



RehabGroup

Investing in People, Changing Perspectives

Pathways To Work

Submission To Department of Social Protection

Supporting People with Disabilities into Employment

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1. Introduction

Rehab Group is an independent voluntary organisation that has supported adults and children with disabilities for more than 75 years. As a campaigning and advocacy body, we represent the voices of the 12,500 individuals who currently access our services, as well as their families.

Our mission is to empower those we support to live more independent lives and to participate fully and meaningfully in their communities. We achieve this through the delivery of high-quality, flexible, and sustainable services in care, learning and education, training, and employment.

We are a rights-based, inclusion-focused organisation, operating through three key divisions: RehabCare, National Learning Network, and Employability and Social Enterprise. Rehab Enterprises is one of the largest non-governmental employers of people with disabilities.

This submission is based on two recent consultations conducted by our Advocacy Team with the people who use our services. The first consultation was our Pre-Budget Submission consultation where we held over 50 focus groups with a total of 600 participants. A significant portion of that consultation was devoted to employment issues. The second consultation was specifically targeted at this consultation on Pathways to Work. We held about 50 Focus Groups with 90 participants to collate the experiences of our service users with Ireland's public employment services, INTREO. We also identify broader policy issues that need to be addressed to provide pathways to quality work for people with disabilities.

The aim is to highlight what is working well, where challenges remain, and what supports are needed to ensure people with disabilities can access meaningful employment and training opportunities.

2. Policy Context on Disability Employment

The right of persons with a disability to work on an equal basis with others is enshrined in international, EU and national policies, including the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Article 27), UN Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 8 Decent Work), EU Disability Employment Package (2022), the European Union Pillar of Social Rights, the 2020, 2025 Programme for Government - *Our Shared Future* and the recently published National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People. However, significant obstacles remain in developing pathways to their employment in Ireland.

The employment rate of people with disabilities is persistently low and those who are in employment are often under-employed. 51% of the people with disabilities in employment are elementary occupations. While over 40% of people with disabilities are completely outside of the labour market

According to the most recent Census(2022), 303,859 people in Ireland reported difficulty working at a job, attending school, or college due to a long-lasting condition or disability. Of these, 58% experienced this to a great extent. People with disabilities in Ireland are more than twice as likely to be unemployed compared to those without disabilities.

The last Comprehensive Employment Strategy (CES) for People with Disabilities ended in 2024. Disappointingly, the third action plan for the CES for 2022-2024 was never published and the Strategy petered out before its completion year in 2024. A final review of the CES by the National Disability Authority concluded that while the CES had shown some progress, the disability employment gap persisted, and people with disabilities still reported “continuing fragmentation in and inflexibility of support services” around employment. Part of the problem with the CES was that oversight was with the Department of Justice and Equality rather than in Social Protection.

People with disabilities in Ireland are almost three times more likely to experience poverty and isolation than those around them who do not have a disability. Ireland also has the lowest rate of people with disabilities in employment (36.2%) and the widest disability employment gap (38.6%) in the European Union.

Employment has been identified as a key pillar (Pillar 2) of the recently published National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People. We welcome that the new Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People clearly identifies the Department of Social Protection as having responsibility for Pillar 2 of the Strategy in relation to Employment.

Ireland’s poor record of employment of people with disabilities is reflected in the employment history of the respondents to our survey. Just 52% of respondents had ever had a job. Unfortunately, when asked in a supplementary question what was the longest they had worked in a job, 57% said 6 months or less. Despite this, perhaps as a sign of their determination, the majority of respondents stated that they felt very hopeful of getting a job at 44%, while 28% felt a little hopeful, 8% not hopeful, and 8% unsure. ..

3. Developments since publication of the First Strategy 2015

It is important to acknowledge that the Department of Social Protection has taken several innovative and significant steps in developing pathways to work for disabled people. The recently launched Work and Access Programme which aims to remove or reduce barriers in the workplace for people with a disability in order to help them find employment or stay in work. The Review of the Wage Subsidy Scheme has loosened some of the eligibility criteria to incentivise employers take on people with disabilities. However, both these programmes which are demand led have not seen the increase in demand/participation that had been anticipated despite a very comprehensive public information campaign.

4. Our Service Users Experiences of Using INTREO Services

Feedback from our service users on INTREO services was very divided with 46% stating their experience was mainly positive as opposed to 13% stating their experience was mainly negative. Concerningly though 41% of respondents stated that they were not aware of the services at all.

However, once our survey sought a little more detail it revealed a mixture of positive and negative experiences. Many people described supportive and approachable staff who provided practical advice on job seeking, training, and interview preparation:

When I was in INTREO office I met someone every month. I kept them updated to what interviews I did, what jobs I applied for and what events I went to. They gave me advice about what websites to look up, advised me of companies that were hiring or suit my qualifications and gave me interview techniques.

