

A clear plan

***New Disability Plans* is an easy-to-understand booklet on the new disability legislation and extra funding introduced by the Government, writes Carmel Doyle**

PEOPLE THROUGHOUT IRELAND were given a chance to understand new laws on disability this year, with the distribution of a ground-breaking publication to every home in the country.

In May, the National Disability Authority (NDA) distributed its publication, *New Disability Plans*. Presented in an easy-to-read format, the booklet outlines the new laws on disability and extra funding that have been introduced by the Government.

While the National Disability Strategy was devised in 2004 to support the participation of people with disabilities in all aspects of Irish society, it is an organic strategy that incorporates constant changes and updates. A number of Acts make up the integral elements of the strategy. These include: the Disability Act, 2005; the Citizens Information Act, 2007; Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs, 2004; and the Comhairle (Amendment) Bill, 2004.

Six sectoral plans created by six government departments and a multi-annual investment programme are also hugely important elements of the strategy. The six government departments that have devised sectoral plans are: Health and Children; Social and Family Affairs (DSFA); Transport; Communications, Energy and Natural Resources; Environment, Heritage and Local Government (DoEHLG); and Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE).

What a sectoral plan basically means is that each government department will look at various issues under its remit. For example, the Department of Transport will look at improving public transport for



people with disabilities, while the Department of Health will look after improving the delivery of health services, among other things.

Worth €900m and targeted at high-priority disability support services, the investment programme is set to run until 2009.

REFORMS IN THE WORKPLACE

While the National Disability Strategy concerns all people with disabilities, areas of particular concern for those with MS include reforms in the workplace and access improvements in public institutions, infrastructural improvements at public and heritage sites and the upgrading of transport services.

With regard to the workplace, the Disability Act, 2005 sets a 3% target for

employment of people with disabilities in the public sector. While it has been government policy for the past 30 years that at least 3% of public service jobs are assigned to people with disabilities, the Act put a legal onus on this target for the first time. In the past, employers would have had their own definition of a disability; the National Disability Strategy has a much tighter definition.

One aim of the NDA is to showcase companies that are exhibiting good practice in promoting employees with disabilities. "We want to encourage public bodies to carry out good practice and to learn from each other," it says.

By 2015, public sector bodies are also obliged to make their buildings accessible to people with disabilities. The NDA says: "The standards for buildings are under

review and new standards are set to be implemented next year. We need to look at universal benchmarks for people in wheelchairs and for signage for people with visual impairments.”

BREAKING DOWN THE STRATEGY

A spokesperson for the NDA explains that the distribution of *New Disability Plans* brings to the public domain complex pieces of legislation and gives people with a disability a guide to what's out there across the whole spectrum, while acting as a signpost to the specialised objectives of each of the six government departments.

The plan also provides information on changes that have taken place in the social welfare system, covering issues such as whether a person can work and still receive disability benefit. In terms of employment, people might not have been aware that FÁS now has responsibility for employment and training issues concerning people with disabilities.

One of the biggest issues pertaining to the Disability Act, 2005 centres on disability services. From 1 June 2007, children under the age of five with a disability have the right to have their disability, health and education needs independently assessed. By 2011, independent assessments will be put in motion for adults. “It’s a systematic process for the independent assessment of people with disability needs. It gives people a stake in their own requirements,” affirms the NDA.

The NDA indicates that each year the Department of Health and Children will try to reduce the gaps that occur between the outcome of people’s individual assessments and the service statements that they receive.

The NDA is working closely with the DETE to develop a comprehensive employment strategy for people with disabilities. This also encompasses holding on to staff who have acquired a disability. The NDA points out that of the people in

the working age bracket who have a disability, between 70% and 80% of these disabilities were acquired as an adult.

In addition, the NDA now has power to recommend action when a public body is repeatedly failing its targets. It is illegal to discriminate in employment or promotion of people with disabilities who are equipped to do the job. An employer also has a legal obligation to take measures to ensure that a person with a disability, such as MS, can participate or advance in their employment, unless these measures place too large a burden on an employer. This is particularly applicable for people who have acquired an injury as measures could include adapting a workstation, providing special equipment and altering work hours.

The DETE’s sectoral plan incorporates an action plan to elevate the number of people with disabilities at work. In addition, FÁS helps people with disabilities find jobs and offers special training, while also providing grants for employers to take on staff with a disability. Says the NDA: “FÁS has grants for employers of up to €15,000 for employees who have developed a

disability such as MS. A person might need to work fewer hours or require retraining. The aim is to encourage employers to retain an employee.”

