Untapped Resource:
A Co-Designed Blueprint for Welcoming and Supporting
Disabled Employees
in the Civil and Public Sector

The Public Appointments Service (publicjobs.ie)

and

Tilting the Lens

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Foreword - Margaret McCabe

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The Public Appointments Service (PAS), through publicjobs.ie, is the centralised recruiter for the civil and public sector in Ireland. We recognise and value the importance of attracting and welcoming talent into our workforce that is diverse, flexible, resilient, and reflective of the communities it serves. This diversity of skills and experience is what will drive the innovation, creativity, and productivity required in our public services of the future.

Guided by the ambitions contained in our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy,[1] we strive to provide excellence in service delivery for our clients, ensure equitable approaches and opportunities for candidates of all backgrounds, skills, and experience, and support the cross-government work to ensure the public sector workforce reflects an increasingly diverse society. The Public Service Transformation 2030 Strategy[2] (Pillar Two - Workforce and Organisation of the Future) sets out the government's vision for an "inclusive, high quality and integrated Public Service provision that meets the needs and improves the lives of the people of Ireland".

This project to create a blueprint for the delivery of reasonable accommodations was commissioned with support from the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform's (DPENDR) Public Service Innovation Fund.[3] Through an inclusive co-design and collaborative process, the project aims to secure better outcomes for Disabled candidates applying through publicjobs.ie for roles in our civil and public sector. We also hope to support better outcomes for our clients as they onboard Disabled candidates into new roles. Finally, it will support our own recruitment teams to deliver better, more inclusive, more efficient recruitment services for clients and candidates alike.

A recent review of our application and assignment data from 2019 to 2021, revealed that only 2.8 percent of applications received were from candidates who stated they have a disability,[4] and only a small percentage of those required support in the form of reasonable accommodations (assistive technology at application and assessment, extra time for interviews, scribes, readers, and others). Our purposeful support of accessibility through the recruitment process with these accommodations means that, of candidates assigned, 2.6 percent have a stated disability. It is clear that when Disabled candidates apply and are

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[1] PAS Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy
https://www.publicjobs.ie/documents/PASED&IStrategy2021-2023.pdf
[2]Better Public Services - Public Service Transformation 2030 Strategy
https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/255872/e6feb71e-0199-4061-894e-6f8e80bafad1.pdf#page=null
[3] Public Sector Innovation Fund https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/d6b8a-minister-donohoe-announces-18-projects-to-be-funded-under-public-service-innovation-fund-2023/
[4] While PAS does not undertake all recruitment for the civil and public service, it does play a central role in meeting the workforce needs of 18 government departments, the Health Service Executive, An Garda Siochana, and 150 other public organisations.

appropriately supported, many are successful. Much more needs to be done to attract Disabled individuals, with their skills and experience, into the public service.

The challenge that this project aims to address is the difficulty in ensuring that, once successfully through our recruitment process, Disabled candidates are assigned to the right roles with the right accommodations, and successfully onboarded by their HR teams and local hiring managers.

This Blueprint framework for the successful assignment and onboarding of Disabled candidates has been co-designed in consultation and collaboration with Disabled and non-Disabled employees, local HR teams and hiring managers across the civil and public sector, and other key stakeholders.

External experts in accessibility and inclusion have shared their insights and experience to guide and steer this project. This Blueprint lays out a range of practical recommendations and highlights policy challenges requiring action not only for PAS, but for those organisations, teams, and individuals working to ensure a public sector workforce that reflects the diversity of this country, a country where 22 percent of the entire population identify as having a disability.[5]

We are enormously grateful to everyone who gave their time and energy to contribute. The work has been challenging, and we thank everyone who generously shared stories, experiences, and insights, and helped identify the solutions to support the much-needed change.

This framework for the 'Reasonable Accommodation Process (Assignment & Onboarding)' has been facilitated and collated by an all-disabled consultancy team from Tilting the Lens and Blue Line Consulting.

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[5] Central Statistics Office, Census of Population 2022 https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpsr/censusofpopulation2022-summaryresults/healthdisabilitycaringandvolunteering/

A Note on Accessibility and Language

The activities in this project were approached with intentionality, modelling accessible practices as far as possible. The ambition was to create equity and consistency of experience for everyone involved, through communication, flexibility and collaboration, with the outcomes being dignity, agency, ease and pride.

That pride extends to the language purposefully used in this document: identity-first language has been deliberately and intentionally selected, meaning that throughout you will find references to 'Disabled person', rather than 'person with a disability', other than where legislation or existing documentation that uses person-first language is quoted or referred to.

