

Mapping the journey for people who are short-term unemployed



Report on Phase One of the Intreo Project



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Foreword

I am pleased to present this report on the first phase of the INOU's work on researching unemployed people's experience of using the Department of Social Protection's Intreo Service.

Over the last two years, there have been extensive changes to how the State delivers employment and entitlement services and the roll-out of the Department of Social Protection's Intreo Service has been at the centre of these changes. A key priority for the INOU, as the representative organisation for unemployed people, was to undertake research with the people who are directly affected by these changes. Our work in this area has enabled us to hear directly from unemployed people about their experiences of the new service. We set out to establish what unemployed people thought was working well in the new service and what changes people would like to see to improve the service. As the Intreo Service initially focussed on people who had more recently signed-on the Live Register, the first phase of this work centred on the experiences of unemployed people who are short-term unemployed in two Intreo Centres. This work covered unemployed people's experiences of the Intreo Service during the period from late Spring 2013 to late Spring 2014.

The Intreo Service has now been extended to people who are long-term unemployed. We have started to develop the next phase of this work where we plan to link directly with people who are long-term unemployed about their experiences of the Intreo Service. We look forward to developing and reporting on this aspect of the work.

I would like to thank the Intreo Managers, Regional Managers and other staff for their time, engagement and courtesy during the course of the first phase of this work. I would also like to thank the Department of Social Protection for supporting the organisation to undertake this work and the officials for their assistance in ensuring the smooth running of the project and for providing links to other relevant DSP sections including the Training Unit. Above all I would like to thank all the unemployed people who took the time to talk to us at the Intreo Centres; who gave us their contact details; who talked to us openly about their experiences and who contributed so fully at our focus group meetings.

John Stewart
Co-ordinator

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1. introduction

New Structure and Scale of Changes

Ireland's employment services have received criticism in the past decade or more from the EU, OECD etc. as being too passive and lacking in structured engagement with unemployed people. The lack of structured engagement and support has also been a criticism that the INOU and many unemployed people themselves have made. The design and delivery of Intreo marks a shift to increased activation. There was a recognition within the Project Plan for the Development and Implementation of the new National Employment and Entitlements Service¹ – now called Intreo – that the scale of the changes envisaged is such that it would be difficult to prevent a 'dip' in the quality of the service being delivered before the service establishes itself.

The Intreo service was initially rolled out in four social welfare offices during 2012. As of August 2014, there are 44 Intreo Centres listed countrywide. It is intended that the Intreo service will be rolled out completely by the end of 2014 i.e. 60 offices. The 2014 Budget included the provision for a further €15 million investment to complete the roll-out of Intreo Centres countrywide by the end of 2014.

The new Intreo service was developed and its roll-out implemented at a time of economic and social crisis. The scale of the economic and labour market crisis since 2008 has been stark and huge numbers of people have been affected by unemployment. Whilst it is positive that the number of people who are unemployed has been decreasing since 2012, the numbers of people signing-on in September 2014 were still 370,050. The numbers of people signing-on for more than one year has increased as a proportion of the total number of people on the Live Register – in September this accounted for 48% of the Register or 178,388 people. According to the half-yearly figures, in June 56% of the people signing-on for more than a year were doing so for more than 3 years: 99,972 people.

¹ Ref: <http://www.welfare.ie/en/pages/project-plan-for-the-development-and-implementation-of-the--.aspx>

Lack of jobs is clearly the main overall problem. Though the number of vacancies for every unemployed person in Ireland has improved from almost 33 unemployed people for every vacancy in 2012, to 26 unemployed people per vacancy last year it clearly demonstrates the huge challenges that unemployed people face in finding work. In the UK, for example the equivalent ratio is 4.5 unemployed people to each vacancy. For unemployed people generally, the situation is very difficult. For those who are further removed from the Labour Market, the situation is particularly challenging. It is against this background that the new service has been launched.

Given the significance of these changes, the INOU believes it is vital to hear from unemployed people about their direct experiences of the new service. The questions that informed this analysis across the various stages of the Intreo process were:

- ‘What are individuals finding useful and helpful in the new service?’
- ‘What is not working as well as it might?’
- ‘What changes would make the Intreo process and service a better one for unemployed people?’

The INOU receives funding from the Department of Social Protection. In the agreed Work Plan an aspect of this funding committed the INOU to:

- Developing structured engagement with unemployed people around the implementation of the Intreo Service;
- Engaging with key Departmental officials on the outcome of the structured engagement with unemployed people.

Methodology and Structure

Mapping the Journey

At the centre of this report is the direct experiences of unemployed people who have been/are clients of these services in two Intreo Centre locations. We have set out to map their journey from:

- Signing-on or losing their job
- Their contacts with Intreo in accessing payments
- Group Engagement Sessions

- Meeting Case Officers
- Review and subsequent meetings and engagement
- Accessing education and training courses
- Finding employment

As the Intreo services' engagement with unemployed people occurs over time, we aimed to track unemployed people's journeys during the time of their involvement in the Intreo process (and subsequent follow-up). One method that had proved effective previously involved visiting Social Welfare Offices, talking to unemployed people and taking the contact details of those who express an interest in attending a meeting to discuss their experiences.

This approach was not as straightforward in this instance. Previously we visited the Social Welfare Offices on signing-days but this approach would not have worked for this project. One of the reasons is that many Intreo clients would be excused from signing-on the Live Register for the period of their involvement with the Case Officer. It was also the case that the Intreo clients, particularly initially represented only a fraction of the numbers of unemployed people signing-on the Live Register in their local office and would have been nearly impossible to identify.

Agreed Process

Following a meeting with senior DSP officials and Intreo Managers, it was agreed that the INOU would meet unemployed people at the Group Engagement Session (GES) stage. With the agreement of the Department and assistance from the Intreo Managers and staff, the INOU made a number of visits to the two Intreo Centres and talked to unemployed people as they entered and exited from Group Engagement 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 hand-out our key publication, "Working for Work". We subsequently emailed those who were interested in attending the meeting with information on the Focus Group meetings including the time and venue. We phoned people in the days coming up to the meeting to check if they were be able to attend. We talked to people who were unable to attend the Focus Group meetings and got their feedback on the process to date, focusing in particular on the Group Engagement Session and the initial and subsequent meetings with the Case Officer.

