

Bridging the Gap

Research Summary Report on the Implementation
of the United Nations Convention on the Rights
of People with Disabilities at a Local Level

January 2025



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Foreword

I am delighted to introduce this important research, commissioned by the Disability Federation of Ireland, DFI. The study shines a much-needed light on how Local Authorities are meeting their obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, UN CRPD, identifying progress made and the challenges that remain.

DFI has a long history of collaborating with local authorities, with a standout partnership involving Wicklow County Council. For over seven years, a DFI Community Development Officer has worked in partnership with the council to support disability inclusion across the county. This resulted in the creation of the Disability Inclusion Steering Committee, DISC, a unique collaborative structure akin to a Strategic Policy Committee. This partnership, guided by the UN CRPD and the Wicklow County Disability Strategy, highlights the potential of local authorities to improve the lives of disabled people.

I extend my deepest gratitude to the research team, Dr. Mary Keogh and Dr. Charles O'Mahony, whose dedication and expertise made this study possible.

Special thanks to the members of the Advisory Group, whose guidance and perspectives were invaluable. The Advisory Group included:

- Marian Moloney, Galway Access for All
- Lorraine Lally, Barrister, Galway
- Leigh Gath, Disability Campaigner
- Michael Nicholson, Wicklow County Council
- Councillor Miriam Murphy, Wicklow County Council
- Councillor Elisa O'Donovan, Limerick City Council
- Councillor Vicky Casserly, South Dublin County Council
- Trudy Reilly, Access Officer, Donegal County Council
- Micheal Hurley, Access Officer, Kildare County Council
- Tommy Moylan, Association of Irish Local Government
- Emer Begley, Disability Federation of Ireland
- Laura O'Callaghan, Disability Federation of Ireland
- Meredith Raley, Disability Federation of Ireland

We remember with great respect and affection Leigh Gath, who was a fearless advocate for equality and the rights of disabled people. Leigh's contributions to this project, and her lifelong commitment to disability rights will not be forgotten. Her sudden passing in July has left a void, but her legacy inspires us to continue the work she was so passionate about.

Finally, to all the participants, including the disabled people and organisations who shared their experiences and insights, your voices are at the heart of this research. Thank you for your courage and advocacy.

This study highlights significant gaps that must be addressed to ensure full implementation of the UN CRPD at a local level. While there is evidence on good practice there is also much more to do. DFI remains steadfast in our commitment to ensuring that local authorities have the tools, resources, and resolve to uphold the rights of disabled people, creating a society where everyone can participate equally.



Elaine Teague

Elaine Teague
CEO, Disability Federation of Ireland

Background

DFI commissioned this research in early 2024 to explore how the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, UN CRPD^{1,2} is being implemented at local authority level. The aim was to look at structures and programme that are in place to understand the barriers to participation and aspects that support inclusion and equality for disabled people at a local level.

The UN CRPD provides a comprehensive international framework to promote and protect the rights of people with disabilities, ensuring their full inclusion and participation in all aspects of society.

While it is essential that the UN CRPD framework is reflected in state policy and legislation, inclusion and participation should be felt in a material way by people with disabilities in their local communities across the country. It is important as a result, to embed a human rights approach at a local authority level. This research aimed to bridge the gap, and provide evidence about how disability rights are and can be supported by local authorities.

This report provides a summary of the research. Outlining how it was carried out. It gives a brief overview of the findings from the literature and policy review, as well as presenting key findings from data collected and presents a series of recommendations.

The research was carried out by Dr. Mary Keogh and Dr. Charles O'Mahony and undertaken between February and October 2024. It was supported by an Expert Advisory Group. This group included Local Authority Access Officers, representatives from the Association of Irish Local Government, County Councillors, disability activists and campaigners, a practising barrister, and staff from the Disability Federation of Ireland.

The research gathers evidence on current practices, informal collaborations, and the gaps that hinder implementation of the UN CRPD across Ireland's 31 local authorities.

