



# Returning to Work after a cancer diagnosis

Irish Cancer Society reflections

The Irish Cancer Society funded the ESRI (2021) to conduct research that would provide a solid evidence base on the impact a cancer diagnosis has on employment and to draw out lessons on how to address barriers and facilitators for people returning to work after a cancer diagnosis in Ireland.

This detailed work has revealed a broadly positive picture, with almost 7 in 10 patients and survivors saying their manager or organisation was supportive of them in their return to work.

Despite this, a number of barriers were identified in the ESRI Report, which need to be addressed by a range of stakeholders.

Financial need was cited as the main reason people returned to work by nearly 4 in 10 people surveyed, while the same number of those asked whether the amount of leave they took from work was appropriate, felt their time off was too short.

These responses, and the fact that 1 in 6 people said their manager was unsupportive or very unsupportive, suggests that as a society, we need to do better.

The Irish Cancer Society believes that all patients should feel supported in their return to work after a diagnosis, and their quality of life, finances and career prospects should not be affected by their illness.

Coping with the disease and not work issues should be a cancer patient's main priority.

It is clear that there are immediate actions that can be taken by Government, employers, representative bodies and the Irish Cancer Society to make sure all cancer patients and survivors are supported in their time off work and feel supported to return to work in a way which suits them.

The COVID-19 pandemic has meant unprecedented disruptions to the way we work, while many cancer patients who want to work have been unable to do so while cocooning at home, in line with public health advice.

COVID-19 has also revealed our ability to innovate and adapt, to empathize and support.

Government and employers adapted to support workers during one of the most challenging times in recent history, and we note a number of recent legislative and policy developments around working from home, the right to disconnect and sick leave.



Now, we're asking Government and employers to adapt to support the growing numbers of cancer patients and survivors continuing in and returning to the workforce.



## Recommendations for Employers

- **To mitigate** any current or future barriers to an employee being able to execute their job function efficiently, employers should implement and agree, in advance of employees' return to work, a flexible 'Returning to Work plan' with employees returning to work after a cancer diagnosis.

This plan should include any modifications to working hours/days, lighter tasks, working from home, information on the company's Employee Assistance Programme (if applicable), counselling or other support services, and leave for medical appointments.

This is valuable for both employee and employer as it helps ensure all these areas are discussed, and expectations and understanding are clear.

- **If an employee** wishes to remain at work during cancer treatment, employers should implement and agree a flexible 'Remaining at Work plan'. This should take account of time off for treatment and reduced hours or reduced workload, as appropriate to the individual employee and the expected impact of their treatment.
- **Employers should** ensure communication is maintained by way of regular informal check-

ins with the employee or a nominated contact-person, during their time out of work and following their return. Frequency and method of contact should be at the discretion of the employee.

- **Employers and employees should** discuss any treatment-related physical and psychological impairments to working. Both should agree on suitable areas of work for the employee to help mitigate any challenges as much as possible.

An occupational health professional should be engaged to assist the employee and employer to make preparations in this respect.

- **Employers should** consider implementing a standalone workplace policy on cancer and other chronic illnesses, which outlines supports for those who have been diagnosed with cancer.

This should include provisions for sick leave, attending medical appointments, regular point of contact at the company, modifications to the workplace, and organisational principles for supporting people affected by cancer.

Where this is not possible, provisions for supporting employees with chronic illness should be included in a company's sick leave policy.

- **Workplace policies** on cancer and chronic illnesses and supports should be clearly communicated to managers, so they feel fully equipped to support their staff.
- **Meaningful consultation** with staff should inform all and any workplace policies on cancer.
- **Employers should** ensure that employees on extended leave due to cancer are fully informed of their contractual sick pay and leave entitlements, and that employees are provided with information on other statutory entitlements which they may qualify for. This includes partial capacity benefit which facilitates returning to work for those receiving qualifying social welfare payments.
- **In the absence** of sick pay legislation, employers should endeavour to ensure employees have access to adequate financial supports if they become ill.
- **Employers should** regularly review relevant legislation including Ireland's Employment and Equality Acts, which oblige employers to make reasonable accommodation for people with

disabilities in the workforce, including those with cancer, and the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005, which obliges an employer to ensure the safety, health and welfare of its employees.

- **Employers should** put in place practical training and guidance for managers to facilitate the return to work of people with cancer and other chronic illnesses.
- **Where cancer patients** and survivors work from home, employers should ensure the provision of adequate facilities and any modifications required to facilitate the individual's work.
- **During the current COVID-19 pandemic**, many cancer patients who would be in a position to work must stay at home in line with public health advice due their 'extremely medically vulnerable' status. Where possible, employers should facilitate employees with cancer who wish to continue working to do so from home by assigning tasks that can be performed from home.



