

From Awareness to Action

Ireland's Business and Policy Roadmap to Closing the Disability Employment Gap

Supporting Research Paper



Open Doors
Initiative
**Roundtable
Series**



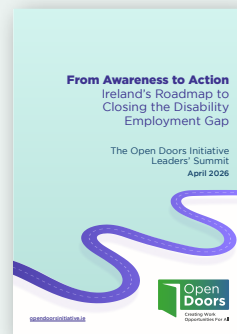
Creating Work
Opportunities For All

Introduction

In early 2026, the Open Doors Initiative facilitated a series of roundtables bringing together business leaders, inclusion practitioners, policymakers and people with lived experience of disability. The goal was to move the conversation beyond awareness toward practical solutions that will move the dial and impact Ireland's disability employment gap. Across these sessions, attendees examined why the gap persists despite clear intentions within business and government. While perspectives and experience varied across the groups, there was strong alignment on some central themes.

These themes and insights were analysed and assessed and brought together in a report called *From Awareness to Action Ireland's Roadmap to Closing the Disability Employment Gap*. This report lays out actionable steps that can be taken by businesses and government to create meaningful change that will positive impact the disability employment gap in Ireland.

The Roadmap Report was informed by a range of research and data, which has been brought together in this Supporting Research Paper. The following lays out key definitions and terminology, current employment statistics, national strategies as well as a review of uptake of government supports.



Key Concepts & Definitions

| Key Term | Definition |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Disability Employment Rate | This is the percentage of people with a disability of working age who are in employment. |
| Disability Employment Gap | The percentage difference between the rate of employment of the disabled community and those without a disability |
| Universal Design | Designing products, environments, and services to be usable by everyone (including those with disabilities) without the need for adaptation. |
| Reasonable Accommodation | Specific adaptations to the workplace (e.g., assistive tech, flexible hours) that enable a qualified person with a disability to perform their job. |
| DPO | Disabled Persons Organisation led by and for people with disabilities. “Nothing about us, without us.” |
| UNCRPD | The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) is an international human rights treaty, which exists to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all disabled persons. |

The Models of Disability

- **Charity Model:** Portrays persons with disabilities as victims in need of care or pity. This outdated model often reinforces dependency and exclusion.
- **Medical Model:** Views disability as a health condition or impairment that resides in the individual. The focus is on diagnosis, treatment, and rehabilitation to “fix” the person.
- **Social Model:** Emphasises that disability arises from societal barriers - physical, attitudinal, and systemic, rather than the individual’s impairment. It advocates for removing these barriers to enable full participation.
- **Human Rights Model:** Builds on the social model, framing disability as a human rights issue. It promotes dignity, autonomy, and inclusion, aligning with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)¹.

The Shift: CSR vs. CSJ

Historically, disability initiatives fell under Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), sometimes viewed as “charity” or “giving back.” We are moving towards Corporate Social Justice (CSJ). CSJ recognises that inequity is systemic and it demands that businesses not only “do good” but actively dismantle barriers within their core operations to ensure equity, dignity and justice.

Employment Statistics and Data

- **1 in 5 People:** According to Census 2022, 22% of the Irish population (over 1.1 million people) are living with a disability².
- **21.5% Employment Gap:** 49.3% of people with disabilities, of working age in Ireland, are in employment, compared to 70.8% of people without disabilities³.
- **38.6% Employment Gap:** 32.6% of people with disabilities are in employment, almost 20% below the EU average of 51.3%. The average disability employment gap in Europe is 24.4%⁴.

¹ Employers for Change (2025) [Advancing Disability Awareness, Equality and Inclusion Training in the Workplace: Practical Toolkit](#)

² Census (2022): [Disability Census of Population 2022](#)

³ NDA (2024): [Factsheet Employment and Disability](#)

⁴ European Disability Forum (2023): [European Human Rights Report](#)

As we discuss the employment rate of people with disabilities and the gap between this rate and those without a disability, it is important to note there are different sets of data that are used across civil society, business and public bodies.