The Disabled community advocates for identity-first language, as it considers the whole person, thus stressing that disability is a fundamental part of one's personhood and shapes an individual's experience, skills, personality and outlook. This language reinforces Disability Pride. Led by the community, within this framework, the opposite of Disabled is 'non-Disabled'. However, some people prefer to be defined as a 'person with a disability', and where this has been explicitly detailed, their choice has been respected.

Euphemisms have been avoided in this document, such as 'differently abled', or 'special needs', to move from the medical model of disability to one rooted in justice and rights. Further discussion and explanation of the Models of Disability are included in Appendix 2.

According to the European Commission, just 32.6[6] percent of the total Disabled working population in Ireland and Greece are in employment. In Estonia 64.9 percent of Disabled people are in employment. Ireland's Disabilities Employment Gap (DEG)[7] the gap between the employment of Disabled people and the employment of non-Disabled people is 38.6 percent, the EU's highest DEG. The lowest DEG is in Italy, at 14.9 percent.

As the centralised recruitment gateway for the public service, the Public Appointments Service (publicjobs.ie) has worked to create accessible interviewing and recruitment processes which has increased the potential for Disabled people in Ireland to secure opportunities within the public and civil service. Over time, it is hoped that this and other endeavours will encourage more Disabled candidates to consider applying to work in the public sector.

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[6] European Commission, Country Report: Ireland, 2022, Stability Programme of Ireland https://commission.europa.eu/publications/2022-european-semester-country-reports_en

[7] European Human Rights Report 2023 - The European Disability Forum https://www.edf-feph.org/content/uploads/2023/05/hr7_2023_press-accessible.pdf

Project Scope

The aims for this project were:
- Using co-design and collaborative thinking and methodologies, to improve candidate and client experience of the assignment and onboarding process for Disabled people entering the public sector or being promoted to new roles, who require reasonable accommodations (RA).
- To ensure robust knowledge and skills transfer on co-designing and creating a universally accessible reasonable accommodations process for stakeholders, drawing on international best practice from across public sector organisations in other jurisdictions.
- To encourage and support the implementation planning of key solutions and recommendations to address systemic barriers to success.
- To inform wider Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (ED&I) Policy development in the civil and public service.
- To support the attainment of the government's minimum target of 6 percent for the employment of Disabled people in the civil and public sectors in Ireland by 2025.

The Challenge

The current statutory employment target for Disabled people in the public sector is a minimum of 3 percent. This increases to a minimum of 4.5 percent in 2024, and a minimum of 6 percent by 2025.

The lack of a consistent approach across the public sector to provide reasonable accommodations for Disabled people has led to many cases of poor experiences during assignment and onboarding. This has tended to result in Disabled people having low career expectations, with many limiting their ambition to progress and contribute in their roles longer-term. Participants in this project described:
- Limited access at times to buildings, technology, group engagement (such as meetings), and opportunities both for onboarding and moving on to probation.
- Lack of provision of meaningful work in some cases.
- Lack of disability awareness and allyship.
- Lack of foresight and planning for onboarding.
- At times, a lack of available, timely, and relevant information.
- The absence of an informed and supported handover from PAS to the relevant Department or Service.

In order to support the success of Disabled candidates who may require accommodations applying to work in the public sector, key elements need to be in place:
- Successful candidates assigned to roles that can support their accommodations.
- Identification and confirmation of any accommodations they require for both the recruitment process and onboarding in their new workplace in a timely, robust, and flexible way, knowing that needs can be fluid.
- A planned onboarding and training process that supports success throughout their probationary period.

-   Clear guidance for recruiters and hiring managers on how to ensure that Disabled candidates' requirements are central throughout the process and in ongoing communications.

The Motivations for Change

The vision for Ireland's Public Service Transformation Strategy[8] is for inclusive, high quality, integrated Public Service provision that meets the needs and improves the lives of the people of Ireland. The workforce of the future is skilled and motivated, supported by dynamic career development, progressive policies and inclusive workplace cultures—for everyone.

The implementation of the Transformation Strategy is supported by the Public Service Innovation Fund[9] which aims to support innovation in the development and delivery of public services. The fund was created and is run by the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform (DPENDR).

