
WAM and Local Authorities partnership results in internships for graduates with disabilities!

The Willing Able and Mentoring Programme (WAM) is the transition to employment initiative of AHEAD established in 2005. WAM offers graduates with disabilities the benefit of a 6-month minimum fully paid and mentored work internship with high profile public and private sector employers. A key part of WAM is to build the capacity of employers to integrate disability into the mainstream workplace by influencing their mainstream recruitment policies and practices. To date over 600 graduates have secured paid work with both private and public sector employers.

In Ireland, there are two key pieces of legislation and national policy on the employment of people with disabilities in the public sector, in addition to the Equality Acts. The [Disability Act 2005](#) places an obligation on public bodies to consider and respond to the needs of people with disabilities. Under the Act, 3% of jobs in public service bodies (local authorities, civil service, the Health Service Executive and so on) are reserved for people with disabilities. More recently under the [Comprehensive Strategy for People with Disabilities \(2015 – 2024\)](#), the Government has committed to increasing the public service employment target for persons with disabilities on an incremental basis from a minimum of 3% to a minimum of 6% by 2024.

In 2020, the number of employees in the public sector reporting a disability was 7,637 (3.1%) as outlined in the [NDA Report on the Compliance with Part 5 of the Disability Act 2005](#)

One of the ways in which public bodies can proactively take measures in improving their rate is by working with WAM. WAM has a long-standing and very successful partnership with the Irish Civil Service where annually an average of twenty Civil Service employers' express interest in offering WAM placements for graduates with disabilities.

This year WAM launched a new public sector partnership with the local government sector. The Local Government Management Agency (LGMA) provides a range of professional services to the local government sector, they advise and support on strategy and policy development across the 31 local authorities in Ireland. In early 2020, the initial engagement with the LGMA was focused on providing information on the WAM model and how WAM can work with local government on their diversity agenda and support graduates with disabilities into employment.

Following this initial engagement, WAM presented at the LGMA's Equality and Diversity Conference in June 2021. Several WAM presentations to all local authorities were organised providing an overview of WAM's recruitment procedures, needs assessment, mentoring and support processes within the programme. From there the discussions and collaboration with the LGMA shifted to identifying local authorities interested to partner with WAM to ring fence and recruit for paid and mentored graduate level placements.

Initially, ten local authorities expressed an interest in the programme in January 2022, with five local authorities confirming their commitment in partnering with WAM and subsequently secured approval to ring fence positions for graduates with disabilities.

WAM worked closely with the LGMA to develop a job specification template, an information booklet and a dedicated application form used across all positions and local authorities to streamline the process. WAM then engaged individually with each of the five local authorities to offer one-to-one advice and support. This included the disability proof of the job specifications and answer any queries they had on the WAM recruitment process, best practices in recruiting people with disabilities and how WAM and local authority processes can work alongside each other.

In July 2022, WAM advertised 10 positions across the following local authorities:

Local Authority	Placements	Duration
Cavan County Council	3	12 months
Donegal County Council	1	12 months
Leitrim County Council	1	6 months
Kerry County Council	4	12 months
Waterford City and County Council	1	6 months

AHEAD was thrilled with the geographical spread of these roles and also the varied and diverse roles offered in Climate Change, Communications, Community & Sport, Environment, Health & Safety and Human Resources.

AHEAD's Communications and Events Officer and the WAM team engaged with the LGMA Communications Team to develop a joint Communications Strategy for this targeted recruitment drive. In collaboration with the LGMA, AHEAD prepared a [press release](#) which was circulated to local papers in Donegal, Leitrim, Kerry and Waterford and both Donegal and [Waterford](#) ran features.

WAM promoted these roles by engaging with local print media and running advertisement campaigns. Advertisements ran in [Killarney Outlook](#) paper and Northern Sound radio shows to attract candidates from Cavan and Kerry as those counties had the highest number of roles available.

Recruitment for the roles has been successful with eight positions filled and interviews taking place for the remaining two positions. All graduates commencing a WAM placement with the local authorities must undergo a WAM Needs Assessment to identify what supports or accommodations, if any, they may require to complete the work placement. WAM are then available to the employer to offer support and advise to put the recommended supports in place. WAM also delivers pre-placement training to the direct line manager and assigned mentor supporting the placement.

A number of factors contributed to the success of this new partnership:

- The LGMA's investment and dedication to increasing the opportunity for people with disability instigated and then progressed this partnership.
- The central role of the LGMA meant the dissemination of information about WAM was delivered to all 31 local authorities and provided WAM with a platform to reach a large body of employers located across Ireland at one time.
- WAM's model of working with employers provided a structure, plan and target for local authorities to take positive action to recruit people with disabilities and create more inclusive and diverse work environments.
- Identifying a key stakeholder from the LGMA to work alongside WAM was vital to the gain the buy-in from the local authorities to participate in the programme and was essential to the progress through the various

stages of the project.

- The great interest and engagement from Senior Leadership in the local authorities enabled the various departments to get involved and identify the roles to be filled by the WAM graduates.

WAM alongside the LGMA and participating local authorities will capture the learning from this pilot to further develop and strengthen this partnership and showcase what local authorities can do. WAM has already received expressions of interest from other local authorities to engage with the programme in 2023. AHEAD looks forward to what this new partnership will bring in the coming years!



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Deirdre joined the AHEAD team in 2021 and is working on The Willing Able Mentoring (WAM) Programme which aims to promote access to the labour market for graduates with disabilities and build the capacity of employers to integrate disability into the mainstream workplace. Deirdre holds a Bachelor of Arts in Applied Social Studies in Social Care and has 18 years' experience working in the disability sector both here in Ireland and in Australia. During this time Deirdre was involved in the establishment and delivery of various new and innovative disability and social inclusion programmes for people with disabilities.

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