

Pre-Budget Submission to the Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands Funding for the Rehab Transitional Workforce Solution

INTRODUCTION

The Rehab Group is an independent voluntary organisation providing services and support for 10,000 adults and children with disabilities for more than 70 years. We are a campaigning organisation that advocates for the people who use our services and their families.

Our purpose is to empower those we support to lead more independent lives and play an active and meaningful role in their communities by providing high-quality, flexible, and sustainable care services, learning, training and education, and employment skills and opportunities. We are a right-based and inclusion focussed organisation comprised of RehabCare, National Learning Network and Employability and Social Enterprise

Rehab Enterprises welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands.

Rehab Enterprises is one of the largest employment providers for people with disabilities. We operate a unique integrated model of employment, where employees with disabilities work alongside employees without disabilities across a number of sectors. We champion and promote the employment of people with disabilities through trialling an innovative **Transitional Workforce Solution (TWS)** of employment. We advocate for the rights of people with disabilities to access meaningful employment.

There are many benefits for companies employing people with disabilities including:

- Lower absenteeism
- Lower staff turnover
- More positive work environment
- Increased staff loyalty
- Increased ROI on training and development

A key priority of Rehab Group's five-year strategy "Delivering our Future" is to support people with disabilities to develop and progress in their careers. To that end, we have introduced an innovative new model of supported employment for people with disabilities the **Transitional Workforce Solution (TWS)**. Through this programme Rehab Enterprises is working with the business community to provide employment opportunities for people with disabilities that to date have been underdeveloped.

People with disabilities participate less often in the open labour market and are more at risk of poverty or social exclusion. At present, the Department of Social Protection operates a number of programmes to incentivise employers to take on people with disabilities, with limited success.

Over the past year, Rehab Enterprises has been piloting the TWS Solution Employability Programme. The TWS goes beyond other existing employability programmes by supporting both the participant and the host company with end-to-end guidance and interventions, from a less formalised, friendlier recruitment process to providing employers with the confidence and knowledge to work with people with disabilities within their workforce. The programme also seeks to bring people with disabilities into mainstream employment as opposed to finding them employment in congregated settings within social enterprises.

We believe that this programme offers exceptional value for money and will increase the number of persons with a disability in employment. However, the TWS does not fall neatly into the strict criteria of current DSP disability employment incentive programmes such as the Wage Support Scheme or the Work Placement Experience Programme.

We are therefore requesting the Committee's support for a funding stream for the Transitional Workforce Solution model in the Social Protection envelope for Budget 2024 either within the existing programmes or through a specific TWS Programme. We would also

POLICY CONTEXT

The right of persons with disabilities 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, the European Union Pillar of Social Rights and the 2020 Programme for Government, *Our Shared Future*. However, while the need to build bridges for persons with disabilities to employment in the open labour market has been clearly identified, significant obstacles remain in developing pathways to their employment.

Recognising the need to increase the number of people with disabilities in employment, the 2020 Programme for Government "*Our Shared Future*" specifically commits to promoting an "awareness and support programme for employers to support the recruitment and retention of people with disabilities".

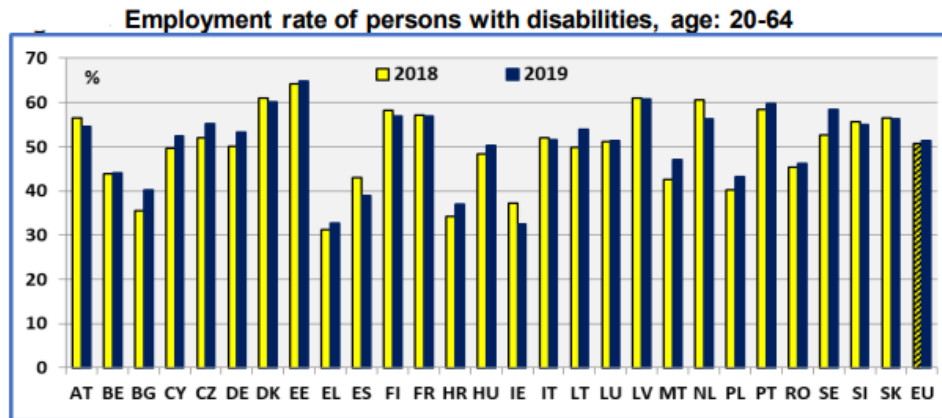
As a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), Ireland is committed to promoting "*employment opportunities and career advancement for persons with disabilities in the labour market, as well as assistance in finding, obtaining, maintaining and returning to employment*" and "*the employment of persons with disabilities in the private sector through appropriate policies and measures, which may include affirmative action programmes, incentives and other measures*" (Article 27)

