



**Disability Federation of Ireland
Submission on Ireland's Austerity
Budgets 2012 to 2016**

THE DISABILITY STRATEGY ON THE CUSP OF COLLAPSE

Disability is not a sectoral issue; it is a social issue. 18.5% of the population have one or more disabilities according to the CSO's special disability survey¹.

The Taoiseach and the Tánaiste have both made disability, including mental ill health, their social justice priority². The Programme for Government aims to enhance the quality of life of people with disabilities³. These Government commitments support the objective of the National Disability Strategy (NDS), that people are enabled to participate in economic and social life because services and facilities accommodate disability.

Yet despite this commitment the Government has no way of knowing the impact of the recession on the very group that it has prioritised in terms of social justice, namely people with disabilities. Because clear lines of accountability and effective monitoring have never been established, the adverse effects are largely hidden from the public eye.

Since 2008 people with disabilities have been suffering cumulative reductions in essential income and service supports. In DFI's view further pressure on them would be unsustainable.

DFI fears that the National Disability Strategy (NDS) is on the cusp of collapse. We have submitted to the Government a Proposal to Support Implementation of the National Disability Strategy consistent with the Programme for Government⁴. Without the establishment of an effective accountability and monitoring system that brings the disability perspective to bear on budgetary and other decision-making across the Government, the NDS and the Government's commitment to enabling full participation by people with disabilities will become meaningless⁵.

People with disabilities deserve a Government that at a minimum protects the existing level of supports (adjusted to accommodate demographic pressures) through the recession, and demonstrates that it is doing so. Ireland's sense of social justice demands it. All citizens are entitled to mitigation of the adverse effects should disability happen to them or a family member. The NDS provides such assurance.

DFI calls on the Government to honour its priority to people with disabilities and to bring the disability perspective to bear on Budgetary decisions and to get the NDS Implementation Plan into place without further delay⁶.

¹ Central Statistics Office (2008) *National Disability Survey 2006 – First Results*, page 20.

² In the final debate of the election campaign on *Prime Time* on 22 February, 2011.

³ In particular the Programme commits on page 54 to "a realistic implementation plan for the National Disability Strategy, including sectoral plans with achievable time scales and targets within available resources. We will ensure whole-of-government involvement and monitoring of the Strategy, in partnership with the disability sector." *Programme for National Recovery 2011-2016*, page 54.

⁴ DFI (2011) *DFI Proposal to Support Implementation of the National Disability Strategy*.

⁵ For example, deficit-reduction actions such as the Croke Park Agreement cannot be primarily employer/employee driven. Provision of the necessary services must be the over-riding consideration. Ultimately it is not about those who provide the services but rather the actual provision of services.

⁶ The Disability Stakeholders Group has been working with Government officials to this end; that work needs to be expedited.

If services relied on by people with disabilities continue to be pared down, when Ireland finally exits from austerity, the supports that underpin people's ability to maintain their health, participate in education, keep their jobs and lead fulfilling lives will have been greatly weakened. Moreover, the social infrastructure on which to reinvigorate progress will be deeply eroded and exceedingly difficult to regenerate.

BOTH INCOME AND SERVICE SUPPORTS NEEDED FOR PARTICIPATION

Further to protecting the infrastructure of the NDS, we must ensure that people with disabilities, as citizens of Ireland, have an income that covers their basic needs and the public services that enable them to participate. Although some welcome progress was achieved on this front, recent experience has been alarmingly negative. Support to cover the extra costs of living that disability imposes on many people, long acknowledged by Government, still has not been addressed. Worse, the level of disability benefit was cut at the same harsh rate as for people on other social programmes. Further, additional charges have been imposed on things that people with disabilities have to buy.

Impact of the Recession – Poverty

While the Disability Allowance was cut by more than 4% in Budget 2011, consumer price inflation is close to 3%, with price increases for basic utilities exceeding 8%. People often incur extra costs in heating, transport, special foods etc. due to their disabilities.

People with disabilities have faced a double hit in terms of services and supports available, with the impact of the recession falling more heavily on them than other groups.

- The disability-specific services they need have been reduced, and freezes imposed that ignore the ever-increasing demand that comes with an ageing population.
- At the same time, generally available or universal services, such as social housing, leisure and dental services, which disabled people also use, have been eroded.
- Legislative entitlements in the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004, the Disability Act 2005 and the Citizens Information Act 2007 have been stalled.
- Huge cutbacks have been announced in capital funds for social housing appropriate to people with special needs and funds for housing adaptation grants have been reduced.
- Recent job creation and training initiatives have done little to enable access for people with disabilities who seek work.

Impact of Recession – Children

From June 2007 to April 2011, 2,461 'Independent Assessments of Need' reports had been completed for children under 5 years by the HSE. However 751 are currently overdue (i.e., another 31% had not been completed within the prescribed time limits).

