



# PENNEYS

## Pulse of the Nation Index

Style Without Limits: Taking the Pulse  
on Fashion and Accessibility

In partnership with



# Introduction

Welcome back to the Penneys Pulse of the Nation Index, which explores how Irish people are spending their money and living their lives today. This is our fifth edition and this time, in partnership with Amárach Research, we are exploring the topic of disability in Ireland and how it is viewed by the general public. Within this context we take a look at how accessible and inclusive fashion is for disabled people in Ireland and consider the challenges they face in everyday scenarios.

Having a disability impacts the daily lives of 1.2 million people in Ireland.\* For context, two out of every 10 people in this country struggle with everyday tasks and face a hefty financial burden just to cover their cost of living.\*\*

As part of our mission to drive change across our stores and our business to better serve our colleagues and customers, we decided to take a deep dive with this research into the challenges disabled people face. Over the years, Ireland's approach to disability has come a long way – evolving from a medical model to a rights-based one. This transformation, powered by strong advocacy efforts from the disability sector, has led to significant policy changes and greater awareness of disability rights in Ireland.



\*Source: Census 2022, [CSO.ie](https://www.cso.ie)

\*\*Source: ESRI and IHREC, [Adjusting Estimates of Poverty for the Cost of Disability](#)

# Introduction

The past three decades have been shaped by some standout moments. Not long after the appointment of the first Minister for Disability in 1997, the National Disability Authority was established and became instrumental in shaping government policy with expert advice. Another major landmark came in 2018, when Ireland ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), committing to equal opportunities and full inclusion for people with disabilities. In 2020, the creation of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) reflected a broader social inclusion approach from government and the 2024 General Election saw disability rights dominating the campaign trail.

While these milestones reflect our journey towards a more inclusive society, challenges remain. Eurostat data highlights the challenges that disabled people face in terms of employment and poverty risks. In 2022, Ireland recorded the highest disability employment gap among EU countries\*, with a 38.6 percentage point difference between employment rates of individuals with and without disabilities. This stark contrast indicates systemic barriers to employment for disabled individuals in Ireland. Disabled individuals are also 2.5 times more likely to experience poverty compared to their non-disabled counterparts, placing Ireland among the EU countries with the highest relative poverty risks for this demographic. There are often hidden barriers for the disabled community that are not seen by the general public where everyday choices can be limited and result in financial pressures.

For example, when it comes to fashion disabled people don't want clothing to feel clinical but often have to pay more for adaptive clothing, forcing them to choose practicality over style. Our research backs this up, showing that disabled people find clothing choices limited, with some even avoiding social events due to the stress and trauma of shopping for clothes.

Overall, we can summarise these findings under key themes, which we explore further in this report:

<b>Theme 1: Our Nation's Wallet</b> – Tightening the purse strings	<b>4</b>
<b>Theme 2: Living with a disability</b> – Does the general public really get it?	<b>6</b>
<b>Theme 3: Adaptive fashion</b> – What needs to change?	<b>11</b>

\*Source: Which countries in Europe pose the biggest challenges to living and working with a disability? [Euronews](#), 2024

# Our Nation's Wallet – Tightening the purse strings

The Penneys Pulse of the Nation Index taps into the everyday challenges many of us face as we go about our daily lives.

Since it first launched in 2023, our research continues to indicate that, unsurprisingly, the cost of living is a growing concern for the Irish public. And we know that historically, women, families and those who rent their home, stand out as being more impacted by the cost-of living crisis than the general public.

The current findings in this report highlight that adults are continuing to struggle with managing their finances, but the latest research also shines a light on the challenges faced by the disabled community.

