

Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities

Report prepared by the Chair of the Implementation Group

in respect of Year Two – 2017

Introduction

We have reached the end of the “foundation phase” of the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities. In broad terms, the purpose of this phase was:

- to enable a collaborative approach to be developed among Government Departments and Agencies charged with delivering on the Strategy;
- to encourage specific policy measures and actions to be developed and rolled out; and
- to foster dialogue with the wider disability movement for the purposes of arriving at greater accountability.

It is very clear from the Strategy that the next phase must be one where specifics begin to be delivered, where the barriers to employment are systematically broken down and replaced by pathways to fulfilling and rewarding work, and where we finally begin to be able to measure the only progress that matters – a steady downward trend in the number of people with disabilities unable to find a job that suits them.

All the economic indicators suggest that over the next couple of years Ireland will reach effective full employment. If that is the case, there is every possibility that people with disabilities will be the only group of the population in Ireland who are, for all practical purposes, discriminated against in the job market.

But here is what the latest Census figures tell us – and it is important to place these figures in the context of a rapidly recovering economy. It is also important to note that in collecting census data, there are no questions which would enable the impact for people with autism or developmental delay, for example, to be measured specifically.

Educational attainment among people with a disability was much lower than that of the general population at all levels. Amongst those aged 15 to 50 (inclusive), 13.7% had completed no higher than primary level education, compared with 4.2% of the general population; 37.0% had completed third level education compared with 53.4% of all those aged 15-50.

There were 176,445 persons with a disability in the labour force, giving a labour force participation rate of 30.2% compared with 61.4% for the population overall.

However people with disabilities are still only half as likely to be in employment as others of working age (between 20 and 65). Census 2016 figures show that the employment rate for people with disabilities of working age is 37% compared to a rate of 73% for people of working age without a disability.

The unemployment rate amongst persons with a disability was 26.3%, more than double the 12.9% rate for the population as a whole.

These figures demonstrate ongoing inequality and discrimination. We will fail to address that discrimination if we continue to fail to get education right, to set services right, to get the infrastructure around employment right, and to get attitudes right.

If people with disabilities continue to fail to benefit from a recovering and growing economy, and from a demand among employers for loyal, committed and productive workers, it will be our failure, not theirs.

So what have we achieved so far? Are we ready to begin to deliver on specifics?

The first thing I must report is that the Implementation Group has worked hard during 2017. More than that, there is a real sense of collaboration and purpose in the work that has been done. There have been some significant achievements in the year, which will be set out in more detail below, and a real sense of the possibility of change.

Side by side with that, however, there has been frustration in the wider disability movement, and it is frequently expressed at our meetings. There is no “real time” way of measuring the number of people who have got jobs as a result of our work, but there is a very strong sense that nothing has yet really changed for people with a disability. In terms of our strategic priorities, progress can more often be measured in terms of internal awareness, and a desire to do better, than it can in terms of completion.

The journey, therefore, has been a frustrating one for many. And I don’t have a sense yet that there is a strong shared understanding of what needs to be done and what can be done. As one example, in the area of public transport a lot of change for the better has taken place. But people with a disability routinely report that the single greatest barrier between them and the world of work is the lack of adequately accessible public transport.

Another example comes from a presentation made to us by the Public Appointments Service. That agency acts as the primary recruiter for public service jobs, and has developed a detailed charter and guidelines on positive supports for people with disabilities.

But the Public Appointments Service, in effect, only recruits for full time jobs – and they do so by way of fulfilling the requests made to them by employing Departments and Agencies. Many people with disabilities are not in the market for full-time jobs – what they need is a commitment to part-time work, to job sharing, and to other forms of employment that meet their capacities and skills.

So the commitment to reasonable accommodation will only become truly meaningful if it affects the pre-employment phase. In other words, public service employers have a huge amount of work to do, and a lot of imagination to employ, in redesigning jobs so that people with disabilities can genuinely join the market for those jobs.

