NDA opening statement: Joint Oireachtas Committee on Autism

Dr. Gerard Craddock, Chief Officer, Centre for Excellence in Universal Design (CEUD) and Standards & Monitoring, National Disability Authority.

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# Introduction

The National Disability Authority (NDA) thanks the Chair and the members of this Committee for the opportunity to present on the topic of accessibility of the public realm for people with autism. I am joined here today by my colleague Ms. Mary Tallant, Senior Standards and Monitoring Officer.

The NDA provides independent and evidence informed advice to Government on policy and practice relevant to the lives of disabled people, informed by engagement with relevant stakeholders, including Disabled Persons Organisations such as AsIAm as well as persons with disabilities, older people and professional bodies. The Centre for Excellence in Universal Design at the NDA promotes the universal design of built and digital environments, services and systems.

Important to note that a Universal Design approach also caters for the needs of people with autism and other neurodiverse conditions. We view autism as a different ability rather than a disability. This is an enabling approach, not only for the person with autism but also for practitioners in facilitating their full participation. Universal Design is central in creating an environment that is accessible, understandable and usable by everyone and disadvantages nobody. 2

# Challenges and Opportunities

Our public realm is still not designed to be fully inclusive and welcoming for disabled people, including those with autism and their families in key areas such as transport, public spaces, buildings as well as key life domains such as education and employment.

* We know from our work that disabled people regularly encounter issues such as:
* Poorly designed public spaces and buildings, through a lack of awareness and planning
* Lack of adjustability of lighting, acoustics, temperature and ventilation
* Lack of clear and easy to use signage
* Lack of poor pre-visit information about the accessibility of buildings
* Lack of quiet spaces for people who get sensory overload
* Lack of training of staff to build disability awareness and competence in the organisation.

We advise the importance of this committee considering and including the following in its deliberations:

* That a Universal Design approach is a central element in designing more inclusive services and buildings that enable autistic persons to fulfill their potential
* That educational institutions design their campuses to be more inclusive but also that the content of the curricula and assessment processes are designed to cater for the diversity of students and staff that are now part of all educational organisations. This will also ensure that graduates are educated and knowledgeable about how to design more inclusive buildings, services and products into the future
* Referencing key documents that can support professionals today in designing and delivering more inclusive solutions
* Referencing important national accessibility monitoring functions that provide, and will provide, valuable data going forward on measuring how inclusive public services, buildings and digital services are for disabled people including persons with autism
* Highlighting the development of a new national Standard on Universal Design of Dwellings which will ensure that key issues, some of which I have already mentioned, are included to improve the lives of persons with autism and neurodiverse conditions.

# A number of Important National Publications to Consider

The NDA has produced a number of documents and guides that include several recommendations to meet the needs of persons with autism and other neurodiverse conditions:

1. The Centre is developing a new Code of Practice on Accessible Public Buildings, for the purpose of informing public bodies of their obligations relating to the accessibility of public buildings. This draft document is currently undergoing public consultation and will be submitted to the Minister for approval later in the year.

2. The NDA has also updated the existing Code of Practice on Accessible Public Services and Information to include specific references to autism. This updated Code of Practice is awaiting approval from the Minister. 4

3. The NDA has responsibility to monitor its Codes of Practices and publish its findings. We will be publishing our first report on Access Officers later in the year.

 4. The NDA monitors annually the accessibility of public websites and mobile apps as well as the percentage of disabled people employed in the public sector and publish the resulting data that is publicly available.

5. The NDA are developing a National Standard for Universal Design Dwellings in collaboration with the National Standards Authority of Ireland (NSAI).

6. The Centre has produced a series of ten booklets, called “Building for Everyone: A Universal Design approach”. Booklet 9 is specifically on more inclusive Planning. This booklet is aimed at planning professionals and provides guidance on how to deliver, promote and achieve Universal design within the planning system highlighting the importance of a collaborative approach to planning.

7. Research by the centre on Shared Spaces in the Irish Context. The report found that most stakeholders supported the general aims of shared space but expressed concerns about safety. There was broad consensus that Ireland needs a set of national shared space design guidelines directed by Universal Design principles. It will be important now for local authorities to review the findings and begin addressing the recommendations through in-depth stakeholder engagement with DPOs and persons with disabilities including people with autism.

# Education

Under education, at present we are working closely with the Higher Education Authority (HEA) supporting them on delivering on the PATH 4 program. This is a 5 fund provided by HEA on building capacity in 3rd level institutions to incorporate universal design as a core part of the built, digital environment as well as the teaching and learning.

 The Centre launched a new eLearning CPD module last year aimed at professionals involved in the design and procurement of buildings, but open to anyone interested in Universal Design in the built environment. The module provides participants with a case study of a universal designed public building, bringing them through the design, highlighting accessible features and presenting the real life benefits from interviews with users.

The NDA is also currently updating its existing eLearning training module on disability awareness aimed at public sector staff.

# Conclusion

Thank you. We are happy to answer any questions related to any of the matters we have raised.