We ran 4 Focus Groups (2 in each Intreo Centre location) in addition to a Focus Group of INOU members who have experienced both Intreo and non-Intreo services to gather feedback on people's experiences of the Group Engagement Sessions and the initial meeting with the Case Officer.

We had originally planned to run further meetings of each focus Group – at four month or so intervals to follow people's progress and experiences through the different stages of the Intreo journey. We envisaged that it would be likely – subject to the numbers of people attending who have accessed work or education and training opportunities and who would not be able to attend subsequent focus group meetings – that we would have to combine the Focus Groups in each location. It proved more difficult than envisaged to organise the combined Focus Group meetings. We ran one subsequent Focus Group meeting and cancelled another as the vast majority of previous Focus Group attenders were unavailable. Unemployed people's experiences of review meetings and their subsequent engagement with the Intreo service was gathered primarily through telephone interviews.

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 process. The report sets out those experiences at every stage of the journey. This report highlights the journey from when the person who had been unemployed for a short time lost their job or signed-on, through to their ongoing engagement with the Intreo service including accessing training, education or work opportunities.

This phase of the Report is not intended to provide a specific focus on the two Intreo Centres, in the same way that intended future work is not about providing a focus on other individual Intreo Centres. Rather, the intention of the Report is to provide recommendations that focus, in an overall way, on how the Intreo Service might best be delivered from the unemployed person's perspective.

We would also hope to engage with the following groups as part of this project:

- long-term unemployed people;
- those who are showing up as more likely to exit the Live

Register sooner (the vast majority of those we have contacted were profiled as less likely to leave the Live Register sooner); and

- unemployed people attending Social Welfare Branch Offices.

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 through the Intreo system of people who have been unemployed for more than one year.



2. Key Recommendations

- **That the focus of the Intreo Service is to work with unemployed clients until they find sustainable and suitable employment.**
- **That the relationship between the Intreo service / Case Officer and unemployed people is based on a partnership approach to identifying an agreed suitable career or pathway to work. The Intreo service should provide the most comprehensive service possible covering the whole range of options currently available and ensures the Case Officer has the wherewithal to identify/agree the best option for the unemployed person.**
- **That continuous training and development should be a priority within the Intreo service. Priority should also continue to be given to ensure that staff who possess the necessary people or interpersonal skills are on the frontline meeting with and assisting unemployed people.**
- **That the Intreo service matches suitable job candidates to vacancies if employers are to look to Intreo as a key recruitment resource.**
- **That Case Officers should pro-actively contact their unemployed clients – by text, email or phone – to inform them of upcoming suitable events, work, and training or education opportunities. Text messaging also has an important part to play in informing Intreo customers of signing-on days and appointment times.**

- **That there are opportunities for the Intreo service to further utilise the expertise that exists externally and maximise linking people in with the services and supports they need, including local community based supports and resources. One clear example is the importance of further developing links and utilising the expertise of the Adult Guidance service.**
- **That there should be a greater consistency in the Group Engagement Session structure and this should be a genuine engagement session. This should involve the DSP Official who presents information at the Session, taking the group step-by-step through the process and engaging with the Group.**
- **That all DSP communication to individuals be conveyed in a clear and positive manner. It is important, for example to ensure that there is no confusion in relation to signing-on times. Letters should always be signed, dated and include contact details for a person to respond.**
- **That the initial letter of invite for the Group Engagement Session should be used to promote the positive benefits of engaging with the Intreo process. Intreo represents a really important change. There is an excellent opportunity to emphasise what the new service is and how it can positively support unemployed people rather than putting too great a focus on the implications of non-attendance.**



3. Signing-on / Losing your job

Shock of Job Loss

3.1 One of the aspects highlighted at the Focus Groups was the effect on the individual of losing their job. A number of Focus Group participants talked about the shock when they lost their job. While the effects of the job loss varied among individuals (and individual circumstances, period of time working, likelihood to find work in the short, mid or long-term, voluntary or compulsory redundancy) it was a shock. This loss occurred at the very time that people needed and will need to contact their local Intreo office to sign-on for their payment and engage with the national employment service.

A number of Focus Group Members spoke about their anger and the difficulty they had in coming to terms with losing their job. It is clear from talking to the Intreo managers and their colleagues that this is something that they are aware of. Indeed ensuring the placement of staff with appropriate people skills at reception was referred to as a priority by the managers at both locations. It is important, in general that the Intreo service and staff are able to understand this loss and demonstrate the necessary empathy and understanding at this time.

Knowledge about Social Welfare

3.2 For the majority of Focus Group Members, the fairly recent loss of their job was their first time signing-on and for some others they had not needed to contact their local office for a long period of time. As a result, many participants had very little knowledge of the Social Welfare system and were not aware of what they needed to do.

- 3.3 Some Focus Group Members had received information through word of mouth, which in a few cases centred on being referred by friends etc. to local centres including the Citizen Information Centre, Centre for the Unemployed and Local Employment Service.
- 3.4 There was a very useful example where people were informed of the process. This resulted from where a few Focus Group Members worked for a local company. The company made a large number of people redundant – these were predominantly voluntary redundancies. The company linked in with the local Intreo Office to ensure that those who were losing their job had a seamless transition signing-on and accessing payments and information. The company also provided support to the workers losing their job in relation to career transition. Both of these initiatives worked very well (and eased the move from work to social welfare).

Another Focus Group Member compared becoming unemployed previously where a company linked in with Social Welfare and this was much easier than the current situation.

Queuing

- 3.5 One of the issues that was flagged up at some of the Focus Groups related to queuing in one of the two Intreo offices.
- 3.6 One of the Focus Group Members said that they had become frustrated after having queued unnecessarily first and subsequently being referred to the wrong queue. Being in an incorrect queue was also experienced by some others. Some other members were in the wrong part of the office or were queuing at reception when this was not necessary or they should have been somewhere else.
- 3.7 However, one of the Focus Group Members said that they talked to one of the Security personnel who very helpfully indicated the correct queue.

We are aware that opening more hatches when the service is busier happens in locations and this was reported to us.