These are a couple of examples that our work has thrown up, and there are many more. As we move into the next phase, we have to deliver on the specific “infrastructural initiatives” that will support people more fully. But I believe it has to be repeated, again and again, that that a major barrier to employment of people with disabilities is employers.

In my first report last year I called for the development of a major campaign of public awareness, aimed at employers, unions, and the wider workforce – that is aimed at breaking down barriers, and highlighting the real contribution people with a disability can make.

There is, and continues to be, a huge disparity in perception. Survey work conducted by the NDA in 2017 shows that overall, only 18% of respondents believed that people with disabilities receive equal opportunities in terms of employment (20% in 2011, 15% in 2016).

When asked about their level of comfort working with people with disabilities, respondents reported highest comfort levels for working with people with physical disabilities (8.9 out of 10), and the lowest comfort levels for working with people with mental health difficulties (8.2 out of 10). Nevertheless, positive attitudes towards all, including people with mental health difficulties, have increased when compared to previous years.

Perception contributes to entrenched attitudes, reinforcing and copper-fastening discrimination, not just among the general public but also among employers. I would hope that the Minister might find it possible to call together an informal “summit” of employer and trade union bodies to start putting the kind of awareness campaign that is necessary in place, and to call out champions from the world of work to end the ongoing discrimination in this area.

None of the above is to disparage the continuing progress that is being made. In the next section of this report I intend to set out some real highlights that have emerged from our work, which ought to provide a significant base for progress.

It was clear from the time implementation began that this is a ten year strategy, and it may well take that long for all of the strategic priorities to be met. My hope is that the level of engagement and commitment we are seeing, together perhaps with significant improvements in the economy, may enable us to reach our goals faster.

Before concluding this introduction, I should acknowledge that I have been hugely supported by Jennifer Farrell in the Department of Justice and Equality, by Siobhan Barron and her team in the National Disability Authority, and by the members of the Implementation Group, individually and collectively. I am grateful for their hard work and unstinting commitment.



Fergus Finlay
Chair

2017 Highlights

Last year we employed a “traffic-light” system (green, orange and red) to report progress against specific measures in the Strategy. Some felt this was a bit unfair, because we were reporting against deadlines that had been a bit overtaken by the slower than expected start of the Strategy. (The foundation phase was originally seen as a three year period commencing in 2015. However, the Implementation Group didn’t start its work until late that year.)

I will ask the Group at the start of next year to look again at each of the deadlines in the Strategy, with a view to agreeing what we can achieve and by when. If we can agree specific, realistic, and challenging deadlines, we will publish them.

In overall terms if one were looking at the six strategic priorities right now, and applying a traffic light to them, the picture might look like this.

Strategic Priority 1 – Build skills, capacity and independence	Some good work and new resources beginning to take shape	
Strategic Priority 2 – Provide bridges and supports into work	Some more progress than in Year 1	
Strategic Priority 3 – Make Work Pay		Publication of Make Work Pay report and associated decisions a significant step
Strategic Priority 4 – Promote job retention and re-entry to work		Real danger of paralysis in this area
Strategic Priority 5 – Provide co-ordinated and seamless support	A great deal of internal work needs to show fruit	
Strategic Priority 6 – Engage employers	This is a huge area of pro-active work that needs to be done here	

Within this overall picture, there are a number of individual highlights. These are set out below. In reporting them I am relying on information supplied by relevant Government Departments. I am also relying on, and am grateful for, the independent and detailed assessment of the Strategy carried out by the NDA, which includes a more detailed breakdown of the contribution of individual Departments and agencies.

In addition to the progress reports from individual areas, there are two areas in particular which require particular mention.

Public Service Target

The government has decided to double the public service target for employment of people with disabilities. As of now it is intended that the public service employment target for people with disabilities will be increased on a phased basis in 0.5% steps from 3% to 6% by 2024.

It is my view that it is possible – and necessary, given the evidence referred to above from the Census – that advantage be taken of economic growth to do more.

