DeafHear.ie

Services for Deaf & Hard of Hearing People

DeafHear Submission

to

Department of Social Protection

on

Strand 3 of the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities (CES) – Make Work Pay

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1 Introduction

DeafHear welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Department of Social Protection on the Consultation on Strand 3 of the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities (CES) – Make Work Pay.

1.1 DeafHear.

DeafHear is a national organisation that provides a range of specialist services to Deaf and Hard of Hearing people and advocates for better access to services in the wider community for Deaf and Hard of Hearing people. DeafHear's Vision is of an inclusive society where Deaf and Hard of Hearing people are fully integrated, with equality of opportunity and participation. DeafHear's role is to make this Vision a reality by promoting the equal rights of Deaf and Hard of Hearing people and enhancing their life opportunities.

1.2 Hearing loss.

One in six people have some level of hearing loss. Approximately one in a thousand people are profoundly Deaf and use Irish Sign Language to communicate. According to the HSE, 8% of adults have a 'disabling hearing loss' (270,000 adults in Ireland), and most of these people are older people with acquired hearing loss. Hearing loss is the third most common health condition in adults, and the most common in older people.

By the age of 65, one third of people have a significant hearing loss (a moderate or greater hearing loss). The fact that we are living longer and research has shown that many young people are damaging their hearing by using music playing devices at high sound levels, hearing loss is on the increase in the population. The World Health Organisation expects that in the coming decades hearing loss will be one of the top ten health burdens in developed countries.

There are over 70,000 Irish adults of working age with a moderate or greater hearing loss. A moderate hearing loss is considered a significant disabling hearing loss by the World Health Organisation, and all of these people will have difficulty conducting conversations without some form of amplification. However, it is estimated that less than a third of these people have hearing aids, and cost is a significant factor.

1.3 Communication.

Communication is the key issue that affects people with hearing loss. It contributes to social isolation and negatively impacts on the health, social and economic status of people with hearing loss or deafness. For example, compared to hearing peers, older people with a mild hearing loss have twice the rate of dementia, people with moderate hearing loss 3 times the rate of dementia, and people with severe hearing loss 5 times the rate of dementia. People with hearing loss have double the rate of depression compared to hearing peers, while the negative impact of hearing loss on the quality of life of people has been found to be greater that that of cancer or heart disease.

The key to understanding these significant research findings is an appreciation of just how fundamental communication is to daily life: research consistently demonstrates that there is a strong correlation between access to communication with family, friends and society in general, and quality of life, health status and well-being. Based on an analysis of the economic costs associated with deafness/hearing loss conducted in Australia, the annual cost to society of hearing loss in Ireland is €2.2billion. More than half of this cost is borne by the individuals affected in terms of loss of income, care costs and the costs of assistive technology. (For more information on these research findings see www.deafhear.ie).

1.4 Areas of concern

People who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing are more likely to be unemployed and underemployed compared to the wider population. Hearing loss is the third most common health condition in adults, and it can result in people leaving employment due to challenges in the workplace. These challenges may be due to the nature of the work and the requirement for good hearing, or the additional stress associated with hearing loss and work (e.gwork) In some cases a person may leave the workplace ostensibly due to anxiety and stress, but in fact an acquired hearing loss may be a significant and unrecognised contributory factor. The fact that people wait up to ten years to address an acquired hearing loss is also likely to be significant.

People who are sign language users also face significant barriers in accessing the workplace, and when they do, they have little opportunity for progression or promotion. Many have no formal qualifications due to poor educational experiences which also restricts employment opportunities and pay levels.

2. Questionnaire

This submission follows the format of the consultation paper, and addresses areas relevant to Deaf and Hard of Hearing people.

2.1 Financial In-work supports.

The medical card and the free travel pass are viewed as particlularly important by many Deaf people, particularly those who are sign language users. Deaf people are often socially isolated, and habitually may travel long distances to attend social events where other Deaf people are congregating. Those who regularly need to visit their GP due to illness or who have young dependents are likely to value the medical card highly. Rent supplement, especially for those in the Dublin area, is particularly important, as is Family Income Supplement, as many are on lower incomes.

Without these in-work financial supports, many Deaf people are unlikely to benefit financially from taking up work opportunties available to them.

2.2 Financial Barriers

When considering taking up work, for many Deaf people the loss of the free travel pass, the medical card and the DSP/DA payment are important considerations. The reasons for placing a high value on the free travel pass and the medical card have already been outlined. DeafHear also believe that the fact that many younger Deaf people have been in receipt of DA from the age of 16 while they were still in full-time education is generally not helpful in encouraging them to take up work opportunities when they are finished school, especially for those who have lower educational attainment and where income levels from work are likely to be low.

