



Working for People with Sight Loss

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We are very grateful for the opportunity to put forward the particular needs of the 54,810 people who are blind and vision impaired in Ireland and to provide clear guidance on how the next Government can best accommodate these needs as the restrictions ease.

NCBI (National Council for the Blind of Ireland) is Ireland's national charity working for the rising number of people affected by blindness and vision impairment. Covid-19 has had a significant impact on people who are blind and vision impaired with 68% of our service user base being over the age of 65. The pandemic has affected every part of the lives of people with vision impairment.

In particular, we are genuinely concerned about the impact of Covid-19 on the mental health of people who are blind and vision impaired, many of whom have not left their homes since March.

The cost of technology has also been too much for many people who are blind and vision impaired which has meant that many have lost out in accessing the technology that they needed during the pandemic.

In addition, Pre-covid-19, a mere 24 per cent of people who are blind and vision impaired of working age were in employment. It is safe to say that the Covid-19 emergency will have reduced the employment rate of people who are blind and vision impaired even further.

Our streets are changing quickly too to enable social distancing, but these changes must be accessible.

Social distancing is near impossible for many people who are blind and vision impaired and therefore, all public transport operators must ensure that passengers with vision impairment are enabled to comply with social distancing requirements as restrictions ease. This is particularly important as public transport is often the only option for independent travel for many people who are blind and vision impaired.

As a Section 39 organisation, Covid-19 has led to an significant unprecedented drop in NCBI's income. No contingency planning could have anticipated the serious system failure that NCBI's unique funding model has witnessed in recent days on account of Covid-19. We have no guarantee the funding we need to continue to deliver services, is secure. Despite our network of charity shops opening on the 8th June in line with Government restrictions it remains highly likely that our shop revenue will not recover in the remainder of 2020 leaving a huge shortfall in our income placing our vital services at grave risk.

National Council for the Blind of Ireland

Patron: Michael D Higgins, President of Ireland • Chairperson: Paul Ledwidge • Chief Executive: Chris White.
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Furthermore, despite positive soundings from Minister Harris, the HSE 1% cut applied to all Section 39 organisations is still being applied and has yet to be reversed at time of writing.

I would be more than happy to discuss our submission with you in further detail.

Kind regards,

Kevin Kelly

Head of Policy, Advocacy and Campaigns



NCBI

**Working for People
with Sight Loss**

NCBI Submission to the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response

June 2020

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Introduction

NCBI (National Council for the Blind of Ireland) is Ireland's national charity working for the rising number of people affected by blindness and vision impairment. At NCBI, we are working every day with people of all ages, from young babies to those reaching their 100th birthday. The majority of people we work with actually have some remaining vision, while only a small percentage are completely blind. Census 2016 figures show that there are currently 54,810 people with sight loss in Ireland and this number is rising [Source: Census (2016) Census 2016 Results: Profile 3 – An Age Profile of Ireland. Available at www.cso.ie]. Last year, we offered support and services to approximately 8,000 people who are blind and vision impaired. Of this figure, 2,000 were new referrals to NCBI. The demands on our services are increasing as the population ages and the incidence of age-related sight loss escalates.

Covid-19 has had a significant impact on people who are blind and vision impaired. 68% of our service user base are over the age of 65 and have been cocooning. NCBI is grateful for this opportunity to put forward the particular needs of the 54,810 people who are blind and vision impaired in our country and to provide clear guidance on how the next Government can best accommodate these needs as the restrictions ease.

1. The impact of Covid-19 on NCBI Services

Covid-19 has led to an unprecedented drop in NCBI's income. Before the outbreak, our funding for 2020 had already been cut by 1% and we appealed that it would be reversed given that services that are vital to people who are blind and vision impaired are already underfunded.

We have willingly and tirelessly stepped in to co-fund the cost of service delivery by approximately €2.9 million year on year (or 30% of the full cost of running its services) through our 116 charity shops and associated charitable fundraising income - both of which have been 100% wiped out by Covid-19. NCBI has no financial contingency or recourse to co-finance the almost €3 million deficit in the cost of delivering its lifechanging services to the 7,000 plus people who desperately depend on them.

