RehabGroup
Investing in People, Changing Perspectives

Rehab Group Submission to Make Work Pay

September 2016

Rehab Group feedback to the Make Work Pay Interdepartmental Group

The establishment of an interdepartmental group to look at ways to Make Work Pay for people with disabilities will allow for an overall view of barriers that arise and the identification of strategies to overcome these. This is a very welcome development because the lives of people with disabilities don't fit neatly into one government department.

In 2015, Rehab supported nearly 800 people with disabilities in or into employment. In compiling this feedback, the staff supporting people with disabilities into work were asked to provide their feedback in relation to the obstacles that they have encountered for people wishing to take up employment. The issues they have identified are provided in detail after the questionnaire provided by the Department. Direct quotes are included in italics throughout.

In compiling this submission, a consultation was carried out with people working with people with di

1. Financial In-work supports

We want to know what works best and is attractive for people with disabilities when considering a return to or taking up work in terms of financial supports

How important are the following when considering taking up or returning to employment?

	Very Important	**Moderate Importance**	**Neutral**	**Slightly Important**	**Low**
Disability Allowance Earnings Disregards (up to €120, €120-350)	x	O	O	O	O
Partial Capacity Scheme (on Illness Benefit, Invalidity Pension)	O	O	x	O	O
Retention of Medical Card for 3 years	x	O	O	O	O
Secondary Benefits: (Rent Supplement/Free Travel/Fuel Allowance)	x	O	O	O	O
Household Benefits Package (Electricity/Gas Allowance/Free TV Licence)	x	O	O	O	O
Family Income Supplement	O	O	x	O	O
Tax Credits and reliefs	O	x	O	O	O

How well do you think the following are understood by people with a disability or their advocates?

	Well Understood	Moderately Understood	Neutral	Slightly Understood	Not
Disability Allowance Earnings Disregards (up to €120, €120-350)	O	x	O	O	O
Partial Capacity Scheme (on Illness Benefit, Invalidity Pension)	O	O	O	x	O
Retention of Medical Card for 3 years	O	O	x	O	O
Secondary Benefits: (Rent Supplement, Free Travel, Fuel Allowance)	O	O	x	O	O
Household Benefits Package (Electricity/Gas Allowance, Free TV Licence)	x	O	O	O	O
Family Income Supplement	O	O	x	O	O
Tax Credits and reliefs	O	O	O	x	O

Comments

2. Financial Barriers

Please rank the following in importance 1 – 6 (according to the scale of barrier) when considering taking up or returning to work: (1 = most important)

Loss of DSP Payment	O
Loss of Secondary Benefits (Rent Supplement, Free Travel, Fuel Allowance)	O
Loss of Household Benefits Package (Electricity/Gas Allowance, Free TV Licence)	O
Perceived difficulty obtaining DSP payment/benefits again (e.g. If work ceases)	O
Loss of Medical Card after 3 years	O
Other (please specify) _____	O

It is recognised that the needs and issues arising for people with disabilities vary, and that different circumstances arise for different people at different times. If there are circumstances that are particularly relevant, please indicate:

This question is difficult to answer as the importance of these financial barriers will differ depending on the person. Please see feedback appended to this questionnaire for further information about these payments and supports and how they interact with a person's decision to take up employment.

In general, do people with a disability feel that they would be better off financially by taking up work?

Yes	**No**
O	O

Please elaborate:

The response to this question very much depends on the type of payment people are in receipt of. People on Disability Allowance are aware that they can earn €120 per week without affecting their payment or their medical card. Many people in this situation know that they would be financially better off in work and would like to get into employment. For people on Invalidity Pension, concerns about being assessed as having a mild disability in the Partial Capacity Benefit assessment would give rise to concern that a person would be worse off. Further details in relation to these concerns are included in the feedback attached at the end of this questionnaire.

3. Length of time out of workforce

Are there particular financial barriers to resumption of work for PWD if out longer term, i.e. 2 yrs or more?

Please see feedback below for further information

What suggestions would you have to overcome barriers for PWD who have been out of the workforce long term?

Please see feedback below for further information

Do you feel there are particular financial barriers that apply more to men than women, or to women than men?

