually. Indeed, the employment rate of disabled people in Scotland has increased by nine percentage points from 2014 to 2023, an average of one percentage point annually. The United Kingdom set a target to see one million more disabled people in employment between 2017 and 2027, a target which was achieved in 2022 (31). Between 2013 and 2022, there was a 9.2 percentage point reduction in the UK disability employment gap, giving an average annual reduction of one percentage point (31). In light of these figures, the more ambitious employment target dates may be more appropriate for Ireland, and so they are recommended here; however, it is strongly advised that these be subject to appropriate consultation and debate.

It is also important to note that analyses conducted at the UK level and in Scotland have shown that most of the increases in the disability employment rate over the last decade are attributable to increases in disability prevalence (70% in Scotland; 60% in the UK), meaning that the changes are mainly as a result of working people becoming disabled or reporting a disability[[9]](#footnote-9). Only a small share of the changes (10% in Scotland; 15% in the UK) were due to disabled people who were previously not employed becoming employed.[[10]](#footnote-10) In Ireland, it may be important to analyse contributing factors to any increase in the employment rate of disabled people, which may include (a) an increase in the number of disabled people moving into employment, (b) an increase in the number of people in employment acquiring a disability, or (c) an increase in the number of people in employment reporting a pre-existing disability for the first time. **RECOMMENDATION 4**: A target should be set to increase the employment rate of people with disabilities in Ireland from 49% in 2022 to 54% by 2027.

**RECOMMENDATION 5:** A target should be set to reduce the disability employment gap in Ireland from 22 percentage points in 2022 to 17 points by 2027.

Table 2 Labour force participation, employment and unemployment rates, by disability status

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | All | People without disabilities | People with disabilities to any extent | People with disabilities to some extent  | People with disabilities to a great extent |
| Total population aged 15-64 (number) | 3360537 | 2699454 | 661083  | 440794 | 220289 |
| Employed (number) | 2236811 | 1910830 | 325981 | 265894 | 60087 |
| Unemployed (number) | 207512 | 155003 | 52509 | 35070 | 17439 |
| Not in labour force (number) | 916214 | 633621 | 282593 | 139830 | 142763 |
| Labour force participation rate (%) | 72.7 | 76.5 | 57.3 | 68.3 | 35.2 |
| Employment rate (%) | 66.6 | 70.9 | 49.3 | 60.3 | 27.3 |
| Unemployment rate (%) | 8.5 | 7.5 | 13.9 | 11.7 | 22.5 |

Source: Census 2022

# Exploring intersections

In pursuit of the global employment targets for people with disabilities recommended above, it may be helpful to understand how employment and unemployment rates of people with disabilities vary for different subgroups, so as to inform where policy measures are targeted.

### Gender and disability

In many countries, women with disabilities are subject to multiple forms of discrimination when seeking employment, and in 2019 across the EU, 49% of women aged 20-64 were in employment, compared to 54% of men (18). In Census 2022 in Ireland, the employment rate for males with disabilities (to any extent) was 52.8%, compared to 46.3% for females. However, for both the population with a disability and without, higher proportions of females are outside the labour force completely. A lower employment rate among females with (and without) disabilities is in part accounted for by higher proportions of females looking after home or family.

In terms of unemployment, in Census 2022, unemployment rates were similar for males and females overall (8.8% for males and 9.2% for females) but were somewhat lower for females with disabilities than for their male counterparts. For example, the unemployment rate for males with a disability to a great extent was 24.8%, compared to 20.2% for females with a disability to a great extent. Similarly, the unemployment rate was lower for females with a disability to some extent than for males with a disability to some extent (Table 3). It is argued here that the differences are not of a magnitude that would warrant a gender-based approach to increasing disability employment levels.