Others appreciated the support they received to understand the complex language associated with job searches:

"If you don't understand a question they help you to try understand better." While one respondent was successful with help from INTREO services.

"They helped me find work locally."

Some of the responses were glowing:

"They were searching for the right jobs for me, they were brilliant. They had chats with me and got to know me and help find the right job for me."

For some, INTREO offered useful guidance that helped them explore new options such as courses or voluntary work, while administrative services like renewing travel passes were described as straightforward and efficient: "I went to renew my travel pass as it couldn't be done online. The staff there was very helpful."

However, other accounts were less positive. Some service users felt that the advice they received did not match their individual needs, with a narrow focus on full-time or factory work.

I have experience with Employability in [REDACTED]. I didn't find them good because all they suggested to me was full time employment where I was only looking for part time. They did give some good advice about speaking up for myself and to make sure I am always comfortable if and when I find a job. I had meetings with them once a month over 5 months. I stopped because I didn't find it useful, I got nowhere.

Others described repetitive meetings with little benefit, or staff who appeared stressed and less supportive. In certain cases, participants felt actively discouraged from pursuing opportunities such as Community Employment schemes due to their disability: "Intreo would not allow me to do a CE scheme due to being in a wheelchair.

As highlighted above the experience of our service users' experiences indicated that it is not just employers who might need disability awareness training but also staff within Intreo

offices. It is important to emphasise that for many people with a disability the entire experience can be extremely daunting for some: "It made me feel anxious and intimidated going into the offices." The experience once inside needs to run smoothly with understanding and empathy.

Our service users have not always felt their experiences with INTREO ran smoothly with understanding or empathy: "*I felt that the attitude from the staff was terrible and they had a very negative attitude when you told them you were from NLN.*" Another service user felt dismissed or even ridiculed on their visit:

In my own experience I was asked why I would want to go to college', "Why would you want to pursue advocacy?", "What job would you have from that?", "You don't have an end goal for a job".

Some service users noted that some training is required within the services themselves to familiarise staff with supports that will be beneficial to people with disabilities to gain employment: "I felt they did not know information on supports for me" and "workers need to have up to date training and standards checks."

What some of our service users highlighted was possibly an opportunity for INTREO and their employees to link more closely with organisations such as National Learning Network to foster a relationship with people with disabilities before they come to their offices seeking employment. This would reduce any anxieties on either side whether from our service users towards INTREO or vice versa:

"If it wasn't for Rehab and NLN I wouldn't be where I am now. They put things in a way I could understand."

These experiences highlighted inconsistency across different offices and staff and raised concerns about the lack of tailored support.

5. Barriers to Employment for People with Disabilities

Participants in Rehab's Focus Groups consistently report that from their lived experiences there are serious systemic, attitudinal, and practical challenges that must be addressed to make sure people with a disability get a fair opportunity for employment.

Participants provided detailed insights into the barriers and the types of support that would help them successfully access and sustain employment.

i. Fear of losing benefits

Another barrier to participation in the labour market is the fear of losing the Disability Allowance (DA) which brings with it essential secondary benefits such as the medical card or free travel pass. Respondents in our focus groups said that they were concerned that if their ability to work fluctuates, that they may be left without the safety net of having DA and their benefits. They fear that if they go into employment, they may well be punished with the loss of some or all of their supports. The thought of losing benefits and then having to reapply is particularly daunting.

There is a palpable fear of losing disability allowance and secondary benefits like the travel pass and the medical card. Being able to keep the medical card for three years is little consolation to a disabled person with complex medical needs – those needs will always be present. Participants described this as “unfair” and a barrier that stops people from even trying to find employment.

ii. Disability awareness training for employers

The people from NLN and RehabCare who participated in our focus groups expressed frustration over their inability to gain employment. Many of the people in our Focus Groups found that employers were biased against taking on someone with a disability due to misguided preconceptions around employing someone with a disability based on negative stereotypes. Many of the people who took part in our focus groups felt that they were ready for employment but that employers weren't ready for them.

The need for disability awareness training for employers to help reduce stigma and encourage inclusive hiring practices was a recurring theme.

Our survey explored the barriers people with disabilities face when looking for work with several recurring issues emerging. Respondents felt that stigma, discrimination, and misunderstanding continue to be significant challenges for people with a disability to get into employment:

Employers look down on you when you have a disability.

Disabilities are misunderstood, there are different types and different capabilities.

Many respondents felt underestimated or treated as less capable, with some reporting direct discrimination or unfair treatment in the workplace:

Employers don't realise that people with disabilities can work just as hard if not even harder than someone who doesn't have a disability.