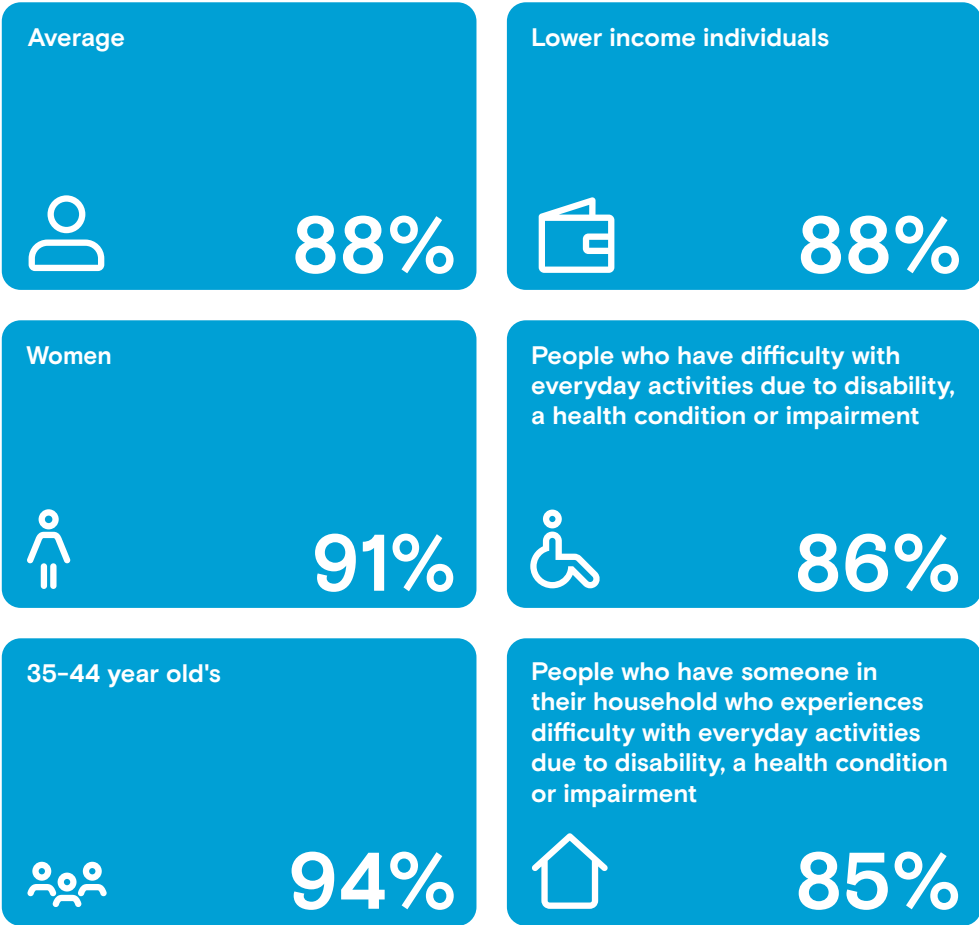
Our research found that the hidden financial burden of having a disability is often overlooked – living with a disability in Ireland costs an extra €10,379 to €14,673 a year, with a recent report from the Economic and Social Research Institute\* finding that households with a disabled member have a lower standard of living than those without.



\*Source: ESRI and IHREC, [Adjusting Estimates of Poverty for the Cost of Disability](#)

What is the true cost of living with a disability and why should disabled people be expected to pay more just to live their lives?

## Things have become more expensive and my spending power has decreased.



# Our Nation's Wallet – Tightening the purse strings

Almost half of the people surveyed say their finances have got worse and once again our Pulse findings show that women are feeling the strain even more. Going out for meals, affording a holiday, and even setting money aside for savings are all becoming increasingly challenging.

However, while 48% of the Irish public said their financial situation had disimproved in the last three months, this stretched to 57% when looking at respondents who are physically impacted by disabilities, highlighting the financial burden they face.

