



Disability Federation of Ireland

**Submission to
Department of Employment Affairs and Social
Protection**

Budget 2021

20 July 2020

Executive Summary

Budget 2021 will be the first budget of the new government, and thus a statement of intent for its term in office. It is imperative that the new government use this budget to demonstrate its commitment to delivering a life of equality and opportunity to the 643,131 people with disabilities in Ireland. Ireland made a commitment to this vision when it ratified the UN CRPD in 2018, and Budget 2021 gives the new government an opportunity to set out a path to delivering on this commitment, and those included in the recently published programme for government.

People with disabilities have lived with strikingly, disproportionately high levels of poverty and low levels of employment for years, and Ireland is one of the worst performing countries in the EU in both these areas. Budget 2021 must urgently address this by committing resources to targeted measures to reduce poverty levels (notably by finally taking action on the extra cost of disability) and improve the employment possibilities for people with disabilities.

In Budget 2021, DFI calls on the government to:

- Make concrete provisions to address the extraordinarily high poverty levels of people with disabilities through specific and targeted measures, including by increasing core social welfare rates towards a Minimum Essential Standard of Living.
- Introduce a €20 Cost of Disability payment and make financial provisions to enact the INDECON recommendations.
- Provide adequate social protection support to high/extremely high risk people for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Benchmark social welfare rates to a level above the poverty line, while taking the cost of disability into account.
- Ensure employment supports for people with disabilities are not deprioritised due to broader employment support needs post-COVID-19.
- Commit to actively support people with disabilities by putting in place and funding appropriate employment and training supports, and reviewing the Comprehensive Employment Strategy.
- Make the Workplace Equipment Adaptation Grant more flexible and consider creating a 'Working from Home' grant.
- Invest €1.5 million in an Assistive Technology (AT) passport.
- Ensure all budget decisions are subject to equality proofing, including taking into account the cost of disability.

Introduction

Budget 2021, the first budget of the new government, will be a crucially important one for people with disabilities in Ireland. Having ratified the UN CRPD in 2018, it is now time to make concrete provisions and plans to deliver on the commitments involved, and on the promises included in the 'Our Shared Future' programme for government. Budget 2021 must put in place the necessary funding to support the full implementation of the UN CRPD and the disability commitments in the programme for government.

People with disabilities in Ireland continue to live with extremely high levels of poverty and deprivation, and notably low employment levels. In both these areas Ireland ranks amongst the worst performing countries in the EU. Budget 2021 must specifically address these already alarming statistics to avoid a further worsening quality of life for people with disabilities, for whom the many impacts of COVID-19 have been particularly devastating. The European Commission, in its 2020 EU Semester Country Specific Recommendations for Ireland also specifically recommended a focus on this area, noting that "the challenges facing Ireland in regard to poverty and employment quality and support, including for people with disabilities, remain and they are likely to be exacerbated by the pandemic"¹. These figures point to ongoing, long-standing structural inequalities, that must inform budgetary decisions. Budget 2021 must urgently address these striking inequalities in order to ensure that people with disabilities are not further left behind as we move into a difficult post-COVID economic scenario, and to deliver on Ireland's UN CRPD obligations to protect the rights, and ensure the equal treatment, of people with disabilities. To do this Budget 2021 must deliver a higher income for people with disabilities and make concrete commitments and provisions to specifically address core issues including:

- Factoring the cost of living with a disability into budgetary decisions and bringing in specific cost of disability supports.
- Improving and ringfencing employment supports, while also exploring the positive employment possibilities opened up by the move to home working due to COVID-19.

Address Extremely High Poverty Rates

People with disabilities live with extremely high rates of poverty; Ireland's at risk of poverty rate for people with disabilities in 2018 was 36.9%, almost 10% higher than the EU average. The at risk of poverty rate for the general population in the same year was 14%. As the European

¹ European Commission, *Recommendation for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on the 2020 National Reform Programme of Ireland and delivering a Council opinion on the 2020 Stability Programme of Ireland* 20.5.2020, p5.