Please see feedback below for further information

4. Communication

Please rank the following sources of information people with disabilities use to research the financial aspects of taking up or returning to work:

	Always	**Often**	**Sometimes**	**Rarely**	**Never**
Department of Social Protection website	O	O	x	O	O
Intreo office/Local DSP office	O	O	x	O	O
Citizens Information Office	O	x	O	O	O
Citizens Information Website	O	O	x	O	O
Representative groups for PwD	O	x	O	O	O
Friends and family	O	x	O	O	O
Media (TV/Radio/Newspapers)	O	O	O	x	O
Other (please specify)	O	O	O	O	O

Do you think people worry about asking for information from the Department of Social Protection when considering returning to work – e.g. applying for Partial Capacity Benefit, or the Disability Allowance Earnings Disregard?

Yes	No
x	O

If yes, why?

Some people would be concerned about seeking information about return to work because they worry that they may be identifying themselves as a person who is able to work and who may therefore not be eligible for social welfare.
However, there are many organisations operating in the disability sector who are in a position to support people in accessing information about employment and the supports available. They are also able to provide formal and informal supports to the person in identifying and taking up employment, in line with that person's needs. In making its recommendations the Make Work Pay group should consider the supports that exist within the community and how they can be supported, enhanced and promoted. These services play a crucial role in employment outcomes for people with disabilities because they allow people to investigate the possibility of entering employment before they formally engage with the Department of Social Protection.

5. Experience of PWD who ARE working

Approximately 21% ***of PWD are in the workforce; in your view what are the financial and other factors which have supported these people to:***

A) Transition successfully from education/training to employment:

Please see feedback below for further information

B) Remain in employment:

Please see feedback below for further information

6. How do you see the role of the Intreo centre evolving to meet the needs of PwD?

The Department of Social Protection is expanding the role of the Intreo centres as an employment and recruitment service for pwd who wish to take up work.

What do you think PwD need from their Intreo centre in terms of assisting them to search for work?

In accessing employment, people with disabilities need support in many areas including transport, social welfare, housing, ongoing support, etc. The Intreo services must be able to provide an individualised support to people to help them to make the transition to employment. Alternatively, Intreo must be able to refer the person to an organisation that is in a position to provide the support that a person needs.

By working closely with the disability sector, the Department of Social Protection can ensure that all of the resources available in the community are leveraged to support people into and in employment.

Many people with disabilities need support not only with entry to employment but also with retaining a job on an ongoing basis. This should be carefully considered within the Make Work Pay recommendations.

How do you think the Intreo centre can best engage with PwD? e.g.

- Communication – social media, email/letters from intreo, telephone?
- Promotion of services via disability representative bodies/media?
- Named case worker

Intreo offices need to be able to communicate with people with disabilities in a range of accessible formats that meet the person's need. Ultimately, people require face to face support delivered in a relatively informal way that encourages and supports people to make the decision to take up employment.

A phone line which would allow people to make initial inquiries without having to identify themselves may help people to overcome their concerns about identifying themselves as available to work and potentially jeopardising their social welfare payment.

Accompaniment of family/friend/advocate at Intreo:

	Yes	No
▪ Is this important to PwD?	O	O

Support from a family / friend or advocate will be important to some people with disabilities and not to others. It is important that each individual receives the supports they require based on their needs and that a family member attends with them where that is their wish.

Rehab Group detailed feedback to the Make Work Pay Interdepartmental Group

The establishment of an interdepartmental group to look at ways to Make Work Pay for people with disabilities will allow for an overall view of barriers that arise and the identification of strategies to overcome these. This is a very welcome development because the lives of people with disabilities don't fit neatly into one government department.

In 2015, Rehab supported nearly 800 people with disabilities in or into employment. In compiling this feedback, the staff supporting people with disabilities into work were asked to provide their feedback in relation to the obstacles that they have encountered for people wishing to take up employment. The issues they have identified are detailed below. Direct quotes are included in italics throughout.

1. The need for greater flexibility in employment for people with disabilities

In identifying employment supports for people with disabilities it is important to consider what kind of employment people want. Many people with disabilities have complex needs which can make retaining a full-time job challenging. Many people would like more flexible working arrangements.

Schemes to support employment need to recognise this need for flexibility and be open to part-time employment. For example, the WSS is only open to those willing to work more than 21 hours per week while the employers of those working less receive no subsidy.

The system needs to recognise that there may be times when people with disabilities are not able to work or need to work fewer hours because of their disability. This is particularly important in the case of episodic conditions or recurrent mental health difficulties. Fear of not being able to easily return to a social welfare payment should employment not work out is a considerable barrier to taking up employment in the first instance.

