Submission to the Department of Transport on the introduction of a Vehicle Adaptation Scheme

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Introduction

For disabled people, older people and their carers accessible and affordable transport is essential for accessing medical appointments, disability supports, primary care services, education and employment as well as providing access to family and friends. Family Carers Ireland's State of Caring 2026 survey highlighted the extent of carers' reliance on private transport, with 95% of respondents using their own car or taxi to travel with the person they care for. The survey also showed the intersection of transport with other dimensions of the carer experience, including loneliness and social participation. Carers who struggle to afford private transport are substantially more likely to experience loneliness, with nearly three-quarters (74%) of those who often feel lonely reporting difficulty meeting transport costs.

Family Carers Ireland welcomes the Government's announcement in October 2026 of the framework for a new Vehicle Adaptation Scheme which will provide financial assistance towards the cost of adapting vehicles for drivers and passengers who require support to enter, exit or operate a vehicle. We particularly welcome the commitment to a needs-based approach, informed by the social model of disability, rather than eligibility being determined by a person's medical diagnosis or disability classification and the commitment that the scheme will not be means-tested and that applicants will not be required to pay for adaptations upfront, with payments made directly to approved suppliers.

These are important and positive developments in addressing the transport inequalities experienced by disabled people and their families. However, while the proposed scheme represents a welcome step forward, Family Carers Ireland believes it is important that its development is considered within the wider context of the longstanding inadequacy and inequity of transport supports for disabled people, older people and their carers in Ireland.

1. Two-tier system of transport support

The withdrawal of the Mobility Allowance and Motorised Transport Grant in 2013 following concerns that both schemes were incompatible with the Equal Status Act, left a significant gap in the State's provision of transport assistance. Despite government's commitment to replace both schemes with a Transport Support Scheme, this did not materialise and more than a decade later, disabled people, older people and their carers have had to accept a single transport support scheme – the Disabled Drivers and Disabled Passengers Scheme– which is available only to severely and permanently disabled individuals who hold a Primary Medical Certificate. This has created a 13 year long two-tier system of transport support, that gives assistance to people with a physical disability but no support to those with non-physical disability.

Government has stated publicly that the Disabled Drivers and Disabled Passengers Scheme is outdated and no longer fit for purpose. The medically based "in-or-out" eligibility model, reliant on the Primary Medical Certificate, is overly narrow, inconsistent with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with a Disability (UNCRPD) and excludes many disabled and older people.

The absence of a replacement Transport Support Scheme has also created an inequitable situation whereby people who were receiving Mobility Allowance before its withdrawal have been allowed to keep the monthly payment, while other disabled people with equally significant transport needs have been locked out of the scheme since 2013.

The new Vehicle Adaptation Scheme has the potential to address some of these barriers, but it will not, in its current form, address the broader financial and practical challenges faced by people who depend on private transport. Family Carers Ireland is therefore calling on the Department of Transport to ensure that the Vehicle Adaptation Scheme is sufficiently comprehensive, adequately funded, accessible and flexible to meet the diverse needs of disabled people and their families. We also believe that the scheme must form part of a wider commitment to restoring appropriate financial support for disability-related transport costs, including supports for persons with hidden or non-physical disabilities.

2. The financial impact of disability-related transport costs on families

Transport is an essential component of independent living. For many disabled people, particularly those living in rural areas, private transport is not simply a matter of convenience but a necessity. While public transport accessibility has improved in recent years, significant barriers remain. Many disabled people cannot independently access or use available public transport, while others require a family member or personal assistant to accompany them. In rural areas, the absence of accessible and reliable public transport can make private transport the only realistic option. The additional costs associated with disability-related transport can be substantial. These include:

- The purchase and adaptation of an appropriate vehicle.
- Fuel and increased mileage arising from additional journeys.
- Vehicle maintenance, servicing and repairs.
- Insurance and motor tax.
- Taxi and accessible transport costs where a private vehicle is unavailable.
- The costs associated with a family carer having to provide regular transport.
- The additional time and financial costs of travelling longer distances to access specialist services.