- 3.8 Ensuring that queues are as short as possible and that people are in the right queue would reduce unemployed people's frustrations, increase their sense of the professionalism of the service, ameliorate tensions and create more positive experiences for both unemployed people and staff.

Signage and Signposting

- 3.9 The lack of clear signage to indicate the different hatches or areas that people needed to go to was referred to by a number of people.
- 3.10 One of the suggestions from a couple of the Focus Groups was that it would be very useful if a person could be on the floor directing people to the section, hatch or individual that they need to visit.

First experiences and contacts

- 3.11 The first experiences and contacts that unemployed people have with social welfare staff are and will be important in helping to shape their relationships with the new Intreo process. These experiences were mixed. As indicated earlier, some people – who had taken voluntary redundancy, but were assisted by the company in linking with the Intreo service and staff – had a very positive first experience. Their subsequent experiences were also positive and indicated, at least in that instance that an initial positive experience is more likely to lead to a more positive overall experience. Some others had mentioned that they were treated in a professional and courteous way and others discussed the helpful attitude of some frontline staff. Others referred to the understanding and empathy expressed by frontline staff.
- 3.12 For others the experience was less positive. For a number of Focus Group Members there was a lack of empathy from staff and the belief that the attitude of staff could be better. Two members in one of the Intreo offices had a very negative experience. One referred to the attitude of a staff member who was very dismissive of one of the Focus Group Members and the other reported that they had witnessed a staff member

who was insulting to another unemployed person in the queue.

The Focus Group Members acknowledged the stress that staff were experiencing, but believed that it would be very important to ensure that the frontline staff who deal with people have the necessary attributes and skills such as people skills, empathy and knowledge.

We know from talking to Intreo Managers, Regional Managers and others that serious consideration is given to ensuring that frontline staff are the ones with appropriate people skills and has been a determining factor in a number of instances as to which staff are allocated to frontline positions. While this is very welcome, it is important that the Intreo service ensures that this occurs across all Intreo Centres. In order to ensure this occurs, it needs to be prioritised, monitored and resourced.

- 3.13 One of the Focus Group Members also noted that they had seen customers insulting staff.
- 3.14 The research has highlighted the need to develop a culture of respect on both sides of the counter. Implementing the recommendations from this piece of work would, we believe go a long way towards creating more positive interaction and minimise the potential for a lack of respect from either side of the counter.

Processing payments

- 3.15 With a couple of exceptions, payments were processed satisfactorily or very satisfactorily from the Focus Group Members perspective. Some commented on the payment being made speedily, including one Focus Group Member who brought in all their documentation two days after losing their job and had their payment processed within a week.
- 3.16 A Focus Group experienced a difficulty, though that was in relation to Habitual Residency Criteria and another experienced a delay in payment. Another referred to having felt 'a sense of shame' for getting the payment as a result of the Staff member's attitude.

Payments

- 3.17 There were a couple of examples which illustrated the system working well where the payment was being changed or transferred.
- 3.18 One person outlined how the switch from Jobseekers Benefit to Jobseekers Allowance resulted in a very quick processing payment time. Another referred to a 'seamless switch in their payment'.

Another individual was appreciative of the efforts of the Intreo service in ensuring that there was only a minimum delay in accessing a Jobseekers payment following a frustrating and unsuccessful JobBridge Internship. They highlighted that the Case Officer and Local Intreo office were helpful in expediting the transfer to the Jobseekers payment.

- 3.19 One example of a delay occurred where one person who had attended an earlier Focus Group meeting had filled in a form for the transition from JB to JA 10 weeks or so prior to the transition, but the transition was not seamless.

A Focus Group Member said that they only found out about their end date for Jobseekers Benefit by chance. One positive aspect in this case was that the person was given the opportunity to have their Means Test for Jobseeker's Allowance explained fully by a staff member. They found this was very helpful.

Signing-on

- 3.20 There was significant variety in relation to signing-on times for Focus Group Members across both Intreo offices. The period of time varied from monthly, 3 monthly, 6 monthly and yearly. One reason for this is that some were in the process of having their signing-on periods extended.

One of the Intreo Centres have streamlined signing-on times for young people (aged under 25) where their signing-on times were more frequent and have been standardised.

- 3.21 For most of the Focus Group Members, signing-on times and days were satisfactory. However, this was an issue for a couple of people in one of the Intreo offices as there was some uncertainty over whether a new signing-on date had taken precedence over a previous one.

It is important that messages are conveyed in a clear and unambiguous manner to ensure that there is no confusion about signing-on times.

- 3.22 Focus Group Members highlighted the value of text messages informing them of signing-on times (and other events). Some of the Group had received messages which they said were very helpful to remind them of their signing-on day.

A number of others said that they did not receive text messages to inform them of their signing day. Some had previously received text messages but had not received them in the recent past.

While the frequency of signing-on has welcomingly reduced for unemployed people who are using the Intreo system, the text messages are important as a reminder.

Appointment Times

- 3.23 The scheduling of appointment and meeting times were generally regarded as being satisfactory for those Focus Group Members and Telephone Interviewees we contacted.

There were a small number of examples where difficulties arose. These included people who worked for part of the week and signed-on for other days and where appointments fell on work days. This was also highlighted where the appointment fell on a training day. There was also the broader question of a person turning 65 getting an invitation to Group Engagement Session; those going back to work within a relatively short period; and a significant number going back to education.

Letter of invite

3.24 Some of the Focus Group members referred to what they saw as the threat in the letter. Though they were being 'Invited to attend' the threat that their payment could be reduced was very clear. It was commented that the letter made unemployed people fearful and someone suggested that they felt they were being criminalised.

Many were unsure from the letter what the Intreo process entailed and why they were being summoned to a meeting. One of the Telephone Interviewees said he was relieved that the meeting was to provide information as he was unsure what it was about and was fearful it was about being 'cut off' a payment.

3.25 A very useful development would be to make it clearer why the individual is being called to a meeting and what that meeting is about. Some information – either as part of the letter or as an extra document – should be included on the Intreo process.

Administration

3.26 One of the Participants highlighted that the letter accompanying the Form they received to apply for Credits was signed with the Staff person's position, but did not include a name of the person or phone or email contact. The Participant compared the very different approaches, where signing-on for payments was very clear but there was a much reduced focus on ensuring that the person was signing-on for credits.

