

RehabGroup

Investing in People, Changing Perspectives



Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission in respect of the Reasonable Accommodation Fund

And let us say at the outset that we welcome the accessible nature of the consultation and the fact that Easy Read material was published as part of the consultation.

In putting this brief submission together, we have drawn on the experience on 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 – Who we are and What we do

The Rehab Group is one of the largest not-for-profit organisations in Ireland providing specialist services to persons with a disability and people who are at a disadvantage. We provide direct services to over 10,000 people including children and adults. We champion the values of diversity and inclusion for persons with a disability or disadvantage in their communities throughout Ireland.

Our mission is to help change the lives of the people we serve by helping them to become more independent and more included in their communities, by empowering them with the skills and confidence to be active in the workforce, and supporting them to be in charge of their health and wellness. The Rehab Group is comprised of RehabCare, National Learning Network and Rehab Enterprises. We specialise in residential, supported accommodation, respite and day services; home support services, further education and training; and employment for individuals with a disability and people who are disadvantaged.

Funded by the HSE, RehabCare is the care division of the Rehab Group providing 52 residential/supported accommodation services, 70-day services including resource and outreach centres, 10 respite services for adults and children, and home support services to both children and adults across Ireland.

National Learning Network (NLN) is the education and training division of the Rehab Group specialising in individualised, person-centred training and education with a specific focus on persons with a disability. We support between 6,000 and 7,000 students each year, between the ages of 16 and 65 who have experienced a setback, an accident, a mental

health issue, an illness, an injury or have a disability to progress to further education and training or employment. NLN is funded through the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and the HSE and has 50 centres around the country.

Rehab Enterprises provides sustainable employment for persons with a disability. It operates a unique integrated model of employment, where employees with disabilities work alongside employees without disabilities across a number of sectors.

Reasonable Accommodation Fund

Ireland has one of the lowest rates of employment for people with disabilities in the western world. There are many factors involved and the reasonable accommodations fund has an obvious role to play in addressing this dreadful record.

The central issue in this submission is the low take-up of the existing grant schemes. We also look at ways the existing grants could be improved.

Take up of the various support schemes under the RAF is very low (see table taken from Dáil reply below).

Table1: Number of grants issued 2016 to 2020

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Workplace Equipment Adaptation Grant (WEAG)	39	39	44	37	42
Personal reader grant (PRG)	49	56	34	24	28
Job Interview Interpreter Grant (JIIG)	26	28	36	28	21
Employee Retention Grant (ERG)	0	0	1	0	0
Total	114	123	115	89	91

While it is not easy to pinpoint the exact reason for this we believe the following factors are at play and require consideration:

Awareness of Grants:

The single biggest factor around low take-up seems to be awareness levels among employers. Employers need to be made more aware of training grant opportunities for diversity and inclusion awareness raising around this issue.

We believe the Department's emphasis should be on:

- communicating that disability awareness training is an option for employers and they should be encouraged to avail of it. Many companies have already incorporated Diversity and Inclusion into their overall business strategies. We find some employers and staff are still uncomfortable about taking on people with disabilities and the "unknowns" around this. Often this is down to lack of knowledge and never having had interaction with disabled people. Better supports under disability awareness training would help with this and would in turn help promote the other grant options.
- providing clarity to employers on the exact scope of workplace accommodation and employee retention grants and how it can benefit their businesses. Present a clear outline of the monetary value of the grants available and how it has already benefitted other businesses.
- consideration of best practice examples and the identification of ambassadors from the business sector on disability recruitment. Rehab can support the Department, if it so wishes, in identifying "good practice" employers that may be able to act as ambassadors. We also think the Department should consider better using the Department of Enterprise, Trade & Employment and its ancillary organisations to promote awareness and take-up of the scheme

Some practical issues:

While we have had both positive and negative experiences of the scheme, the operation of the scheme can be a bit cumbersome at times. Listed below are some of the factors at play.

- The Manager must identify what the person requires as an adaptation - not all locations/Managers are experts in this.
- The Manager must get different quotes depending on the costs involved in purchase or adaptation which can add to the burden of the application process. In some cases, it is simply easier for employers to pay for the alterations themselves rather than go through the process – obviously, only certain employers can afford this approach.
- The application process requires the submission of medical evidence that the adaptation is necessary in order to retain employment. This can be off-putting for

employees as some feel they are highlighting their disability rather than their ability. We have seen cases where people who required workstation adaptations would not proceed when they had to go to their GP for the application process.

- Having to meet the upfront cost and then claim cost back from the DEASP can be a deterrent for employers.
- The application forms could be more accessible and we would recommend they are updated and co-produced with people with lived experience of disability
- We have found the support/involvement of Wage Subsidy Scheme case officers has often helped to streamline the application process

Some ways in which grants could be improved:

We think the Department should consider the following:

- Examine the possibility of extending the scope of the schemes. At the moment, they tend not to cater for “hidden disabilities”. For instance, it would be helpful if the grants could cater for people who require personal support in order to flourish in the workplace.
- Consider expanding support for the services of Irish Sign Language interpreters so that the scheme can be accessed for, say, team meetings, a performance review, or an interpreter on Zoom/Teams. The absence of long-term in-work ISL support is a major drawback of the current scheme. One suggestion would be to allow up to, say, 100 hours of ISL per year and allow businesses draw from this as per need.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission and we are happy to support the Department’s review of these schemes in any way it wishes.