Local Election 2009 Manifesto

The availability of the Housing Adaptation Grant for people with disabilities

Access to Grants: an equality issue

Ensure the availability of adequate Housing Adaptation Grants. These grants are vital to enable people with disabilities to adapt their homes so that they can continue to live independently in their own communities.

People with limited mobility may have to undertake considerable adaptation and extension to their existing homes to make them suitable for their needs. This need to adapt a home can often occur at a time when personal income has been reduced dramatically and future income remains uncertain. These adaptations are not lifestyle choices, but basic necessities. The decision to adapt a home is often taken against a background where the supply or availability of appropriate accessible housing is inadequate.

Despite positive developments under the new suite of grants (The Mobility Aids Grant, the Housing Adaptation Grant for People with a Disability and the Housing Aid for Older People), concern remains in regard to the cross-authority introduction of means testing and the continuation of the cap on the maximum grant payable. These measures have restricted eligibility and further compounded the financial burden on individuals and families at what can be a critical stage in their lives. In many situations people with disabilities can not afford to undertake the necessary home adaptations. This can result in these people remaining trapped in unsuitable, inaccessible homes or having to reside in hospitals or nursing homes when other options should be available to them.

Addressing the issue

IWA recommends that in regard to the Housing Adaptation Grant, Local Government needs to address the:

- **Inequalities of access to the Housing Adaptation Grant for people with disabilities.**
- **Inadequacies of the grant in providing financial support.**
- **Backlog of unprocessed and unpaid Housing Adaptation Grant applications.**

IWA calls on Local Government to advocate for:

1. A full Housing Adaptation Grant payment with no cap where the household income is below €32,000 pa.
2. A means test, sliding scale payment and adaptation grant payment with a cap at €40,000 to begin where the household income is above €32,000 pa.
3. Sliding scale bands and grant payment rates to be changed to favour households on incomes below €58,000. Also the increase of the upper band income limit to €85,000.
4. Central Government to fully fund the local housing adaptations grants scheme and that the 20% rebate from local authorities is managed in a way that does not affect draw-down of funds from Central Government.

The enforcement of Part M of the Building Regulations

Legislation that promotes equal access to society: an equality issue

The proper enforcement of Part M of the Building Regulations would ensure full compliance with legislation and provide equal access for all. Effective monitoring of this legislation is also needed to guarantee full and equal access for all.

Part M of the Building Regulations was devised to advance the rights of people with disabilities to equal access within their community. The legislation was required as people with disabilities (10% of our population) are excluded from many aspects of economic, social and cultural life. Inaccessible buildings and facilities can severely restrict people with disabilities opportunity to participate in employment, access shops, banks, and their entitlement to engage in social events. IWA asserts that virtually no building, irrespective of age, culture or architectural value, is inherently inaccessible. Many creative examples of access solutions that retain aesthetic integrity can be seen throughout Europe.

Part M is currently under review, as it has been acknowledged that the present legislation is fundamentally inadequate. Part M requires only a 'minimum access standard' and merely 'encourages' developers to go further. The present deficits in Part M have been further compounded by the blatant non-compliance of many architects, planners, developers and construction companies. To date, Part M has failed to create equal access to the built environment for the population. IWA awaits the reviews, pending recommendations and the introduction of the Disability Access Certificate (DAC), to be issued under the Building Control Act 2007. IWA advocates that the continued reliance on self-compliance within Part M will only work if the significant fines to be introduced under DAC for non-compliance are enforced.

In the spirit of raising awareness and promoting equal access, IWA has published its own set of Access Guidelines. It is hoped that these guidelines will inform all stakeholders on the access requirements of our growing, diverse population i.e. people with different physical and sensory disabilities, people who are temporally disabled, elderly people and those with buggies and prams.

Addressing the issue

IWA recommends that, in regard to Part M, Local Government needs to:

- **Enforce Part M of the Building Regulations by ensuring that there is full compliance with the legislation and effective monitoring to guarantee full and equal access for all.**
- **Undertake a proactive awareness-raising campaign with all stakeholders to highlight the social importance and responsibilities associated with the universal access provision of Part M.**
- **Take into consideration the Access Guidelines published and advocated by the Irish Wheelchair Association.**

The promotion of accessible social and affordable housing

Housing: an equality issue

IWA calls for a commitment that 10% of affordable and social housing will be made fully accessible for residents with disabilities.