On a partly related matter a Focus Group member explained that they are starting an Education and Training Board course in the summer but as they are signing-on for credits they are not entitled to a payment. The person described their situation as being in 'No Man's Land'.

3.27 The letter and supporting documentation should be as easy to read as possible – the DSP has linked successfully with the National Adult Literacy Agency's (NALA) "Simply Put" programme in the past and this would be useful in relation to the letter and supporting documentation.

Intreo: Promoting the service to unemployed people

3.28 Intreo has the potential to provide a positive experience for unemployed people. The opportunity should be taken in the letter to sell what Intreo offers and could offer - a structured, more active engagement with unemployed people; assistance to develop a career plan; assistance to find suitable work, education and training; letting unemployed people know of a job, training or education course or job fair; providing a contact to resolve issues that may arise.

There is a real opportunity to promote the Intreo process and the value of the process that is being lost at the moment.

Recommendations:

Signing-on / Losing your job

- Priority be given to ensure that staff who possess the necessary people or interpersonal skills are on the frontline meeting with and assisting unemployed people.
- Continuous training and development should be a priority within the Intreo service. While recognising the practical difficulties of continuous training and development, this needs to be prioritised, particularly in providing information on what constitutes a quality service from an unemployed person's perspective.
- The DSP prioritises linking-in with companies that are about to make some of their employees redundant. While acknowledging that this happens in some instances, it would be really useful if this could be replicated as widely as possible.
- The frequency of signing-on times should be further standardised. While recognising the discretion that local Intreo offices will exercise in relation to the frequency of signing-on times, this should only be done in the very minimum of cases.
- Retain and enhance the use of text messaging (and emailing). Text messaging has an important part to play in informing Intreo customers of signing-on days, appointment times and potentially events, jobs, courses etc.
- All DSP communication to individuals should be conveyed in a clear and positive manner. It is important, for example to ensure that there is no confusion in relation to signing-on times. Letters should always be signed, dated and include contact details for a person to respond.
- The initial letter of invite for the Group Engagement Session should be used to promote the positive benefits of engaging with the Intreo process. Intreo represents a really important change. An excellent opportunity is being lost to emphasise what the new service is and how it can positively support unemployed people, rather than focus on the threat of non-attendance.
- Intreo Offices should seek to minimise any queuing delays that may arise.



4. Group Engagement Session (GES)

- 4.1 The overall sense of the Group Engagement Session was that it was not overly useful for the majority of Focus Group Members and Telephone Interviewees.

Some people had more positive experiences. Some Focus Group Members said that though it was brief it was concise and included important information. A couple of people said that it wasn't overly useful for them because they were going back to College, but thought it would be useful for others.

- 4.2 A number of people attended the Group Engagement Sessions but were unsure going in (and in some cases coming out of the session) about what Intreo is. As we have highlighted, there are opportunities being lost in the letter advising people to attend. There are also opportunities being lost at the GES itself to properly explain what Intreo is, the purpose of the Group Engagement Session and the meetings with Case Officers.

- 4.3 At one of the locations, a couple of members said that they had been left outside the room where the Group Engagement Session was taking place until a few minutes before start time. The Focus Group Members said that it had been cold.

From observation, it was clear that this changed as the meeting room was being opened 15 minutes prior to the Session. From our meeting with the Intreo Manager and colleagues, the Manager informed us that he had noticed people waiting and instigated the change. This was reflected in the comments from the second Focus Group.

- 4.4 A number of people who were moving onto the next year of education through the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) believed that they should have had a choice of engaging in the process as it was not relevant for some.

Presentation

- 4.5 Some of the Presenters providing the Sessions did not introduce themselves. A number of Focus Group Members said that this would have been useful. Clearly, it was not the only reason, but where the Presenter introduced themselves, generally the feedback from the Group Engagement Session was more positive.
- 4.6 Across both locations, though particularly in one, unemployed people felt that there was a deficit in presentation skills. Issues such as a lack of clarity in the presentation and not facing the group were referred to. In other sessions, Focus Group Members and Telephone Interviewees had a more positive experience as the presentation was clearer and the Presenter spoke to the group.

Attendees also indicated that the presentations would have been very difficult for people with literacy issues, hearing problems or language difficulties as the session was largely based on reading slides or listening to the slides being read out.

- 4.7 One of the comments that was repeated on a number of occasions was that a lot of information was presented at the Group Engagement Session, but that it was very difficult for people to assimilate all of this information as only some aspects were perceived as being relevant to themselves.

A number of people also referred to the slides being over complicated. The issue about relevance led to a number of people recommending that it would be really useful to tailor the GES to a group with broadly similar profiles. The rationale for this is to provide a bespoke Group Engagement Session that would be much more relevant to the individuals present.

A smaller number of Focus Group Members did find the presentations informative and a number at one of the Focus

Groups said they received what appeared to be the Jobseeker Resource Pack. They found this useful and it would be important to make these available to all Intreo clients.

A Focus Group member said that the hand-out could have been read at home and that it was not necessary to attend the GES. Another responded that the slide show was useful.

- 4.8 At most of the Focus Groups, the members said that people who arrived more than a couple of minutes late were not let in.

Lack of Engagement

- 4.9 One of the most common criticisms of the GES was what people saw as the misnomer of calling the meeting a Group Engagement Session as there was little engagement. The lack of engagement arose across all Focus Groups and a significant number of Telephone Interviews.

A majority of participants reported that the Presenter did not explain (or did not explain adequately) what this process entailed. It would have been very useful to provide an explanation of the changed system.

At Focus Group meetings a couple of members discussed the sense of being 'rolled in, talked at and rolled out' and others said that it was a lecture or sitting in a classroom rather than an engagement.

- 4.10 At a small number of Group Engagement Sessions that Focus Group members attended some questions were asked and answered. This was welcomed and contributed significantly to unemployed people having a more positive experience of the GES.

A number of participants referred to questions not being encouraged. In the main, when queries were raised, they were not answered or encouraged. Most people were referred to the upcoming meeting with the Case Officer (and on one or two occasions to the local Citizens Information Centre).

In addition to what some people saw as a lack of professionalism or a deficit within the Intreo process, the lack of knowledge to deal with queries was raised.

