RehabGroup

Investing in People, Changing Perspectives

RIGHTS TO REALITY
Actions for a Disability Budget

REHAB GROUP'S PRE-BUDGET SUBMISSION

2027

Pre-Budget Submission
August 2026

The Rehab Group

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Foreword

Laura Keane, CEO Rehab

As the new Chief Executive of Rehab Group, I am honoured to lead an organisation that has been supporting people with disabilities for more than 75 years. Every day, Rehab Group works alongside more than 12,800 children and adults with disabilities to help them live independently, achieve their goals and participate fully in their communities. Through RehabCare, National Learning Network, Employability and Social Enterprise, we provide high-quality health and social care, education, training and employment services, while also advocating for the rights and voices of the people who use our services and their families.

The common theme coming through from my meetings with the people who use our services across the country, their families and our staff is that people with disabilities continue to face barriers that limit their independence and opportunities. Poverty, inaccessible housing and transport, hidden healthcare costs, inadequate personal assistance and home support, and persistent barriers to employment mean that many are prevented from living the lives of their choosing. I am aware that participants in our focus groups spoke of feeling increasingly isolated and marginalised, with growing concerns about housing, mental health, the cost of healthcare and transport, and the lack of the supports needed to live independently.

At the same time, the community and voluntary organisations that provide almost 70% of Ireland's specialist disability services are under unprecedented pressure. Rising demand, workforce shortages, increasing regulatory requirements and years of underinvestment are placing the sustainability of essential services at risk. As one of Ireland's largest disability service providers, Rehab Group is committed to working in partnership with Government to develop sustainable funding models that enable providers to recruit and retain our people, innovate, expand services and respond to growing need.

Budget 2027 presents an important opportunity to turn Ireland's commitments under the National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People and the Programme for Government into meaningful action. We welcome the focus this Government has put on disability matters over the past eighteen months. The National Human Rights Strategy rightly adopts a whole-of-government approach, recognising that responsibility for advancing disability rights extends across all areas of Government. Ireland has the policy frameworks needed to advance disability rights. What is now required is sustained investment to deliver them.

This submission sets out practical proposals to reduce the cost of disability, strengthen independent living, improve access to education and employment, and ensure disability services are sustainable into the future. By investing in both people with disabilities and the services that support them, Government can help build an Ireland where everyone has the opportunity to live with dignity, autonomy and full inclusion.

Laura Keane
CEO
Rehab Group

Rehab Group at a glance

Rehab Group empowers people with disabilities to live independently, achieve their goals and participate fully in their communities

RehabCare

Investing in People, Changing Perspectives

179 Services

64 Residential Services/ Supported Accommodation

117 Day/Resource Centres

15 Respite Services

10 PA/Home Support Services

National Learning Network

Think *Possible*

89 Services

30 QQI Awards on offer

211 Accredited Programmes

RehabEnterprises

6 Locations in Ireland

157 Employees in Ireland

50% Employees have a disability

75+ Over 75 years of empowering people with disabilities and building a more inclusive Ireland

Care | Educate | Employ | Empower

12,800 Student/Services Users

276 Locations

3,014 Employees

Our Priorities for Budget 2027

1. Cost of Disability and Disability Poverty

Address the additional costs of disability and strengthen income supports.

2. Inclusive Employment

Remove barriers to employment and support people with disabilities to access, remain in and progress in work.

3. Independent Living

Increase investment in housing, Personal Assistance, transport and community supports.

4. Health & Wellbeing

Reduce hidden healthcare costs and improve access to timely, person-centred supports.

5. Education & Training

Expand access to specialist education and training and improve progression to further and higher education, training and employment.

6. Sustainable Disability Services & Effective Reform

Invest in the workforce, funding, and reform needed to deliver high-quality, sustainable disability services.

1. The Cost of Disability and Disability Poverty

UNCRPD Article 28 - Adequate standard of living and social protection

State Parties recognise the right of persons with disabilities to an adequate standard of living for themselves and their families, including adequate food, clothing and housing and to the continuous improvement of living conditions. People with disabilities should not be prevented from participating fully in society because of the additional costs of disability.

People with disabilities should not be prevented from participating fully in society because of the additional costs of disability.

Disabled people face unavoidable additional costs every day. These extra costs contribute to significantly higher levels of poverty and social exclusion. Too many people with disabilities face barriers that prevent them from living independently, participating fully in their communities and enjoying the same opportunities as everyone else.

In recent years Ireland has made progress, but much more needs to be done to deliver the rights set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

A joint Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) and the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) report in March 2025 showed that households with a disabled member face significant financial burdens related to disability and estimated the cost of disability to be between €488 and €555 per week[1]. Key additional costs identified by respondents to our focus groups include higher energy bills, healthcare and therapy costs, sometimes having to pay for private assessments; transport costs with a dependence on taxis when public transport is not accessible; home energy and heating costs; housing costs including costs for home adaptations; education costs including additional tutoring; communications equipment; disability aids and assistive technology.

People with disabilities in Ireland are substantially more at risk of poverty and exclusion than those without a disability.

CSO data shows that people who are unable to work because of a long-term health condition are much more likely to experience poverty and financial hardship. In 2025, almost 3 in 10 were living below the poverty line, while almost 4 in 10 could not afford basic everyday necessities (CSO, SILC 2025).

- Ireland has one of the highest rates of disability poverty in the EU. In 2024, 32.7% of people with a disability (activity limitation) were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, almost four percentage points above the EU average of 28.8%.[2]
- Almost one in three (28.4%) people unable to work because of a long-standing health condition or disability are at risk of poverty.
- 16% of people unable to work due to longstanding health problems (disability) live in consistent poverty, compared to the national average of 4%.[3]
- Almost four in ten (39.2%) people unable to work because of a long-standing health condition cannot afford basic everyday necessities.[4]

[1] Adjusting Estimates of Poverty for Cost of Disability, ESRI, 2025
[2] Eurostat July 2025
[3] CSO SILC Data 2025
[4] Eurostat April 2025

Cost of Disability Payment

We welcome the Government's commitment to introducing a Cost of Disability Payment in Budget 2027 and the preparatory work undertaken to date. Designing a payment that reflects the diverse needs of people with disabilities is a significant undertaking which must be informed by meaningful consultation and co-design with disabled people and their representative organisations. Budget 2027 should introduce an initial payment of at least €55 per week, alongside a commitment to further engagement on the long-term design of the scheme.

The experiences of people who use our services highlight the urgent need for action. Many described being unable to meet basic living costs without support from family, relying on food banks, or having to choose between essential expenses. Respondents in our focus groups explained,

> *"I can pay my rent but my food shopping has to be minimum. If I have an emergency, I'm in trouble," while another said, "I can pay for the essentials but there is nothing left for any extra like the internet."*

Others highlighted the high cost of disability-specific supports:

> *"There are a lot of sensory aids that would benefit me because of my autism but they are just too expensive."*

These additional costs undermine independence and leave many people struggling simply to get by.

The financial impact extends beyond essentials and affects people's ability to participate in everyday life. Participants described missing out on social activities, celebrations, and opportunities that many take for granted, contributing to isolation and poorer mental wellbeing. As one respondent reflected,

> *"When we were out for my parents' birthdays, I couldn't afford the meal so I got food from the kids' menu because it was cheaper."*

These experiences demonstrate that the cost of disability is about much more than income—it affects inclusion, dignity, and quality of life.