[The European Pillar of Social Rights](#) addresses disability rights (Principles 3 and 17). In the [Action Plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights \(ESPR\)](#), the EU has set ambitious targets for 2030 to have at least:

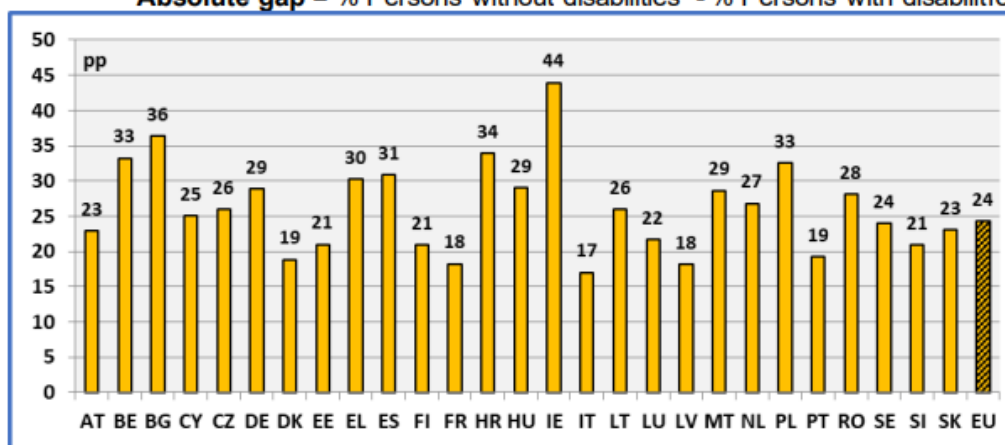
- 78% of the population aged 20 to 64 in employment,
- 60% of all adults participating in training each year,
- and to reduce the number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion by at least 15 million.

The Action Plan also recognises the contribution of persons with disabilities in achieving the 2030 targets and includes a new headline indicator on the disability employment gap in the Social Scoreboard. Consequently, the [European Union Disability Employment Package \(2022\)](#) has a specific focus on the need for Member States to increase the employment rate of persons with disabilities and reduce the employment gap with persons without disabilities.

As can be seen from the diagrams below, the employment rate in Ireland for people with disabilities is the lowest in the EU while the disability employment gap is the highest. The EU average gap between the employment rate of persons with disabilities and others stands at 24% while in Ireland it stands at a whopping 44%¹.



The employment gap between persons with and without disabilities (age 20-64), 2019, expressed in percentage points (pp)
Absolute gap = % Persons without disabilities - % Persons with disabilities



Note: The data are rounded for the clarity of comparison.
 Data source: EU-SILC UDB 2019.

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, of guidance and of information on support for adaptation of concrete recruitment processes and for social inclusion of persons with disabilities at the workplace. Hence, one of the key actions of the EU Disability Employment Package is “Promoting hiring perspectives through affirmative action and combating stereotypes”.

¹ European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, Grammenos, S., *European comparative data on Europe 2020 and persons with disabilities – Labour market, education, poverty and health analysis and trends*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2022, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/48279>

The [Disability Employment Package](#) notes that Public Employment Services (PES) are in a good position to take advantage of the growing ecosystem of partnerships between state, private and civil sector organisations. Therefore, the European Commission is encouraging PES to partner with organisations to initiate small scale pilot projects which foster social innovation and experimentation in the field of support for persons with disabilities and have indicated that ESF+ funds could be used for such projects.

Rehab Enterprises proposal for the Transitional Workforce Solution Employability Programme would provide an opportunity to do just that.

The **Transitional Workforce Solution** has the potential to add enormous value to existing disability employability programmes through the unique supports it can provide to both employers and potential employees. The programme provides an innovative mechanism for the development of partnerships between INTREO offices, supporting disability agencies, Rehab Enterprises and employers to increase the number of people with disabilities being able to access employment opportunities

Through Rehab Enterprises TWS programme, employers could work with an experienced, trusted and respected provider of disability services to increase the employment of persons with disabilities within their companies in a supportive environment while applicants are equipped with the interventions required not only to apply for a position but to overcome obstacles along the initial stages of their employment.

BACKGROUND TO THE TRANSITIONAL WORKFORCE SOLUTION

Rehab Enterprises, as part of its remit to provide long term, sustainable employment for people with disabilities has developed the Transitional Workforce Solution (TWS) Employability programme to create employment opportunities with external employers.

This is a unique employability programme offering supports to both the host company and the participant throughout this programme.