Table 4 Unemployment rates by disability status and gender

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Males % (n) | Females% (n) | All% (n) |
| Total population | 8.8 (114,812) | 9.2 (92,700) | 8.5 (207,512) |
| Population without disabilities | 7.7 (85,707) | 7.2 (69,296) | 7.5 (155,003) |
| Population with a disability to any extent | 15.1 (29,105) | 12.6 (23,404) | 13.9 (52,509) |
| Population with a disability to some extent | 12.6 (19,389) | 10.7 (15,681) | 11.7 (35,070) |
| Population with a disability to a great extent | 24.8 (9,716) | 20.2 (7,723) | 22.5 (17,439) |

### Disability and age

Data from Census 2022 show that the disability employment gap in Ireland varies considerably by age (Table 4). The gap is smallest among younger people of working age, at just 3% among 15-19-year-olds (a majority of whom are still in full-time education), 10% among 20-24-year-olds, and 16% among 25-29-year-olds. The DEG increases for each age group until it peaks at 32% among 55-59-year-olds. While a wider gap for older people might suggest a need for age-based employment sub-targets, research has shown that older people with disabilities are less likely to return or to want to return to work.

Younger people with disabilities report better health and stamina than older people with disabilities, both of which are linked to employment rates. In Census 2022, 81% of 15-34-year-olds rated their general health as good or very good, dropping to 55% of people with disabilities aged 50-64 years old. In the 2006 National Disability Survey, 54% of 18-34-year-olds with a disability but just 32% of 55-64-year-olds with a disability reported good or very good stamina. The National Disability Survey also indicated that there were much higher levels of interest in work among younger people than older people (63% of those under 44 were interested in work, in the right circumstances, compared to 28% of those over 55) (28). Again, it is argued that a focus on unemployment rates rather than overall employment rates is preferable in terms of realising equality of employment opportunity.

Looking at unemployment rates (Figure 1), there is no strong linear relationship between age and unemployment. The proportion of people with disabilities who indicate that they are not working but seeking work is highest among 15-19-year-olds (24%), followed by 60-64-year-olds (16%) and then 55-59-year-olds (14%).

While specific policy measures are likely to be warranted for young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEETs), it is advised here that a specific employment target for this group is not warranted, given that education or training may be a more suitable option for an unknown proportion of this group of teenagers. While it is also recommended here that any policy measures aimed at increasing levels of employment among people with disabilities should seek to support older people with disabilities who wish to enter employment, the evidence suggests that older persons are less likely to be interested in or able to work and that a wider disability employment gap among older people is to be expected.

Table Employment rates of people with and without disabilities by age, Census 2022

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Employment rate of people with disabilities (%) | Employment rate of people without disabilities (%) | Disability employment gap (percentage point difference) |
| 15-19 | 7.7 | 10.5 | 2.8 |
| 20-24 | 39.5 | 49.8 | 10.3 |
| 25-29 | 64.9 | 80.9 | 16.0 |
| 30-34 | 66.0 | 83.1 | 17.2 |
| 35-39 | 64.1 | 83.4 | 19.3 |
| 40-44 | 62.0 | 84.2 | 22.3 |
| 45-49 | 58.9 | 84.3 | 25.3 |
| 50-54 | 53.4 | 82.8 | 29.3 |
| 55-59 | 46.2 | 78.4 | 32.3 |
| 60-64 | 34.2 | 62.9 | 28.7 |

Source: Census 2022

Figure Unemployment rates of people with a disability to any extent, by age group

### Disability type

Census 2022 data show that unemployment rates are highest among individuals with an intellectual disability (29%), followed by persons with difficulty learning, remembering or concentrating (23%) and individuals with a difficulty with basic physical activities (22%). Unemployment rates are lowest among individuals who report deafness or hearing impairment (10%) and those who report blindness or vision impairment (10.5%) (Table 5). Different policy measures and/or different employment services or supports may be required for different disability types.

In terms of gender differences, the unemployment rate of males with a psychological or emotional condition or a mental health issue (24%) is somewhat higher than that of females (17%). For all other listed conditions, the unemployment rates are approximately the same (e.g., among people with intellectual disabilities, among people who are deaf or have a hearing impairment) or are of a magnitude in line with the (small) difference in overall unemployment rates between disabled men and women.