The NDA advice has been that by 2019, all public bodies must ensure that a minimum of 4% of their employees must be people with disabilities. By 2021, public bodies must ensure that a minimum of 5% of their employees must be people with disabilities. And by 2023, public bodies must ensure that a minimum of 6% of their employees must be people with disabilities. The NDA has also been continuing to press public bodies to work on increasing now rather than later by being proactive recognising that they will have retirements and increased mobility.

But it is already the case that many public bodies are exceeding the target. At the end of 2016, (the most recent figures available) public bodies reported that 3.5% of employees employed in the public sector are people with disabilities. This is a slight decrease from 3.6% in 2015. This was the same percentage achieved in 2014.

This decrease in the percentage of employees employed in the public sector from 3.6% to 3.5% is in the context of a significant increase of 12,650 in the number employed in the public sector. The total number of employees in the public sector in 2016 is 213,991.

In 2016, the total number of employees reporting a disability did increase to 7,457 from 7,245 in 2015. This is a slight increase of 212.

This increase in the total number of public sector employees is linked to the significant increase in the total number of employees reported by the HSE. In 2016, the HSE continued to implement a number of practical measures to promote and support the employment of people with disabilities and to foster a culture where employees with disabilities felt comfortable disclosing a disability. Some key measures included implementing a Disability Action Plan for employing people with disabilities, and the development of a diversity-proofing recruitment guide for health service managers to support the practice of diverse recruitment.

In 2016, many public bodies reported to the NDA that lack of disclosure prevented them from obtaining an accurate count of the number of people with disabilities that they employed. The NDA continues to provide public bodies with ongoing guidance on creating a culture whereby employees are comfortable disclosing a disability.

Some public bodies have implemented this guidance with positive results. In 2014 and 2015, for example, Enterprise Ireland, Oberstown Children Detention Centre and the Arts Council had not met the 3% target for two years in a row. Each of these public bodies implemented a number of key measures and exceeded the target in 2016. These measures included, among other things, developing a communications strategy within their respective organisations, making it clear that confidentiality and anonymity would be fully respected. As a result, these organisations have exceeded the 3% target in 2016.

We can do more.

I am recommending that the Government give serious consideration to achieving the 6% target in three years rather than six. That would involve an increase from 3% to 4% this year, with identical increases in 2019 and 2020. We know that people with disabilities are being left behind in the economic recovery. Government can, and should, give a strong lead in facing that fact.

Setting a more ambitious target is not enough. There needs to be a determined approach too to the issue of reasonable accommodation. There is much talk about new recruitment avenues, competitions held specifically for people with disabilities, internships, and other approaches. It would be my hope that the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform would be enabled and encouraged to give a strong lead in this area over the next three years.

Strategic Priority 5.1

One of the key strategic priorities of the Strategy is 5.1, which proposes that the Department of Health, the HSE, the NDA, and the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection would:

“work together to develop an effective co-ordinated policy approach (and draw up an implementation plan based on that approach), to assist individuals with disabilities, including those who require a high level of support, to obtain and retain employment having due regard to the implementation of New Directions.”

(New Directions is a policy position adopted by the HSE in 2012 that envisages all the supports available in communities will be mobilised so that people with disabilities have the widest choice and options about how to live their lives and how to spend their time. It has significant implications for day services and of course for employment – in general, the whole idea is that people move more and more out of dependence on service providers and into life in the community.)

The work on employment in the context of New Directions has been ongoing, and has been facilitated by the NDA, with the Department of Education and Skills also involved.

During 2017 the working group proposed and agreed a seamless pathway to employment, supported by 3 policy pillars: effective and coordinated pre-activation; a national programme of supports to employment; effective and coordinated protocols between departments and agencies. The Working Group conducted an extensive consultation exercise with stakeholders, facilitated by the NDA, which provided rich feedback on the proposed policy approach.

The working group intends to present a report outlining the agreed policy approach and associated implementation plan by the end of 2017. I understand this report is almost ready.