WHAT IS THE TRANSITIONAL WORKFORCE SOLUTION (TWS)?

The Transitional Workforce Solution is a unique supported employability programme to place graduates with disabilities from partnering disability agencies, into direct employment through a network of participating host companies with both a need to supplement their existing workforce and interested in having a more diverse and inclusive workforce.

The TWS transitions participants from:

1. actively seeking employment
2. to employment with Rehab Enterprises,
3. to potentially direct employment with the host company through the 6-month TWS programme.

The participant and host company have the option upon successful completion to progress to a direct employment relationship.

The TWS is the natural and logical conclusion to participation in a specialised vocational and educational training course, or for people currently in receipt of various State Allowances.

HOW IS THE TWS UNIQUE?

- The current Social Enterprise model creates congregated settings in social enterprises whereas the TWS is designed specifically to move participants into mainstream employment
- Fills the market for people with disabilities and employers with low risk and maximum exposure
- Upon successful completion there is a pre agreed definitive job available for the participant
- The programme is for a defined minimum 6-month, maximum 9-month timeframe, and not up to 18 months as many programmes can be.
- Because the programme revolves around external employers an element of job carving and job redesign is facilitated as participants work during the programme
- Job Matching – better fit that ensures sustainability
- Includes 5 stage supported employment process
- Place and train model that has proven success
- Training can be on the job-most success for people with disabilities
- Seeks to address the needs of mainstream employers and people with disabilities.

WHAT ARE THE PROGRAMME OBJECTIVES?

- To maximise employment opportunities for people with disabilities.
- To increase retention rates during the initial integration phase of employment to reduce the numbers of jobseekers falling back into support services.
- To achieve higher participation rates nationally in mainstream employment for people with disabilities.

WHO DOES THE TWS SUPPORT?

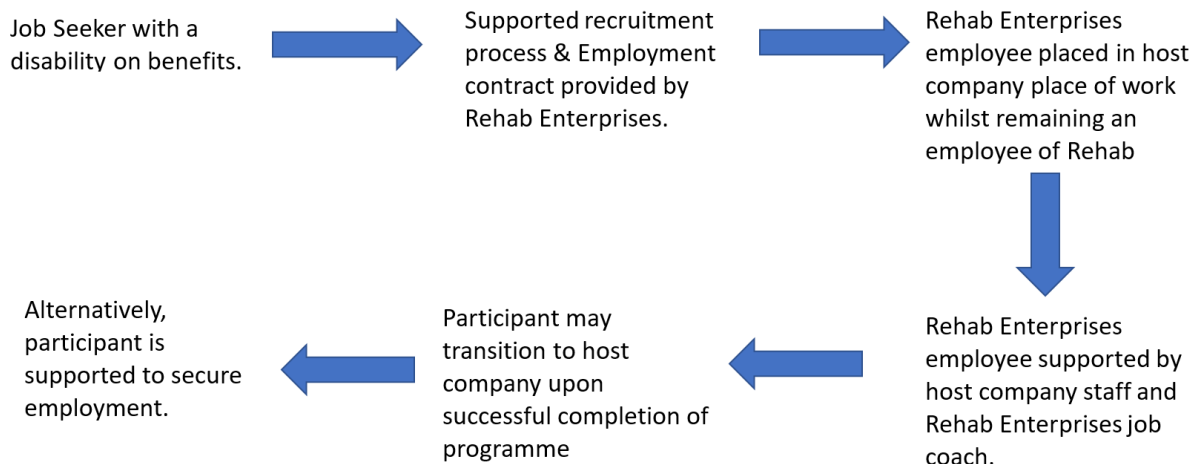
Rehab Enterprises primary remit is to create employment opportunities for people with disabilities and as such, the TWS supports people who:

- Have been diagnosed with a disability,
- Are in receipt of Disability Allowances
- Are in receipt of additional state disability supports
- Have been referred to various partnering agencies through Intreo Gateway Services.