Disability Forum's recent comparative report points out, Ireland ranks in the worst 5 EU countries, with only Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and Bulgaria having higher poverty rates for people with disabilities². People with disabilities did not see a recovery post-recession – their poverty rates doubled from 2011 to 2017. Moreover, as the SILC is a measure of income only, and does not take into account the extra cost of disability, it actually may significantly underestimate the level of poverty experienced by people with disabilities.

Many people with disabilities are now extraordinarily worried that their already meagre and insufficient support will diminish in the anticipated post-COVID recession, and their already extreme economic vulnerability will be further exacerbated. Budget 2021 must take concrete steps towards ending the worryingly high rates of poverty experienced by people with disabilities in Ireland by increasing the basic disability related social welfare rates - while increases in recent years were welcome, they were not sufficient, and there was no increase in last year's budget. The shocking fact that people not at work due to disability or illness had the highest at risk of poverty rate in 2018 of all economic groupings, with a rate of 47.7% - a rate that increased more than 10% in just one year - should sound the alarm. Specific and targeted social protection measures, which we will discuss in more detail below, are required to ensure these figures do not rise even higher.

Increase Core Social Welfare Rates to Move towards Minimum Essential Standard of Living

Social Justice Ireland, Saint Vincent De Paul and the European Anti-Poverty Network have also highlighted in their submissions the fact that current social welfare rates are insufficient to address poverty, and called for an annual increase to core social welfare rates in the region of €7/8 to move towards ensuring a Minimum Essential Standard of Living. We support and endorse this call, which anti-poverty groups have been making for years - with the important caveat regarding the need to factor in the cost of disability, when indexing and more broadly in policy, which is covered in more detail below. Impoverished people in Ireland already suffered hugely during the post financial crisis austerity years and we cannot expect them to live through another decade of poverty because of COVID-19.

² European Disability Forum, *Poverty and Social Exclusion of People with Disabilities: European Human Rights Report: Issue 4 – 2020*, pp. 18-19.

Inadequacy of Current Social Welfare Rates Highlighted by COVID-19

The experience of COVID-19 has highlighted issues with Ireland's social protection provision. Many people with disabilities struggle to live on Disability Allowance, given that they often face much higher, and often hidden, extra costs than the general population, and 47.7% of people not at work due to disability or illness (ie those who depend on these payments) are at risk of poverty in Ireland, a shockingly high figure. The developments around state welfare provision in the context of COVID-19 only reinforce this concern. The introduction of the differential Pandemic Unemployment Payment and Enhanced Illness Benefit was further, striking evidence that the government and general population accepted that it is extremely difficult to live on €203 a week. As EAPN have written "the initial COVID-19 Pandemic Payment, set at the flat rate of €203 per week, equivalent to a Jobseeker's main claimant, received extensive criticism due to the inadequacy of the payment versus the cost of living. In response, on March 26th, the Government announced that the Pandemic Unemployment Payment would increase to €350 per week. This u-turn by the Government essentially introduced the operation of a two-tiered welfare system in Ireland, with a higher rate of payment available to those made unemployed during the pandemic, but not for those accessing social welfare prior to the pandemic".³ People with disabilities live with a range of extra costs but are expected to make do on the lower rate of €203, often for the rest of their lives. This is not only unfair - it also creates a poverty trap from which many people struggle to escape. Budget 2021 should acknowledge and take action to address this inequality.

Make Concrete Provisions to Address Cost of Disability

The extraordinarily high poverty rates are also inextricably linked with the (often hidden) extra cost of disability, which people with disabilities and their families live with. On average, people with disabilities spend more on heating, travel, mobility aids, medical expenses and home adaptations, amongst other disability-specific expenditure. DFI has been raising this issue for decades and has been calling for Disability Allowance to be increased by €20 as a temporary measure to account for this extra cost, until the INDECON research on this issue has been completed. This extra cost of disability was estimated to be £583 (approximately €640) a month in the UK by British disability organisation SCOPE in 2019⁴, and €207 per

³ EAPN Ireland, *Rethinking a more Inclusive and Equal Ireland for 2020 and Beyond*, June 2020, p12.