Employment is just one area of our daily lives. People with disabilities may also need to access day-time support with health and social care needs, independent living skills and psychological support. For example, RehabCare, Rehab's health and social care division, provides supports to more than 1,500 people with disabilities in a network of resource centres throughout Ireland. More than 170 of these people are employed on a part-time basis in local businesses but return to the resource centre regularly during the week to receive other supports.

Ongoing support is also required. One person who provided feedback to this document said,

> *"I have found that many of our disabled employees benefit from ongoing, relevant and appropriate counselling services. With the right type of service, the chances of a person with disability maintaining her/his employment are increased significantly. The current entitlement is not adequate and sometimes difficult to access or not appropriate to the person's needs. We do have the wonderful support of WorkPath [specialist employment support programme] team which has proven invaluable to employees. However Work Path support is aimed at practical aspects, challenges and obstacles to maintaining employment, and as such is not a substitute for professional counselling. This, in my opinion, should be considered as part of Government/HSE role in supporting people with disability in employment. Also the type of counselling and choice of practitioner should be part of a consultative process between employee, her/his family and*

employer/Work Path. The current service offering from HSE is based on 'one-size-fits-all' and to my knowledge is not person-centred".

It is also important to recognise that not everyone is able to work so initiatives to get people with disabilities must recognise that some will be more able than others given their disability. This quote came from a person who uses our services.

> *"Why in the first place should a person on disability have the added worry of deciding whether or not they should have to scramble their broken bodies back to work just because they need urgently to make ends meet".*

Possible actions

- Provide a clear commitment and pathway back to social welfare for a person should work become unviable either in the short or long-term. This is particularly relevant in the case of Partial Capacity Benefit (more details below) and where a person has been in work for a longer period of time.
- Ensure that government schemes are flexible enough to recognise that over time people with disabilities may experience fluctuations in their capacity to work and that support may be required throughout a person's working life.
- Consider reducing the number of hours required for eligibility for the Wage Subsidy Scheme. The 21 hour requirement is a barrier to take up a job for someone who has been out of work for a period of time or who is entering work for the first time.

2. Medical card and employment for people with disabilities

Throughout this document, the interaction between work and access to a medical card arises. The risk of losing a medical card is one of the most significant disincentives to employment for people with disabilities. People with disabilities will often fear loss of their medical card because they require it to enable them to effectively manage their medical needs. Many people, particularly those with chronic or complex conditions, decide not to work because the cost of their medical care would be prohibitive were they to lose their medical card.

People with disabilities can retain their medical card for three years upon taking up work. However, they know that they will still have their disability and therefore their medical costs in three years' time. Medical cards provide the gateway to so many more services and supports than just medical services. Fear of losing a medical card, even in the medium term, is one of the greatest obstacles to taking up employment.

To look at the issue in another way, for a person with significant medical needs, ongoing access to a medical card rather than fear of its loss can represent a gateway to employment. While they may not be entitled to the card on the basis of means, their medical expenses are such that employment is not financially viable. An example of this is a person who requires prosthetics or assistive technology which are very costly and must be replaced on a regular basis. A medical card can give them access to aids and appliances they need while ineligibility for a medical card would likely lead to unemployment being unviable.

It is recognised that specific benefits are rare given to one group of people where they are limited for another. However, a specific approach to medical cards for people in employment makes sense. People with disabilities encounter more medical costs as a result of their disability. Without a medical card they may not be able to take up employment and would then receive a medical card on social welfare. The DA Income Disregard is an example of a

specific reasonable accommodation for people with disabilities which continues indefinitely while other mainstream back to work initiatives are time limited.

> *"Consider the working people. It is unfair to say that someone who is working is not entitled to a medical card, if they get sick and have to avail of expensive medication. They should be entitled to a medical card for the duration of the illness. It is much more beneficial to keep someone at work on a medical card while they need it rather than them having to give up a job so that they can get in receipt of jobseekers allowance and apply for a medical card, in other words they will be better off on the dole than paying one more bill" (this feedback was included in a submission to the HSE on Medical Card Eligibility in 2014)*

Further specific points in relation to medical card and its interaction with particular schemes are detailed below.

Possible actions:

- Extend medical card eligibility indefinitely for people with disabilities who are in receipt of medical cards and a disability related social welfare payment who are entering employment. This would recognise that they would have continued to receive this support had they remained on social welfare. This could be undertaken in a similar way to the DA Income Disregard which is an indefinite social welfare support for people with disabilities which is not available to other groups.