This report is a resource for policymakers, local authority staff, county councillors, civil society, disability advocates, their representative organisations, and community organisations.

A longer, more detailed version of the study is available [here](#).



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1. Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (2021), Initial Report of Ireland under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, prepared for the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/204196/138b7f87-c6e7-4176-bdd7-61b9e7fff6b9.pdf#page=null>
 2. The Oireachtas Disability Matters Committee undertook a module of public meetings, 20, 27 October and 24 November 2022, 9 February and 6 December 2023, 17 January, 20 March and 3 July 2024 examining various aspects of communities and the supports required by persons with disabilities to live and participate in their communities.

What was done?

The importance of local, regional and national actors in implementing the UN CRPD was understood from the very beginning of the development of this important convention.³ One of the core principles of the UN CRPD is the promotion of inclusive communities. Local government therefore plays a crucial role in transforming this principle into reality.⁴

In this context the research examined how the 31 local authorities in Ireland are implementing the UN CRPD, with specific aims to:

Identify good practice examples in Ireland.



Identify good practice models in other countries.



Identify current barriers in delivering the UN CRPD at local level.



Identify existing programmes, structures and key personnel who lead or could lead UN CRPD implementation at a local level.



Investigate the potential of a national standardised approaches to UN CRPD implementation by local governments across the country.



Provide a series of recommendations outlining next steps.



3. See United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Social Policy and Development, *Handbook for Parliamentarians on The Convention on The Rights of Persons with Disabilities, No 14 – 2007* (Secretariat for the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2007).

4. Article 3 (General principles), UN CRPD 2006.

How was the research carried out?

The researchers used a variety of methods to gather information on this topic, including:

A desk-based review of relevant literature, policies and laws.



A survey of local authority Chief Executives (CE's).

- 14 responses were received which represents 45% of all CEs.



A survey of local authority Access Officers.

- 12 responses were received which represents 39% of all Access Officers.



A focus group with disability activists and Disability Person's Organisations, which included 10 participants.



A focus group with sitting local councillors, which included 10 participants.



10 key informant interviews, with representatives from public bodies, Disabled Persons Organisations (DPOs), disabled people and family members, government departments, and local authorities.



Limitations

The scope for cross-country comparisons is limited, due in part to different levels of decentralisation across countries. Centralisation, where decisions are made at national government level impact on how and if local governments engage with disability rights.

This research aimed to address information gaps by carrying out surveys with Access Officers and Chief Executives, with response rates received of 45% and 38%, respectively. While higher participation would provide a fuller picture, the findings still shed light on local authority's practices and attitudes towards disability inclusion.

Non-response bias and feedback on survey relevance, particularly regarding Access Officers' roles, highlight gaps in meeting UN CRPD responsibilities. Despite these limitations, interviews, focus groups, and expert input provides valuable information and depth to the findings.

Policy and Literature Review

Local authorities in Ireland manage key community services, support and functions including, but not limited to:

Housing

Planning

Roads

Libraries

Transport

Public spaces and other amenities

They thus play a central role in creating environments where disabled people can live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life.⁵

This research included a literature review analysing relevant laws, policies, and previous research, both domestically and internationally on the role of local government in implementing the UN CRPD. The review sought to identify gaps in existing knowledge and informed the qualitative research component of the study.

The literature review shows that despite reform over the past decade, Ireland remains one of the most centralised countries in Europe⁶ and local authorities have a limited role in determining public spending. In addition, Irish local authorities receive among the lowest funding across OECD countries.⁷

What did the review show?

A review of 17 State Reports to the UN Committee showed that as well as local authorities receiving insufficient funding they are considered to have limited democratic decision-making powers (see full report for more details). There is a reported power imbalance between elected councillors and Chief Executives within local authorities when compared to the structure of local authorities in other OECD countries.⁸

5. Article 19 (Living independently and being included in the community), UN CRPD 2006.

6. See OECD, 'Regional Policy Profile: Ireland' (OECD 2016) <https://www.oecd.org/regional/regional-policy/profile-Ireland.pdf> 14 October 2024.