Table 6 Unemployment rates by disability type and gender (population aged 15+)[[11]](#footnote-11)

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Male unemployment % (n) | Female unemployment % (n) | Total unemployment % (n) |
| Difficulty with pain, breathing or any other chronic illness/condition | 14.8 | 12.8 | 13.8 |
| A difficulty with basic physical activities | 23.8 | 20.9 | 22.4 |
| Blindness or vision impairment | 11.2 | 9.8 | 10.5 |
| A psychological or emotional condition or a mental health issue | 23.9 | 16.9 | 19.9 |
| A difficulty with learning, remembering or concentrating | 23.9 | 21.7 | 23.0 |
| Deafness or hearing impairment | 9.5 | 10.5 | 9.9 |
| Intellectual disability | 29.5 | 29.2 | 29.4 |

### Extent of Disability

As described earlier, the unemployment rate of people with disabilities to some extent (12%) is much closer to the unemployment rate of people without disabilities (7.5%) than the unemployment rate of people with disabilities to a great extent (22%).

If the unemployment rate of people with disabilities to some extent equalled that of people without disabilities in 2022, this would have equated to 12,589 fewer unemployed people with disabilities to some extent (i.e., a reduction from 35,070 to 22,480 persons) or an increase in the employment rate of people with disabilities to some extent from 60% to 63%.

For the unemployment rate of people with disabilities to a great extent to equal that of people without disabilities in 2022 would have necessitated a further 11,626 unemployed persons with a disability to a great extent entering employment (i.e., a reduction in the unemployment figures for this group from 17,439 to 5,813), which would equate to an increase in the employment rate of people with disabilities to a great extent from 27% to 32.5%.

**RECOMMENDATION 6:** A target should be set to increase the employment rate of people with disabilities to some extent in Ireland from 60% to 63% by 2027.

**RECOMMENDATION 7:** A target should be set to reduce the gap between the employment rate of people with no disabilities (71%) and people with disabilities to some extent in Ireland (60%) from 11 percentage points in 2022 to 8 points by 2027.

**RECOMMENDATION 8**: A target should be set to increase the employment rate of people with disabilities to a great extent in Ireland from 27% to 33% by 2027.

**RECOMMENDATION 9**: A target should be set to reduce the disability employment gap between people with no disabilities and people with disabilities to a great extent in Ireland from 44 percentage points in 2022 to 38 points by 2027.

# Quotas as a means of achieving national employment targets

While national employment targets can be seen to represent a country’s ambition or aspiration for improving employment levels of disabled people in a given timeframe, appropriate policy action is required to realise these. Indeed, Article 27 of the UNCRPD obliges States Parties both to employ persons with disabilities in the public sector and to promote the employment of disabled people in the private sector through appropriate policies and measures, which may include affirmative action programmes, incentives, and other measures (32). A 2019 review by the International Labour Organization (ILO) found that 103 countries worldwide have quota schemes for the employment of people with disabilities, making quotas one of the most common policy measures to promote the employment of disabled people (27). While targets are goals, quotas are mandated outcomes; in many countries, the latter have been deemed necessary to achieve the former.

### Characteristics of quota systems worldwide

In approximately one third (32%) of the countries with a quota scheme for the employment of disabled people, the quotas have associated fines or levies for non-compliance. In 62% of cases, quotas are binding, but there is insufficient information available to determine whether or how these are enforced. In 6% of the countries with quota schemes, quotas do not have a legislative basis and may therefore not be binding. At the time of the review, a further six countries were considering or in the process of introducing a binding quota (27).