Up to March 2020, an effective three-sided business operation of 116 charity shops, budgeted to raise a surplus of €1,700,000 in 2020 and NCBI Foundation, budgeted to raise a surplus of €1,500,000 contributed to close the significant operating deficit of €3,000,000 in maintaining the core operation of providing NCBI's services to approximately 8,000 people per year.

The total cost of running NCBI Services in 2019 amounted to €8,935,415 of which Section 39 grant funding of €6,033,258 was gratefully provided for by the Health Service Executive. As of 16 March, all NCBI charity shops have been closed at the loss of €180,000 per week, with a minimum cumulative cash loss of €5,000,000 expected by years end - the lifeblood of the Services operation. On 19 March, NCBI laid off all NCBI Foundation staff, with an expected further loss in Services revenue in the region of €1,500,000 by years end.

Below is a list of the draconian measures taken to safeguard NCBI Services:

- 20% reduction in working weeks of Services based staff including management,
- Immediate lay-off of all 157 employed staff in NCBI Retail,
- Lay off of all 5 Foundation staff,
- Written to all landlords suspending rental payments for April and May,
- Written to the Revenue to state that NCBI cannot make Revenue returns for March,
- Written to every local authority stating we will not be able to pay Business Rates in 2020 and
- Written to our Banks suspending payment of all business loans.

Similar to all other section 39 organisations, these are unprecedented times, but no contingency planning could have anticipated the serious system failure that NCBI's unique funding model has witnessed in recent days on account of Covid-19.

NCBI have no guarantee the funding we need to continue to deliver services, is secure. Despite our network of charity shops opening on the 8th June in line with Government restrictions it remains highly likely that our shop revenue will not recover in the remainder of 2020 leaving a huge shortfall in our income placing our vital services at grave risk. Furthermore, despite positive soundings from Minister Harris the HSE 1 percent cut applied to all Section 39 organisations is still being applied and has yet to be reversed at time of writing.

2. Disability Coalition

NCBI is part of a new coalition of eight not-for-profit Disability service providers whose aim is to address the significant funding shortfalls that are threatening frontline disability services in every county in Ireland.

The Disability Action Coalition is looking for a clear commitment from the next Government to the following:

- Special fund to meet Covid-19 fundraised income losses. Our organisations have lost millions of euro in normal fundraised income. Supports announced so far are very far from adequate to meet our needs.
- Eliminate deficits for Section 39 disability service providers and fund services at the actual cost of providing them. Our research indicates that, for our eight organisations alone, this will cost at least €20m a year in extra funding from the Health Service Executive.
- Adopt all of the recommendations of the IRG report relating to Section 39 organisations (Chapter 8). This includes overhauling the completely flawed process for how the HSE currently decides to allocate funding to the sector. The Government commissioned an independent review of the sector and a report was published in February, 2019 called the [Report of the Independent Review Group established to examine the role of voluntary organisations in publicly funded health and personal social services](#), also known as the IRG report, chaired by Dr. Catherine Day.
- Pay full cost of Section 39 pay restoration. Pay restoration has only been partially funded and not for all organisations. This has to be remedied.

3. NCBI adjustments to Covid-19

Covid-19 has forced the NCBI to rethink its strategy aided by the scale and pace of our financial contraction. Notwithstanding, our nationwide service teams continue to provide a needs-based service to all people who are blind and vision impaired who are seeking support during this crisis.

NCBI has adapted our service provision to ensure that the impact of this crisis does not further marginalise people and families affected by sight loss. Service managers have sought to replace all face to face appointments by switching to telehealth and phone support which has helped to put in place the necessary precautions to help keep our service users safe, slow the spread of the virus, whilst still being able to offer many of our specialist interventions and training programs in a convenient and safe manner.

Telehealth may involve:

- Video conferencing
- Telephone based appointments
- Use of email and SMS
- Any combination of the above.

Aside from a significant rise in number of incoming calls to NCBI's helpline, NCBI's national teams are continuing to conduct full risk assessments with some 16,781 service users across Ireland who have indicated that they want to hear from our staff.