It was suggested that it would be very useful, if possible to have an Information Officer present at the meeting who could talk to people individually afterwards if they had a specific query.

- 4.11 The need for training for Presenters was commented on a number of times. This included up-skilling the presenters in presentation skills and increasing their expertise to answer questions.
- 4.12 One positive aspect that people referred to was that the meeting time with the Case Officer was organised within a few days of the GES. It was also useful that - in general- the time, venue and purpose for the meeting with the Case Officer was very clear.
- 4.13 Though it was not mentioned at the Focus Groups, it is clear from our own meeting with the Intreo Managers, staff and others running Group Engagement Sessions and overseeing the Intreo process that having the Sessions are very important in assisting to improve the Case Officer/Intreo client meeting. This has been highlighted as a significant improvement on the previous National Employment Action Plan approach where individuals directly met their Placement Officers without having the Group Engagement Sessions.
- 4.14 One of the Focus Group members referred to the missed opportunity at a Group Engagement Session. The member said that the Springboard roadshow was on the same day but it was not mentioned.

It would be very useful if any upcoming useful events including Roadshows, Jobs and Advice Fairs, Recruitment events, Information days, Library events etc. were highlighted at the Group Engagement Sessions.

Similarly some training schemes that a small number of Focus Group Members were interested in were not mentioned at the GES.

Recommendations:

Group Engagement Session

- The Group Engagement Session should be better structured. This should involve the Presenter at the GES taking the group step by step through the process, by introducing themselves, explaining why people are present – explaining the Intreo system and process, the Group Engagement Session and what happens afterwards.
- There should be serious consideration given to ensuring that people attending the Group Engagement Session have broadly similar profiles so that it becomes more relevant for the group. This would lead to ensuring that information is more specific for a particular group attending the GES and would be very useful.
- The GES should be a genuine engagement session. This could be achieved by running a 30 minute session followed by an optional 30 minutes for those who would like to discuss aspects of the presentation further. It would be very useful if an expert information officer was present in addition to the presenter so that people's questions could be answered.
- Additional information to explain as clearly as possible what the Intreo process entails should be sent with the letter of invitation. The slideshow or hand-out could usefully be posted or emailed in advance of the session.
- The GES should not be provided in such a text driven presentation. It is important, for instance that the Presenter can convey the content in as clear and easy to understand manner as possible.
- The Presenter should highlight any upcoming events such as roadshows, job fairs, career zoos, Information events etc. that might be useful for attendees.
- People on the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) should either not be invited to GES and Case Officer meetings or given a choice of engaging in the process. If it is very likely for example that a person may be accessing the BTEA from September, serious consideration should be given to assessing whether it is in the best interests of the person or the Intreo service for them to be contacted prior to September.



5. Case Officer

Initial Meeting

5.1 The majority of Focus Group Members were positive about their one-to-one meetings with Case Officers. This ranged from fairly to very positive. This was also generally true of the Telephone Interviewees.

Some individual experiences were less positive and a small minority had very negative experiences.

5.2 Generally, the one-to-one meetings appeared to last for 40 minutes or so. Most people were satisfied or very satisfied with the duration of the meeting. A significant number said that they did not feel rushed during the meeting.

5.3 Some people talked about their positive experiences with the Case Officer and that they were dealt with courtesy and respect.

5.4 As highlighted in the previous section, one aspect of the Group Engagement Session that worked well was the speed of the appointment with the Case Officer afterwards. This was welcomed by nearly all participants.

5.5 As outlined earlier, the meeting with the Case Officer was signalled in advance and generally the unemployed people we talked to were clear about what was needed. This usually, (though not in all cases) included bringing a CV and working on a jobs, training or education plan. We believe this was a very useful aspect of the Group Engagement Sessions and Intreo process that improved the subsequent meeting with the Case Officer.

5.6 The Case Officers introduced themselves and this was contrasted favourably with some of the officials in the Group Engagement Sessions who did not.

- 5.7 A number of Focus Group Members referred to the Case Officers as knowledgeable. A couple highlighted the Case Officers good awareness of the range of available options. A small number of others were positive about the knowledge and expertise of the Case Officers in assisting the individual in accessing courses and services.
- 5.8 Some mentioned that Case Officers welcomed their questions and were able to answer them.
- 5.9 A small number stated that the Case Officer took notes and they found this useful and also referred to the usefulness in the Case Officer printing out course information etc.
- 5.10 Others were given an email address of the Case Officers which was very useful as it provided people with an opportunity to contact or follow up with their Case Officers.
- 5.11 The Focus Group Meetings and in Telephone Interviews occurred after the initial meetings and prior to any review meeting. It is perhaps not too surprising then that there was little or no interaction or engagement between the Case Officers and the people we contacted as part of our work prior to the review meeting. Nearly all participants were not contacted by the Case Officer at this admittedly early stage. One aspect that was raised by a number of people was how much they would welcome, and how positive it would be, if the Case Officer would contact them if they saw a good job, training or educational opportunity.

Similarly, most Focus Group Members said that contact by a Case Officer to inform them of upcoming information events, jobfairs, training roadshows etc. would be very useful.

- 5.12 A number of Focus Group Members and Telephone Interviewees described the Case Officers as knowledgeable and friendly.

One person was very impressed that the Case Officer provided information on potential funding that was available in accessing a course they were interested in. They compared this very favourable in noting 'that's the sort of information you don't hear from the other side of the counter'.

Another person said that the Case Officer had accessed information on a suitable Springboard course and advised them on the best way to apply. The person subsequently joined the course.

In another example a Case Officer assisted the person in arranging for a truck licence through FÁS.

One of the Focus Group Members had been through a very difficult time since they lost their job and found their meeting with the Case Officer to be very helpful. They mentioned how the Case Officer empathised with their situation and recognised the particular difficulties they were going through. The Case Officer offered the Focus Group Member more time to agree their follow-up actions.

- 5.13 Whereas a majority believed that the initial meeting with the Case Officer was useful, a significant minority had less positive experiences. Some referred to what they saw as the Case Officer putting pressure on them to find work where they were eager to pursue education or training. Similarly others felt pressurised to take-up programmes which they had no interest in or could not see the relevance for them of either the programme or the specific pathway arising from their participation.

