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SUPPORTING DISABILITY INCLUSION

An Ireland for all.

COLM KEAVENEY

FIANNA FÁIL SPOKESPERSON
ON MENTAL HEALTH & SPECIAL NEEDS



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Introduction

Ireland at present is a highly divided society, characterised by high levels of inequality, deprivation and poverty. For people with a disability the problem is compounded not because of their disability, but rather because of how society treats people with disabilities.

In Government, Fianna Fáil's vision and proactive approach made a positive impact on the lives of people with disabilities. We were the first political party to set out a comprehensive commitment to address the specific needs and rights of people with disabilities.

During our time in Government there was a dramatic change in terms of legislation, planning, specialist service provision and access to mainstream services and activities for people with disabilities.



Fianna Fáil is committed to creating a more inclusive society and to dismantling barriers across a range of sectors that prevent people with disabilities from fully participating in society. We need to ensure that people with disabilities are given equality of opportunity so they can participate in society to the best of their abilities.

Ireland is in the process, albeit slowly, of moving from institutionalisation and congregated settings to community settings. We recognise that adequate supports and services are required if people with disabilities are to live independently.

Fianna Fáil is aware that removing barriers takes time, but is committed to ensuring that over the lifetime of our tenure in Government people with disabilities will see a measurable and tangible improvement in their living standards.

Based on data from the 2011 Census 13% of our population is classified as having a disability. Research has shown that people living with a disability are more likely to experience poverty and deprivation, have lower levels of educational attainment and are less likely to participate in the labour market. Furthermore, research has shown that a disability can result in additional heating, mobility, medical and dietary costs, all of which can significantly impact on income adequacy and the cost of living.

This document outlines our key commitments relating to disability and our vision for how a more equal and inclusive society can be achieved. The series of proposals, based on consultation with the disability sector, includes innovative ideas and practical proposals.

Fianna Fáil is ambitious for Ireland and its citizens. We are steadfast in our belief that if Ireland is to be a thriving and progressive country economic recovery must be felt by all sections of society.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Colm Keaveney'. The signature is fluid and cursive, written on a white background.

Colm Keaveney TD

Spokesperson on Mental Health, Disabilities and Special Needs

Disability Inclusion & Reforming the System

Fianna Fáil will ensure that disability inclusion is one of central tenets of the next Government and aim to achieve this by:

A Cabinet Minister with Responsibility for Disability

Fianna Fáil commits to having a Minister at the Cabinet table with responsibility for disability issues. We envisage that this Minister will drive and co-ordinate disability inclusion, whilst also embedding the idea that disability is a cross-departmental issue, requiring a whole of Government approach, and that each Government Department has a responsibility in terms of disability inclusion policy. This commitment demonstrates our desire to put disability equality at the core of the next Government.

Transferring Disability Policy to Social Protection

The current location of disability policy within the Department of Justice and Equality is not suitable. It has relegated disability to a secondary issue and as a consequence we have seen very little progress in the area of disability over the last 5 years.

In Government, we will place disability policy within the Department of Social Protection. It is from this Department that many decisions are made that affect the lives of people with disabilities, and we as a consequence believe that disability policy should fall under this Department's remit.

Ratifying the United Nations' Convention

In Government, Fianna Fáil will as one of its first priorities work towards the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with a Disability (UNCRPD) by the end of 2016. We recognise that this is an essential step and must be done if we are to achieve our goal of ending discrimination and achieving equality for all of our citizens.

Considerable legislative changes are required before the UNCRPD can be ratified, and in Government we will ensure that the necessary changes are implemented in a timely and efficient manner.

Enhancing the Recognition of Irish Sign Language

The 2011 census indicates that there are 3,502 users of Irish Sign Language. However, service providers believe that the usage of Irish Sign Language (ISL) was seriously under-reported due to how the question on the census form was phrased. Fianna Fáil has been at the forefront of working towards an official recognition of Irish Sign Language and to that end put forward a Bill in the Seanad on this issue.

Unfortunately, significant barriers remain for people in the deaf community and they are often disadvantaged in legal, medical, educational, social services, and employment related settings. It is our aim to remove these barriers, enhance the recognition of ISL and we will also legislate to give it statutory recognition.

Disability Awareness Training for All Intreo Staff

It is essential that people with disabilities accessing services are treated in an appropriate, fair and non-discriminatory manner. Negative experiences are not only upsetting and disheartening for the person involved, but it can also affect future outcomes leading to withdrawal or disengagement from services.

The State has a responsibility in this regard and it is essential that people with disabilities have positive experiences when engaging with State provided services. To that end Fianna Fáil will ensure that all staff working in Intreo offices are given disability awareness training. The full cost of providing disability awareness training for all staff in Intreo offices is in the region of €150,000 based on information received through a parliamentary question. This training is essential from a disability inclusion perspective and will ensure that people with disabilities accessing Intreo Centres are treated appropriately, and with dignity and respect.

