



Disability Federation of Ireland Commentary & Recommendations for Budget 2013

Ireland's Performance

Ireland must regain its sovereignty and its ability to borrow. The Disability Federation of Ireland (DFI) recognises the Government's responsibility to reduce the deficit, and that decisions on spending cuts and tax increases still have to be taken. But after four years of cumulative, stringent measures, we consider it time to rebalance the Government's recovery programme in light of pressing social priorities.

As the National Economic and Social Council concluded some time ago, "A successful economy requires a successful society". DFI is greatly concerned that the successive public expenditure cuts applied to date undervalue vital features of Ireland that are critical to our long term success as a socially cohesive economy and society. The adverse economic pressures have resulted in such tightening of public services and supports that our social infrastructure is being eroded, to our lasting detriment.

Our Common Purpose

The Programme for Government stated, "By the end of our term in Government Ireland will be recognised as a modern, fair, socially inclusive and equal society supported by a productive and prosperous economy." The Government needs to look again at its social priorities, and to recalibrate its deficit measures to protect both our social and economic future. We cannot content ourselves with having reduced the deficit at the expense of a collapsed social infrastructure.

If people can't look to their local education, training, health, housing and child services for ways to sustain their capacity and develop, their economic and social potential inevitably deteriorates. If capital in the form of health, social care and other precious expertise is run down, it can take a long time to regenerate. If community strength and resilience are not maintained, our ability to respond as a nation to opportunities in the future is undermined. Ireland learned the heavy cost imposed due to deficiencies in economic and financial regulatory capacity, which the Government has acted to rectify, but we are failing to protect essential social services. These are vital services for people with disabilities and their families if they are to participate and have opportunities.

In the area of disability policy, DFI welcomed the commitment by both the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste in the last pre-election debate. When asked what their one key social justice issue was, Mr Gilmore T.D. responded, “it will be looking after people with disabilities” while Mr Kenny T.D. stated, “I agree with that, and I feel an absolute priority should be the three hundred thousand people who suffer from mental illness every year”. They saw that disability services and supports offer insurance for everyone, protecting us all against the worst effects should disability occur.

Yet there still is no Implementation Plan for the National Disability Strategy, and the infrastructure to underpin the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is being weakened instead of reinforced. People with disabilities are slipping further and further behind. This is especially evident in terms of the health and personal social supports that enable people to participate. Supports including work or education options for disabled school leavers, family resource services, personal assistant services to enable independent living and income supports to help people with disabilities and families all have come under further pressure during 2012.

Balanced Budgeting

There is scope for better, more balanced decisions in Government budgeting. A National Budget of €48 billion should yield much stronger support to sustain people’s well being. In particular,

- The intense pressure on the health budget is excessive and is causing undue hardship. Although Government had earlier indicated that the heavy cuts applied to health in 2011 were to be followed by lesser reductions, Budget 2012 imposed another round of stringent cuts. Also optimistic developments on the revenue and cost side were assumed for 2012 that have not materialised, with a growing health deficit emerging this year such that people with disabilities are being targeted to achieve savings.
- Renewed talk about further steep health cutbacks is alarming because health and related services are absolutely critical for people with disabilities. Disability services have not caused health spending over-runs despite rising demand for these services. Essential health spending must be protected in Budget 2013.

- People with disabilities have involuntarily contributed to deficit reduction through other harsh measures. For example, the ESRI's research found that Budget 2012 was regressive overall, with disproportionate pain being inflicted on the least well off.
- There is still scope for implementing better ways of working in health and other public services - to get necessary services for less outlay. The recent Value for Money & Policy Review of the HSE's disability services, for example, saw potential for changing the skill mix of staff, reducing the use of highly qualified professional staff. But no spending reform should compromise a disabled person's ability to get on with their life. The Government's Recovery Programme's commitment to fairness and social justice is on the line.¹

Budget 2013 and the Future

The recession has meant that everyone, including organisations in the voluntary sector, need to revisit their priorities and ways of working to deliver better outcomes for the people whom they serve and support. The Government is justified in demanding value for money from social programmes, just as from schemes to build roads or extend broadband services.

But the Public Service Reform Programme and the Comprehensive Expenditure Review need to look beyond the short term savings achievable from proposed cuts and also weigh up the outcomes in terms of people's well being and their ability to get on with their lives.

Short term measures need to have a long term logic. It is dangerously easy to underestimate the value of maintaining the social infrastructure when money becomes very tight.² The enduring costs of short term savings have to be reckoned within Budget 2013.

¹ While the Troika has indicated overall satisfaction with Ireland's progress, the EU Commission's Spring 2012 Review stated in relation to risks, "it is essential that the burden of the necessary consolidation [of the budget] be fairly and equitably shared." Page 45

² A strong social support system encourages the optimism and confidence of people and business to take risks, innovate, upgrade education and training, move to better job opportunities. It also reduces strain on families and communities when disability or other adverse events happen.

The Disability Federation of Ireland considers that the Government's National Recovery Programme must change to achieve a balance in both the social and economic priorities. We therefore propose for Budget 2013:

1. Government needs to protect the viability of our community infrastructure, the community and voluntary bodies, as well as the locally operating statutory agencies whose interventions underpin ordinary life. Because many different public bodies fund aspects of this social infrastructure, it is essential that the overall, cumulative impact of budget decisions is explicitly considered.
2. For people with disabilities community-based services and supports are critical to enabling independence, to seeking work and a fuller life. The Government's policy objectives cannot be progressed without a greater focus on resourcing such services and supports. Health disability specific and personal social services funded by the HSE particularly merit protection.
3. An ambitious Implementation Plan for the National Disability Strategy is required, in keeping with the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, where people have dignity, individual autonomy and full and effective participation in Irish society.
4. The basic standard of living of the most vulnerable, including people with disabilities, must be protected. This means off-setting the impact of any increased charges imposed, or essential services withdrawn, as well as recognising the extra costs that people with disabilities incur. The social justice issue named by the Government leaders makes this a priority.

DFI commends the Government for planning for long term economic recovery. However we strongly urge that the planning pay as much heed to the social foundations for long term success as to the economic factors. Budget 2013 is the opportunity to rebalance the recovery programme better to protect our future prospects. Otherwise after the recession finally ends we will face the frustration and costs of sustained social stress and blockages that drag down growth, as well as dismaying levels of inequality, caused by disinvestment in Ireland's social infrastructure. Decisions made over the next couple of months will affect the quality of life of people with disabilities, and members of their families, next year and for many years to come after the end of this recession.