# The Rights Reporting podcast

# Episode 6, the right to personal mobility

**Speaker1:** This podcast is supported by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Program of the European Union.

**Neven Milivojevic:** Welcome to the Rights Reporting podcast. This is a show aiming to improve the rights of blind and partially sighted citizens in Europe. My name is Neven Milivojevic and I will be hosting today's episode. Today we will focus on the important right of personal mobility. The right is actually stipulated very clearly in article 20 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The one called CRPD and personal mobility is actually a prerequisite for inclusion in society. For instance, according to the European Court of Human Rights, to be mobile and to have access to transport, housing, cultural activities and leisure is a precondition for the right to establish and develop relations with other human beings. So this all sounds very nice, but unfortunately the political visions do not always turn into reality, and we will see that the implementation of rights often are not in place. Today we will meet two experts, one from Ireland and one from Norway. And we will hear more about barriers and challenges, but also talk about possibilities and tools for solutions. First we will listen to Audrey Tormey in Ireland and hear about her experiences of accessibility when traveling.

**Audrey Tormey:** So hello, my name is Audrey Tormey. I am a guide dog owner and I am totally blind. I am working with my third guide dog and I travel a lot in my work and for recreation on public transport I use in Ireland. Here we have a system called the tram system. We have trams and buses. So I mainly use trams and buses and it's wonderful to be able to be independent and get out and about. And particularly with the introduction of audio announcements on public transport, for me it makes it much easier and I don't have to rely on asking someone where are we? I can, you know, get on a bus, get on the tram, ask my guide dog to find a seat and sit back and hopefully listen to the announcements. So I live on the south side of the city, but I work on the north side of the city. So that involves getting two buses or a tram and a bus and then getting another tram a short distance. Recently I was travelling to work and I discovered when I got on the bus, the first bus I taken the morning at 6.30 and there was no announcements. So I said, oh dear, I have to really concentrate. It really makes the journey a little bit more stressful I think when there's no announcements and especially if I can't see or hear people nearby because I don't know, oh, is there anybody there to ask? So in some ways I have to rely on my dog. So he's kind of conditioned to know I stopped to get off the bus.

As so we got on the bus, no announcements, the journey was a little bit, you know, erratic. Then we get our Lewis or our tram, which is called Lewis on the tram. There was equally no announcements as well. So I just think, oh, there's one of these days, thankfully I did meet someone I know on the tram, so I was able to, you know, get off the tram at the right stop and get my next mode of transport. Often when that happens, I do think it's good to let the authorities wholike the bus company or the tram company know that, you know, I am a guide dog owner. I'm blind. Often I have to remind people that it is so important because we don't see as people who are blind or vision impaired, we totally rely on the audio announcements and we need to have them working continuously. Now I understand sometimes the system has to be upgraded and the audio announcement may not be working, but it's vital and it's essential. And in many instances, I think it's a matter of safety for audio announcements to be maintained and working correctly on public transport. And I have had situations where I got off at the wrong stop. I got totally lost and I had a trip off a footpath because I wasn't familiar with the environment. So this is a reason why we should really have working audio announcements and it makes a huge difference for all of us with sight loss.

**Neven Milivojevic:** I would like to welcome our two guests for today's podcast. So first, we have Elaine Howley, who is an advocate, a member of a Disability Stakeholders Group and a member of a European Blind Union's low vision network. Welcome, Elaine.

**Elaine Howley:** Thank you.

**Neven Milivojevic:** And we also have from Norway Soelvi Oerstenvik**,** who is the president of the organisation committee of a Norwegian Association of the Blind and partially sighted. Welcome, Soelvi.

**Soelvi Oerstenvik: T**hank you. And thank you for having me.

**Neven Milivojevic:** Well, it's a great pleasure to have you both in the show. So let's start with you, Elaine. Maybe you could tell me what your reflections are after listening to Audrey’s story and how I mean, how would you describe accessibility in general in relation to being able to travel on one's own? Also, could you tell me something about would there be any consequences for providers in Ireland, for instance, when they do not apply to what is expected from them?