⁴ SCOPE, *Disability Price Tag 2019*.

week by a well-respected Irish academic study in 2015⁵. We once again submit that this extra support is urgently required. It is essential that the INDECON report is concluded this year and acted upon swiftly. There is an urgent need for a Cost of Disability payment, and a package of appropriate and improved support services to address the extra cost related to disability including Assistive Technology, increased PA hours and better accessibility. It will also be important to introduce measures such as a fast track return to payments should a person no longer be able to work. For now, Budget 2021 should increase Disability Allowance by €20 per week, over and above any general increase to core social welfare rates. It should also make financial provision to act on the INDECON recommendations in 2021.

Benchmarking Social Welfare Rates – Include Cost of Disability

This also highlights issues related to the indexing of social welfare rates, which have been consistently highlighted by anti-poverty groups. Benchmarking of social welfare payments should only happen once a minimum social welfare floor is established and should be set against the Minimum Essential Standard of Living. The benchmark rate must be set above the poverty line and take the cost of disability into account. Once the benchmark is established, it will be possible to index social welfare rates for people with disabilities. To move to benchmarking payments without doing this first would have the unintended consequence of locking people into greater structural poverty.

Protect the Lives of High Risk Individuals during COVID-19 by Providing Adequate Social Protection

Another issue that has emerged due to COVID-19 is the issue of social protection and the economic support for high risk and extremely high-risk people. Economic supports must be put in place to enable those high risk individuals who are unable to work from home due to the nature of their role or their employment to continue to follow public health advice. These people must be supported to protect their lives by staying at home until it is safe for them not to, and it is unfair and potentially discriminatory to expect high risk people to take on a higher risk to their lives than others in the return to work during COVID-19. Budget 2021 should make provision to enable high risk people to stay home should they need to do so to protect their lives from COVID-19 by committing to support this group via the PUP, enhanced illness benefit, or some other bespoke measure, for the duration of this pandemic.

⁵ Cullinan, J., & Lyons, S. (2015). *The private costs of adult disability*. In J. Cullinan, S. Lyons, & B. Nolan, The economics of disability: Insights from Irish research.

Actively Prioritise, Ring Fence and Improve Employment Supports

Ireland has the lowest employment rate for people with disabilities across the whole EU: 32.3% - a rate which is nearly 20% lower than the EU average of 50.8%⁶. Not only that, but we have the highest employment gap between the general population and people with disabilities - persons with disabilities are 42.1 percentage points less likely to be employed than persons without disabilities – a gap that the European Disability Forum calls “staggering”⁷. Moreover, these rates of underemployment are inextricably linked with the extraordinarily high levels of poverty of people with disabilities.

While some people cannot work due to their disabilities, many others wish to, but simply do not get the supports from the system to enable them to become employed. Investment in this group could mean securing greater returns for social welfare benefit support, additional tax income, and a group of people with disabilities happy to finally have the opportunity to offer their contribution to the workforce. This should be on a voluntary basis and subject to the ability of each individual, but the potential is enormous. In the past many people with disabilities have unfortunately not been eligible for many of the employment or activation supports offered by DEASP, as they were not on the Live Register. More effective interagency, and inter-Departmental, coordination and the provision of joined up cross-agency/departmental supports, including in the area of entrepreneurship, offers the potential of better value for money, and more holistic services and supports to people with disabilities, and in the longer term of reduced social welfare dependency.

Moreover, COVID-19 has utterly changed the employment scenario in Ireland for the years to come. People with disabilities and the organisations that support them are now extremely worried that the already bad employment situation in Ireland will worsen, and there will be a backsliding on the small progress in the employment of people with disabilities in Ireland. Thus Budget 2021 must commit to actively support people with disabilities by putting in place and funding appropriate supports to enable them to gain education, training and employment. It must commit to ensure that employment support and activation programmes for people with disabilities are not deprioritised due to increased needs for employment support from the general population. It should also make budgetary provision for a Review of the effectiveness of the Comprehensive Employment Strategy, which has unfortunately not been delivering adequate results.

⁶ EDF, *Poverty and Social Exclusion of People with Disabilities: European Human Rights Report: Issue 4 – 2020*, p. 48.

⁷ Op cit, p 50.