Participants were clear that the new payment should be permanent rather than a once-off measure. They noted that it ought to be available to all people with disabilities, including those in employment and those over 65,and designed so that it supports rather than discourages employment. However, addressing the cost of disability requires more than a single payment. It must be accompanied by coordinated action across Government to reduce the additional costs created by inaccessible services, housing, transport, and healthcare. We also believe the title "Cost of Disability Payment" should be reconsidered, as the additional costs people face arise not from disability itself but from barriers in society. A more inclusive name would better reflect a rights-based understanding of disability.

Increase Core Welfare Rates

Introducing the proposed Cost of Disability Payment alone will not be sufficient to lift people with disabilities out of poverty. People with disabilities continue to experience one of the highest **At Risk of Poverty (AROP)** rates in Ireland and many rely on core social welfare payments that are inadequate to meet the cost of a minimum acceptable standard of living. Budget 2027 should therefore increase core social welfare rates as part of a wider strategy to achieve income adequacy.

Emergency Payment in 2026

The withdrawal of one-off cost-of-living supports in Budget 2026 has had a significant impact on people with disabilities, many of whom rely on social protection payments while facing unavoidable disability-related costs. As a result, some people are up to **€1,264 worse off** over the course of the year. To provide immediate relief, the Government should introduce an emergency **€400 Cost of Disability Payment** for the remainder of 2026, ahead of the introduction of a permanent Cost of Disability Payment in Budget 2027.

Energy and Fuel Crisis

Rising energy and fuel prices are placing disproportionate pressure on people with disabilities, who already face higher living costs because of their disability. Many have greater energy needs as they spend more time at home, rely on electrically powered medical and mobility equipment, or need to keep their homes warmer for health reasons. As one service user explained,

"Winter months are hard and expensive... some days we have to go without and just light the fire in the sitting room only."

Another described the impossible choices they face:

"It becomes a decision about whether I eat or I travel. I can either buy food or fuel but not always both."

While the extension of the Fuel Allowance to the end of April was welcome, it should be extended until the end of May and made available year-round for people with additional heating needs. Rising fuel costs also increase the cost of travelling to healthcare appointments, work, education, and community activities, particularly for people in rural areas who have no accessible public transport alternative.

Our Priorities for Budget 2027

Recognise the additional costs of disability

- ✓ Introduce a €55 per week Cost of Disability Payment to recognise the unavoidable additional costs associated with disability.
- ✓ Provide for an Emergency Payment of €400 for the remainder of 2026 to help people with disabilities survive until a permanent Cost of Disability is introduced

Address Disability Poverty

- ✓ Increase core social welfare rates to protect people with disabilities from poverty and reflect rising living costs, with payments indexed over time to keep pace with inflation and wage growth.
- ✓ Social protection rates should be indexed to both inflation and wage growth.

Address energy poverty

- ✓ Address energy poverty by extending eligibility for Fuel Allowance, increasing the allowance and extending the period until at least the end of May.
- ✓ Introduce targeted supports for households facing higher energy costs because of disability.
- ✓ Make the Fuel Allowance available to anyone in receipt of disability-related social welfare payments

2. Inclusive Employment

UNCRPD Article 27- Work and Employment
States Parties recognise the right of persons with disabilities to work on an equal basis with others.

People with disabilities should have equal opportunities to access, remain in and progress in employment, with the supports needed to succeed.

Ireland has the lowest employment rate for disabled people in the EU (32%) and the widest disability employment gap (44%, compared with the EU average of 24%). Employment improves financial security and social inclusion, yet disabled people are nearly three times more likely to experience poverty and isolation because of disincentives and inadequate workplace supports.

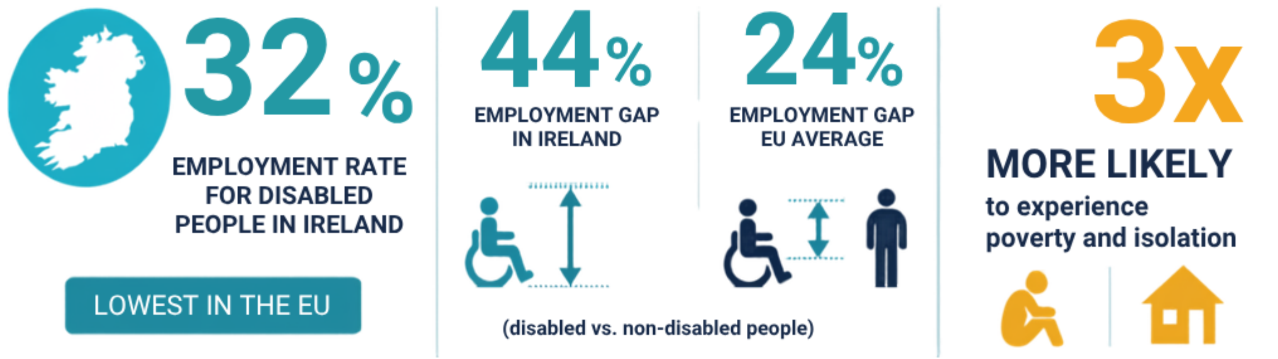
People with disabilities in Ireland are almost three times more likely to experience poverty and isolation than those around them who do not have a disability. The lack of employment and the resulting poverty can have a wide-ranging effect from physical health, mental well-being, and their general outlook on life.

According to Eurofound research (2024), people with disabilities who are unemployed are 13 percentage points less likely to feel optimistic than those who are in work, demonstrating the wider social and wellbeing benefits of employment.

Employment can only be part of the solution if people with disabilities can access quality, well-paid work. People with disabilities attain a lower level of education than the general population and as a result work in lower paid work which will not cover the cost of disability. If a disabled person does progress to higher paid work, they risk losing primary and secondary supports.

Ireland's Disability Employment Gap

Employment improves financial security, independence and social inclusion. Yet disabled people in Ireland face the **lowest employment rate in the EU** and are almost **three times more likely** to **experience poverty and isolation** due to barriers to work, disincentives, and inadequate workplace supports.



Income Disregard for Disability Allowance and Retention of Secondary Benefits

The earnings disregard for Disability Allowance in Ireland was last increased in Budget 2022 coming into effect in January 2023. The full disregard increased from €140 to €165. Full assessment begins at €375. Since then, there have been no further increases to the Disability Allowance earnings disregard thresholds.

This is in stark contrast to the Carer's Allowance disregard, which has been increased in consecutive budgets 2024, 2025, and 2026. The most recent Carer's Allowance disregard increase was from €625 to €1,000 for a single person and from €1,250 to €2,000 for a couple.

The situation is further compounded when a spouse's income is taken into account. The means test for Disability Allowance places couples at a significant disadvantage. While Carer's Allowance allows a couple to earn up to €2,000 per week before their payment is affected, the income disregards for Disability Allowance are far less generous. As a result, many people with disabilities see their payment reduced or even removed simply because they have a partner who is working expecting them to rely completely on their partner financially.

In addition to this disincentive, if disability allowance is removed, other supports such as the Free Travel Card are stopped immediately, while the anxiety of losing other supports such as the medical card is truly crushing.