3. Take up of the extended Disability Allowance Income Disregard

This is a valuable scheme which supports people with disabilities to take up employment while still retaining their Disability Allowance (DA) and the 'status' that comes with it.

The right to earn up to €120 before any impact on Disability Allowance always provided a ceiling to employment for people with disabilities. The extension of the disregard to €350 has not led many individuals to increase their hours. There are many reasons for this but significant among them is access to secondary benefits.

For the purposes of the medical card means test €120 earned in rehabilitative employment by a person on DA is disregarded as means but anything earned above €120 is counted as means so these earnings (above €350) could very quickly lead to a loss of medical card for an individual. Any threat or perceived threat to a medical card is enough to discourage employment.

Greater access to medical cards for people with disabilities, regardless of their means could help to overcome this challenge and increase the number of people who increase their hours and therefore their income under the DA Income Disregard.

Another issue is the need for greater awareness of the extended disregard as well as its impact on a person's DA – the way that DA is reduced can be hard to understand. It is our experience that where there is complexity people are anxious that there may be an unforeseeable impact on their payment. In this case, there is confusion even among support staff working in disability organisations. Some easy read materials distributed through relevant DSP offices and disability organisations could help with this.

People responding to our call for feedback acknowledged the value of the DA Income Disregard but expressed concern that it cannot be accessed in tandem with an incentive for the employer. There is confusion about the interaction between DA and the Wage Subsidy Scheme (WSS) and this is detailed further below.

Quotes from our respondents

"In working with students, the only scheme which truly benefits people on a Disability payment is the Disability Plus Scheme, where the person can earn up to €120 with no effect on their D.A and up to €350 before they have to come off D.A. They also keep their secondary benefits. However, the downside is that there is no incentive for the employer to employ a person with disabilities.

Proposed actions

- As above, extend medical card eligibility indefinitely for people with disabilities who are in receipt of medical cards and a disability related social welfare payment who are entering employment. This would recognise that they would have continued to receive this support had they remained on social welfare. This could be undertaken in a similar way to the DA Income Disregard which is an indefinite social welfare support for people with disabilities which is not available to other groups.
- For the DA Income Disregard, the medical card means test takes account of earnings between €120 and €350. An extension of the medical card means disregard to the full €350 or the introduction of a sliding scale for the means test would encourage greater take up of the extended DA Income Disregard.
- Develop and disseminate simple information about the DA Income Disregard and its impact on a person's payment.

4. Secondary benefits and employment

Travel pass: Many people with disabilities will be in lower paid roles and, as such, travel costs can represent a disproportionate portion of weekly income. Some will have to travel long distances to find an employer who is happy to take them on and support them in their job. A travel pass helps to offset these travel costs for people who can access public transport. Alternative travel subsidies are required for people living in more rural locations or people with more significant mobility difficulties who may require door-to-door transport.

Quotes from our respondents

"Why can't the Free Travel scheme be extended to certain groups i.e. WSS Participants as the cost of public transport is quite expensive and the services required in certain cases are not there to meet the demand where there is one. At the end of the day these people gave up their allowances to take these up and there should be some incentive to keep this going".

"Also, more people with disabilities are being placed on Jobseeker's Allowance (JA) rather than a disability payment. People on JA are not entitled to Free Travel and the difficulty for people with intellectual disabilities in the West of Ireland, is that to access employment, they need transport but transport is costly. I have two students with similar disabilities but because they are in receipt of different payments, one has access to free transport and thus greater chances of securing employment and one who has to pay for transport and is thus limited in accessing employment".

"One primary concern for people I work with is that public transport routes are finite and so those living rurally cannot offer the same hours of availability as those living in an urban area. Most of the people I refer to cannot drive and so are further disadvantaged. Maybe a private transport allowance/ work incentive is something to look at?"

Possible actions

Extend financial support with travel costs to people with disabilities to ensure that travel costs are not a barrier to work

5. The Wage Subsidy Scheme

Rehab Enterprises employs 167 people with disabilities in a range of businesses throughout the country. People with disabilities work alongside people without disabilities in a 400-strong workforce.

