



Speech by the Minister for Labour Affairs, Mr. Billy Kelleher, T.D.

**Launch of the OECD Report:
Sickness, Disability and Work: Breaking the Barriers**

20 November, 2008

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased to be here this morning to launch the third volume in the series of reviews undertaken by the OECD addressing the critical linkages between sickness, disability and employment. The Report ranges across a wide spectrum of issues including social welfare schemes, activation policies and the role of FAS, so it is clear that it carries key messages for many Government Departments, notably for the Department of Social and Family Affairs and for my own Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

At the outset, then, may I extend a warm welcome to Mr. John Martin, Director for Labour, Employment and Social Affairs at the OECD, and thank him for taking the time to be here at this event this morning. Equally I would like to thank him and his colleagues at the OECD for undertaking this project and for all the work that went into producing this final report. The report addresses topical issues which are high on the policy agenda here in Ireland and in many other OECD countries. This review represents a key input to the debate on how best to meet the challenges involved in seeking to improve the social and economic situation of all people with an illness or disability.

This challenge is one which successive Governments have recognised and is reflected in the development of an overarching legal and policy framework to support people with disabilities over the past number of years. Key elements of this framework include the National Disability Strategy in 2004, the publication of Disability Sectoral Plans by six Government Departments, and the enactment of the Disability Act which enshrines in legislation positive action measures designed to support the provision of disability specific services and to improve access to mainstream public services for people with disabilities.

My colleague, Mr John Moloney, TD, Minister of State for Disabilities and Mental Health, now links policies across four different Government Departments to reflect the Government's commitment to bring services for people with disabilities into the mainstream, and in particular those which require a cross Departmental response. The Minister of State also has responsibility for the Office for Disability and Mental Health, with the objective of getting all Departments working together in a structured approach to the delivery of services for people with a disability.



Department of Social and Family Affairs

While there have been substantial developments, we recognise that there is a long way to go before we can say that people with disabilities have every possible opportunity to participate on an equal footing in Ireland's social and economic life.

We know that people with disabilities are among those most at risk of poverty in Ireland and, notwithstanding the very difficult economic conditions which we now face, we remain fully committed to addressing this. Clearly, the best way to avoid poverty is through employment and that is why we have committed to increasing the employment rates for people with disabilities. This requires concerted action across a range of Government Departments and agencies, including my own Department and the Department of Social and Family Affairs, as well as FAS and other agencies.

A total of €77.7 million in the FAS budget for 2009 is ringfenced for specific employment and training programmes for people with disabilities. In addition, people with disabilities can avail of the FAS Community Employment programme and FAS mainline services such as traineeships and skills training.

The Disability Employment Project in the Midlands region, co-funded by the European Social Fund and the Department of Social and Family Affairs, has been instituted in order to test a comprehensive employment strategy based on individual case management of people on disability/illness welfare payments that will have the capacity to increase their rate of employment.

In regard to boosting the quality of employment support for people with disability I am pleased to say that many of the recommendations contained in the report have been taken on board, and are already being implemented.

For example, promoting and developing 'One - Stop- Shop' access through the FÁS Gateway for all people with disabilities seeking employment, or support towards employment such as the FAS Supported Employment and the Community Employment programmes, forms a key element of the implementation of a comprehensive employment strategy that is being finalised under my Department's Sectoral Plan.

My Department is also actively addressing the fragmentation of programmes and supports, and we see the 'One-Stop-Shop', or Gateway approach, as being a central coordination mechanism in this regard.

Reviews have been carried out into the operation of on the Wage Subsidy Scheme and the Supported Employment Programme, and appropriate reforms are about to be implemented to improve the operation of these incentives.



Research is also being finalised on the issues associated with the reintegration of people who acquire a chronic illness or disability while they are in work.

In seeking to implement these actions we are aware that many other OECD countries have much to teach us, in terms of what works and, as importantly, what doesn't work. Participation in projects where policy directions are subjected to rigorous independent analysis is always worthwhile and we are therefore very much value the opportunity to participate with our counterparts in Denmark, Finland and the Netherlands in this OECD review.

I have no doubt but that this report will provide a valuable input to the policy making process in the coming years and I have confidence that when the OECD come to look at progress in this area in the future, they will see that further significant steps have been taken to ensuring that the barriers facing people who are ill or with a disability have indeed been broken.

ENDS

Further information in relation to *Sickness, Disability and Work: Breaking the Barriers* is available at:

http://www.oecd.org/document/62/0,3343,en_2649_33933_41662270_1_1_1_37419,00.html