

2023

# Submission to Pay-Related Benefit for Jobseekers



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Rehab Group

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## **Overview**

*In the Programme for Government, 'Our Shared Future', the Government made a commitment to consider the introduction of a new Pay-Related Benefit for jobseekers. This would bring Ireland in line with other EU Member States operating pay-related benefit systems, where the payment rate during the initial period of unemployment is related to a person's prior earnings.*

Rehab Group welcomes the efforts made to establish a new Pay-Related Benefits system for jobseekers. Over the course of February 2023 the advocacy team in Rehab Group conducted five focus groups with just under 40 students, primarily on vocational training, of National Learning Network to develop an understanding of their experiences and viewpoints for this submission.

In putting this brief submission together, we have drawn on the experience of the people we support and also the experience of frontline staff in supporting people with disabilities. We have also drawn on our experience as one of the largest employers of people with disabilities in Ireland. Rehab Group welcomes the opportunity to take part in this consultation.

### **This submission seeks to:**

- Outline our students' experiences of employment to date, their experiences both positive and negative of jobseeking and the financial supports available to them during those times.
- Make suggestions to improve the proposed new Pay-Related Benefit (PRB) scheme for jobseekers in Ireland.
- Ensure that the proposed new system will be accessible to all and will be effective in its delivery. This will make sure that the new system is best equipped to help all jobseekers, including those with a disability, back into employment.
- Use the structure of the consultation to give a clear and concise representation of our students' views on the topic of Pay-Related Benefits.

National Learning Network provides courses, guidance and support to students each year across a wide range of vocational and rehabilitative training courses. You will hear their views throughout this submission.

### **The key points suggested for Pay-Related Benefits are:**

- Expand the system to include those who work part-time, the type of work often accessed by those with a disability.
- Any assessments be made for a person with a disability on a case-by-case basis with a welfare officer specifically trained and experienced in disability awareness.
- Expand the system also to include those who are in self-employment in order to consider people with a disability who are self-employed.

- Consideration be given to using payments as a method of support to people to retrain and upskill. Payments could be made at a reduced rate in order to last the duration of the course.
- Increase the minimum payment of €100 be increased in line with Jobseeker's Allowance.

## **Feedback**

### **Section 1 - KEY FEATURES of the STRAWMAN DESIGN**

All focus groups were in favour of the introduction of such a system, however once more scrutiny was applied to their reactions a deep divide became clear. There was a division between the great enthusiasm amongst those who had recently left employment and who felt confident of returning to employment soon and the caution of those, often with a disability, who were less confident of returning to work in the near future.

Those participants who were most enthusiastic about it were those who had most recently been in employment. There was a strong belief that a system like this could make a real difference: *"if a system like this was in place prior to me being laid off it would have greatly benefited me as I had financial obligations"*.

The scheme needs to be expanded to ensure that it is inclusive to all. At a basic level, certain people could be excluded from the system due to working part-time on account of their disability: *"It doesn't seem to cover everyone. People with disabilities who might work part time are being excluded"*. Participants felt that there was an extremely high risk of exclusion amongst people who fell ill on a long-term basis or those who could no longer work full-time due to injury or disability.

*My concern would be that those of us on Disability Allowance would be left behind. It would widen the gap between us and everyone else. Putting us well and truly at or below the poverty line.*

In order to ensure that this system caters for all an inclusive assessment would need to be established. Each assessment case would need to be dealt with individually, on a case-by-case basis, in relation to people with a disability. All responses stressed the need for all assessments to be carried out on an individualised, case-by-case basis. Participants also expressed they would feel comfortable with an officer that dealt specifically with people that had disabilities due to negative experiences previously with officials who lacked disability awareness.

*Have qualified people who are compassionate and don't treat a person as a number and properly assess each Individual case.*

Participants stated that they felt that people that had *"less than five years' prior contributions"* should also be entitled to 60% as they also would have financial obligations and may have medical issues that contribute to them being unable to hold down a long term Job. The six month period of reemployment was also very short: *"what happens if you cannot return to work then due to mental ill health, workplace injury etc."* They felt the period should be extended to a year.

- Good general support for the system of Pay-Related Benefits.
- Expand the system to include those who work part-time, the type of work often accessed by those with a disability.
- Any assessments be made for a person with a disability on a case-by-case basis with a welfare officer specifically trained and experienced in disability awareness.

## **Section 2 - STRAWMAN PROPOSALS**

This section also raised concerns about how it may impact people with disabilities. Participants said they were confused and concerned when it came to the treatment of self-employed people. All respondents felt that the exclusion of those who are self-employed was unfair:

*No they should be included. Self-employed people pay PRSI the same as anyone else. It seems strange and unnecessary to exclude them from this.*

This expands on the possible exclusion of people with a disability earlier as people with a disability, who are in employment, are more likely than those without a disability to be self-employed:

*At present, there is little information available about self-employed people with disabilities in Ireland, and it is not yet well-established as an employment option. Despite this, people with disabilities are more likely to be self-employed than people without disabilities. In Ireland, 19.2% of people with disabilities who are 'at work' are self-employed, while the figure for people without disabilities is just 16.8% (CSO, 2011). It is the same situation in many other countries, including the US and the UK. (SELF-EMPLOYMENT OPTIONS FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES GOOD PRACTICE REVIEW, Helen McQuillan, Brothers of Charity, p. 07).*

This means that the exclusion of self-employed people is more likely to negatively impact people with a disability. This criteria is likely to leave people with a disability in a situation where they are more likely to end up in limbo and below the poverty line.