Research undertaken by the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice in April 2022, on behalf of Family Carers Ireland, found that low-income households caring for a child with a profound intellectual disability incurred additional average weekly costs of €244 compared with a similarly composed household without disability or care needs. Transport was identified as one of the contributors to these additional costs. This research demonstrated that the financial impact of caring extends well beyond lost earnings or reduced employment opportunities. It also includes the additional everyday expenditure required to meet the needs of a disabled family member. These pressures have been further intensified by increases in the cost of living, fuel, insurance and vehicle maintenance.

The proposed Vehicle Adaptation Scheme will help families meet the cost of necessary vehicle adaptations. However, it will not address these ongoing transport expenses.

3. The Vehicle Adaptation Scheme: ensuring the framework delivers in practice

Family Carers Ireland welcomes the Government's proposed framework for the Vehicle Adaptation Scheme and, in particular, the intention that it will:

- Be open to drivers and passengers who require adaptations to enter, exit or operate a vehicle.
- Be based on individual needs rather than a specific medical condition or disability.
- Not be means-tested.
- Allow applicants to nominate a supplier from a pre-approved list.
- Provide grant approval before adaptations are undertaken.

- Pay approved suppliers directly, removing the requirement for applicants to fund adaptations upfront.

These commitments reflect important principles of accessibility, fairness and dignity. However, the effectiveness of the scheme will ultimately depend on the detail of its eligibility criteria, the level of financial assistance available, the range of adaptations covered and how straightforward it is for people to access support. Family Carers Ireland wishes to highlight the following considerations:

A genuinely needs-based approach to eligibility

We welcome the commitment that eligibility will be based on an individual's functional needs rather than their medical diagnosis or disability classification. This is a significant departure from the restrictive approach associated with the existing Disabled Drivers and Disabled Passengers Scheme, which requires applicants to satisfy stringent medical criteria in order to obtain a Primary Medical Certificate.

Under that scheme, people with substantial mobility difficulties can be excluded because they do not meet narrowly defined medical conditions, despite experiencing significant barriers to independent transport. The new Vehicle Adaptation Scheme provides an opportunity to move away from this approach and adopt a more inclusive model, consistent with the UNCRPD.

However, Family Carers Ireland believes that a needs-based approach must be reflected in the practical assessment process and not simply in the language used to describe eligibility. Eligibility should be determined by the person's actual difficulties and the adaptations required to overcome them. It should not depend on the severity of a diagnosis, whether a person receives a particular disability payment, or whether they have a physical disability. The scheme should also recognise that disability-related needs are diverse. While many applicants will require adaptations because of physical or mobility impairments, others may have sensory, intellectual, cognitive or other disabilities that affect their ability to access or operate a vehicle.

An appropriate range of adaptations

The scheme is intended to provide assistance towards the cost of adaptations required to enter, exit or operate a vehicle. Family Carers Ireland welcomes this approach but urges the Department to ensure that the list of eligible adaptations is sufficiently broad and responsive to individual circumstances. The adaptations required by disabled people can vary considerably. Some may require relatively straightforward modifications, while others may require more specialised equipment to facilitate safe and independent access. The scheme should be flexible enough to accommodate adaptations such as:

- Swivel seats and transfer equipment.
- Wheelchair access and storage solutions.
- Ramps and lifting equipment.
- Hand controls and adapted driving controls.
- Modified seating and positioning supports.
- Door and vehicle access modifications.
- Other specialist equipment required to enable safe entry, exit or operation of a vehicle.

This list should not be exhaustive. The scheme should be capable of responding to new technologies and changing individual needs. It is also important that adaptations are assessed in the context of the person who will use the vehicle, rather than relying on a standardised list of modifications.

Adequate funding and grant limits

The financial assistance available through the Vehicle Adaptation Scheme will be central to its success. Family Carers Ireland is concerned that if grant limits are set too low, the scheme may provide only partial assistance and leave families facing substantial additional costs. The cost of vehicle adaptations

can vary significantly depending on the nature of the disability, the type of vehicle and the equipment required. For some families, even relatively minor adaptations can represent a considerable financial burden.

