



Government Strategy Needs to Ensure the Quality of Life for People with Disabilities

The Disability Federation of Ireland (DFI) understands that the implementation of the National Disability Strategy is a critical measure to ensure that people with disabilities can access their civil and social rights. Over the years, we have made substantial time and effort to ensure the National Disability Strategy (NDS) is not just a visionary document, but instead creates meaningful changes in the lives of people with disabilities. DFI is acutely aware of the importance of ongoing reviews, involving critical and independent evaluation, to ensure that legislation and policies are implemented effectively. We therefore led a campaign from early 2009, with the support of the Disability Stakeholder Group (DSG) members and others, to get the Government to put an NDS Implementation Plan in place to protect and advance the Strategy throughout the economic downturn. Despite a target date of May 2012, serious delays meant that it was not until July 2013 that the Minister for Disability, Equality, Mental Health and Older People, Ms. Kathleen Lynch, TD, published the National Disability Strategy Implementation Plan 2013 – 2016 (NDSIP); DFI lobbied consistently throughout that time to achieve this.

The NDSIP is to be the first module of a ten-year plan and, while it marks a step forward in ensuring progress is achieved in implementing the NDS, we have serious concerns that the delay in its publication may have negative consequences for people with disabilities. Likewise, although it has 92 actions to be achieved, 62 of these have target completion dates described as "ongoing", which take them beyond the end of 2013. This makes it difficult in terms of evaluating and monitoring the outcomes of the Plan. The Minister has announced her intention to review the Plan, and DFI is seeking as much support from our member organisations as possible to feed into this process. We are committed to having much stronger engagement to ensure the views of our members are heard. DFI has already carried out a mid-term review of the Programme for Government (PfG) due to our serious concerns that disabled people have been consistently targeted by cuts to their supports and services. This is despite the commitment given in the PfG to 'ensure that the quality of life of people with disabilities is enhanced and that resources allocated reach the people who need them'.

This is the situation as DFI embarks on the work of reviewing the NDSIP over the next few weeks. The information in this special newsletter edition provides an update on the implementation and monitoring of the NDSIP to date, as well as some of our concerns, mirrored at the DSG. We have also included a list of our designated staff who are assigned to sectoral plan departments. Please feel free to contact them at any time

John Dolan, Chief Executive Officer



National Disability Strategy: Towards 2016

The National Disability Strategy (NDS) is understood to provide a whole-of-Government approach to advancing social inclusion of people with disabilities. At its launch, it was noted that, in spite of challenging economic challenges, the National Disability Strategy Implementation Plan (NDSIP) had been developed to build on the progress that has been made to date and to advance Government's commitment to improving the lives of people with disabilities.

The NDSIP is framed in the context of citizenship and participation and is organised around important rights for citizens with disabilities. All of the actions contained in the Plan are under the themes of

- equal citizens;
- independence and choice;
- participation; and
- maximise potential.

The High Level Goals of the NDSIP are that people with disabilities are free from discrimination; are supported to live the life they choose; live ordinary lives in ordinary places, participating in the life of the community; and are enabled to reach their full potential. Each Goal has specific objectives and actions through which it will be achieved.

The NDSIP was developed by the National Disability Strategy Implementation Group (NDSIG), chaired by Minister Lynch, and comprising representatives from relevant government departments, and the Disability Stakeholder Group (DSG)¹.

Image by Salvatore Vuono, courtesy of freedigitalphotos.net

¹ The DSG Comprises of Center for Independent Living (CIL), DFI, FedVol, Inclusion Ireland, Mental Health Reform, National Service Users Executive and Not for Profit Business Association. Individuals with lived experiences of disability are represented, and it has an independent Chairperson, Siobhan Barron. The National Disability Authority (NDA) provide the Secretariat to this group, which meets frequently in advance and following NDSIG meetings preparing for discussions with the Minister for Disability, Kathleen Lynch.