ACCESS FOR ALL

Under the six sectoral plans, each department has set out its own objectives to develop supports and services for people with disabilities over the coming years. Some of the Department of Health and Children’s key actions included the establishment of a National Disability Advisory Committee by the end of 2006 and appointment of assessment and liaison officers by April 2007.

Local authorities are completing access audits, with the aim to make all streets and footpaths fully user-friendly for everyone within 10 years.

At the DoEHLG, key targets include the development of a National Housing Strategy for people with disabilities and the reformation of the Disabled Persons Housing Grant Scheme.

Supporting people with disabilities to move from a position of welfare dependency to meet their income needs through employment is part of the DSFA’s

Towards 2016

Towards 2016, a 10-year framework social partnership agreement from 2006 to 2015, incorporates a vision for people with disabilities. It outlines how the sectoral plans and aspects of the strategy will address the following:

- **Assessment for and access to appropriate health and education services including residential care, community-based care and mental health services**
- **Elaborating on a comprehensive employment strategy for people with disabilities including measures to promote education, employment opportunities and**

vocational training

- **The introduction of national standards in relation to specialist health services for people with disabilities**
- **Ensuring adequate income levels for people with disabilities**
- **Evolving building standards and the potential for advancements in Irish housing**
- **The progression of information and advocacy services for people with disabilities**
- **Accessible public transport services being addressed by the Department of Transport in its sectoral plan.**

USEFUL LINKS

www.justice.ie

www.nda.ie

www.disability-federation.ie

core strategic policy aims.

Actions of the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources include having a cross-departmental approach. The Broadcasting Commission has developed rules for the levels of subtitling, sign language and audio descriptions that Irish television channels can use.

In the realm of transport services, the Department of Transport has set out to make all levels of transport accessible in Ireland. By 2012, all city buses will be accessible and by 2009 nearly all

inter-city passenger trains will have new easy-access carriages.

AN ORGANIC PROGRESSION

So with the strategy now set, and the Government committing to improve the lives for people with disabilities, is the strategy now being put into action and how will it become a reality?

A high-level monitoring group representing the government departments and people with disabilities has been established to make the plans in the strategy a reality. The NDA is also monitoring progress and has consulted each department about its own plans.

Nearly 800 bus stops in Dublin have been improved, and European regulations now mean that airlines have to look after the needs of passengers with disabilities. Work has started on passenger facilities at airports, ports and stations throughout the country. Fines for illegal parking in

disabled spaces have also been increased to €80. However, many of the other improvements, such as making all city buses accessible, have deadlines of 2009 onwards.

The preliminary examinations of footpaths, public buildings and playgrounds have now been carried out, with plans to make all of these places accessible by 2015. However, it is thought that by the end of this year, all heritage sites in Ireland will be accessible for those with disabilities.

Some departments are behind on implementing actions under the strategy, but progress is slowly being made. The National Disability Advisory Committee has now been established and its first meeting is due to take place on 24 September.

Organisations such as MS Ireland and the Disability Federation of Ireland have been lobbying for services to be implemented as quickly as possible.

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South East gets physical

THE SOUTH EAST is getting fit, thanks to an exercise programme now taking place in a number of counties in the area. The MS Society's Wexford Branch has been running the exercise programme for the past few years, with the classes gaining in popularity each time they are run.

Physiotherapist Heidi Bramley started the classes in Wexford a few years ago. Heidi is now on maternity leave, so the programme has been placed in the very capable hands of Nicki Lacey, who started working with MS Ireland earlier this year.

Nicki says the classes have proved very popular. "Physiotherapy and exercise seem to benefit people with MS hugely. We started off with a small number of people but this has built up gradually. We're basically trying to improve core stability and muscle balance," she says.

While the issue of exercise was once a controversial one among people with MS, it is now recognised that doing exercise brings with it many advantages. Regular exercise can improve one's level of fitness and improve or maintain mobility, balance and function. Core stability exercises help provide a stable platform for the arms and legs to work, while muscle balance exercises help improve the function of the muscle that has been affected by MS.

The South East exercise programme includes both land-based and aqua classes; the latter will certainly appeal to those water-loving creatures out there.

Nicki assures us that the classes in the South East programme shouldn't lead to overexertion. "We do very specific exercises, where the participants sit down and we try to engage the core muscles. All exercises are very targeted and there's no sweating or running on treadmills. Fatigue is a massive thing for people with MS, but the good thing about these classes is that



they're self-paced. It's all about pacing yourself, knowing when to stop and knowing when to take a break."

Land-based classes last for 30 minutes, while the water-based classes go on for one hour. Nicki says classes are kept short because participants have to concentrate quite hard, and it is difficult to maintain a high level of concentration for too long.

While those attending the classes are asked to continue to do a few of the exercises at home, Nicki doesn't agree with giving too much homework or handouts. "If you bombard people with too many things like handouts, it can become a bit daunting."