The Department must ensure that the funding available reflects the actual cost of adaptations and does not create a situation where those with the most complex needs are least able to afford the necessary modifications. We also welcome the commitment that applicants will not be means-tested. This is particularly important for family carers, many of whom have already experienced significant financial disadvantage because of reducing their working hours or leaving employment to provide care.

Choice of supplier and geographical accessibility

Family Carers Ireland welcomes the proposal that applicants will be able to nominate a supplier from a pre-approved list and that payment will be made directly to the supplier. However, we are concerned that the availability of approved suppliers could create difficulties for people living outside major urban centres. Access to vehicle adaptation specialists may be limited in rural areas, potentially requiring applicants to travel considerable distances to have work completed. This could create additional costs and practical difficulties for disabled people and their families.

The Department must ensure that the pre-approved supplier network is geographically accessible and sufficiently diverse to meet demand nationwide. It is also important that applicants have a reasonable degree of choice and are not restricted to a small number of suppliers or required to accept lengthy waiting times.

A straightforward and accessible application process

Family Carers Ireland welcomes the commitment that the Vehicle Adaptation Scheme will be simple to access, use and receive payments through. This is particularly important given that many disabled people, older people and family carers already face considerable administrative demands when trying to access health, social care and other State supports.

The application process should not create unnecessary barriers through complex forms, excessive documentation or lengthy assessment procedures. Information about the scheme should be available in accessible formats and written in clear, straightforward language. There should also be appropriate assistance for people who may need support to complete an application, including those with intellectual disabilities, communication difficulties or limited digital access.

Supporting family carers

Family carers play an essential role in enabling disabled people to access transport and participate in their communities. In many families, the disabled person is a passenger and depends entirely on a parent, spouse, sibling or other family member to provide transport. This is particularly common for people with profound intellectual disabilities, complex needs or significant mobility difficulties.

We believe that the scheme must explicitly recognise the role of family carers in facilitating access to transport. The vehicle used to transport a disabled person may be owned and driven by their family carer. It is important that the scheme does not create unnecessary restrictions based on vehicle ownership or require the disabled person to be the registered owner or driver. The scheme should also recognise that adaptations may need to accommodate the changing needs of the person receiving care, as well as the practical requirements of the person providing transport.

4. The relationship between the Vehicle Adaptation Scheme and the Disabled Drivers and Disabled Passengers Scheme

Family Carers Ireland welcomes the Government's confirmation that the Vehicle Adaptation Scheme is a standalone scheme and is not intended to replace the existing Disabled Drivers and Disabled Passengers Scheme operated by the Department of Finance. This distinction is important.

The existing Disabled Drivers and Disabled Passengers Scheme provides valuable tax reliefs linked to the purchase and use of specially adapted vehicles, exemptions from motor tax and toll charges, and access to fuel-related supports. However, eligibility remains restricted by the requirement to satisfy specific medical criteria in order to obtain a Primary Medical Certificate. As a result, many disabled people who have substantial transport needs remain excluded from the scheme. The introduction of the Vehicle Adaptation Scheme provides an opportunity to address some of these inequalities, particularly for people who require adaptations but do not qualify for the existing tax relief arrangements.

Nevertheless, Family Carers Ireland believes that the Department of Transport and the Department of Finance must work together to ensure that the two schemes complement one another and that people do not fall between the eligibility criteria of different government supports.

5. The need for a wider transport support payment

While Family Carers Ireland welcomes the Vehicle Adaptation Scheme , we wish to emphasise that vehicle adaptation is only one element of the additional transport costs experienced by disabled people and their families. The scheme will assist with the cost of modifying a vehicle, but it will not provide financial assistance towards the purchase of a vehicle or the recurring costs associated with its use. Nor will it assist those who cannot afford to maintain a vehicle, those who depend on taxis or accessible private transport, or those who require regular financial support to meet the additional costs of travelling. This is particularly concerning for people living in rural areas, where public transport services may be limited or inaccessible and where private transport is often essential to accessing basic services.

Family Carers Ireland believes that the State must revisit the question of a broader mobility support payment. The former Mobility Allowance provided a degree of flexibility by allowing recipients to use financial assistance towards their individual transport needs. A similar approach would recognise that people experience disability-related transport barriers in different ways and that no single transport solution will meet everyone's needs.