7. See OECD, 'Regional Policy Profile: Ireland' (OECD 2016) <https://www.oecd.org/regional/regional-policy/profile-Ireland.pdf> 14 October 2024.

8. Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the European Charter of Local Self-Government (Monitoring Committee), "Monitoring of the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in Ireland" (Report, CG(2023)45-17final, 25 October 2023).

There are gaps in understanding and applying disability rights at a local level. This may be due to a focus on implementing the UN CRPD at national level, with less attention on local government's role in meeting state obligations, possibly stemming from low awareness or prioritisation of disability rights at the local level. The challenges for local government of having sufficient resource allocation, lack of planning, and clear guidelines were identified across the UN CRPD Committee's Concluding Observations⁹.

A comparison of other countries shows that the decentralisation of responsibilities from central to local government is different from country-to-country. This leads to differences in the extent to which local governments engage with disability rights.

A survey by the Council of European Municipalities and Regions carried out in 2021 on the implementation of the UN CRPD at local level¹⁰ identified challenges including:

Lack of funding

Too much bureaucracy

Lack of information from national level

Difficulty to apply the UN CRPD directly

Lack of clear guidelines

Availability of accessible buildings and structures.¹¹

Another key finding from the literature is that there is limited research on local authority/ local government implementation of UN CRPD compared to the significant amount of research on the UN CRPD more generally.

Articles of the UN CRPD most relevant to local authority responsibilities, alongside obligations under the Irish Disability Act (2005) are listed below. All 31 local authority websites in Ireland were reviewed for information on these articles, along with key public policies related to local government.

9. UN CRPD Committee's Concluding Observations to State Parties are official assessments and set of recommendations issued by the Committee addressed to State Parties following the review of their compliance with the UN CRPD.

10. Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CCRE), 'CEMR/UN CRPD Survey Final Report' (CCRE Website) https://ccre.org/img/uploads/piecesjointe/filename/CEMR_UN_CRPD_Survey_Final.pdf last accessed 3 November 2024.

11. Ibid.

Relevant Articles include:

Article 9 on accessibility

Article 19 on living independently and being included in the community*

Article 21 on freedom of expression and opinion, and access to information

Article 29 on participation in political and public life

Article 30 on participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport

*This Article emerged as the core article which countries focus on in relation to their local UN CRPD implementation.

For further detail and information arising from the study's review of the literature and relevant national policies, please see the full research report.

Key Findings

This section outlines the key findings from (i) survey results of Access Officers; (ii) surveys of Chief Executives of local authorities and (iii) focus group and key informant interviews.

Survey Findings: Access Officers

Findings from the survey responses from Access Officers show that some progress has been made e.g. construction of accessible buildings, improvements in digital communications, and engagement with disability networks. However, participants reported that significant challenges and gaps still remain. Progress is inconsistent across local authorities, with some Access Officers experiencing better support and more proactive engagement than others.

There is limited scope within Access Officer role and many are part-time. A significant number stated that their role is an “add-on” to their full-time positions, often without a defined job description. This has resulted in a lack of focus on disability within local authorities and a weakening of their responsibilities, which undermines the effectiveness of the role.

The area of work is huge, covering all aspects of human rights. It is an unreasonable expectation that one person could possibly be equipped to fulfil the diversity of this role. We are catering to the needs of 22% of our population and it should be similarly resourced to that of Climate Change, Age Friendly, Healthy Ireland, and Integration Teams, where there are sizeable teams in place in each Local Authority. National recognition of Grade 7 would also enforce the importance of this brief and help gain buy in from senior management teams.”

Access Officer 6

The absence of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) related to disability rights within local authorities was noted as further underscoring the need for clearer evaluation measures to assess the functions of the role of the Access Officer.