Also, due to communication issues and the fact that they are in receipt of the DA payment, it is less likely that these young people will have engaged in part-time or summer time work as students, activities that encourage a work culture. DeafHear believe that the welfare of young Deaf and Hard of Hearing people would be better served by continuing the DCA payment to parents for young people who are still in full-time education, while at the same time developing targetted initiatives that provide part-time and summer-time paid work for these young people.

The medical card is also particularly significant for any Deaf or Hard of Hearing person who is a hearing aid user. Hearing aids can cost anything from €2,000-7,000. Medical card holders are entitled to free audiology services, but all other citizens with hearing loss must buy their hearing aids themselves. Given that hearing aids have a typical lifespan of 4-5 years, the cost of hearing aids, (not to mind the cost of batteries and other assistive technology), is a considerable element in the ‘cost of

disability' borne by Deaf and Hard of Hearing people. For those in work who qualify for the Treatment Benefit Scheme, the grant available may be less than 20% of the overall cost of the hearing aids. The present status quo in this regard acts a significant disincentive for Deaf and Hard of Hearing people when considering taking up work or returning to work.

2.3 Length of time out of workforce.

There is a significant number of Deaf and Hard of Hearing people, particularly those who are sign language users, who have had little or no work experience in their lifetime. Many attended Deaf schools and on leaving school, were unable to engage successfully with 'mainstream' vocational training opportunities. Typically these individuals were left to find their own way with no formal supports or services. Social isolation, low self-esteem and self-confidence, and low educational attainment are often key factors.

What is required is a training and develoment service that is inclusive and developmental. This is exactly what is provided by the CE Scheme in the Deaf Village in Cabra, Dublin. Although it is only in place for a couple of years, already a significant number of Deaf people who are sign language users, many of whom have been socially isolated and unemployed for a long number of years, have engaged succesfully in this CE Scheme. Working within an environment where communication, support and active participation is supported through sign language, many of these 'long-term unemployed' individuals have thrived.

2.3 Communication

Communication is a particular issue for Deaf and Hard of Hearing people in terms of access to sources of information to research financial and other aspects of taking up work. There is a high reliance on family and friends and representative groups, as many service providers are not seen or perveived to be 'deaf friendly'. Examples include non-availability of information in sign language, poor listening environments in welfare offices and a lack of deaf awareness among frontline staff. Also, due to the regular communication barriers they face on a daily basis, Deaf and Hard of Hearing people are more likely to experience low levels of confidence and self-esteem, making it even more difficult for them to 'present' in public offices. Certainly much more could be done to 'reach out' to this cohort of people in supporting them to seek and access employment.

2.4 Experience of Deaf and Hard of Hearing people who are working.

Research shows that people who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing are more stressed and fatigued in the workplace, and that this is primarily related to communication issues. People with acquired hearing loss are likely to be 'straining' to hear information, and this can take a considerable toll on the individual, depending on the individual's circumstances and the nature of the employment. Also, Deaf people who are sign language users are typically the only sign language user in the workplace, resulting in them being uniquely isolated within the workplace. It is little wonder that many Deaf workers actively seek contact with other Deaf people in their leisure time, or that they may be more likely to experience mental health difficulties.

2.5 Role of INTREO centres.

Deaf and Hard of Hearing people need INTREO centres to be accessible and sensitive to their communication needs. For Deaf people, INTREO needs to provide widely available information in Irish Sign Language and ready access to sign language interpretation for face-to-face appointments. Over time this would encourage Deaf people to avail of a service that heretofore has largely ignored them. However, the reality is that the ongoing delays in providing access to the sign language remote interpreting service in INTREO centres is indicative of the level and quality of service offered to Deaf and Hard of Hearing people.

Availability of email and text communication to contact the services, good communication environments within centres (i.e. quiet environments with good lighting and acoustics), and keyworkers with deaf awareness training would be beneficial for many Deaf and Hard of Hearing people. Clear and consistent application of the WEAG scheme across the country would also be helpful.

3. Summary

DeafHear welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Department's consultation on Strand 3 of the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities – Make Work Pay.

In DeafHear's view the Department's does not consistently meet its stated objective of putting clients at the centre of services and policies when serving Deaf and Hard of Hearing clients. The Department needs to create greater public awareness of the supports and schemes in place to support people with disabilities in the workplace, and to develop policies in conjunction with other Departments to make work pay for people who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing. Making exisiting services more accessibl for Deaf and Hard of Hearing peole and developing programmes and supports that meet the particular needs of sign language users are key priorities in supporting people with deafness/hearing loss to access work opportunities. Providing free access to sign language interpretation, assistive technology and hearing aids would go a long way to making work pay for Deaf and Hard of Hearing people on a par with their hearing peers.

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