Increasing the earnings disregards would make work pay by reducing the welfare trap and enabling people with disabilities to enter employment gradually without losing essential income supports. It would better reflect the additional costs of disability, keep pace with rising wages, and recognise that many people can only work limited or fluctuating hours. Higher disregards would also encourage labour market participation, support the achievement of the Government's disability employment targets, reduce administrative complexity for both claimants and the Department of Social Protection, and better align Ireland's social protection system with its commitments under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The income disregard for disability allowance must be significantly increased to ensure that people with disabilities are not disincentivised from seeking employment and are later encouraged to seek career progression.

Retention of Secondary Benefits

A major barrier to employment for people with disabilities is the fear of losing secondary benefits and supports. Each year Rehab Group prepares a Pre-Budget Submission and each year when discussing employment our service users describe the fear of losing secondary benefits. The potential loss of the medical card instils a prohibitive fear amongst people with disabilities who understand that such a loss, and the costs that would follow, would make employment pointless from a financial perspective.

The free travel scheme, which is essential for securing and maintaining employment, can be retained for a set period of time. However, the criteria for retaining the free travel scheme disincentivises career progression as even a slight increase in salary could mean the loss of an essential support. One respondent told our focus groups,

> ***"I'm worried about the risk of being punished and my allowance and bus pass being taken away."***

Research by the Geary Institute for Public Policy found that the structure of Disability Allowance can discourage people from increasing their working hours or taking up employment if they risk losing their payment and associated supports.[5] As a result, some people may limit their hours or leave the labour market altogether to protect their financial security. This research also reflects Eurofound's finding that people with disabilities are more likely to work reduced hours, highlighting the need for a social protection system that supports, rather than penalises, participation in employment. The risk of losing essential secondary supports discourages people from entering employment to begin with and disincentivises career progression.

[5] Assessing the policies to assist Disabled People to access Employment in Ireland - Edward Leonard, Geary Institute for Public Policy, 2023.

Wage Subsidy Scheme

The Wage Subsidy Scheme (WSS) is one of the Government's most important supports for helping employers recruit and retain people with disabilities. As a demand-led scheme, it encourages more inclusive workplaces by reducing the cost of employing people who may otherwise face barriers to securing employment.

Employers with more than one WSS employee are very much in the minority. Rehab Enterprises is one of seven employers employing more than 17 people on the WSS.

While the 2025 review of the WSS was a welcome step, further reform is needed to ensure the scheme is attractive to employers and delivers on its objective of increasing employment opportunities for people with disabilities. The following changes would strengthen the scheme and improve its effectiveness.

i. Reform of WSS Rates:

In Budget 2026, the **Wage Subsidy Scheme** moved from percentage-based subsidy rates to flat-rate increases across three employer bands. This resulted in employers with fewer than three employees with disabilities receiving a **€1.20 per hour** increase, while employers with 23 or more employees with disabilities received just **€0.55 per hour**. Such an approach undermines the objective of encouraging employers to recruit and retain more people with disabilities, as those employing the largest numbers received the smallest increase.

To strengthen the scheme, WSS rates should be reviewed annually and linked to increases in the National Minimum Wage. A graduated subsidy structure, based on a percentage of the NMW, should also be introduced across the three employer bands. This would better reflect the costs of inclusive employment, improve sustainability for employers and create a stronger incentive to employ more people with disabilities. We estimate that this would cost €3.6 million based on the numbers participating in 2025 and an average working week of 28.5 hours (see table below).

Moreover, the Wage Subsidy Scheme (WSS) rates should be reviewed and adjusted annually rather than every three years, as recommended in the 2025 Review. Under the current approach, the modest increases introduced in Budget 2026 would remain unchanged until at least 2029, despite rising labour costs and increases in the National Minimum Wage.

Wage Subsidy Scheme (WSS) – Comparison of 2025 Rates and Proposed 2027 Increases

NO. OF EMPLOYEES IN EACH BAND	NO. OF EMPLOYEES 2025 IN RECEIPT OF WSS	2025 RATE (per hour)	2026 COST BASED ON 28.5 HOURS PER WEEK	PROPOSED INCREASE BASED ON % OF 2027 NMW* 55% (1–6) 65% (7–16) 80% (17+)	TOTAL COST BASED ON 28.5 HOURS PER WEEK	VARIANCE ON 2026 COST
1 to 6	2,002	€7.50	€22,252,230	€8.25	€24,477,453	€2,225,223 ↑
7 to 16	182	€8.50	€2,292,654	€9.75	€2,629,809	€337,155 ↑
17+	354	€10.00	€5,246,280	€12.00	€6,295,536	€1,049,256 ↑
TOTAL	**2,538**	–	**€29,791,164**	–	**€33,402,798**	**€3,611,634** ↑

Based on 85 cent increase in NMW to €15

ii. Increase the grant for Strand 3 Employment Assistance Officers to €60,000

The Strand 3 grant of €30,000 to support employers in hiring an Employment Assistance Officer (WorkPath Facilitator in Rehab Enterprises) has remained unchanged for over 20 years, despite significant increases in employment and operating costs.

WorkPath Facilitators play a vital role supporting people with disabilities to access, retain, and progress in employment by providing one-to-one support, workplace problem-solving, disability awareness, and liaison with managers to ensure appropriate workplace accommodations are in place. These supports improve employee retention, productivity and workplace inclusion while helping employers create more inclusive workplaces. Increasing the Strand 3 grant to €60,000 would better reflect the true cost of delivering this essential service and strengthen employers' capacity to recruit and retain people with disabilities.

iii. Reduce the hours required to qualify for WSS from 15 to 8 hours per week

The minimum-hours requirement for the Wage Subsidy Scheme should be reduced from **15 to 8 hours per week** to remove an unnecessary barrier to employment. An 8-hour threshold would align the WSS with other Irish disability employment programmes, including Work and Access and EmployAbility, which already recognise 8 hours as meaningful labour market participation. It would also better reflect evidence-based supported employment models, which focus on individual capability rather than minimum working hours. Reducing the threshold would create employment opportunities for people with higher support needs or fluctuating conditions, encourage greater employer participation, and support Ireland's commitment to increasing disability employment in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Individual Placement Service

Individual Placement and Support (IPS) is an internationally recognised, evidence-based supported employment model that helps people experiencing mental health challenges secure and sustain competitive employment. Funded by the HSE, IPS is delivered by National Learning Network (NLN) in partnership with Community Mental Health Teams across 20 locations in Ireland. Employment Specialists are embedded within multidisciplinary mental health teams, providing person-centred, individualised support to jobseekers while working closely with employers to achieve sustainable employment outcomes that contribute to recovery, inclusion, and improved quality of life.

Since 2019, NLN's IPS service has received 4,371 referrals of people with severe and enduring mental health issues, looking to explore the world of work and supported 1,566 those into paid employment.

The current level of funding to manage the IPS within NLN is not nearly sufficient to cover core costs and is based on temporary funding levels agreed in 2018.

To continue providing high-quality, high-fidelity IPS services and to meet the growing demand, a revised and sustainable funding model is urgently required. For **Budget 2027**, we are seeking a 25% increase in the funding for it to remain a viable programme. We are also calling for the service to be expanded across the country, ensuring equal access for all regardless of where they live.

Work Ready Programme

The Work Ready Programme is a pilot scheme (10 participants) with the Department of Social Protection to provide a six-month work placement for people with a disability. This programme uniquely offers a part-time placement option for those unable to sustain employment full time. Rehab is not directly paid by the State for this programme. We recruit the participants, provide employment supports to the person and disability awareness training/supports to the employer. Participants maintain their social welfare entitlements and receive a top up like those on a full-time placement. Participating host companies pay Rehab a nominal monthly fee for our support services.

