

Introduction

The Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Department of Social Protection's document on the re-configuration of Community Employment (SI 4 10 13 (2)). The INOU's response will use the structure / headings of the DSP document.

Community Employment is the State's largest employment programme and the second biggest activation programme - after the Back to Education Allowance. In December 2013 there were 22,575 participants on CE, an increase of 7% over the year.

It is welcome that the dual role of CE is being acknowledged. However, it is important that in creating *"a clear boundary between activity focused on improving employability and activity dedicated to combating social exclusion for groups and individuals"* that a strong focus on supporting people distant from the labour market into sustainable employment is also developed.

The proposal is to have two broad parameters: *(i) an Activation Strand and (ii) a Social Inclusion Strand*. A critical element to rolling this will be the capacity of the Case Officers to assess which strand would be most relevant for the person they are working with and what supports are required to improve the longer-term employment prospects of this individual.

To that end the on-going training and professional development of Case Officers will be essential to equip them with the skills and competencies to do this work effectively; and to ensure that they have a good knowledge and understanding of the CE Projects to which participants will be referred. In some cases it will be clear that projects are more open to or focused on the social inclusion strand.

However, many projects are mixed and it will be important that the development of the two strands does not create new barriers to progression. To that end consultation with CE Supervisors and their on-going training and professional development will be required. Members have raised with the INOU the need for a job and person specification for the position of CE Supervisor; that applicants for CE Supervisor positions demonstrate that they have the necessary skills and aptitudes to undertake this work; that they have a clear understanding of social inclusion and equality issues and their impact on employment programme delivery; and an appropriate third level qualification or relevant experience.

The INOU is in the roll-out phase of a project exploring good practice in relation to progression which will assist in highlighting the most important elements for progression.

Activation Strand

The Department of Social Protection is proposing that the primary focus of activation places should be on the progression of the participant into employment; and that the employment target for the activation strand should be set at a high level e.g. 50% placement in employment in the year following exit.

While welcoming the setting of an ambitious employment progression target for CE, the INOU strongly believes that a range of other issues must be addressed if this target is to be achievable. Employment services must work with CE Projects in developing better links with local employers in the wider labour market. As part of its work with employers the Department must promote Community Employment and the transferable employment skills participants develop. Such a development would help to address the negative perceptions of CE and the concerns raised by some employers about the 'job-readiness' of some unemployed people.

The employment target will also have to vary regionally given the current geographical spread of employment and where it is likely to emerge. There are also significant sectoral aspects to employment maintenance and creation. So, it will be imperative that every effort is made to ensure that CE participants receive opportunities to up-skill themselves so that they can greatly enhance their prospects of securing a decent job in the wider labour market.

Duration

"Participation on the Activation Strand will be set at up to 2 years to complete a Major Award at Level 5 with an optional 3rd year to gain work practice. For those considered suitable to complete a Level 6 Award 2 years should be sufficient to gain the qualification and the experience to enter the open job-market."

The time envisaged to facilitate a participant's learning and skills development is welcome however the proposal above throws up a number of challenges. Firstly, on the training and upskilling issue it would be important to bear in mind that there are unemployed people participating on CE or who will be whose educational attainment is higher than L5 and L6 but who could benefit from educational and training supports. Given the skills gaps in the Irish labour market, the provision of such supports would meet not only the individual's needs but those of the country, and could be particularly pertinent in the regions struggling with job creation and which are seen as less attractive to inward investment.

Secondly, adequate resources must be made available to address CE participants' education and training needs and increase their prospects of finding a decent job. Integral to this are the issues of location and perception.

Ireland is experiencing some job growth but it has a particular geographical and sectoral focus to it: as a consequence many participants are likely to find themselves back on the Live Register at the end of their time on CE. The Public Employment Service is now placed within DSP: it must work alongside employment programmes and ensure that building on the work of these programmes is integral to the PES. This work must seek to address the poor perception of CE; include any job matching developments; and offer participants who have not found work a genuine high support process to address this issue.

Participant Profile

“The activation strand will give priority to persons on the Live Register and is open to all eligible groups who want to gain a significant qualification for entry to employment.”

The INOU queries this sole focus on the Live Register given: the number of people of working age who are without work; who view themselves as unemployed and who are in receipt of another welfare payment or no payment at all and who are feeling let down and excluded from the State's activation policy. In 2010 the DSP published a paper on a single social assistance payment for people of working age: if this is still departmental policy than system re-design and delivery must strive to be as inclusive as possible. Indeed equality and human rights should be an integral part of all aspects of public sector and service reform.

Given the focus in this quote on participants gaining *“a significant qualification for entry to employment”* it is absolutely critical that participants can participate in higher level courses. Participation on a CE programme may not deliver the type of experience and skills development that people need to enhance their prospects of getting a job in, for example, the knowledge economy, but with the right education and training support it could.

Social Inclusion Strand

“This Strand will be focused on facilitating the participation of vulnerable adults who are very distant from the labour market and who need special supports. Schemes under this strand will have access to multiple supports and specialist inputs from social and health mainstream services in addition to the programme offered under CE. Participants on this strand will be offered the opportunity to undertake a Major Award at Level 3 of the NQF.”

The intention behind this is to be welcomed as it recognises that some people will need particular types of supports and interventions. It would be important to ensure that the supports are put in place to facilitate the on-going development of projects striving to address a wide range of needs, often arising from structural inequalities e.g. drugs.

