

Mapping the journey for unemployed people



Report on Phase Two of the Employment Services Research Project



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December 2016

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Foreword

I am pleased to present this report on the second phase of the INOU's work on researching unemployed people's experience of the State's Employment Services. The first phase of this project focused on unemployed people's experience of the INTREO Service and this work is outlined in the INOU's publication – "Mapping the Journey for People who are Short-term Unemployed".

The second phase of the work has focused on the experience of people who are longer-term unemployed and their experience of accessing the Local Employment Service (LES). The third and final phase of this work will survey and report on unemployed people's experience of the JobPath service. This work is due to commence in the first quarter of 2017.

The Local Employment Service plays a key role in assisting people who are long-term unemployed and other newly unemployed people referred to the LES by the local Intreo Centre in accessing employment, education and training options. Our work in this area has enabled us to hear directly from unemployed people about their experiences of using these services. We set out to establish what unemployed people viewed as working well in these services and what changes people would like to see to improve the effectiveness of the Local Employment Service's implementation of the Intreo Employment Services model. This work covered unemployed people's experiences of the Local Employment Services where we conducted the research during the period from late Spring 2015 to late Spring 2016.

I would like to thank the LES Managers and their staff in the areas where we conducted this research for their time, engagement and courtesy during the course of our work. I would also like to thank the Department of Social Protection for supporting the organisation to undertake this work and also the officials for their assistance in ensuring the smooth running of the project. This research was undertaken solely by INOU staff who spent many days visiting the LES and local Intreo Centre where the Group Information Sessions were being conducted to meet with unemployed people and I would like to acknowledge the huge effort that the staff made in this regard. Finally, I would like to thank all the unemployed people who took the time to talk to us so openly about their experiences and who contributed so fully at our Focus Group meetings.



John Stewart
Co-ordinator

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1. Introduction



Introduction to the INOU

The INOU is a federation of unemployed people, unemployed centres, unemployed groups, community organisations and Trade Unions. The INOU represents and defends the rights and interests of those who want decent employment and cannot obtain it. We promote and campaign for policies to achieve full employment for all. We also campaign for an acceptable standard of living for unemployed people and their dependents. The INOU is an anti-sectarian, anti-racist, non-party political organisation which promotes equality of opportunity within society. (Mission Statement)

The INOU was formed in 1987 against a backdrop of high unemployment, low participation rates, long-term unemployment and mass emigration. At the time, the scale of the unemployment crisis was such that collective action was needed both to bring forward potential solutions and to ensure that unemployed people had access to programmes and services and reasonable social welfare payments whilst unemployed.

From its fledgling roots, the organisation has developed over the last 29 years and now has over 215 member groups including community based resource centres, Citizens Information Services, Money Advice and Budgetary Services, national and local NGOs and trade unions, in addition to our unemployed members.

The INOU provides services to and engages with six key groups:

- Unemployed people and other people of working age,
- Local organisations which support unemployed people,
- National organisations which work on a range of equality, social inclusion and anti-poverty issues,
- Employers,
- Policy makers / key Government Departments,
- The media.

The work of the INOU in relation to all these groups is central to sustaining our role and relevance as the national representative organisation of the unemployed. The INOU has long recognised that

the most effective route out of poverty and social exclusion for unemployed people, and those reliant on working age social welfare payments, is access to decent and sustainable employment coupled with the knowledge, capacity and ability of the individual to take up such employment opportunities.

Introduction to the Local Employment Service

The INOU played an important role in the creation of the Local Employment Service (LES). In 1995, the Interim Report of the Task Force on Long-term Unemployment endorsed the recommendation from the (then) National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) on the establishment of a Local Employment Service to mediate people who were long-term unemployed into jobs and to act as a gateway to a range of education and training options. This central recommendation was strongly based on the INOU's submission to the NESF on the need for a pro-active, highly developed, locally based, national Labour Market Service. In its submission, the INOU argued that the ability of an Employment Service to offer clients opportunities in the mainstream labour market was critical. The proposal was adopted by Government and £6m was allocated in the 1995 Budget to set up the Local Employment Service in the twelve original Partnership areas and two non-designated areas (Clare and Kildare).

Today, the LES provides a local gateway, or access point, to a range of services and facilities that are available to help jobseekers to enter or return to employment. Services, including Group Information Sessions and one-to-one meetings, are provided to jobseekers referred to the LES through the Department of Social Protection's (DSP) activation process and also to clients who engage directly with the service.

Key services provided by the LES include:

- **Placement Service:** Professional one to one support; access to jobseeking supports (phones, e-mails, printing and photocopying), assistance with career progression, registration, career guidance, vacancy matching and placement into employment.
- **Progression planning:** registration, referral onto education, training or development opportunities / programmes within the context of a Career Action Plan. Information on enterprise supports (Back to Work Enterprise Allowance) and assistance with completing Business Plans.

- **Labour Market information:** Provision of information and advice on areas that relate to the Jobseekers labour market situation.
- **Mediation / Guidance:** Provision of personalised guidance leading to development of a career plan; career counselling and referral to third party agencies.
- **Jobseeker-Employer Liaison:** Contact with employers, identification of vacancies suited to Jobseekers and advocating on behalf of Jobseekers.
- **Post-Employment Programme Assistance:** Provision of supports to Jobseekers experiencing difficulty in accessing employment from labour market programmes.
- **Post-Training / Education Programme Assistance:** Provision of supports to Jobseekers experiencing difficulty in accessing employment from employment related training or education.

In 2012, following major Departmental realignments, including the eventual disbandment of FÁS, the DSP took over responsibility for the Local Employment Service. In 2016, the LES is being run in 25 locations across the country. LES Mediators play a key role in supporting unemployed people. The DSP has increased the frequency of engagement that an unemployed person referred to this service has with her / his Mediator from once every two/three months to once every month.

Background to Research

This is the second phase of extensive work the INOU has carried out with unemployed people collating their direct experiences of the State's Employment Services. The first phase of this work 'Mapping the journey for unemployed people' focussed on the delivery of the Employment Service in two Intreo Centres to people who were shorter-term unemployed. Originally, it was intended that the second phase of the work would focus on the delivery of the Employment Service in Intreo Centres to people who are long-term unemployed. However, after selecting two locations for this work, we found that the majority of long-term unemployed people in these areas were clients of the Local Employment Service who are under contract to deliver an Intreo-type Service. The service is also available to some people who were short-term unemployed. We therefore modified this phase of the work to focus on the

experiences of people (both short-term and longer-term unemployed) who were referred to the Local Employment Service. Given the key role played by the LES in supporting unemployed people to access employment opportunities and the extent of the overall changes in how the State delivers employment services, the INOU believes it is vital to hear from unemployed people about their direct experiences of the Intreo / LES process including:

- ‘What are individuals finding useful and helpful in the service?’
- ‘What aspects of the service are not working as well as they might?’ and
- ‘What changes would make the Intreo / LES process and service a better one for unemployed people?’

The agreed INOU Work Plan submitted to the Department of Social Protection included a commitment to develop structured engagement with unemployed people around the implementation of the Intreo Employment service and the rollout of its model through the Local Employment Service.

Methodology and Structure

Mapping the Journey

This phase of the Report focusses on the direct experiences of unemployed people who have been clients of two Local Employment Services. We have set out to map their journey - in a similar way to the first phase of the Project – through:

- Signing-on or losing their job / processing payments;
- Group Information Sessions;
- Meeting Case Officers / Mediators;
- Review and subsequent meetings and engagement;
- Accessing education and training courses;
- Finding employment.

Agreed Process

Following a meeting with senior DSP officials and Intreo Managers, two locations were agreed for the second phase of the project. As

already highlighted, it became clear in subsequent discussions that the vast majority of people who were longer-term unemployed and who were invited to attend a Group Information Session and subsequent one-to-one meetings with Employment Service personnel were referred to the Local Employment Service.

We met with the Co-ordinators of two Local Employment Services to discuss our proposed work. With the agreement of the Co-ordinators, we adopted a very similar approach to contacting unemployed people to that used in the first phase of the project. This involved regular visits to the two venues where unemployed people were attending Group Information Sessions. We took the contact details of the people who expressed an interest in attending the Focus Group meetings and we took the opportunity to distribute our key publication, Working for Work. We subsequently emailed those who were interested in attending the meeting with information on the Focus Group meetings. We phoned people in the days coming up to the meeting to check if they were able to attend. We also followed up with people who were unable to attend the Focus Group meetings with a view to getting their feedback on the process to date, focusing in particular on the Group Information Session and their meeting(s) with the Mediator (the LES Mediator fulfils a similar role to the Intreo Case Officer).