It was interesting that a number of Focus Group Members and Telephone Interviewees referred to what they saw as a tick box mentality. Some who had referred to the courtesy of staff referred also to a tick box mentality. Some others mentioned their experiences of being treated as a number.

A number of people said that the Case Officers were 'out of their comfort zones' and recommended that additional training would be very useful.

One of the Focus Group Members had a less positive experience with the Case Officer. They were very frustrated that the Case Officer was failing to take into account their aspirations and educational level and felt they were being pressurised into taking-up low paid, relatively low skilled work they had done previously.

Another had a negative meeting with the Case Officer where they received no support. They had felt unnecessarily pressurised about their jobseeking, felt that the Case Officer had not engaged at all with what they were hoping to do. The only positive aspect they felt was that they were offered the choice of meeting again and declined. It is recommended that in similar cases the Case Officer would suggest that it might be more useful for the unemployed person to have a different Case Officer.

At one of the Focus Group meetings, the one-to-one meetings with Case Officers seemed to be less positive for some Focus Group Members who had immigrated to Ireland.

5.14 The participant progression plan was seen as useful in helping to define work options. One of the Telephone Interviewees gave an example where they started a Start your Own Business Course and were very positive about the Case Officers role in this.

5.15 A number of Focus Group members at one of the meetings said that it would be useful to consider having two meetings with the Case Officer. It was suggested that the initial meeting would allow for an opportunity to discuss the person's previous work experience, skills, education and what they might want to do in the future. The period between the initial and second meeting would allow time for reflection for both the individual and Case Officer and the progression plan could be agreed at the second meeting.

It was recognised that this might not be necessary in all cases. From discussions with Intreo Managers and staff, a progression plan is not agreed until a second meeting for a small number of individuals.

5.16 One aspect that was highlighted at a Focus Group meetings was that voluntary work was not being encouraged by the Case Officer. Focus Group Members saw the value of voluntary work in assisting them in their social interaction and enhancing their employment opportunities.

5.17 As indicated, we are in the early stages of both the Intreo process itself and this project. One aspect (again from a small sample) is that none of the unemployed people we have

talked to who have secured employment to date attributed this to the new process. A person who had secured work said that the process had been useful in helping 'to get his head together' and another said it had been useful.

A Focus Group Member who had a worthwhile meeting with their Case Officer and who was positive about the meeting said that the Case Officer mentioned about how they could not find work for them.

Review and follow-up meetings

5.18 The majority were generally positive about their review meetings with the Case Officer. Some were more neutral, one or two were disillusioned with the process and a number were very positive.

5.19 Some of the positive feedback referred to Case Officers being helpful. A couple of the participants referred to the Case Officer as being 'very nice and helpful'. Another outlined how the review meeting went well and also how subsequent meetings were positive. One mentioned that 'everything was fine' at the review meeting and another that the review meeting went well.

5.20 The Focus Group Members at the follow-up meeting were positive about their contact with the Case Officer. One aspect they found helpful was the consistency in having the same Case Officer. A number described the Case Officers as understanding and empathetic.

One person highlighted an example where she was unable to take up a training course she initially showed interest in from her first meeting with her Case Officer. They reported that the Case Officer was very understanding when the participant outlined the reasons why it wouldn't be suitable for their present situation. Another commented that they were given valuable information on starting their own business and the grants that are available. One said that the Case Officer was extremely helpful with providing contacts and other sources of information.

It was also useful that a number of people were given the Case Officer's phone number and encouraged to call with any

queries. One of the Focus Group Members remarked that it was very useful to have the direct contact details of the Case Officer rather than a general number.

Members welcomed the more relaxed nature of the review meeting with the Case Officer and felt at ease during the meeting. It was noted that the service to date is helpful and some participants said that they are treated as people rather than impersonally as numbers.

- 5.21 One aspect that was highlighted at the meeting was that people were not pro-actively contacted by the Case Officer either through phone-calls, emails, or text messages regarding suitable job or training opportunities. This would have been very welcome, though Focus Group Members acknowledged that they were encouraged to contact the Case Officer should they require further assistance.

One of the participants who we contacted by phone said that the Case Officer had emailed information about a course on networking that they thought would be very useful. This was a very useful example of the type of proactive engagement that could very usefully be replicated across the Intreo service.

- 5.22 A few of the people did not have a follow-up review meeting. In some cases, this resulted from a change in individual's circumstances – including changes to a determination of the payment they received or a cessation of the payment.

In one instance, and this was exceptional across all the Focus Groups and telephone interviews, the participant had been offered the choice of attending a future review meeting, but following a frustrating and unsatisfactory initial meeting, they had declined further meetings.

- 5.23 While a Focus Group Member referred to the Case Officer as being personable, they also mentioned about the deficits as they saw them within the Intreo process. They mentioned that the supports and subsequent course that they accessed was accessed by themselves. They highlighted what they saw as a very significant gap in the service whereby the Case Officer was unable to highlight meaningful opportunities or

information that they hadn't come across themselves. They also referred to a lack of mapping or charting of progress in their own case that they thought would be useful.

- 5.24 Another had negative experiences of the Intreo process as a whole. In particular, they felt there was a lack of support/information. They had accessed a college course themselves, but found it difficult and believed that they should have had access to greater supports and resources to ensure they would have every possibility to complete the course.
- 5.25 One aspect that was highlighted by a small number of people was how the Intreo 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, being in a group and talking to a Case Officer.

A person mentioned that people can get very distressed when they are unemployed. He suggested that information and links to organisations that assist people including Samaritans, Aware etc. would be useful.

Recommendations:

Case Officers

- Case Officers should work with people until they find sustainable and suitable employment.
- Case Officers (and the Intreo service) should utilise the expertise that exists externally. One clear example is the importance of building links and utilising the expertise of the Adult Guidance service.
- It is recommended that continuous training and development for Case Officers is prioritised. The position is a particularly specialised one that ideally requires knowledge of all available training and education courses, job vacancies, necessary criteria for accessing courses and supports, employer incentive schemes etc. The position ideally requires the person to have highly developed inter-personal skills, including empathy.
- The Case Officer 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. This is an aspect of the work of the Intreo service that the report has identified, that if implemented could make substantial positive differences for unemployed people.
- Networking opportunities for Case Officers to explore good practice and assist each other should be prioritised. At one of the Intreo locations for example, the Case Officers meet for a half day each month to discuss Cases and explore potential pathways. It is important that these regular structured opportunities are provided across the Intreo roll-out.