## Recommendations for Government

- **Legislation should** be introduced to ensure a statutory obligation for employers to provide sick leave pay.

As outlined by the ESRI (2021), financial supports

from employers to support an individual taking leave would ensure that they do not need to return to work before they are physically and psychologically ready. Current provision of sick leave pay varies across employers and those in low paid, temporary, private sector employment are less likely to be covered.

- **The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) should** implement guidance on supporting public sector workers with chronic illnesses in returning to work, and undertake detailed research across the public sector to understand why cancer patients and survivors working in the public sector are more likely to have a negative experience when returning to work.
- **The Government should** introduce a state-run pilot programme on reintegration into the workplace for cancer patients and survivors out of work at the time of their diagnosis or after their diagnosis.

This should examine similar programmes in the Netherlands and Belgium for learnings applicable in an Irish context and should be introduced in tandem with new employment supports (such as training) for those who have lost their jobs due to their cancer diagnosis.

Different streams of the programme should be targeted at different groups, including:

- Self-employed
- Those unemployed at the time of their diagnosis
- Younger workers
- Older workers

The programme's goal should not just be a return to work, but remaining in work.

- **The Government should** establish a programme of occupational health supports for SMEs and self-employed people.

Being off work for treatment and rest can be more difficult in small organisations and for self-employed people, who tend to have far more limited access to occupational health services.

- **The Department of Social Protection (DSP) should** begin an information campaign to promote work-related supports and rights for employees and employers including Partial Capacity Benefit and the Employee Retention

Grant Scheme. Particular consideration should be given to information for self-employed individuals and smaller organisations, which may lack a designated human resource department.

- **DSP should** introduce a new statutory payment for employees and self-employed people with chronic illness to attend medical appointments where they have had to take unpaid leave to attend appointments during work time.
- **DSP should** ease the eligibility criteria for partial capacity benefit to increase security for all cancer patients seeking to return to work.
- **The Irish Cancer Society recommends** that all cancer patients be given an automatic medical card on diagnosis until treatment has finished.

Almost 4 in 10 people in Ireland who returned to work after a cancer diagnosis did so before they were ready. Of these, half did so because of financial need. Medical costs are a significant cost for cancer patients and the wider provision of medical cards would alleviate some of the financial difficulty of a cancer diagnosis.

- **To provide greater flexibility** for cancer patients and survivors seeking to continue working or to returning to work, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment should introduce legislation which gives employees the right to request to work from home.
- **To safeguard the health** and safety of cancer patients and survivors in the workplace and to ensure adequate rest periods during non-working hours, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment should introduce legislation on the right to disconnect from work.
- **During the current COVID-19 pandemic, DSP should** provide additional income supports to cancer patients who would be in a position to work but must stay at home in line with public health advice due their 'extremely medically vulnerable' status, and cannot perform their role from home.



# Recommendations for Trade Unions and Representative Groups

- **Trade unions and representative groups should** seek to introduce a provision on chronic illnesses including cancer in collective agreement negotiations with employers. This provision should cover sick leave and reasonable accommodation.
- **Trade Unions and representative groups should** ensure that their organisers are aware of the specific needs of cancer patients and survivors in the workplace
- **Trade Unions should** seek to foster positive conversations between employers and employees. A good example of policies to support employees and employers is the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) guide – “Policies to assist workers with breast cancer and other illnesses”.
- **Trade Unions and representative groups should** proactively reach out to members who are taking time off work because of chronic illness to discuss their employment-related needs and rights.



## Irish Cancer Society actions

- **It is unclear** why those working in the public sector are more likely to report a negative impact of cancer on their ability to return to work. The Irish Cancer Society will engage with

Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (D/PER), public sector unions and those working in the public sector to understand what supports would better facilitate a manageable return to work for public sector workers.