**Elaine Howley:** Well, I can relate very much to the experience that Audrey describes, and I have low vision. I don't use a guide dog, but I do depend on audible announcements and to do my job I go to all sorts of communities and so I don't have a regular route every day. I need to find new houses, new hospitals, nursing homes, that kind of thing. So I'm very dependent on it. And for me sometimes it's been very embarrassing because when it didn't work or when the announcement was incorrect, I either got off at the wrong place or didn't know where I was going and arrived late to appointments. And that's really important you know, we strive to get employment. We want to be as professional as possible. And then when we're delayed by these things, it's just not good enough, really. And in general, how are things you asked me. I suppose travelling alone as somebody with low vision or as a blind person brings about many challenges and lots of mobility techniques and things are used finding safe road crossings, using audible signals. And in Ireland things have improved greatly. I would say over the last 20 years things have improved greatly with tactile markings and that kind of stuff at train stations and it kind of ends there. So funding goes into making a place accessible or making a service accessible, but then very often it's not monitored or nobody's checking that the audible announcements are actually working. And so it can't be guaranteed to be operational every day or every time of every day. And obviously, this makes such a huge impact on our lives, of course.

**Neven Milivojevic:** And are there any consequences, for instance, for the providers if they don't apply to what's expected from them?

**Elaine Howley:** Unfortunately, not really. And so there are opportunities to make complaints. There are various committees that I sit on and, you know, there are apologies and that kind of thing. When we speak with government departments who provide funding for these accessible features, you know, they are constantly improving. They are constantly investing. And there is goodwill there. But unfortunately, even though we have ratified the UNCRPD, it's not seen as a right. It still depends on continued representation on an ongoing basis and like legislation is there for equality, anti-discrimination. We have a disability act since 2005, but a lot of it is not enforced and then it's really expensive. If people choose to take somebody to court, it's not an easy process at all.

**Neven Milivojevic:** Yes, we can come back to that. Let's move on to you, Solvi, and to hear how the situation is in Norway. I mean, would you say what experience Audrey had would be similar in your country? And I mean, how do you work with the providers in Norway to manage this challenge?

**Soelvi Oerstenvik:** You'll find the same experiences here that audio announcements, the providers have to have audio announcement but still we see a lot of providers that doesn't use the system. Maybe they have the system, but for example, the bus drivers, they take the sound down so you can't hear it. And there are many, many ways to come around this. Of course, we have a system, we have a very strong legislation in the Equality and Discrimination Act and the regulation about universal design. These are very strong legislations, but we see that the providers try to come around it. So then we, the users always have to report on it. And maybe that's a challenge for many, many users to take that road, so to speak, to take to report this and go through the system. And it takes time. It's almost the system is quite you can say it's a parallel to if a person has done any other criminal act and you know, it takes time and the person or the provider they should tell their story. They should give their argumentation why they do like they do and so on. So when the governments are laying out their tender and the providers answers upon that, always in these documents, they have to take into account the universal design. But often we see that maybe they say this in the documents, but when it comes to do it in the practical. We see that suddenly it's not there. They have in some way forgotten it or in some way they say that, oh, it's going to be that when the rest is finished. And then all the troubles come because the systems isn't available or the systems doesn't fit with the other systems they already need. So, there's a lot of challenges on many levels here.

**Neven Milivojevic:** I can see that. So another part I know is important when we talk about this is actually the consultations which are done with different stakeholders. So Elaine, for instance, could you explain a little to us the importance of consultations as a tool and what are their possibilities as well as their challenges?

**Elaine Howley:** Well, I think consultation is essential, and I think that it needs to be full engagement with people. And I think it needs to be clear that consultation is not an end in itself. It's part of a process. And there are lots of possibilities for consultation in Ireland. And we have a disability inclusion strategy and we have a group that sits together where all the government departments are represented, the disability sector is represented by individuals, DPOs service providers, and there is full engagement. But still, you know, we get explanations and excuses and reasons why and anticipated improvements that will happen. And we're expected to be pleased about that. And we are pleased about it, but we often come across as very negative because consultation has been too late. So the timing is essential. Also, who gets included is important because Ireland, unlike lots of other countries, I think, has very few actual appeals. A lot of disabled people have traditionally been represented by service provider organisations, so there's a bit of tension there in terms of who gets included in consultation. So it needs to be both and it needs to be open to any individual who wants to get engaged in the consultation process and publicly put out there. You know, people need to know this consultation happening and you too can get involved even though you're not necessarily using a service of a particular organisation.