Estimates of disability employment in Ireland vary significantly depending on how disability is defined and measured. National data from the Central Statistics Office (CSO), based on self-reported disability, indicates that 49.3% of working-age people with disabilities are in employment, compared to 70.8% of those without a disability resulting in a gap of 21.5%⁵.

However, internationally comparable data, which uses a standardised “activity limitation” measure across EU countries, presents a starker picture. This data shows an employment rate of 32.6% for people with disabilities in Ireland and a gap of approximately 38.6%, significantly higher than the EU average of 24.4%.

This difference reflects how disability is defined. National data uses a broad definition that includes anyone with a long-term condition, whereas EU data uses a narrower focus on those whose daily activities are significantly affected. This means EU figures specifically highlight the deeper exclusion faced by people with the most substantial barriers to work.

While the figures differ, both datasets point to the same conclusion, Ireland has a substantial disability employment gap and continues to lag behind European peers.

⁵ Census (2022): [Disability Census of Population 2022](#)

Government Actions & Opportunities

There are several Government initiatives, funds and strategies that have been designed to reduce systemic barriers and increase workforce participation of disabled people. For business leaders, awareness of these measures matters as:

- Organisations can utilise financial and advisory supports to attract and retain disabled talent
- There is opportunity to align corporate practice with national inclusion goals
- Companies can stay competitive in a tight labour market while accessing an underutilised talent pool

The National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025 to 2030

Launched in September 2025, the National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People⁶ is Ireland's five-year framework to advance the rights and equality of disabled people in line with United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities⁷ (UNCRPD). It consists of five key pillars, with employment coming under pillar two. The strategy is supported by the Programme Plan of Action 2025 to 2026⁸, its aim is to turn the commitments laid out in the strategy into measurable actions. Within this plan, Commitment Five- Private Sector is what is most relevant for this discussion and will inform part of our focus.

We have included a number of key actions alongside the department who has responsibility to carry this action out. This is by no means a complete list but an attempt to highlight those that might be of interest.

⁶ Dept. of Children, Disability & Equality (2025): [National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People](#)

⁷ NDA (2026): [United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#)

⁸ Dept. of Children, Disability & Equality (2026): [First Programme Plan of Action 2025 to 2026](#)

| Priority Action | Responsible Department |
|--|--|
| 5.1 Launch and maintain on an ongoing basis a significant media campaign to change attitudes to employing people with disabilities, increase awareness and take-up of supports (for example, Work and Access Scheme) and provide practical information on how to hire, retain and promote a disabled employee. | Department of Social Protection, Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment |
| 5.5 Establish a ministerial-led forum which will engage with Disabled Persons' Organisations for discussion with employer representative bodies on the employment of disabled people. | Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment |
| 5.7 Identify models of good human rights practice in the employment and advancement of disabled people to act as role models for other business enterprises. | Semi-State Bodies and parent Government Departments |
| 5.8 Undertake research with employers in identifying enablers and obstacles to employing disabled people. | Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment |
| 5.9 Promote resources and supports available to small and medium enterprises to encourage the hiring, retention and promotion of disabled people. | Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment |

The Programme Plan of Action 2025 to 2026 commits to changes and adjustments in a number of key social protection supports. Over the last number of years there have been some adaptations in Government policy and ongoing initiatives to support disability employment, including:

- **Wage Subsidy Scheme (WSS):** Reduction in minimum working hours from 21 to 15 per week in 2024⁹. This made the scheme more flexible but more has to be done
- **Work and Access (2024):** A rebranding and restructuring of the “Reasonable Accommodation Fund”, the main source of support for employers seeking to hire disabled employees¹⁰. These changes have been welcomed with certain elements streamlined and the inclusion of disabled entrepreneurs. However, there is a lack of detailed data on uptake from employers and the impact this rebranding has had on inclusive disability employment.
- **Pathways to Work (2021 to 2025)¹¹:** The Government’s previous strategy to support jobseekers, including the long-term unemployed and people with disabilities, into employment through training, incentives and employment supports.
- **WAM¹² and OWL¹³ Programmes:** The establishment of Willing Able Mentoring and Oireachtas Work Learning programmes provide paid employment for disabled people within the civil and public service.