New Employment Opportunities Post-COVID

Our pre-budget submission last year already highlighted issues related to the digital working and the Future of Work, which have only been further spotlighted by the recent experience of COVID-19 lockdown working. Given the ongoing shift to digitalisation, and the opportunities opening up as employers understand that working from home is a viable option, the supports provided and allowed for under the Reasonable Accommodation Fund must be reviewed and adapted to the changed employment scenario. They must be revised to include access to assistive and accessible technology, so that people with disabilities can afford to work and have the technology that they need to do so.

In this context, the government should consider making the Workplace Equipment Adaptation Grant more flexible, given that it is anticipated that many people may continue to work from home into the future, or split their time between home and office. Thus, some employees might need additional equipment (eg a second piece of AT) to support them in working from home. This might be required due to workplace changes, public advice, or the employee having health issues that prevent them returning to the workplace at this time.

The government might also consider offering a new grant to support remote working/working from home. This grant would not necessarily be specifically for people with disabilities but for the broader population. Nevertheless such a grant could potentially support many people with disabilities to be employed in jobs they might have been precluded from previously due to inaccessible offices or transport options, or the difficulty involved in commuting to a workplace, and could also promote employment retention in the context of the risks of COVID-19 to some people with disabilities.

Budget 2021 should commit to, and make provisions to resource, the introduction of an ecosystem of supports for Assistive Technology across education and employment, including supports around assessment, provision and training that will support transitions between education and employment and support work retention. In particular it should specifically invest €1.5 million to introduce an AT Passport.

Equality Proofing and More Ambitious, Consultative Equality Budgeting

We welcome the ongoing pilot on equality budgeting and believe its scope should be broadened and made more ambitious and consultative. All budgetary measures should be equality proofed in advance of the budget in line with the government's own commitments. Budget decisions must take the cost of disability into account across all decisions.

Conclusion:

In summary, DFI recommends the following for Budget 2021:

- An increase of core disability, and broader social welfare, rates to move towards a Minimum Essential Standard of Living.
- A minimum of €20 increase in Disability Allowance payments to address the cost of disability.
- A commitment to act on INDECON recommendations on cost of disability, and a financial provision in budget 2021 for this.
- Make concrete provisions to address the extraordinarily high poverty levels of people with disabilities.
- Provide adequate social protection support to high/extremely high risk people until COVID-19 does not pose a risk to their lives.
- Benchmarking of social welfare rates must be set above the poverty line and take the cost of disability into account.
- Ensure employment supports for people with disabilities are not deprioritised due to broader societal needs post-COVID.
- Commit to actively support people with disabilities by putting in place and funding appropriate supports, and review the Comprehensive Employment Strategy.
- Make the Workplace Equipment Adaptation Grant more flexible and consider creating a 'Working from Home' grant.
- Invest €1.5 million in an AT passport.
- All budget decisions should be subject to equality proofing and take into account the cost of disability. Equality budgeting should be broadened, and made more ambitious and consultative.

People with disabilities have lived with shocking levels of poverty, inequality and low employment opportunities for too long, and did not benefit from the post financial crisis recovery years. This year's budget must show that the new government is serious about addressing the ongoing problems with income and employment supports that prevent people with disabilities from participating fully in society and see them living with disproportionately higher levels of disadvantage than their non-disabled fellow citizens. It must do so to live up to both new and old commitments, made both nationally in the new programme for government and internationally via the UN CRPD, under which Ireland's first review will take place later this year.



DFI is about making Ireland fairer for people with disabilities.

We work to create an Ireland where everyone can thrive, where everyone is equally valued.

We do this by supporting people with disabilities and strengthening the disability movement.

There are over 120 member organisations in DFI. We also work with a growing number of other organisations that have a significant interest in people with disabilities.

DFI provides:

- Information
- Training and Support
- Networking
- Advocacy and Representation
- Research, Policy Development and Implementation
- Organisation and Management Development

Disability is a societal issue and DFI works with Government, and across all the social and economic strands and interests of society.

DFI, Fumbally Court, Fumbally Lane, Dublin 8

Tel: 01-4547978, Fax: 01-4547981

Email: info@disability-federation.ie

Web: www.disability-federation.ie

Disability Federation of Ireland is a company limited by guarantee not having share capital, registered in Dublin.

Registered No 140948, CHY No 6177, CRA No 20010584

