



Disability Federation of Ireland

**Submission to
Department of Social Protection
on
Budget 2022**

June 2021

Executive Summary

Like everyone in Ireland, people with disabilities have had an extraordinarily difficult time over the past year, weathering the storm of the COVID-19 pandemic. The experience has highlighted income inequality and the insufficiency of core welfare rates, and has exacerbated existing persistent poverty among marginalised groups. Budget 2022 must address these inequalities and make a commitment to delivering a life of equality and opportunity, rather than economic vulnerability and deprivation, to the 643,131 people with disabilities in Ireland.

People with disabilities have lived with shockingly, 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 2022 must urgently address this by committing resources to targeted measures to reduce poverty amongst those unable to work due to disability (notably by finally taking action on the extra cost of disability) and work to continue to improve the employment possibilities of those who wish to secure employment but experience recurrent barriers.

In Budget 2022, DFI calls on the government to:

- Increase core social protection rates as per the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) recommendations i.e. by €9.80 per year, until 2026 to ensure income adequacy.
- Publish the Indecon Cost of Disability report and make financial provision in Budget 22 to implement its recommendations.
- Introduce a €20 per week cost of disability payment for those on Disability Allowance and Blind Pension as an interim measure (cost €161 million).
- Address issues of digital poverty which COVID has highlighted by reviewing and updating Household Benefits package and Telephone Support Allowance to include support for internet services, broadband and hardware such as laptops and tablets.
- Raise the €350 threshold on earnings disregard for Disability Allowance by €20 (cost €2m).
- Ensure all budget decisions are subject to equality proofing, specifically assessing their impact on disabled people, including taking into account the cost of disability.
- Ensure employment supports for disabled people are not deprioritised, make the Workplace Equipment Adaptation Grant more flexible, consider creating a 'Working from Home' grant, implement recommendations of other disability organisations.
- Work together with other Departments to invest €1.5 million in an Assistive Technology (AT) passport.

Introduction

The past year has highlighted the important role Ireland's social protection system can play in protecting people from poverty, through the deployment of an emergency tool, the PUP, which was roundly welcomed, and acknowledged as protecting hundreds of thousands of people, and their families, from poverty and debt. However it has also created a two-tier social protection system, leaving disabled people feeling like second class citizens. Budget 22 gives an opportunity to address this inequality, and move to address the long-standing issues of income adequacy and poverty faced by people with disabilities in Ireland.

This would be appropriate too, as Ireland submits its first report on its implementation of the UN CRPD, which commits the country to providing an adequate standard of living for disabled people. The Roadmap to Social Inclusion also commits to specific targets in poverty reduction, and while these are insufficient, and it is inherently unfair to have less ambitious targets for disabled people than for the general population, it is nevertheless clear that the current level of social protection provision will not deliver a reduction in poverty levels, given that they have remained stubbornly high for years.

It is important to note that on average EU countries spend 2% of their GDP on social protection expenditure for disability. Ireland's expenditure is just 0.8%, the second lowest in the EU – only Malta spends less of its GDP.¹

Shockingly High Poverty Persists

Once again, the annual poverty statistics show that people with disabilities have amongst the highest rates of poverty and deprivation in Ireland.

- EU SILC data shows that Ireland has the highest percentage of people with disabilities at risk of poverty and social exclusion (AROPE) in Western Europe (37.8%). This is one of the worst EU rates, almost 10% over the EU average of 28.4%. Only Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Bulgaria have worse EU AROPE rates.
- A striking 37.5% (CSO SILC) of people not at work due to illness or disability are at risk of poverty and social exclusion, over 18% live in consistent poverty, and 43% live in deprivation. These rates are 3 times higher than those for the general population in Ireland.

¹ European Disability Forum, *Poverty and Social Exclusion of People with Disabilities: European Human Rights Report: Issue 4 – 2020*, p26.

- The extra cost of disability has previously been estimated to be an average of €207 a week². That is an amount €4 more than the weekly Disability Allowance payment.

Recent Reports Highlight Significant Poverty

Recent research has further highlighted the continuous difficulty disabled people have in securing an adequate standard of living. Research by Saint Vincent de Paul in March showed a substantial amount of financial strain experienced by people due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The study highlighted the fact that 42% of people unable to work due to illness or disability reported going without heating due to cost due to Covid-19, compared to 18% of people at work³.

The ESRI also published two relevant studies in recent months. A report on the dynamics of child poverty published last month found that children with disabled parents are more likely to live in persistent poverty, and this is especially true where the parent cannot work due to their disability, particularly where the mother is disabled.⁴ The report also found that children living in poverty are twice as likely to have a chronic condition or disability. It concludes that families where the primary caregiver is disabled “are at a high risk of becoming trapped in poverty and this warrants additional policy intervention”⁵.