Personal barriers such as anxiety, low confidence, and gaps in qualifications compounded these difficulties, often worsened by negative employer attitudes.

Some respondents referred to an employment and work experience partnership between Rehab and Mr Price as a positive example of what is possible when employers were open-minded and supportive.

The agreement between Rehab and Mr Price is really good and we need more like that so that we have more opportunities to get jobs. There is a stigma with people with disabilities and Mr Price is treating us the same as normal people. I feel comfortable there.

Focus group participants stressed the importance of inclusive and understanding employers, noting that stigma and low expectations often acted as barriers. However, barriers to hiring persons with disabilities are created not only by negative stereotypical beliefs and preconceptions, but often also by a lack of positive action, and absence of guidance and

information on available supports for inclusive recruitment processes and for the accommodation of people with disabilities in the workplace

iii. Support with the Application and Interview Process

One-to-one support with applications, interviews, and emotional wellbeing was key, along with ongoing check-ins to help maintain self-confidence and reassurance in the role: “If I am struggling to be able to go to someone that will listen and help me.”

While others stressed the need for less mystery surrounding the interview process to combat anxieties and to help applicants with a disability to prepare for the interview:

Provide plenty of information about the job and what kind of person who is interviewing me and what information the company is looking for. I need more transparency, every interview I went to I was always caught off guard and I would prefer to be well prepared. Provide potential interview questions, so that the job seeker has a baseline of what to study and be aware off.

Respondents also emphasised the importance of emotional and social supports, including reassurance from peers and employers, clear feedback after interviews, and opportunities for teamwork and inclusion.

iv. Inaccessible Work Places

Practical obstacles such as inaccessible buildings, lack of adapted workspaces, and poor transport connections further limited opportunities: “Very few places want to hire someone with a disability due to a lack of facilities.”

Accessible buildings, bathrooms, and quiet spaces were some of the issues listed by respondents to our survey. Practical barriers were also raised, especially around transport. For those in rural areas, limited transport options made employment difficult to sustain.

Medical considerations, such as the need for epilepsy supports in the workplace, were also mentioned: “I need medical support, I have epilepsy so most places need my medical details so they know what to do.”

The concept of reasonable accommodation remains poorly understood by many employers. Rather than assessing how a role can be adapted to suit the needs of a person with a disability, the benchmark used by many employers tends to be based on a person’s ability to do the job without addressing what accommodations could be put in place (eg job carving, job redesign, assistive technologies etc.) that could support equity as well as equality. This approach overlooks the legal and ethical obligation to provide accommodations and fails to move towards compliance with national and EU legislation and guidelines.

Misconceptions that accommodations are costly or require notable additional admin/resources to organise are prevalent, and employers fail to engage with employees with disabilities to identify the practical supports needed. Information and guidance should be made available to employers on how to put reasonable accommodation into practice for workers with disabilities, with 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.

v. Training and skills development

Training and skills development were also identified as critical. Respondents to our survey emphasised the need for both general and job-specific training, ranging from digital skills and interview preparation to recognised qualifications. Work experience opportunities, that eventually lead to employment, were particularly valued as they helped build confidence and demonstrate ability in real workplace settings.

vi. Provision of In-Work Supports

Several participants said they would benefit from a support person or job coach, especially during the preliminary stages of employment. Assistance in preparing for interviews was seen to be an important support. Such supports would instil a sense of reassurance and confidence.

Once in employment, our respondents stated they would need some supports to retain their employment. They highlighted the need for clear communication and accessible training as being particularly important, with simple, step-by-step instructions and written job lists helping people to learn effectively. This would develop a sense of self-confidence within the employee in their new role.

“Having one on one with a person in the company to check in with me and make sure all is ok.”

Make sure information is clear, I found my training unclear especially Safety training it was too complicated. I need simple, clear, easy to read information.

Take the time to teach me how to do the job properly so I don't make mistakes and I understand everything.

Make sure they explain everything properly and check that I understand.

The Individual Placement Service (IPS) supports people with severe and enduring mental health issues into employment and supports them in their career development. Through the IPS the National Learning Network have secured and sustained employment for over 1,100 people into mainstream, competitive jobs. However, funding is not adequate for the existing service and there is a clear need for this programme to be rolled out across the country.

vii. Lack of Flexibility

The development and promotion of quality, sustainable and flexible roles — including remote work, part-time options, and customised tasks would make employment more viable for people disabilities. Employees with little control over their working hours, pace of work, tasks, order or manner of work are more likely to quit if they suffered a health setback.

Respondents asked for flexibility in working hours and breaks to support any complications associated with their disability:

I needed more understanding around my working hours and times. I lived in fear of going over the allowed working hours and losing my benefits because my employer didn't take my times into consideration or my days.

