

Chime Pre-Budget Submission

To

Department of Social Protection

June 2023

Introduction

Chime is the national charity for deafness and hearing loss. In addition to providing direct services to Deaf and Hard of Hearing people, Chime also advocates for others to provide accessible and relevant services to these people.

The Department of Social Protection currently has an important and broad remit in protecting and supporting Deaf and Hard of Hearing people in Ireland. In operational terms, this remit currently ranges from an important grant to support people to access hearing aids, supports in relation to employment, and responsibility for a scheme to support access to social and cultural events under the Irish Sign Language (ISL) Act.

This pre-budget submission focusses on 3 specific areas that require attention and should be included within Budget 2023.

The 3 specific areas are:

1. The Treatment Benefit Hearing Aid Grant
2. The Reasonable Accommodation Fund
3. The Irish Sign Language (ISL) Voucher scheme

This submission and accompanying reports has been submitted to the Department of Social Protection via email on June 16th 2023 to pbf@welfare.ie

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This submission will briefly outline the key issues relating to each of the three areas for consideration in Budget 2024. The Department will already be aware through other channels and reports of the detailed rationale for the proposals in this submission. For convenience and brevity, a number of relevant reports will be submitted with this submission for reference.

1. Treatment Benefit Hearing Aid Grant

This grant is currently set at a maximum of €1,000 for 2 hearing aids. In 2021 a change was made to the grant which has resulted in an additional 20,000 people getting hearing aids by end of 2023 – an increase of c80% in the rate of applications granted.

The background to the change and the importance of people with acquired hearing difficulties getting access to hearing aids is outlined in the DSP's own report: *Report under Section 23 of the Social Welfare (No. 2) Act 2019 on the Cost of Hearing Aids and the Adequacy of Financial Supports*, published in August 2020 (see attached).

It is important to note in terms of current practice:

- 50% of those with adult acquired hearing loss being fitted with hearing aids in Ireland today receive the hearing aid grant.
- Currently there is very limited oversight (and no clinical governance or quality assurance) of the service provided to recipients of the hearing aid grant.
- Chime believes there are a number of areas that need attention with regard to this important healthcare service supported through the hearing aid grant. These include, but are not limited to: qualifications of providers; transparency on service and pricing; duplication of resources (for those with dual eligibility, i.e. qualifying for hearing aid grant and medical card), and types of hearing aids being provided (see below).
- Chime notes that since the introduction of the change to the hearing aid grant in May 2021, there has been a significant increase in the number of claimants for the hearing aid grant receiving basic so-called 'Level 1' hearing aids. (Chime understands the increase has gone from c3.5% prior to May 2021, to c28% since then). This indicates that people may not be getting the most appropriate hearing aids suited to their needs, probably due to cost.
- Chime has called on the Minister for Health to develop a national hearing care plan for the whole population, as recommended by the World Health Organisation. The WHO have stated that for every €1 invested in hearing care, States can expect a return of almost €16 over the following 10 years. The Minister for Health has recently committed to having discussions with relevant stakeholders on the need for a national hearing care plan. Chime recommends that the Department of Social Protection engage with the Department of Health in relation to the development of a national hearing care plan.

Chime is calling on the Minister for Social Protection, in consideration of all of the above, to:

- **introduce in Budget 2024 a tiered Hearing Aid Grant, similar to that in operation in France, to ensure patients receive hearing aid technology appropriate to their needs;**
- **engage with the Minister for Health to develop a whole of population hearing care plan, that includes those in receipt of the Hearing Aid Grant into the future, with appropriate clinical oversight and quality assurance of the health care service being provided.**

2. The Reasonable Accommodation Fund (RAF)

The RAF is administered by the Department of Social Protection with the aim of supporting employers and employees with a disability to take appropriate measures to help a person with a disability to access, improve or retain their employment.

A review of the RAF was due to be completed in 2019, with recommendations to be implemented beginning in Q1 2020 (see attached *Comprehensive Employment Strategy, Phase Two Action Plan 2019-2021*). A public consultation was eventually completed in early 2022, we understand a report has been compiled, but this has yet to be published.

Currently the fund has four distinct grants, one of which is the Job Interview Interpreter Grant, which allows for a sign language interpreter to be engaged to facilitate a job interview involving a Deaf applicant.

However, if the Deaf applicant is successful, there is no provision under the RAF for any in-work communication support to ensure full access in the workplace for the Deaf employee. Full access would include appropriate communication support for activities such as training, staff meetings, supervision etc. Is it any wonder in the current status quo that it is virtually impossible for Deaf people in Ireland to aspire to progress their careers towards supervisory or management roles. This contrasts with the UK where the Access to Work Scheme provides Deaf people with in-work access to levels of communication support that are appropriate to their roles and responsibilities.

(The benefits of the Access to Work scheme for Deaf people was vividly illustrated in a RTÉ Prime Time documentary broadcast in 2019. The documentary featured three Deaf people from Ireland who emigrated to London seeking work – and demonstrated the senior roles they were able to attain in a short period of time due to their talents and the availability of in-work communication support. This documentary can be viewed at this link: <https://www.rte.ie/player/movie/london-calling/100117032437>).

Chime is calling on the Minister for Social Protection to:

- **make provision in Budget 2024 for the expansion of the Reasonable Accommodation Fund to include funding for in-work communication support for employers and Deaf employees.**

3. The Irish Sign Language (ISL) Voucher scheme

The Irish Sign Language Act 2017, Section 9 relates to support for Deaf citizens to access social, educational, cultural and other activities. This has become known as ‘the voucher scheme’ amongst the Deaf community. In 2021 there was a very successful pilot scheme that was lauded by members of the Deaf community. A report was compiled, (see attached *Evaluation of the Irish Sign language (ISL) Interpreting Voucher Scheme Pilot Project 2021*), and published by the Citizens Information Board (CIB) in July 2022.

This scheme is essential for Deaf people to have reasonable access to participation in society and to be able to look after their own affairs in an independent and dignified manner (e.g. make a will, apply for a mortgage, etc).

While we understand that another voucher scheme is due to restart in October 2023, it is as yet unclear if this is to be a permanent scheme. The CIB report recommended a budget of c€400,000 per annum, which we are recommending is increased to €450,000 per annum to take account of inflation etc.

Accordingly, Chime is calling on the Minister for Social Protection to:

- **Provide multi-annual funding of c€450,000 per annum for a permanent ‘voucher scheme’ as recommended by the CIB Pilot Project report.**

For any queries related to this submission, please contact:

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