The first phase of the pilot has been successful with 80% of participants moving into employment in their host company. A further 6 companies have been identified as interested in participating for the next intake. **For Budget 2027** we are requesting that the Work Ready Programme be mainstreamed and expanded.

Work and Access Scheme

The Work and Access Scheme was introduced to replace the underused Reasonable Accommodation Fund (RAF), whose Workplace Adaptation Grant reached an estimated 0.01% of Ireland's 300,000 employers. While uptake has improved following a significant national awareness campaign, it remains low. By August 2025, just 132 payments, totalling €227,848, had been approved under the scheme. This figure includes supports previously provided through the RAF and the Disability Awareness Support Scheme, suggesting employer engagement remains limited despite increased promotion. The scheme provides valuable supports, including workplace needs assessments, work coaches, and assistive technology, yet feedback from people using our services indicates that many employers remain unaware of the supports available. Greater promotion, alongside targeted disability awareness training, is needed to increase employer participation and improve employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

Employer Disability Awareness

A lack of disability awareness among employers remains a significant barrier to employment for people with disabilities. Participants in our focus groups consistently described being judged on their disability rather than their skills and potential. The National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People recognises this challenge and commits to a national media campaign to improve attitudes towards employing disabled people and increase awareness of employment supports. While welcome, awareness campaigns alone will not address the misconceptions and unconscious bias that continue to limit employment opportunities. Dedicated disability awareness training is needed to equip employers with the knowledge and confidence to recruit, retain and support employees with disabilities. As one participant observed, “Employers need a greater understanding of people with disability, and their ability and capability,” while another said, “It’s the lack of disability awareness that’s the problem.” Such training would challenge stereotypes, improve understanding of reasonable accommodations and support more inclusive recruitment and workplace practices.

Our Priorities for Budget 2027

Make work pay

- ✓ Increase income disregards and reform means testing to ensure employment always pays.
- ✓ Protect access to secondary benefits for people with disabilities moving into employment.

Reform the Wage Subsidy Scheme

- ✓ Index, or review annually, Wage Subsidy Scheme rates in line with the National Minimum Wage, alongside a graduated support payment structure that recognises employers providing higher levels of disability employment.
- ✓ Reduce the hours required to qualify for WSS from 15 to 8 hours per week
- ✓ Increase the grant for Strand 3 Employment Assistance Officers to €60,000

Provide Meaningful Supports for Employers

- ✓ Increase funding for Individual Placement and Support (IPS) services by at least 25% to ensure its future viability and make it available across all local mental health services.
- ✓ Create structured pathways from placements to paid employment for people with disabilities through the expansion and mainstreaming of the pilot Work Placement Experience Programme with Rehab’s Work Ready Programme.
- ✓ Expand disability awareness training to improve employer confidence and support inclusive recruitment and retention practices.
- ✓ Fully utilise Article 20 of the EU Public Procurement Directive to create more employment opportunities through public procurement.

3. Independent Living: Housing, PA Supports, Transport and Community Participation

UNCRPD Article 19 - Living independently and being included in the community

States Parties to the present Convention recognise the equal right of all persons with disabilities to live in the community, with choices equal to others, and shall take effective and appropriate measures to facilitate full enjoyment by persons with disabilities of this right and their full inclusion and participation in the community.

People with disabilities should have the opportunity to live independently, exercise choice and control over their lives, and participate fully in their communities with the supports they need.

Independent living is a fundamental right under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. However, many people with disabilities continue to face significant barriers to living independently, including a shortage of accessible housing, insufficient Personal Assistance and community supports, inaccessible transport, and limited access to local services.

Housing

Access to independent and assisted living is increasingly out of reach for many people with disabilities as a result of Ireland's housing crisis. Despite the publication of the National Housing Strategy for Disabled People 2022–2027, progress has been slow, with little clarity on implementation funding. According to the National Disability Authority, almost one in four adults over 25 still living with their parents has a disability, while more than 1,200 people under 65 continue to live in nursing homes designed for older people—settings that are inconsistent with the right to independent living.

People who use our services described significant barriers in accessing both social and private housing. Many reported struggling to navigate complex application processes for local authority housing and the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP), often without adequate support. As one focus group respondent explained,

> *"It is difficult to apply for the housing list and housing schemes; more information and support is needed to advise people in this process."*

Others spoke of spending years on waiting lists with little progress.

For those seeking private rented accommodation, the challenges are even greater. A limited supply of accessible homes, escalating rents and the high cost of adaptations have left many unable to live independently. As one participant reflected,

> *"When I was renting it was very expensive... I have had to move back home now because I couldn't afford to keep paying the high rent."*

These experiences illustrate that, for many disabled people, the housing crisis has become a crisis of independence, underlining the urgent need to accelerate implementation of the National Housing Strategy and expand the supply of affordable, accessible housing.

Supported Accommodation

People with intellectual disabilities continue to face significant barriers to accessing affordable, accessible housing. RehabCare Residential Services supports people to live as independently as possible in their communities, with person-centred supports that promote choice, autonomy, and community participation. As one tenant described,

> *"I like my independence. They help me here to become as independent as I can."*

Newgrove Housing Association, which is part of Rehab Group, provides homes for people with disabilities in more than 50 locations throughout Ireland.

The current Capital Assistance Scheme (CAS), which funds housing for people with disabilities, is not operating effectively. The prohibition on purchasing second-hand homes limits the ability of Approved Housing Bodies to respond quickly to urgent housing need, while unrealistic property price ceilings and lengthy approval processes make it difficult to secure suitable homes in a competitive market. In addition, the absence of funding for ongoing maintenance and long-term capital investment creates significant sustainability challenges for housing providers.

Reforming the Capital Assistance Scheme is essential to increase the supply of accessible housing and ensure Approved Housing Bodies can continue to deliver high-quality homes that enable people with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in their communities.

Personal Assistance and Homecare

People who use our services consistently report that they do not receive enough Personal Assistance (PA) and home support hours to live independently. Many described struggling to manage everyday life and being unable to participate in their communities because of limited support. As one service user explained,

> *"I need more P.A. hours. It would help me to do more things out in the community. Currently there is no cover if my P.A. is out sick or on holidays – this needs to change."*

These experiences demonstrate that progress towards independent living is being undermined by the continued absence of adequate, rights-based PA supports.

Current investment also falls well short of identified need. The Government's Action Plan for Disability Services (2024–2026) estimated that an additional 800,000 Personal Assistance hours and 110,000 Home Support hours would be required by 2026. However, the additional hours provided in Budgets 2025 and 2026 fall significantly short of these targets, leaving the commitments in the Action Plan out of reach and limiting opportunities for disabled people to live independently in their own homes and communities.

Home Care Support and Personal Assistance are distinct models of support with different purposes and principles. Home Care Support has traditionally been delivered through a medical model focused on assistance in the home, whereas Personal Assistance is rooted in the social model of disability, promoting independent living, choice, control, and full participation in society. While greater flexibility within Home Care Support is welcome, we are concerned that current proposals risk blurring the distinction between these two models and could result in Personal Assistance being subsumed within a broader Home Care Support framework.

Home Care providers are facing increasing costs associated with meeting statutory requirements and implementing the Department of Health's new Home Care regulations, including compliance with HIQA standards. While robust regulatory standards are necessary and indeed welcome, they must be matched by sustainable funding. Without an increase in the hourly funding rate and a mechanism to reflect future regulatory and cost pressures, community and voluntary providers will struggle to maintain and expand services.