Other pragmatic and responsive measures adopted by NCBI Services include:

- NCBI's library taking on the production of the Governments Covid-19 information leaflet which will be made available to all service users across Ireland in their preferred formats, that is, braille, large print and audio.
- Established a new dedicated national helpline for all service users, families and friends Locall: 1850 33 43 53 running on extended hours from 8am – 8pm during the lock down. Our staff have made over 3,000 outward calls of support as well.
- Conducting risk assessments with all service users. Contact is being prioritised as follows; those living alone, those with no family supports, those with other significant disabilities and/or health issues.
- Prioritizing wrap around support for new referrals and newly diagnosed children and adults being referred from NCBI's Eye Clinic Liaison Officer services based across Temple Street, Crumlin, Mater, Vincent's, and Royal Victoria Eye and Ear Hospitals.
- Delivering hundreds of hot meals, care packages, sanitizer, medication, shopping, craft packages to our most susceptible clients who desperately need our support and services across day services.
- Scaled up NCBI's over the phone counselling and emotional support service across the country on the back of increased identification of need.
- Advocating on behalf of the organisations most vulnerable service users to ensure that required and additional supports are received.
- Developed a new national peer support program which focuses on keeping blind and visually impaired people connected to one another during these challenging times as well as providing a social outlet.

4. Mental health supports

NCBI is genuinely concerned about the impact of Covid-19 on the mental health of people who are blind and vision impaired. A recent survey from a sample of 2,000 service users of NCBI & Vision Sports Ireland found that:

- 1 in 5 of our service users have not left their homes since March and
- 50% of respondents indicating Covid-19 has had a serious negative impact on mental health.

The reality that social distancing practices are here to stay is a source of concern and anxiety for many because engaging in these practices is virtually impossible for people who are blind or vision impaired.

In addition, people are still receiving a diagnosis and/or experiencing a deterioration of vision during the pandemic. This adjustment coupled with the instinctive human need for physical social connection at a time when it is not permitted can be overwhelming for some.

Since Covid-19, we have set up a national helpline and scaled up a number of other support services but this is not enough. NCBI's over the phone counselling across the country remains underfunded. We only have the funds to resource two trained psychotherapists part-time and one family therapist part-time. During the pandemic and following easing of

restrictions, these services have been stretched to capacity and urgently needs more funding, so that we can support all people with vision impairments who require this service.

5. Technology

During the pandemic, we have all turned to technology for it's potential to allow us to stay connected with family and friends, to access a wealth of online resources and apps and to continue to work from home. Technology is an enabler but it's cost can be too much for many people who are blind and vision impaired.

Despite the clear significance of assistive technology for people who are blind and vision impaired, funding for assistive technology in Ireland is fragmented and uncoordinated. As a result, many people are unable to afford the upfront costs of essential assistive technology and have to go without. There needs to be fair and equal access to assistive technology for all people who are blind and vision impaired across the country, regardless of where the person lives.

Alarming, people over the age of 65 cannot apply for the Technical Aids Grant available from the Health Service Executive despite the fact that, the most common cause of sight loss is age-related macular degeneration (AMD) which tends to affect people over the age of 50.

In addition, the Health Service Executive does not consider smartphones under the Technical Aids Grant, despite the fact that smartphones are often the most accessible for a person with vision impairment and the developments in technology such as the Siri intelligent assistance tool, built in screen reader (Voice Over) and screen magnification are indispensable.

The Government needs to:

- mandate a central agency with the responsibility of ensuring coordinated delivery of the Technical Aids Grant.
- provide funding to the Health Service Executive, so that the Technical Aids Grant is adequately resourced.
- The Technical Aids Grant should be available to people over 65 who have a vision impairment and
- provide funding towards the Technical Aids Grant so that it can be extended to include smartphones.

6. Employment

Pre-covid-19, Census 2016 statistics already indicated that the level of labour force participation amongst people who are blind and vision impaired in Ireland is only a mere 24.4%. Therefore, less than 1 in 4 people with impaired vision were actively participating in the labour force. It is safe to say that the Covid-19 emergency will have reduced the employment rate of people who are blind and vision impaired even further.