Ireland is counted in the ILO review among a smaller group of countries that “have explicitly avoided the introduction of quotas but have established other positive action measures to promote the right to work of persons with disabilities which can be considered close to quotas in terms of their requirements” (27). In its 2023 Human Rights Report on the right to work of persons with disabilities, the European Disability Forum includes Ireland among 23 EU countries with a quota in place (the exceptions being Denmark, Finland, Latvia, and Sweden) and one of eight whose quota systems have no financial sanctions for failure to comply (along with Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Luxembourg, Portugal, and Spain) (18).

In 70% of the 100 countries for which the relevant information was available, the quota schemes apply to both the public and private sectors, while in 24% the quotas apply only to the public sector and in 6% of countries only apply to the private sector. Further, in some countries, particular employment sectors are exempt from the quota scheme. In Haiti, for example, the quota applies only to the agricultural, commercial, industrial and service sectors. In Ecuador, the armed forces are only required to comply with the quota among their administrative staff.

In just over half of countries (53%) with a quota scheme for the employment of people with disabilities, the quota applies only to employers with a workforce over a certain size, with smaller-scale employers being exempt from the quota scheme. Most frequently, the lower limit for the quota to apply was 20 or 25 employees (e.g., Czechia, Egypt, Germany, France, Tanzania, Uzbekistan) with some countries (e.g., Angola, Bosnia Herzegovina) having a lower threshold, and others (e.g., Israel, Indonesia) having much higher thresholds of 100 employees. In one country (Haiti), employers with fewer than 1,000 employees were exempt from the quota scheme in their country (27).

In some countries, including Austria, China, Czechia, Japan and Poland, persons with particular levels or types of disability can count as multiple people towards the quota. In Czechia, for example, persons with more severe disabilities are counted three times for the quota calculation. In Japan, persons with severe intellectual and physical disabilities and persons with psycho-social disabilities are each counted as two workers with respect to the quota.

It is rare for countries with quota schemes to make particular provision for women with disabilities, although both Albania and South Korea do so (27).

There was considerable variation in the magnitude of the quota rates across countries, which typically ranged from 1% to 10%, with one country (Senegal) having a quota of 15% (Table 6). Approximately three out of four countries had a single quota rate applying to all employers, with around one in five having different quotas for the private and public sectors or that varied depending on the workforce size of the employer. In a small minority of countries (e.g., Bangladesh, Peru), the quality or seniority of employment was also part of the quota scheme. In Peru, for example, the law provides for access to management roles for people with disabilities who have the appropriate employment profile.

Table Magnitude of disability employment quotas in different countries

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Quota rate  | Percentage of countries | Example countries |
| Lower than 2% | 20% | Algeria, Cambodia, Chile, China, Haiti, Indonesia, Lithuania, Malta, Tunisia |
| 2-5% | 62% | Costa Rica, Czechia, Ecuador, Egypt, Germany, India, Japan, Jamaica, Kenya, Luxembourg, Pakistan, Slovakia, Spain, Uganda, Venezuela |
| 6-7% | 8% | Bosnia Herzegovina, Burkina Faso, Croatia, France, Italy, Morocco, Poland |
| 7-15% | 20% | Cameroun, Cyprus, Nigeria, Senegal |

Source: ILO (2019)

In countries where quota schemes are enforced, compliance is typically monitored by the labour inspectorate of the ministry or department with responsibility for labour and employment.

The ILO review found that data on the effectiveness of the quota systems were accessible for very few countries. Where available, the evidence suggests that quotas are frequently not complied with, although they may be drivers of progress. The ILO cite the case of Germany, where the proportion of people with ‘severe disabilities’ among employers subject to the quota increased from 4.3% in 2008 to 4.7% in 2014, lower than the 5% quota rate set by law. The quota was found to be more successful in the public sector, where 6.6% of employees had a severe disability, than in the private sector, where the rate was 4.1% (27).