Delivering sustainable Home Care and Personal Assistance services also depends on a stable, fairly rewarded workforce. Budget 2027 should ensure that Section 39 workers continue to benefit from the WRC Agreement and that future funding models, including home care authorisation schemes, support pay equity, and do not disadvantage community and voluntary providers. Funding arrangements should strengthen the long-term sustainability of these providers, enabling them to invest in workforce capacity, meet growing demand, and comply with regulatory requirements, rather than creating incentives that increase reliance on commercial provision.

Transport

UNCRPD Article 9 - Accessibility: States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communications.

Transport is a fundamental enabler of independent living, providing access to education, employment, healthcare, and community participation. However, people who use Rehab Group services consistently identify accessible transport as one of the greatest barriers to living independently. Buses, accessible taxis and trains are the most commonly used services, yet many reported that these are unavailable, unreliable or unaffordable, particularly in rural areas. Staff also highlighted that poor transport limits access to education, day services and therapeutic activities, with one noting that

“we have potential students in rural areas who are not able to access public transport and would like to access our services – this is a big issue.”

Affordability was a major concern. Many people reported that Free Travel Passes are not accepted on all services, particularly Local Link and private operators, leaving some to pay up to €80 per month to attend essential services. As one focus group respondent explained,

“It’s disappointing that our service is provided by Local Link and yet they will not accept my free travel card... Some people are being charged up to €80 per month to travel to their day service. It is encouraging people to stay at home more and come in less days to save money. This is not right.”

The closure of the Mobility Allowance and Motorised Transport Grant in 2013, without replacement schemes, has further reduced transport options, while many also called for subsidised driving lessons, insurance, and vehicle costs. As one participant stated,

“They should subsidise driving, make it affordable for us to learn to drive and get cars, we would be independent then.”

Accessibility remains a significant challenge across the transport network. Service users described difficulties including limited wheelchair spaces on buses, steep train ramps, broken lifts at rail stations, inaccessible bus stops and footpaths, and inadequate visual and audio announcements. As participants emphasised, accessible vehicles alone are not enough if the surrounding infrastructure is inaccessible. One wheelchair user summed up this experience:

“We are lucky to have public transport on our doorstep, but the footpaths are what are causing us the issues.”

These findings demonstrate that improving transport requires investment in affordability, and supporting infrastructure to enable genuine independent living.

Assistive Technology

UNCRPD Article 26 Habilitation and Rehabilitation
States Parties shall promote the availability, knowledge and use of assistive devices and technologies, designed for persons with disabilities, as they relate to habilitation and rehabilitation.

Assistive Technology (AT) is an umbrella term for assistive products, equipment, and systems that enhance learning, working, and daily living for persons with disabilities. Assistive products can enhance a person’s functioning related to cognition, communication, hearing, vision, mobility, and self-care.

Access to assistive technology is fundamental to the rights of people with disabilities to live independently, participate fully in education, employment and community life, and enjoy the highest attainable standard of health.

Appropriate assistive technology can transform lives by increasing independence, reducing reliance on paid supports, preventing unnecessary hospital admissions, and enabling people to remain in their own homes for longer.

However, access in Ireland remains inconsistent, with significant variation in eligibility, funding, assessment, provision, maintenance, and replacement depending on where a person lives or the service they access.

The publication of the WHO Assistive Technology Capacity Assessment (ATA-C) for Ireland provides a clear roadmap for reform, identifying the need for a coordinated national programme, sustainable investment, stronger governance, and a skilled workforce to deliver equitable access across the lifespan. Budget 2027 should provide the funding needed to begin implementation of the review's recommendations, ensuring that assistive technology is recognised as an essential investment in independence, inclusion, and participation rather than a discretionary support.

Community Participation

People with disabilities have the right to participate fully in family, community, and civic life, yet inaccessible environments and limited community supports continue to create significant barriers to inclusion. Investment in accessible public spaces, transport infrastructure and local services is essential to enable independent living and equal participation. Equally, community-based disability supports play a vital role in preventing isolation, strengthening natural supports and enabling people to engage in education, employment, recreation, and community life.

There is also an urgent need to expand specialist diversion programmes and embed neurodiversity-informed approaches across policing and the criminal justice system to ensure people with intellectual disabilities and neurodivergent people receive appropriate support rather than unnecessary criminal justice intervention. Investing in inclusive communities benefits not only people with disabilities but society as a whole by promoting participation, preventing crisis, and reducing demand for more intensive and costly services.

People with disabilities have the right to participate fully in democratic life - as voters, advocates, and elected representatives. Budget 2027 should make provision for accessible civic participation/voter education initiatives that facilitate their participation in public decision-making at local, national, and European level Support should be provided to enable disabled people to develop leadership and advocacy skills and to stand for election at local, national, and European level.

Our Priorities for Budget 2027

Increase access to accessible housing

- ✓ Increase investment in accessible housing and fully implement the Housing Strategy for Disabled People.
- ✓ Ensure the Capital Assistance Scheme (CAS) is fully responsive to current requirements.
- ✓ Increase Housing Adaptation Grant limits, reform the means test, and reduce the administrative burden.

Expand independent living supports

- ✓ Increase investment in Personal Assistance and home support through sustainable funding models that reflect the full cost of service delivery, including appropriate hourly rates, uphold the WRC Agreement, support pay equity, and protect community and voluntary providers.
- ✓ Increase investment in assistive technology, aligned with the recommendations of the World Health Organization (WHO) Global Report on Assistive Technology, and the recommendations of the WHO Assistive Technology Capability Assessment (ATA-C) to improve access, independence, and participation for people with disabilities.

Improve accessible transport

- ✓ Increase investment in accessible public transport, expand rural transport services, and reduce the cost of accessible transport.
- ✓ Introduce a replacement Mobility Support Scheme and support driving as a pathway to independence.

Improve accessibility in local communities

- ✓ Provide additional funding to local authorities to improve the accessibility of public buildings, streets, transport infrastructure, and local services.
- ✓ Increase investment in community-based disability supports that enable people with disabilities to participate fully in family and community life.
- ✓ Increase investment in specialist diversion programmes and neurodiversity-informed policing to reduce criminal justice involvement for people with intellectual disabilities and neurodivergent people
- ✓ Provide dedicated funding to promote the political participation of people with disabilities through accessible voter education, civic leadership programmes, and practical supports to enable people to stand for election.

4. Health and Wellbeing

UNCRPD Article 25 - Access to Quality Health Care
States Parties recognise that persons with disabilities have the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health without discrimination on the basis of disability. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure access for persons with disabilities to health services that are gender-sensitive, including health-related rehabilitation.

People with disabilities should have timely access to the healthcare and supports they need to achieve the highest attainable standard of health and wellbeing throughout their lives.

People with disabilities experience poorer health outcomes than the general population. Despite holding a medical card, they also face significant hidden healthcare costs, including GP visits, prescription charges, therapies, specialist equipment, and transport. Many experience long waits for disability services, therapies, respite, and home supports, while at the same time providers face increasing workforce and regulatory pressures.

As Ireland's population ages, there is also an urgent need to plan for increasing demand for disability and older person's services, ensuring people continue to receive the supports they need throughout their lives. Budget 2027 should reduce financial barriers to healthcare, improve access to disability services and ensure people receive the right support at every stage of life.