- **Urgent issue in relation to Medical Cards and the WSS**

In recent days, the HSE has indicated that the Wage Subsidy Scheme is no longer a prescribed scheme for a medical card under the HSE Medical Card Guidelines. This change in HSE policy has the potential to prevent many people with disabilities from continuing in work. This decision has been undertaken without consultation or notice and will cause significant anxiety for this vulnerable group of workers, many of whom encounter significant medical costs as a result of their disability.

For at least the last three years, WSS participants have been guaranteed access to a medical card by virtue of being in the scheme.

This provision provided a valuable support to people with disabilities employed under the Wage Subsidy Scheme. It gives them access to the medical care they require. It has also allowed them a sense of security that their medical benefits will continue. Previously, each application for renewal of a medical card was a source of considerable concern for employees on the WSS.

The removal of this guaranteed access to the Medical Card will result in far higher medical costs for people working under the Wage Subsidy Scheme and could lead many to consider leaving employment.

Possible action
Reinstate the Wage Subsidy Scheme as a prescribed scheme for medical card eligibility under the *HSE Medical Card Guidelines*, without delay.

- **Proposed changes to the Wage Subsidy Scheme**

The WSS provides a subsidy to employers to employ people with disabilities. The scheme comprises three strands which include subsidy and other supports for employers of people with disabilities. It was a mainstreaming of the previous Pilot Programme for the Employment of people with disabilities which was developed in 1994 through a partnership between the Government and Rehab.

The Wage Subsidy Scheme is a very good scheme and one that is now used by approximately 2,000 employees. There are a number of changes that could be made to the scheme to make it more attractive to people with disabilities:

1. Allow employees, particularly those entering employment for the first time or after a period of leave to work fewer than 21 hours per week. A shorter working week would allow people to build up their capacity. It would also allow people with disabilities to reduce their working hours as they age and where their disability exacerbates the ageing process.

2. Make it easier for people leaving employment or who wish to reduce their hours of employment to re-access their disability payment such as Disability Allowance, regardless of the duration of their participation in the scheme.
3. Ensure guaranteed retention of Medical Card for all WSS participants at renewal without delays and reapplication.
4. Ensure an entitlement to a travel pass for people in employment under the Wage Subsidy Scheme, recognising the significant travel many undertake to access suitable employment.
5. Remove the need for positions under the Wage Subsidy Scheme to be permanent positions only, opening up access to temporary work and fixed term contracts to people with disabilities who need the supports of the WSS.
6. Increase the Employer subsidy rate to take account of the rise in minimum wage.
7. Remove the inequality of access to DA Income Disregard by opening this scheme to people already on the WSS as opposed to just new entrants.

- **Wage Subsidy Scheme and Disability Allowance**

For many years, the sector has been asking for alignment between the Disability Allowance Income Disregard Scheme and the Wage Subsidy Scheme. Until about 18 months ago, people were not permitted to retain their DA on entry to the WSS. This has changed due to a recognition that there was nothing in the guidelines for the statutory DA scheme which prohibited entry to the administrative Wage Subsidy Scheme. This is a very welcome development because following the removal of the back to work scheme in about 2008, entry to the WSS had become a stark financial choice for people on DA, who no longer had access to a supporting social welfare payment to help them to transition to work.

However, extension of DA eligibility for WSS participants has led to a situation where some people on the WSS were required to give up their DA to enter the scheme while newer participants have been allowed to enter while retaining the safeguard of Disability Allowance.

A two tier WSS is emerging. The earlier participants who were required to give up their Disability Allowance are earning less than newer participants and are far more vulnerable should their employment not work out or their disability or health deteriorate. They should be fully supported to apply for and receive Disability Allowance to remove this inequality and to support them to retain their jobs.

Furthermore, no announcement was made in relation to this new eligibility for DA while on the WSS and therefore there is a low level of awareness among potential participants. The WSS is a very strong offering for an employer who is thinking of taking someone on and is an essential incentive for the person with a disability who doesn't need to jump into employment without the support of DA. Here is some of the feedback we received

<u>Quotes from our respondents</u>

> *"... the Wage Subsidy Scheme (WSS) is a double-edged sword. It is a great incentive to employers to receive €5.30 per hour towards the cost of a person's wages. However, again the person stands to lose their Disability Allowance (DA) and possibly their secondary benefits, although this is currently under review. Also, if the person is only working the minimum of 21 hours as stipulated by the WSS at minimum wage, the person will receive less than they would, if they remained on DA and the shortfall is not compensated for by Social Welfare. Thus, the person is better off unemployed. Ironically, as an instructor, when looking for employment for people with disabilities, if a person is in receipt of DA, I will not mention WSS as an incentive*

to the employer as I will be disadvantaging the person I'm trying to help. The only person to gain in this situation is the employer."

