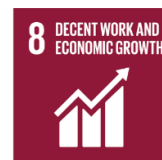




**Chambers
Ireland**
Advancing business together



Public Consultation to inform the Review of the Disability Act 2005

Submission by Chambers Ireland

October 2026

About Chambers Ireland

Chambers Ireland is an all-island business organisation with a unique geographical reach. Our members are the Chambers in the cities and towns throughout the country – active in every constituency. Each of our member Chambers is central to their local business community and all seek to promote thriving local economies that can support sustainable cities and communities.

Introduction

Chambers Ireland welcomes the Government's comprehensive review of the Disability Act 2005. The Disability Act 2005 made important progress in a number of areas when it was introduced, but it is now time for it to be updated.

The Act was developed before many of the rights-based standards that are now reflected in disability policy and therefore places a stronger emphasis on service provision and public-sector obligations, rather than on full participation, inclusion and equality. Implementation has often been fragmented across departments and agencies, accountability mechanisms have been limited, and several provisions have not kept pace with changes in employment, technology and accessibility expectations. The Act also provides only a limited framework for improving employment outcomes across the wider economy, with a particular focus on public bodies rather than supporting participation in all areas of working life. These gaps have become increasingly evident as expectations around accessibility, independent living, digital inclusion and labour-market participation have evolved.

The review provides an important opportunity to ensure that Ireland's legislative framework reflects the State's obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and responds to the lived experience of disabled people.

The business community recognises the social and economic value of a diverse and inclusive workforce. Employers across Ireland want to recruit, retain and develop people on the basis of their skills and potential. However, many employers, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises, require clearer guidance, practical support and accessible routes to advice so that they can confidently remove barriers and provide reasonable accommodation.

Although Part 5 of the current Act focuses on employment in public bodies, the review should look beyond a public-sector-only approach. While this was progressive in 2005, it does not provide a comprehensive framework for improving disability employment outcomes across the

wider economy¹. Given Ireland's large disability employment gap, there is an opportunity to provide a strategic foundation for increasing disability employment across the entire economy, while respecting the distinct roles of disability legislation, equality law, labour-market policy and employer support schemes.

1. A whole-economy approach to disability employment

Employment is central to economic independence, social participation and personal fulfilment. Article 27 of the UNCRPD recognises the right of disabled people to work on an equal basis with others in a labour market and work environment that are open, inclusive and accessible. The review should therefore treat employment as a cross-cutting strand. The revised Act does not need to duplicate the Employment Equality Acts or prescribe every operational support. Instead, it can establish principles and coordination mechanisms that encourage coherent action across public and private employment.

2. Closing Ireland's disability employment gap

Ireland's labour market has operated close at full employment in recent years, yet disabled people remain substantially less likely to be in work.

The OECD found that Ireland's disability employment gap was particularly large at 38.6%, compared to an EU average of 24.4%, and that employer engagement is critically important to ensure that good policies yield good outcomes². Employment rates for working-age people with disabilities were 49.3%, compared with 70.8% for those without disabilities³.

¹ <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2026-06-23/19/>

² https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2021/09/disability-work-and-inclusion-in-ireland_c6df4722/74b45baa-en.pdf

³ <https://nda.ie/uploads/publications/NDA-Employment-and-Disability-Factsheet-Accessible-Design-November-2024.pdf>

This represents both an equality failure and a loss of talent. At a time of persistent recruitment difficulties and skills shortages, enabling more people to enter, remain and progress in employment can expand the available labour pool and support more inclusive growth. Reducing the disability employment gap is therefore both a social objective and an economic imperative.

The OECD has identified lower educational attainment, reduced participation in adult learning and weaker access to skills development opportunities as significant factors contributing to Ireland's disability employment gap. There are a number of possible solutions to this problem. Ensuring National Training Fund programmes are fully accessible and actively promote participation by people with disabilities, as well as providing targeted career guidance and mentoring for disabled learners and jobseekers.

The OECD has also highlighted that disabled people are significantly more likely to leave employment, suggesting that retention, workplace support, career development and return-to-work pathways are as important as recruitment. A possible way to mitigate this issue would be to support employers to provide on-the-job training and progression opportunities, rather than focusing solely on recruitment.