## These things in my life have disimproved in the last three months

### The cost of grocery shopping



### The cost of utility bills



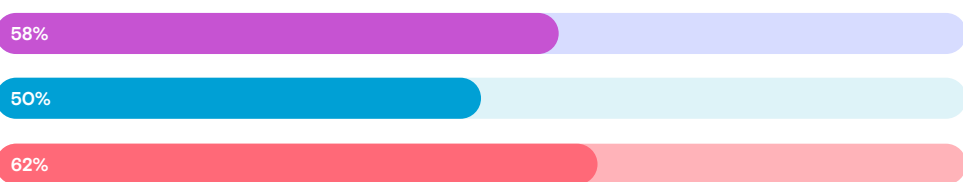
### My confidence in the economy



### My ability to afford to eat out/ have takeaways



### My ability to afford a holiday abroad



### My ability to save money





# Living with a disability

## – Does the general public really get it?

It's fair to say that the people of Ireland today struggle with their finances which impacts their day-to-day living. But what about the people within our society who face even more challenges every single day when doing basic things like using public transport, socialising with friends, going out to the shops and even getting dressed? More than one in five people in Ireland are disabled\* and face these barriers every day as well as dealing with an ever-worrying cost of living. Our research tells us that those with a disability or health impairment find a range of activities challenging – over half (52%) struggle with sports, and a similar number (50%) experience difficulties with leisure activities. Public transport is challenging for 27% of this same group of respondents, while 44% struggle to socialise and almost a quarter (23%) find it hard to go out to the shops.

We wanted to get an understanding of how aware the general public are of the everyday difficulties disabled people have to overcome and how fairly they are treated. Our research tells us that more than four in ten disagree that Irish society treats disabled people fairly but that more than one in five are unaware or have no experience of this.

### Do we understand challenges faced by disabled people?

- Agree
- Unaware

Specialised clothing for disabled people is more expensive

45%

49%

Disabled people have limited options when purchasing clothing

58%

35%

Disabled people have to adapt clothing to make it more suitable for their needs

60%

34%

Retail stores are accessible to disabled people

43%

22%

Disabled people receive assistance from retail staff when shopping

36%

39%

\*Source: Census 2022, [CSO.ie](https://www.cso.ie)