Disabled by Design

In 2019, the Supreme Court made a landmark judgement in Daly v. Nano Nagle,[10] which laid out recommendations relating to Ireland's approach to the support of Disabled people in the workplace, updating Ireland's framing of disability, and indicating that the State must move towards the social- and rights-based approaches that Europe, the United States, and other nations follow, and the definition of disability championed by the World Health Organisation.[11]

That judgement directed employers to reframe their thinking, in that the accessibility (or otherwise) of the workplace or physical environment is what disables people, and that the ability to do a job can only be judged after reasonable accommodations are made and provided for a Disabled employee.

Methodology

The framework and recommendations in this document were developed using co-design and collaborative methodologies. In order to ensure equitable, diverse and inclusive outputs, the

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[8] Gov.ie, Public Service Transformation 2030 https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/255872/e6feb71e-0199-4061-894e-6f8e80bafad1.pdf#page=null
[9] Public Services Innovation Fund https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/56174-supports-from-better-public-services/
[10] Nano Nagle v. Daly [2019] IESC 63 https://www.ihrec.ie/supreme-court-significantly-clarifies-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-to-reasonable-workplace-accommodation/
[11] World Health Organisation definition of disability https://www.who.int/health-topics/disability#tab=tab_1

people most impacted at the assignment and onboarding stages shared power throughout the process, using ongoing and iterative dialogue to build, test, and validate the recommendations.

Over 100 individuals were involved through input and engagement in the following areas:

Grouping	Meetings	Ideation Session	Validation Workshop
Client & Stakeholder Group	3	1	
External Advisory Group	3	1	
Disabled Employee Group		1	1
Disabled Non-Employee Group		1	
Disability Liaison Officers	1		

One-on-one meetings were also held with individuals from civil and public service organisations, Disabled employees from the public and private sector, Disabled Person's Representative Organisations (DPROs), support organisations, unions, and stakeholders.

The project brief and critical path ranged across:
- reviewing the PAS evidence base;
- stakeholder engagement via interviews to discover current processes, challenges, and practice;
- iterative group sessions to develop and evolve recommendations that would support change;
- and transfer of knowledge.

The Ambition

The longer-term ambition for the outcomes of this work is that:
- hiring managers can better embrace the assignment of Disabled employees;
- we build psychological safety and increase confidence to self-identify or communicate requirements without fear of discrimination or stigma;
- Disabled employees in the services excel in their careers, driving benefits for the inclusive delivery of public services across the country;
- we unlock an untapped wealth of experience for Ireland;
- we future-proof the services to support people who, within their working lives, will become disabled, temporarily or permanently.

Framework – The Tenets of Change

This project aims to build on existing models of good practice and protocol. It targets positive change in the assignment and onboarding of Disabled new recruits to the public and civil services, moving towards a point of excellence. Crucially, the change will have wider positive impacts. Key tasks will be to:

- Build awareness, drive accessibility
- Update language, update attitudes

- Understand and apply the relevant legislation
- Prioritise inclusive information and accessible communications
- Develop a data-driven evidence base
- Create inclusive processes to incentivise pride.

Recommendations

These recommendations are designed to help public bodies implement and report on transparent actions to achieve long-term positive change in assignment and onboarding. These changes will ripple out and have benefits in all aspects of increasing the employment and successful advancement of Disabled people in the public sector.

Recommendations 2, 3, 4 and 7 have the potential to be 'quick wins', activating behavioural and cultural change at pace across the services, which will increase Disability awareness and impact positively on the experience of Disabled assignees across the service. The recommendations are listed under the pillars of People and Culture, Process and Systems, and Governance and Policy.

People and Culture

1. Convene a services-wide **Disabled Employee Resource Group** (DERG) representing different experiences of Disability to support the implementation of all the recommendations in this Blueprint and ensure that the voices and lived-experiences of Disabled employees is central as we evolve the delivery of reasonable accommodations (RA) across assignment, onboarding, and throughout careers.

2. Appoint a **Disability Support Champion** (DSC) for the public services, available to support PAS, Disability Liaison Officers (DLOs) or equivalent position, and hiring managers in the assignment and onboarding of candidates, and provide access to greater expertise for the Occupational Health offices in their work. The DSC will also identify and gather examples of best-practice, support case-making across hiring organisations, develop confidence and awareness, and maintain focus, accountability and visibility. Once the role is piloted and proven, it may lead to a wider team as the volume of successful appointments increases.
   *This recommendation has the potential to be a quick win.

3. Commission and make available **appropriate, relevant, and quality training** to all civil and public service teams to improve disability awareness and embed the skills necessary to support the induction and training of Disabled team members.
   *This recommendation has the potential to be a quick win.