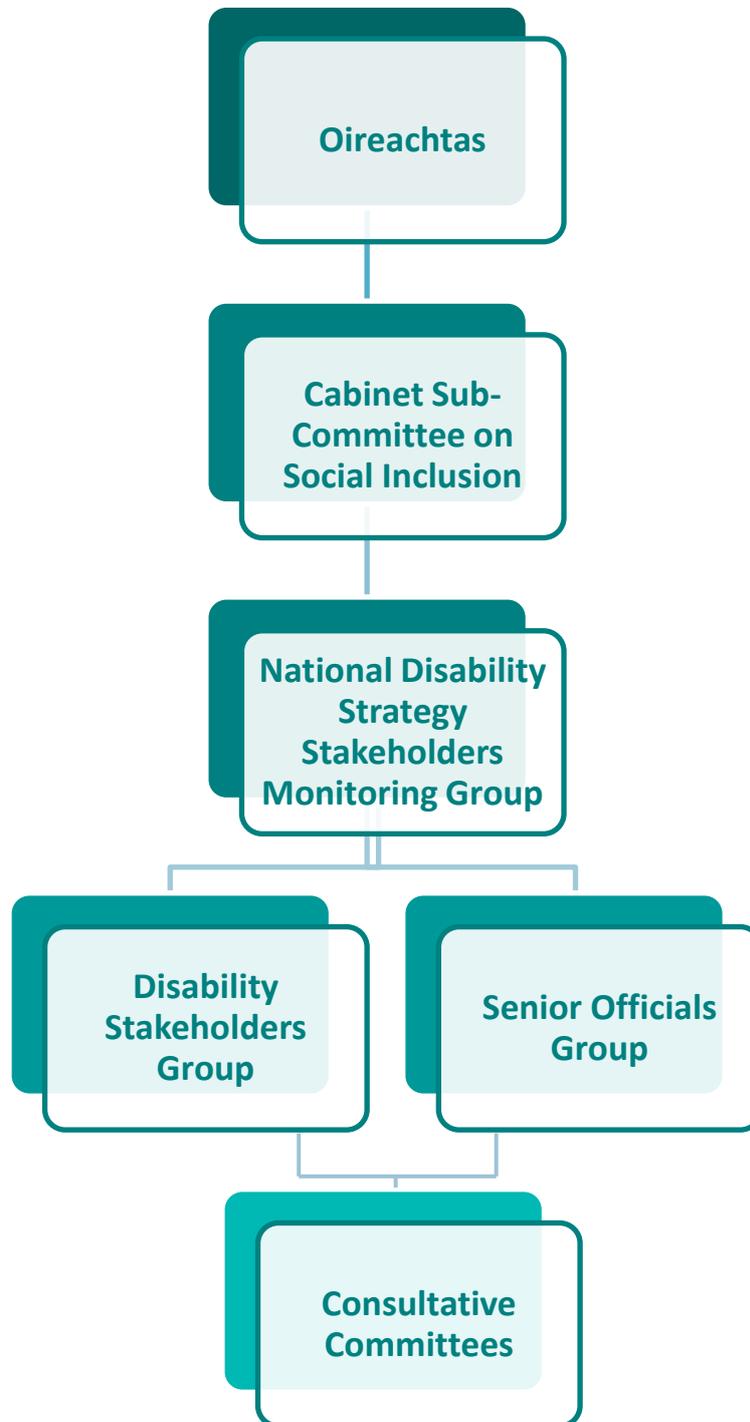
Monitoring the Implementation of the National Disability Strategy

A key feature of the NDSIP is the establishment of strong oversight mechanisms to ensure delivery of its actions. It is agreed that the NDSIG will meet four times a year or as directed by the Minister, to include at least one plenary and a number of thematic meetings. These thematic meetings cover, for example, cross- departmental issues or topics of particular interest, which need to be discussed. They will include the relevant members of the NDSIG as appropriate.

The overall Implementation Plan will be reviewed through these thematic meetings, which will be chaired by the Minister. Prior to each meeting, the National Disability Authority (NDA) will develop a briefing paper, based on the data available from departments, to help identify key themes and issues to inform discussion.