A number of people who are blind and vision impaired are in part-time work. It is vital that they do not fall into a poverty trap, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, by losing their state benefits and returning to work on reduced working hours (short-time working).

The next Government needs to:

- Ensure that as the minimum wage increases, the Wage Subsidy Scheme also increases in the same manner, so that people who are on short-time working hours are not losing out and falling into poverty. Introduce measures designed to retain in employment people with disabilities in their current jobs.
- In order to accommodate remote working during the Covid-19 emergency, more funding needs to be provided to the Workplace Adaptation Grant, so that an employee who is blind or vision impaired can set up an adapted office in their own home.
- The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection should extend the Workplace Adaptation Grant to those on Community Employment Schemes, so that people who are blind and vision impaired who are participating on these schemes can continue to work remotely during Covid-19.
- The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection needs to engage with NCBI in relation to barriers in accessing Intreo services for people who are blind and vision impaired as the restrictions ease. We urge the Department to initiate a project that will increase awareness amongst Intreo staff of the challenges faced by people who are blind and vision impaired in terms of accessing Intreo services during the crisis.

7. Education

We have found that children with vision impairment are struggling with remoting learning during Covid-19. Children are not finding it easy to access online learning material being sent to them by their school because different schools are using different platforms some of which are not accessible to the pupil's assistive technology. This means that individualised solutions are required to support individual children. There is also a lack of access to resource teaching at this time and insufficient support from the Visiting Teacher Service operated by the Department of Education and Skills. This has meant that support to assist pupils to access online learning has fallen to NCBI.

Children with vision impairments need to work harder because they can often not learn visually. This needs to be supported in an educational setting so that they do not fall further behind.

While NCBI welcomes the inclusion of children who are blind and vision impaired in the Summer Provision scheme, we do so cautiously as we still await the operational details from Department of Education and Skills to see if the potential of this scheme will be in any way realised.

8. Accessible streets

Our streets are changing quickly to enable social distancing, but these changes must be accessible. Discussions have started around the possible reallocation of street space to allow cafes, bars and restaurants to reopen whilst obeying social distancing rules. Whilst it is understandable that every option should be explored to allow businesses to trade in the months ahead while we are living with the virus, this cannot be done in a way which endangers the safety of pedestrians who are blind and vision impaired.

NCBI had to cancel our annual #ClearOurPaths campaign this year due to Covid-19. The core objective of this campaign is to highlight the dangers of temporary obstacles on the footpath. In fact, much work has been done in recent years to reduce the volume of temporary street furniture like sandwich boards, chairs and tables, and temporary structures that block footpaths in our towns and cities across Ireland. The current system of enforcement is not perfect, but the thought of cafes, restaurants and bars being allowed to place these types of obstacles on public paths are a grave source of concern for people who are blind and vision impaired.

Currently, businesses are required to have a license from their county council in order to place temporary street furniture on the public footpath and it is up to each county council to enforce its bylaws.

In addition, the number of people walking and cycling has increased during the pandemic and the new draft Programme for Government has also announced a significant spend each year over the life of the next Government for changes to street design that encourage more walking and cycling. Where any changes to street layouts are going to be made, the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government must oblige local county councils to consult with representative organisations including NCBI and people who are blind and vision impaired who live in the locality to ensure that the needs of people who are blind and vision impaired are fully considered.

9. Blind Welfare Allowance

NCBI is calling on the Health Service Executive to make the payment of the Blind Welfare Allowance available by bank transfer in light of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Blind Welfare Allowance (BWA) is a monthly means-tested payment of up to €240 for a single person who is blind or vision impaired or €480 for a couple who are blind. It is mainly issued by cheque by local Health Service Executive offices. The NCBI has recently learnt of some local Health Service Executive offices being unwilling to make this payment by bank transfer, which is placing thousands of people who are blind and vision impaired at unnecessary risk and financial hardship across the country.