Programme for Government: Securing Ireland’s Future

In early 2025, Government laid out its commitment to disability inclusion in Securing Ireland’s Future: Programme for Government 2025¹⁴ including an insurance of a step change in supports and services. A number of notable points relating to equitable employment include:

- Develop a Code of Practice to support the hiring of workers with a disability (pg.17)

⁹ Dept. of Social Protection (2024): [Decrease in Hours Threshold for the Wage Subsidy Scheme](#)

¹⁰ Dept. of Social Protection (2024): [Work and Access](#)

¹¹ Dept. of Social Protection (2021): [Pathways to Work Strategy 2021 to 2025](#)

¹² Ahead (2026): [The WAM Programme](#)

¹³ Oireachtas (2026): [Oireachtas Work Learning Programme](#)

¹⁴ Programme for Government (2025): [Securing Ireland’s Future](#)

- Work with employers and across Government to improve employment of people with disabilities and ensure that supports for entrepreneurs and enterprise are accessible to all, including people with disabilities with a goal of reaching at least the EU average (pg. 17)
- Examine ways to make it easier to regain Disability Allowance if employment ceases (pg.93)
- Ensure citizens with disabilities can access employment on an equal basis to others by focussing on building skills, capacity and independence, and develop bridges from special schools into employment (pg.17)
- Continue to ensure employers make reasonable accommodation for people with disabilities in the workplace (pg.17)
- Promote training initiatives to raise awareness and understanding of disabilities amongst Intreo staff (pg. 93)
- The Government will review the minimum hours requirement under the Wage Subsidy Scheme for people with disabilities and examine an increase to the payment rate (pg. 100)
- The ‘ability to work’ criteria for certain payments will be examined to ensure that ongoing medical assessments are not carried out for people with lifelong conditions that are not going to change (pg.101)

Disability Act 2005: Public Sector Quotas & CSRD

As of January 2025, the statutory employment target for people with disabilities in public bodies is 6%. Public bodies are required to submit an annual report on their progress in this area and for those who are failing to meet this target provide a formal explanation and action plan to address it. Reports are submitted to the National Disability Authority (NDA)¹⁵.

Private corporations are not required to meet this quota. However, as part of the EU’s Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) large companies must publicly report on their workforce diversity and inclusion efforts¹⁶.

15 NDA (2026): [Employment of Persons with Disabilities in the Public Sector](#)

16 Ahead (2026): [Disability and the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive](#)

Comprehensive Employment Strategy 2015 to 2024

Over ten years ago in 2015, Government launched the very first dedicated cross-departmental employment strategy for disabled people, the Comprehensive Employment Strategy (CES) 2015 to 2024¹⁷. The aim of this strategy was to address the disability employment gap and move it from a “welfare” issue to an employment goal.

Over the lifetime of the CES, the employment landscape evolved dramatically from one of high unemployment to full employment for the general population.

While the CES supported increase access to education for disabled students, modernisation of some employment supports, the development of employer information services such as Employers for Change and the creation of collaborative networks led by Ibec and ICTU persistent systemic gaps remain¹⁸.

Current Government Supports: Uptake and Analysis

Currently under the Department of Social Protection (DSP) there are a number of schemes employers and employees with disabilities can access to support inclusive recruitment and retention. Over the last number of years these have evolved and some have been updated to reflect employer and employee needs. The Reasonable Accommodation Fund (RAF) transitioned to the newly branded Work and Access in July 2024 and represented a shift in how the Department of Social Protection supports the employment of people with disabilities¹⁹.