As shown in Table 1 above, Ireland had the highest DEG in Europe according to EU-SILC data from 2022, at 37%. The EU average DEG was 21 percentage points, with ten countries below the EU average. Of these, three countries did not have a quota scheme for the employment of people with disabilities: Denmark, Finland, and Latvia. Characteristics of the quota schemes in the remaining seven countries are shown in Table 7, drawing on information published in the ILO review

Table Characteristics of the quota schemes in place in EU countries with relatively low disability employment gaps

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Country  | Disability employment gap  | Quota % | Employer threshold | Non-compliance | Incentives for compliance |
| Luxembourg | 8.5% | 5% | Public sector | No information available | No information available |
| Portugal | 13.1% | 5%, for new public sector recruits | Public sector | No information available | Wage subsidies, job and workplace adaptation grants, subsidy for personalised support |
| Italy | 14.0% | 7% for public and private sector with over 50 workers.2-6% for employers with 15 workers or more | Public and private employers with at least 15 workers | Fine payable | No information available |
| Spain | 14.6% | 2% for the private sector5% for the public sector | Public and private sector employers of 50 or more employees | No information | Lump sum subsidies for indeterminate contracts. Social security contribution rebate, varying according to the type of contract (indeterminate or temporary), the degree of the disability, and the sex of the worker. Workplace adaptation grants. Subsidies for the training of disabled workers. Tax rebates.  |
| Slovenia | 18.8% | 2-6% depending in the size of the company | All employers of at least 20 employees, except for diplomatic and consular missions, sheltered workshops, and employment centres | No information | No information |
| France | 20.8% | 6% | Public and private employers with more than 20 employees | Paying contribution to employment fund, with an additional payment by employers who have not taken any positive action in the previous four years | Grant to employers hiring disabled persons for over 12 consecutive months. Subsidy towards cost of equipment, specific training. Accessibility support. |
| Slovakia | 21% | 3.2% | Employers with at least 20 employers | Payment of financial contribution | Non-repayable financial contributions |

Source: ILO (2019)

Little information is provided on how different countries have determined the magnitude of their quotas. However, the International Labour Organization provides recommendations on how the setting or revision of disability employment quotas should be approached (21). These are as follows:

Preparatory phase:

1. Current data should be compiled on the number of men and women with different disability types who are seeking employment in a country. Information should be gathered on the structure of the labour market and, particularly, on the number of companies/employers of different sizes. Together, this information can enable an informed decision to be made about a) the quota percentage, b) whether the quota/target should apply to all employers or just those over a certain size, and c) whether some disability types or levels should be counted as double or triple for the purposes of the quota obligation.
2. Consultations should be carried out with representatives of people with disabilities, trade unions, and employers. Buy-in from these groups is emphasised by the ILO as integral to the success of any disability employment policy measures such as quotas.

Developing or revising the quota:

1. If there is consensus for developing or revising a quota, a policy document should be developed with key stakeholders that outlines the features of the scheme. The ILO recommends that any quota scheme should involve a binding obligation underpinned by legislation (and, optimally, under the umbrella of anti-discrimination legislation).
2. A decision on the magnitude of the quota should be made on the basis of data gathered in the preparatory phase. Decisions should be taken on whether particular groups, such as women with disabilities, should be prioritised, for example through double counting when calculating compliance with the quota obligation.
3. The scheme should apply to employers in both the public and private sectors.
4. The scheme should include provisions to promote the employment of persons with disabilities in higher-level positions.
5. The scheme should include sanctions for non-compliance in the form of a levy for each unfilled position under the quota requirement.
6. The resulting fund from levies should be ringfenced for the purposes of funding measures to increase the employability of people with disabilities or for supporting employers who do comply in full or in part with the quota to, for example, fund workplace adaptations.
7. The aim of the quota scheme should be to promote the recruitment of jobseekers with disabilities and to support the retention of employees who acquire a disability, rather than as a way of generating funds for disability-related or any other purposes.

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to review them, the ILO provides recommendations on a number of further phases in implementing a quota scheme, including: defining eligibility criteria for who will benefit from funds generated by non-compliance with the quota, providing support services to employers and to promoting the inclusion of disabled people in employment, monitoring compliance with the quota, and encouraging employer observation of the quota (27).

