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SPRING 2017

**Budget 2017/  
Disability  
& Poverty**

**Health &  
Education**

**The Housing  
Crisis**

**Transport**

**Committees  
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Engagement  
Group**

## *A letter from John Dolan*

*Greetings to all members and supporters of the disability community for 2017.*

*I am deeply honoured to be in a position to represent this community as a member on Seanad Éireann. I can assure you all that my efforts during the term of this Seanad will be focused on the needs of people with disabilities, their families and carers.*

*Since taking up office last May I have continually raised disability inclusion issues in the Seanad and with other members of the Government and Oireachtas whenever possible.*

*I have especially focused on the risk of increasing public pay, in breach of the Lansdowne Road Agreement, at the expense of much needed services and I have used every opportunity to push for the urgent ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities by the Government.*

*My firm commitment is to continue the fight for people with disabilities in the year ahead.*

**Best regards,**

## Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD)



The failure of the Government to ratify the UN CRPD - despite repeated assurances from the relevant Departments and An Taoiseach that it would be ratified by end of 2016 - is a source of great frustration and anger for me and persons living with a disability and their families in Ireland.

I have continuously engaged on this matter, both publically and privately, with An Taoiseach and Minister McGrath. Within the Seanad I have

questioned Minister's Harris, Varadkar, Bruton and Ross with regard to the legislative timetable to enable ratification and related matters. More recently I raised this matter at the Justice and Equality Joint Oireachtas Committee and on numerous occasions in the media.



*John speaking to RTÉ regarding his concerns at the delay in ratifying the UNCRPD*

This convention was adopted by the UN in 2006, eleven years ago, and was signed by our Government in 2007.

This delay can no longer be justified. This ongoing dragging of feet is a disgrace, especially as Article 1 of the convention states that the purpose of the Convention is to 'promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity'.

This ratification by the Government of the UN CRPD will require a whole of Government Implementation Plan that is based on real costing's and set timescales. Had the Government also addressed the litany of outstanding issues in the 2017 budget statement; a good start would have been made.

Be assured that I will continue to maintain pressure at every level and opportunity to ensure that this vitally important convention, for so many people, will be ratified early in 2017.

# Senator JOHN DOLAN

## Education

I have used the Seanad as a platform to highlight the need for Government to raise their ambition and increase investment regarding the educational needs of children and young people with disabilities and special needs. This is essential for a fairer and more inclusive Ireland.

A quarter of the children of Ireland have some form of disability. Children with disabilities are more likely to come from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. This creates a double disadvantage because those with disabilities, based on their lower socio-economic status, are more likely to be at the bottom rung, to be placed in special schools settings or to be outside the mainstream setting.

## Transport

One in four people with a disability do not use public transport for accessibility reasons. Most rail and bus providers require 24 hours notice if wheelchair users plan to use their service. Only 56% of Bus Éireann's coach fleet is deemed wheelchair accessible. Inaccessibility of public transport is notable throughout the country, especially in rural areas.

The lack of accessible transport is a major barrier to inclusion within Irish society. I have requested that the Minister for Transport, Shane Ross set out in Seanad Éireann the advances that disabled passengers will experience by this time next year.

## Health: Joint Oireachtas Committee on Health



*John with Candi O'Reilly and her daughter Bronwyn discussing barriers to access.*

I was very pleased to have secured a position on the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Health, as it provides me with a further opportunity to put badly needed services in place for the disability community. This Committee plays an important role in scrutinising the work of the Department of Health and its agencies, as well as examining current health policy, assessing the future planning of health services and scrutinising any proposed changes to the way healthcare is delivered in this country.

As a result of my participation, there is a strong focus in the 2017 work programme on disability and mental health and the Department of Health's strategy statement now strongly emphasises the UNCRPD and independent living for people with disabilities.

I am also actively contributing to the ongoing debate on the Disabilities (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2016, which sets

out to address the remaining legislative barriers to Ireland's ratification of the UNCRPD and have engaged in the Justice Committee with Minister McGrath.

## Seanad Civil Engagement Group

On 28th May, I was one of five new Independent members of Seanad Éireann that formed a technical group known as the Civil Engagement Group.

This group is not a political party. It is a parliamentary alliance to maximise speaking and participation opportunities for its members, all of whom have backgrounds in civil society, activism and social movements.



*John pictured here with members of the Civil Engagement Group and other Independent Senators*

## Budget 2017

As many of you are aware people with disabilities are at almost twice the risk of living in poverty (34.8%) as the general population. This is a national scandal, which successive governments have failed to address. Regretably, working is not an option for everyone and citizens with disabilities are entitled to income support that allows them to live in dignity. It was for these reasons that DFI's Budget submission 2017 called for an increase of €20 in disability payments to offset some of the additional costs of disability, as well as the protection of all supplementary benefits. Ultimately, the Budget included a €5 increase in weekly rates of Invalidity Pension, Disability Allowance, Blind Pension, Illness Benefit, Disablement Pension. This meagre increase is simply not good enough and this Government has failed the 600,000 living with disability. The 2018 budget affords this government a further opportunity to deal with this vitally important matter.