A cash-based support would also provide people with greater autonomy and choice, allowing them to decide how best to meet their transport needs, whether through a family vehicle, taxis, accessible transport services or other arrangements. This is particularly important for people with intellectual disabilities and those who do not meet the eligibility criteria for existing vehicle-related tax reliefs.

6. Implementation, funding and accountability

The Government has indicated that the Vehicle Adaptation Scheme will open for applications in early 2027. Family Carers Ireland welcomes this commitment and urges the Department to ensure that the necessary administrative and operational arrangements are completed without further delay.

The allocation of €6.5 million for the establishment and operation of the scheme in Budget 2027 is a positive development. However, it will be important to monitor whether this funding is sufficient to meet demand and ensure that applicants receive meaningful financial assistance. The Department should also establish clear arrangements for monitoring the scheme once it becomes operational. This should include monitoring who is accessing the scheme, the types of adaptations being funded, geographical differences in access, waiting times and the number of applications refused.

It is particularly important that the Department identifies whether particular groups are experiencing difficulties accessing the scheme, including people with intellectual disabilities, people with complex needs, older disabled people and those living in rural areas.

7. Summary of recommendations

Family Carers Ireland welcomes the development of the Vehicle Adaptation Scheme and believes it has the potential to make a meaningful difference to the lives of disabled people and their families. To ensure that the scheme delivers on this potential, we are asking the Department of Transport to:

1. **Adopt a genuinely needs-based approach to eligibility**, reflecting the social model of disability and individual functional needs rather than medical diagnoses or disability classifications.
2. **Ensure that the scheme is inclusive of drivers and passengers**, including people with physical, intellectual, sensory and other disabilities who require vehicle adaptations.
3. **Provide adequate grant funding** that reflects the actual cost of adaptations and the differing levels of individual need.
4. **Maintain a broad and flexible range of eligible adaptations**, including provision for specialist and exceptional requirements.
5. **Ensure equitable access to approved suppliers** throughout rural and urban Ireland, with meaningful choice for applicants.
6. **Keep the application process straightforward and accessible**, with non-digital options, appropriate assistance and a transparent appeals process.
7. **Recognise the role of family carers**, including allowing carer-owned vehicles to qualify where they are used to transport a disabled family member.
8. **Protect existing entitlements** under the Disabled Drivers and Disabled Passengers Scheme and ensure that the two schemes operate in a complementary manner.
9. **Provide adequate and sustainable funding**, with regular reviews to ensure the scheme remains responsive to demand and changing adaptation costs.
10. **Revisit the introduction of a broader transport support payment**, similar in principle to the former Mobility Allowance, to address the ongoing costs of disability-related transport.
11. **Establish robust monitoring and evaluation arrangements**, ensuring that the experiences of disabled people and their families inform the ongoing development of the scheme.

9. Conclusion

The introduction of the Vehicle Adaptation Scheme must be viewed as the beginning of a broader effort to address the transport inequalities experienced by disabled people, older people and their families, rather than as a complete solution. For more than a decade, since the withdrawal of the Mobility Allowance and Motorised Transport Grant in 2013, many people have been left without adequate financial assistance to meet their transport needs. The consequences have been particularly significant for low-income families, those living in rural areas and those with a non-physical disability.

Access to transport is not a luxury. It is fundamental to independent living. For many families, the availability of an appropriate vehicle and the financial means to use it determines whether a disabled family member can access healthcare, education, employment and social opportunities. Family Carers Ireland urges the Department of Transport to ensure that the new scheme is sufficiently inclusive, adequately funded and straightforward to access. We also urge the Government to address the wider gap in transport supports by progressing a flexible financial support payment for people with disabilities who face additional transport costs.

Ultimately, the success of the Vehicle Adaptation Scheme should be measured not simply by the number of vehicles adapted, but by whether it enables disabled people, older people and their families to enjoy greater independence, choice and participation in their communities. Family Carers Ireland welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of this important scheme and looks forward to working with the Department of Transport to ensure that the needs and experiences of disabled people and family carers remain central to its design and implementation.

Clare Duffy
Policy & Public Affairs Manager
cduffy@familycarers.ie