In the meantime however the HSE has published a document for the guidance of its own stakeholders entitled “New Directions Guidance Document – Day Services – Work and Employment”. This document has never been discussed by the Implementation Group.

There is considerable confusion in the sector about the implications of this guidance. To give one example, a number of service providers in the field of intellectual disability employ people with a

disability in some of their “in-house” facilities (as cooks, waiters, cleaners, etc), often on the basis of a pretty nominal payment as a top-up to their disability allowance. The impression created by the HSE document was that this would have to be discontinued, without any advice given as to alternative approaches.

The guidance is open to the suggestion that it sets out a number of prohibitions, but little or nothing in the way of actual guidance. One would hope that if a view was being taken, with obvious implications for existing employment among people with intellectual disabilities, that it would be necessary to set out what could or should be done in future alongside what mustn’t be done.

The Implementation Group will invite the HSE to an early meeting to seek a broader understanding of the guidance being offered. It may be the case that the HSE sees itself as not having a role in the provision of employment services for people with a disability, despite being the largest funder of day services for them. If that is the case we need to know who will take responsibility, where will the funding go, and what are the appropriate standards to be applied in the future.

Department of Employment and Social Protection

Make Work Pay

Last April the government published the “Make Work Pay” Report (MWP), designed to help people with disabilities to achieve their ambitions and find work, and to remove the many barriers which prevent them from doing so. Publication of this report and early implementation of its recommendations meets a number of the targets set for the Department in the Strategy.

A number of the report’s 24 recommendations have already been implemented. Amending legislation dispensing with the requirement (in respect of the Disability Allowance, the Blind Pension and Rent Supplement under Supplementary Welfare Allowance), that work must be of a rehabilitative nature has been included in Social Welfare, Civil Registrations Pensions Bill and 2017.

The Free Travel Pass may be retained while there is a continued entitlement to Disability Allowance and Blind Pension. Where a person takes up full-time employment or has means over the qualifying threshold they will continue to have an entitlement for a period of 5 years. A Fast-Track return to Disability Allowance protocol is in place subject to operational constraints around timing of payments while ensuring clarity for recipients and staff in operating the protocol .

In addition to the above, a formal protocol, ensuring that an enquiry from a person on a long term disability payment about taking up or returning to work will not result in a review of their current entitlements, is being finalised.

On the publication of the Make Work Pay report, the then Minister gave a clear commitment to consult widely in relation to a number of recommendations. This has led to initial consultation with the DEASP’s Disability Stakeholders Group followed by the procurement of an independent facilitator and the holding of a number of facilitated focus groups.

Following this, the DEASP will now engage in an extensive consultation process in early 2018 with people with disabilities, parents of children with disabilities, and sectoral representatives, in relation to early engagement with people with disabilities on the recommendations 9 and 10 of the MWP report (which deal with reconfiguring the disability allowance for new entrants to apply principles of early intervention.

The Intreo Service

In 2017 the Midlands Division of Intreo commenced a consultative engagement with local and national disability stakeholders with a view to informing the engagement with people with disabilities. Four named case officers have been designated as contacts for people with disabilities in Longford, Mullingar, Athlone and Portlaoise and people with disabilities can make an appointment through the local Intreo service or by contacting the named officers directly by phone or email.

One of the key messages to be conveyed to people with disabilities is that, unlike activation for Jobseekers, engagement with people with disabilities during the proposed pilot is voluntary and will be demand led. The intention is that people with disabilities are informed of the availability of Intreo supports and that a designated case officer will be available to them by appointment. The case officer will assist with the development of a personal plan and in identifying appropriate supports.

The Ability Programme

In 2017 the Department initiated a pre-activation and training programme “Ability” for young people with disabilities (aged 15-29) to be delivered by community groups. The focus of the programme will be on projects aimed at young people with disabilities (aged 15 – 29) designed to assist in their transition from school to further education and employment.

The programme will promote employment prospects and meaningful roles for young people with disabilities and in particular, young people who are distant from the labour market.