We ran seven Focus Groups - two in each of the Local Employment Service localities, plus a follow-up focus group meeting in each area and a National Focus Group comprising INOU Individual Members – people who are unemployed – from around the country.

We have structured the report to follow the chronological journey of unemployed people from when they lost their job or signed-on, through to when they accessed either employment, education or training or had completed the Intreo / LES process. The report sets out those experiences. One of the changes from the previous phase of the report is that there is less of a focus on the Signing-On / Losing your Job aspect in this phase of the work. This reflects the fact that the majority of people who we met and who participated in the Focus Group meetings and telephone interviews were long-term (and in some cases significantly long-term) unemployed.

Changes to Local Employment Service

There have been very significant changes in how the Local Employment Service are delivering their Intreo-style Service since

the start of 2016. These changes are characterised by reduced numbers of unemployed clients, but more intensive supports.

The LES are delivering:

- Significantly fewer Group Information Sessions than previously
- More frequent (twice as frequent) and longer meetings with unemployed clients
- Have a Case Load capacity of 120 people a month

The research we have undertaken with unemployed people in the two geographical areas preceded these changes.

Next Steps

We envisage that the next phase of this work will involve – using similar agreed methodologies and processes – meeting with and mapping the journey of people who have been unemployed for more than one year and who have been referred to JobPath. JobPath is a new approach to employment activation to support people who are long-term unemployed, and those most likely to become long-term unemployed, to secure and sustain full-time (30 hours per week or more) paid employment. The JobPath service is operated by two companies: Turas Nua and Seetec. Turas Nua operates in Cork Central; South East; Mid-Leinster; Mid-West; South West; and Midlands South. While Seetec operates in the West; Midlands North; North East; North West; Dublin Central; Dublin North; and Dublin South.



2. Policy Context

At present employment services are provided to unemployed people primarily through three mechanisms: the Department of Social Protection's own service, Intreo; the Local Employment Service and JobPath. The key policy document for employment and activation services for unemployed people is Pathways to Work 2016-2020, and it notes that as Ireland's economy recovers, its focus is changing from 'activation in a time of recession' to 'activation for a recovery'. Two main objectives are identified:

- Continue and consolidate the progress made to date with an initial focus on working with unemployed jobseekers, in particular people who are long-term unemployed
- Extend the approach of labour market activation to other people who, although not classified as unemployed jobseekers, have the potential and the desire to play an active role in the labour force.

On June 13th the Labour Market Council, of which the INOU is a member, published its 'Response of the Labour Market Council to Pathways to Work 2016-2020'. While welcoming and acknowledging the progress made in the labour market in recent years, the Council emphasised the need for a labour market activation strategy that is flexible, that is seen to meet the needs of jobseekers and employers, and that can respond to existing challenges and emerging opportunities in the period ahead.

Stronger Targets

The Council concluded that while "Pathways to Work 2016-2020" addresses a number of important challenges, the strategy has the potential to be more ambitious in its targets. Specifically they recommended that the Government:

- Increase the employment rate target for those in the 20-64 age group to greater than 73% by 2020. Currently, the official target is to achieve an employment rate of 69-71% by 2020

- Reduce the unemployment rate to between 5-6% by 2020. The Monthly Unemployment Rate for November 2016 was 7.3%
- Reduce the long-term unemployment rate to less than 2.2% by 2020. The long-term unemployment rate for Quarter 3, 2016 was 4.2%
- Set a target for youth unemployment of less than 12% by 2020. The Monthly Unemployment Rate in November 2016 for people aged 15-24 years was 15.5%.

Services for unemployed jobseekers

The Council also recommended that specific adjustments to existing activation measures should be made. In particular, to take account of the greater diversity of skills, experiences and motivations of the unemployed and other jobseekers. As part of this work, the Council noted that the 'Department of Social Protection will need to develop its capacity and skills in 'back-to-work' training and counselling to engage with this increasingly diverse group in a constructive and productive manner'. (p12)

The report also recommends that: 'the public employment service should ensure that active labour market programmes to which jobseekers are referred (e.g. Community Employment, TÚS, Gateway) represent stepping stones to decent sustainable jobs. Such programmes should not just address the skill requirements of employers but also cater for the competency levels of people who are longterm unemployed and the type of barriers that they are likely to face in returning to employment.' (p12)

Employer Services

Under this heading, the Council recommended that 'the Government accelerate its efforts to develop a professional service for employers to support the recruitment of people who are unemployed, and in particular long-term unemployed.' (p13)

The report also notes that 'Training and education for unemployed people should be designed to meet identified skills needs. The Council notes that SOLAS and the ETBs have a crucial role to play in this and considers that the impact of their services should be subject to ongoing rigorous monitoring and evaluation. It is also important that local employers be involved in the diagnosis of skill gaps.' (p13)

One significant concern raised by the two Local Employment Services where we conducted this research is that education and training options are not recognised by the Department of Social Protection as progression outcomes – only job placements are registered as such. The INOU is keenly aware that this not only presents challenges for people trying to improve their existing skills and their chances of securing a decent job; but can be particularly challenging for people who require more developmental supports, for whom a ‘job first’ approach is not a feasible initial response.

To that end the INOU would caution against the proposal in Pathways to Work 2016-2020, to ‘Consider the extension to other programmes (e.g. LES/Jobs Clubs) of ‘payment by outcomes’ approaches as used in, or similar to those used in, Momentum and JobPath.’ (Action 6.1, page 26) The organisation is concerned that such a funding approach to a service that particularly engages with people distant from the labour market, people who can benefit from well co-ordinated local services, may prove to be counterproductive to securing better long-term outcomes.



3. Key Conclusions and Recommendations

- **The INOU acknowledges the expertise that the LES has developed in supporting people who are longer-term unemployed and recommends that the LES retains its identity within the range of DSP supported employment services. The INOU recognises that notwithstanding significant changes to the Local Employment Service since its inception in the mid 1990s, one very positive aspect that remains for unemployed people is, in the main, the LES ethos of treating the individual with empathy and respect.**
- **Though the two Local Employment Service areas that we focussed on in this report are very different in terms of scale and resources, the INOU recommends that greater resources are provided to the Local Employment Services to further develop their effective engagement with unemployed people. In addition, the INOU contends that additional resources should be made available to facilitate the LES to further develop and deepen their links with employers.**
- **One detrimental change in the transition to the current Intreo employment service model has been the diminution in the provision of a public employment service. This relates to the employment service overall, not the LES. While recognising the importance of providing a more focussed service to people in receipt of Jobseekers payments, the INOU recommends that the employment services should be available to all people who are seeking assistance in relation to work or employment related activity. Therefore, people in receipt of other social welfare payments; people who are working; people who are unemployed and not on the Live**

Register; jobseekers with a higher Probability of Exit (PEX) score who are considered unlikely to need activation supports, should all have greater access to the public employment service. Employment services should be adequately resourced to provide this service.

- **The INOU recommends that in order for the unemployed person to be placed at the heart of the system, the employment service model and wider welfare to work system needs to evolve to one increasingly based on choice, whereby unemployed people are being supported to achieve their preferred future work options. The INOU acknowledges the efforts that the LESs in this phase of the research have made in this regard. In order to give effect to this the INOU recommends that there should be increased supported self-referral to employment and activation supports.**
- **The INOU notes that good inter-agency working is an important component in ensuring the delivery of an effective public employment service. A good example of effective inter-agency/organisation work from this phase of the project is the link with local Job Clubs. We also know from discussions with one of the LES managers that the LES is acutely aware of the need to ensure their service links in with other supports e.g. community based services providing assistance to people who are recovering from substance abuse. The INOU recommends that the LES — and Employment Services generally — further develop these links to ensure that unemployed people have access to the widest range of useful services locally.**
- **The INOU notes that ageism clearly is a very significant barrier for many unemployed people in returning to work. The INOU recommends that the employment services seek to address ageism in the labour market, and work with employers and older unemployed people to constructively address this issue.**
- **The INOU notes that while the Employment Services currently have feedback mechanisms (mostly web based), we recom-**

mend that the Employment Services run Focus Groups or Service Users Forums in addition to the existing feedback mechanisms. This will help ensure that Services capture, more fully, the experiences of service users.