Improved Application Process for Carers' and Disability Payments

The application processes for carer's payments will be changed to enable applicants to provide more information on the level of care being provided. This would give the Department a far clearer picture of the level of care being given in the absence of a face to face assessment, and would prevent over 50% of applications being refused at the initial stage.

Eligibility for Disability Allowance depends on capacity to work. However, decisions are made based mainly on a medical assessment. This does not, in itself, give an accurate assessment of a person's capacity to work in many cases. We will give people an opportunity to describe how their disability impacts on their daily life. We will direct the Department to work with the Disability Movement and voluntary disability providers to develop a fair and comprehensive system of assessing people's capacity to work.

Income Adequacy & Reducing the Cost of Living

Inadequate income is a pivotal issue for people with disabilities. The latest statistics from the Survey of Income and Living Conditions (SILC) published November 2015 showed that the consistent poverty rate for those not at work due to an illness or a disability increased from 10.8% in 2013 to 13.2% in 2014, while the at-risk of poverty rate increased from 18.1% to 22.8% in the same period. In Government Fianna Fáil will improve income adequacy and reduce the cost of living. The measures that we will introduce will have a positive and tangible impact on living standards for those with a disability.

Ensuring an Adequate Income and Recognising Disability Costs

Fianna Fáil will recognise the additional costs that people with disabilities face. This policy will be one of the hallmarks of our time in Government. This innovative step towards improving income adequacy for those with a disability will for the first time recognise the extra costs a person with a disability can experience in their everyday life. Higher heating costs due to reduced mobility, transport costs, medical costs and special dietary requirements are just some of the additional costs that people with a disability face. To this end, Fianna Fáil will introduce a Cost of Disability Top up Payment. This payment will be paid to those in receipt of Disability Allowance; Blind Pension; Invalidity Pension and Carers Allowance.

This payment will amount to an €10.00 per week and will be in addition to a further €10 increase in an individual's basic social welfare payment, resulting in a €20 weekly increase overall. The cost of this new payment is approximately €123.8m. This new Top-Up Payment demonstrates Fianna Fáil's proactive approach to improving living standards and it will have a real and measurable impact, enhancing social inclusion and participation of people with disabilities in our communities.

Abolishing Prescription Charges

As part of approach to improving income adequacy Fianna Fáil will abolish prescription charges over a two year period as resources allow at a total cost of €126 million.

The current government quadrupled prescription charges to €2.50. This has had a disproportionate impact upon fixed income groups and people with disabilities. People with disabilities are far more likely to require substantial medicinal prescriptions and are much more vulnerable to the cumulative impact of the €2.50 charge. This diminishes their income and quality of life. Eliminating prescription charges will be a key goal for Fianna Fáil and one of the measures we plan to introduce to reduce the cost of living and improve income adequacy for people with disabilities.

Personal Assistant Hours & Supporting Access into Employment

Personal Assistant Service

The importance of Personal Assistants in the lives of people with disabilities cannot be overestimated and it is almost impossible for people to realise how difficult life can be for people with disabilities. People with disabilities must not be left behind as the public finances recover.

Fianna Fáil believes that we must support them to have more fulfilling lives and careers. Personal Assistant hours are enormously important in this regard. They are a crucial way to allow people with a disability to enjoy equal and independent lives in the same way as other people. We would propose at least a doubling of 1.3 million hours over the next five years.

Improved Access to Mainstream Employment Activation Measures

There is a strong correlation between employment and poverty. The latest data from the Survey on Income and Living Conditions shows that in 2014 the rate of consistent poverty for those not at work due to illness or disability was 13.2% and the deprivation rate was 51.3%, while the 2011 census showed 33% of people with disabilities of working age (age 20-64) in work, compared to 66% of non-disabled people. Such a vast disparity cannot be allowed to continue.

Current policy has excluded people with disabilities from mainstream activation programmes. Fianna Fáil will ensure that people with disabilities are able to access mainstream employment activation measures and are supported into employment so that they too can play a full and active role in Ireland's economic recovery. This we believe is also crucial to enhancing the social inclusion of people with disabilities.

As Ireland begins to emerge from the economic and fiscal crisis employment can play a pivotal role in helping people with disabilities avoid poverty. It is vital to support people with disabilities into the labour market and minimise the flow into long-term unemployment.

Extending the MOMENTUM Programme

We will begin the process of ending the exclusion of people with disabilities from mainstream employment programmes and will specifically address the exclusion of people who are in receipt of Disability Allowance from the MOMENTUM Programme.

This Programme funds the provision of free education and training projects to jobseekers (who are unemployed for 12 months or more) allowing them to gain skills and to access work opportunities in identified growing sectors. As an initial step we will increase the MOMENTUM Programme by 20% or 1,200 places on a voluntary basis for people in receipt of Disability Allowance.