## Poverty Among People with Disabilities on the Increase

The Survey on Income and Living Conditions in Ireland, published by the CSO on 1st February 2017, showed that half of the population of people living with disabilities are not able to afford essential items, such as:

- Adequately heated homes;
- Two pairs of strong shoes;
- A warm coat;
- Meat on a frequent basis.

These totally independent findings are distressing, but should not come as a surprise to the Government. When the Taoiseach visited the Seanad last year, I took the opportunity to highlight the fact that poverty among people with disabilities was on the increase. On this occasion, I emphasised that "Disability comes to every door and has a couple of hallmarks. It drives people into poverty and causes exclusion and these twin imposters conspire in a potent way to ensure people's hope and possibilities for the future are diminished. Ireland can and must work against these twin evils."

I also raised with the Taoiseach his Government's failure to ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. I stressed that: "Something like 50,000 or 60,000 people who are not disabled today will be disabled by this day next year. It is something that comes to every one of us. We know this in our own lives. A good start in 2017 is vital after the years of difficulty that we have had. The Taoiseach should harness the resources of his Government and Cabinet and get to grips with this terrible dilemma, this running sore. Areas such as health and community services, income supports, cost of disability payment, employment and housing are the issues that will have to be tackled in faith when we sign."



John facilitated the pre-Budget submission for the Irish Wheelchair Association at Leinster House. IWA delegates pictured here with Minister Finian McGrath.

## THE HOUSING CRISIS



Inadequate housing remains a concern for many people with disabilities living in the community. Almost 4,000 people with disabilities are on social housing waiting lists. Meanwhile, Ireland still has almost 3,000 people living in congregated settings and many others inappropriately placed in nursing homes. They are deprived of the basic human right to live in the community with choices that are equal to others.

In July, with the support of my colleagues in the Civil Engagement group, I tabled a motion on the housing needs of people with disabilities. This motion was unanimously passed by Seanad Éireann and it called on the Government to:

- ensure the provision of an annual update from local authorities of the number of social housing units allocated to people with disabilities on the housing waiting list;
  - ensure that any housing projects supported by public funding, including Part V housing, provide a percentage of pre-planned and reserved housing units to meet local needs for persons with disabilities;
  - ensure that the Social Housing 2020 Strategy is routinely disability proofed;
- and*
- provide funding in 2017 to increase housing supply and to make necessary and timely adaptations to current housing stock.

## Raising issues in the media



I use a combination of press statements, opinion pieces (Irish Times and Cork Independent), twitter, facebook and interviews to raise issues facing people with disabilities in the media. My position on public service pay/

resources for services led to appearances on the RTE TV News and the Claire Byrne TV programme. All of the political correspondents in the Oireachtas have been made aware of my ongoing availability to comment on disability issues.

My comment after the budget was published last October to the effect that “the budget utterly fails to address issues facing disabled people”, was covered by many media outlets and represented the view of the entire disability community.

My various comments and statements can be found on Twitter, Facebook and my website.

## Meetings/Activities

Since my election I have held meetings in Leinster House with Multiple Sclerosis Ireland; Age Action; Rehab; the Irish Wheelchair Association; Muscular Dystrophy Ireland; European Multiple Sclerosis Platform; Mental Health Reform; Neurological Alliance; Ann Sullivan Centre; Debra Ireland; Irish Society of Chartered Physiotherapists; Disability Federation of Ireland and Asthma Ireland. I have also met many disabled people and their families.

I am especially keen to meet disability-based organisations and to work with them to build stronger and more inclusive communities.

I am also happy to facilitate tours of the Oireachtas for disability groups and I am a strong believer in making our national parliament open to all our citizens.

## Main Social Welfare Changes and Rates of Payments Budget 2017 – Department of Social Protection

### Main Changes

€5 increase in max. rate of all weekly payments for pensioners, carers, people with disabilities, widows, lone parents, jobseekers etc. 1.5 million beneficiaries

Invalidity Pension eligibility will be extended to the self-employed from December 2017 and for Treatment Benefits, such as Dental, Optical and Hearing, from March 2017

Lone parents package including new €500 Cost of Education Allowance

More Dental and Optical Benefits for all insured employees and self-employed from October Proportionate increases for people in receipt of reduced rate payments and for qualified adult dependants

50,000 extra children to benefit from School Meals Reversal of cuts to Farm Assist & 500 additional places on the Rural Social Scheme

€2 million for pre-activation supports for people with disabilities

Young Jobseekers: full Back to Education Allowance, lower contributions to Rent Supplement

### Continued Support for Older People

- €5 increase in the maximum rate of all weekly welfare payments for pensioners aged 66 and over with proportionate increases for adult dependants and those on reduced rates

- Living Alone Allowance and Over 80 Age Allowance will be protected

- Fuel Allowances, Household Benefits and Free Travel will be protected

### Supports for Carers

- Carer's Allowance to continue to be paid for a period of 12 weeks when the person being cared for moves permanently into residential care/nursing home – January

- €5 increase in maximum rate of Carer's Benefit and Carer's Allowance weekly payment

- Carer's will continue to get the annual Carer's Support Grant of €1,700 for each care recipient.

### Supports for People with Disabilities

- Funding of €2m to be provided for Projects which provide pre-activation supports for people with disabilities in 2017.

- €5 increase in weekly rates of Invalidity Pension, Disability Allowance, Blind Pension, Illness Benefit, Disablement Pension

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