6. Partial Capacity Benefit

Partial Capacity Benefit is a payment that allows a person with an illness or condition who is in receipt of illness benefit or invalidity pension and who has been out sick for more than six months to return to work and retain some of their social welfare payment.

Its take up has been low and there are a number of possible reasons for this:

1. Partial Capacity Benefit (PCB) replaces the previous system of exemptions to work for people on Invalidity Pension (IP), which allowed a person to work for up to 20 hours per week. For people assessed as having a moderate or severe restriction on their capacity for work, the Partial Capacity Benefit will leave them worse off than they would have been under the previous system.

2. PCB is described as a voluntary scheme but it is only voluntary for those not already in work. When it was introduced those already accessing employment on IP, with an exemption, were required to apply for PCB when their exemption expired. It would be useful to compare the number of people who were availing of an exemption on IP who chose to transfer to PCB when it was introduced. This could have shown if people had actually left the workforce when PCB was introduced.

3. Furthermore, if a person on IP or Illness Benefit (IB) wanted to take up employment for just a few hours per week, their income is not only reduced by, in some cases, 50%, but they also lose their secondary benefits. This is determined on a sliding scale depending on how they are medically assessed − mild, moderate or severe. In some cases they may lose all their payment (if they are deemed as having only a minor condition). This means that PCB will only be an attractive scheme to a small number of people who can work full-time or nearly full-time hours and this can be very difficult for many people in receipt of IP. The previous system of exemptions make taking up part-time employment far more viable.
4. An issue for many people on IP or IB contemplating employment is that there is a risk that you will be assessed as having a mild restriction on your capacity to work and if that happens your IP or IB will also be reviewed. This is a source of great concern for people. It may be appropriate to remove the mild categorisation and therefore the risk of loss of benefits. Potential PCB beneficiaries have met the criteria for IP so a reassessment that could seriously disadvantage them is a big risk to take in order to take up employment. Those most able to take up employment will be least likely to apply for PCB.
5. For applicants who are on Illness Benefit, the waiting period is six months. This does not focus on early intervention. All research shows that the long you are out of work, the less likely you are ever to return. Earlier access make may the scheme more attractive to people on IB who have acquired a lifelong disability and who have jobs to go back to.
6. Many people are concerned that they will not be able to return easily to their social welfare payment. This is not the case for those assessed as moderate, severe or profound and this needs to be communicated. It is the case for those assessed as mild and this should be changed, as in point 4 above.
7. Partial Capacity Benefit is not one of the Government schemes where a person can retain their medical card for the duration of the scheme This is acting as a disincentive to participation in the scheme as people who have been off work sick for more than six months are likely to have ongoing medical needs and are reluctant to give up their social welfare payment as it would result in loss of their medical card. This payment could be easily included in Section 5.2 of the *Medical Card/G.P. Visit Card National Assessment Guidelines* and the cost offset by reductions in social welfare payments.

Quotes from our respondents

"The Partial Incapacity Scheme (PIPS) is marketed as an initiative to help people back into employment. However, the reality is that it appears to be merely a means of forcing/cajoling people off Invalidity Pension (IP). If a person decided that they want to take up employment, even for a few hours per week, their income is not only reduced by, in some cases, 50%, but they also lose their secondary benefits. This is determined on a sliding scale depending on how they are medically assessed- mild, moderate or severe. In some cases they may lose all their payment (if they are deemed as having only a minor condition).

In addition to this reduced income and lose of secondary benefits, there is a huge uncertainty as to the long term consequences, if the person is made redundant or their health deteriorates. They can never go back onto I.P. and it appears that they must remain on their reduced income, despite altered circumstances. Hence, the person has so much to lose, that many people on IP decide not to risk looking for employment and resign themselves to being unemployable – because of the punitive benefit system that is in place.

This has created a fear in people with disabilities and many who would like to work, are simply afraid of the long-term consequences. Thus, financially it makes more sense to remain unemployed indefinitely. The general advice circulating about this initiative is to avoid it with at all costs. However, ironically, students are sanctioned to come onto NLN vocational programmes whilst on IP but cannot work if they remain on this payment!!!! I've had several students who have trained on my programmes and I've sourced employment for them but they cannot take it up. It's not only very disheartening for them but for me. Even voluntary work is not permitted. Hence, we have people who want to work for their own emotional well-being and to be an economically productive member of society, but cannot. They have too much to lose".

