National Learning Network Submission to Special Committee on Covid-19 response

1. Summary of our Recommendations to the Committee:

Throughout this submission we make reference to several issues that have arisen during the pandemic, how we have responded, and what further action is required. Below we summarise the issues that are most important to us and how the Government and state agencies could help us address these:

Our immediate requests are as follows:

1. Meet the additional costs of Covid19, i.e. IT and Software costs, PPE, staff training, quality assurance and additional overhead costs. We will not be able to fund this within existing funding.

2. Extend training time for students whose journey has been interrupted and ensure a flexible approach is provided to training allowances.

We also urge the Committee, the Government and state agencies to consider the following:

3. Examine the Funding Model for Specialist Training Provision (STP) service providers who are tied to a 'fee for service' payment model, recognising the difficulties this model represents in the current volatile context. (Please see section below on Funding System for explanation)

4. Fund technology needs for blended learning for RT and STP students

5. Fund additional transport services/support for RT and STP students

6. Consider part-time training options for people with disabilities in STP

7. Increase mental health provision for additional psychology supports for both staff and students who may have been struggling with lack of routine and with anxiety/low mood etc. and who will need support with time management, motivational skills organisational skills and regulating emotion and increasing resilience.

8. Introduce flexibility from funders to allow ex-students who have lost their employment due to Covid19 to return to training temporarily, even if their training funding has elapsed.

2. Background

2.1 National Learning Network

National Learning Network (NLN) is the education and training division of the Rehab Group specialising in individualised, person centre training and education with a specific focus on people with disabilities. We cater for over 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.

We have 50 centres around the country offering flexible training courses and individual supports. We are funded by the Education and Training Boards (ETB) and the HSE. NLN is the largest private provider of personalised education, training and employment in Ireland.

Our vision is a world of equal opportunities through learning. Our mission is to promote equality by providing world-class training, education and employment access services, and by actively influencing the creation of a more inclusive society.   Our education and training services are underpinned by a rights-based approach. NLN is an enabler of Active Inclusion, a strategic goal of the Further Education and Training Strategy. Our services contribute to Ireland's commitment under the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities with specific reference to Article 8 (Awareness Raising), Article 24 (Education) and Article 27 (Employment).

2.2 What we do

NLN services are diverse with varying degrees of educational focus and supports for life-long learning. Our services span the following:

- Rehabilitation Training on behalf of the HSE covering 9 Community Health Organisation areas.
- NLN are partners in delivery of Individual Placement and Support (IPS) Services with the HSE in 4 CHO areas - A 'place, then train' rather than 'train, then place' approach.
- Vocational Training (Specialist Training Provision) on behalf of the 16 ETBs.
- Contracted Training - NLN are on the framework for delivery of contracted training on behalf of three ETBs.
- Disability Support Service - we provide disability support services in eight mainstream Colleges of Further Education on behalf of City of Dublin ETB.
- Educational Support Services - we provide education support services in a number of Higher Education Institutions. All services promote equity of access and participation.
- NLN delivers over 250 training programmes offering QQI major awards at levels 1 – 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)
- Students progress to further or higher education/training and employment.

Some 1,223 students with disabilities have been supported into employment in the last three years by NLN. Since 2017, a further 2,500 people with disabilities, mental health difficulty or challenging life circumstances have been supported to progress to further training/education opportunities. A total of 800 of these have progressed to higher level education courses including third level colleges and universities. Those who were supported to find employment through NLN, and who may otherwise have remained reliant on social welfare payments, have contributed in the region of €750,000 to the state as a result of securing employment. It also means that the Exchequer has saved in the region of €1 million annually in reduced expenditure on social welfare benefits.

We welcome the request for a written submission from the Special Committee on Covid19 Response with regards to education. Since the Government's implementation of lockdown measures, our

further education colleges have had to adapt to Government protocols and guidelines. Our centres had to close, but we continued to educate, train, assess and support students remotely through a variety of methods.