A second report, published by IHREC and ESRI, highlights the significant employment gap people with disabilities continue to live with. It shows how people with disabilities are at much higher risk of employment disadvantage and have less access to decent work. The report highlights the discrimination disabled people experience in attaining employment, and that they are less likely to secure high-skilled positions⁶.

The issue of poverty is sadly relevant for people living across a range of circumstances. The recently released Ombudsman’s report ‘Wasted Lives’ highlights the poverty experienced by disabled people inappropriately housed in nursing homes. The case studies in the report show that many

² 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*.

³ <https://www.svp.ie/news-media/news/one-in-four-people-report-cutting-back-on-food-and.aspx>

⁴ ESRI, *The dynamics of child poverty in Ireland: Evidence from the Growing Up in Ireland survey, 2021*, p42 <https://www.esri.ie/publications/the-dynamics-of-child-poverty-in-ireland-evidence-from-the-growing-up-in-ireland>. “The model allows us to differentiate between different types of non-employment and reveals that the mother’s inability to work due to illness or disability is the strongest predictor of both transient and persistent EV. While this is a small group (circa 1 per cent of families in wave 1), their very high risk of poverty is of policy concern”.

⁵ ESRI, *op cit*, p 74.

⁶ ESRI and IHREC, *Monitoring decent work in Ireland*, https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/BKMNEXT414%20%281%29_0.pdf

individuals in nursing homes (who are in receipt of DA or similar payments) struggle to pay for basic essentials such as toiletries or clothes, having almost no disposable income left after accommodation, services and medical expense payments. It highlights a very worrying case study where a woman in significant pain declines to go to hospital due to the cost of having an escort accompany her (at a charge of €23 per hour) and the cost of transportation that would be involved⁷.

Citizens Assembly Calls for Better and Increased Supports

Another relevant policy development in the past year was the release of the Citizen's Assembly report on its recent deliberations on gender, including on care and disability. The Assembly undertook a comprehensive reflection and consultation on the related issues, and made strong recommendations in the area, endorsing an improved system of supports for disabled people and their families. Its recommendations included increased and better supports for carers⁸. It also recommended that disabled people should:

- a) Be actively supported and resourced to live independently.
- b) Have access to person centred financial supports to serve their individual needs.
- c) Be enabled to participate as fully as possible in decisions on their care needs, based on principles of fairness, respect, equality and dignity.
- d) Be facilitated and resourced as much as possible if their choice is to be cared for at home.⁹

Other recommendations relevant to the Department's brief include:

- Lifelong care for persons with disabilities who need it should be seamless and there should not be any break in services provided or need to reapply for support when a person turns 18.¹⁰
- Social protection services should:
 - a) Set social protection payments and/or supports at a level that lifts people above the poverty line, prevents deprivation and supports an adequate standard of living.

⁷ Office of the Ombudsman, *Wasted Lives, Time for a better future for younger people in Nursing Homes*, ps 26 – 35 <https://www.ombudsman.ie/publications/reports/wasted-lives/>. NB pages 31-35 which contain the individual case studies.

⁸ Recommendation 4-7, p 60, <https://www.citizensassembly.ie/en/about-the-citizens-assembly/report-of-the-citizens-assembly-on-gender-equality.pdf>

⁹ Recommendation 10, p 61-62, op cit.

¹⁰ Recommendation 12, p. 62, op cit.

- b) Regularly train staff to prioritise dignity and respect in all contact with clients, including giving a choice in how they receive payment.¹¹

Finally, a crucial part of the Citizen's Assembly conclusions is the fact that citizens were willing to pay to support increased social welfare provision and a more equal Ireland. 95.6% of citizens indicated that "if necessary, we are also prepared to support and pay higher taxes based on the principle of ability to pay, to make a reality of our recommendations".¹²

Department Figures show Disabled People's Dependency on Emergency Needs Payments

The Department's own statistics back up the concerns already outlined. If we see the Emergency Needs Payments as an indication of poverty and financial distress, the uptake figures indicate that people with disabilities live with great economic vulnerability. Looking at the ENP breakdown by category, 30% of the payments made in 2020, and a similar amount of the emergency needs payments made so far in 2021, went to recipients of social protection payments related to disability (including Disability Allowance, Carers Allowance etc). This again indicates that existing social welfare provision is insufficient.