The Programme for Government promises no further cuts in benefit levels. The Implementation Plan for the NDS must track the multiple impacts of the recession and work to prevent further harm to this historically disadvantaged group in Irish society.

It is critical that Budget 2012 contains actions that address the income and service / support needs of people with disabilities in an integrated way.

USING THE POWER OF VOLUNTARY DISABILITY ORGANISATIONS

A valuable resource for Government Departments and Agencies seeking to increase their capacity to include people with disabilities exists in the voluntary disability sector. Today many of these organisations are driven by people with disabilities and members of their families, who serve on the Board, work on the staff and / or contribute as volunteers. They bring energy, commitment, direct involvement of people with disabilities and additional

Table 1

DFI's Survey of Member Organisations: Activities of the Respondent Organisations

| Respondent Organisations' Activities | Percentage of Cases |
|--|---------------------|
| Aids and Appliances | 18% |
| Respite care services | 31% |
| Helpline/telephone support | 54% |
| Family support worker | 27% |
| Personal Assistance hours | 28% |
| Assessments | 19% |
| Training and support | 52% |
| Day care services | 19% |
| Newsletter | 58% |
| Advocacy work | 67% |
| Accommodation and residential services | 24% |
| Information on websites | 52% |
| Support groups | 48% |
| Other | 46% |

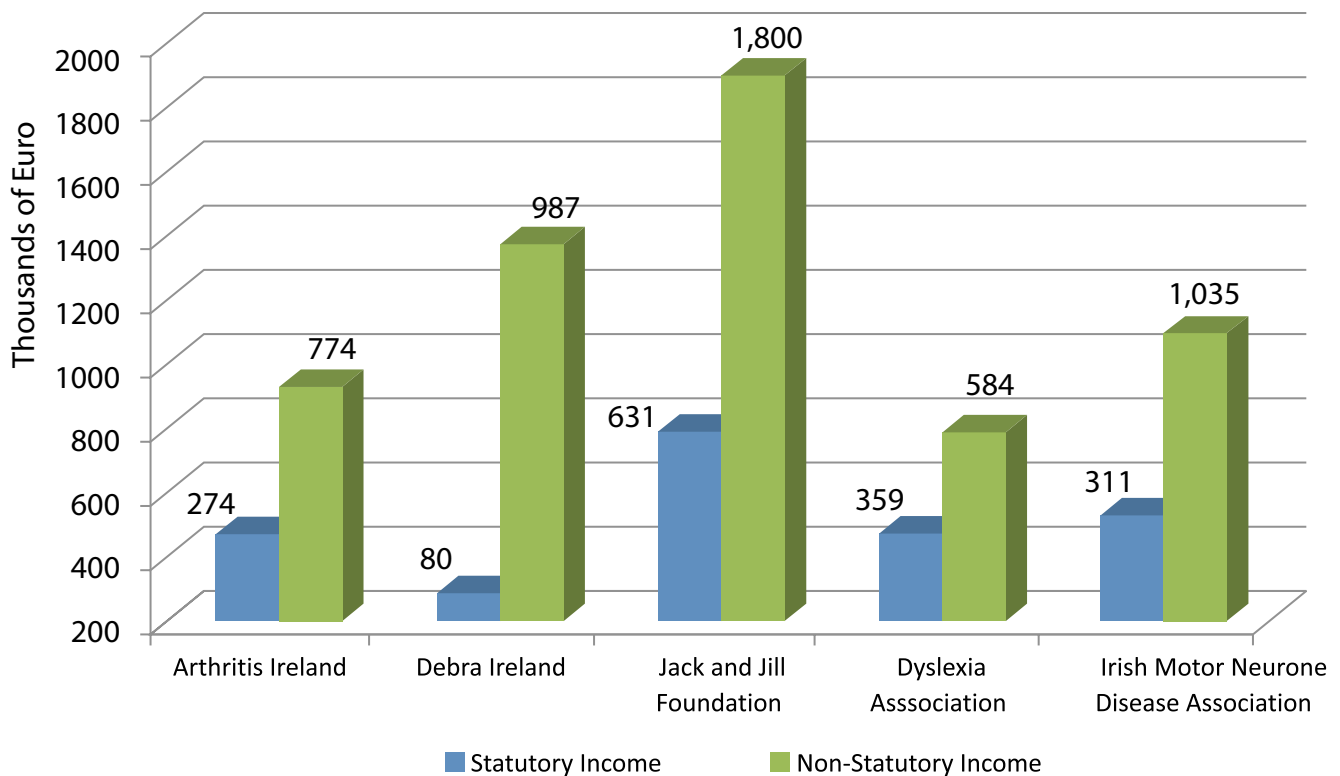
DFI 2009 Survey of Members, 68 of whom responded to this question.

funding to the table. Chart 1 shows for five DFI member organisations how private fund raising yields significant resources to complement public funding. The organisations hold valuable knowledge about specific disabilities and have the trust of people with those disabilities; they are embedded in the local community⁷.