**Neven Milivojevic:** Interesting. So we can hear that legislation is very important, but it doesn't really work always in practice. If we, for instance, look at another piece of legislation and going back to your system, I know you are a guide dog user and I know that this is very important as an aid and assistance when moving around. But how would you say that the rights are protected as a guide dog user in Norway? And would you say that the legislation is important as a tool here?

**Soelvi Oerstenvik:** Yeah, I would say that this is very important, like a tool here. For instance, if you go into a shop and buy food, so you have the right to have your dog with you. If you go into a restaurant, you have the right to have the dog with you. So everywhere you go as a guide dog user, you have the right to have the dog with you. And since it is not everybody who has the same understanding about what guide dogs are, we live now in a multicultural world that people come from many places. And it is true that some places in the world, people are little more afraid of dogs and have other thoughts about dogs than maybe we have here in the Nordic countries. So that's one of the reasons that legislation is important that everybody who runs a store, who runs some restaurants, who drive a bus has the knowledge about this. And if they do not, we have a certificate that we can show the people that works in their shop, for example, that tells them that we have the right to have the guide dog with us everywhere we go. Like a child sitting in a wagon or like a wheelchair user and have the right to still sit in the wheelchair, you know, and get into the shop.

**Neven Milivojevic:** And how important is the guide dog for you, would you say, in your life for being able to independently move around?

**Soelvi Oerstenvik:** Yeah, it's very important. It makes me much more safer. It makes me able to go to places that I'm not so sure I would go there just by the blind stick. But now I can go alone and much freer to go almost where I want to. So it's very important in my life. And of course, I use it every day when I go to work in the morning, when I go home in the evenings, I use my guide dog. And especially in the wintertime, you know, where it can be quite difficult to move around. It's extremely important with the guide dog. So I think guide dogs, at least for me, it's freedom.

**Neven Milivojevic:** Well how is it in Ireland, do you know that Elaine, with the rights for guide dog users, do you have any idea of it?

**Elaine Howley:** Yes, we do. We have legislation also the same.

**Neven Milivojevic:** You also mentioned, Elaine, before about accessibility in outdoor spaces. And for instance, you said there is a trend with shared spaces and there is lots of things going on. Could you tell us about how you see the trends and what do you think we should be concerned about now. I mean, for instance, nowadays we have everybody is using e-scooters and leaving them just anywhere. And I mean, that must be a really huge problem in terms of accessibility.

**Elaine Howley:** It is unfortunately becoming a very, very significant problem. And first of all, shared spaces relies on the principle of people making eye contact between cars and pedestrians. And well, that just doesn't work for us. I'm afraid so. For a long time I've been advocating against shared spaces. Unfortunately, we haven't got very far with that, and we have like everywhere else, there's a big focus on sustainability and alternative ways of moving around and you know, the green agenda, which is very important. But, you know, the design of things, there are domains being designed that are taking away from the safe space of the footpath, for example. And there are bus stops where a person who wants to get on or off a bus needs to cross over the cycle lane. And these are getting planning permission. These are being funded and approved. And for the likes of me with low vision, I have walked around for many, many years on the footpath feeling safe, now I don't feel safe anymore. There are e-scooters up and down the footpaths, on and off cycle lanes, on and off footpaths. No sound emissions, no rules, no highways, anything. And they're arrogant. There needs to be a huge culture change because the arrogance of cyclists and people on e-scooters is phenomenal. And for the first time in my life, I'm afraid going around, I do not feel safe anymore on the footpath and this hasn't happened by accident. This has been funded and approved by planners and decision makers and it's a huge increase in problem. I know that in other parts of Europe e-scooters are being left all over the place that is starting in Ireland. And so that's going to become just a nightmare for anybody. And I really think something needs to be done about it.

**Neven Milivojevic:** Well, this is not, of course, a solution, but how would you say the importance of getting local training and mobility in relation to the more challenging environment?