Extending and opening up access to the Labour market activation programmes will have long-term economic benefits for the individual and for the state. An individual participating in the labour market will pay taxes which will in turn support the provision of services. By contrast an unemployed individual will cost the state in terms of having to pay for unemployment or other benefits and potential mental health issues etc. This initiative makes sense from an equality perspective and an economic perspective too.

Extending the Wage Subsidy Scheme

The Wage Subsidy Scheme provides financial incentives to private sector employers to hire people with a disability for between 21 and 39 hours per week under a contract of employment.

The Partial Capacity Benefit (PCB) scheme is designed for people who are on illness benefit, for at least six months, or on invalidity pension and who have retained some capacity for work and wish to work. Currently, those in receipt of the Partial Capacity Benefit cannot avail of the Wage Subsidy Scheme. We propose to extend the Wage Subsidy Scheme to those in receipt of Partial Capacity Benefit. This measure will encourage the employment of people with disabilities and make it easier for people with disabilities to engage with the labour market.

The Reasonable Accommodation Fund

Tied to our policy of improving access to mainstream Activation Measures is promoting the employment of people with disabilities and raising awareness of schemes that are available both to employees and employers to support and retain people with disabilities into employment.

The Reasonable Accommodation fund includes the Workplace Equipment Adaptation Grant Scheme, the Employee Retention Grant Scheme and the Disability Awareness Training Scheme. These are demand led schemes and information received from the Department of Social Protection shows that there was zero expenditure on the Employee Retention Grant Scheme in 2013, 2014 and expenditure remained at zero as of the end of October 2015.

Up to the end of October 2015 only €46,558 had been spent in the year to date on the Workplace Adaptation Grant, while in the same period only €6,214 had been spent on the Disability Awareness Training Scheme. The total expenditure as of the end of October 2015 for these three schemes was €52,772.00. In 2014 the total expenditure on the three schemes was approximately €65,500, while in 2013 it was €82,500.

Significant efforts need to be made to not only promote the employment of people with disabilities but to also raise awareness and encourage the take-up of the schemes that can facilitate the employment of people with disabilities.

It is our goal that we will see a significant uptake of these schemes as more people with disabilities enter the labour market. We would seek to increase the expenditure on each of the three of the schemes by €80,000. The total annual cost of this will be €240,000. We expect that this combined with our other measures will increase the number of people with disabilities into employment, which is an effective tool to combat poverty and social exclusion.

Transport & Accessibility

Fianna Fáil recognises the importance of having accessible transport for people with disabilities. Unfortunately, public transport is often inaccessible making it extremely difficult for people with disabilities to go about their everyday lives. This can cause alienation and isolation, and also prevent people with disabilities from partaking in employment and accessing services.

We recognise that substantial investment in our public transport infrastructure is required to improve accessibility. To this end the increase in the PSO subsidy will allow for improvements to be made to our public transport system making it more accessible for people with disabilities.

Fianna Fáil will work to provide barrier free routes in stations, e.g. have ramps in place instead of steps, progress unassisted access for wheelchair users, improve public announcement systems and ensure stair lifts and lifts at stations are operational. These measures are essential and will improve the living standards for people with disabilities.

In relation to the Mobility Allowance and the Motorised Transport Grant these schemes were abolished by the Government in February 2013 due to the difficulty of making them compliant with the Equal Status Act. An inter-departmental group was asked to develop detailed proposals for the operation of the new scheme or schemes, including eligibility criteria and administrative arrangements, and to report back by October 2013. However, to date no policy proposals have been published by the inter-departmental group.

Fianna Fáil has pressed the Government on this issue on a number of occasions and believes that the length of time people have been left in limbo awaiting a replacement to this scheme is appalling.

Based on recent information received through a parliamentary question the work of this group is apparently nearing completion. Fianna Fáil is awaiting the proposals and will consider the options of the inter-departmental group when published. Given the protracted length of time that it has taken to address this issue, we will endeavour to ensure that any replacement to these schemes is introduced in a timely fashion and without delay.

Government Taxi Contracts

Presently, the percentage of our national taxi fleet that is accessible to people with disabilities is very low and based on data received from the National Transport Authority only 4% of the taxi fleet is accessible as of the end of September 2015.

Fianna Fáil believes that Government should take the lead in encouraging our national taxi pool to become more accessible to people with disabilities. To achieve this we will stipulate that one of the criteria in awarding government contracts on taxi services will be based on a percentage of a company's fleet that is accessible to people with disabilities. This will encourage companies to increase their fleet of accessible taxis and as companies replace their fleet due to age and wear and tear, that they will replace these vehicles with accessible taxis.