### Structure of the labour market

The ILO advises that any potential quota scheme must be informed by up-to-date information on the proportion of people with disabilities seeking employment (already described above) and on the structure of the labour market, data on which are now considered.

In 2022, 368,000 people, or 14.4% of the workforce, were employed in the public sector (33). In relation to the private sector, 32% of people working in the business economy in Ireland in 2020 (504,896 people) were employed in large enterprises, defined as those with 250 or more employees (34). A majority of people working in the business economy worked in small and medium enterprises (SMEs; defined as enterprises employing fewer than 250 persons), which comprised 99.8% of the total number of enterprises in Ireland and employed 1,093,747 people or 68% of all persons employed in the business economy (Table 8). SMEs can be further classified as micro (fewer than 10 persons), small (10-49 persons) or medium (50-249). In 2020, micro enterprises comprised 93% of all enterprises and employed 28% of those working in the business economy.

Table 9 Number of people engaged in the business economy in Ireland in 2020, by enterprise size

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Enterprise size | Number of people engaged |
| Micro (<10 persons) | 449,520 |
| Small (10-49 persons) | 343,043 |
| Medium (50-249) | 301,184 |
| **All SMEs (<250)** | 1,093,747 |
| Large (>250) | 504,896 |
| **All sizes**  | 1,598,693 |

Source: CSO Structural Business Statistics

### Considering a private sector quota in Ireland

As reported earlier, the requirement of public sector bodies to employ persons with disabilities under Part 5 of the Disability Act, and the mandated reporting of same, has appeared to have driven progress on the employment of people with disabilities in the public service. As outlined above, many countries worldwide also place similar obligations on private sector employers.

The introduction of any such obligation in the private sector would require reporting and monitoring. A difficulty with workplace monitoring relates to how data on disability are collected. Data collection in the public sector for Part 5 uses the definition of disability used in the Disability Act. This is different to the Census questions on disability. Census 2022 data indicate that people with disabilities to any extent already represent 14.6% of employed people. This contrasts with 3.1% (in 2021) employed in the public sector and may reflect the different definitions. Therefore, any quota set for the private sector could not rely on census data for monitoring.

There is now precedent, however, for requiring private sector employers in Ireland to provide information on their workforces in pursuit of equality goals. Gender pay gap reporting was introduced in 2022, initially applying to all organisations with 250 or more employees. It is acknowledged here that there may be different challenges in identifying employees with disabilities than in identifying people’s genders. From 2024, however, many companies in Ireland are going to be required to report on their employment of persons with disabilities as a result of EU legislation. The European Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) came into force in January 2023 which requires all large companies and listed SMEs to report on non-financial information, including on environmental, social, and governance issues. In July 2023, the European Commission adopted the European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS) which apply to all companies subject to the CSRD and relate to a range of issues such as climate change, biodiversity, and human rights. A number of the standards relate to the reporting of social information about the enterprises’ own workforces, including on diversity. In relation to persons with disabilities, companies will be required to report the percentage of persons with disabilities within their own workforce and the total number of employees with disabilities broken down by gender (35). This information could readily be used to monitor compliance with an obligation on private sector employers to employ persons with disabilities, were it to be introduced.

**RECOMMENDATION 10:** Conduct more research, analysis and consultation as to the advantages and disadvantages of extending the public sector minimum target for the employment of people with disabilities to the private sector

# Conclusion

This paper has set out a series of recommendations for developing future national employment targets for people with disabilities in Ireland, and these are reiterated below. The recommendations are in line with Ireland’s European and international obligations and have emerged from analysis of recent data on people with disabilities in Ireland. As a next step, it is crucial that the proposals be subject to appropriate consultation and debate. Only through buy-in from all relevant stakeholder groups can the employment rights of people with disabilities be fully realised.

# Recommendations

**RECOMMENDATION 1:** A consistent definition of the working age population should be adopted for any future national employment targets for people with disabilities. In line with the official definitions adopted by both national and international entities, future national employment targets for people with disabilities should be set for the population aged 15-64.