Educational and employment status are strongly interlinked but there are unemployed people who have existing skills who find it difficult to secure work because of the exclusion facing their community; or they have a disability; or they are parenting alone; or they are long-term unemployed and employers presume that they lack the where-with-all to work.

It is therefore important in reconfiguring existing schemes that additional barriers, including rigid educational attainment levels, are not set that limit the capacity of these schemes to meet the wide range of learning needs unemployed people have. As the system expects greater engagement of unemployed people in addressing their own unemployment, it is vital that it is not limiting in its ambitions.

So, this strand must recognise that participants may be distant from the labour market because of discrimination and that their learning needs are at a level higher than Level 3. So it would be important to ensure that projects working with, for example, Travellers do not find themselves unable to support participants' upskilling because they are at a higher level already, yet a higher qualification may help to address this structural inequality.

While welcoming the acknowledgement of the dual role CE plays and the Department's concern to recognise and build on both roles, the INOU is concerned that the complete separation of the two could lead to further exclusions. So, for example, it is proposed on this Strand that participants can only access Level 3. Yet, if a CE Supervisor and participant decided that it was in the participant's best interests that she / he should be in the other strand, a learning gap could emerge, at level 4, that neither strand could currently address.

In any re-design of supports for unemployed people and others distant from the labour market, a key focus must be on the needs of the individual participant and what he / she needs to progress on into further education and training or employment. To that end the target should be to provide the most appropriate education / training support required rather than the application of potentially limiting, and unambitious, levels.

Participant Profile

"Participants coming under this strand will have a cluster of indicators comprising of one or more of the following: long term unemployment, low educational attainment, jobless households, persons with special needs and persons in Rehabilitative Services."

For many people for whom this strand will be relevant, it will be important that CE does not remain the only access point to the labour market but that good supports are put in place to support those participants with the capacity to make real progress. Integral to this development will be a stronger equality focus and a commitment to realising an inclusive labour market.

As many projects will be linked to the Social Inclusion Strand, it will be critical that the right supports are put in place to enhance the capacity / employability of the individual while meeting the needs of the organisation to undertake its work. CE Supervisors have a key role in striking the balance between these often competing needs. Supervisor consultation, training and development should be a key aspect of any re-configured programme.

Duration of Social Inclusion Strand

“Participation on this strand will be up to 3 years. In the first year the participant will receive remedial inputs and supports in order to be in a position to commence a Major Award. The progression target for this group is 20% to further education or training and 10% into employment.”

The duration of up to three years and the recognition that some participants will require pre-development supports before undertaking further studies and striving for a major award are useful. While recognising that for some projects and participants these targets might be particularly challenging, the INOU is struck by the overall lack of ambition.

The structural nature of the social exclusion facing so many long-term unemployed people, people parenting alone, people with disabilities is broader than the issues any single programme can address. To that end it is important that the full range of services now under the remit of the DSP work together to maximise programme potential. So, it is essential that the Public Employment Service builds on the role Employment Programmes play in addressing social exclusion and seeks to create additional progression options for people participating on this strand. Similarly, SOLAS and the local Education and Training Boards have an important role to play in supporting these CE participants to acquire more marketable skills and address social and economic inequalities.







In Conclusion

Employment programmes have provided community based organisations with an opportunity to develop targeted programmes to meet the needs of the marginalised individuals and communities with whom they work. It will be important that the activation models that have worked well with marginalised groups are learnt from and built on. These models have included good recruitment processes; quality training; and clear links to progression options including employment. Where employment has been the outcome it has either been within the community and voluntary sector,








often the developers of these models, or where projects have had significant input from the other two sectors in the labour market: the state and the private sector.

Work must be undertaken to build better links, clearer pathways between labour market programmes and the wider labour market. The skills and experience acquired must be identified and this information used to support the participant to find subsequent employment through the job-matching facility developed by DSP employment services. This job matching facility and associated work should serve to address the misgivings of non-sponsoring employers regarding the quality of the work undertaken, and the presumed lack of transferability of the skills acquired in employment programmes. Basically, DSP must strive to create an image, for itself and its programmes, of excellence, that both unemployed people and employers see as integral to providing employment and labour market supports.

There are a number of key principles that the INOU believes strongly should be an integral part of any employment programme and its configuration including that:

-  Participation on employment programmes are by choice;
-  Potential participants are given the right supports to make an informed choice;
-  Appropriate and learner centred education and training options are provided;
-  Sponsoring organisations are given the correct supports to provide good opportunities for participants;
-  Mechanisms are put in place to support exchange of learning and the development of models of good practice; and
-  Progression into paid employment is actively supported by employment services.

And specifically to the reconfiguration of Community Employment, the INOU recommends that:

-  CE participants should be able to switch to or progress from the Social Inclusion Strand to the Activation Strand.
-  The employment targets set for CE should recognise the regional realities while remaining ambitious.
-  Participants on the CE Activation Strand should have the opportunity to access FETAC/QQI levels in advance of Levels 5 or 6 to enhance their prospects of securing a decent job.
-  Participants on the CE Social Inclusion Strand should have the opportunity to access FETAC/QQI Level 4 or higher.
-  The DSP Public Employment Services must inform other employers about CE and the skills participants acquire.
-  CE Supervisors and CE projects should be facilitated to exchange learning and models of good practice.
-  Consultation should be integral to the development of the CE manual and other supports for CE Supervisors and projects.

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