“Disability with Local Authorities is addressed in its basic format especially through Human Resources, but the role of the Access Officer is really not taken seriously unless we are asked to feedback to queries received from the Department or a citizen on a very infrequent basis.”

Access Officer 2

A recurring theme throughout the survey responses was inadequate training provided to Access Officers. The lack of formalised and consistent training was found to undermine the ability of Access Officers to perform their duties effectively.

Survey findings also highlight gaps in consultation and engagement with disabled people at local level. While some local authorities having established strong networks with disability groups, such as local Disability Networks and through their Public Participation Network, others have less formal or structured engagement processes.

Several Access Officers also stated that their role lacks recognition and support at both the local and national levels.

“We all need a national link to guide us in our work. Proper Training for the role should be provided to us and at a suitable location (not MS Teams) and where we can discuss our learnings together.”

Access Officer 11

The absence of dedicated budgets for accessibility projects was cited as a key obstacle to progress.

Survey Findings: Local Authority Chief Executive's (CE)

All Chief Executives confirmed moderate levels of awareness of the UN CRPD. Recognising its link to the work of the local authority.

Local authorities use different data collection methods on disability, including census data and housing assessments, and while consulting with disability advocacy groups.

Successful and good practice initiatives identified from the survey data included housing adaptations, accessibility improvements, and awareness campaigns. Local authorities cited examples like Sligo's Disability, Inclusion, and Access Strategy, Meath's sensory garden, and Kerry's beach wheelchair service as examples of good practice.

Local authorities also have mechanisms to consult disabled people outside standard public consultations, including consultative committees and forums.

Self-reporting on performance in providing accessible information and conducting disability awareness campaigns was varied across the local authorities CE's that took part in the research.

The role of Access Officers was viewed by CE's as moderately effective, with suggestions for improvement including more training, making these full-time roles, and better internal and external support. Collaboration with community organisations and Disability Persons

Organisations (DPOs) was highlighted as important. Equally, there were calls for increased collaboration with DPOs' and more flexible, context-specific strategies rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

There was a moderate to strong report on providing accessible and inclusive housing, adhering to accessibility standards, and supporting employment opportunities. CEs noted challenges in administering housing adaptation grants, including funding shortfalls, inflation / rising construction costs, and delays due to application requirements. There was a call for improved systems and more resources to meet the growing demand.

"The level of [housing adaptation] grant aid available is determined on the basis of gross household income and shall be between 30% - 95% of the approved cost of the works. Demand is greater than the budget available, we could double the number of houses adapted in one year. Increasing accessible housing stock and supported services [is needed]."

Chief Executive, Survey Participant, County Council

Challenges identified by this cohort, included:

- Inadequate funding.
- Training gaps for local authorities.
- Accessibility, particularly in older buildings and rural areas.
- Transport and employment opportunities are limited in many local areas.

Government support was generally rated as "fair" or "good," though some called for more guidance and resources.

Most CEs supported a standardised national approach to inclusion, though some were worried about a rigid system.

While this data provides valuable and interesting insights, it is important to acknowledge the limitations that are linked to self-reporting. These factors may impact the reliability of these findings.

Findings from Key Informant Interviews and Focus Groups

Findings from both the key informant interviews and focus groups DPOs / Disabled people and County/City Councillors highlighted a significant gap between awareness of the UN CRPD and the challenges in its implementation within local authorities across Ireland.

While there is an increase and some awareness of the UN CRPD, especially among staff who have undergone training, significant barriers remain.

“There’s very limited awareness across all councillors. There are obviously those of us who are heavily embedded in advocacy for people with disabilities, but for most, it’s just not on their radar.”

(Focus Group with Councillors)

Both sources of data, the key informant interviews and focus groups, underscore the importance of resources, structural changes, and deeper engagement with disabled persons and their representative organisations (DPOs) to promote meaningful implementation of the UN CRPD.

A recurrent theme was the lack of financial and human resources dedicated to promoting disability inclusion.