The latest exercise programme from the South East office is set to begin in the last week of September and will run for six weeks. Nicki is giving classes in Kilkenny, Enniscorthy, Carlow, Tipperary and Waterford. Most are held during the morning, except for those in Enniscorthy and Waterford, which take place in the afternoon.

For more details, contact the South East Regional Office on 056 7751522.

MS Ireland Regional Offices and Branches run various exercise programmes throughout the year. Contact your local Regional Office for details.

Members of the South Wexford Aqua group pose with Heidi Bramley, physiotherapist, after another fun and rewarding session.



Check out the next issue of *MSnews* where we will be launching details of the 'Getting The Balance Right' programme, the physical therapy and exercise programme developed with the Tesco Charity of the Year funding.



Olga Estridge, MS Ireland's Services Manager, brings a wealth of experience and knowledge to the Society's service provision

AT YOUR SERVICE

THERE IS A huge range of MS Ireland services available to people with MS, families, carers and health professionals. From the Care Centre to the audio library, the Branch network to the Regional Office, MS Ireland services aim to support and inform clients in a variety of ways. Open to all, services are delivered in a time, place and pace suitable to the client. And at the helm of many of these services is Olga Estridge, MS Ireland's Services Manager.

Olga has had a long career in the community and voluntary sector and has held posts in Dublin, the UK and Australia. A trained teacher and social worker and holding a postgraduate degree in organisational behaviour and a masters in innovation services management, Olga comes to MS Ireland with vast experience and knowledge in service provision and development.

Much of Olga's career has been spent in

the provision and management of human services for various state departments, both home and abroad. Concentrating mostly on child protection and adolescent/family care, she began her career with what is now the Health Service Executive before moving to Australia.

Olga became a manager for human services in Melbourne and developed a keen interest in health and the multidisciplinary approach needed to address needs of clients adequately. In 1996, she was made a ministerial appointee to the board of the local Community Health Service. Olga was soon elected president and with a health centre as a focal point she guided the development of inclusive services to a wide range of users with a variety of different social backgrounds and service needs.

Olga moved back to Ireland in 2004 and began work with Barnardos before coming to MS Ireland. In situ for the past 18

months, she has been involved in many services developments including the upgrading of the Care Centre in terms of staff training and system practices.

Olga says of her work in MS Ireland: "The Services Manager position is relatively new and offers me great scope to develop and broaden services, which is key to ensuring we meet the needs of our clients. Although there are so many priorities and objectives, my overriding aim is around the area of best practice. I believe that in working with our clients we need to be offering services that are not only client focused but that also excel in terms of social policy, technology, medical and social advances and organisational capacity. We have a dedicated staff and improving facilities and I am confident that our continued professionalism and growth will certainly benefit all our service users."



A 'RUNNING' SUCCESS!

MS IRELAND WOULD like to thank everyone who ran, walked or crawled the 25th Flora Women's Mini Marathon on 4 June. Some very energetic, and not so energetic, people took part in the event, which was a tremendous success. Over 600 people took part and raised more than €100,000 for MS Ireland.

If you are interested in raising money through other runs for MS Ireland you may be interested in the following marathons.

The Mizuno Cork Half Marathon 2007 will take place at Blarney on 22 September. The marathon has gone from

strength to strength in recent years and now has over 400 people racing in it. Just outside Cork City, the race covers a scenic route around Blarney, Waterloo and Grenagh.

The Adidas Dublin Half Marathon 2007, also on 22 September, will start from Castleknock College and is part of the overall Adidas race series. The course will be accurately measured throughout the Phoenix Park and will cover 21 kilometres, or 13 miles.

On 30 September, those who like a bit of fun will be able to take part in the

'Mooathon' in Kilmacrenan, Donegal. Everybody involved in this 21km race is to wear black and white.

All of the above are great ways to warm up to the Adidas Dublin Marathon 2007, which is being held on 29 October. Now in its 27th year, the Dublin City Marathon covers over 42 kilometres. Visit www.dublincitymarathon.ie for more information.

Also call Sarah in the fundraising team of MS Ireland on 1850 950650 for further details. Sponsorship cards and T-shirts are provided on sign-up.

SUPPORT OUR SERVICES

The services of MS Ireland rely heavily on the generous support from our many members, friends and supporters. We would be grateful if you could become a regular supporter or even ask your friends and family to get involved. All monies are used to services directly to the MS Community.

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A decade of reading

The 2006 MS READaTHON was a significant year for 17 outstanding schools. Celebrating 10 years of participating in the MS READaTHON, the schools were presented with plaques as a thank you from MS Ireland. These schools have raised thousands of euro over the years and we hope they continue reading and fundraising in the years to come.



