



Comments from Intac about the consultation on Disability and Work: A Strategy for Northern Ireland

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Making our information accessible

As an organisation of and for disabled people and older people Imtac recognises that the way information is provided can be a barrier to accessing services and participation in public life. We are committed to providing information about our work in formats that best suit the needs of individuals.

All our documents are available in hard copy in 14pt type size as standard. We also provide word and pdf versions of our documents on our website – www.imtac.org.uk. In addition we will provide information in a range of other formats including:

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About Imtac

The Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (Imtac) is a committee of disabled people and older people as well as others including carers and key transport professionals. Its role is to advise Government and others in Northern Ireland on issues that affect the mobility of Deaf people, disabled people and older people.

The aim of Imtac is to ensure that Deaf people, disabled people and older people have the same opportunities as everyone else to travel when and where they want.

Imtac receives support from the Department for Infrastructure (herein after referred to as the Department).

Comments on Draft Disability and Work Strategy

Imtac welcomes the opportunity to comment on the draft Strategy. Deaf and disabled people experience discrimination and oppression in all areas of our lives including work and employment. Northern Ireland has a significant lower employment rate for disabled people than other regions of the UK and the employment gap between disabled people and non-disabled people is the highest of all the regions. Statistics published by the Equality Commission show that by far the most queries it receives annually come from disabled people and relate to discrimination in employment and work. This is the context through which Imtac views the draft Strategy. It is our opinion that as currently drafted the draft Strategy does not deliver the change in culture and ambition required by the Executive in Northern Ireland to deliver a work environment that is open, accessible and inclusive for disabled people.

The Strategy lacks ambition. Its key outcome is to have 50,000 additional disabled people in work, something that demographic changes may deliver without intervention over the next decade. There is no overarching ambition to reduce the employment gap between disabled people and non-disabled people, simply a desire to increase the employ rate for disabled people to 50% by 2035, an ambition that will still place us below the current employment rates in England, Scotland and Wales. For Imtac this is simply not good enough.

The lack of ambition is also exemplified by the lack of SMART commitments from the NICS to lead on delivering change. For Imtac, if

Government cannot be seen to provide real leadership how can we expect others to do it.

The Committee notes that the draft Strategy does not reference resources. There appears to be no additional money to help deliver the outcomes. There is also no mention of financial support available to disabled people through programmes such as Access to Work. People applying to Access to Work are already experiencing lengthy delays and there is growing evidence of funding for the programme being reduced by the Westminster Government. Many of the organisations involved in current employment programmes used by disabled people are facing real and current funding uncertainties. It is legitimate to question the effectiveness of any strategy that does not address resources, particularly in a very uncertain funding environment.

For members the themes outlined in the draft strategy appear to reflect a more of the same approach that has been failing for decades. A focus on fixing disabled people so we better fit in the world of work. A focus on campaigns gently encouraging employers to be more open and accessible. Both represent the same approach and ignores the direct discrimination Deaf and disabled people experience daily in the work environment. The Strategy is silent on employers who routinely flout their legal obligations including the requirement to make reasonable adjustments. A strategy that cannot be honest about widespread discrimination we experience or plan to addresses the enforcement of what the law says is in danger of simply reinforcing an existing culture that blames disabled people for the discrimination of others and excludes us.

The draft Strategy underplays and shows a lack of understanding of the wider barriers that make Deaf and disabled people's life difficult and often make employment and work impossible. Barriers including a lack of suitable and accessible transport are not acknowledged, nor barriers created by health and social care systems that deny people the ability and right to live independently or a social security system that denies people the right to an adequate standard of living. Successive investigations by the UN Committee on the Rights of People with Disabilities have demonstrated a regression in disabled people rights around these areas both across the UK generally and Northern Ireland specifically. A work and employment strategy that ignores these wider barriers can only have limited impact on our lives.

For members the Disability and Work Strategy should have complimented the wider Executive Disability Strategy, which could include commitments to address these wider barriers. Unfortunately, the draft Disability Strategy, published after the Disability and Work Strategy, fundamentally fails to include meaningful commitments to address the widespread oppression, discrimination and exclusion of Deaf and disabled people from everyday life in Northern Ireland.

Conclusion

For Imtac both the Work and Disability Strategy and wider Disability Strategy are inadequate in both ambition and commitments to address the oppression and discrimination Deaf and disabled people experience in the work environment and in our wider day to day to lives. Both Strategies require a significant rethink and revision with input from Deaf and disabled people at the core of the revisions.