Hidden Healthcare Costs

Many people who use our services continue to face significant hidden healthcare costs despite holding a medical card. Essential expenses such as dental treatment, prescription charges, injections, chiropody, medical certificates, and supporting letters place an additional financial burden on people with disabilities. Some service users also report being incorrectly charged for services that should be covered, including blood tests, but often lack the confidence to challenge these charges. As one person explained,

> *"It's €20 for bloods and €30 for an injection, the medical card doesn't cover enough,"*

while another noted,

> *"It's €20 to get a sick cert and €30 to get bloods done."*

Long waiting lists across the health system further increase these hidden costs. Faced with lengthy delays for GP appointments, specialist consultations, and treatments, many people are forced to pay privately or rely on family members for financial support. One service user described how delayed access to a GP resulted in an avoidable hospital admission:

> *"It took me a week to see the GP. I ended up in Portlaoise Hospital; this wouldn't have happened if I could see my GP."*

Participants also highlighted concerns about prescription charges, the affordability of medications not covered by the medical card, and uncertainty around charges for essential supports such as monitored dosage trays. These experiences demonstrate that people with disabilities continue to face substantial healthcare costs and access barriers that compound the wider cost of disability.

Dental Services

Access to affordable dental care remains a significant challenge for people who use our services, despite many holding medical cards. Participants consistently reported long waiting lists and major difficulties finding dentists who accept medical card patients, particularly in rural areas. This reflects a wider national crisis, with the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health reporting that the medical card dental scheme is "haemorrhaging" dentists, leaving many card holders unable to access timely treatment.

For many people with disabilities, the lack of participating dentists means travelling long distances or facing prolonged delays for essential care. As one service user explained,

"I have no dentist in my area. I would have to travel an hour to the nearest one and they don't take medical cards."

Even where a participating dentist is available, many practices are closed to new patients or have waiting lists stretching over several years. Another participant described the consequences:

"It's €1,200 to get my wisdom teeth out. If I go with my medical card it's years to wait. My gums are rotting and I have to take antibiotics regularly."

The impact of poor access to dental care can be severe. Research from the Intellectual Disability Supplement to the Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (IDS-TILDA) highlights significantly poorer oral health outcomes among people with intellectual disabilities, including much higher rates of complete tooth loss and lower rates of receiving dentures compared with the general population. These findings, together with the experiences of our service users, demonstrate the urgent need to strengthen the medical card dental scheme and ensure people with disabilities can access timely, affordable and appropriate dental treatment.

Mental Health Services

Mental health was one of the most consistent issues raised by people who use our services and by frontline staff. People with disabilities experience significantly higher rates of mental ill-health than the general population yet continue to face greater barriers in accessing timely and appropriate supports. Participants described long waiting lists, limited availability of services and significant difficulties accessing assessments, counselling, and treatment. As one person explained,

"I was waiting 1.5 years for CAMHS. They didn't get back until it was an emergency and I was in hospital."

Too often, people reported that support was only available once they had reached crisis point or could afford to pay privately.

Accessibility remains a major barrier to mental health care. People with intellectual disabilities, deaf people, and those with sensory or physical disabilities encounter communication barriers, inaccessible information, and physical obstacles when trying to access services. For many, geography also compounds these challenges, particularly where public services are unavailable locally.

These barriers mean that many people with disabilities are excluded from the mental health supports they need.

Frontline staff highlighted that disability services are increasingly filling gaps left by under-resourced mental health services, despite not being funded to do so. They emphasised the need not only for greater investment in specialist mental health services, but also for better follow-up supports to ensure people are not lost to the system. Participants also stressed that promoting good mental health requires more than clinical care, calling for investment in community, social, and sporting activities that reduce isolation and support wellbeing.

We welcome the long-awaited enactment of the Mental Health Act (2026). Budget 2027 should ensure that its implementation is fully resourced, ensuring involvement of people with lived and living experience in governance, implementation, and evaluation.

Day Services

Day services play a vital role in enabling people with disabilities to live independently, develop skills, build relationships, and participate fully in their communities. Guided by the principles of *New Directions*, Rehab Group's Day services are person-centred, rooted in local communities and focused on supporting people to achieve their individual goals and aspirations. Sustained investment in high-quality day services is essential to support independent living, promote social inclusion and wellbeing, and provide vital support to families and carers.

Multi-Disciplinary Teams

People with disabilities have the right to timely, high-quality, coordinated healthcare and rehabilitation services that enable them to achieve and maintain independence throughout their lives. However, access to multidisciplinary supports remains inconsistent and inadequate, despite Government commitments to roll out Multi-Disciplinary Teams (MDTs) nationally. Significant gaps persist, particularly for young people transitioning from school to adult services, leaving many without access to essential therapies and specialist supports.

Current funding models do not provide many Section 39 disability providers with the resources required to employ multidisciplinary professionals directly, while local Young Adult Teams do not have sufficient capacity to meet demand.

Investment in multidisciplinary teams is an investment in people's rights, independence and wellbeing. Early access to physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, psychology and counselling helps people maintain function, maximise independence and prevent deterioration, reducing the need for more intensive and costly interventions over time. Budget 2027 should ensure disability funding models provide equitable access to MDT supports across the lifespan, enabling Section 39 organisations to recruit and retain the specialist staff needed to deliver high-quality, person-centred services.

Funding for people who acquire disability/present later in life

While Budget 2026 provided a welcome extension of day service funding to support 50 older adults for the first time, provision remains overwhelmingly focused on school leavers. As a result, many people who acquire a disability later in life, or whose needs emerge or increase with age, continue to be excluded from the specialist supports they require. This must be addressed more comprehensively in Budget 2026.

Buildings and Transport

Lease rental funding from the HSE for new service locations does not meet the market rents and rates. Many premises where day services are located are old and in need of substantial refurbishment. As demand for day services increases, funding must be made available for the provision of fit-for-purpose buildings.

Transport is not part of a school leaver's package when they come into a day service. The HSE frequently provide money for transport for individuals in the form of a once off payment for a vehicle. However, there are no running costs - fuel, tax, insurance, upkeep costs granted in these once off requests making them ineffective.

Respite Services

Respite services are a cornerstone of support for people with disabilities and their families, yet they remain chronically underfunded and inaccessible to many who need them. Current waiting lists are unacceptably long, with provision remaining patchy and inconsistent across the country. Budget 2027 presents a critical opportunity to deliver on the commitments in the Programme for Government by expanding respite services to meet growing demand and address significant unmet need.

RehabCare, in partnership with the HSE provides centre-based respite services for children and adults with disabilities in a welcoming, home-from-home environment. Planned respite gives people with disabilities opportunities to build independence, confidence, and social connections, while providing families with meaningful breaks from their caring responsibilities. Timely access to respite helps sustain family carers, reduces stress, and prevents burnout, enabling people with disabilities to remain living at home and in their communities for longer. It also supports better long-term planning by responding to immediate needs while informing future service provision.

Investment in respite is both a rights-based and cost-effective intervention. When families are unable to access timely support, caring arrangements can reach crisis point, increasing the likelihood of emergency admissions or the need for full-time residential care. Expanding respite capacity will improve quality of life for people with disabilities and their families, strengthen the sustainability of informal care, and reduce demand for more intensive and costly services.

