**Disability Federation of Ireland**

**Submission on the Rural Transport Programme**

**12 March 2024**

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**Introduction**

The Disability Federation of Ireland is an umbrella organisation representing over 120 organisations across Ireland. We advocate for our members and people with disabilities, and for the full implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, or UN CRPD. DFI campaigns for a society in which people with disabilities are fully equal and included.

DFI was delighted to facilitate and convene a focus group in February, to support and inform Indecon in their Rural Public Transport Review. This was attended by members of DFI, many of whom provide transport to disabled people in the community, and highlighted a number of issues around disability transport, both for individuals in the community, and for community-based organisations that provide transport services to them.

We offer this short submission as a supplement to that focus group.

**Rural Public Transport**

Rural public transport is an important part of life for many people. Not everyone in rural areas has access to an independent form of transport, and access to reliable, easy-to-use public transport can be an important path to independence and equality. People with disabilities are particularly likely to rely on public transport.

The UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, or UN CRPD, sets out the rights that people with disabilities should enjoy in order to be equal in our society. For instance, Article 19 addresses living independently and being included in the community. It notes that one requirement for people with disabilities to be part of the community is that “Community services and facilities for the general population are available on an equal basis to persons with disabilities and are responsive to their needs”. This of course includes public transport.

In addition, the UN CRPD notes in several articles that people with disabilities have a right to receive services in rural areas. This includes Article 25, on Health, and Article 26, – Habilitation and Rehabilitation. Article 9, on Accessibility, notes that all public services, in both urban and rural areas, should be fully accessible.

For people with disabilities in rural areas to fully access services, they require transport. An inclusive, accessible Rural Transport Programme is therefore an important part of creating a more equal, inclusive society for people with disabilities.

**Current Rural Transport Programme**

**What is working**

There are some aspects of the current rural transport programme that are positives. 90% of Local Link buses are wheelchair accessible. The push to ensure that all buses are accessible is a positive, and should continue. It is also important that regular maintenance is done, so that wheelchair ramps and other accessibility features work, and can be relied on by people with disabilities and drivers. The increase in services, routes and frequency of services has also been noted over the years, and is appreciated by those who rely on rural public transport to live their lives independently. The affordability of the service is also a positive. Those who rely on public transport need it to ensure they can access services, education, employment and the wider community. A lack of services can mean a person is trapped in their own home, unable to participate in community life. Therefore, any expansion of services can mean more independence and a better life for many people in the community.

**What needs to be addressed**

An inclusive, accessible transport programme must be based on the principles of universal design. This means designing all parts of the programme so that it is accessible to the largest number of people possible, including people with disabilities and other marginalised groups. This includes the physical infrastructure, but is not limited to that. It also includes how drivers and other staff interact with users, and the entire experience of the journey.

The journey is not limited to the time that users are on a bus or other vehicle. An accessible programme should take a “whole journey approach” to design. This includes not just the bus and bus stop but every step from leaving the house to arriving at the destination. This will involve working with local authorities, and considering issues such as footpaths, traffic, the location of bus stops, and bus stop shelters. It will also involve working with the community, including local access groups, to determine what is needed in each community, and what needs to be prioritised.

In addition, it is important that any transport programme is affordable for people with disabilities. According the Indecon’s own Cost of Disability report, the cost of transport can act as a true barrier to people with disabilities. According to the report, the average extra cost of private transportation is €683. The extra costs of taxi fare for a person with a disability is €335 on average. These costs could be brought down by more accessible public transport.

**Future Programme**

In the design of a new Rural Transport Programme, the voice and experience of people with disabilities in rural areas must be heard and included. No transport programme can be inclusive unless it is designed with the needs of marginalised groups in mind from the beginning.

Providing disability awareness training for all staff would also help to make transport more accessible. If all staff are aware of disabilities, the different kinds of disabilities and the best way to assist people with different disabilities, then the entire experience of using public transport can be improved.

**Conclusion**

In Census 2022, 22% of the population of Ireland, or over 1 in 5 people, identified themselves as having a disability. In this group, nearly 350,000 people said they had difficulty with everyday activities.

This includes over 258,000 people who have difficulty going outside the home, and over 300,000 people who have difficulty working at a job or business, or attending school or college.

While these difficulties could be caused by many things, it’s possible that at least some of these difficulties could be addressed by better public transport.

Access to reliable, accessible public transport can be life changing, allowing someone to leave the house and travel independently. This is why it is so important that any rural transport programme take the needs of people with disabilities into account.

**ENDS**

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You can find all of our submissions on our website [www.disability-federation.ie](http://www.disability-federation.ie)