



Activation: Burning Issues Paper April 2010

1 Introduction:

The INOU is participating in a project entitled "Ireland in Social Europe" which is funded by the European Union through the EU Year against Poverty and Social Exclusion and lead by the European Anti-Poverty Network. The INOU is leading the 'Active Labour Market Inclusion' theme by:

- Running 4 focus groups of unemployed people in Dublin, Dundalk, Cork and Galway.
- Working with the EAPN in training 8 participants from the focus groups who wished to further their understanding and participation in national / European policy structures and debates.
- Writing a 'Burning Issues' paper on activation highlighting the issues raised during focus group and training discussion which would feed into the overall Burning Issues paper on active inclusion.
- Building on the work of the four focus groups by organising 3 regional and 1 national roundtables targeting key policy makers and practitioners to discuss active labour market inclusion.
- Working with the other project partners in identifying and disseminating key messages/stories for a public awareness initiative in the context of the EU 2010 Year.

This Burning Issues paper explores the issues raised at the four focus group meetings of unemployed people and people working on active labour market programmes like Community Employment and Jobs Initiative. Participants raised issues where they felt local service delivery and design were not what they should be and made recommendations on how more effective services could be built.

The focus groups in Dundalk, Cork and Galway targeted people in receipt of Jobseekers Benefit or Allowance and participants were found by meeting with people signing-on at their local social welfare office and informing them of the project and inviting them to the focus group. The focus group held in Finglas in Dublin targeted people participating on Community Employment or Jobs Initiative in Finglas and Ballymun through local INOU affiliates and contacts.

In the CE/JI focus group word of mouth was identified as an important source of information. Concerns were raised at the lack of information available initially and the importance of good detailed information up front if people are to make good choices that will improve their 'employability'.

Unemployed people's experience of their local Social Welfare Office varied from good, timely and friendly to information provision could be better to you needed to know more than they did in the first place. There was a sense that time spent talking to someone was insufficient to get a real understanding of the service, entitlements and options. The responsiveness and ability of the system to do work properly was seen as poor. Yet it was noted that it is of benefit to all sides that services gets things right and operated more efficiently. Questions about eligibility criteria were raised on the one hand the limitations these can put on people's opportunities and on the other the lack of information and clarity.

Concerns were raised about the personal and inappropriate nature of some comments made for example, on age; level of mortgage repayments; family support. Inconsistencies across system were noted for example on NEAP roll-out; secondary benefits; self-employment and the social welfare system; and volunteering. There was a sense of being damned if you do and damned if you don't when you try to keep yourself occupied. And if you as an unemployed person made a mistake on a form your payment could be stopped immediately. Participants also noted that the lack of jobs is the real problem.

Participants' experience of FÁS courses and work placements also varied, ranging from the positive to the critical. In particular, participants queried the current relevance of course content; the length of courses; their availability and accessibility; and the lack of aftercare and follow up. A key dimension to the issue of accessibility was the distance required to access relevant training opportunities. Delays in getting back on to a social welfare payment when the FÁS course ended were also raised.

Participants understood that there are people out there with little or no skills but training services also need to be oriented to help people who do have previous experience, skills and training to take more advanced courses. There was a strong sense that technology is not being optimised both within and across different agencies.

The issue of self-employment and accessing a social welfare payment was especially fraught. In particular, being assessed for a payment; the waiting involved; suspicions you were working; being asked to wind down the business completely even though it is costly to re-start; and lack of clarity as to the extent of the documentation required.

3 Job seeking:

In finding work, pro-active support from services to find employment was seen as crucial. Some participants advised people to take a look for jobs in FÁS ads, papers, anywhere you can find them. However, others noted that job ads in FAS were left up long after the job was filled. There was a strong sense that the job will go to someone already in employment and that 'it's not what you know but who you know'. Social interaction suffers when you are unemployed and you aren't a part of the informal circles to hear about new job opportunities.

In the current climate, one focus group noted how hard it was for people who left school early to get jobs when employers want Leaving Cert and experience for minimum wage jobs. People felt it was important that the job is linked to what the job needs not a degree for even a basic job. Experience was also seen as essential in finding work and participants noted that voluntary work can be a good way of building up experience. In the CE/JI focus group participants felt there was insufficient time to build up the necessary work experience that would carry weight with other employers. Some participants also noted that being over qualified for positions available at present was problematic.