- That there are more opportunities for a second meeting with a Case Officer to finalise a progression plan. While the flexibility that is being used currently to provide Intreo clients with a second meeting is very useful, it would be very positive if the option of a second meeting would be available to all Intreo unemployed people who are struggling to agree a progression plan.
- Generally, and as is the practice, unemployed people should retain the same Case Officer. It is also recommended that in instances where there is a breakdown in the relationship or a clash of personalities between the Case Officer and the individual that the individual should be transferred to a different Case Officer.



6. Progression Outcomes: Work, Education and Training

Getting Work

- 6.1 A number of people got jobs, though none directly attributed finding work to the Case Officers or the Intreo service. Some outlined how they had got work based on previous contacts, others as a result of their job-seeking efforts.

While it is likely that having a more structured process provides an indirect benefit to people becoming employed, the Intreo service needs to have a greater impact in being able to provide access to potential work opportunities for unemployed people. The roll-out of employer engagement staff as part of the local Intreo service has the potential to be very useful in this regard.

- 6.2 A person said that there is a need for Case Officers and the Intreo service to provide people with the necessary supports to find work. They believed that this was not happening in the way it should.
- 6.3 Another outlined that what was needed with the Intreo system is a partnership between the Case Officer and the individual that focusses on looking for work for the individual. He added that it would be very useful if the Intreo service could evolve into that partnership.

There was a similar comment from a Focus Group Member who said that their vision of the employment service was one where the Intreo service (and Case Officers) would engage with, and support the individual until they became employed.

6.4 As already noted it was welcomed that Case Officers had supplied them with their contact details and Focus Group Members at the follow-up meeting added that the Case Officers had encouraged them to contact them with any queries. They also welcomed having the contact details as they didn't need to call a switchboard for an enquiry, but had a useful direct line and email address.

6.5 However one of the aspects that was highlighted was the lack of follow-up or proactive engagement from the Case Officer. In the majority of instances, people received no email or phone correspondence from Case Officers about available vacancies or suitable education or training courses. They said that it would be very useful if Case Officers (or someone from the admin support team) could follow-up with individuals, either through a text, email or phone call to let them know of suitable opportunities.

An example, cited earlier where a Case Officer emailed a course on networking through to an Individual was very welcome from the individual's perspective. The Intreo service should replicate this approach very widely.

Jobseeking and Jobsearch referral and supports

6.6 In a number of instances, some Focus Group Members were referred to Job Clubs or similar organisations for assistance in relation to jobseeking and jobsearching. In general, this proved to be a welcome link for the individual. A number of the participants highlighted the local Job Club as being beneficial for the opportunity to improve and review CVs that were outdated.

A person noted that their Case Officer was 'helpful in assisting with CV's and where to look for work, in addition to training opportunities'.

Genuinely Seeking Work requirement

- 6.7 Some highlighted what they saw as a greater focus within the Intreo process on meeting Genuinely Seeking Work (GSW) criteria rather than to support them into suitable and sustainable employment, education or training options.

Some – while outlining that their Case Officer was very personable – said that they believed that the Case Officer review meetings were more about monitoring people’s jobseeking rather than working with the person to progress them into suitable employment and training or education opportunities. Another referred to the strong requirement to constantly prove that they were genuinely seeking work.

It is important to state that those who highlighted the much greater monitoring of Genuinely Seeking Work were satisfying these (GSW) requirements. At the follow-up Focus Group, for example, none of the Focus Group members felt ‘intimidated’ by the Service.

Training and Education – guidance and options

- 6.8 There were a number of good examples where the Intreo service and the Case Officer provided information on and assisted unemployed people to access suitable education and training courses.

A person said that they were notified by the Case Officer at a review meeting of a 10 week course that would be suitable. They highlighted that they would not have known about the course without the Case Officer.

Another reported that they had accessed an IT course which had been suggested by the Case Officer. The Course was useful. Another participant noted that the training they received through the VEC/ETB was accessed through their Case Officer.

A person met with the Case Officer and had identified – with the Case Officer – a training course that would be useful. They were about to start the course but one of their parents died. They were unable to start the course and were grateful to the

Case Officer for facilitating them in not taking-up the course and for their empathy.

- 6.9 There were a number of cases where people identified suitable opportunities themselves. A number of these were internship positions. Others accessed or were in the process of accessing third level degree places – they would have linked in with their local office in relation to the Back to Education Allowance and supports.
- 6.10 The Case Officers – in the main – do not appear to have a role in highlighting third level degree places for individuals. Similarly, volunteering was generally not an option that Case Officers tended to highlight or explore with individuals.
- 6.11 One person experienced difficulties when they accessed a JobBridge Internship. When organising the internship they were required to bring documents to the Intreo Office. It took a month to iron out the difficulties and the person had to go to the office on four occasions. They reported that the queue varied from 45 minutes to an hour and a half and believed that the process should have been easier.

Another participant completed a Springboard course. They said that one of their signing-on days clashed with the course. They recommended that it should be possible if someone is attending a Springboard course that they do not miss any course time through signing-on requirements. They mentioned that similar situations happened with others too. They also referred to a review meeting which occurred close to the exams.

One said that they found it difficult to get the key or right information that was relevant for them.

Another reiterated a concern which was that they were invited in error to the Group Engagement Session and the meeting with the Case Officer because they had already been offered a course. They said that the letter they received was very worrying.

Linkages between Intreo Centres and with other Services

6.12 It is clear that it will be very important, in order to maximise suitable training and education opportunities that Intreo links very closely and effectively with the local Education and Training Boards at an implementation level and with SOLAS at a strategic level.

6.13 A person highlighted communication difficulties and subsequent delays where they needed to follow-up with a Case Officer in a different local Intreo office in relation to looking at starting their own business options. They noted that though their Case Officer was helpful, the other Case Officer was not following up in relation to the enterprise scheme in that area. They also highlighted the need for greater communication.

It is important that the services work well together in relation to sharing information, following-up on contacts etc.

