

PRE-BUDGET SUBMISSION 2025 SUMMARY

Rehab Group is an independent voluntary organisation that has been providing services to adults and children with disabilities for 75 years. We are a rights-based and inclusion focused organisation comprising three divisions: RehabCare, National Learning Network and Employability and Social Enterprise.

The 12,500+ people who currently use Rehab Group services are our most important stakeholders. Our overall objective is to ensure their voices are heard both internally and externally.

In preparation for this submission, our Advocacy Team carried out 49 in-depth focus groups with more than 460 people who use our services across the country.

We set out here the concerns of the people who use our services and their priorities for Budget 2025. We also outline the funding challenges Rehab Group faces as one of the largest disability service providers in the country and call for urgent action to address these.

Disabled people are marginalised by financial, physical, and societal constraints that reinforce our unequal society. Ireland still has a way to go to meet the needs and rights of disabled people as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with a Disability.

As Budget 2025 will be the final budget of the 33rd Dáil, the Government now has one last opportunity to deliver on the commitments it made to people with disabilities in the Programme for Government.

Our Top Ten Priority Asks

1. Introduce a Cost of Disability payment of €50 per week and increase basic rates of Social Welfare by at least €30 per week.
2. Increase investment in housing provision and supports to enable people with disabilities to live independent lives.
3. Address hidden healthcare costs by ensuring all medical and dental needs are covered by the medical card and ensuring speedy access to mental health services.
4. Invest in rural transport links and provide greater supports for individualised transport, including subsidies/ allowances for people with disabilities to avail of driving lessons.
5. Ensure the funding is in place to match the ambition of the Action Plan for Disability Services (2024-2026).
6. Provide funding for full pay parity for Section 39 organisations and return to alignment with HSE pay scales.
7. Provide multiannual funding for disability organisations delivering vital services on behalf of the HSE and State.
8. Invest in and develop a clear strategy to support people with disabilities to gain and retain employment, including reform of the Wage Subsidy Scheme.
9. Ensure a first-class education experience for NLN students with disabilities, through the funding for core costs at 2024 rates, provision of capital investment, and make provision for students' extra-curricular activities.
10. Invest in the development of an Irish Assistive Technologies ecosystem that supports the active inclusion and participation of disabled people in all aspects of life.

REHAB GROUP PRE-BUDGET SUBMISSION

Cost of Disability:

- Introduce an annual cost of disability funding stream (suggested €50 per week) to address the inequality identified in the Cost of Disability report.
- Increase core social welfare payments by at least €30 per week in recognition of the cost of living and the increasing inflation rate.
- Make the fuel allowance available to anyone in receipt of disability-related social welfare payments.
- Provide a higher level of fuel allowance to those with higher energy usage due to medical and/or disability needs.
- Extend the period of the fuel allowance for people with a disability.
- Provide subsidies for social activities/vacations.

Housing & Independent Living:

- Ensure that people with disabilities are provided with housing, and access to supports to enable them to live independently as is their fundamental right under Article 19 of UNCRPD.
- Provide an additional 270,000 Personal Assistance Hours and 40,000 Home Support Hours in line with targets of Action Plan for Disability Services (2024-2026).
- Review the functioning of the Capital Acquisitions Scheme (CAS) including:
 - Increase CAS funding to allow for higher ceilings on 3 and 4 bedroom houses.
 - Provide a fund for maintenance costs as proposed by the Irish Council for Social Housing.
 - Ensure local authorities are resourced to conduct the timely processing of grant applications.

- Fund the implementation of the Housing Strategy for Disabled People (2022-2027).
- Provide support services for people with disabilities who are applying for housing through the Local Authority/Approved Housing Body or who need support in renting privately.
- Publish the Review of Housing Adaptation Grants and implement changes to increase funding, increase the maximum grant, reform the means testing process and reduce the administrative burden.
- Ensure a sufficient percentage (at least 7.5%) of new build housing is universally designed UD+& UD++ for wheelchair liveable accommodation.