PLEASE NOTE: that the specific recommendations dealing with the key aspects of ‘Mapping the Journey’ — the Signing-On process; the Group Information Session; the Mediator; and the Progression Outcomes — are contained at the end of each of these sections.

Action on these recommendations could make a meaningful difference to how unemployed people experience welfare and employment services.



4. Signing-on

Knowledge about Social Welfare / Information Deficits

- 4.1 The Local Employment Services do not have responsibility for payments, signing-on or the letter of invite to the Group Information Session. These functions are carried out by the Department of Social Protection and the Intreo service.

In order to get as comprehensive an overview of people's experiences as possible, we sought feedback from focus group participants on their level of knowledge / awareness of the social welfare system prior to signing on for a payment. A recurring theme at the focus group meetings was that many people present reported that they were not informed about their entitlements concerning Jobseekers Benefit or Jobseekers Allowance payments. Similarly, during the telephone interviews and at the national focus group meeting concerns were raised about a lack of information or knowledge about the Social Welfare system. Some people talked about their lack of even basic social welfare information when they signed-on first, including information on entitlements in relation to their Jobseekers payments if they had a family.

- 4.2 Similarly, many people advised that they were not fully informed about what was expected of them when they were in receipt of a Jobseekers payment or the rules that underpin continuing eligibility to a Jobseekers payment, including Genuinely Seeking Work (GSW) legislation. A number of participants at the focus group meetings and some others during the telephone interviews also noted that they did not know about the range of available welfare to work incentives.
- 4.3 As a result of this feedback, one change we introduced during the course of these focus group meetings was to provide welfare to work information at the beginning of the meetings. There were two specific aspects to this information, the first to

outline the criteria and rules underpinning Jobseeker payments to ensure those who attended were fully aware of the 'Genuinely Seeking Work' criteria and the second to highlight a number of potentially very useful incentives that support people to take-up work.

- 4.4 One of the focus group participants, for example, thought that as their next signing-on day was scheduled to take place in six months' time, the Department of Social Protection (DSP) would not be in touch in the interim, but the person had been contacted by the DSP recently. It was useful at meetings to help clarify the DSP regulations including Genuinely Seeking Work criteria.
- 4.5 The need for communicating key information in a readily understandable manner was seen as important by a number of people attending focus group meetings and telephone respondents. One suggestion to address the information deficit, which was raised by a number of people at both meetings and through interviews, was to provide more information to people as soon as they sign-on.

First Experiences and Contacts

- 4.6 Feedback on the "front of house" service was positive. In one of the locations, this was provided by the Local Employment Service itself and a number of focus group participants and others referred to the service as being friendly and well organised. A significant number of the people attending the focus group meetings and interviewed by telephone referred to staff being professional, courteous and polite. A number of people said that they were dealt with courteously by staff, from their first contact through to the one-to-one meetings.

A number of people mentioned that they were encouraged to engage with the service. Some compared this favourably with their previous experiences of other services.

In the other location, the arrangements were different as the Group Information Session was being hosted in the local Intreo Centre. The feedback was generally positive and a number of focus group participants and telephone respondents commented that the service was polite.

It was noteworthy that even in certain instances where people were unsatisfied with aspects of the Service, generally the courteousness and professionalism of staff was highlighted.

- 4.7 There were a few examples where people highlighted a less than satisfactory service. One person who was uncertain as to the type/nature of the employment service they were engaging with, was told to 'just fill out the application forms' and the service would be in touch with them. They added that they would have welcomed an opportunity to have gone through the process and receive information on what should be the next steps.
- 4.8 A small number of people at the focus group meetings advised that they had been unemployed for a number of years without having had any correspondence from the Department of Social Protection regarding jobseeking or training.

Confusion over Employment Services

- 4.9 A significant number of the focus group participants were unclear, at least initially, of any distinction between different employment services and also lacked awareness of the specific employment service to which they had been referred. This is not surprising perhaps, as in one of the locations, the Local Employment Service were running the Group Information Sessions in the Intreo Centre premises and in the other, the Intreo Centre was next door to the Local Employment Service.

This led to confusion expressed by many people at focus group meetings and interviewed by phone as to which employment service the person was using. For many, at least initially there did not appear to be a clear distinction between the LES and Intreo.

For some people this led to uncertainty about how the services work individually and how they linked with each other — including the LES, Intreo and Local Development Companies. Some people asked whether these services were individual standalone services or if they were inter-related. Some people were also confused about how the Education services and supports linked in with the Intreo service.

4.10 Not surprisingly, many focus group participants and telephone respondents were unsure of how the significant shake-up over the past number of years in the public employment, entitlements and educational / training structures worked. A number of people still referred to FÁS and generally that reference was in relation to education and training under the remit of Education and Training Boards and Solas.

One aspect that participants found useful was some information about the different services, helping to clarify the changes that have taken place and the areas of responsibility and work for each of the different services.

4.11 Similar to what has already been outlined, some people attending the meetings were not entirely clear about the purpose of the employment service intervention they were receiving. Many people saw this as a process to assist them in accessing suitable work or training and education opportunities. Some others felt the service was primarily about monitoring their jobseeking and for some others, particularly older very long-term unemployed people, they voiced concerns that it would lead to them being compelled to take-up unsuitable positions on activation programmes.

Payments

4.12 It was noteworthy that at some of the focus groups, people who had been unemployed previously compared their experiences of signing-on in this current period against when they signed-on previously. Where people compared these experiences, the vast majority believed that the service had significantly improved since they last claimed a Jobseekers payment. Nearly all compared the present system more favourably to what they had experienced in the past.

4.13 While the focus group participants and others interviewed by phone were clients of the Local Employment Service, their Jobseekers payments are processed by the Department of Social Protection / Intreo. Though there were fewer people who were short-term unemployed, there had been no issues in relation to processing payments and this aspect of the DSP/Intreo service appears to be working well.

- 4.14 One issue that was raised by some people at the meetings was that jobseekers should have the choice to receive their payment through the bank, rather than having no option, but to receive it through the Post Office.
- 4.15 Another issue that arose was unemployed people with children who did not realise that they could have applied for the Qualified Child Increase payment. This struck the focus group concerned as another example of the system failing to be pro-active in the provision of relevant information.

Signing-On

- 4.16 Generally people reported that they did not experience significant delays in queuing when they were signing-on. At one of the meetings, a couple of people referred to queuing for a longer period, but when there was an opportunity to discuss this further, it did not appear to be a significant delay.
- 4.17 The frequency with which people signed-on varied. Some people specified that they only sign on every 6 months and others once a year. In some instances, some people were signing-on monthly.

Record of Mutual Commitments

- 4.18 A number of people mentioned that they signed the Record of Mutual Commitments, but they noted that the DSP official did not sign it as well. There also appeared to be some confusion in relation to whether people had signed the Record of Mutual Commitments or their Personal Progression Plan; others could not recall signing the Record. A person at one of the focus group meetings, who was unsure about what forms he had completed advised that he had 'signed everything that was put in front of him'.

Given the increasing focus on job searching, conditionality and the application of GSW criteria, it is surprising that a mechanism that was introduced to make these changes clearer, appears to be invisible in the process. The Record of Mutual Commitments is an opportunity for the Intreo Centre to let unemployed people know about the services and supports that will be made available to them to assist them to meet the obligations the Department expects them to fulfil. Indeed, at one of the focus groups, participants said it would

be useful to receive information on the Service's expectations of the unemployed person as they engage in the Intreo / LES process.

Signage and Signposting

- 4.19 In one of the LES areas, there appeared to be some confusion with people getting a letter to visit the Intreo Centre as a result of failing to attend a previous Group Information Session meeting. As the information session is being run in the Intreo Centre and particularly when it was being held at a similar time to the time specified on the letter for the person to attend the Intreo Centre, this was confusing and caused at least one person who was in attendance to be late as they believed the invite was to the Group Information Session.

Letter of 'invite'

- 4.20 The letter of invite to the Group Information Session (GIS) was again highlighted as an issue. The letter of invite is sent centrally by the DSP and not by the Local Employment Service. Despite some information being given in the letter about the Group Information Session and the activation process more generally, the aspect that people who attended the Focus Group meetings remembered most, centred on the implications for people if they did not attend the meeting.

There was some confusion at one of the focus group meetings over who signs the letter – whether it is the DSP/Intreo or the LES and we were able to clarify that it is the Department.