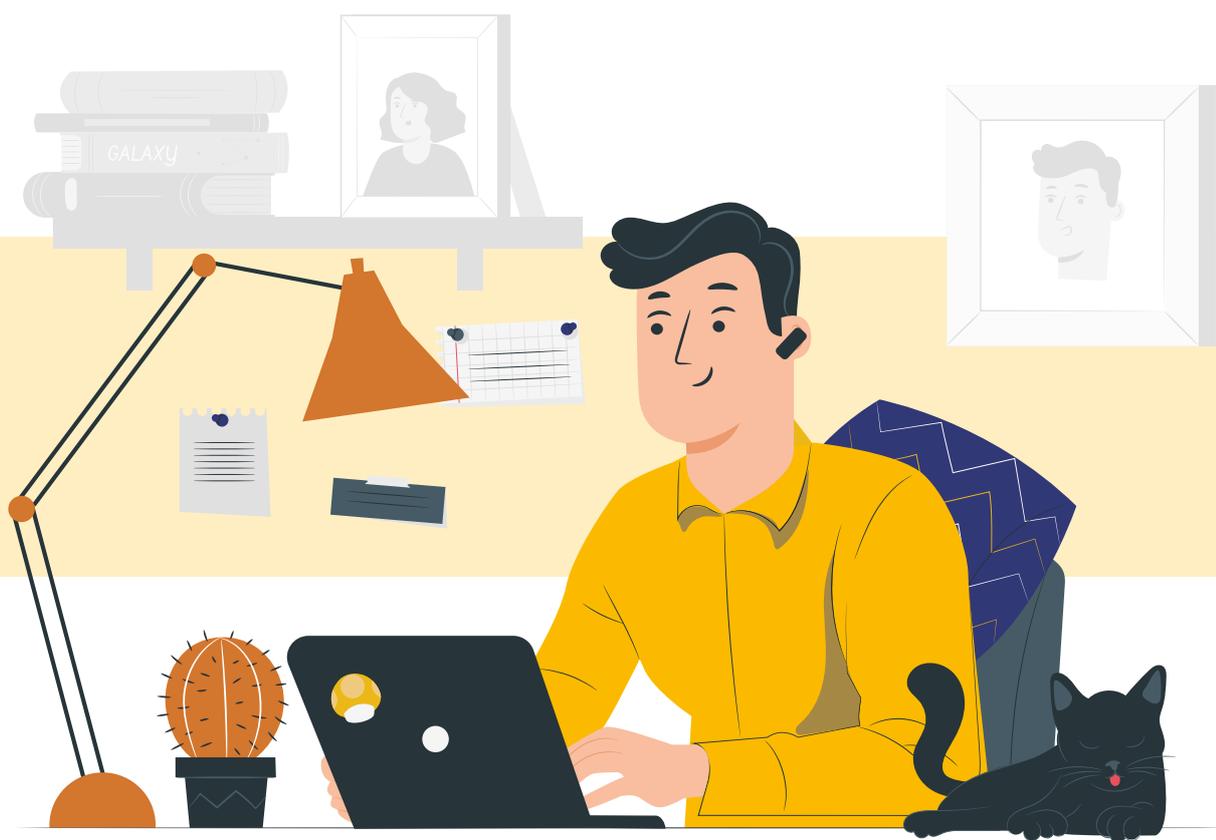
- **The Irish Cancer Society will** establish a stakeholder forum on the challenges of returning to work which will bring together employers, cancer patients, survivors, and trade unions. This forum will seek to foster better understanding of the challenges faced by patients and survivors and will enable stakeholders to work together to implement solutions.
- **The Irish Cancer Society will** work to develop a template workplace policy on cancer and guides for employees and employers, in partnership with stakeholders.
- **The Irish Cancer Society will** undertake work to identify the needs of certain patient and survivor cohorts, which were not fully addressed by this research, including men and those with lower levels of education.
- **No one with a newborn child should** have to use maternity leave to cover their cancer treatment. The Irish Cancer Society will seek to review whether legislative changes are required to ensure that employees who take maternity leave, and subsequently receive a diagnosis of cancer, are entitled to postpone their maternity leave to avail of sick leave while receiving treatment.

Further to this, we will campaign to ensure that employees are not forced to use maternity leave to cover their cancer treatment.

- **The Irish Cancer Society will** establish and information hub for State benefits and entitlements for those affected by cancer and those whose ability to work has been affected by cancer.
- **The Irish Cancer Society will** examine the need for development of a training module to support employers and line managers to help employees stay at work during cancer treatment or return to work following treatment.

This will include a specific module aimed at assisting self-employed people to return to work.

- **As an employer,** the Irish Cancer Society commits to implementing all recommendations for employers in this document.



## Conclusion

The Irish Cancer Society urges Government and other stakeholders to implement these recommendations to support cancer patients and survivors in their employment and quality of life.

We will campaign to ensure the adoption of these recommendations and will make sure that patients and survivors are at the forefront of this.

We want to engage in detail with Government, employers and trade unions as well to ensure all patients feel supported in returning to work by their employer and by the State, and to build cross-sector support for these progressive measures.

COVID-19 has fundamentally changed the way we work in Ireland. When the pandemic becomes a distant memory, we must ensure that support and flexibility continue to underpin our approach to assisting cancer patients and survivors in the workplace.

## To find out more about our services:

Visit us at [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)

Call our Support Line **1800 200 700**

Email us on [supportline@irishcancer.ie](mailto:supportline@irishcancer.ie)

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