The accessibility of public infrastructure was highlighted as a significant barrier in both sets of data. Technical challenges local authority staff face in understanding and implementing accessibility standards were highlighted, with such oversights further isolating disabled people from participating fully in community life.

“In rural villages like the one I live in, they put in a ramp for wheelchair access, but they did it around a telephone pole. So, if you’re actually in a wheelchair, there’s no way to use it.”

Participant 2

The Housing Adaptation Grant was frequently criticised for being insufficient, poorly implemented, and fraught with bureaucratic inefficiencies across local authorities.

“The CRPD recognises our right to live independently and to choose where and with who we want to live with, but we cannot get the financial support needed to adapt our homes”.

Participant 5

"Housing is an enormous elephant in the room. People with disabilities go to the bottom of the very long list."

(Focus Group with County Councillors)

Both key informants and focus group participants called for more meaningful engagement between local authorities and DPOs. The key informants emphasised the need for structured, consistent consultation processes.

"There was a changing space built in x recently, and while it was a positive step, it wasn't accessible when it first opened. The measurements were off, and further work had to be done to fix it. It's frustrating because if proper planning had gone in from the start, we wouldn't have had these issues. If we were involved (as disabled people) we would have made sure that accessibility was correct from the planning right through to completion."

Participant 3

"It's about co-design and co-creation, where we actually have a say in decision-making. Plus, there needs to be way more transparency about how local authorities use the feedback from DPOs, so it's not just a box-ticking exercise, but something that brings real change."

Participant 8

The lack of clear reporting mechanisms was another theme, which makes it difficult to assess how well local authorities are contributing to national implementation under the UN CRPD. With a need for transparent and consistent accountability measures, such as regular reporting to a national focal point. The consensus was that without these measures being in place there is a risk that the implementation of the UN CRPD will continue to be inconsistent across local authorities.

Recommendations

The research has identified significant gaps between the obligations of local authorities and their actual implementation concerning disability rights.

Local authorities have statutory obligations under domestic legislation, including public sector duty. These include ensuring human rights, equality, accessibility, and non-discrimination for disabled people. These obligations extend to budgetary decision-making, passing resolutions, and enacting by-laws etc. However, the research reveals that there is often a disconnect between legal frameworks and practical realisation, leading to unmet needs and a failure to address barriers to full participation for disabled people.

The following are a series of recommendations arising from the research findings to bridge this gap.

Enforce and Monitor Existing Statutory Obligations

1. Increase compliance with the Disability Act by:

- a. Ensuring discussions take place between the National Disability Authority and senior local authority management on yearly monitoring of compliance with the Disability Act.,
- b. Include this as organisational metrics that is publicly available.¹²

2. Ensure Public Sector Duty is fully implemented by putting in place metrics to measure budgets for social inclusion.

- a. This duty extends to planning functions, housing delivery, and other community-based activities.
- b. In addition, the recently published Joint Committee on Disability Matters Planning for Inclusive Communities for Disabled People report, recommends that equality budgeting must be developed to deliver on the UN CRPD, and all Government departments must update their budgetary key metrics to include disability.

3. Ensure enforcement of building regulations for accessibility:

- a. Local authorities have the statutory responsibility to enforce building regulations for accessibility, ensuring people with disabilities can access public and private infrastructure. Therefore, technical training for engineers is required

12. Statutory duties include ensuring compliance with various accessibility standards, such as the Web Accessibility Directive and the Disability Act. These regulations aim to improve accessibility in buildings, roads, pathways, and online services provided by local authorities. Stronger compliance and accountability is needed.