Employers need to understand that sometimes people with disabilities need more time to complete a task and they need to be more flexible in the time they allocate for the tasks.

viii. Quality/Meaningful Jobs and Fair Pay

The shortage of suitable, meaningful jobs meant many people were offered only unpaid placements or voluntary roles rather than real employment:

“The woman I spoke to suggested that I would be better doing voluntary work.”

Rehab Enterprises is one of the largest non-governmental employers of people with disabilities and provides unique integrated employment opportunities in five social enterprises across Ireland. Rehab Enterprises. We work with a range of public and private sector partners in providing dynamic business solutions in secure WEEE IT and paper recycling, manufacturing and logistics.

An OECD’s report on public procurement published in June 2023 highlighted that Ireland’s public procurement spend of €22 billion per annum could be used to promote inclusive employment,. The report was critical of the Government’s failure to use even a portion of this budget to provide employment for people with disabilities. The report noted that Ireland was not availing of EU and Irish Regulations, such as Article 20, which would enable government to reserve certain public contracts for social enterprises whose main aim is to integrate people with disabilities into the workplace. The review of the EU Procurement Directive and the recent consultation on Ireland’s first National Public Procurement Strategy to be published shortly provide an opportunity and impetus for the development of social clauses and reserved contracts in public procurement. The Department of Social Protection should seek to ensure that social considerations, and reserved contracts are included in the new Strategy.

The Wage Subsidy Scheme is an important support for employers to take on disabled people. Over the years, the rate has failed to keep pace with increases in the National Minimum Wage and fell to an all-time low of 46% in 2025 of the NMW from 60% in 2019. The recent increase in Budget 2026 is welcome, but it still falls short of what is needed.

Recommendations:

1. Increase income disregard for Disability Allowance means-testing only the disabled persons income (and not the spouse); protection of secondary benefits such as medical card and travel card and fuel allowance; cost of disability payment to apply to those in-work.
2. Develop effective strategies for employer engagement to overcome disability-related misperceptions and discrimination and to raise awareness about available support programmes and subsidies. Disability awareness training programmes for employers alongside the promotion of positive role models such as inclusive companies already employing people with disabilities should be rolled out nationally. Word of mouth and peer-to-peer communication were seen as powerful tools to normalise disability in the workplace and challenge stigma.
3. Public Employment Service (Intreo) should work with employers to develop practical solutions to making reasonable accommodations for people with disabilities and improving the Work and Access Programme to encourage more take-up.
4. There is a need for mentorship, shadowing, and regular check-ins with supervisors in maintaining that confidence and independence: This would develop an environment where employees would feel comfortable to ask questions to allay any doubts or fears they have of the task in hand.
5. Improve Public Awareness of Employment Supports Many of our respondents felt that information about available schemes and supports was not well communicated. They suggested mass media campaigns, social media promotion, posters and leaflets in local areas, and outreach in colleges and community settings.
6. Allow for more flexible working arrangements for people with disabilities to enable them to take up employment opportunities. This would necessitate a change in some of the requirements of the Wage Subsidy Scheme (minimum 15 hours) and the Work Experience Programme (Minimum 37 hours) to accommodate people with disabilities take up work on a part-time basis.
7. Ensure fair pay and quality work for people with disabilities. Ensure that the Wage Subsidy Scheme is linked to the National Minimum Wage and that increases in NMW are linked to WSS rate increases.
8. Ensure ongoing investment in training and skills development such as those offered by National Learning Network. Additional supports be put in place for people with disabilities with the application and interview process to develop confidence.
9. Increase the current funding for the Individual Placement Service (IPS) by at least 25% to ensure its future viability and make it available across all local mental health services.
10. Ensure greater use of reserved contracts and social procurement clauses could offer more employment opportunities to people with disabilities, increase the number of disabled people in employment and reduce Ireland's disability employment gap.

7. Conclusion

The insights and experiences of the people who use our services highlight three core priorities for strengthening pathways to work for people with disabilities.

Firstly, there is a need to build greater disability awareness and understanding among employers, supported by respect, patience, and empathy in workplace practices. Secondly, effective pathways require clear communication, structured supports, and accessible workplaces that can respond to diverse needs. Thirdly, there is a need to expand access to meaningful and secure employment opportunities that provide real choice, fair pay, and sustainable career prospects.

Together, these priorities set out a vision for an inclusive labour market where people with disabilities have the same opportunities as everyone else — to use their talents, contribute to society, and build sustainable futures. Achieving this requires a joined-up approach that combines supportive employment services, informed and inclusive employers, practical and emotional supports, and strong public awareness. With these elements in place, barriers can be broken down and employment made genuinely accessible to all.