



Angela Kerins, Chairperson NDA

**Speech : NDA/ComReg Seminar on 5 November 2008,
Croke Park, Dublin**

Commissioner and Invited Guests.

The National Disability Authority, NDA, is very pleased to be working in partnership with ComReg and co-hosting this important initiative today with the Telecommunications Industry.

At the outset I would like to acknowledge the commitment that Comreg has shown to people with disabilities as consumers, in particular through the Telecommunications Forum which they have established and the work it has done to date as a result. This Forum as the Commissioner referred to has been the catalyst for the Breakfast Briefing which took place on 15 October 2008 with senior management of telecommunications industry and for this follow –up event here today.

The NDA is an independent statutory body which was established to advise the Government in relation to policy and practices that impact on the lives of people with disabilities. One of the significant developments in Government policy, relating to people with disabilities, has

been the National Disability Strategy. Under this strategy ComReg have committed to a number of actions as set out in the Sectoral Plan of the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources. This seminar today is a tangible outcome of these commitments.

The NDA has long played a role in supporting the achievement of accessible public services and facilities, including operating an award scheme to recognise excellence in this regard. The NDA is also the primary statutory body with the responsibility for promoting Universal Design in Ireland through the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design. This Centre was established just over a year ago as part of the National Disability Authority, although its brief is wider than disability, focusing on the design and composition of the environment so that it may be accessed, understood and used to the greatest practical extent, in the most independent manner possible, in a wide range of situations, without the need for adaption, modification, assistive devices or specialised solutions. This relates to access, use and understanding by persons regardless of age, size or having any particular physical, hearing, sight, communication or mental health or intellectual ability or disability.

The main activities of this Centre are

- to contribute to the development and promotion of standards in Universal Design
- supporting and promoting the principles of Universal Design within courses of education and training for those engaged in work relating to the environment and
- to raise awareness of Universal Design.

Traditionally, when people considered the needs of people with disabilities it was often about how best can we adapt a product to meet such need, or what adjustments do we need to make to our services in order to make them accessible. It was often seen as “special” or “add ons”. The approach of Universal Design, however, is about universal access. Universal Design enables people to participate in a society that takes account of human difference and to interact with their environment to the best of their ability. It is about getting design right from the start.

The ever changing world of telecommunications and the convergence of telecommunications, broadcasting and computing will have a significant impact on peoples’ lives over the next few years. The introduction of new technological systems for the general public offer exciting possibilities to improve access for all if adequate consideration is given to the universal design of the systems, controls and interfaces and how such an approach should increase the potential market for your services .

Not only are there changes happening within the telecommunications sector globally and new directives at EU level that will impact on telecommunication providers but also from the disability perspective there is a new United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Article 4 for example of the Convention highlights the importance of Universal Design and Information Communications Technologies and NDA is a member of the working group established by the UN to look at this. From current research the mobile phone has been identified as one of the key communication products in this area and in this regards. The NDA and the Centre would hope to further collaborate with you through the Forum on

the proposed development of global ICT guidelines being developed with the support of the UN.

Today's seminar is unique. This is the first time that senior management and key personnel within the telecommunications industry in Ireland have come together as a group to hear about Universal Design and how Universal Design can actually benefit your business. It is about how the transforming world of communications can be shaped and enhanced by the principles of Universal Design.

Today's seminar and workshops are about looking at the bigger picture and to see how Universal Design can be applied to all aspects of your business – product design, marketing, communications and quality customer services. It is about how in applying Universal Design within the telecommunications environment, that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people, regardless of their age, size or disability.

Thank you.