- 4.21 Most people at the meetings advised that the letters did not communicate sufficient information of what the meeting was about or what people should expect from the meeting. Those who attended the focus group meetings could not recall any information in the letter about how the GIS, one-to-one meetings etc. will really help people to get back to work or identify suitable training or education options.

A number of focus group participants and some people interviewed over the phone reported that they found the letter to be intimidating. As we highlighted in the first phase of our research, a number of unemployed people felt that the letters were threatening and if they did not attend, their social

welfare payment would be stopped. One focus group participant said that the 'threatening' letter made them 'feel like [they were] back at school'.

- 4.22 A number of people said that they would have liked to have more information about the Group Information Session and the activation process generally so that they were fully informed and better prepared.
- 4.23 One issue that was highlighted by some participants was that they found it very difficult to get through to the office by phone if they could not attend the GIS and wanted to change the date.
- 4.24 It was also suggested at one of the meetings that the letters should be more personalised and individualised. These could be constructed as different templates and should include as much relevant information as possible about how this new service can support people to get back to work.

The INOU notes that the two LES Offices involved in this phase of the project have acquired the Q-mark status (for a number of years) and survey the people using their services twice yearly. The INOU believes there may be a usefulness for all employment services to run focus group meetings in order to receive ongoing feedback. One of the focus group participants noted that the research being carried out by the INOU was useful and recommended that the employment services should carry-out research with individuals that they are supporting to ensure that the experiences of clients continually informs how the Service works.

- 4.25 A number of focus group participants suggested that the letter of invite should provide a much greater explanation of the process. They added that the letter should not only explain what the information meeting entails and clarify what people should expect at the GIS, but also about the purpose of the engagement i.e. to support people to find work (or suitable training or education opportunities with a view to finding sustainable work).

The recommendations from the first phase of this report included ones focussing on maximising the benefits of this activation process and minimising the threatening content of the letter. The INOU brought these recommendations to the

attention of DSP staff and we would like to acknowledge some useful changes which the DSP implemented in the letter arising from this work.

The letter of invite is very important and helps to set the tone for how unemployed people engage with the process and the employment service. Notwithstanding the useful changes, this letter's focus on the implications of not attending the GIS establishes the coercive aspect of this process, rather than the supportive one. Currently there is a significant wasted opportunity as it would be really useful if the letter could highlight the ways in which the Group Information Session, One-to-One and follow-up meetings can assist people to find jobs and access training and education opportunities.

LES: 'Not Selling' the service to unemployed people

4.26 Similar to the first phase of this Project, and related to the point about the opportunity of letting people know about the service, there are opportunities being lost to inform the unemployed person about the Local Employment Service. It was particularly clear in one of the LES areas and evident in the other, that the experience and ethos of the LES is one that will resonate with unemployed people.

Notwithstanding that the LES is delivering, by contract a template Intreo activation process, it would be useful, if possible for the LES to provide greater clarity that they (the LES) are delivering the employment service and to highlight briefly their purpose and ethos.

Recommendations:

Signing-On

- **Similar to the first phase of the report, the INOU recommends that all DSP communication to individuals should be conveyed in a clear and unambiguous manner. There should be no confusion as to what is expected of or on offer to the recipient: though, this information should be communicated in a constructive and non-threatening manner.**
- **In relation to the Record of Mutual Commitments, unemployed people should be made aware of the mutual commitments that are being entered into, including the range of supports that the State is undertaking to provide. The INOU recommends that the Record is signed by both parties at the same time and that a copy of the Record of Mutual Commitments is given to the unemployed person.**
- **This phase of the Research indicates that there is a significant need for greater information or signposts to information when people become unemployed. The INOU recommends that the LES and other Employment Services provide information such as the Intreo Jobseekers pack and information covering the activation process as soon as possible to the people using their services.**
- **The INOU recommends that all people in receipt of a Jobseekers payment should have the choice as to whether they receive their payment at their local post office or through an electronic payment.**



5. Group Information Session (GIS)

- 5.1 The Group Information Sessions were delivered using different approaches in the two LES areas. In one of the LES areas, the information session typically lasted 10 minutes or so, though could occasionally run for a longer period. This LES Group Information Session differed from the other LES GIS (and from the Sessions we researched last year) in that the GIS was immediately followed by initial one-to-one meetings with Mediators.

In the other LES area, the GIS typically lasted 25-30 minutes, though for a short time period the session lasted for 10-15 minutes. The people attending received appointment times for their one-to-one meetings, generally within a week or so of the Group Information Session.

Presentation

- 5.2 There were different perspectives on the initial Group Information Session presentation.

A number of people who attended the focus group meetings and others who participated in the telephone interviews reported a positive experience of the Group Information Sessions. For most people who had a positive sense of the GIS they reported that they learned about different incentives that they were not aware of previously. One of the telephone respondents said that the Group Information Session was useful. In particular, the person noted interesting information about further education opportunities at the GIS and followed up with their Mediator at the one-to-one meeting.

- 5.3 Some participants and telephone respondents reported that the useful information in the Presentation assisted in helping them become more aware of job opportunities.

Another respondent reported that the GIS was very useful for them. The person added that there was useful information available. In particular, they noted that they did not know about the Back to Work Enterprise Allowance (BTWEA) until they attended the Group Information Session. The person advised that they were long-term unemployed and their regret was that they did not have the information session much earlier. They were encouraged to hear that the Group Information Session is being rolled out to people who are recently unemployed.

- 5.4 A telephone respondent stated that the Group Information Session was useful, not for the information that was included but that it gave them 'a necessary push'.

Another of the respondents reported that they believed the GIS was fairly useful for people who were not aware of the different incentives, services, and programmes, though they noted that they were aware of the information. The person noted that the INOU publication, Working for Work was very informative.

- 5.5 One of the people attending the focus group meeting noted that though they were aware of some of the information, it was very useful to have that confirmed.

One person at a meeting remarked that it was very useful that the person delivering the session put people at their ease from the outset of the GIS by clarifying that this activation process was a supportive one and the group were not to be overly concerned about the coercive aspects highlighted in the letter of invite. This reassurance was very useful.

- 5.6 Some focus group participants said that the Group Information Session was rushed with the emphasis on courses / schemes. A couple of the participants added that there was not enough information on job vacancies, but that there was a lot of information on employment programmes.

- 5.7 The answers to the question, how much information should be included in a Group Information Session varied considerably, with some people preferring to receive more information and others less.

While one person at one of the focus group meetings mentioned that they got some useful information at the GIS, the consensus at that meeting was that the Group Information Session was very short and included too much information within the short timeframe.

A couple of people said that the GIS was useful but they would have liked more time in order to receive additional information. For example, at one of the Focus Group Meetings, the people attending did not know that they could follow-up themselves with Intreo to establish their JobsPlus eligibility.

Another aspect flagged at the meeting as an area where greater information might be provided was in relation to comprehensive up-to-date information on training and education options.

Some of the participants reported that the courses, programmes or schemes that were referred to at the GIS were not suitable for either themselves or some of the others at the GIS. They were not eligible to participate on a number of the courses highlighted at the session.

In one of the Local Employment Service areas, the GIS presentation was read off a screen, which was considered by a number of people attending the Focus Group Meetings, to be too small for the purpose. It was also noted that there was a general lack of communication between the group and the presenter.

A number of people attending the GI Sessions reported that a direct one-to-one meeting was more beneficial than a group meeting. One person said they did not like the Group Information Session: that it felt as if they were 'herded in' to the session. They added that they didn't know what the Session was about and said they were confused and felt that the experience was humiliating.

- 5.8 In addition to the focus groups and telephone respondents, we also emailed a questionnaire to some people for whom we had contact details. Those who answered this question in our survey were generally not overly positive about the GIS. Three of the respondents who rated the Group Information Session

overall, ranked it as 'somewhat helpful' - 4th out of 5 possible options. One respondent ranked the GIS as 'fairly helpful' (3rd of 5 options).

The ranking for the material was much more positive as one person ranked it as 'very easy to understand' (1st out of 5 options) and two others rated it 'fairly easy to understand' (3rd out of 5 options). One of the respondents also referred, in answering what they liked about the Session, to the GIS being 'very informative as to different options available to job seekers [particularly] education options'.

5.9 In one of the LES areas, a difference in perspective was given between people who attended a 30 minute or so Group Information Session and a smaller number who attended a GIS which was considerably shorter but with the same information. The feedback from those who attended the longer GIS was significantly more positive as the information was explained more fully than the considerably shorter Presentation.