The Steps involved:

- 1) Rehab Enterprises, working with a potential host company identifies suitable employment opportunities within that host company.
- 2) Rehab Enterprises, in conjunction with partnering disability agencies source suitable candidates for these roles.
- 3) The host company selects a suitable candidate, through an introduction process facilitated by Rehab Enterprises.
- 4) The successful candidate is employed directly by Rehab Enterprises for a minimum 6-month term and is placed in the participating host company's place of employment, fulfilling the role requirements.
- 5) Rehab Enterprises supports intensively both the host company and the employee during this 6-month term to ensure the successful integration of the candidate into the host company's main workforce.
- 6) Upon successful completion of the 6-month programme, the candidate may transition to direct employment with the host company and Rehab Enterprises ceases its contract of employment with the candidate.
- 7) Rehab Enterprises works with the host company to identify other roles, which may be suitable as an ongoing recruitment and employment option.
- 8) The salary is dictated by the role and host company but is the same as the host company's existing rate for this role, i.e there is no specific "programme rate". Upon successful completion of this programme, the employee will maintain this salary upon moving to direct employment with the host.
- 9) Rehab Enterprises pays the participant this salary and invoices the host company for this gross salary, plus all direct employer taxes such as employers PRSI. There are no additional costs to fund this programme passed on to the host company. The reason for this is to encourage as many potential hosts as possible to partake in this programme, and ultimately maximise employment for people with disabilities in their workforce, and nationally.

THE TWS PROCESS



Since the TWS inception, Rehab Enterprises has worked with partnering organisations and employers to tailor and design this unique supported employability programme. Rehab Enterprises has listened to experienced professionals across numerous agencies to identify the service shortfalls in current employability programmes.

The TWS goes beyond other existing employability programmes by supporting both the participant and the host company with end-to-end guidance and interventions, from a less formalised, friendlier recruitment process to providing employers with the confidence and knowledge to work with people with disabilities within their workforce. This end-to-end involvement removes the need for CV's and rigid interview skills, provides security and reassurance on the first day of employment, through to integration and in work supports, delivered in an "on the job" format, which provides real time positive outcomes to all involved.

Currently, because of partnering with external agencies and employers we have several positions available across various supporting local and national employers, with suitable participants interested in partaking in this programme.

CASE STUDY AND TEST CASE: REHAB ENTERPRISES & GAELITE SIGNS

Due to continued expansion, and a desire to achieve an inclusive workforce Gaelite Signs (<https://gaelite.com/>) were selected as a suitable host company for the pilot TWS Project.

Gaelite Signs provided Rehab Enterprises with detailed Job Descriptions, including required skills, hours of work and rates of pay of the selected roles. Rehab Enterprises engaged with two local agencies to match these requirements with suitable on programme participants.

Once suitable candidates were identified, the candidates were brought to Gaelite Signs manufacturing premises for a tour of the facilities and to meet with the management of Gaelite Signs. During this visit

Gaelite Signs had the opportunity to meet and greet the applicants in a relaxed and non-formal selection environment.

Because of this process, there are currently four participants on site and on programme with plans to expand this even further across the full range of roles within Gaelite Signs from manufacturing to office admin roles.

Rehab Enterprises has provided Disability Awareness training to Gaelite Signs Management and key staff, while frequently visiting participants on site to ensure that obstacles to successful completion of the programme are removed prior to becoming an issue for either the employees or Gaelite Signs.

Supporting Reference:

To whom it may concern,

As part of the launch of Rehab Enterprises Transitional Workforce Solution Employability Programme I, Finbarr Clarkson, Managing Director, Gaelite Signs am actively working with Rehab Enterprises to place candidates with disabilities within Gaelite as and when positions become available for these candidates.

As part of this launch, we have worked collaboratively to ensure an optimised recruitment and on boarding process which facilitates maximum participation and retention rates.

I very much look forward to our continued partnership on the Transitional Workforce Solution Employability Programme over the coming years.

Best Regards



Finbarr Clarkson

PROGRAMME BENEFITS

Benefits to the participant:

- Six months paid employment guaranteed
- Potential for permanent employment
- Advanced Job specific training
- Disability awareness training provided to peers
- Working alongside trained mentors
- Supported in finding work and on the job
- Opportunity to showcase their skills and abilities to an employer

Benefits to host company:

- Opportunity to have a more inclusive and diverse workforce
- Reduced recruitment and training costs
- Staff trained in disability awareness
- Training developed specific to the company's needs
- Low risk recruitment

Benefits to the Department/Exchequer:

- Contributes to achieving national and EU targets on employment of people with a disability.
- Reduces the number of people in receipt of a social welfare support.
- Promotes independence for people with disabilities.
- Achieves better, more sustainable outcomes and better value for money from previous state supports.
- Contributes significantly to compliance with Articles 19, 25 & 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
- Contributes to development of innovative national policies that promote the employment of persons with disabilities.
- Contributes to the implementation of EU Disability Employment Package in Ireland.

WHAT WE ASK:

To ensure a well-resourced funding stream for the TWS model either through one of the existing DSP disability employment programmes, or from a bespoke funding model.

The level of funding should reflect the unique and deep supports offered to ensure the maximum opportunities and retention rates for programme participants.