The OECD has also highlighted that many people receiving disability-related income supports retain a capacity and willingness to work. This points to a significant untapped source of talent at a time when employers continue to face recruitment difficulties and skills shortages.

3. Support employers to act with confidence

A rights-based framework must be matched by practical implementation. Many employers support inclusion but remain uncertain about reasonable accommodation, recruitment practices, the interaction between disability and equality law, available supports, and where to obtain specialist advice. This uncertainty can be particularly acute for SMEs without dedicated human-resources or occupational-health capacity.

Chambers Ireland welcomes the introduction of Work and Access, which brings together a range of workplace disability supports. However, the availability of supports alone is not

sufficient to improve employment outcomes. Employers must also be aware of available assistance, understand how to access it and have confidence in applying inclusive employment practices.

The review should therefore consider how the legislative framework can support greater employer engagement and awareness. This could include promoting stronger coordination between relevant agencies, improving signposting of supports, facilitating access to specialist advice and encouraging employer outreach through Chambers, employer representative bodies, Local Enterprise Offices and sectoral networks. Chambers Ireland's members support disability inclusion but often report uncertainty regarding available workplace supports, eligibility criteria and where to obtain specialist advice. At a time when many sectors continue to experience recruitment shortages, improving disability employment outcomes represents an economic opportunity as well as a social objective.

Government should also ensure that employers have access to practical guidance and training on recruitment, retention, return to work and reasonable accommodation. Any future framework should further consider whether supports remain appropriate for evolving forms of work, including self-employment, apprenticeships, internships and flexible or remote working arrangements.

The success of any revised framework will depend on ensuring that employers, particularly SMEs, can access practical supports quickly and with minimal administrative burden. Where additional obligations arise, they should be accompanied by appropriate guidance and financial supports.

4. Interaction with equality legislation and future reform

This review is not, by itself, a substitute for reform of the Employment Equality Acts. It can, however, identify where the statutory framework is fragmented or where disabled people and employers experience uncertainty. The final review should specify which issues can be

addressed through amendments to the Disability Act and which require separate action under equality, social protection, occupational health and safety, education or employment law. Future reviews of the legislation should also take place periodically, perhaps every five years, to ensure that it remains relevant, effective and fit for purpose. The pace of technological, social and workplace change since 2005 has been profound, creating new opportunities as well as new barriers for disabled people. A regular statutory review cycle would ensure that the legislation continues to reflect evolving rights, lived experience and accessibility expectations, rather than allowing another two decades to pass before its effectiveness is assessed.

Recommendations

- Embed disability employment as a whole-economy objective within the revised Disability Act, with a focus on supporting disabled people to enter, remain in, return to and progress within employment, supported by stronger cross-government coordination between employment, education, training, health and social protection policies.
- Improve access to skills development and career progression opportunities for disabled people by ensuring publicly funded training programmes are fully accessible, promoting participation in lifelong learning, and supporting targeted career guidance, mentoring and progression pathways.
- Complement recruitment initiatives with retention and return-to-work supports, including workplace accommodations, on-the-job training and career development measures that help disabled employees build sustainable careers and remain engaged in the workforce.
- Strengthen employer confidence and capability through a coordinated employer-support framework that provides practical guidance, specialist advice, disability inclusion training, and greater awareness of available supports such as Work and Access, particularly for SMEs.

- Ensure that disability-related income supports facilitate labour-market participation where individuals wish to engage in employment, while maintaining appropriate protections and income security.
- Carry out periodic reviews of the revised legislation every five years to ensure it remains relevant and fit for purpose.

The review of the Disability Act 2005 is an opportunity to move from a fragmented approach towards a coherent, rights-based and employment-focused framework. Ireland should aspire to a labour market in which disabled people can obtain work, remain in work, progress in their careers and secure the social and financial benefits of employment on an equal basis with others.

Employers have an essential role, but they cannot deliver this change alone. Clear law, practical guidance, accessible supports and effective coordination are all required. By placing whole-economy employment within the scope of the review, Government can provide the impetus for wider reforms and help unlock a significant pool of talent for Irish businesses and communities.