5.10 One of the telephone respondents stated that they did not find the Group Information Session useful. The person added that the Session did not tell him anything he did not already know and also that he was not given a chance to ask questions about paid work.

One recommendation that a number of people who attended the meetings and other telephone respondents proposed was that the Group Information Session should also include opportunities for questions and clarification.

In one of the LES areas, the LES had a general policy of shorter Group Information Sessions as Mediators met with clients immediately afterwards for the initial one-to-one meetings. The LES viewed the one-to-ones as providing the best opportunity for clients to ask questions or seek further clarification.

5.11 There was a discussion at one of the focus group meetings about tailoring presentations and information depending on whether the person was short-term unemployed or longer term unemployed. This would be particularly useful as eligibility criteria for some back-to-work incentives and

training or education courses are dependent on the period of time that a person has been unemployed.

A number of people attending meetings and a couple of people interviewed by phone highlighted the difficulties of giving information that is not relevant. This can lead to people who are shorter term unemployed and therefore not eligible for some interventions/supports becoming frustrated with the lack of supports that are available and can also result in them 'tuning out' of the remainder of the Presentation as they believe that the Presentation was not relevant to them.

- 5.12 The INOU appreciated the opportunity to engage with the DSP on reviewing the Presentation Slides for the Group Information Session – this occurred after the focus group meetings reviewing the Group Information Sessions. The INOU welcomed the changes which were made to the Presentation Slides where the information is clearer and presented in a way that provides a greater emphasis on the collaborative nature of the process.

Copies of Presentation and other Information Material

- 5.13 In one of the LES areas, some people at the meeting advised that they did not receive a copy of the GIS presentation. A number added that it would have been useful to have a hand-out or some information from the Group Information Session.
- 5.14 A number of people at the focus group meetings who had received a copy of the presentation from the Group Information Session, welcomed this material. One person who referred to the GIS as very good also stated that the hand-out was very useful.
- 5.15 One of the participants also remarked that they believed that the information handed out to people at the GIS would have been more useful if it focused more on information relating to job seeking including sources of information on available jobs in the locality.

There was also a suggestion at one of the meetings that it would be useful if the hand-outs provided clearer and more accessible information to support people to find employment,

access relevant education and training courses, and also better prepare people to engage in the Personal Progression Plan process.

One of the participants said that the information supplied was not particularly useful or relevant though they added that others may be unaware of some, much or nearly all of the information.

- 5.16 It was also proposed, at different focus group meetings, that it would be very useful at the Group Information Sessions to provide information leaflets, books or other materials for people to take on their way out of the information sessions.

Sanctions

- 5.17 One of the questions that arose in the discussions at one of the focus group meetings was whether the Local Employment Service could sanction a Jobseeker and reduce their payments. We were able to clarify that the LES does not have powers to either reduce or stop a person's Jobseekers payment and to explain that the LES report to the DSP on the level of engagement with the Jobseeker. We were also able to clarify that the DSP does have the power to apply sanctions and that an appeals process also exists if the Jobseeker believes they were treated unfairly.

Recommendations:

Group Information Session

- **The INOU recommends that the ‘letter of invite’ for the Group Information Session promotes the positive benefits of engaging with the LES delivering the Intreo model, and should inform recipients of the employment services and supports that are available.**
- **All letters should always be signed, dated and include contact details for a person to respond to or raise queries. Letters should also include all relevant information.**
- **Given the range of information disseminated at the Group Information Session, it would be important to tailor them to meet the attendees’ needs; organising different sessions for different groups with similar profiles should be explored; participants should be given sufficient time to absorb all of the information presented; and to assist in this process relevant information should be disseminated in advance.**
- **The Presenter at the GIS should take the group step-by-step through the process: introduce themselves and their service, explain why people are present, what the Group Information Session is and what happens afterwards. The INOU recognises that this format is currently being followed at some Group Information Sessions but recommends that this should inform all presentations.**
- **The Presenter should also highlight any upcoming events such as roadshows, job fairs, career zoos and information events that might be relevant for attendees.**



6. Mediator

- 6.1 Unemployed people at the Group Information Sessions met their Mediator immediately following the GIS in one of the LES areas and within a week in the other.

In the LES where people met with a Mediator immediately after the shorter GIS, the LES advised that one advantage of this approach was that everyone attended the one-to-one meetings, (thus reducing the possibility of people not attending the one-to-one meeting if the meetings are held a week or so later).

Opinion among focus group participants and those interviewed by telephone was mixed on whether it was preferable to meet immediately or to have a follow-up meeting within a week, giving participants an opportunity to reflect on the information presented. A number of people at the focus group meetings suggested that it seemed to be fairly useful to meet with a Mediator immediately after the Group Information session.

- 6.2 On balance most would have preferred a meeting within a week rather than immediately as this would have given them time to reflect on the information given in the GIS and therefore better prepare them for the meeting with the Mediator.

A number of people suggested that it would be useful to have a break between the group information session and the meeting with the Mediator. This seemed to be particularly the case where people were unsure of what was happening, of what was expected of them, or would have appreciated an opportunity to prepare for the meeting.

- 6.3 We have already noted that it would be useful to include additional information about the different aspects of the

employment service process and this was also borne out in relation to the one-to-one meeting. In both LES areas, a number of participants said they would have liked to receive more information in advance on the process. It was noted that it would be particularly useful for participants to know in advance about the Personal Progression Plan including its purpose and objectives and that there is a requirement to agree and sign-off on the Plan, usually at the initial meeting.

One suggestion at a focus group meeting was that Jobseekers would receive an information pack covering both the activation process as well as providing jobseeking assistance including useful jobs websites, job clubs, basic CV and cover letter information.

- 6.4 One of the participants commented that there appeared to be an over emphasis on paperwork when much of that information may already be available on the system.

The participants and telephone respondents agreed that it was useful to retain the same Mediator, though one of the participants asked whether it would be possible to request a change of Mediator if they felt the interaction was unsatisfactory. Both LES managers clarified that the LES they managed would change a person's Mediator.

Initial Meeting

- 6.5 The initial one-to-one meeting varied from '5 minutes or a little over' to over 40 minutes, though most people stated that the meeting lasted approximately 25-30 minutes. The telephone respondent whose initial meeting was very short advised this was a result of them having a clear plan. Similarly, the vast majority of Survey respondents who answered this query indicated that their initial meeting lasted from 16-30 minutes.

- 6.6 The Initial meeting with the Mediator was generally viewed as a useful one-to-one meeting. A large number of people at the focus group meetings and telephone respondents said that they were dealt with professionally and courteously by staff and that the meetings were conducted in a friendly and supportive manner.

One of the focus group participants attending the initial meeting reported that the Mediator described their own role

as one of mentor. The participant found this useful adding that the Mediator was friendly and helpful. Another participant remarked that the Mediator had 'put them at their ease' and added that the meeting was useful and conducted in a 'pleasant atmosphere'.

A person interviewed by telephone said that the Mediator was courteous, professional and highlighted a number of potential options available to the person, which was useful. Another person interviewed by phone said that the Mediator demonstrated understanding and empathy about their circumstances. The person noted that it is 'very demoralising' to keep applying for jobs and to rarely receive any response from employers.

- 6.7 A significant number of people attending the meetings and interviewed by phone said that the Mediator was helpful in assisting them with preparing for work. Some focus group participants and telephone respondents advised that the Mediator assisted them with identifying suitable training options.

One of the people interviewed by phone relayed that the meeting was a very positive one. The person had noted some information on the Back to Work Enterprise Allowance (BTWEA) at the GIS and was further informed about the BTWEA at the one-to-one meeting with the Mediator. The person had been thinking about self-employment as a potential option but was unaware of the incentives available. The person is now self-employed and currently in receipt of the BTWEA. This is working well and the person stated that this was directly as a result of information at the GIS and follow-up with their Mediator.

One of the telephone respondents reported that their one-to-one meeting was very useful. They added that the Mediator was very helpful, gave 'lots of relevant information' and asked the person to reflect upon different options including full-time and part-time work and Community Employment options.

One of the people interviewed by telephone had a one-to-one meeting with their Mediator. They reported that the Mediator outlined a range of potential options for them. One aspect that

worked very well for the person was that they had an opportunity to highlight that they had significant literacy difficulties. They subsequently enrolled in a literacy course where they are developing their literacy skills. They advised that this is progressing well and added that the Mediator and the activation process played an important role in enabling this to happen.