COVID-19 highlighted Digital Poverty

Digital poverty was also highlighted by COVID-19, as so many services and interactions moved online and many economically vulnerable people were unable to afford good broadband and/or laptops, tablets or smartphones on the low social protection income they receive. While individual Local Authorities have responded to this need at an ad hoc level, a comprehensive nationwide response has been lacking. This is also important as the move to remote working opens up increased employment possibilities for people with disabilities.

Budget 2021 Disappointed

Budget 2021 saw no increase in core payments, including Disability Allowance and similar payments. Despite claims that the budget protected and supported the most vulnerable, it did not contain any provision that supported *all* of the disabled people who depend on the state for their income. According to the Department's statistics, a proportion of disabled people did benefit from provisions last year – for example approximately 21% of people on DA received a living alone increase and 30% received a qualified child allowance. A higher number (approximately 50%) benefited from increased fuel allowance, but this was really to mitigate against the

¹¹ Recommendation 14, p66. op cit.

¹² Question 49, p. 138, op cit.

impact of increased carbon taxes. The increase in the income disregard, while very welcome, was originally estimated to impact on less than 10% (10,000) of the people on DA, and more recent Department figures show it may only improve the income of approximately 6,000 people. This means the measure improves the situation of only 4% of DA recipients, notably those who are, very relatively speaking, better off, in as much as they have already overcome the substantial barriers to employment and cost of disability issues to secure a job. Moreover, Departmental responses indicate that the ESRI's SWITCH model, the key tool used to assess the social impact of budgetary options, "does not include specific analysis for people with disabilities". This raises the question of how well placed the Department is in assessing the budgetary impact of various measures on people with disabilities, who consistently have one of the highest AROPE rates in the country, and thus clearly require specific targeted budgetary measures and attention.

Key Asks for Budget 2022

If the government is serious about delivering on its commitments to reduce poverty, and the Roadmap for Social Inclusion poverty reduction targets for people with disabilities, it will need to deliver specific measures in this and future budgets. Unfortunately, most of the context and detail provided in our pre-budget submission last year is still relevant¹³.

Budget 22 must Address Poverty, Cost of Disability

Disability Allowance has not increased since 2019, despite clearly escalating cost of living, notably rent. There was outcry when the government originally proposed to offer people made unemployed by the pandemic the standard social protection rates. Setting the PUP at the much higher rate of €350 demonstrated what disability and poverty focused organisations have been highlighting for years – the current rate of €203 is completely inadequate to enable a decent standard of living.

It was a slap in the face when the government acknowledged at the start of the pandemic that €203 per week is not a living wage, and increase the Pandemic Unemployment Payment to €350 per week. Meanwhile, those who are disabled are still in receipt of the lower payment, or even less, if someone in their home is earning more. Robert Joyce, who has MS and depends on Disability Allowance.¹⁴

In this context, the government can learn from the experience of the pandemic and the positive societal and economic impact of providing an

¹³ https://www.disability-federation.ie/assets/files/pdf/dfi_deasp_pre_budget_submission_for_2021_-_final_200720_2.pdf

¹⁴ See <http://a30minutelife.com/research-vs-social-welfare-in-ireland/>

adequate level of social protection payments via the PUP and thus protecting cohorts of society from poverty and vulnerability. It should afford the same protection and support to its disabled citizens, especially those who cannot work due to their disability. To do this the government should:

Poverty

- Increase core social protection rates as per the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) recommendations i.e. by €9.80 per year until 2026.
- Publish the Indecon report on Cost of Disability and make financial provision in Budget 22 to implement its recommendations.
- Introduce a €20 per week cost of disability payment for those on Disability Allowance and Blind Pension as an interim measure (cost €161 million).
- Address issues of digital poverty and the digital divide by reviewing the Household Benefits package and Telephone Support Allowance to include support for internet services, broadband and hardware such as laptops and tablets.
- Raise the €350 threshold on earnings disregard for Disability Allowance by €20 (cost €2m).
- Ensure all budget decisions are subject to equality proofing, specifically assessing their impact on disabled people, including taking into account the cost of disability.
- Make progress and take action on budgetary concerns highlighted by Carers' organisations.

Employment

- Ensure employment supports for people with disabilities are not deprioritised due to broader employment support needs post-COVID-19.
- Make the Workplace Equipment Adaptation Grant more flexible to enable it to support local working hubs that will support remote working, and consider creating a 'Working from Home' grant for disabled people.
- Work together with other Departments (Health/HSE, Education, Higher and Further Education and Enterprise, Trade and Employment) to invest €1.5 million in an Assistive Technology (AT) passport.
- Implement employment related recommendations of other disability organisations.



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.

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Registered No 140948, CHY No 6177, CRA No 20010584