Tralee Branch chairman Ted Cronin presents Principal Margaret O'Connor and students of Listellick National School with a 10-year award for participating in the MS READaTHON



Dromlough National School in Cork is presented with a 10-year award for participating in MS READaTHON. Front: (from left) Noreen Dowling, organising teacher; Noel O'Sullivan Vice-Chairman, Skibbereen/Bantry Branch; Bernadette Collins, School Principal. Centre: the 10 pupils who participated. Back: (from left) Geraldine Cato, Board of Management; Sheila Vickery, Assistant Treasurer of the local MS branch; Very Rev Canon John O'Donovan PP; and Rhoda Patterson, School Secretary.

Sisterly love

IT HAS BEEN nearly 40 years since Mai Choiseul's sister Nuala died, having lived with MS for a number of years. To honour Nuala's memory, Mai and her family organised Mai's own 80th birthday celebrations to raise money for MS Ireland.

Speaking of the money her friends and family raised, Mai says that Nuala was only 36 when she passed away, leaving four young children. "Although it has been many years, I can still remember the tough days she had. When I went about organising my party, I knew I didn't want presents; I decided I'd invite people to donate money to MS Ireland in lieu of gifts, if they wished."

Mai's 80th birthday celebrations were held in the Killashee House Hotel, Naas, on 25



Mai, second from left, catches up with friends and family at her 80th birthday party

May. Everyone in attendance enjoyed food, drink and merriment. Some €2,500 was raised through donations. Thanks to Mai and her family and friends for their generosity.

Corporate giving



Regional Community Worker Jennifer Reilly, based in Bray, far left, accepts a cheque from some of the employees of ServiceSource

COMMUNITY WORKER JENNIFER Reilly received a cheque from some of the 150 young and enthusiastic employees of ServiceSource Europe who recently held a week of events to raise funds for MS Ireland. The events included a bring and buy sale, home baking and an auction. In this one week of events, the staff at the company raised an incredible €11,786.02.

ServiceSource, a Solectron company, is one of the leading global providers of IT service parts, repairs and related logistics services, supplying an array of parts and services to manufacturers, maintainers, repairers and end users.

MS Ireland wish to extend a huge thank you to everybody who was involved in this great effort.

Walk of life



MS IRELAND SAID goodbye to a very special lady in June, when Lorna Mitchell hung up her walking boots after 18 years with the Society.

Lorna has run the Walks Department for MS Ireland since 1989, and over the past two decades has helped raise over €10m.

A leaving party was organised by the walkers and MS Ireland in the Lansdowne Hotel in June. Speaking at the event, Anne Winslow, Chief Executive, MS Ireland, praised Lorna for all her efforts throughout the years.

“Over this time, Lorna has established the MS Ireland walks as the best charity walks in all of Ireland,” she said. “On behalf of MS Ireland, I would like to wish her all the best in her new journeys and travels. She will always hold a special place in the hearts of MS Ireland.”

To give an indication of the huge work achieved by Lorna over the years, Anne listed some very impressive figures. In the past 18 years:

- Nearly 2,000 walkers have walked for MS Ireland
- There have been 36 separate walks to China, Tanzania, Peru, the Grand Canyon

and other far-flung places

- The €10m raised has assisted covering the annual running costs of the MS Care Centre for 18 years
- This means the walks have allowed 9,000 families to benefit from a one- or two-week stay in the MS Ireland Care Centre.

Lorna finished her work as she started by building on the success the walks have seen over the past years. In 2007 alone, more than 160 people are taking part in three walks for MS Ireland.

While the figures speak for themselves, Anne was quick to point out that Lorna’s work has been about more than just money. Her ability to provide the personal touch has inspired many. At the leaving event, many of Lorna’s friends, colleagues and co-workers spoke about their individual memories of the walks.

June O’Connor from Cork has been on 19 walks for MS Ireland and believes that it is the understanding, care and consideration shown for the people involved that make the walks so successful.

“The minute I hit Dublin Airport and see Lorna, I relax as I know the whole trip will



Top left: Lorna poses with walkers Tomas O’Connor, Robbie Maguire and John O’Halloran

Top right: Lorna is presented with her caricature by long-time walker Alex White

Above: Lorna with husband Peter and children Susan, Andrew and Patrick

run smoothly. She not only ensures everything is organised, but she also makes sure everyone is happy and enjoying themselves. I will certainly miss her professionalism, enthusiasm, calmness and sense of fun.”

As Lorna walks away from MS Ireland, her good work will no doubt live on in years to come, as she leaves it in the very capable hands (and feet) of the walkers.