- 6.8 A number of people who attended the initial focus group meeting were unable to attend the follow-up meeting as a result of attending training or active labour market programmes. Mediators had assisted people in accessing a number of these places.

Focus group participants also remarked that it was also very useful that they had the Mediator's work contact details.

- 6.9 The responses from the people who replied to the survey were generally more positive in relation to their one-to-ones with their Mediators than the group information sessions. Of the five respondents: three rated their meeting with their Mediator as 'fairly useful' (3rd of 5 options); one as 'very useful' (1st of 5 options) and one as 'somewhat useful' (4th of 5 options).

When responding to what they liked about the meeting, one person answered it 'was new' and another that the Mediator was 'very understanding towards personal issues'.

- 6.10 Whereas a significant majority of focus group participants and telephone respondents reported on a positive initial meeting with their Mediator, a smaller number had less positive experiences.

One person highlighted that the Mediator was friendly but added that they thought the meeting was possibly too short and they believed it was of no real value to them in their job seeking.

At one of the focus group meetings, a person was informed by their Mediator of different courses, which the person deemed unsuitable in terms of their own experience and progression. They were concerned that their failure to take-

up one of these courses may result in a reduction to their Jobseekers Payment.

Another participant advised that their confidence 'took a knock' at the meeting with their Mediator. They added that their stress levels had increased and they were not sleeping as well following the meeting.

- 6.11 One person expressed the view that they believed their Mediator was more interested in "forcing" them back to work.

At one of the meetings, two people reported that their Mediator appeared to have a greater focus on training rather than work, though when we discussed this further, the training appeared to link to possible jobs that the participants could access in the future.

At another of the focus group meetings a number of participants advised that they would have welcomed more information on available jobs.

- 6.12 Focus group participants and some telephone respondents reported that they had received limited generic information from the Local Employment Service. The vast majority of people attending the meetings and a number of telephone respondents advised that they would welcome more proactive contact from their Mediator about tailored/suitable training, education and work options.

A number of people at one of the focus groups were asked to bring their Curriculum Vitae (CV) with them, but were unsure why the Mediator wanted the CV. It would be useful if this could be fully explained at the initial meeting. This also relates to the broader point that was made at all the focus group meetings that people would prefer to be fully informed in advance about each of the aspects of the activation process.

In one of the Local Employment Service areas there was some confusion among a number of focus group participants who had first attended the LES as 'walk-ins' (i.e. people who went to the LES without being referred by Intreo) and who were subsequently referred by Intreo. They attended the group information session and were subsequently assigned a

different Mediator but were confused because they had been dealing with another Mediator who meets people who 'walk-in'.

- 6.13 The overall focus on work by a number of participants led to suggestions on aspects that would improve people's opportunities, including proposals for having the opportunity to access different talks or sessions including one on work experience or voluntary work.

There was also a related proposal about receiving more information on the range of useful websites that are available to support people's jobsearch.

Personal Progression Plan (PPP)

- 6.14 Nearly all of the participants at the focus group meetings signed the Personal Progression Plan at the first one-to-one meeting. A number of participants reported that the plan was not "set in stone" and could be subject to revision at a later meeting. This was seen as very useful.

One of the telephone respondents said that 'they had been in a rut and were applying for everything and anything' prior to their engagement with the Local Employment Service. They agreed a Personal Progression Plan with their Mediator and believed that the process and agreeing the Plan was very helpful in providing them with a renewed focus on their jobsearch.

Another of the respondents was not sure if they had signed the Personal Progression Plan. The person mentioned that the Mediator had highlighted potential jobs at the Meeting, but unfortunately the person was unsuccessful in securing work.

- 6.15 Another of the people interviewed reported that their initial one-to-one meeting was of short duration as they had attended an interview for a job and were hopeful that they would be successful. They were successful and started work the next day.

In another instance the person agreed the progression plan with their Mediator. The person had received a referral to Tús, but when they mentioned to their Mediator about their health

difficulties, the discussion included information about disability payments. The person's application was refused and they subsequently reapplied with information from their doctor. They noted that they had found the LES staff they encountered - from reception to Mediator - very professional and courteous. They added that they thought the gap between meetings was too long (6 weeks or thereabouts) and they have not been contacted since their Tús referral.

One of the Telephone Interviewees said that there was insufficient time at the one-to-one meeting to agree the Personal Progression Plan.

Review and follow-up meetings

6.16 In relation to the follow-up meetings with Mediators, most people at the focus group meetings had dates for follow-up meetings, whereas some others did not.

One aspect participants welcomed was having the same Mediator for follow-up meetings. The continuity of contact was seen as being useful.

In the main, similar to the initial meetings with Mediators, a number of positive aspects to these meetings were reported. A number of people reported that the second meeting was more positive. There were examples where two people outlined that the initial meeting with their Mediator did not progress as well as expected and – in at least one of those cases the person was unsure whether they wanted to continue with their Mediator. However, both people reported that they were very satisfied with the follow-up meeting.

One of the telephone respondents reported that shortly after their initial meeting with their Mediator they were referred to one of the activation programmes. When they advised their Mediator that they were in the process of accessing part-time work they were advised to continue with the work. At the follow-up meeting, the person was told about JobsPlus which they found useful. They hoped that additional lines might be opened in the factory where they were working part-time that may lead to full-time positions.

One of the focus group participants found that the follow-up meeting was very useful. They advised that the Mediator was able to assist them in identifying potential work opportunities that they were interested in. The person noted that they felt less pressure at the second meeting, adding that they 'felt human'.

Another of the participants reported that they received information on different courses and schemes as well as potential jobs which they found useful at their follow-up meeting. They also highlighted that they would very much welcome notification of jobs by the LES through emails and texts.

Another of the people interviewed by telephone said that following a review meeting with their Mediator, they were referred for a place on a Community Employment (CE) programme. The person reported that this was useful. They outlined, similar to other people's experiences referred to earlier, how they had been in a rut and the CE position had got them 'up and going again.'

One of the focus group participants said that their review meetings were useful. The person referred to receiving feedback on their CV and Cover Letter which was helpful.

One of the telephone Interviewees noted that their Mediator provided useful assistance completing an application form.

Another of the participants at the focus group meeting advised that at the follow-up meeting with the Mediator, they found the Mediator's suggestion to investigate the possibility of teaching as very useful.

- 6.17 At a follow-up meeting, two months or so later, one of the people interviewed by phone advised that their Mediator had put their name forward for a couple of CE places. However, they were subsequently referred to Tús and they have started on a Tús programme which is working out well. One of the focus group participants has started their own business and are currently in receipt of the Back to Work Enterprise Allowance (BTWEA).

6.18 One of the participants advised that they were looking at setting-up a business within a business partnership, but were unable to get clear answers in relation to how the Back to Work Enterprise Allowance would work within a business partnership arrangement.

Another participant received an invite to a second meeting. Unfortunately as there were problems with the computers in the LES on that day, the Mediator advised that they would contact the person in due course, but two months later, the person had not received their follow-up invite.

One of the focus group members had not had a meeting since their first visit a number of months previously. The member had achieved a high educational level and had worked previously. They mentioned that they did not know whether they were disappointed that they did not have the meeting or were glad. They advised that they would be grateful for assistance in their jobseeking, but were unsure of the extent to which the LES might be able to assist and feared being compelled to take-up something that they were not interested in.

One of the telephone respondents advised that their second meeting with their Mediator seemed to be 'more about ticking a box' than assisting them. They recommended that the Mediator should have listened more to their particular circumstances. In their case, the person was being referred for a CE position which they believed was not suitable.

Recommendations:

Mediator

- The INOU recognises that notwithstanding significant changes to the Local Employment Service since its inception in the mid 1990's, one very positive aspect that remains for unemployed people – in the main – is the LES ethos of treating the individual with empathy and respect.
- Every unemployed person should be treated with courtesy and respect and that employment service personnel should be treated similarly by unemployed people. In particular, employment service personnel should be mindful of the potential frustrations of people who have been unemployed for a number of years and have had little or no contact from the employment services and may believe that this engagement is 'too late'.
- To that end, it is recommended that more time is taken to finalise the Personal Progression Plan (PPP) at the first Meeting to ensure that people have a greater sense of ownership of their plan and a better understanding of how it can be fulfilled. It is also recommended that, in the event that agreeing the PPP is not straightforward, this should be agreed at the next meeting.