In an increasingly flexible labour market the challenge of working on temporary contracts, in casual employment and interacting with the social welfare system needs to be properly addressed to support people to take up employment opportunities. Another issue raised was the lack of response received to job applications from employers and how disheartening this can be for people. There is also the practical issue of having to meet Genuinely Seeking Work criteria and how difficult this can be when employers do not reply to job applications. On the other side it was noted how difficult this can be if an employer is a sole trader.

Self-employment and unemployment was also discussed from the angle of job seeking i.e. creating your own job. A number of issues arose which mirrored issues arising for other job seekers e.g. lack of information and supports. Another related to the issue of newer training courses for the green economy and lack of opportunity arising for sole traders as they would not meet the installer criteria for homeowners seeking to avail of the grants to improve their homes.

4 Training & Education:

A critical issue for the unemployed people who participated in these focus groups was the quality of the provision of education and training courses available. In particular, it was seen as crucial that courses were well planned and structured and delivered by good instructors. Prior to participation the role of supportive and well informed employment and related services personnel was highlighted in ensuring people gain access to the right option. Concerns were also raised that employers don't value existing courses.

Discussions took place about a number of dilemmas facing unemployed people seeking to re-educate and re-skill themselves. In particular people were concerned about what happens next if you are deemed as already too highly qualified for available courses. This scenario arose even for people wishing to change career path and whose existing qualifications may not be relevant. It was noted that information about the part-time post-grad places available in Autumn 2009 did not filter out to local services. Subsequently, an indispensable source of information was word of mouth and browsing the internet. Similarly, what happens next when there is no obvious progression option to the FETAC course you have pursued up to that point? This dilemma makes it very difficult for unemployed people to systematically build up their qualifications and so plan for their future job options. The cost of participation in meaningful courses was also raised and the lack of support and progression from initial engagement.

From a systemic point of view, a number of questions were raised. For example, with regard to the lack of consistency across the system if a person's signing on day and the day their course ran fell on the same day some social welfare offices allowed for this, others did not. There were time delays in starting courses which impacted on people's ability to sign-up for other courses that may be run sooner because of administrative barriers that only allow people to sign-up for a limited number of options. Then there is a dilemma facing people doing courses over more than one year with regard to the waiting time to get a summer payment and the implications of taking up work over the summer on one's eligibility for the second year of course. And finally, the question was asked 'why threaten to cut people's social welfare payments when provision is inadequate?'

5 Building More Effective Services:

The thinking and culture within the system needs to change: it needs to be geared towards the individual's needs and be more innovative in its responses. The local Social Welfare Office needs to shift from an authoritative and processing mind-set to that of assisting people. On the first visit to SWO you should be advised up front of the total range of entitlements including information on the role of the Jobs Facilitator. Personal contact aimed at guiding the individual would be far more positive as up-to-date information more widely available would facilitate better decision making. A drop in service that actually provides information would be very useful. It was also noted that services need to have a goal and be realistic.

On a practical basis participants recommended that the social welfare system should look at total working hours in a week and not working days. This was seen as important given the increased flexibility in the labour market and the need to better accommodate part-time work within the social welfare system. It was noted that, when working on temporary contracts, the ability to suspend a payment then have it reinstated when the temp work ends was beneficial. Over the four focus groups the issue of information and timely access to relevant information was raised. It was seen as urgent that communication across all schemes and providers should improve to facilitate positive participation. Participants recommended maximising use of online facilities for example:

- SWO should learn from revenue.ie website.
- Should be able to get letter stating you are on the dole to apply for courses would be useful.
- Should be able to access to your stamps and entitlement status on line.

On the training issue participants recommended that FÁS could be re-orientated as a training facilitator as opposed to a training provider and used to fund individuals taking up professionally run training courses. Participants noted the importance of employment and related services understanding what qualifications you already have and explore how you can be further progressed. In keeping with the opening point people felt that the service needs to start with the person and that there is no point in just sending people on courses that are of no benefit.

Activation

In the focus groups, participants acknowledged that experience is key to being able to get a job. And they recommended that services need to do all they can to make work placements and work experience available to the unemployed. However, they also noted that work placements cannot be used to replace paid jobs and that they should be relevant to the person's training. It was also noted that the Government needs to lead by example and take unemployed people on themselves on work placements.

The issue of self-employment was discussed and participants recommended that the process of starting your own business and getting access to funding for good ideas should be simplified. The lack of jobs had been noted as the nub of the crisis and to that end participants felt that job creation when it comes must be inclusive.



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