IWA has, for a long time, identified the need to significantly increase the supply of appropriate housing/accommodation available to people with disabilities. Despite the development of inclusive design, the housing needs of people with disabilities continue to be hugely under represented and the supply of appropriate housing remains inadequate.

By promoting increased mainstream housing provision for people with disabilities, IWA recommends that 10% of houses built under the affordable and social housing schemes are fully accessible for disabled people as residents. Accessible housing will provide many people with disabilities the opportunity to continue to live independently in their own local community.

Addressing the issue

IWA recommends that, in regard to Social and Affordable Housing, Local Government needs to:

- **Guarantee that 10% of affordable and social housing is fully accessible for disabled people as residents.**
- **Ensure that the Social and Affordable Housing Sector adopts a more inclusive agenda.**
- **Ensure that the construction of mixed housing projects is inclusive of the various different types of housing needs within our society.**

Access to the built environment in our local communities

Environmental access: an equality issue

Ensure that all members of the community should have equal access to all facilities and amenities within their communities.

It has long been recognised that accessibility for all in the human environment is a fundamental prerequisite of inclusion. Historically however, the mobility of people with disabilities was not an integral part of environmental policy development. Without access to society at this basic level, people with disabilities can not obtain equal access to employment opportunities, education, social activities, healthcare etc. These social and economic barriers are contributory factors to the high levels of poverty experienced by people with disabilities. Environmental access is clearly an important enabler towards social and economic participation.

The Disability Act 2005 acknowledged environmental access as central to creating an equal society. The Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government Sectoral Plan under the Disability Act introduced active measures to ease the societal discrimination and isolation that people with disabilities experience. When we consider that most people start and finish their journey as a pedestrian to work, education or daily activities, it is often the pedestrian environment that presents the first obstacle in a person's journey. Barriers take the form of steep path gradients, no drop kerbs or pathways blocked by parked cars, to name but a few. The adoption of Universal Design will ensure access to facilities and amenities for our growing diverse population. A vision of 'access for all' will require Local Government to move beyond compliance with legislation to accessibility becoming a seamless principle of planning and development.

Addressing the issue

IWA recommends that, in regard to access to the built environment, Local Government needs to:

- **Ensure the implementation of Universal Design to serve the entire population.**
- **Adopt an integrated approach to environmental planning and development that utilises the existing body of knowledge in consultation with disability groups.**

The provision of additional disabled parking bays

Disabled Parking Bays: an equality issue

People with disabilities urgently require additional disabled parking bays in our cities, towns and villages. These parking bays need to be strategically situated to support ease of access to places of work, education and daily living amenities.

The importance of a disabled parking bay cannot be over emphasised. It is not just a matter of access to a larger parking space enabling a wheelchair user to embark and disembark from a vehicle; it is an issue of equality and opportunity. The disabled parking bay gives a person access to all aspects of life: work, social and daily living facilities.

"A disabled parking bay is not a luxury; it's a basic necessity to maintain independence" IWA Member

The issues that surround the Disabled Person's Parking Permit Scheme and provision of disabled parking bays are outlined in detail in IWA's 2007 review of the scheme (www.iwa.ie). In 2007, more than 30,000 Disabled Person's Parking Permits were in circulation. This figure has continued to grow steadily with requests for permits coming from the wider general public and specifically from Ireland's growing elderly population. Significantly however, there has not been a relative increase in the number of disabled parking bays to correspond with the increased number of Parking Permits being issued. Therefore a person with a physical disability wishing to avail of an accessible parking space finds it extremely difficult to do so.

Under the Disabled Parking permit scheme, a permit holder is entitled to free parking and access to premium parking spaces in our developing towns and cities. These attractive entitlements are opening the scheme up to considerable abuse. To ensure the validity of the scheme, there needs to be active enforcement of the penalties and fines in relation to the abuse of Parking Permits and illegal parking in accessible spaces.

Addressing the issue

IWA recommends that, in regard to Disabled Person's Parking Bays, Local Government needs to:

- **Increase the number of disabled parking bays.**
- **Ensure all disabled parking bays are strategically located adjacent to vital facilitates and amenities and are supported by environmental access.**

Additional information

The Irish Wheelchair Association (IWA) is a national organisation dedicated to the achievement of the full social, economic and educational integration of people with disabilities as equal, independent and participative members of the community.

Our Association is made up of a vibrant network of 20,000 members and over 2,000 staff, as well as many dedicated volunteers. Together we work to achieve greater independence, freedom and choice for people living with a disability.

IWA provides a wide range of services including Resource and Outreach Centres, Holiday Centres, and Assisted Living Services.

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