



Ms Norma Foley, TD
Minister for Children, Disability and Equality,
Department of Children, Disability and Equality,
Meisian Plaza,
Dublin 2,
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Via Email to: minister@education.gov.ie

17th February 2025

Dear Minister Foley,

Congratulations on your appointment as Minister for Children, Disability and Equality. We look forward to working with you over your term of office to ensure that disability services in Ireland are provided to a high standard, through a publicly funded system for all individuals and families.

Fórsa is the largest public sector union in Ireland, and the fastest growing. At the end of last year our overall membership was close to 90,000 with over a third working in the health sector in Ireland. We represent over 32,000 health workers including health and social care professionals, and clerical, administrative, management staff working across disability service in the Health Service Executive and funded agencies, Tusla and the wider Community & Voluntary Sector.

As the incoming Minister, we wish to set out three significant issues that are of serious concern to our members. They are:

1. **Section 39 Workers:**

You will be aware of this pay dispute from your previous term of office and the commitments given by your party in relation to the matter. It is important to advise you that the Department of Children, Disability and Equality has been in pay negotiations with the group of unions representing workers in this sector throughout 2024. In December 2024, the representatives of government informed the unions that *'in the context of the current government formation process, and the reduced day-to-day engagement with outgoing Ministers, it has not been possible for the Departments to achieve any change to our existing mandate for these negotiations it is therefore proposed that the WRC would formally adjourn the talks until departments are in a position to get a renewed mandate from an incoming Government and new Ministers. These developments are anticipated in early 2025'*.



We call on you as the newly appointed Minister to provide your officials with the mandate to re-enter the WRC process and to bring this matter to conclusion – the continued level of uncertainty for those who work in this sector, the service users and their communities is unnecessary, and it beholds us all to find a sustainable solution.

A high-level meeting with you at your earliest convenience to discuss these matters in greater detail is required and requested. We believe that collaborative engagement is essential to finding solutions that benefit all stakeholders.

2. **Low morale within the workplace:**

We must draw your attention to the growing concern of low morale among healthcare workers of all grades, but particularly those involved in the provision of Disability Services. The persistent challenges have taken a significant toll on the wellbeing and motivation of our members. Many feel undervalued, disrespected and overburdened. These feelings have been compounded by constant political shifts in policy and priority that have left staff feeling vulnerable as they try to provide services.

It is important that steps are taken to address the underlying issues, as sustained low morale risks further exacerbating workforce retention challenges and compromising service delivery. We urge you to prioritize policies that uplift and support the dedicated individuals who form the backbone of this sector and without whom services could not be provided. Central to this must be meaningful consultation and engagement with Fórsa members.

3. **Children's Disability Services**

Fórsa represent all HSCP and clerical admin staff working across Children's Disability Services. This encompasses those working in Primary Care as well as Children's Disability Network Teams. It also includes staff involved in Assessment of Need. The engagement with staff over the term of the last Government was fraught with the views of staff often being disregarded and diminished.

There are significant challenges in the provision of disability services following the policy shift to Progressing Disabilities. This change programme has not been adequately resourced, nor have the central needs of staff been prioritised. This is evidenced by the ongoing issues in relation to lack of Discipline Managers to support staff services, the lack of a coherent workforce plan to address recruitment and retention issues, a roadmap developed without staff input and a multitude of assessment processes with no clear strategy on assessment for children and young people with disabilities. This is not an exhaustive list of the issues currently faced.



Fórsa had hoped that the review currently proposed by the National Disability Authority would address some of the systemic issues arising from the change process, but it appears that our feedback in that regard has been disregarded.

We hope that as Minister you will take a different approach and place value on the views and voice of staff who provide services and engage constructively on their issues of concern.

Finally, we wish to extend to you an invitation to address our upcoming biennial Health & Welfare Conference which takes place in Letterkenny in May 2025 from the 14 to 16th. Previous Ministers have taken the opportunity to address our in-person conference of over 200 delegates from around the country. Should you be available, we will work with your office to agree a suitable time on the agenda for Thursday 15th May.

Our members look forward to your response.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ashley Connolly".

Ashley Connolly
Head of Division

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Linda Kelly".

Linda Kelly
National Secretary