The objective of this programme will be to help bring young people with disabilities who are not work-ready closer to the labour market through engagement in training and personal development activities, which would be followed by an incremental exposure to work.

The funding for this programme will amount to around €10 million over a three year period. Over €3 million will be provided under the ESF Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning (PEIL) operational programme, 2014-2020 (PEIL, 2014 – 20). 50 per cent of this expenditure will be reimbursed from the EU.

The principal source of funding will come from a Budget 2017 allocation of €2 million per year for projects which will deliver pre-activation supports for people with disabilities. This funding is being provided on a multi-annual basis and the €2 million figure is being built into the base expenditure figure for the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection.

The programme will be managed by Pobal on behalf of the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection and will be delivered by national, regional or local organisations from around the country that have experience of working with people with a disability. A formal call for applications by Pobal issued on 3rd October and Pobal followed this announcement up with a series of information sessions in October and November to assist prospective applicants with the application process. Applications will only be accepted through an on-line application facility available on Pobal’s website from 4th December 2017 to 12 pm on 31st January 2018. Pobal will appraise the applications in early 2018 and, following consultations with the Department, notify the successful applicants in April/May 2018. It is anticipated that the projects will commence in Q2 2018.

The minimum grant will be for €200,000 while the maximum grant will be for €750,000. On this basis, it is estimated that the programme will fund between 5 and 16 proposals. Projects will have funding agreements in place with each programme provider for a period of two to three years. Pobal will co-ordinate a programme level evaluation aimed at evaluating the extent to which the programme has met its stated policy objectives. This will be put in place from the outset of the programme and a mid-term report will be provided.

Promoting job retention and re-entry into work

In July an exploratory meeting was held to discuss how the Department of Health, the Health Services Executive, Mental Health Division and the Department of Social Protection might collaborate together in building a National Framework for the roll out of an Individual Placement and Support (IPS) initiative. At a further meeting with the HSE Mental Health Division in November, the DEASP was informed that the HSE will fund 27.5 IPS workers for a 3 year period through the Service Reform Fund and through funding from Clinical Programmes. To oversee this work, a national steering group will be set up. It is envisaged that the EmployAbility service will be the main agency of choice to work directly with each CHO area.

Department of Education and Skills

The Department's summary refers to progress in three areas – in relation to schools, further education and higher education.

At the school level a new model for the allocation of additional teaching supports for pupils with special educational needs, which was piloted over the 2015/16 school year, was introduced for all schools from September 2017. The new model is based on the profiled special educational need of each school and is aimed at providing better outcomes for children with special educational needs and addressing potential unfairness in the previous model.

On the further education and training (FET) side a significant development has been the decision to establish a new social inclusion unit in SOLAS in order to support the participation of all, including people with disabilities, in FET. The process of establishing the unit has commenced and staff are currently being recruited.

In the higher education area, as part of the implementation of the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, new funding was announced in August 2017 to support initiatives to widen access to higher education among disadvantaged groups, including people with disabilities. Funding of €2.5m per annum is being allocated on a competitive basis to regional clusters of higher education institutions in order to attract new students from the target groups identified in the Access Plan. In addition, a review of the Fund for Students with Disabilities was published in October 2017. The review sets out a number of recommendations on what aspects of the Fund are working well and where improvements could be made. The Higher Education Authority will now establish a working group to oversee the implementation of the recommendations.

Department of Business, Enterprise & Innovation

The Department reports that in July, Ireland's 2nd National Plan on Corporate Social Responsibility 2017-2020 Towards Responsible Business was launched. This aims to promote a culture of inclusivity and fairness in Irish society. DBEI is the lead Department for this Plan that wants to "support businesses in Ireland to create sustainable jobs, embed responsible practices in the marketplace; embrace diversity and promote responsible workplaces". One specific step identified in this Plan is "to encourage business to develop strategies to integrate diversity and to promote gender equality at all levels in the workplace and for the employment of people with disabilities". This Plan will work across Government Departments and public bodies to progress these policies for the betterment of society as a whole.