Each department will have a consultative mechanism to facilitate a streamlined process of engagement at departmental level. These will involve officials from that department and representatives from the disability sector, including members of the DSG, examining NDS matters within that department's area of responsibility. The consultative mechanism will be the forum where the detail in implementation of actions, in accordance with measurable Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), will be examined and any issues on actions can be addressed. Where major issues of a broader cross-sectoral or national importance are involved, such discussions will take place at a full NDSIG meeting.

Structure of the NDSIP monitoring process





Current Issues For DFI

Meetings to Date: 2013 and 2014

The NDSIG met twice in 2013, both of which were thematic meetings, the first on the issue of sign language and the second on housing. The key issues that emerged from these two thematic meetings included:

- **Irish Sign Language Thematic meeting: 28th of November 2013**
 - Following the meeting it was agreed that a report be produced with input from stakeholders in the Deaf Community to set out recommendations, including those related to the NDS Implementation Plan. This report will be submitted to the Minister for consideration.
- **Housing thematic meeting: 3rd of December 2014**
 - The meeting focused on Tenancy Support issues and the need for better data on housing need was recognised. There was a commitment to look at how to promote lifetime and universally designed houses.

There have been no thematic meetings of the NDSIG during 2014; however, a plenary meeting is scheduled for 29th May 2014. Although the agenda has yet to be circulated, it is expected to include the National Disability Employment Strategy and a report from the NDA on consultation with autism stakeholders with regard to the NDS.

DSG Letter to Minister Lynch

In March 2014, the DSG wrote to Minister Lynch requesting a specific meeting with her to discuss the Group's concerns in relation to monitoring the implementation of the NDSIP. This letter reflected the high-level critique and concerns with regard to various elements of the NDSIP and its monitoring. The letter expressed the disappointment of the DSG that, since the Plan was published in July 2013, it has not been possible for them to get any real sense of whether the process is working as designed and intended, and whether the NDSIP is achieving measureable progress.

In particular, the DSG highlighted the following as issues that it wished to discuss with the Minister:

- **Key Performance Indicators (KPIs):** The DSG considers that we will soon be one year into a two and a half year programme, but that there is little sense of what progress has been achieved over this period. The fact that 62 out of 91 actions are timetabled as “ongoing” or “ongoing over the life of the plan” does not assist in identifying priorities or evaluating progress.
- **Departmental Consultative Committees:** The DSG understood that the departmental consultative committees are key in the monitoring mechanism for the NDSIP. Members understood the committees were to be in place and meeting at regular intervals, in order to facilitate active engagement with stakeholders on the delivery of actions and on addressing barriers to implementation, which would enable the stakeholders to bring solutions to the table. However, the Group is concerned that very little progress has been achieved in this regard. Meetings of those committees are essential to identifying what issues should be escalated to the NDSIG and to thematic meetings to be resolved.
- **Commitment to Mainstreaming:** The DSG understands that it was intended that all relevant Government Departments would have a consultative mechanism in place in relation to the NDSIP. However, it remains concerned that some Departments do not appear to be planning to put a committee in place or, where appropriate, to join with another Department's committee. Such arrangements would be helpful in evaluating

progress by those Departments on critical areas, such as services for children, education and access to the justice system.

- **Sectoral Plans:** Members welcome the fact that the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport has published a revised sectoral plan (although it is only focused on transport matters). The DSG considers that all relevant Departments should produce revised sectoral plans reflecting the committed actions in the NDSIP, including commitments to cross-departmental coordination, in line with the spirit of the Disability Act 2005. This would then provide for statutory reporting on progress to the Oireachtas, and access by persons with disabilities to the Ombudsman with regard to any failures to implement those plans.
- **Implementing the NDS:** The DSG considers that an assessment on progress should be undertaken at the mid-point of implementation - that is mid-2014 - and that consideration should now be given to planning for the next implementation plan post 2015.