7. Progression Outcomes

Jobseeking and Jobsearch Referral and Supports

7.1 A number of Focus group participants and telephone interviewees had received information from the Local Employment Services in relation to jobs, job fairs and other events. Some noted that the information on jobs was generic rather than targeted. One of those interviewed by phone had received a text with information about an upcoming Job Fair from the LES and found that useful.

Another of the Telephone respondents said that the initial and review meetings with their Mediator were useful, but that they were getting information about jobs in larger urban areas that were not really accessible.

Of the three people who responded to this section of the survey, two answered that they received information about job vacancies.

7.2 Notwithstanding the information that some focus group participants and telephone interviewees were receiving, one aspect that nearly all recommended was how useful it would be if the LES could pro-actively inform them about further relevant opportunities. There was general agreement that this would be very helpful in assisting people with their jobsearch, both in relation to being notified of relevant jobs, but also of relevant training or information events.

7.3 The activation programme that featured most in discussions with focus group participants was JobBridge. Generally, participants disapproved of this work placement programme. However, at one of the focus group meetings despite the misgivings of the group, the consensus was that participants

would take-up a JobBridge position if this was the right option for them, i.e. it was a well-run internship that led to employment.

- 7.4 A number of people at one of the focus group meetings reported that they were asked for their CVs, but were not told the purpose of submitting the CV. We brought this to the attention of the LES and they acknowledged that while the rationale was very evident for LES staff, it would be useful to ensure that people using the Service are clear about this as well.

Getting Work

- 7.5 One noticeable difference, as the time period of the project rolled-out was that focus group participants in general were noticing an increase in available jobs. One of the participants reported at the meeting that they were receiving some feedback in relation to job enquiries and applications for the first time in many years.

One of the telephone respondents reported that they are completing their driving license and hoping to follow-up by completing their fork lift license in the period ahead. They hoped this would increase their opportunities to get paid work.

Another of the respondents who had a generally positive interaction with their Mediator said that the one aspect of the meeting that they believed was unhelpful was what they saw as the Mediator's overly singular focus on the person's previous experience. This included recommending training courses which would have been suitable to the person's previous work experience, but not to the career they were hoping to develop.

There was a very good example of the role that a local Centre for the Unemployed played in helping one of the participant's access work for 4 months. The person had attended a Job Club in the Centre and one of the staff who knew the work that the participant was interested in, contacted him about an ad in the local paper with a suitable vacancy. He subsequently got the job.

Voluntary Work

- 7.6 When the topic of volunteering arose at the Focus Group meetings, very few of the participants were aware that it is necessary for unemployed people to formally notify the DSP of their intention to volunteer and to receive authorisation from the Department in that regard. A number of focus group participants reported the importance of voluntary work, but were concerned that this was not being fully valued.

While the INOU recognises that officials may be eager to prioritise work opportunities for unemployed people, the INOU contends that doing work on a voluntary basis can have very significant benefits for the individual (and the organisation). These include the social and work benefits of meeting people; creating routine in a work environment and carrying out socially useful work. We also know that the benefits in improving a person's self-esteem can be huge. Volunteering can also lead to employment either directly with the organisation or indirectly through another employer valuing a person's voluntary work.

Training and Education – guidance and options

- 7.7 A number of people in the focus groups and interviewed by phone reported that the Mediators had assisted them in relation to training and education courses.

One of the Focus Group participants reported that their Mediator assisted them in starting a retail course with the Education and Training Board (ETB).

Another of the focus group participants said that their Mediator advised them of a training grant, the Mediators' Fund – the course cost €1,000. The Mediators' Fund is available up to a maximum of €500 and the person paid half of the €1,000 course.

- 7.8 One of the telephone respondents reported that they had started a Community Employment (CE) programme. The person advised that they had accessed CE through their Mediator. They added that CE was working out very well.

Another of the respondents also highlighted that they have started a CE programme and again this was with the assistance of their Mediator.

A number of other telephone respondents advised that they had taken-up training courses, some with the assistance of their Mediator and some that they had accessed themselves.

7.9 Of the 4 survey respondents who provided information on whether they were contacted either by their Mediator or another person in the LES about training/education courses, three answered that they had been contacted about courses, with one answering they had not. Of the 4 survey respondents who provided information on whether they were contacted by their Mediator or another person in the LES about events (information, roadshows, Job Fairs etc.), two answered they had been contacted and two were not.

7.10 Another of the focus group participants mentioned that they were also advised of the €500 training grant. The person reported that though he was told about the grant and had followed up on it, he had 'not heard anything further' in relation to the grant.

Another of the participants reported that they were looking at the possibility of courses for a truck driving license and they were advised to check out such courses, but the training grant was not mentioned.

One of the people interviewed by phone started on a CE Scheme shortly after one of the meetings, but they had accessed that opportunity themselves.

7.11 One of the ongoing barriers for unemployed people accessing opportunities is lack of information. At one of the Focus Group meetings, a person advised that they were interested in a Community Employment position and had applied to the organisation for the position but had received no communication. The person was unaware of the change whereby it is necessary to be referred by an official in the Intreo Centre for CE positions and they had not contacted Intreo to check whether they might be included on the referral list. Interestingly, if the person was living in the other geographical area

where we carried out the research, they would have been able to make contact directly with the CE organisation to submit their application.

One of the participants had mentioned the possibility of starting a college course as one of a number of potential options, but they believed that the Mediator overemphasized this. The person added that the Mediator advised that unless they were accessing work or courses, the likelihood is they would be referred to one of the activation programmes such as Community Employment, Tús or Gateway.

Linkages between Intreo Centres and also with other Services

7.12 One of the people interviewed by telephone signed-up for a Job Club at their first meeting with a Mediator which they started a month subsequently. The person advised that the Job Club was useful and had assisted them in accessing and attending interviews for jobs. The Job Club was also useful in assisting them so that they receive regular emails from recruitment sites. The person had not been contacted by the Mediator since, but welcomed that if they needed to they could contact the Mediator. The person added that it would also be useful to receive information on relevant jobs from the LES. Another focus group participant attended the same Job club and found that useful too.

7.13 One focus group participant said that he believed that the Irish social welfare and employment services are not designed for the unemployed person, but rather as a system that is 'seen to be doing'. Another of the participants said that the system can sometimes operate as if it is punishing rather than supporting an unemployed person and it depended on the individual rather than a systemic response. It is important to note that the person also noted that a number of people working, particularly within the LES, had been supportive of him.

Comparative experiences

7.14 Generally, where people had experienced both the Local Employment Service and Intreo, their experiences of the LES were more positive. A number of participants for example

compared their meetings with their Mediator and the service available to them through the LES more favourably than their experiences with Intreo. Another participant had a number of meetings with both Intreo and the LES and added that the LES compared slightly more favourably.

Recommendations:

Progression Outcomes

- **It is recommended that Mediators work with people until they find sustainable employment.**
- **It is also recommended that in instances where there is a breakdown in the relationship or a clash of personalities between the Mediator and the individual that the individual should be transferred to a different Mediator.**
- **It is recommended that the Mediator (or other LES staff) would pro-actively contact their unemployed clients – by text, email or phone – to inform them of upcoming suitable events, work, and training or education opportunities.**
- **Working on a voluntary basis can have very significant benefits for the individual, including improving people’s employment opportunities and it is recommended that volunteering would be fully valued by employment service staff.**
- **The INOU acknowledges the usefulness of the Mediator Fund. While the €500 maximum grant is usually sufficient, the INOU recommends that there is a value in allowing for some flexibility in the few cases where there is a clear need for more than the €500 maximum.**
- **While acknowledging the importance of ‘job placement’ as integral to measuring successful employment service outcomes, it is critical that suitable education and training progressions are also acknowledged.**



8. National Focus Group

Range of Employment Services

- 8.1 Similar to the first phase of the project, we organised a separate national focus group meeting. We invited INOU Individual Members from a range of counties who were in receipt of Jobseekers payments to discuss their experiences of the employment service they were receiving.

The people that attended were linked to the Intreo Employment Service, Local Employment Service and JobPath Service.

- 8.2 Prior to the start of the meeting the INOU's Welfare Rights Information Officer and the Development Officer provided a range of information to the group focusing in particular on the range of incentives to support unemployed people to take-up work including the FastTrack system, Family Income Supplement, the Back to Work Family Dividend and JobsPlus.

