

Opening Remarks for Joint Oireachtas Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment
22nd February 2023

Employment strategy and how persons in the workplace with a disability are impacted.

It's a privilege to address the Committee, and I commend Members on their work highlighting the many issues affecting people who are disabled in the workforce in Ireland. Rehab Group provides services for over 10,000 adults and children and champions diversity and inclusion for persons with disabilities or disadvantage in their communities throughout Ireland.

We support people to live the lives they choose by providing care, education and meaningful employment opportunities.

I'm Anne Marie McDonnell, and I'm Head of Business Development. - I am joined by my colleague Adrian Stewart, Head of Employability with Rehab Group. Much of our work involves engaging with the business community to support people with disabilities to complete job shadows, work experience placements and transition to employment.

National Learning Network is a progressive leader in delivering personalised education, training, and development opportunities for people with disabilities or requiring additional support throughout Irish communities.

Between 2017 and 2022, more than 2,400 people with disabilities and those with additional needs have found jobs through National Learning Network.

National Learning Network also supports hundreds of people with complex and enduring mental health issues through a programme launched in 2019 called Individual Placement and Support (IPS). IPS helps people who would have otherwise met with barriers to the employment market to find work in mainstream competitive jobs.

Under this initiative, 616 people who participated in the IPS programme with NLN since 2019 have secured employment.

Current challenges for people with a disability trying to enter the Labour Market

Public Sector Employment

In the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020, Ireland has targeted increasing the employment rate of people with a disability. However, this target will not be met unless there is a significant change in the approach of public authorities to employment support and work opportunities for people with disabilities.

- Select specialist panels within the civil and broader public service to provide accessible pathways for people with disabilities to be recruited and promoted within government state agencies.
- Fulfil the promise in the Programme for Government to double the target for employment of people with disabilities in the public service to 6%

Wage Subsidy Scheme

The Department of Social Protection has committed to evaluating the Wage Subsidy Scheme in light of its overall objective of increasing the likelihood of people with disabilities obtaining and sustaining employment in the open labour market. In June 2021, 1,602 private sector employers were availing of the subsidy for 2,539 employments. Rehab Group seek the following changes to the scheme to make it accessible to more people with disabilities and to support both large employers to avail of the subsidy.

- We recommend shortening the initial contract of employment to avail of WSS to a minimum of three months, with any follow-up employment contracts requiring six-month contracts.
- We recommend a more nuanced and tiered level of subsidy depending on the proven productivity of the employee with a disability and their support requirements.
- Strand 3 is not paid pro rata only for each multiple of 25 employees with disabilities employed. In addition, no account is taken of the differing support needs of the people with varying disabilities and may be seen as discriminatory to some disability groupings. We would recommend that threshold for the number of people with disabilities employed to avail of funding for an Employment Assistance Officer should be lowered and be dependent on the needs and profile of the employees with disabilities, including variances in productivity levels. We believe Strand 3 should also be paid on an incremental pro-rata basis to give a gradual incentive for companies to employ more people with disabilities.
- The current threshold of 21 hours per week should be lowered to 8. High weekly hours discriminate against certain people and profiles of disabilities. Eight hours of work per week is deemed an employment outcome for employability companies and is the generally adopted outcome criteria for grant funding in the disability sector.
- Over quite several years, the level of subsidy paid under the WSS has yet to keep pace and continues to fall out of line with the National Minimum Wage. Any loss or diminution of the linkage between the Wage Subsidy Scheme and the National Minimum Wage reduces the recognition by the state of the contribution that people with disabilities can make to the open labour market with appropriate support. Therefore, we also recommend that the level of subsidy be maintained in line with any increase to the NMW.
- The current WSS applies to employees with less than one year of employment. Those with over one year's employment can avail of the Employee Retention Grant scheme. These two schemes are different. We recommend that the WSS apply to all employees regardless of employment duration to provide an ongoing incentive for the employer to retain the person with a disability. This is particularly important for employees whose productivity has decreased dramatically due to the onset of disability.
- Currently, there are supports provided to employ an Employment Assistance Office depending on the number of people employed under WSS. This grant should be decoupled from the WSS and based on the number of people with disabilities employed, with or without a subsidy. This avoids an inequitable two-tier approach to supporting people with disabilities while in employment.

Supported Employment

The National Employability service, funded by the Department of Social Protection, currently provides supported employment services for 3000 people with a disability service and is planned to go out for public tender in April this year.