**RECOMMENDATION 2**: In line with Ireland’s obligations under the UNCRPD and with calls from the European Commission under the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030, national targets should be set for an increase in the employment rate of people with disabilities **and** a reduction in the disability employment gap.

**RECOMMENDATION 3**: Employment targets should be set using Census 2022 as baseline data, and progress towards these targets should be monitored using data from future censuses.

**RECOMMENDATION 4**: A target should be set to increase the employment rate of people with disabilities in Ireland from 49% in 2022 to 54% by 2027.

**RECOMMENDATION 5:** A target should be set to reduce the disability employment gap in Ireland from 22 percentage points in 2022 to 17 points by 2027.

**RECOMMENDATION 6:** A target should be set to increase the employment rate of people with disabilities to some extent in Ireland from 60% to 63% by 2027.

**RECOMMENDATION 7:** A target should be set to reduce the disability employment gap between people with no disabilities and people with disabilities to some extent in Ireland from 11 percentage points in 2022 to 8 points by 2027.

**RECOMMENDATION 8**: A target should be set to increase the employment rate of people with disabilities to a great extent in Ireland from 27% to 33% by 2027.

**RECOMMENDATION 9**: A target should be set to reduce the disability employment gap between people with no disabilities and people with disabilities to a great extent in Ireland from 44 percentage points in 2022 to 35 points by 2027.

**RECOMMENDATION 10:** Conduct more research, analysis and consultation as to the advantages and disadvantages of extending the public sector minimum target for the employment of people with disabilities to the private sector

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1. Census 2022 data were not released until after this report was published. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See [Disability Act 2005 (irishstatutebook.ie)](https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2005/act/14/enacted/en/html) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Individuals who selected a response of 'yes, to some extent' for at least one condition/difficulty or 'yes, a little' for difficulty with one activity, but did not select 'yes to a great extent' or 'yes, a lot' for either question were classified as having a 'disability to some extent'. Individuals who selected at least one of the 'yes, to a great extent' or 'yes, a lot' response options were classified as having a 'disability to a great extent'. Any individual who ticked any of the 'yes' boxes in either question was considered as part of the 'disability to any extent' group. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The national disability questions have been asked as an add-on module to the LFS in Ireland since 2010 with different frequencies. They are currently asked every odd year in Q2. The Washington Group short set was included in Q4 2018. The GALI set are asked in each quarter of even number years from 2022 (information provided by CSO on request, November 2023). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. When the OECD report on the disability employment gap, they typically draw on SILC data for participating EU countries, and SILC data do not include 15-year-olds. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. It is intended that the mode of data collection will change for Census 2027 where there will be a move to an on-line self-completed questionnaire moving away from the more traditional paper based self-completed questionnaire. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The NDA acknowledges that disabled persons organisations (DPOs) have expressed concerns around the accuracy of the disability information collected in Census 2022. For example, there are concerns arising from a perceived lack of clarity in the way any questions relevant to the Deaf community were asked, as well as insufficient support and accessible resources available to Deaf people when completing the Census. Together, these issues have raised concerns that the number of Deaf people reported in Census 2022 is an underestimate. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The overall response rate for the survey was 27%. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Over half of the increase in disability prevalence in Scotland is due to large increases in rates of depression, mental illness, and learning difficulties since 2014, with these overtaking musculoskeletal conditions as the most common disability types in Scotland (30). Similarly, in the UK, there was an 84% increase in the number of disabled people reporting a mental health condition as their main condition between 2013/14 and 2021/22. The authors state that it is likely that the increase in mental health conditions is due to an increase in reporting rather than an increase in people experiencing mental health conditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Other components of change are changes to the non-disabled employment rate and increases in the total working age population, which are indicators of more total jobs in the economy (31). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. It is not possible to construct this table for the 15-64-year-old age group using data that have been released by the CSO. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)