On the whole, our staff and students' experiences of teaching and learning during lockdown are similar to those of primary and secondary schools across Ireland. We face the same challenges as we work to re-open our doors and continue to provide high quality, safe and purposeful education and training to our students, while adhering to Government protocols and guidelines. We have the added challenge of ensuring adequate psychological supports for our students, particularly those who find it difficult to manage.

3. Overview of the impact of the Pandemic on National Learning Network and how we have responded

The Covid19 Pandemic and the associated restrictions have presented many challenges for many of our students and their families. In particular, Covid19 has increased the digital divide experienced by students.

3.1 Impact on Students and Families

The restrictions placed on social connection and interaction and the ability to exercise personal choice have left many students feeling fear, anxiety, disconnected and worried about being able to do and/or complete their training.

Covid19 has led to a loss of structure, routine and opportunities for friendship among students and this has also triggered huge anxiety. Some students have experienced bereavement and trauma during Covid19 and for all of these issues students have needed emotional and well-being support over the phone or via internet from our psychology teams.

Some families of students who were coping prior to lockdown have found it very difficult to cope during lockdown. NLN provided students with a safe base. In some cases, students' lives have become chaotic and the vulnerabilities of students have become even more pronounced. There may have been changes in family circumstances e.g. unemployment, illness or bereavement and tensions have increased. All of these factors have impacted on some of our students, student families and/or carers. We have experienced regression and an increase in the presentation of behaviors that challenge in some of our students during Covid19. Our psychologists and rehabilitation officers have been supporting students, families and the instructors who are supporting these students to continue learning.

Some students have relapsed with addiction issues during Covid19 and these students will require additional support to return to training and assistance in re-engaging with their professional community supports.

Mental health stresses increased significantly and we have found that we needed to target and modify support for our students who have presented with anxiety / low mood / bereavement / addiction issues.

3.2 Digital Divide

A key challenge for students during the pandemic has been an exacerbation of the digital divide.

Many students did not have the skills and competencies to use technology. Many students have low literacy skills and are accessing training for more practical ways to learn skills and show their skills and competencies in alternative ways.

 Some very practical issues faced by NLN students and all students nationally include:

- Poor IT skills
- No access to technology in the home
- Shared family laptops with competing priorities for work and school
- Poor Broadband Coverage
- Cost implications for data usage at the start of the crisis
- Lack of space in the home to have a dedicated learning space

These issues are echoed in an AONTAS Discussion Paper on Mitigating Educational Disadvantage.

One significant issue for National Learning Network is that in April 2020, our students were not eligible to access the €10 million funds dedicated to the purchase of devices like laptops for schools. This is despite the fact that many centres are in areas with a high deprivation index, with families experiencing socio-economic disadvantage.

3.3 Our Response:

National Learning Network, as with all providers of education and training, responded quickly and effectively to lockdown, placing much greater emphasis on remote learning. In doing so, NLN complied with each ETB's contingency planning for programme delivery and assessment, and all reporting requirements.

Management and staff worked together to develop a remote working and learning guide to support the immediate transition to remote learning. The guide supported staff to work in a new way with students in order to provide a safe working/online environment.

As a specialist training provider, it was important that equal consideration was given to the provision of student support such as psychology and learning supports (literacy and numeracy) with training and assessment, and this has been reflected in our response.

Individual support sessions continued remotely, adjusting as we moved through the pandemic - moving from face to face sessions to remote sessions. Psychologists continued to work with students on existing needs and emerging needs remotely, putting in place on-call services at the weekend. Training continued each day with multiple modes of engagement from use of online learning, Microsoft Teams and Zoom sessions to more traditional phone-calls, emails and weekly training activity packs arriving by post.

Other specific measures taken include:

The Rehab Group established a Best Practice Group with focus on tracking activities and student progression.

NLN developed contingency plans to set out how courses would be delivered and assessed and how students would be supported during the pandemic.

A service re-modelling approach commenced to support inclusive practices and ensure all students received a seamless training provision through blended learning approaches i.e. home learning, online learning, phone support, email support and access to E-Learning platforms.