Process and Systems

4. Ensure **accessible communications and planning for assignment and onboarding,** and update and enshrine **data collection.** This will support candidates waiting for assignment, optimise outcomes in the placement/assignment

process, and set them up for success in their new roles. It will also ensure tracking and understanding of the requests and delivery of RA as well as the progress of Disabled people through the services and through their careers.
*This recommendation has the potential to be a quick win.

5. **Professionalise and review the resourcing model for the DLO (or equivalent) role** to be full time, with a detailed and skills-led job description, including a broader brief of Inclusion and Access, to ensure better support for Disabled employees and their teams across the services.

6. Develop **expertise across the services in assistive or adaptive technologies** and focus on mainstreaming across the service to solve for consistency issues, ensuring accessibility for Disabled employees as they are onboarded, and continuity of RA should they move via Mobility process or through promotion. It is crucial that assistive technology is supported and understood by IT teams as they upgrade systems and ensure ongoing cybersecurity; therefore, key leaders and experts for an **Assistive Technology Taskforce** (ATT), with representatives from across the services, should be a priority. The ATT will identify best practice and make the case for resources to roll out across the services, and identify opportunities to make cloud-based assistive technology available to all.

Governance and Policy

The recommendations that follow, while impacting positively on assignment and onboarding as a longer term outcome, targets wider systemic change across the civil and public sectors.

7. Action each organisation to convene a **Reasonable Accommodations Team** (RATeam) comprising DLO or equivalent position, IT, Health & Safety, Facilities, HR, Learning & Development, organisational leadership, and key hiring managers. The teams will feed in expertise and solutions being developed centrally (via ATT, DERG, DLO Network etc), solve local issues and requirements related to RA, and manage a database resource of implemented solutions.
*This recommendation has the potential to be a quick win.

8. The definition of disability within Irish policy and legislation was cited time and again by participants as problematic, and at odds with the guidance in the 2019 Supreme Court ruling, that people are disabled by their environment rather than their bodies. Beginning the work to **update legal definitions of disability**, such as those in the Disability Act (2005), will, in the longer-term, encourage hiring managers and Disabled people themselves to evolve beyond the thinking that all Disabled people are by definition "restricted in carrying on a profession, business or occupation in the State … by reason of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or intellectual

impairment."[12] This thinking unnecessarily creates a hierarchy of disability, positioning some as not Disabled enough—and therefore perhaps not entitled to necessary support to engage in the workforce—and reinforcing in others the imperative not to identify as Disabled as it may reduce their opportunities.

9. Develop the business case to **establish a Centre of Excellence**, with a focus on accessibility and inclusion, to support the scale up, development, provision, and delivery of accommodations across the services supporting more people to successful careers. The Centre will exist to synthesise and provide access to the findings and outputs of the ATT and RATeams, with dotted lines into their resources, and support, research, and champion the needs of people in the services. It will also seek to understand the gaps and innovate, solve problems, and deliver solutions, to ensure that Disabled people and other marginalised communities experience success in their working lives. The Centre will thus help to create great public services for all.

Getting Started on Implementing the Recommendations

We don't know what we don't know. The open dialogue throughout this project has broadened the perspectives of everyone involved regarding the scale of the challenges for Disabled people within the working world—and specifically in the public sector—alongside the challenges for employers who want to support and hire Disabled people.

Developing the conditions for culture change within the sector and, by extension, in society more generally, is key to improving the working lives and opportunities of Disabled people, an ambition enshrined in the EU Accessibility Act.[13] The work to implement the framework and recommendations from this process should begin with further socialising the learning across organisations in the sectors, and encouraging them to plan a critical path to implementing the recommendations.

Initial discussions will begin with DPENDR, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth (DCEDIY) and PAS to:
- discuss the recommendations;
- agree actions;
- assign areas of responsibility in line with strategy and policy;
- set out work plans and evaluation metrics;
- identify projects to pilot in 2024, possibly with the support of the Public Service Innovation Fund.

The actions to move forward will use the Design Principles of the Action Plan for Designing Better Public Services in Ireland.[14]

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[12] Disability Act 2005, Irish Statute Book
https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2005/act/14/section/2/enacted/en/html
[13] The EU Accessibility Act https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1202
[14] Government of Ireland's Action Plan for Designing Better Public Services in Ireland
https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/278360/be0d3897-b538-4bb2-9fe0-98cd28473d5e.pdf#page=null

It is anticipated that the monitoring and measuring of outcomes and provision of reasonable accommodations can bolster the data already recorded each year on the employment of Disabled people. This will help underpin accountability across departments and organisations.