"There has also been a major change when a person is on Invalidity Pension in that one used to be allowed with permission to take part in Rehabilitative work, now one must apply for partial capacity payment which in turn puts their disability into a percentage scheme. More Categorisation which is not required".

7. Access to activation measures for people with disabilities

Over the last number of years the focus of activation measures has been on jobseekers. This has meant that many new activation measures have not been open to people with disabilities. For example, Jobbridge was initially not open to people on DA. Decisions such as this led to a perception that employment for people with disabilities was not a government priority.

With the establishment of Intreo, the referral pathway to employment for people with disabilities was disassembled. With the recovery, work has begun to improve supports for people with disabilities but ground has been lost. Many people with disabilities who might otherwise have sought support waited out the recession because they were not able to access activation and training measures.

Quotes from our respondents

"The current benefit system is not conducive to people with disabilities entering the workforce. Also, some of the so-called initiatives, supposedly designed, to encourage people with disabilities into employment simply are not viable".

Possible actions

- Ensure that people with disabilities can access the specialist training and education supports that they need and are easily referred to these.

- Mainstream access to activation measures for people with disabilities to ensure they have access to the full range of supports available.

8. Building rewarding careers

The vision of the Comprehensive Employment Strategy is that people with disabilities can get a job and enjoy a rewarding career. This is a worthy objective but is unusual in practice.

Most young people will have to take a lower paid job when starting out in work and do this for the greater good of their careers. For people with disabilities low paid work may continue throughout their working lives. This impacts on a person's motivation to work and leads them to question the value of work.

One of the people who uses our services gave a speech last year in which he spoke about this experience of work. He spoke about the need for a person to get the right job and not just any job.

"I had the support of a job coach who tried to get me into any job. Her attitude was that I was too choosy but the jobs she suggested just didn't suit my needs and I turned them down. One was washing dishes in a Chinese takeaway – I hadn't been diagnosed with Aspergers at that point but I couldn't have done that job. They also suggested I work in a paint factory but with my allergies I couldn't have worked with all those paints and turpentine smell. I would also have ended up on less money than I was on – it just didn't make sense".

He also spoke about the need to recognise that people with disabilities can learn and adapt, gain confidence and progress in their careers but they may need ongoing support to do that. Often the supports stop when the person has the job or soon after but people need to be able to access support throughout their working lives.

"I got a job in a local supermarket, in the car park. As time went on I ended up doing car park duty and then I helped out with the deliveries, then helped out in the store, I made my way up gradually and they had me stocking shelves and then in stock control. At one stage the manager came up to me and said that in a couple of hours I did more work than others did in a day."

9. Information about employment supports

The system of employment supports is very complex. It is difficult for people to identify what schemes they can take part in, given their disability payment. Clear information would help people to identify the right scheme or payment for them to support them in employment.

<u>Quotes from our respondents</u>

> *"I do find with so many differing social welfare payment types, there is still confusion over what people are entitled to .While Citizens Information etc. are helpful the process is still quite wordy. A clearer or more user friendly explanation of entitlements would be really helpful. Or a leaflet type document that could state the key points (dispelling some of the myths) could also be of use"*

Possible actions

- Provide clear information about the programmes available, the eligibility criteria and the potential impact on social welfare.

- The ready reckoner proposed in the Comprehensive Employment Strategy could be extended to include a search mechanism whereby a person could input their current social welfare payment to generate a list of activation, training and education programmes for which they are eligible.

10. Access to a training allowance while in Vocational Training

People with disabilities need to receive sufficient financial supports to undertake training as a pathway to work. Many people who acquire a disability will need to retrain in order to re-enter work. In Budget 2014, the SOLAS Training Allowance of €20 per week was removed for new entrants to training.

This has caused considerable hardship to people in Vocational Training who are now worse off in training than they would be at home. This is because it costs money to access activities in the community – transport, meals, internet access, etc. SOLAS Funded Vocational Training can provide a very effective pathway to and back to employment for people with disabilities.

> *"People with disabilities who progress from Rehabilitative Training to Vocational Training are mostly heading for employment. This progress is hampered by the absence of a training allowance. It used to be €31.80, the same as RT allowance. It was reduced to €20 [per week] before being removed altogether.*

Further information

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