

Roisin Foster

Disability Qualified Member Appeal Tribunals

Professional Background

Roisin has worked in the voluntary sector since 1985, developing and managing services, primarily for disabled people. Roisin also held the role of Chief Executive of Cancer Focus NI for ten years, starting in 2010.

Why did you apply for a judicial role?

I joined the DLA Panel because they were short of panel members with a learning disability background and I had spent my career working in the voluntary sector in the areas of learning disability, physical disability and cancer.

Since then there have been lots of changes, and I have stayed on as a disability qualified panel member because I thoroughly enjoy it and as my career has developed and I have worked with different client groups I think I have been able to bring different perspectives to the role.

What is a typical day like?

In terms of a typical day, preparations start well before the day of the tribunal. The first thing I do when I get my bundle of paperwork is open it and make sure it is correct and that I don't know any of the appellants – If I did then I would have to recuse myself. I then put the paperwork away until the weekend before the tribunal when I would pull them out and read them. The preparation can take longer than the tribunal itself - the papers can be quite substantial. Over time with experience you know what to look for and where to find the evidence and formulate questions to ask on the day that will help you find out what you need to in order to make a fair judgment as a member of the tribunal.

On the day of the tribunal I arrive early, get the papers ready, listen to the appellants, ask questions, and make a decision with the other two tribunal members at the end of each case. There will be a discussion between the panel members and people will raise things to discuss further, but there will generally be a meeting of minds when it comes to arriving at a decision.

What are the key challenges you face in the role?

The real challenge is how imposing it is for the appellants. Some of them have had no engagement with social services, social security or the benefits system previously so they will be entirely unfamiliar with being asked questions that at times can be very intimate concerning their personal care and their personal lives. As a panel we try to put people at ease as best as we can. I try to keep my questions short and straightforward so they don't get lost. You also have to remain calm as tribunals can be stressful for appellants. A lot can be riding on the decisions made in the tribunal.

As a panel member my role is to look at the facts as far as I can get them from the case and assess whether or not they meet the legislation. However, I also personally strive to make sure I treat

people the way I would like to be treated if I was in that position. With experience you learn how to reach a balance between obtaining information that will help you make your decision, and trying not to increase anxiety for the appellants. In summary, the role is to make an assessment and a decision, but being fair is how you go about doing the role. I think performing the role with a sense of understanding and patience is important.

Another challenge is trying to get to the truth – there are people who are refreshingly honest, but there can also be those who underestimate their needs or those who overstate the facts. You learn how to tell who is being genuine though.

Do you get a lot of support in the role?

The training we receive is excellent, it is very clear. There is a standard in terms of being fair to people. Any of the training I have attended I have found to be useful, not only when conducting tribunals, but even in my other work. I have often utilised the skills gained in this role in other roles such as, learning how to formulate a question, listen to an answer, identify your own bias, along with learning interview techniques, or how to distil large amounts of information in a short space of time.

Generally the people you meet as panel members are good people, and of course the role can be challenging, but the panel members generally have everyone's best interests at heart. This is also reflected in the way we work together. As a team we help each other out and there is definitely a sense of support. Overall I have found it to be an enjoyable thing to do, and a positive experience.

Would you recommend the role to others?

To those considering applying for the role – I would highly recommend it.

As a disability qualified member you bring a lot of practical hands on knowledge to the panel. If like me, you have worked across a range of fields and listened to a range of patients that have gone through different experiences related to disability, then it will be a valuable way to utilise that experience and knowledge.

Once more, you also have a lot of flexibility in the role. I will typically attend 3 tribunals a month - if I have the time I will increase this to perhaps 5 a month.

Do you have any advice for applicants?

I would say try to put yourself in the position of the appellant and try to treat people the way you would expect to be treated in that situation.