- b. Publicly listing failure to meet building regulations could help improve accountability.
 - c. Disabled people should be involved in the training and be paid for their time and expertise.
- 4. Use the reserve functions as a positive measure within the authority of councillors on decisions about annual budgets, housing policy and other concerns to ensure that they are aligned with the national obligation and in compliance with the UN CRPD.
 - a. This requires, as highlighted earlier, a good understanding of disability equality, and of their responsibilities by city and county councillors of the UNCRPD.
- 5. Reform the Housing Adaptation Grant.
 - a. Address problems with the Housing Adaptation Grant by streamlining its application process to reduce bureaucratic inefficiencies. With uniform guidelines and a simplified application system to make the grant more accessible.
 - b. Ensure the grant adequately covers the costs of adaptations, reflecting the different needs of applicants and increased cost of building works.
 - c. Enshrining also universal design principles in all housing adaptation projects, ensuring accessibility and alignment with the UNCRPD.
 - d. Facilitating partnerships between local authorities, disabled people, and Disabled Persons Organisations (DPOs) to co-design and monitoring of the grant's implementation and accessibility.

Develop and build a structured approach to support local authority implementation of the UN CRPD¹³

“Local Authorities (LA) take notice when they are directed to put Strategies and actions into place. The Public Sector Duty will inform some work of the LAs in the near future but only if resources are provided as well as training for staff across LAs. No one or two people will be able to create change unless the LA environment is also supported to do this.”

Access Officer 2

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13. Examples of effective models that could be adapted to suit the needs of UN CRPD implementation were identified in interviews, surveys and focus groups as:
- **The Age Friendly Programme:** Age-friendly coordinators at local and regional levels focus on involving older people in decisions affecting their lives.
 - **Climate Action Coordinators:** Work with local Climate Action teams and Climate Action Regional Offices (CARO) to implement the National Climate Action Plan,
 - **Sports Inclusion Disability Officers:** Operate in Local Sports Partnerships nationally to promote inclusion.

5. Incorporate disability inclusion as a key area of focus within the Corporate Strategic Plans across all 31 local authorities.

- a. Disability inclusion is incorporated into all plans of the local authority support functions.
- b. Develop localised disability strategies.
- c. Set key performance indicators on disability inclusion across the range of local authorities' plans.

6. Implement a tailored approach to awareness training and capacity building on the UN CRPD and what this means for local authorities including county councillors.

- a. Training should be regularly updated, ensuring continuous learning and engagement rather than being a one-time event.
- b. The training should be delivered by a diverse group of facilitators, including DPOs, civil society, human rights experts, and, most importantly, people with disabilities who are Disability Equality Trainers.
- c. Training to cover key technical areas such as universal design principles, accessible housing, and the importance of incorporating disability inclusion into all aspects of local government functions, including planning, budgeting, and policy development etc.

7. Review and update the role of Access Officer.

- a. Make this a dedicated, full-time role at an appropriate level of seniority with decision-making authority within each local authority.
- b. Give Access Officers responsibility to drive accessibility and disability inclusion initiatives working with existing staff and where necessary have additional staff in support.
- c. This role could be an expansion of its current remit within the Disability Act to be a cross-cutting role driving a mainstreaming of disability across other local authority programmes.
- d. In advance of this, a review of the Access Officer role and the associated personnel profile is essential to ensure that candidates have a strong understanding of disability rights, community development, social inclusion, and, where possible, lived experience of disability.
- e. This reform would align with best practices across all local authorities under the guidance of the Local Government Management Agency.

8. Ensure a coordinated approach through regular meetings between state agencies, services providers and people with disabilities and their representative organisations.

- a. Different models exist and there are good practice examples that can be drawn from and replicated across each local authority.
- b. These committees/forums need to be resourced to ensure meetings are coordinated, accessible and inclusive.

9. Structured and consistent monitoring mechanisms are necessary to assess the impact of disability inclusion efforts.
 - a. Adopting a national framework for tracking progress on disability inclusion and disability rights at local level is the minimum needed to track progress, map disability-specific efforts and to highlight gaps.