In addition to this policy initiative, specific actions reported by the Department as having been undertaken by the Agencies of DBEI in 2017 included:

- Enterprise Ireland hosted a meeting with 30 of its client companies run by the National Disability Authority – Employer Disability Information Service. At this workshop, a Senior UK disability consultant spoke on supporting employers to recruit people with disabilities and on how to target customers with disabilities.
- Also in consultation with the NDA and other key stakeholders, Science Foundation Ireland worked on a programme to include people on the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) within the SFI Discover Programme.

Department of Health and Health Service Executive

The Department reports that they have progressed a significant piece of work to develop key messages that will be delivered to people with disabilities by HSE and HSE funded multi-disciplinary staff. This will emphasise each person's positive potential. This work has been supported by the Federation of Voluntary Bodies and the National Disability Authority.

So far this year, a literature review has been completed, a survey of all multi-disciplinary staff in services has been completed and analysed, and focus groups are now being conducted with different groups of people with disabilities to capture their experience. Once these focus groups are complete, key messages will be drafted and a work-plan will be developed to support the delivery of these messages by relevant staff. The focus of this work has been on developing key messages for young people with disabilities between the ages of 16 and 25 years.

The Department also reports that the HSE has developed a process to attend to the needs of school leavers and people leaving Rehabilitative Training programmes each year that have a requirement for a HSE funded day service. As part of this process, each person presenting as requiring a day service is profiled to establish their support needs. Within the guidance service available, young people who are identified as having the potential to progress to vocational training or employment are provided with the necessary contact details and encouraged to advance these options. Owing to a reduction, or indeed in some areas, a lack of guidance services this approach has been more effective in some areas, than others. It has been particularly more effective in those areas of the country that have guidance staff.

The HSE has identified the people that are currently engaged in Sheltered Employment. A validation process is currently underway in that regard. Once completed, and having reviewed the outcome, recommendations will be made as to the appropriateness of transferring this element of service to a more appropriate mainstream agency.

The HSE is also completing work on the development of a "person centred framework" to underpin the delivery of New Directions. This framework is going through the final stages of consultation and once finalised, a plan will be developed to support its seamless implementation. At the centre of this framework is the need to ensure that people with disabilities are facilitated to make informed choices. People will be provided with information about all the variety of opportunities they can explore. Employment prospects will form a key part of that information.

The pilot Individual Placement Support (IPS) Model which was developed by the HSE and Department of Employment Affairs & Social Protection to include coordinated support for employers and employees at local level will conclude at the end of this year and an evaluation of the programme will also be completed. This will hopefully lead to the development and implementation of standard operating procedures and to negotiate increased access to the IPS.

The Department of Transport, Tourism & Sport and the National Transport Authority

The Department of Transport, Tourism & Sport (DTTAS) has policy responsibility for the actions in the Strategy and the National Transport Authority is the lead agency when it comes to implementation. Both bodies report that the four year capital envelope for Public Transport announced in Budget 2018 includes a multi-annual allocation of almost €28m for the accessibility retro-fit programme for the period 2018 to 2021.

This funding is a trebling of the previous allocation for accessibility under the Capital Plan. This will facilitate the continued roll-out of the programmes to install accessible bus stops, the upgrading of train stations to make them accessible to wheelchair users and the grant scheme to support the introduction of more WAVs into the taxi fleet.

Measures underway or initiated in 2017 to further improve accessibility in public transport include the following:

Bus

- Re-tendering of the 1,035 Rural Transport Programme (RTP) routes continued during 2017 and included in the tender requirements is a condition that the buses used are to be wheelchair accessible within 2 years.
- The NTA has had discussions with vehicle manufacturers and has initiated a tender competition for medium distance bus/coach type vehicles which would allow un-booked wheelchairs to board with normal ramp access on Bus Éireann PSO services. These vehicles being sought are intended for routes up to 50km, being regional commuter routes. It will not be possible to definitively confirm the availability of satisfactory vehicles until the tender process concludes at the end of this year. The conclusions from this tender process will also inform a review by the NTA of the issue of wheelchair accessibility on commercial licensed services.
- The NTA is supporting a multi-agency initiative, launched in October 2017, of a new awareness campaign which highlights the importance of the dedicated wheelchair zone on every Dublin Bus. The initiative aims to demonstrate the negative consequences which can impact a wheelchair user if they are unable to access the wheelchair zone on Dublin Bus services and encourages commuters to leave the wheelchair zone vacant for those who need it most.
- In 2017, 110 new wheelchair accessible/fully accessible buses were purchased for the (public service obligation) PSO fleet in the Dublin region and 70 for the Bus Éireann PSO fleet.
- The NTA continues to roll out its accessible bus stop programme on a route by route basis, with work carried out on 2 routes in Donegal in 2017.

Rail

- Irish Rail plans to commence a pilot project on the DART aimed at reducing the period of advance notice from 24 to 4 hours by guaranteeing staffing across grouped stations and ensuring flexibility to enable staff to move between stations to provide assistance. It is anticipated that the pilot will run for 6 months at which point learnings will be used to inform how best to develop its customer service across all networks.
- Funding for station accessibility upgrades in 2017 enabled work to be progressed on 6 stations identified for improvement.

Taxi

- Through the 2017 wheelchair accessible vehicle (WAV) Grant Scheme, 229 new WAVs have been added to the fleet, together with 51 previously licensed WAVs being replaced, at a cost of €1.733m.

The National Disability Authority

The NDA has a critical role in supporting the overall delivery of the Comprehensive Employment Strategy, through its guidance of Departments and agencies, and through its support for the work of the implementation group.

In the overall context the NDA advised on a thematic approach for considering and discussing progress on the implementation of the Strategy commencing with a series of meetings to focus on key themes during 2017. These included the output of the Make Work Pay group; actions to foster and enhance Employer Engagement; consideration of actions to support effective transitions to further education, training and employment; actions to guide a national policy approach to help people with disabilities – particularly those with high support needs – to find and retain employment.

This thematic approach has helped us considerably to focus our work, and I would hope that we will proceed on that basis in 2018.

More specifically in 2017,

The NDA completed a study on 'Good practice in public sector employment' and conducting research on 'work placements' i.e. exploring the idea of expanding internships as a recruitment route for both public and private sectors. In each case, the research and review work informed NDA advice and interaction with relevant departments on routes to improving approaches to recruiting and employing people with disabilities in the public sector.

The NDA also published a commissioned study of '12 jurisdictions Good Practice on Vocational Rehabilitation'. This detailed report was disseminated to 70 key stakeholders including members of the Healthy Ireland initiative.

In May, the NDA hosted a seminar on Inclusive recruitment and workplace practice attended by key stakeholders from the public sector employment environment to discuss alternative and innovative approaches to inclusive recruitment. The aim of the seminar was to share learning on and promote good practice in recruitment, employment and placements. This is particularly important in the context of the doubling of the public service employment target.

The NDA continued to fund the pilot Employer Disability Information (EDI) Service which entails collaborative working between ISME, IBEC and Chambers of Commerce to provide advice and guidance to employers with the aim of promoting employment of persons with disabilities. In 2017 the network recruited a new project manager and agreed a work programme to end of the pilot term. This is focused on increasing employers' awareness of the range of supports available to them through the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection and by promoting relevant and practical guidance by disseminating information to the business community. The service continued to build its information base with Case Studies from ISME, IBEC and Chambers Ireland members, to share employers' experience of recruiting and employing people with disabilities.

The development of an 'employer peer support network' is underway with the EDI service seeking members for a national employer peer support network and/or seeking engagement from regional employer peer networks towards a national group. The NDA has committed to commissioning an external independent peer review of the Initiative in order to guide consideration of any future developments. The peer reviewers have been selected and the main aspects of the review are scheduled to take place in December 2017, with a final report issuing in Q1 2018.