

Review of the Employability Service

A Submission by the Citizens Information Board (July 2015)

Introduction

The Citizens Information Board (CIB) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to Indecon in respect of their Review of the EmployAbility Service for the Department of Social Protection (DSP). The submission is based on feedback from staff working in Citizens Information Services (CISs) and the National Advocacy Service (NAS) and is based mainly on the experience of using the EmployAbility Service on behalf of clients. It should be noted that as feedback and direct experience relating to the EmployAbility Service was quite limited, general observations about the Service taken from Disability Forum meetings¹ and research into the area have also been added to the submission to supplement the feedback.

Role of the Citizens Information Board

The principal functions of the Citizens Information Board (CIB) are to support the provision of and, where appropriate, provide directly to the public, independent information, advice and advocacy services in relation to social services. The CIB is also required to assist and support individuals, particularly those with disabilities, in identifying their needs and options and in accessing their entitlements to social services. In this regard, the Citizens Information Act 2007 provides for the introduction by the CIB of a range of advocacy services, including a Personal Advocacy Service aimed at people with a disability². Other functions of the Board are to support, promote and develop:

- (i) Greater accessibility, co-ordination and public awareness of social services
- (ii) The dissemination of integrated information in relation to such services by statutory bodies and voluntary bodies and
- (iii) The provision of information on the effectiveness of current social policy and services and to highlight issues which are of concern to users of those services

¹ CIB is a constituent member of the Department of Social Protection's Disability Consultative Forum.

² The establishment by the Citizens Information Board of the Personal Advocacy Service was deferred by the Government in the light of current budgetary circumstances.

The CIB funds and supports the nationwide network of Citizens Information Services (CISs)³ and the Citizens Information Phone Service (CIPS). It also provides and manages the Citizens Information website (www.citizensinformation.ie).

The National Advocacy Service for People with Disabilities (NAS) is funded and supported by the CIB as is the Sign Language Interpreting Service (SLIS). The NAS provides an independent, confidential and free, representative advocacy service that works to ensure that when life decisions are made, due consideration is given to the will and preference of people with disabilities and that their rights are safeguarded. SLIS is the National Sign Language Interpreting Service for Ireland with the overall goal of ensuring that Deaf people can exercise their rights under equality and disability legislation and access their entitlements to public and social services on an equal basis with others.

Main issues identified from the feedback

A number of issues came through in the feedback about the EmployAbility Service. These were:

- **Awareness:** there is a lack of awareness of the EmployAbility Service in the private sector, so possible jobs that could be filled through the EmployAbility Service are being missed ([Example 1](#)).
(**Note:** there is much greater awareness of the Service from people working in the disability sector).
- **Access issues:**
 - lack of Sign Language Interpreters in the Service makes it difficult for Deaf users ([Example 2](#))
 - waiting times to access the EmployAbility Service are growing ([Example 3](#))
- **Job types:** the Service tends to list low-paid jobs so does not meet the needs of people with higher career aspirations
- **Eligibility criteria:** the EmployAbility Service's current 'eligibility criteria' exclude some people with disabilities, for example those that want to work flexible hours, those with limited abilities and those who are not 'job ready' ([Example 4](#))
- The service is more successful for people with moderate physical disabilities but cannot currently cater for people with high-level support needs. These individuals require long-term individualised support with comprehensive wage subsidies to the employer as they would have lower productivity levels. This issue is particularly urgent as 'sheltered work' is now being phased out so there are fewer options for people with severe disabilities.

³ Citizens Information Services and the Citizens Information Phone Service dealt with over 700,000 callers in 2014 and over a million queries.

Feedback

The following examples illustrate the different issues being discussed above:

Example 1

“Prior to working at the National Advocacy Service (NAS), I was Human Resource Manager for a multi-national company and when a position became available that would require a person to scan documents and do small jobs we decided to recruit from St John of Gods, however, when we contacted them we were put in touch with Employability in Bluebell. I don't think the Private Sector is very aware of Employability as a general rule. However, I am very aware of the service since I joined NAS and we would be in touch with them on a regular basis.”

Example 2

“The EmployAbility Service is well-known within the Deaf Community but is not being used much by them due to the language barrier.”

Example 3

“EmployAbility Service is easy to contact however there is “currently” a waiting period of six months before new clients can be taken on”.

Example 4

“The demand is limited to those that are “job ready” and able to work a certain number of hours, this excludes those that wish to work very limited hours and those that have limited ability and limited skill level. In essence, a large population of people with a disability are excluded from participation in the programme.”

Observations on the EmployAbility Service

A number of issues came through about the EmployAbility Service during discussions with other stakeholders and when researching the topic for this submission. These were:

- **Job-ready:** the need to be “job-ready” for eligibility to the service is not suitable for people with mental health difficulties as “experts say that it is not possible to tell in advance whether someone with a mental health disability will be able to obtain competitive employment”⁴. According to statistics from 2007 people with mental health disabilities made up approximately one third of those accessing the then Supported Employment Scheme⁵.

⁴ [Mental Health Reform, Submission for Budget 2015](#), Pg 9

⁵ [Mental Health Reform, Submission for Budget 2015](#), Pg 10

- **Meeting demand:** approximately 2,700 people a year participate in the EmployAbility Service, but there were over 106,279 on Disability Allowance and 53,196 on Invalidity Allowance in 2013⁶. So is the Service meeting the needs of all people with disabilities, considering the ‘results from the 2006 National Disability Survey, which indicate that over one-third (37 per cent) of working-age people with a disability would be interested in work if the circumstances were right⁷.
- **Criteria:** the EmployAbility Service supports individuals for 18 months. For people with high-support needs, they require more long-term support.
- **Organisational structure:** the EmployAbility Service consists of 23 independent companies. How do you ensure consistency of service across the companies as well as ensuring there are no gaps in service delivery?

Recommendations

CIB feedback and research have shown that the EmployAbility Service is generally well thought of amongst the disability sector and has seen mainly positive experiences from those that use it, whether employer or employee. Feedback has also highlighted issues that should be addressed to ensure that the Service is suitable for a broader range of people with disabilities.

The following options should be considered:

- Promote the scheme amongst the private sector to get more varied jobs listed (some of the EmployAbility Services receive referrals from Intreo, but perhaps developing relationships between Intreo and private employers could also be used to promote the Service further amongst private sector employers)
- Broaden the eligibility criteria to allow more people with disabilities access the Service:
 - remove the need to be “job-ready”
 - allow participants work more flexible hours
- Extend the Service to accommodate people with high-support needs, this would include wage subsidy arrangements with employers and extra long-term support
- Extend the time limit from 18 months to accommodate those that need longer support

⁶ [Parliamentary Question 96 \[7043/14\], 12 February 2014.](#)

⁷ [Educational and Employment Experiences of People with a Disability in Ireland: An Analysis of the National Disability Survey, July 2015](#)

- Create an over-arching, umbrella group for the 23 EmployAbility Services that would ensure consistent quality and nationwide service delivery across the individual Services
- Ensure that the Employability Service is compatible with the objectives and targets contained within the forthcoming comprehensive employment strategy for people with disabilities and are supported through the Department's activation strategy