## The biggest challenges that disabled people feel they have in their everyday lives.



Taking part in sporting activities

52%



Taking part in leisure activities

50%



Going out to socialise

44%



Using public transport

27%



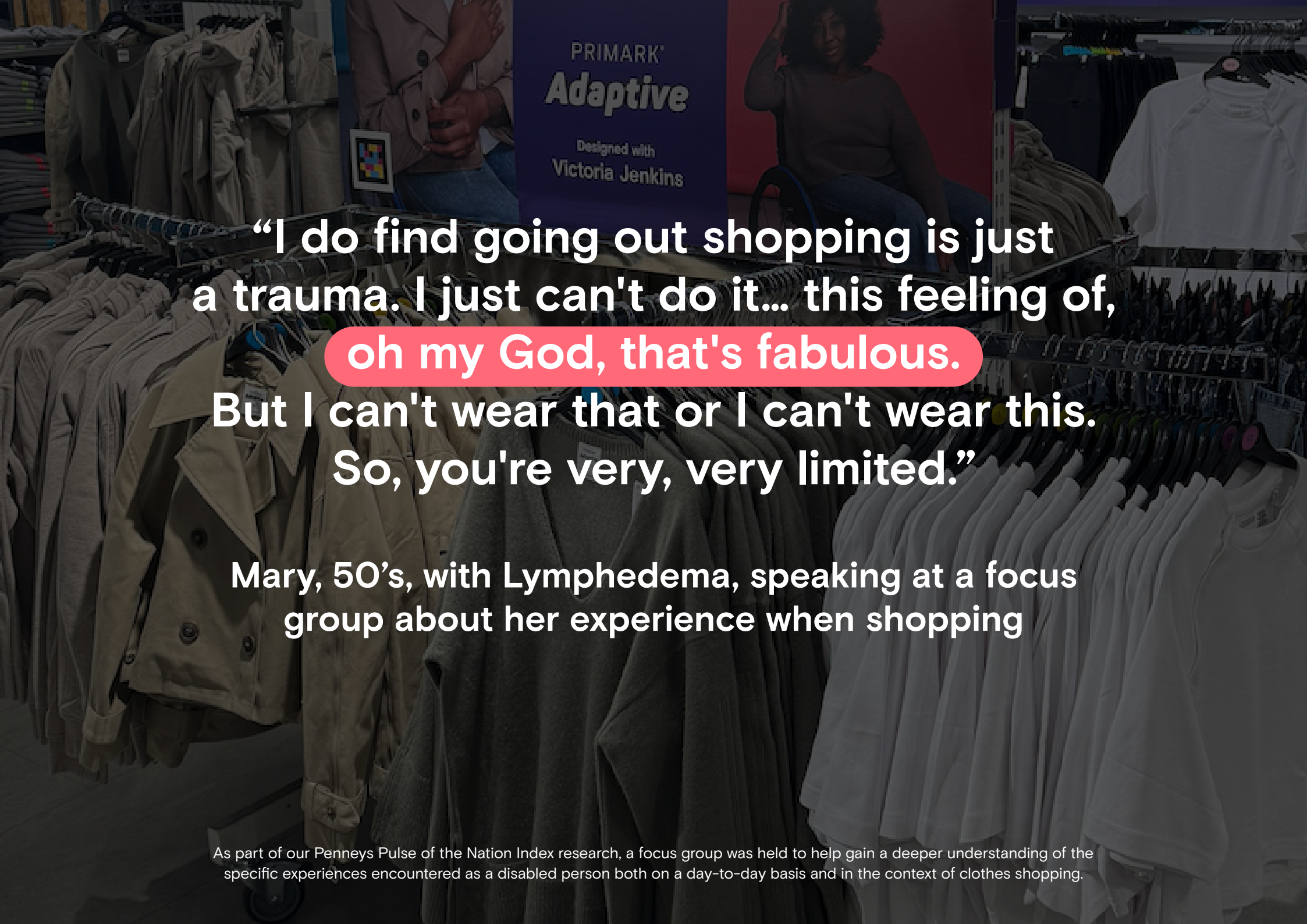
Going to work/college

26%



Going out to the shops

23%

The background image shows a clothing store aisle. On the left, there are racks of light-colored jackets. In the center, a blue sign reads "PRIMARK Adaptive" and "Designed with Victoria Jenkins". To the right of the sign, a woman is sitting in a wheelchair, looking towards the camera. On the right side of the aisle, there are racks of white t-shirts. The text is overlaid on this image.

**“I do find going out shopping is just a trauma. I just can't do it... this feeling of, oh my God, that's fabulous. But I can't wear that or I can't wear this. So, you're very, very limited.”**

**Mary, 50's, with Lymphedema, speaking at a focus group about her experience when shopping**

As part of our Penneys Pulse of the Nation Index research, a focus group was held to help gain a deeper understanding of the specific experiences encountered as a disabled person both on a day-to-day basis and in the context of clothes shopping.



