# Irish Association of Social Workers

## SUBMISSION TO GREEN PAPER ON DISABILITY REFORM: A PUBLIC CONSULTATION TO REFORM DISABILITY PAYMENTS IN IRELAND

## MARCH 2024

*"Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. (IFSW, 2014).*

# Contents

## Introduction

### THE IRISH ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS

The Irish Association of Social Workers (IASW) is the national body representing social workers in Ireland.

### SOCIAL WORK IN IRELAND

Social workers are regulated and registered by the Health and Social Care Professionals body (CORU). As of October 2023, there were 5,243 social workers registered in Ireland (CORU, 2023). Social workers practice in a broad range of areas including but not limited to: children and families, mental health, addiction, probation, older persons, disabilities, primary care, adoption, international protection, hospitals, policy, academia, NGOs, government, private practice.
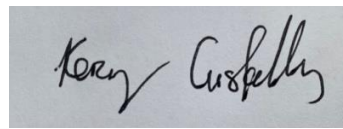
### NOTE FROM THE IASW CHAIR AND SWAMH CHAIR

We would like to thank the individuals and groups who so kindly and graciously offered their time and expertise in discussing issues of concern pertaining to the Green Paper on Disability Reform and of importance for disabled persons in Ireland. Their views informed this submission which, we hope, aligns with the diverse and multi-faceted experiences of disabled persons and their allies across Ireland. This submission is drafted by way of showing solidarity with disabled persons in Ireland, who find themselves impacted by the Green Paper on Disability Reform, and their allies. This submission is also drafted to offer some potential solutions and suggestions for next steps and to highlight the part social workers can play in this regard.

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**Chair, IASW Chair**

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# Definitions

For the purposes of this submission, the following definitions should be noted:

**Work**

Work can take many forms including paid and unpaid labour, for example; caring work, unpaid work, volunteering, formal work, paid work, manual work, intellectual work etc. All types of work should be seen as valid and as contributing to the successful functioning of society. As such, all members of society should be supported to be able to contribute to society under the varied types of "work", according to their own needs and requirements at any given time.

**Disability**

According to Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (UNCRPD): "Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others" (United Nations, 2006).

**Social Model**

An approach to disability that prioritises the identification of systemic barriers, discrimination and social exclusion which make it difficult or impossible for disabled people to attain full participation in society[1].

**Language**

In this submission the term "disabled people" is primarily used, with the term "persons with disabilities" and "people with psychosocial disabilities" also being used at times. The term 'disabled people' is generally understood to align with the social and human rights model of disability, as it is considered to acknowledge the fact that people are disabled by barriers in the environment and society. Social workers also recognise that others prefer the term "persons with disabilities" because of the inherent understanding in the term that they are first and foremost human beings entitled to human rights. This also reflects the language used in the UNCRPD. Social workers also recognise that many people do not identify with either of these terms and as such, social workers respect individuals choices as to how they define themselves in this regard (National Disability Authority, 2022).

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[1] See Peter Beresford's work for an extensive consideration of this area https://www.brunel.ac.uk/people/peter-beresford

### OVERVIEW

This submission provides a brief outline of the social work contribution to the Government proposal to reform disability payments in Ireland. Social workers, through their national association (IASW), take the view that disability should be viewed within a social, environmental and economic context and as such, social work can offer key contributions and leadership on this issue.

This submission highlights the following in particular;

- Poverty is a key factor in disabled people's equitable access to work and any policy focusing on disabled people[2] and work should include poverty prevention as a key policy approach.
- A deficit-based approach to disability policy is harmful to disabled people and society in general. Instead, social workers suggest a social model approach is more conducive to positive outcomes for people and communities.
- Invest in a whole-of-Government approach to disability policy and ensure rights-based, psychosocial wellbeing approaches form the core of all policy responses, thereby ensuring meaningful inclusion of disabled people in all areas of society, including work.
- A citizens assembly on disability is suggested, with time given for measured, reasonable and most importantly, inclusive, discussion and consideration to the topic.
- Fully implement all aspects of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).
- Invest in holistic approaches to ensure the full and meaningful inclusion of people with psychosocial disabilities in society based on people and community-led approaches, which take account of social networks, social solidarity and social wellbeing.
- Invest in a "Think Social" approach to disability policy development and implementation.

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2

## Social work perspectives

### ANTI-POVERTY APPROACHES IN POLICY

- Poverty is a key factor in disabled people's equitable access to work and any policy focusing on disabled people and related work should include poverty prevention as a key policy approach.
- The cost of being disabled and the barriers this causes for people in order that they can even be "work ready" comparable to the non-disabled population is a fact borne out through recent research e.g. each disabled person requires between €8,000-€13,000 (Indecon, 2021) to account for additional costs to function in society, compared to non-disabled people. This needs to be accounted for in real terms through universal, financial support for people.
- Cost of living requirements: any payments to disabled people should be directly linked to the living wage, currently set at €14.80 per hour. Therefore, a proposed disability payment, non-means tested, universal-payment, weekly would be set currently at €518 (based on a 35-hour work week).

- At an absolute minimum, any income replacement payment for disabled persons should, at baseline, be set no lower than the poverty threshold and in line with inflation (MESL, 2023).

### SOCIAL MODEL APPROACH

- A deficit-based approach to disability policy is harmful to disabled people and society in general. Instead, social workers suggest a social model approach is more conducive to positive outcomes for people and communities.
- The current Green Paper proposal essentially pits disabled people against each other and sets up a system of people having to "prove" how disabled they are in order to qualify for a payment (any of the three tier payments are less than is required to live a dignified and independent life and that is less than the minimum additional cost required to simply function in society, as mentioned above).
- The focus should be instead, on reducing the structural barriers that exist, that stop disabled people from participating fully and meaningfully in society. The focus of any policy therefore should be on reducing or eliminating these barriers. That would mean

that disabled people could participate fully (according to their needs, requirements, and individual circumstances) in work. Social workers suggest therefore, a citizen's assembly on disability is convened, with time given for measured, reasonable and most importantly, inclusive, discussion and consideration to the topic.