This provides an exciting new opportunity to build on the excellent work of the service over the last 20 years and to make it more accessible for more people with a disability. One of the key asks of employers to recruit and retain people with disability is access to and provision of ongoing support as long as necessary to both them as employers and the person with a disability. While State supports are generally provided in the initial stages, these taper off quite quickly and can leave the employer and the person with a disability vulnerable to increased risks of the person losing their employment.

- The current staff-to-service user ratio is too high at 1:25. This needs to be lowered as it effectively excludes people with severe and enduring disabilities.
- There is a requirement to acknowledge and recognise the need for ongoing support for some people with disabilities beyond the current cap of 18 months for the employability service.
- Individual Placement & Support (IPS) for persons with mental health conditions should be scaled up and rolled out throughout the country, and the sustainability of such programmes should be ensured through long-term planning and funding. A 2020 Mazars report on IPS in Ireland concluded that the cost and measurable financial benefits of the IPS programme are promising and will improve as the number of participants availing of the programme increases over time.

Return to work on the onset of a disability.

- Increase employer incentives to prevent sickness and disability and promote a return to work: In the ongoing discussion on the introduction of statutory sick pay, the Government should aim for an all-encompassing system that covers all health conditions and all types of employment to realise the most significant gains for workers and the Irish population at large. Ireland should also consider implementing a vocational rehabilitation pathway, with shared responsibilities with the employers. Vocational rehabilitation helps to restore and develop the skills and capabilities of employed persons with disabilities so that they can continue to participate in the general workforce.
- To make work accommodation widely available for all workers, including those with disabilities, a statutory entitlement to working-time flexibility, working-hour reduction and working from home could be introduced. Such a measure would apply to everyone and reduce employment barriers for persons with disabilities.

Information and guidance should be made available to employers on how to put reasonable accommodation into practice for workers with disabilities, with a focus on different and customised types of accommodation which are often not very costly, including the provision of assistive technology, the adaptation of job requirements, and if needed the provision of personal assistance. The promotion of disability awareness training can help for more inclusive corporate cultures.

Quota System

Given the relatively low numbers of people with disabilities employed in Ireland and the relative success of employment quota schemes for people with disabilities in other EU countries, we need to open a discussion and debate about the introduction of a quota scheme for the employment of people with disabilities in the private sector in Ireland. Such a scheme could be tailored to meet the needs of the Irish labour market and bring a renewed focus on the unemployment crisis experienced by people with disabilities. The scheme could be phased out when appropriate targets are met and we are fulfilling our obligations for a truly inclusive workforce.

Increasing Disability Confidence amongst Employers

The business community around the country has always worked in partnership with Rehab Group, being generous with their time and expertise to support people with disabilities to complete a job shadow, work experience placements and transition to employment. We know there is an untapped pool of talent in the disability community. Sharing real stories of disability inclusion and employment through a public awareness campaign would highlight the business case for disability inclusion.

Building disability confidence will not only help employers meet more suitable candidates for roles, but it will also support businesses in attracting more disabled customers. National Learning Network is currently delivering on Hospitality Inc in Westport. It is a transition-to-work programme for adults with disabilities to enter the hospitality industry. This is funded by the DSP administered by POBAL under the Dormant Accounts Fund. This is an excellent example of the Business Community working in partnership on disability inclusion in the workforce. We have the Westport Chamber of Commerce, Destination Westport and the Irish Hotel Federation (Mayo Branch) engaged in guiding us on what the business community needs and responding with support for both the person and helping the employer in making job accommodations.

We also want to highlight that Rehab Group can offer employers complimentary online training in Inclusive Recruitment and Retention. Rehab Group developed this product, AsIAm, Walk and Not So Different, with funding from the National Disability Authority. For example, we have used this online training with Mr Price Branded Bargain to build the capacity of their hiring managers across 60 stores. We have seen first-hand the positive impact of this on building a solid foundation in understanding needs and job accommodations. This was recognised externally as

Mr Price was awarded the Advancing Disability Equality award with the Irish Centre for Diversity.

Conclusion

While Ireland can be rightly proud of the many developments and good work that continues to support people with disabilities in employment, there is a need to bring renewed energy and focus to this area. We have new possibilities now, post Covid19 and with technological advances, to fully embrace new ways of working and to build on our past experiences. Now is the time to finally address this critical human rights issue and be able to hold our heads high along with our European counterparts.

Thank you again for this opportunity to bring these matters to the Committee's attention. We look forward to any questions you may have.