# Accessible Fashion?

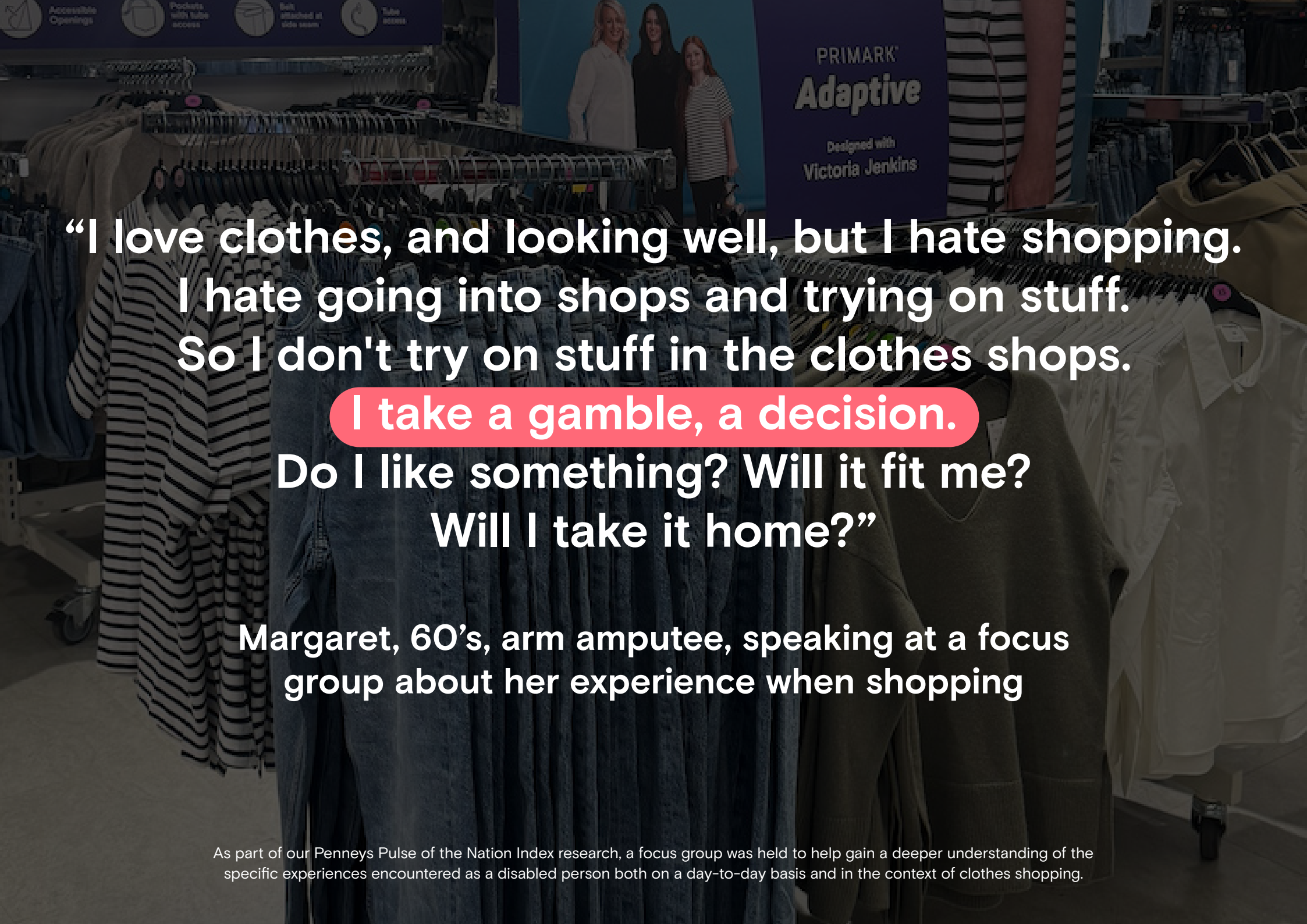


As a fashion retailer who has always stood for making affordable fashion accessible for everyone, we wanted to get an insight into how Irish people perceive the challenges disabled people may face when shopping and finding clothing that suits and meets their needs.

Almost 6 in 10 (58%) believe choice is limited for disabled people when it comes to buying clothes and over a third of people (36%) don't believe retail stores are accessible.

When asked about helping disabled people when they are out shopping, only one third of people (36%) believe they get additional assistance from retail staff. In terms of suitability, 60% agree that disabled people have to adapt clothes to suit them and their needs.

Despite this, awareness and understanding is lacking when it comes to the experiences of people with disability, as almost one in five people don't know if disabled people have to adapt their own clothing.

The background image shows a clothing store interior. In the foreground, there are several racks of clothes, including striped shirts and dark trousers. In the background, a sign for 'PRIMARK Adaptive' is visible, featuring three women standing together. The sign also mentions 'Designed with Victoria Jenkins'. Above the sign, there are icons and text indicating accessibility features: 'Accessible Openings', 'Pockets with tube access', 'Belt attached at side seam', and 'Tie access'.