Enable and Resource Stakeholder Engagement for Inclusive Communities

Steering groups at various levels, national, regional, and local, play a key role in supporting the implementation of the UN CRPD. These groups bring together diverse stakeholders, including local authorities, voluntary providers, and the HSE, to coordinate efforts and share best practices. Recommendation to strengthen these different stakeholders' engagement include:

10. Replicate the good practice examples documented in this report as shown below on stakeholder engagement of disabled people and their representative organisations in co-developing local authority disability strategies.
11. Establish, where feasible local Access Groups in key towns and a County Access Network to coordinate efforts and share best practices on accessibility. In a number of local authority areas, these groups exist, and it is important to build on them.
12. Ensure representation in local authority committees or consultative bodies is genuinely inclusive, ensuring that the voices of disabled people are fully heard, respected, and actively considered in decision-making processes.
 - a. This representation should not cost disabled people to take up, resources need to be put in place to support representation. Staff and funding e.g. ISL etc.
13. The Public Participation Networks (PPNs) (or equivalents) should take pro-active measures to ensure full engagement for more structured and meaningful involvement of disabled people in local governance.
 - a. To ensure meaningful engagement budgets and resources for reasonable accommodation and accessibility should be built into the PPN funding which is allocated centrally.
14. Adopt a more unified approach, working together to advocate for broader changes. This collective effort is essential for effectively influencing policy and decision-making at the local level.

Good Practice Example 1: Kildare County Council

Kildare County Council has taken key steps to improve accessibility and inclusion:

- **Access Officer:** Supported by a dedicated team, the Access Officer focuses on accessibility tasks, with regular management reports, dedicated budgets for disability projects, and additional funding from local property taxes.
- **Disability Strategy:** In 2019, the council held a workshop with 120 stakeholders to create a strategy addressing communication, housing, infrastructure, employment, and disability awareness.
- **Local Access Groups:** Seven access groups were set up in key towns, providing monthly feedback on local issues that inform the council's annual action plans.
- **Kildare Access Network:** Made up of representatives from local access groups, this network helps shape policies and action plans, ensuring diverse disability stakeholder input.

Good Practice Example 2 - Sligo County Council

Sligo County Council, with input from the local DPO, launched a Disability, Inclusion, and Access Strategy, achieving improvements in web accessibility, outdoor recreation, and housing adaptation grants. Key steps included:

Leadership: Commitment at senior level by the local authority to engage in the process.

Council's Disability Consultative Committee and Sligo DPO and Independent Living Movement Ireland. (ILMI) throughout the development process of this strategy has ensured that the "lived experience" of disabled people has been considered.

DPO involvement: Sligo DPO entered a structured dialogue with Sligo County Council. The Disability Committee is included in the county structure. Everything needs to go through the committee. This went through a proper AGM constitutional process.

Good Practice Example 3 - Wicklow County Council

Wicklow County Council, in partnership with DFI, took key steps to improve disability inclusion:

Community Development Officer: A dedicated officer, seconded from DFI, was recruited to support the council in implementing the UN CRPD. This role ensures local plans, like the Corporate Plan and Local Economic and Community Plan, address disability needs. It also bridges local issues with national policies and guidelines.

Disability Inclusion Steering Committee (DISC): Established in 2021, DISC facilitates cross-departmental collaboration on disability inclusion. Similar in status to a Strategic Policy Committee, it includes statutory representatives, community members, and individuals with lived experience of disability.

Strategy Informed by Disabled People: Funded by the 2021 Disability Participation Grant, the council developed a comprehensive strategy shaped by input from disabled people. It identifies priority actions to align council initiatives with the needs of the disability community.

Increased Awareness of the UN CRPD: Initiatives like the DISC have heightened awareness of the UN CRPD within Wicklow, influencing local policies and actions to better support disability inclusion.

Conclusion

This research underscores the critical importance of local authorities in ensuring the successful implementation of the UN CRPD in Ireland. While progress has been made, significant gaps remain in areas such as awareness, resource allocation, accessibility, stakeholder engagement, and accountability.

Addressing these challenges requires a unified and structured approach, with robust support for Access Officers, inclusive infrastructure planning, and meaningful collaboration with disabled people and their representative organisations.