**Elaine Howley:** I actually don't think the difficulty is training and mobility. I think training and mobility gives a person the skills to deal with things, which is of course important. I think mobility training should happen locally in one's local environment. In relation to that, a significant amount of funding is going into a national mobility training centre, which very many people who are blind and vision impaired have objected to because it's bringing people to a centre in Dublin which hasn't opened yet, but it will bring people to a centre in Dublin to learn the techniques, whereas people want local mobility training. But the environment is changing at such a rapid pace, local authorities are putting up barriers, obstacles, little lifts between footpaths and roads that are not colour, contrasted at all invisible barriers to stop people from parking. They're the same colour as the footpath on the road. It is just becoming a nightmare and I don't think any amount of mobility training will assist people when the environment changes so frequently and this leaving scooters around, you can't predict that. The other thing that's happening is since COVID around here, there's been a massive increase in the number of people with dogs and they're on these really long leads and they're just tripping over the lead, if not the dog, and they're moving all the time. It's just becoming chaotic out there.

**Neven Milivojevic:** And if you should give one recommendation on what should be done, what would that be, Elaine?

**Elaine Howley:** Oh, I would recommend that planners need to listen to the people who are being affected by this and not just listening to the cycle lobby, which is what's happening here. And it's being done in a way. It's called you know, it's all about increased walking and cycling, but it's not increased walking for us. For people who live with any kind of disability, it's decreasing safety. And I would say listen to us from the very early stages and engage us fully in the planning of these things.

**Neven Milivojevic:** Thank you. Soelvi, it's often mentioned universal design can be miraculously solving everything and for instance, can it replace assistance at travelling points? What are your thoughts about universal design?

**Soelvi Oerstenvik:** Yeah, I think universal design is extremely important and especially when you hear what Elaine tells about from Ireland. But universal design doesn't solve all problems. You also have the personal assistance. Many places, for instance, railway stations can be very, very large, very difficult to manage to get around if you're not very, very well-known there. If you go to the same railway station on a daily basis or weekly basis, then you have the knowledge of where you can walk, even though there are tactile markings and so on. But if you've never been there or you are there very rarely, then you have to have a system of personal assistance because even if you are good at mobility or you use a guide dog, it can be quite difficult to, for example find the right track for your train if the tracks are not numbered in a way that we can find, for example, and which there really are in many places, maybe especially on the railway station or bus stations. It is necessarily indoor always. It can be outside. And then you have to cross tracks, for example. So personal assistance is still very, very necessary in many situations and in many places, just like the system we have in airports. I believe almost all around the world, you have an assistant system, and I should wish we had that on every railway station, on every larger bus stations and so on. That would give us more safety. I would say it would help more. You shall XX the people to travel alone.

**Neven Milivojevic:** So what I hear you saying is that there is no universal solution, but the universal design could be good for some people. Personal assistance could be good for some people. And of course, tactile and other kind of accessibility tools could be good for some people. So it can't be one solution for all.

**Elaine Howley:** No, you cannot. For example, how can you universally design a cake with a lot of cream on. And that's the situation. It's not always possible to design it so that everybody has the possibility to manage alone. So, we don't have to so-to-speak get blind on the universal design, but also say that, okay, sometimes we have to have the right and the possibility to have the personal assistance.

**Neven Milivojevic:** Thank you so much, sir. You both have been really helpful in looking at these things and telling us about your experiences. Now we are reaching soon the end of his podcast.

But before we end today's episode, I would like to share some exciting information about a new platform related to the feel of Braille review. Are you new in Braille and want to grasp the idea of dots on paper or on a Braille display? Are you interested in methods of Braille teaching and training? Do you want to get to know something about new devices using Braille to communicate? Or do you wish to obtain inspiration about Braille games or toys for your visually impaired child or pupil at school? Well, or maybe you are an expert and you do have some special experiences with using Braille you would like to share with others. Then the European Blind Union's new web space is for you. Let's create one place with all the information about Braille in Europe buzzing with news. A place where everybody can find an answer to Braille related questions. Visit living braille dot eu that is spelled l i v i n g b r a i double l e dot eu so livingbraille.eu

and dive into the Braille world.

Thank you very much for listening to the Rights Reporting Podcast. This show is part of a European this project and is led by the European Blind Union, the Swedish Association of the Visually Impaired and the Eye Association in the Netherlands. This project is supported by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme of the European Union. Did you get curious and would like to know more? Well, then you can find our contact details in the show notes. I would also like to say thank you very much to our sound master, Emil Cornelis, who is in the Netherlands. And finally, don't forget to subscribe so you don't miss out on the next episode. Until then, I wish you all the very best and have a good day.

**Speaker:** This podcast was supported by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Program of the European Union.

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