**“I love clothes, and looking well, but I hate shopping.  
I hate going into shops and trying on stuff.  
So I don't try on stuff in the clothes shops.**

**I take a gamble, a decision.**

**Do I like something? Will it fit me?  
Will I take it home?”**

**Margaret, 60's, arm amputee, speaking at a focus  
group about her experience when shopping**

As part of our Penneys Pulse of the Nation Index research, a focus group was held to help gain a deeper understanding of the specific experiences encountered as a disabled person both on a day-to-day basis and in the context of clothes shopping.

# Adaptive fashion

## – What needs to change?

Given the growing financial pressure Irish people are experiencing, affordability is considered an important factor when it comes to specialised clothing. 72% of Irish people agree it should have a 0% VAT rate – currently VAT is charged at the standard rate of 23% on clothing. This jumps to almost 8 in 10 (79%) for those aged over 65 suggesting it's a topic that affects them more or is one they are more aware of.

In terms of the shopping experience an overwhelming majority of respondents believe stores should be more accessible for disabled people and that retail staff should be trained to assist customers with specific needs.

### What could be changed?

Specialised clothing for disabled people should have a 0% VAT rate

👕 72%

When ranking social issues in terms of importance, respondents mentioned the following in their top three mentions:

Shops should be more accessible for disabled people

♿ 92%

Members of staff in retail stores should be trained to assist disabled shoppers

💡 83%

There should be more disabled people featured in ads for retail stores

👤 47%

While we are considering adaptive clothing as meeting the needs of disabled people, many respondents feel it has a much broader reach – not only does it make dressing easier for disabled people, but it can support older people as well as those recovering from surgery or living with a long-term illness.

### Other than disabled people, who else could benefit from adaptive clothing?



People recovering from surgery 67%



Older people 64%



People with a long-term illness 58%





# Voices for Inclusion



## Minister Hildegard Naughton TD

**Minister of State with responsibility for Disability**

“I’m committed to building an Ireland that is truly inclusive and accessible for all. This research highlights the essential, everyday costs faced by people with disabilities — costs that impact dignity and independence. Addressing these challenges demands a whole-of-society response, with government, businesses, and communities working together to ensure equality, opportunity, and meaningful inclusion in every aspect of life.”



## Ellen Keane

**Paralympian and Disability Advocate**

“I remember, as a young girl, realising I’d have to figure out how to put on a bra with one hand — it was terrifying. But the Adaptive range at Primark changes everything. Disabled people no longer have to struggle alone. Primark is making adaptive clothing accessible, affordable, and stylish — bringing dignity, confidence, and inclusion to the fashion industry.”



## Charlie Magadah-Williams

**Head of Diversity & Inclusion at Primark**

“Penneys was founded to make fashion affordable for everyone, which means meeting the diverse needs of all our customers. We’re proud to offer specialist products at affordable high street prices. Our accessibility commitments go beyond product ranges; we’re continually working to make every part of the Penneys experience more inclusive for disabled customers and colleagues.”

# Making Penneys More Accessible

Inclusivity runs through all areas of the Primark business, and we want to make Penneys and Primark more accessible for as many people as possible, whether they work for us or shop with us. Accessibility means ensuring that disabled people have an equivalent user experience to non-disabled people, which doesn't require extra time, effort, or workarounds.

## Adaptive Fashion

Most recently we launched our second Adaptive collection, partnering with adaptive fashion designer Victoria Jenkins to create a 49-piece collection for men and women. This is about looking and feeling good every day with great quality products which are affordable to as many as possible.