The recommendations serve as a roadmap for bridging these gaps. By aligning local practices with national and international obligations, local authorities can foster inclusive communities where disabled people can participate fully and equally. Continued commitment, resourcing, and accountability are essential to turn these recommendations into actionable change, ensuring that the rights of disabled people are fully realised at the local level.

Glossary of Terms

Access Officer: A person responsible for promoting accessibility and ensuring that public services are accessible to disabled people, as required by the Disability Act 2005.

Association of Irish Local Government (AILG): The AILG is a national representative body represents and supports the role of our elected councillors.

Chief Executive (CE): The CE is responsible for carrying out the executive duties of the city council, county council, or city and county council.

Disability Federation of Ireland (DFI): An umbrella organisation that represents the interests of disabled people and their organisations in Ireland, advocating for improved policies and services. DFI has commissioned this research.

Disabled Person's Organisation (DPO): DPOs are organisations that are led by people with disabilities. These organisations are rooted in the principles and rights of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Disability Act (2005): This Act places a statutory obligation on public service providers to support access to services and facilities for people with disabilities.

Independent Living: The ability of disabled people to make choices and have control over their own lives, including where and with whom they live. Provided for in Article 19 of the UN CRPD.

Local Authority: The system of government at the local level in Ireland known as local authorities, city councils or county councils. Local authorities carry out a broad range of activities that make a significant contribution to the physical, cultural, social and environmental development of their communities. Local authorities play a key role in implementing the UN CRPD and other disability policies through housing, planning, and community services.

Local Government Management Association (LGMA): The LGMA provides a range of professional services to the local government sector. They connect all 31 local authorities, aligning expertise and driving innovation.

National Disability Authority (NDA): The National Disability Authority (NDA) is the independent statutory body, providing evidence-based advice and research to Government on disability policy and practice and promoting Universal Design.

OECD: The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development is a forum and knowledge hub for data, analysis and best practices in public policy. They work with over 100 countries across the world to build stronger, fairer and cleaner societies.

Public Sector Duty: A legal obligation for public bodies to promote equality, prevent discrimination, and protect human rights in their work, including in relation to disability rights, which also applies to local authorities.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD): The UN CRPD is an international human rights treaty adopted by the United Nations in 2006, promoting and protecting the rights and dignity of disabled people and ratified by Ireland in 2018.

Universal Design: The design of buildings, products, and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialised design, as promoted by the UN CRPD.

About the Researchers

Dr Mary Keogh is an expert in disability law and policy. With a background in international development, Mary previously worked with the International Disability Rights Monitor, where she advocated for the rights of persons with disabilities. She holds a PhD in disability law and policy, exploring the mainstreaming of disability in development as required by Article 32 of the CRPD. Her research primarily focuses on intersectionality, gender equality, climate justice, and the rights of persons with disabilities. Throughout her career, Mary has been dedicated to bridging the gap between academic research and practical advocacy. She currently works as Advocacy Director with CBM Global Disability Inclusion.

Dr Charles O'Mahony is a lecturer in the School of Law at the University of Galway. Charles was Head of the School of Law from 2017–2021. He completed a PhD at the Centre for Disability Law and Policy, University of Galway entitled “Diversion: A Comparative Study of Law and Policy Relating to Defendants and Offenders with Mental Health Problems and Intellectual Disability”. Charles previously worked as Amnesty International Ireland’s Legal Officer on its mental health campaign and as a legal researcher for the Law Reform Commission of Ireland. The focus of their research and lecturing is on disability and health law. Charles co-authored with Professor Gerard Quinn, an edited collection *Disability Law and Policy: An Analysis of the UN Convention* (2017), published by Clarus Press. He has published on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, mental health law, disability law and policy and the criminal justice system.

Bridging the Gap

Research on the Implementation of the United Nations Convention
on the Rights of People with Disabilities by Local Authorities



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