Protect and Enhance the Free Travel Scheme

Fianna Fáil introduced the Free Travel Scheme in 1967, a step which had a direct positive impact on older people and people with disabilities, as well communities and businesses throughout Ireland. The Free Travel Scheme has played an instrumental role in enhancing social inclusion and independence particularly for people with disabilities and we will ensure that this scheme is protected.

We believe that this scheme is exceptionally good value in terms of the social impact it has had. There are currently approximately 839,000 customers with direct eligibility with an annual allocation of €80 million.

Fianna Fáil will increase funding to the Free Travel Scheme by 10%, to enhance the scheme and to ensure that this scheme can cater to the increasing number of people availing of this scheme.

Living in Communities

Congregated Settings

In June 2011, the HSE published the Report of the Working Group on Congregated Settings - "Time to Move on from Congregated Settings – A strategy for Community Inclusion". This strategy set out a new model for residential support in the mainstream community. The model envisaged that people living in congregated settings will move to dispersed housing in communities, provided mainly by the housing authorities over a seven year time frame.

However, progress on this has been slow and the HSE has only prioritised the transition of just 150 people from congregated settings in 2015, a target which they did not even meet. This demonstrates the Government's real lack of commitment to moving people out of congregated settings.

Fianna Fáil is of the opinion that if we are serious about mainstreaming and moving people into communities the funding allocated needs to be substantially increased. For that reason we will allocate an additional €20 million to hasten the process of moving people from what is often unsuitable accommodation to the community.

Housing Adaptation Grants

We will restore the Housing Adaptation Grants to 2011 levels. The Housing Adaptation Grant and Mobility Aid Grants have been subject to severe cuts that have had a detrimental impact on people with disabilities.

These grants are vital to make it possible for people with disabilities to remain in their own homes, providing vital support for installing essentials such as hand rails or lifts to assist people to get around their homes more easily.

The cuts to these grants run counter to the policy of trying to move people into communities and to also enable people with disabilities where possible live independently in their own homes.

We are committed to restoring the Housing Adaptation Grant at a cost of €25.5m.

Early Intervention for Children & Medical Cards

Early Intervention Teams for Children with Developmental Needs

We will overhaul and radically change how early intervention services for children with developmental delays and disabilities are provided. We are committed to putting in place new Early Intervention Teams to operate on-site in pre-schools and primary schools.

Fianna Fáil is committed to introducing multi-disciplinary therapy teams on-site in pre-schools and primary schools for children with development delays. This would be a new point of departure for education of children with development delays and special needs in Ireland.

This will include Speech and Language teams, Paediatric Occupational and Physical Therapists; to be employed by the Department of Education and Skills and allocated to given geographic areas.

These school-based Early Intervention Teams will be shared between community and private pre-schools participating in the ECCE programme and Primary Schools in clusters within each given geographic area.

It has been shown by international research that children with special needs make the greatest progress when they:

- 1) Begin therapy at an early age;
- 2) Have continuity in their therapies in terms of similarity of treatment; and
- 3) Can develop an on-going personal relationship with their therapist.

By providing on-site visits by multi-disciplinary teams to each school, children can be assessed for developmental delays at early age, receive early interventions and on-going continuity of care by the same group of professional therapists.

At present, young children face extremely long delays in getting access to assessment, diagnosis and treatment for developmental delays. This commitment will be a priority for Fianna Fáil.

We will expand the number of Speech and Language therapists by approximately 30% (250 new speech and language therapists) as well as increase young children's access to Occupational and Physical Therapists. Such multi-disciplinary teams of therapists would be available to both Mainstream and for Special Schools. The cost of employing an additional 300 therapists is in the region of €12 million, with additional establishment costs in the region of €2 million.

Medical Cards and Domiciliary Care

During the last Dáil, Fianna Fáil was to the forefront in highlighting the Government's targeting people on discretionary medical cards. The subsequent u-turn and climbdown by the Government was testament to the strength of our opposition. However, we believe more can be done, especially for children with disabilities. The Domiciliary Care Allowance payment is made to carers in respect of a child at home under 16 years of age with a severe disability.

Fianna Fáil commits to the provision of a medical card for all children whose carer is in receipt of the Domiciliary Care Allowance. We will also ensure that a more humane and flexible regime for discretionary medical cards so that people with serious illnesses or disabilities which are causing them undue financial hardship will receive a discretionary medical card.

Costings

Proposal	Cost €m
Cost of Disability Top Up Payment	€123.83
Increase Momentum Programme Places	€3.84
Extending Wage Subsidy Scheme	€11.00
Increase Funding for Reasonable Accommodation Fund	€0.25
Increase Allocation to the Free Travel Scheme	€8.00
Congregated Settings	€20.00
Abolish Prescription Charges	€120.00
Additional Personal Assistant Hours	€30.00
Housing Adaptation Grants	€25.50
Early Intervention Teams in Pre- Schools and Primary Schools	€14.00
Medical Cards	€57.00
Total	€413.42