- 8.3 A participant who had engaged with Intreo prior to receiving any correspondence from the service, sought a place at the local Job Club and was disappointed that the letter they received to invite them to the Group Information Session included what the person perceived as a threat at the end of it.

- 8.4 One participant said that their GIS lasted for an hour. A photocopied 2 page document explaining the process was given as a hand-out and the person advised that this was useful.

A number of participants indicated that they had a sense from the one-to-one meeting that this was about "ticking a box",

rather than a service designed to support a person back to sustainable employment.

8.5 One member reported their experience of two different Group Information Sessions, one with Intreo where the person delivering the session struggled 'to connect with the group' and the other where the Local Employment Service (LES) presenter was very good. They added that from their experience, the LES compares favourably with Intreo. When asked to further describe the key elements that underscored an effective presentation, the following key points were highlighted:

- The presenter should have a detailed knowledge and understanding of the material they are presenting;
- The presenter and the presentation material should have an aim of helping people; and,
- The presenter should show interest and respectfully listen to people.

8.6 One member said that their review meeting was 20 minutes in duration. The person was notified about the training grant funding up to €500 that they might be able to access. This led to a discussion about the training grant. Some of the national focus group members were aware of the grant, though the majority were not. The availability of the training grant should be highlighted, but if there is no perceived training need, the issue may not arise.

Another member reported that their Case Officer and other Intreo staff they dealt with were "polite and courteous". They advised that they worked with their Case Officer in agreeing their Personal Progression Plan.

Another member reported that their review meeting lasted 20 minutes. They were considering starting their own business and the Mediator was not able to assist as they were linked in with another Enterprise Officer.

Another member had a very positive experience of their LES. They mentioned that they were told about a range of potential options at the meeting and subsequently agreed the Personal Progression Plan.

8.7 One member had been referred to one of the JobPath providers, and the person advised that this had not been a positive experience to date. They added that they believed a small number of questions in the questionnaire were “demeaning, unnecessary and insulting”. It is our understanding that a number of questions have now been modified based on similar feedback received from unemployed people.

The person also expressed the view that there was a need to ensure that JobPath personnel would receive training including customer service skills. A number of other members also highlighted the need for all Employment Service staff to receive training.

8.8 One of the members compared their experience of the Intreo service much more favourably than their past experience of the local Social Welfare Office. The person reported that they had met with an Officer in Intreo who they said was very helpful in ensuring that they received a payment. The member did not know that they would have been entitled to a payment much earlier. They reported that their experiences with a Social Welfare Office 30 years earlier was very negative, so much so that they ‘wanted nothing to do’ with Social Welfare subsequently. They added that their own treatment and the lengths the Intreo Officer went to, to process the claim compared very favourably with their previous experiences.

8.9 Some of the members noted difficulties that employment service staff may be experiencing. One person said that there were only two people in their Local Development Company to process and support a large number of proposals for self-employment.

8.10 A member also highlighted the lack of a public employment service in their locality and noted when they attended their local Intreo Office the information desk was often unstaffed. The location of the Office in the building also made it difficult to access this service.

8.11 Echoing some of the comments at the other focus group meetings, one of the members said that they received no explanations about either the range of welfare entitlements, the means tested payments or potential incentives available to them.

8.12 A couple of people had participated on a Job Club programme. In both cases, they noted that the staff were “polite and courteous”. One spoke very highly of the Job Club service (coincidentally linked to the LES in one of the areas that we are researching unemployed people’s experiences under this phase of the project) and added they were very happy with the Job Club course. They remained in contact with the Job Club and were notified of different jobs in the locality which was very useful. They added that they also received an invitation from the Job Club to an Employer/ Unemployed speed networking event which directly led to them being interviewed by an employer at the event and getting the job.

8.13 One of the members said that they were “terrified of being forced onto schemes”. The person reported that they have to go overseas for most of their work.

8.14 A member said they were quite excited by a course, but couldn’t do it as there was no Travel Allowance to ensure that they would be able to afford the course.

Another member said that it would be very useful if people had a bus pass for travel. They added that in France unemployed people are able to access public transport for free.

8.15 One member said that it would be very useful if their local Intreo Office had a desk, printer and franking machine that they would be able to access – this would be useful in assisting people to cover the cost. Another advised that the Job Club facilitated people in this regard.

There was some confusion in relation to the name changes in recent years in the employment services and the states’ training structures. This was also noted at the other focus groups.

One member highlighted negative media images or comments about unemployed people that can result in negative stereotyping of unemployed people. They referred to images of long queues at social welfare offices which had become synonymous with unemployed people and are used to represent unemployed people, even though these queues are now less common.



9. Other Key Issues

- 9.1 One aspect that was highlighted by a small number of participants and telephone respondents was how the Local Employment Service was assisting some to combat the isolation they were feeling. Some individuals mentioned how their unemployment had quickly led to isolation and commented on the usefulness of the process to help alleviate this through attending a meeting and talking to a supportive Mediator.
- 9.2 The research also highlighted challenges facing some focus group participants in accessing employment: for example, the difficulties in securing child minding or managing family illness. Others highlighted the cost of transport and the financial difficulties of taking up part-time work or an activation programme if the person had to commute any distance. To that end, it would be very useful if the costs of participating on activation programmes were more accurately and adequately reflected in the payment rates.
- 9.3 We also talked to one telephone respondent who was in the early stages of recovery from substance misuse. The person had been referred to the LES. We note that the LES management and staff are aware that people may not be ready for this intervention, but were eager to signpost some possible options. In one of the LES areas, the LES runs a programme where two Mediators have a dedicated smaller caseload of people who are in recovery from substance misuse. The INOU notes that this is a potentially difficult situation as the Genuinely Seeking Work criteria require people to be capable of, available for and seeking fulltime work. We note that at a given time and in certain circumstances some people may not be able to take-up full-time employment unless other supports and services are available. The LES's approach to assist and support people through this scenario is an example of a person centred approach; an approach that would facilitate a more open relationship between the service provider and the

unemployed person; and one that creates a system that seeks to alleviate financial hardship and the negative impact of unemployment on people's health and well-being.

- 9.4 In one of the LES areas some participants and telephone respondents who had been very long-term unemployed and who were in their late 50s / early 60s were frustrated at what they saw as unfair pressure to take-up activation programmes. They believed that they would be unable to get employment subsequently. One person at a focus group was very frustrated that a more active employment service was not available to him when he lost his job many years earlier. The INOU notes that ageism clearly is a very significant barrier for many unemployed people in returning to work. The INOU recommends that the employment services seek to address ageism in the labour market, and work with employers and older unemployed people to constructively address this issue.
- 9.5 Similar to the first phase of the project, where people had been unemployed for a shorter time, the majority of the participants and telephone interviewees had no objection to greater engagement with the employment services. However, more focus group members and telephone respondents were wary of what might underpin this increased activation and engagement, i.e. would it be a 'box ticking' exercise or would it be relevant to addressing their unemployment.
- 9.6 One aspect that has carried through both phases of our Report to date concerns a Welfare Rights / Welfare to Work information deficit. This can vary from information about entitlements through to information about back to work incentives. It is clear that unemployed people need access to information that is as accurate and as comprehensive as possible. In particular, this is necessary when unemployed people are weighing up part-time and full-time work options. The INOU notes that from focus group meetings (and other work we undertake) that many unemployed people are unaware of the incentives and initiatives that can be very significant in providing financial supports for people returning to work.
- 9.7 Another aspect highlighted by some focus group participants was their concern about the bureaucracy underpinning being unemployed. Typically this results in some people's frustration at what some refer to as an unnecessary duplication of forms / paperwork when involved in the process. It is hoped that the new Public Services Card and better integrated systems might assist in decreasing the level of bureaucracy.



10. Project in Numbers

Numbers of unemployed people who we talked to:
450 approx.

Numbers of unemployed people who gave contact details:
274

Number of visits to the two LES Offices:
35

Number of Unemployed Focus Groups:
Local: 6
National: 1

Number of Focus Group members attending:
Local: 49
National: 8

Number of Telephone Interviews:
37

Numbers of Survey Respondents:
5

Numbers of Working for Work distributed:
1,000

Number of people receiving on-line welfare to work queries:
90

Number of people receiving on-line welfare to work/information/useful links queries:
150



An INOU Research Project and Report

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Produced with the support of the Department of Social Protection

Design, Print and digital creation by Printwell Design www.printwell.ie