

People with disabilities seek action on transport

Pilot transport scheme for people with disabilities mooted by WDN



Pictured at the presentation of the Transport Paper and Charter on Disability Standards in the Mayor's Parlour to Waterford's Metropolitan District Mayor Lola O'Sullivan on Friday morning last were, from left: Michael White (Waterford Epilepsy Support Group), Garrett Wyse (Transport SPC), Anne Marie Cahill-Byrne (Employment Support Officer, Brothers of Charity Services), Elaine Dunne (Chairperson, WDN), Mayor O'Sullivan, Tony McSweeney (Waterford & South Kilkenny Down Syndrome Association), Catriona O'Brien (Waterford Epilepsy Support Group) and Cllr Sean Reinhardt (representing John Halligan TD). Front, from left: John McDonald (WDN PRO), Jo Cregan (Secretary, WDN), Theresa O'Brien (Waterford Epilepsy Support Group) and Kitty Galvin (National Learning Network).| Photos: Noel Browne

Metropolitan Mayor Lola O'Sullivan, with the support of the Waterford Disability Network (WDN), is to lobby Transport Minister Paschal Donohue to establish a public transport pilot scheme in the city for people with disabilities.

Mayor O'Sullivan made the commitment when receiving a copy of WDN's Transport Paper and Disability Charter at City Hall on Friday morning last from WDN Chairperson Elaine Dunne.

The Mayor, who was speaking from personal experience given that she has a 24-year-old niece with special needs and encountered the difficulties of using a wheelchair when her son was confined to one after a leg break 18 months ago, spoke passionately on the issue.

"For one thing, it brought home to me the consequences of what it means for someone with a mobility problem when a car parks on a footpath, which forces a wheelchair user out onto the road, and these are issues which the vast majority don't have to give a second thought to," she said.

"But what's most commendable about this charter is that it's not just about WDN and it's not just about issues affecting people with disabilities in Waterford. There's a national dimension at play here, which is why a pilot scheme in Waterford with positive outcomes could, in time, become the norm across our villages, towns and cities."

Mayor O'Sullivan said that the experience with her son Peter in the wake of a serious leg break was confined to a wheelchair is just how few disabled parking bays there are in the city.

"It's only when you either know someone with special needs or when you experience it on a personal level do you gain some level of understanding of what it must be liked for someone with a disability, be it a visible disability or otherwise."

In its Transport Paper, WDN has called for "a consultation process with all stakeholders in public transport in the area on the provision and implementation of a charter of disability standards for accessible public transport for Waterford city and county". This paper has set out minimum standards on a range of areas, including:

- * Premises and facilities including all bus stops and shelters
- * To provide for access paths
- * Manoeuvring areas
- * Ramps and boarding devices
- * Parking spaces
- * Hand rail and grab rails
- * Symbols and signage
- * The correct payment of fares
- * Access to information regarding public transport, and
- * Requisite staff training.

According to WDN Chair Elaine Dunne: "There's none of us here today who wish that we need to keep publicising the persisting issues which people with disabilities face when it comes to public transport, which is the first of four issues we're aiming to address. But we have no option. No-one else is going to highlight these deficiencies for us.

"To give two examples, there are a limited number of wheelchair accessible taxis in the city, between 20 and 25, while there are none operating in the county. None. We know that several city bus routes may, after a tendering process, pass into private operation; and we need to play a role in how they provide adequate services for people with disabilities."

WDN PRO John McDonald added: "This is only the start of a process. We know there's a lot of work that needs to be done, but it's work we're determined to see through. But we will need help, and if this pilot scheme could be implemented in Waterford, well that would certainly be a welcome development."