While they provide very tangible direct or front line services, voluntary disability organisations also act as a co-worker and mediator with the disabled person to explore personal goals, and to make connections with appropriate services and opportunities. These activities support disabled people to reduce their reliance on specialist, segregated disability services and to lead a more productive life. They include organising peer support groups, family support services, helplines, training mainstream operators, representation on local advisory and decision-making fora. The kinds of work undertaken by DFI members is shown on Table 1.

The 2011 Budget cut the HSE’s Disability Services Programme funding less than most other service areas which was very welcome. In spite of increased demand for services due to demographic trends the Programme kept within its budget. Yet it is important to appreciate that cumulative public funding cuts, if continued, undermine the development of the kind of

Chart 1
Sample of DFI Organisations Statutory and Non-Statutory Income, 2010



⁷ DFI is working to enhance further the capacity of the organisations to implement mainstreaming locally.

services that support people with disabilities to take advantage of mainstream opportunities and lead fuller more productive lives, and that get better value for public money spent. Such services reduce the need for costly hospital and other institutional care by people with disabilities, thereby alleviating budgetary pressures⁸.

Impact of Recession – Disability Services

- **75% of the voluntary disability organisations surveyed by DFI in 2009 reported that demand for their services was increasing although their public funding had been reduced. Funding cuts continued in 2010 and 2011.**
- **In 2010 13% more visually impaired people accessed the services of NCBI than in 2009 although HSE funding was cut by 7% for 2010.**
- **AWARE's helpline, providing support for people with depression, took 14,987 calls in 2010. The number of calls was 8% higher than in 2009, yet AWARE's income was 5% lower.**

DFI calls on those across Government who are planning for the Comprehensive Review of Expenditure and Budget 2012 to consider who is - or can - help them to facilitate access to services so as not to exclude anyone due to their disability. Voluntary disability organisations are essential partners in this endeavour. Moreover they are a critical part of the social infrastructure that can sustain people with disabilities through the stringent years of the Programme for National Recovery. Undermining them to reduce the deficit will hugely compromise Ireland's capacity to realise the legitimate expectations of people with disabilities. Instead it is appropriate to plan with the voluntary disability organisations in relation to what they can contribute, along with public bodies, to protect the NDS by making sure that people who need services get them.

Maintaining public funding for voluntary disability organisations needs to be a feature of Budget 2012 and those that follow.

Organisations that enable people with disabilities to achieve and pursue opportunities as Irish citizens, using voluntary inputs and working with others to enhance effectiveness and the return from the public funding contribution, should be respected and valued as integral to Ireland's social infrastructure.

⁸ Voluntary disability organisations promote prevention, early intervention and amelioration to improve the health of people.

DFI's Recommendations to Government

1. Budget 2012 must at a minimum protect the existing benefit payments and public service entitlements of people with disabilities. Greater openness to training and employment opportunities is also critical. Guarding the resources on which people with disabilities depend is a key aspect of the Government's social justice priority and fundamental to sustaining the NDS through these difficult times.
2. Budget 2012 needs to recognise and support the pioneering role taken by voluntary disability organisations to help open up opportunities for people with disabilities as well as enable them to address their health needs. Funding them yields added value in terms of people's wellbeing and strengthened communities. Also the savings they create, in reduced hospital and other care costs, makes them a sound public investment.
3. The Implementation Plan for the National Disability Strategy (NDS) must be published and incorporated into the Government's Public Service Reform, Comprehensive Review of Expenditure, Budget 2012 and subsequent budgets. The NDS has faltered because of the lack of clear accountability within Government and poor monitoring of the impact of public policy decisions. Unless a whole-of-government Implementation Plan is put into operation the already precarious situations of people with disabilities will be undermined as well as the infrastructure of supports to enable real progress for people with disabilities when Ireland finally regains fiscal balance.
4. Public Service Reform and the new budgetary process need to embed a person-centred, disability perspective in Departmental Statements of Strategy, Business Plans and budgetary decision-making. Departments must acknowledge responsibility to carry out their public service remits having regard for people with disabilities.



**Representing the interests and expectations of people with disabilities to be fully included
Comprising organisations that represent and support people with disabilities**

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.

There are over 126 organisations within membership, or as associates, of DFI. 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.

For further information go to www.disability-federation.ie

Disability Federation of Ireland, Fumbally Court, Fumbally Lane, Dublin 8
Tel: 01-4547978, Fax: 01-4547981
Email: info@disability-federation.ie Web: www.disability-federation.ie