At a meeting with the Minister on 15th April, significant time was given to discussing the DSG's frustration with the slow establishment of the Department Consultative Committees. Progress has been made since the meeting, with a letter sent from Minister Lynch to the Secretary General of the Department of An Taoiseach, Martin Fraser. Each Department with a Sectoral Plan has now been given a tight time-frame for the establishment of these Consultative Committees. It has also been agreed that the NDA will produce an independent Mid-Term Review of progress on the NDSIP in Autumn 2014. Discussions are ongoing in relation to the other issues raised by the DSG, and DFI will communicate and update members as these arise.

Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities

In April 2014, DSG members were asked to consider a draft of the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for people with disabilities. The group was informed that it is Government's intention to publish this Strategy in the last quarter of 2014.

In providing initial comments, DFI acknowledged that the economic and jobs situation we are now in creates new challenges with respect to developing an employment strategy for people with disabilities. Despite this, we must remember that, while the economy thrived, people with disabilities did not benefit on an equal basis to others in Irish society. The first task of the Strategy must therefore be to address the structural inequalities in the system that result in systemic exclusion. People must be entitled to retain their medical card whilst in employment. Secondly, the exclusion of people with disabilities from the Live Register means that they live a life on contingency payments and are excluded from many mainstream activation measures, such as Momentum² and access to Intreo services³. Thirdly, the 3% public service employment quota must be upheld to show government commitment to people with disabilities. Without these measures in place, it is difficult to envisage how the Comprehensive Employment Strategy can deliver.

In particular, the following issues were raised:

- DFI is concerned that there is no indication that the actions outlined in the strategy provide for a comprehensive, person-centred response that will support the disabled person on their journey into work. The Strategy can only be judged on its capacity to deliver jobs for people with disabilities. It must avoid the trap of assuming that the act of creating a strategy and reporting mechanisms is the end point. Therefore, it must commit to real outcomes to be reached at realistic increments throughout the lifetime of the strategy.
- The Strategy rightly refers to the economic context and the future supply of jobs. It must also refer to more than the National Action Plan for Jobs, however, for legitimacy. It must respond to the specific needs of people with disabilities, addressing issues such as work that pays initiatives, minimum working wage that can encompass the costs of living with a disability, zero contract hours and precarious working conditions.

² For more information on the programme 'Momentum' please refer to the Department of Social Protection website at <http://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/momentum.aspx>.

³ DFI successfully lobbied to change eligibility for Jobsbridge to include people on DA however People on blind pension are still ineligible to apply.

At present, the DSG is working to compile a composite document outlining our concerns to be considered by the Minister and the Department at the next NDSIG meeting in May. In addition to responding to the detail in the draft document, this document will argue that, at its core, a Comprehensive Employment Strategy must have the capacity to respond to the diversity of people with disabilities, who should benefit from this Strategy. It must be clearer as to which statutory bodies have responsibility for people with disabilities in different contexts and at different life stages. It must ensure that the 'system' and conditions attached to payments, secondary benefits and training programmes do not hinder people with disabilities taking up work. It must ensure that people with disabilities have the same right to take up employment and it can not restrict access to relevant mainstream employment supports as other people.

For further information on the Comprehensive Employment Strategy, please contact DFI Support Officer, Joan O Donnell, at joanodonnell@disability-federation.ie

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The Disability Federation of Ireland (DFI) represents the interests and the expectations of people with disabilities to be fully included in Irish society. It comprises organisations that represent and support people with disabilities and disabling conditions.

The vision of DFI is that Irish society is fully inclusive of people with disabilities and disabling conditions so that they can exercise their full civil, economic, social and human rights and that they are enabled to reach their full potential in life. DFI's mission is to act as an advocate for the full and equal inclusion of people with disabilities and disabling conditions in all aspects of their lives.

DFI also works with a growing number of organisations and groups around the country that have a significant disability interest, mainly from the statutory and voluntary sectors. DFI provides:

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

DFI works on the basis that disability is a societal issue, and so works with Government and across the social and economic strands and interests of society.

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