

Opening Statement

Introduction - Rights to employment – breaking down barriers

My name is Marian Hennessy, I am the Co -Ordinator of Ability@Work, Cope Foundation Cork city. Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today to highlight the barriers people with an intellectual disability and autism, continue to face when looking for employment. Cope Foundation is a Cork based charity supporting 2,800 people who have intellectual disabilities and autism. Latest figures from the ERSI published in 2021, show that over 71 % of people with disabilities, of working age in Ireland, are unemployed.

I am making this submission on behalf of people we support in the Ability@Work programme. Ability@Work promotes inclusive employment, and works closely with employers to provide sustainable supported employment opportunities. We link employers with people who are distant from the labour market. We receive our referrals from school leavers, and adult day services, who have completed their second level education in a specialist school affiliated to Cope Foundation services. This programme was funded for 3 years through the National Ability Programme, and now by interim funding from the Dormant Accounts until December 2022. We are one of 45 funded programmes around the country. But what we have at present is a sporadic, and scattered service, across the country with particular lack of supports for people living in rural areas.

Ability@Work is a successful model of best practice creating inclusive workplaces. We have supported 100 people who were unemployed. Over the last 3 .5 years we have placed 73 people into paid jobs, and are upskilling a further 70 people in preparation for work . This model is easily adaptable and transferrable across all marginalised groups. Future funding for this programme will be essential to give the people we support the security to know that their service will be available in the long term.

What We Need

We need to be able to employ highly skilled job coaches with job security, and offer a sustainable service to employers. We need to budget for post school training and work supports. We are over reliant on funding which do not offer longevity or security to the people we support.

For inclusion to happen in the workplace, the disability sector needs long term committed support and resources from government to enable specialist agencies to support and maintain people whose needs cannot be met by Intreo or the Employability service.

We need to change the culture of low expectation for people with additional or more complex impairments. We can do this through early interventions in mainstream and specialist schools, incorporating valuable work placements and engaging with local employers. We must work to changes employer attitudes, that it becomes the norm to

have a person with different ability in the workplace. This cultural shift needs to happen through campaigns with families, employers, HR professionals, trade unions and support networks. We need to encourage employers to see the business case. We need to address disability awareness and encourage companies to be inclusive throughout their businesses. Employers need to be fully informed of the supports and services available to them. Post Covid, in our experience, very little has changed for the people we support. They are excluded from general recruitment practices due to lack of experience and qualifications. Often employers will only recruit for full time roles and will not allow flexibility or accommodations. The online screening and application systems makes it impossible for people with intellectual disabilities compete for a role. The design of job descriptions and essential requirements must be changed to include more people during recruitment.

The pitfalls that lie ahead:

As we plan going forward over the next decade, innovations in technology will have a significant impact on people's ability to keep pace with all the technological advances. It may leave many behind. However, advancements in technology can also open up more opportunities and independence for people with high support needs. It may also enable people with more severe impairments/mobility issues to transition to employment.

For example, the 'Getting A Life Programme in the UK, which finished in March 2021, was set up to enable people with severe intellectual disabilities achieve paid employment and have full lives when they leave education. In Ireland many are leaving mainstream, school or post training courses, and are finding themselves at home with their parents without supports. Often they do not know where to go or know they supports they are entitled to. For many there is no service in their locality.

Projects like Ability@Work are value for money, having more positive outcomes for people and their families. Sometimes getting a job is only one part of the solution. Being part of a workforce and being treated as an equal has much more significance.

It cannot be understated that the transition out of Covid is a further barrier. People do not feel comfortable in large crowds. Some have lost their social skills and ability to return with confidence to the workplace. Some have lost their jobs.

In closing, everyone has the right to employment and to freely earn a living of their choosing. I would now like to handover to my co presenter today, Craig Kelly, who is a participant on the Ability@Work Programme, will talk about his lived experience.

Thank you.