The 2023 review of the RAF²⁰ identified that the original system remained largely unchanged for decades with low take-up and typically supporting fewer than 100 people a year with an annual spend of approximately €100,000. This underperformance was attributed to a lack of awareness among employers, a complex paper-based application process and a rigid structure consisting of four separate grants, the Workplace Equipment and Adaptation, Job Interview Interpreter, Personal Reader, and Employee Retention. These grants often failed to meet the modern needs of diversity within the disabled community, innovative business and flexible working arrangements.

¹⁷ Dept. of Children, Disability and Equality (2015): [Comprehensive Employment Strategy 2015 to 2024](#)

¹⁸ NDA (2025): [Final Review of the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for Persons with Disabilities 2015-2024](#)

¹⁹ Dept. of Social Protection (2024): [Launch of Work and Access](#)

²⁰ Dept. of Social Protection (2023): [Review of the Reasonable Accommodation Fund and Disability Awareness Support Scheme](#)

In response to this review and a public consultation process, Work and Access was designed to work as a more flexible, single-scheme model that addresses both labour demand and employee barriers. A key support in the new programme is the introduction of a Workplace Needs Assessments, which were previously only available to employees who acquired a disability while already in employment. The Work and Access data reflects a significant increase of this support, with 106 applications for assessments in 2025, resulting in a spend of €59,612, a figure that is close to the total annual spend of the previous RAF.

A breakdown of the Work and Access applications each year including spend can be found below²¹.

| W&A Support | App. 2024 | Declined 2024 | Spend 2024 | App. 2025 | Declined 2025 |
|----------------------------|------------|---------------|----------------|------------|---------------|
| Workplace Needs Assessment | 35 | 0 | €0 | 106 | 2 |
| Communication Support | 4 | 0 | €0 | 32 | 2 |
| In Work Supports | 0 | 0 | €0 | 27 | 1 |
| Personal Reader | 2 | 0 | €6,255 | 4 | 0 |
| Workplace Equipment | 31 | 3 | €7,559 | 88 | 8 |
| Workplace Adaptation | 14 | 3 | €0 | 28 | 4 |
| WAA Disability Equality | 71 | 6 | €2,340 | 130 | 14 |
| Total | 157 | 12 | €16,154 | 415 | 31 |

| W&A Support | Spend 2025 | App. 2026 | Declined 2026 | Spend 2026 | Pending |
|----------------------------|-----------------|-----------|---------------|----------------|-----------|
| Workplace Needs Assessment | €59,612 | 2 | 0 | €19,280 | 4 |
| Communication Support | €8,647 | 0 | 0 | €731 | 0 |
| In Work Supports | €6,868 | 0 | 0 | €3,630 | 2 |
| Personal Reader | €46,641 | 1 | 0 | €4,320 | 1 |
| Workplace Equipment | €147,880 | 4 | 0 | €21,663 | 10 |
| Workplace Adaptation | €32,149 | 2 | 0 | €19,291 | 2 |
| WAA Disability Equality | €125,779 | 6 | 0 | €11,070 | 8 |
| Total | €427,576 | 15 | 0 | €79,985 | 27 |

²¹ Oireachtas (2026): [Social Welfare Schemes-Parliamentary Questions](#)

While it is encouraging to see an increase in engagement with this scheme in comparison to the previous RAF and that funding is being utilised to support inclusive employment of people with disabilities, there are limitations in the data provided. In this instance, the number of applications does not necessarily represent individual employers, as one business can submit multiple applications across the scheme. Without a clearer breakdown of the number of employers who are engaging with the fund, including location, business size, it makes it difficult to assess where there might be gaps and how these gaps might be corrected. For instance, do larger employers with more resourcing tend to apply for supports in comparison to a smaller organisation that may not have the same access to time or personnel to manage the process.