The collection's adaptive features are designed to make dressing simpler, from magnetic zippers and snap fastenings to waist loops that help to pull up trousers and hidden openings for tube, stoma or catheter access. There is also a range of options for people who are seated, such as wheelchair users. Bestsellers since the collection launched in Ireland include the drawstring



joggers and denim jeans for women, and the performance tee and shorts for men. This collection followed on from our first range of adaptive underwear, which launched last January. This four-piece lingerie collection has small adaptations like easy closures, magnetic clasps, and the use of Velcro, making it more practical and comfortable to wear.

## Accessible Stores

As a bricks-and-mortar retailer we know that our in-store experience matters, particularly for our disabled customers and those with specialised needs. In 2024 we partnered with AccessAble, who reviewed all our stores and offices in the UK and Ireland and created guides that help customers plan their visits to our stores, available on their [website](#).

Our stores are equipped with accessible till points and fitting rooms to enhance the customer experience and we have introduced sensory-friendly shopping hours in Ireland, with plans to extend this further in future. In 2025 we added NaviLens codes to our Adaptive range to support visually impaired customers in locating and identifying the products.

# Making Penneys More Accessible

## Culture of Accessibility

We are reviewing our policies and processes, social and communication channels, to inform an action plan that will help us make targeted improvements to the accessibility of our customer and colleague experiences.

## Inclusive Representation

At Penneys, we strive to reflect the beautiful, vast diversity of our customer base through our campaign imagery, and we are proud to work with talent from the disabled community; both in front of, and behind the camera. In 2024, we increased our work with disabled creators across our social and communication channels and created a guide to improve the accessibility of future events, based on our learnings and informed by our expert partners. We made adaptations to our studio to make it more accessible, including the introduction of ramps and lowered hooks and a video tour for all models to view before attending.



## Accessible Communities

We will work with organisations and charities that help to improve the lives of disabled people in the communities that surround us. Across our markets, we have formed strong relationships with multiple charities and organisations that support disabled people and those who are at a distance to the labour market, such as WorkEqual in Ireland.



A photograph of a clothing store aisle, likely Primark, with racks of white t-shirts. A sign in the background reads 'PRIMARK Adaptive Designed with Victoria Jenkins'. The text is overlaid on the image.

**“It's not only looking good and you feel good.  
It's psychologically... you just feel like  
you're like everybody else.”**

**Mary, 50's, with Lymphedema, speaking at a focus group about finding clothes that meets her needs**

As part of our Penneys Pulse of the Nation Index research, a focus group was held to help gain a deeper understanding of the specific experiences encountered as a disabled person both on a day-to-day basis and in the context of clothes shopping.

# In Conclusion

Together with our community, partners, and customers, we're committed to helping build a future where inclusivity is not an aspiration but a standard.

The latest Penneys Pulse of the Nation Index shines a vital light on the everyday realities faced by disabled people in Ireland. From limited access to inclusive fashion, to the hidden costs of living with a disability, the findings highlight the challenges that need to be overcome.

Yet amidst these challenges, there is reason for optimism. Public awareness around disability rights is growing, and attitudes are shifting toward greater empathy and inclusivity. The overwhelming support for accessible retail environments, adaptive clothing, and improved representation signals a cultural momentum that can't be ignored.

At Penneys, we are proud to be part of that momentum.

Through initiatives such as our Adaptive Fashion collections, inclusive marketing, store accessibility upgrades, and ongoing staff training, we are not just responding to this national pulse — we are helping shape it.

Our mission is clear: to ensure everyone, regardless of ability, has access to affordable fashion that empowers them to express themselves confidently and feel good in what they wear.

## About the Research

The research was undertaken by Amárach, on behalf of Penneys, and consisted of online interviews with a sample of 1,000 adults aged 18+ years. Interviewing was completed between 19th and 25th February 2025. A combination of quota controls and weighting was used to ensure the final sample is representative of the national population in terms of gender, age, region, and social class.

Additionally, a focus group took place on 10th March 2025, featuring eight participants who experience difficulties in dressing and/or sourcing clothes as a result of a disability, health condition or impairment. The participants were aged 55+ years and represented a wide range of health conditions.