An assessment audit took place to ensure all students progressing to mainstream education completed assessments in a timely manner

There were no entries and exits of students for a defined time period in compliance with ETB and HSE requests

4. Responses to Headline areas identified by the Committee

4.1 Challenges we expect to experience for re-opening our specialist training centres

Our training centres face a variety of challenges, not only to re-open, but to provide the same standard of training and support to students as had been delivered prior to the Covid19 lockdown. They are, but not limited to, the following:

- **Implementation of Government Guidelines**: Some students will have a lack of understanding of Covid19 measures e.g. handwashing, respiratory etiquette and social distancing. There will be students who do have an understanding but compliance with the Covid19 measures may require prompting at times. Training for students is being developed to support these issues.

- **Psychological Support**: As all NLN students are people with disabilities and/or health conditions, there are individualised considerations for every student returning to training centres. Any transition is a risk point for a vulnerable student and the risk of return to the centre will need to be managed carefully and compassionately. Gradual or 'soft' starts will be needed for some students to try to re-establish the training centre as a secure and safe base especially for those who live in chaotic circumstances. This will increase the need for psychological support for students to return to our centres. Materials and methods will need to be developed to support students to understand and manage their responses to the challenge of the transition out of the home and to increase their ability to cope with resilience. Additional supports from our psychological services are more difficult to offer remotely. Our multi-disciplinary teams are currently working on case by case basis with every student in managing return to training.

- **Remote/blended learning:** This method of learning is not generally suitable for a significant proportion of students who attend NLN. Some students will be unable / unwilling to engage effectively in remote learning for many reasons, including lack of personal capacity and skills to manage this way of learning and not having access to the technology or space in their home. These are people with disabilities who need face to face exposure to learn effectively when all the 'senses' are being used in a specially structured learning environment. Face to face training is vital for some students to learn new skills by working one-to-one or in a small group with an instructor. Covid-19 protocols will restrict the numbers of those who can avail of face to face training, impeding students with disabilities in their progress and progression. Socialisation skills and friendships are much more difficult to establish and maintain remotely. Peer to peer support is an essential element of effective rehabilitation. Disruption to routine can impact on students' motivation to return. We may need to consider new approaches for outreach and engagement to attract people back to education and training. Many students with disabilities are at risk of disengagement. These people will need additional psychological and face to face support.

- **Course/Training Completion:** Over 250 students were completing employer-based training programmes and over 150 were with host companies when services moved to remote learning due to Covid-19 restrictions. This will have impacted people's progress in training and limited their ability to achieve a major award. In some cases, additional training time may be required by some students to complete required QQI assessments. Also, some business host companies, may not reopen or be in a position to offer work placements in the near future. This will require extensive flexibility and additional resourcing around training scheduling and training time entitlements.

- **Increased costs**: The cost of setting up a blended delivery option is prohibitive. The cost of hardware is estimated at a minimum €2.5 million to enable NLN students to have access to IT equipment and facilities off site. Other costs include: educational software, additional IT support, enhanced staff training and development in TEL approaches to service delivery, additional Quality assurance costs, and additional cost of implementing COVID 19 protocols across 50 training centres, e.g. cost of PPE, increased staffing costs and increased cost of transport.

- **Funding System**: The current funding model is based on a Whole-time Equivalent utilisation / per capita fee for service and is not fit for purpose. This means that the provider is only paid when a student attends their programme/course. It is also dependent on a continuous referral stream which has been badly disrupted due to Covid-19. The organisation still has the same cost base in terms of staffing, infrastructure and transport costs for example. The impact of these factors combined means that providers will experience significant reduction in revenue earned during 2020 with increased costs due to Covid. We would especially highlight that providers of specialist training are the only providers paid on an attendance basis (i.e: WTE fee for service per capita model). This means that the most prohibitive funding model is used to provide funding of provision to the most vulnerable section of the population.

- **Course Sampling**: Students will not have the opportunity to sample courses and identify what will suit their needs. It will be difficult to offer our traditional sampling period to new students so that they can make an informed choice.

- **Transport**: Transport is vital for many of our students to attend training. Covid19 restrictions will severely restrict the number of students who can attend training in centre or in the workplace.