Changing Needs and Ageing Out

People with disabilities are living longer than ever before, making it essential that Government plans for the changing needs of an ageing population. Current policy has not kept pace with this demographic shift, despite Ireland's obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to uphold the rights to independent living, community inclusion, and appropriate health and social care throughout life. People who use our services and frontline staff consistently identified ageing as a source of anxiety, particularly the fear of what will happen when ageing parents are no longer able to provide care. The current National Positive Ageing Strategy is outdated and does not adequately address the rights and support needs of older people with disabilities.

Ageing with a disability presents unique challenges. Many people experience age-related conditions earlier than the general population, yet current funding and service models create significant gaps after the age of 65. Disability-specific supports, including Personal Assistance, become more difficult to access, while people who acquire a disability later in life may be excluded from specialist disability services. Planning for later life must be person-centred, enabling people to remain in their own homes, communities, and existing services through investment in accessible housing, Personal Assistance, home support, community therapies, transport, and multidisciplinary care.

Budget 2027 should provide for a new rights-based strategy for older people with disabilities, with SMART targets, dedicated funding and clear accountability. The strategy should establish a new social contract for care, recognising the rights to receive, provide and decline care, while clarifying the respective responsibilities of Government, communities and families in the context of changing demographics and an ageing population. In this way we can prepare to meet the changing needs of an ageing population while upholding the rights of people with disabilities throughout their lives.

Our Priorities for Budget 2027

Reduce hidden healthcare costs

- ✓ Expand Medical Card Coverage to include essential services like full dental care and reduce waiting times to see consultants.
- ✓ Remove hidden healthcare costs by ensuring that routine medical treatments and medical devices, blood tests, injections, and dental treatments are fully covered by the medical card.

Improve access to timely supports

- ✓ Increase investment in Multidisciplinary Teams (MDT) to ensure timely assessment and intervention.
- ✓ Fund equitable access to high-quality MDT services across the lifespan, regardless of age, location or service status.
- ✓ Expand respite services nationally to meet growing demand and unmet need.
- ✓ Invest in more specialised and community-based mental health supports, particularly for youth and neurodivergent individuals.

Plan for ageing and changing support needs

- ✓ Plan for transition to older person's services, with the option to remain in disability services, in line with individual will and preferences, whilst ensuring funding is in place for those who acquire a disability later in life or who present later with a need for day-services.
- ✓ Develop a new rights-based strategy for older people with SMART targets and clear accountability, defining a new social contract in response to changing demographics and the growing pressures on ageing carers.

5. Education and Training

UNCRPD Article 24 - Education
States Parties recognise the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realising this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning.

People with disabilities should have equitable access to high-quality education, training and lifelong learning, with the supports they need to achieve their full potential and progress to further education, training and employment.

Education and training are fundamental to independence, inclusion, and employment. However, many people with disabilities continue to face barriers to accessing specialist education and training, including limited capacity, outdated funding models and insufficient investment in assistive technology and specialist supports.

National Learning Network (NLN) is a progressive leader in the delivery of personalised education, training, and development opportunities for people with disabilities or people requiring additional supports, leading to further education, higher education, and employment. We are primarily funded through 16 Education and Training Boards, the HSE, and some Higher Education Institutions.

NLN's portfolio of services includes ETB Funded Specialist Training Provision (STP), HSE Day Services and Rehabilitative Training (RT), Contracted Training, Education Support Services, and Individual Placement and Support (IPS). All provision is accredited (QQI, City & Guilds, ICDL) and students achieve positive progressive outcomes to higher levels of education, training, and employment.

Positive progress to higher levels of training, higher education, and employment is a key focus. In the last five years, 4,760 students nationally were supported into employment or progressed to further education. Sustained investment is needed to ensure specialist education and training providers can continue to meet growing demand and deliver positive outcomes for people with disabilities.

National Learning Network welcomes the publication in May 2026 of ***Creating Futures, Further Education and Training Strategy (2026-2030)*** and was pleased to contribute to its development. The strategy provides a strong framework for building a more inclusive, innovative and responsive FET system, with a clear focus on equipping learners with the skills needed to participate fully in society and the economy. As one of the main providers of Specialist Training supporting people with disabilities across Ireland, NLN is an integral part of the FET ecosystem and is well placed to contribute to the successful delivery of the strategy's ambitions, particularly for students with disabilities.

Budget 2027 should ensure that STP providers have the sustainable funding and capacity required to deliver high-quality, person-centred programmes and to play their full role in creating a more inclusive and accessible FET system. This will require a review of the funding model.

Funding Model Review

Core per capita funding provided through the ETBs and HSE has remained at 2011 levels for more than 15 years, with the sole exception of funding to meet nationally agreed staff pay awards. During this period, providers have absorbed substantial increases in operational, regulatory and programme delivery costs while continuing to deliver high-quality, specialist education and training. Similarly, although the RT fee was standardised nationally in 2024, it continues to fall well short of the actual cost of providing services and compares unfavourably with funding provided for comparable disability school-leaver services.

The reviews of **Specialist Training Provision** and **Rehabilitative Training** represent an important opportunity to strengthen specialist Further Education and Training for people with disabilities. While the RT Review has been completed and the STP Review is expected to progress to stakeholder engagement shortly, there remains little clarity regarding the future role of Specialist Training Provision within the wider FET ecosystem or the implementation timeline for either review. This uncertainty is creating significant challenges for providers seeking to plan, invest, and respond to growing student demand.

Budget 2027 should not delay action pending the implementation of the STP and RT reviews. Sustainable funding is required now to protect existing services, support quality provision, and ensure specialist providers can continue to contribute fully to the ambitions of the **Creating Futures FET Strategy**. This requires a funding model that reflects the true cost of delivering specialist education and training. It should also address the longstanding absence of capital investment in Specialist Training Provision which has seen no significant investment since the cessation of European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) support in 2001. While the HSE does provide some capital investment for school leaver services, dedicated capital investment is needed to modernise specialist training facilities, expand capacity, and provide accessible learning environments, assistive technology, sensory spaces and other specialist infrastructure that enable learners with disabilities to achieve their full potential.

Transitions in Education for Students with Disabilities

As Government develops a National Policy on Transitions in Education for Students with Disabilities, Budget 2027 must provide dedicated investment to support transitions as a continuous life-cycle process rather than a series of isolated events. The emerging policy recognises the importance of a whole-system approach, continuity of supports, inclusion, collaboration, and proactive planning across key transition points.

For many young people with disabilities, transitions remain characterised by gaps in support, fragmented services, and missed opportunities. Effective transition planning should begin early and continue throughout a person’s journey from school into further and higher education, training, employment, and adult life. Rehab Group is calling for investment in five key areas:

- **Transition planning and coordination** across all educational stages, ensuring that transitions are planned as a process rather than addressed only at the point of change.
- **Career guidance provision in second-level special schools and special education settings**, where many students currently lack access to the guidance and vocational planning supports available to their peers.
- **Continuity of health and therapeutic supports beyond the age of 18**, ending the “cliff edge” experienced by many young people as they move from child to adult services, particularly in physiotherapy, occupational therapy, psychology, speech and language therapy, and behaviour support.
- **Digital Assistive Technology**, including assessment, provision, training and ongoing support, recognising its critical role in education, independence, communication, and employment outcomes.
- **Employer capacity-building initiatives** to support inclusive recruitment, workplace accessibility, career progression, work placements, and pathways to sustainable employment for people with disabilities.