### WHOLE-GOVERNMENTAL APPROACH

- Invest in a whole-of-Government approach to disability policy and ensure rights-based, psychosocial wellbeing approaches form the core of all policy responses, thereby ensuring meaningful inclusion of disabled people in all areas of society including work.
- Work can take many forms including paid and unpaid labour e.g. caring duties. All types of work should be seen as valid and as contributing to the successful functioning of society. As such, all members of society should be supported to be able to contribute to society under the varied types of "work" according to their own needs and requirements at any given time.

### UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

- Fully implement all aspects of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

- Social workers suggest respectfully that the entire consultation process for this issue should be stopped and reconvened from a rights-based perspective. The reconvened consultation process should take place in an inclusive, accessible way, and in a careful and sensitive manner. The consultation should be based on the UNCRPD, particularly Article 4.3.

- There are many Disabled Persons Organisations (DPOs) and individual disabled persons who have substantial work already completed on how to meaningfully work from a

lived experience perspective. Social workers suggest the relevant Government departments centre any consultation on these processes.[3]

## RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE

- Invest in holistic approaches to ensure the full and meaningful inclusion of people with psychosocial disabilities in society based on people and community-led approaches, which take account of social networks, social solidarity and social wellbeing.

- The principle of universality should underpin any approach to disability payment reform.

- The current system of social protection, employment and social service policies are not achieving their stated aims of protecting disabled people from poverty and social exclusion (Cousins, 2024). Social Workers suggest, that in order to achieve the Department's own aim of supporting social inclusion for marginalized groups, that any reform of disability payments and disability policy take account of the intersectional nature of disability, for example, gender, racism, sexuality etc.

- Any reform of disability policy needs to take account of lifespan approaches i.e. acquired disability, impact on older persons populations etc.

- The punitive 'welfare to work' approach (akin to the UK 'welfare to work' measures which have been shown through research to be responsible for sizeable numbers of deaths (Mills and Pring, 2023), proposed in the Green Paper, individualizes people's experience of disability, putting the onus on disabled persons to engage with employment services as opposed to putting an onus on employers to engage with the Department in order to outline concrete and SMART action plans for how they (employers) will remove systemic and structural barriers in their workplaces which stop

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[3] E.g. AsIAm: https://asiam.ie/
Disabled Women Ireland: https://www.disabledwomenireland.org/
National Platform of Self Advocates: http://thenationalplatform.ie/
Voice of Vision Impairment: https://vvi.ie/
Physical Impairment Ireland: https://www.facebook.com/PiiDPO/
Irish Deaf Society: https://www.irishdeafsociety.ie/
Independent Living Movement Ireland: https://ilmi.ie/
DPO Network: https://dponetwork.ie/

disabled people accessing meaningful work as a means to achieve meaningful participation in society.

- As professionals trained in the application of policy to practice, social workers are acutely aware that policy decisions have real potential to impact on people's lives both positively and negatively. Social workers strongly advocate for all disability policy to be written in a humane, rights-based, socially determined way.

- Social workers have vast direct frontline experience facilitating people and communities to navigate the overly-bureaucratic, exclusionary aspects of the welfare and policy system in Ireland, in order that people can access their basic rights. Social workers therefore recommend a "Think Social" approach to disability policy development and implementation, an approach which focuses on removing structural and systemic barriers to people accessing basic rights.

- Social workers recommend investment in recruitment of social workers across all sectors from frontline to Departmental level to support the development of rights-based, wellbeing-focused policy.

- Social workers recommend a cross-Governmental commitment to investment in enhanced recruitment and retention of social workers across all sectors to further support the development and embedding of lived experience in health and social care settings.

## Key issues to consider

### POVERTY

The connections between poverty and disability and the social work knowledge base around this. Economic stability as a cornerstone of wellbeing stability.

### SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY

It is vital that people are supported in an inclusive way that acknowledges the importance of being able to meaningfully participate in social and community spaces. The impact on people's psychosocial wellbeing is strongly linked to this.

### RIGHTS AND WELLBEING

People's right to fully participate in society.
Requirement to implement UNCRPD in full.

### STRENGTHS BASED APPROACHES

Strengths / solution focused approaches should underpin all responses from individual to systemic. The social work knowledge base is underpinned by these approaches as core social work skills.

## Recommendations

### THINK PEOPLE

Social workers are in favour of a more humane and solution-focused approach to disability policy reform.

### THINK SOCIAL

Social workers recommend a social model approach to disability policy reform, an approach that understands people in a holistic context and decouples disabled people's experiences from medical/functional or deficit-based approaches to their lives.

### THINK COMMUNITY

People exist in social contexts and environments. Social workers recommend investment in holistic approaches based on people and community-led approaches, which take account of social networks, social solidarity and social wellbeing.

### THINK PARTICIPATION

People should be supported through progressive welfare state policies, to economic stability and financial stability, such that they can participate fully in society to the positive promotion of their social, environmental and economic wellbeing.

### THINK SOCIAL WORK

As experts in the field of psychosocial approaches to health and wellbeing, social workers are incredibly well placed to provide leadership, training, education, knowledge and skills towards the realization of a reformed vision for disability policy in Ireland. Working in meaningful partnership with communities, social work can support change from the ground up and can tangibly support change in a rights-based and co-produced way. Invest in social work recruitment and retention strategies to support the development of rights-based, solution-focused policies and practices across government departments, health and social care settings and frontline services.

# References

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