Healthcare:

- Remove hidden healthcare costs by ensuring that medical devices, blood tests, injections, and dental treatments are fully covered by the medical card.
- Incentivise dentists to join the medical card scheme.
- Provide increased funding for respite services for people with disabilities.
- Reduce waiting times for people with disabilities to see qualified counsellors.
- Recognise that supports for mental health go beyond clinical and invest in greater social inclusion opportunities including funding for local authorities to make leisure activities (pools, gyms etc.) available free of charge or at greatly discounted rates for people with disabilities.
- Prioritise the legislation to reform the Mental Health Act 2001 so that it is Human Rights, United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with a Disability (UNCRPD) and United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) compliant.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Transport

- Significantly increase investment in Local Link services to expand on the service it already provides and to ensure those services are viable and accessible to disabled people.
- Ensure all Local Link services are covered by the free travel pass and do not seek supplementary payments.
- Develop the physical infrastructure to ensure all bus stops and train platforms are fully accessible.
- Expand rural public transport services to evenings and weekends.
- Provide subsidies and/or allowances for driving lessons for people with disabilities and eliminate or greatly reduce associated costs (Theory Test, license application etc.).
- Put in place the long-promised and long-awaited Transport Support Scheme to replace the Motorised Transport Grant and the Mobility Allowance (discontinued in 2013) as recommended by the Ombudsman in 2023. This would provide greater financial support to people who require more individualised travel support.

Employment

- Encourage and incentivise employers to take Disability Awareness and Diversity Training to reduce anxiety or hesitancy about employing a person with a disability or mental health challenge.
- Allow people taking up employment to keep their full Disability Allowance for a transition period and increase the income thresholds thereafter.

- Change public procurement policies so that Ireland makes full use of Article 20 of the Procurement Directive to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities.
- **Initiate reform of the Wage Subsidy Scheme (WSS) as follows:**
 - Restore the link to the National Minimum Wage (NMW) and bring the subsidy back to 70% of the NMW.
 - Lower the threshold to the minimum hours per week to 8 hours to allow for more people with significant disabilities to become employed.
 - Shorten the minimum duration of the initial contract of employment to avail of WSS from six months to three months, with any follow-up contracts of employment requiring six months duration.
 - WSS should apply to all employees regardless of their employment duration to provide an ongoing incentive for the employer to retain staff who may acquire a disability during their lifetime.
- Support for a funding stream for the Work Ready model in the Social Protection envelope for Budget 2025 either within the existing programmes or through a specific programme.
- Increase the current funding for the Individual Placement Service (IPS) by at least 25% to ensure its future viability and make it available across all local mental health services.
- Require public agencies that do not meet their disability employment quotas to compensate with a percentage spend on social procurement.

Education and Training

- Budget 2025 should ensure that, as a minimum, core funding is available to Specialist Training Providers and Rehabilitative Training Providers, which is not solely based on the utilisation/attendance of students. This would require a guarantee to providers of a minimum baseline funding level to cover core costs of provision.
- Ensure a level of capital funding for greater investment in the Specialist Training Provider sector to give our students the quality experience they deserve.
- Invest in career guidance supports for students in special classes.
- Provide funding for a formal system of referral for students exiting second-level so that they can better access appropriate further education services and students with a disability are not simply left with a social care option.
- Make funding available for students to participate in clubs/societies and social events to make the college experience real and aligned with the experience of those who do not have a disability.
- Invest in the development of an Assistive Technology ecosystem that supports active inclusion and participation of disabled people in all aspects of life.

Social Care for People with Disabilities

- Ensure that the actions and targets in the Action Plan for Disability Services (2024-2026) are fully funded and resourced so that the above issues are addressed.
- Provide funding for S39 organisations to include Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT) supports within their services to include Physiotherapist, Occupational Therapist and Speech and Language Therapist services.

- Ensure funding is in place for people who acquire a disability or who present later in life as requiring day services.
- Review the Home Care tender process to ensure it is the best way to commission services. The HSE is paying private providers a premium whereas investing in S39/Community Homecare in the long term would be more sustainable.
- Include funding for transport running costs (driver, insurance etc.) for adult day services.
- Provide funding to cover the full cost of regulation including payment for bank holidays, increases in the minimum wage etc.

Funding and Reform

- Government must commit to provide the funding to match the ambition of the Action Plan for Disability Services.
- Equality and parity for S39 organisations: Make provision in Budget 2025 for Section 39 organisations to return to alignment with HSE pay scales.
- Provide multi-annual funding for disability organisations delivering vital services on behalf of the HSE and the State.
- Initiate reform of the disability sector with meaningful consultation with stakeholders to enable Section 39 organisations to be adequately and sustainably funded to ensure continuity of vital disability service provision.
- Responsibility for monitoring and oversight of the forthcoming National Disability Strategy should rest with the Department of Taoiseach.
- Amend 2004 Health Act to ensure that essential services provided on behalf of the state by Section 39 organisations are funded on an equivalent basis to those provided directly by the HSE or Section 38 organisations.