- **Future proofing:** Changes are required to all policies to ensure that procedures are future proofed for public health emergencies as we return to work.

4.2 How schools will operate under social distancing

The training centres will operate with staggered and scheduled attendance of students and staff in line with Public Health guidelines. Flexibility in training hours and opening hours of training centres will be considered in developing a "whole training centre timetable". There are internal and practical challenges that we are addressing with centre layout and physical distancing. It will be easier to accommodate students in larger centres, but more difficult to implement in smaller centres even through numbers would be smaller.

Other measures taken include:

COVID 19 Induction training has been developed for staff and students (Including Social Distancing measures)

COVID 19 signage displayed in all locations (Social distancing measures)

Revised cleaning protocol in place within each Centre

Isolation rooms identified in each centre

A risk assessment is being carried out on potential need for PPE equipment in compliance with Social Distancing

Screens will have been erected in centres where applicable to comply with Social distancing.

Training for students is being developed to support their adherence to social distancing and hand-washing guidelines. The centres will operate with staggered attendance hours and offsite / blended learning. Many students will need to participate via remote learning for longer periods owing to health risks and underlying health conditions. Some students may wish to go against medical advice in order to access their learning opportunity and this is an aspect that multi-disciplinary teams are preparing to address if needed.

4.3 Impact on teachers and other staff

Staff may experience increased responsibilities and will require additional training. Infection control and prevention measures, temperature checks, wearing PPE will be challenging. For example, when administering buccal midazolam or insulin to students with epilepsy or diabetes. Students have different abilities to understand and/or comply with infection prevention measures and this will be difficult to monitor.

Students with underlying health conditions will need extra support from staff. Staff will need psychological support to manage their concerns. Staff will need to provide support to parent/carers in dealing with concerns about students returning to centres.

Some of our students need Personal Assistants to access training. Staff will need to find ways of supporting those students differently. Staff will need to be flexible and work with families to support students to work from home through the use of technology.

There will be implications for carrying out assessments for psychologists in one-to-one situations, especially when equipment used is needed e.g. neuropsychological assessments. Establishing rapport is important for the relationship and there will be difficulties if masks need to be worn.

Staff will require IT training in the use of technology enhanced learning tools. New approaches to attendance will be required in order to ensure equity of service e.g. staggered attendance of students at the centres.

Extra focus will be required in relation to staff resilience and self-care. Staff who are able to model wellbeing will be better placed to support students' emotional needs. Staff well-being programmes will be required in order to support staff to support each other, connect and reflect with each other to support resilience.

4.4 Impact on students and parents

Some parents have claimed that their young adults who attend our service have regressed during this period. This has applied particularly to those on the autism spectrum who have regressed in their social skills, or persons with mental health issues, particularly those with anxiety, social phobia, paranoia or obsessive compulsive disorder. This is because Covid19 related stressors exacerbate these symptoms.

Some of our students are parents. If schools return on a part-time/phased basis, then some of our students will have a gap in their childcare provision or have increased childcare costs. This may make it difficult for them to engage in training.

Public transport is vital for many of our students to attend training. Covid19 restrictions will severely restrict the number of students who can attend face to face training. Families may not be able to provide a solution and this will exclude people with disabilities from education and training opportunities.

4.5 Impact on special needs education

The rates of mental health difficulties in the intellectual disability (ID) population already exceed those in the general population. The disruption to routine and reduced access to social supports has been distressing for students with ID and with Autism. Our Rehabilitation Officers, Instructors and psychologists have been supporting these students to manage anxiety and low mood during the lockdown.

4.6 Advantages and disadvantages/challenges of potential staggered attendance.

Advantages	Disadvantages/challenges
More flexibility for students and families	Managing staffing changes within existing contracts
May be more attractive than 9-5 options	Transport restrictions, and access to transport limiting access to education and training
Helps reduce risk to the student	Families working and unable to support drop off and pick up, especially for rural areas
Reduces the additional costs related to remote learning	Increased heat, power/ overhead, sanitation costs from longer / staggered opening times