Through calls received to our national helpline, it is clear there is a strong regional variation within the Health Service Executive in their willingness to pay the BWA electronically. Some Health Service Executive offices are offering to pay the payment automatically by electronic bank transfer, while others in the Mid-West and North West are reluctantly offering to switch to electronic payment. Unfortunately, Health Service Executive offices in the South East are refusing to pay the BWA electronically. This is both outdated and completely unacceptable, particularly given that we are in the midst of a national health emergency.

Many of those who are in receipt of this payment rely on this income to meet their basic needs.

Subsequently, it means some people who are blind and vision impaired are left with no choice but to go out to the bank to access these vital funds thereby putting themselves at unnecessary risk, whilst others are opting not to go out to cash their cheques, placing them in financial distress.

NCBI is calling on the Health Service Executive nationally to instruct every local office to immediately grant those in receipt of BWA the option to have their payment made electronically. It is feasible as it is already operational in some areas. It is time internal local Health Service Executive bureaucracy is overhauled.

10. Ophthalmology services

Ophthalmology is one of the busiest disciplines across the Irish health service, and prior to Covid-19, had the fourth-highest waiting list for hospital appointments. The number of patients waiting is likely to rise sharply in the months ahead as ophthalmology services recommence with reduced capacity due to infection control measures.

The most recent national waiting time figures from the National Treatment Purchase Fund show over 50,000 patients are waiting for an ophthalmology appointment in Health Service Executive hospitals, 41,401 for an outpatient appointment and 9,822 on the inpatient list. NCBI expects this figure to jump to over 55,000 people by late summer, due to cancelled and rearranged appointments and new referrals which have arisen during Covid-19.

It is imperative every effort is made to create as much capacity in ophthalmology services as possible across the country at this time. Access to timely appointments, diagnosis and treatment for many eye conditions like age-related macular degeneration or glaucoma are critical to prevent irreversible and avoidable sight loss. Eye healthcare professionals have drawn up comprehensive plans to recommence services which NCBI welcomes and hopes these plans will be sufficiently resourced by the incoming Government to ensure eye health is protected.

In the longer term it is critically important that the integrated eye care team model, in a post-Covid world, is fully rolled out and implemented, as being able to access eye care services in non-hospital locations in communities is a guaranteed way to ensure increased capacity and better outcomes for ophthalmic patients.

NCBI has embraced and complemented the primary eye care model through introducing and embedding Eye Clinic Liaison Officers (ECLOs) across three Dublin-based ophthalmology clinics and is keen to roll out more Eye Clinic Liaison Officers to further settings, funding permitting.

The role of the Eye Clinic Liaison Officer is to provide timely practical and emotional support to patients at point of diagnosis and beyond, freeing up clinicians and teams to focus on treatment and care. ECLOs act as a bridge between the eye clinic and community-based services.

The next Government needs to ringfence funding to secure the continued patient and clinic value of the ECLO service in 2020.

In addition to this, in advance of an appointment, all eye clinics must provide patients with vision impairments with information in an accessible format about how the environment has changed and any new obstacles, so they can safely follow the new public health guidelines.

11. Diabetic RetinaScreen

The National Diabetic Retinal Screening Programme is a government-funded screening programme in Ireland that offers free, regular diabetic retinopathy screening to people with diabetes aged 12 years and older. Diabetic retina screening is paused in line with the Health Service Executive's measures to stop the spread of Covid-19. This key service urgently needs to be back up and running as soon as possible otherwise more and more sight problems will be left undetected which will mean that more people will lose their sight.

12. Accessible travel

Public transport is often the only option for independent travel for many people who are blind and vision impaired and therefore, as public transport begins to return to its regular services, all public transport operators must ensure that passengers with vision impairment are enabled to comply with social distancing requirements. Public transport operators must be obliged to put a policy in place that ensures that passengers who are blind and vision impaired:

- get priority boarding.
- are provided with reliable and accessible information about assistance to passengers who are blind and vision impaired, post-covid-19.
- are provided with assistance by staff, upon request, in the safest way possible.
- A subsidised taxi transport scheme should be introduced for people with vision impairments and other disabilities, so that they can have the choice to use taxis as an alternative transport option to get to places that they need to go as the restrictions ease. NCBI would be happy to work with the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport on developing such a scheme.

More information

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