Investment in transitions is an investment in educational achievement, employment participation, and independent living. The successful implementation of a National Transitions Policy will require a coordinated, cross-departmental funding commitment that ensures people with disabilities are supported to achieve their full potential at every stage of life.

Our Priorities for Budget 2027

Review Funding Model

- ✓ Review the Funding Model for Specialist Training Provision & Rehabilitative Training
- ✓ Ensure funding models reflect the true cost of delivering specialist education and training, including core staffing and operational costs.
- ✓ Replace the utilisation-based funding model with a fit-for-purpose model for Specialist Training Provision and Rehabilitative Training indexed annually in line with CPI to allow for inflationary costs.
- ✓ Extend capital investment equitably across all FET providers to support a consistent student experience

Invest in Student Supports

- ✓ Provide dedicated funding for lifelong transition planning and supports, recognising that successful transitions require coordinated action across education, health, housing, employment, and social services.
- ✓ Fund dedicated career guidance provision in special schools to address a critical gap in transition planning and improve lifelong education and employment outcomes for disabled learners.
- ✓ Invest in the early intervention supports needed for 14–17-year-olds with additional support needs who leave or are at risk of leaving the school system.

Resource and Align Strategies

- ✓ Implement and resource the recommendations of the forthcoming STP Review and the 2025 RT Review, aligned with SOLAS' Creating Futures: Further Education and Training Strategy 2026–2030, ensuring investment is focussed on learner needs and delivers improved outcomes for students with disabilities.

6. Sustainable Disability Services and Effective Reform

UNCRPD – Article 26 - Habilitation and rehabilitation
States Parties shall organize, strengthen and extend comprehensive habilitation and rehabilitation services and programmes, particularly in the areas of health, employment, education and social services, in such a way that these services and programmes:

a) Begin at the earliest possible stage, and are based on the multidisciplinary assessment of individual needs and strengths;
b) Support participation and inclusion in the community and all aspects of society, are voluntary, and are available to persons with disabilities as close as possible to their own communities, including in rural areas.

People with disabilities have the right to access to high-quality, sustainable disability services that are adequately funded, appropriately staffed, and responsive to changing needs.

Community and voluntary organisations deliver almost **70% of specialist disability services** in Ireland and are central to the delivery of person-centred supports. However, growing demand, workforce shortages, increasing regulatory requirements, and rising operational costs are placing significant pressure on the sustainability of services.

As the **Action Plan for Disability Services 2024–2026** reaches its conclusion, Budget 2027 must ensure that disability services are a central pillar of the Department of Children, Disability and Equality's new **Vision and Strategy**. The new framework should set out clear priorities, measurable outcomes, dedicated funding, and robust accountability arrangements to address persistent unmet need across day services, respite, residential care, Personal Assistance, home support, employment, and specialist education and training.

The development of a new model of disability service provision presents an important opportunity to build a more responsive, person-centred system that supports people to live independently and participate fully in their communities. Successful implementation will require sustainable workforce planning, transparent performance monitoring, and meaningful partnership with people with disabilities, families, and the community and voluntary organisations that deliver most disability services on behalf of the State.

Funding Model

Large national Section 39 organisations continue to operate under a fragmented regional grant funding model that limits flexibility, creates unnecessary administrative burden, and constrains their ability to respond efficiently to changing needs across the country. Budget 2027 should begin the transition to national contractual commissioning arrangements and multiannual funding for large national service providers. This would provide greater certainty, support long-term planning and investment, and enable organisations to deploy resources more effectively to where they are needed most.

This is not simply a request for additional funding, but for a funding model that makes better use of public investment. A more flexible commissioning approach would enable not-for-profit providers to build capacity, leverage additional capital, reinvest efficiencies in frontline disability services and expand capacity, while maintaining strong accountability for outcomes. It would also help ensure that community and voluntary providers can continue to play a central role in delivering disability services, reducing reliance on commercial provision and supporting a sustainable, high-quality system that delivers better long-term value for the State and for people with disabilities.

Multi-annual Funding

Pending the introduction of a new contractual commissioning model, Budget 2027 should introduce multiannual funding arrangements for Section 39 providers to provide greater certainty. Moving beyond annual grant allocations would enable providers to plan strategically, invest in workforce, infrastructure and service development, and respond more effectively to changing demand. Multiannual funding should reflect the full cost of delivering high-quality disability services and provide the stability needed to support innovation, service transformation, and better outcomes for people with disabilities.

Sustainability Funding

Budget 2026 recognised the financial pressures facing Section 39 organisations by providing sustainability funding to a number of providers. However, the allocation process lacked transparency and failed to support all providers experiencing significant financial pressures. Budget 2027 should ensure that sustainability funding is applied transparently and equitably so that all providers have the financial stability required to deliver high-quality, person-centred services.

Pay Parity

Sustaining high-quality disability services depends on attracting and retaining a skilled workforce. The 2024 WRC Agreement represented significant progress towards pay parity for Section 39 organisations, but full parity has not yet been achieved. The WRC process should continue to align Section 39 pay with future public sector pay developments, to ensure that remaining inequalities are eliminated rather than the gap widening. Pay parity is essential to recruitment, retention and the long-term sustainability of disability services.

Capital Funding

Many disability services continue to operate from ageing buildings that require significant refurbishment, maintenance and upgrading to meet the needs of the people who use them and to comply with evolving regulatory standards. Years of underinvestment have created a substantial backlog of capital works, while the current ad hoc approach to allocating minor capital funding is insufficient to address existing deficits or support future service development. Without sustained capital investment, providers will face increasing challenges in maintaining safe, accessible, and high-quality environments and in meeting regulatory requirements.

Budget 2027 should establish a recurring capital investment programme for Section 39 disability providers to support essential repairs, refurbishment, accessibility improvements, and the development of fit-for-purpose residential, respite and day service facilities. Strategic capital investment is essential to ensure people with disabilities can access high-quality services in modern, accessible environments that promote dignity, independence, and inclusion.

The reforms outlined above would provide the sustainable funding framework needed to strengthen disability services, support the community and voluntary sector to plan and invest for the future, and ensure people with disabilities can continue to access high-quality, person-centred supports throughout their lives.

Our Priorities for Budget 2027

Ensure a Sustainable Funding Model

- ✓ Extend sustainability funding to organisations excluded from the 2026 allocation through a transparent, equitable process that addresses ongoing cost pressures.
- ✓ Ensure funding reflects the full economic cost of delivering high-quality disability services, including increasing regulatory and compliance requirements in 2027.
- ✓ Introduce a multi-annual funding model as committed in Programme for Government
- ✓ Level the playing field by enabling NGOs to compete with commercial providers and expand sector capacity, by replacing the fragmented grant funding model for large national Section 39 providers with the commissioning arrangements available to commercial providers.

Build a sustainable workforce

- ✓ Develop, fund and implement a robust workforce plan to address recruitment and retention challenges and meet current and future demand.
- ✓ Deliver pay parity for Section 39 organisations by aligning pay with equivalent HSE grades, implementing the Low Pay Review agreed through the Workplace Relations Commission process, and ensuring future national pay agreements apply equally to Section 39 organisations.

Invest in future services

- ✓ Increase investment in capital infrastructure, digital transformation and innovation to ensure disability services remain modern, accessible, and responsive to future needs.
- ✓ Support service reform that is rights-based, person-centred, and designed in partnership with disabled people and disability organisations.

RehabGroup

Investing in People, Changing Perspectives

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