It was also a concern that it would be necessary for applicants to have had consistent levels of work in the five year period leading up to the application. Many people with a disability need to work part time or may need to take breaks from employment as their condition fluctuates. Some of our participants were concerned at this approach as they have had experiences of work place contacts being terminated due to them having to take time off work because of their conditions. They were concerned that the PRB may not be available to them.

- Expand the system also to include those who are in self-employment in order to consider people with a disability who are self-employed.

## **Section 3 - STRAWMAN PROPOSALS**

Participants felt the criteria was fair and appreciated that such criteria being satisfied was important to prevent manipulation of the proposed benefit. However, they felt due to their disabilities and their inability to stay in employment for long periods that they could be left on the lower rate due to

breaks in contracts and having to look for new employment. This approach could be overly restrictive for people with disabilities. While it is an understandable approach, even a necessity, it would be better to take a more flexible, case-by-case approach for people with disabilities.

#### **Section 4 - PRB STRAWMAN – LEVEL OF BENEFIT STRAWMAN PROPOSALS**

Overall the participants felt that the benefit should start at a higher percentage and be reduced incrementally in the subsequent months e.g. first month at 100% partially funded by the previous employer, second month 90 %, Third month 80%, Fourth month 70%, Fifth month 60%, then staying at 60% until the payment expires.

Crucially, other participants had a very different approach in mind. They suggested that the payment be set at a lower rate and it be paid out to them as they retrained or upskilled. The payment would be paid out over the duration of the course thus ensuring they could afford to complete the course.

*Yes. It would be great to see more options open to people. If for example, you are made unemployed and you want to complete a training programme in order to upskill, could the PRB be paid over the duration of that programme at a reduced rate?*

This would provide people with the ‘cushion’ required to better support them in their attempts to re-educate themselves and return to the workforce better skilled.

There were other issues highlighted by the focus group participants regarding the amounts and rates of proposed payments under the scheme. Participants felt that 60% would represent a fair percentage, however when they were told that it would be capped at a maximum of €450 per week they felt that would be unfair: *“The maximum payment should be a true reflection of your previous earnings”*.

They were also concerned about the *“A weekly floor, or minimum payment, of €100 per week”* as they felt there was not enough clear information on it. Participants had deep concerns that there may not be proper provision for people with a disability due to possible interruptions in employment. They proposed that the minimum payment be set at an equivalent of the current rate of Job Seeker’s Allowance of €220: *“People will feel supported to seek employment. People will feel like they have been given breathing space to look for a job”*.

All participants reiterated the need for the scheme to be delivered on an individualised or case-by-case basis and stated that they would prefer a disability specific officer that has lived the experience of having a disability due to their previous experiences with department welfare offices *“not understanding”* their condition symptoms and feeling embarrassed speaking about them.

- Consideration be given to using payments as a method of support to people to retrain and upskill. Payments could be made at a reduced rate in order to last the duration of the course.
- Increase the minimum payment of €100 be increased in line with Jobseeker’s Allowance.
- Ensure that the system is administered on an individual basis with people who have a disability.

## Recommendations

- Carry out research as to how the new system may affect people with disabilities. How many people on the current system have a disability? How many people with a disability work part-time or are self-employed who may be excluded from the proposed new system?
- Consider extending the new system to include both part-time and self-employed workers to increase the level of the system's inclusivity.
- Allow payments to be used to facilitate further education and retraining to increase job seeking opportunities.
- Consider the sensitivities of each person's disability during their assessment. Provide specifically disability trained welfare officers to support in this.

### **About National Learning Network**

**National Learning Network (NLN)** provides a range of **flexible training courses** for people with a disability, mental health issues, illness or additional support needs. We are the largest private provider of personalised education, training and employment services in Ireland. We meet you where you are and get you where you want to be. We deliver our programmes through blended learning, which means a mixture of on-site and off-site training.

Our training programmes span many disciplines, including Art, Administration, Sports and Recreation, Graphic Design, Culinary Skills, Computing and Horticulture. We work with people who experience health conditions, illness, disability, mental health difficulty, trauma, addiction, economic isolation or challenging life circumstances. We support people to make successful transitions, whatever their stage in life.

We can help transition from school to the adult environment with access to vocational training, support with getting a job, recovery and wellness, improving people's health, enhancing the quality of life and achieving successful inclusion in the community. NLN's services are aligned with international best practice social and vocational rehabilitation models. You can talk to our experienced staff today about which course best suits your needs. You may want training to find a job, learn some new skills or go on to further education or apprenticeship. Call us today and learn to change your story.

Our programmes include work experience and offer nationally recognised qualifications, including **QQI**, **ECDL**, and **City and Guilds**. **These nationally recognised qualifications** ensure students are ready to get a job or further education. NLN provides personalised training, education, employment and community-based rehabilitation supports and services to people who need additional specialist support to progress their education, training or life plan.