Although it is clear Work and Access has increased its engagement in comparison to the previous Reasonable Accommodation Fund, without knowledge of what targets are guiding this work it is difficult to say this scheme is a success. Further to this, the above data relies on demand-led metrics rather than outcome-led metrics. The 2023 review of the RAF clearly states that take up of a fund or scheme is not the only solution, factors such as employer attitudes and barriers play a role. ODI believes there is scope to track further information such as whether an individual who received a Work and Access support is still in employment 12 to 24 months afterwards.

Why is Disability Employment so Low in Ireland?

Ireland's disability employment rate is among the lowest in Europe, around 32.6% of people with disabilities are in employment. The employment gap between disabled people and their non-disabled peers is at 38.6%, which is significantly higher than the EU average of 24.4%²².

Research has identified several structural causes, rather than a single explanation, for Ireland's low disability employment rate.

²² European Disability Forum (2023): [European Human Rights Report](#)

Job Role Design

The current recruitment market is still structured around the concept of standard full-time employment, which excludes many people who need flexible arrangements such as those with caring responsibilities, returning to work and people with disabilities.

A 2021 OECD²³ describes the Irish labour market as “..a labour market geared towards mainstream full-time employment and offering limited work time and work place flexibility.”

However, we know people with disabilities may need flexibility in their working day including reduced hours, flexible schedules and modified tasks. In one study, 46% of disabled people said flexible working hours and adjustments would improve their experience of seeking and finding employment²⁴. From this we understand the lack of flexible job design reduces participation within the labour market.

Employer Attitudes, Recruitment Bias and Exclusion

Employer’s rigid perceptions and hiring practices have been identified as barriers to inclusive disability employment. This can include assumptions about a candidate’s productivity or capability within a role, a reluctance to provide reasonable accommodations or equitable adjustments and a lack of inclusive recruitment processes.

Inaccessible Workplaces, Transport and Infrastructure

Physical and digital accessibility barriers prevent many people from accepting employment opportunities or even applying for the role. These barriers have prevented people from taking job offers because buildings or systems were not accessible.

Research on disability employment in Ireland identifies inaccessible workplaces and transport as major labour-market barriers²⁵. This signals that employment policy alone cannot solve this issue, housing, transport and infrastructure matter, therefore a whole of government commitment is essential.

²³ OECD (2021): [Disability, Work and Inclusion in Ireland](#)

²⁴ HR Zone (2025): [Almost half of disabled workers say it’s harder to hold down a job due to their disability](#)

²⁵ Ahead (2025): [WIDE Framework: Findings](#)

Poverty and Social Welfare Risks

For many people with a disability who are in receipt of a social welfare payment, the risk and fear associated with losing vital supports is a huge deterrent to accepting employment or a promotion in their role. Concerns range from the impact of losing supports if employment doesn't work out, the complexity of reporting income and the lack of security during employment transitions.

Educational Attainment and Early School Exit

One key driver is unequal access to education and training. People with disabilities in Ireland are more likely to leave education early. Around 17% missed school because of disability and 15% left school earlier than they wanted²⁶. A 2021 OECD report links Ireland's disability employment gap to low educational attainment among disabled people²⁷.

This experience can vary for many, and we know there has been a 364% rise in number of disabled students registering for disability support at third level in the last 15 years²⁸. However, even among those with third-level education, graduates with disabilities in Ireland are significantly less likely to be employed than their non-disabled peers²⁸.

The transition from education to employment for the disabled community is fractured and disconnected. There is a need for stronger policy supports in this area.

Many roles in the labour-market require formal qualifications and unfortunately fewer qualifications can reduce access to stable and higher-paid employment.

²⁶ ESRI (2015): [Educational and Employment Experiences of People with a Disability in Ireland: An Analysis of the National Disability Survey](#)

²⁷ OECD (2021): [Disability, Work and Inclusion in Ireland](#)

²⁸ Ahead (2024): [Report on Disabled Students Uptake of Services](#)



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