6.14 Another who had accessed a course through a Job Club, (the Case Officer had referred them to the Job Club) subsequently experienced difficulties when the College said they were not entitled to take-up the course. The person contacted the Case Officer who was very helpful in sorting out the difficulty with the College and the participant subsequently completed the course. They also noted that the INOU publication “Working for Work” was useful in clearly indicating they were entitled to access that place.

Engagement

6.15 One aspect that featured throughout the Focus Groups was the willingness of unemployed people to engage with the Intreo process. Generally, unemployed people welcomed the more active process. Nearly all of the people we spoke to were positive, at least about the potential, that a more active employment and entitlements service might offer.

Developments

6.16 Both Intreo Centres highlighted work they are undertaking with employers and interns on JobBridge. When JobBridge positions start each Case Officer is assigned a JobBridge

Intern and they meet with both the employer and intern after 3 months. This is useful in assessing how the internship is progressing for both the intern and the employer. It is also particularly useful as a way of explaining to the employer about the benefits of recruiting unemployed people, including how JobBridge interns may be eligible for the JobsPlus incentive. This is a very positive development and could be very usefully mainstreamed across the service.

6.17 The work involving NALA and Dublin North DSP in relation to developing Literacy Awareness Guidelines and the Literacy Awareness & Referral Training for DSP staff in the area is one very useful example of Intreo working with an organisation to develop awareness and expertise for staff. These linkages should be developed further and mainstreamed.

6.18 It is also useful where Intreo Centres ensure that when unemployed clients become unemployed for more than 1 year, that they fill out their JP1 form to become JobsPlus eligible.

6.19 One issue that acted as a major barrier to unemployed people's progression is the rule which existed prior to June 2014 that a person could not take-up an opportunity for a course at a similar FETAC level than the one which they had already received accreditation. It is a useful development whereby, subject to certain criteria, it is now possible for unemployed people to take-up courses at the same FETAC 5 or 6 levels that they had received accreditation previously. It would be very useful to further extend this provision to include FETAC levels other than levels 5 and 6.

It would be a useful development for the Intreo service and the unemployed people using the service if there was some flexibility within the system to provide for exceptions to criteria where this was warranted.

6.20 It would be useful if the proposed computerised system would provide top quality job-matching supports for Case Officers and unemployed people using the service. It would also be important that the new system would be able to ensure that up-to-date, readily accessible quantitative data is available in relation to the whole range of job placements, participation in education and training etc.

Recommendations: Progressive Outcomes

- That the Intreo Service works with unemployed clients until they find work.
- That links to employers are prioritised within the DSP and Intreo locations. The INOU welcomes the roll-out of employer engagement staff within the Intreo Centres as a potentially very useful development in this regard. It is vital that the Intreo Service will be able to match suitable job candidates for vacancies that are identified by the employer engagement section.
- That the relationship between the Case Officer and the unemployed client is one of a partnership – a partnership approach to identifying an agreed suitable career or job route.
- The Intreo service should provide the most comprehensive service possible covering the whole range of options currently available and ensures the Case Officer has the wherewithal to identify/agree the best option with the unemployed person.
- That the Intreo Service maximises linking people in with the services and supports they need, including local community based supports and resources.
- That the Intreo Service is sufficiently flexible to manage issues when they arise, including effective collaborative working between Intreo Centres, ETBs, and other providers.



7. National Focus Group:

Intreo, Local Social Welfare and Branch Offices

7.1 The National Focus Group (NFG) of INOU members was a separate group from the Intreo Focus Groups. National Focus Group members are INOU unemployed members from across the country, almost half of whom were unemployed for one year or more and the others who were unemployed for a shorter term.

National Focus Group Members were signing-on in local social welfare offices, Intreo Centres and Branch offices. Some were working part-time and signing-on and others had recently been, or were looking to go on to training or education courses.

7.2 National Focus Group Members had different experiences. Three of the members who dealt with local Branch offices told of the difficulty of getting information, while two others had a more positive experience of their Branch office. One of the members told of the difficulty in getting a payment through an appeal.

7.3 One National Focus Group member was told at a local social welfare office that they could only take up part-time work for up to 6 weeks without breaking their claim instead of 8 weeks.

7.4 There was a big variation in the frequency of signing-on times. This ranged from weekly to monthly to every 3 months to every 14 months.

- 7.5 One of the National Focus Group Members who was interacting with a local Office referred to the Intreo process as being what he needed a couple of years ago, and would really welcome having a Case Officer assist him.
- 7.6 The lack of jobs was referred to by a number of National Focus Group Members. This was referred to in particular by those who lived in rural areas. While a number expressed some apprehension about the new Intreo process when there are such a lack of jobs (particularly in rural areas), all recognised the huge potential of a supportive Intreo service and in particular a supportive Case Officer.
- 7.7 The importance of quality information and guidance was mentioned by a number of National Focus Group Members.
- 7.8 Three members had been through the Intreo process. One had a very positive experience of the Group Engagement Session. The session lasted over an hour and was very useful. One of the key aspects that resulted in this positive experience was that the Group Session was an engagement session with questions that were answered and a very useful discussion. One of the other members found that the GES was not beneficial as it was very quick, included too much information and the Presenter was unprofessional.
- 7.9 Two of the three National Focus Group Members who had been through the Intreo process had generally positive experiences of their one-to-one meetings with the Case Officer. These were underpinned by a professional approach. One of the members said that they were referred to the local employability service. The person they linked in with the local employability service was very helpful and assisted them in accessing part-time work.
- 7.10 One of the National Focus Group Members had a less positive experience with their Case Officer. They acknowledged that the effect of losing their job was such that they struggled to really engage with the Case Officer. The Case Officer contacted the person very regularly to the point that they felt harassed and they took up a Community Employment Scheme to ease the pressure on them.



8. Project in Numbers

Numbers of people who we talked to:

Total: 480 approx.

Dublin - 250

Sligo - 230

Numbers of people who gave contact details:

Total: 214

Dublin- 103

Sligo- 111

Number of visits to Local Offices:

Total: 25

Dublin; 12

Sligo; 13

Number of Unemployed Focus Groups:

Total: 6

Dublin: 2

Sligo: 3

National: 1

Number of Focus Group members attending:

Total: 56

Dublin: 17

Sligo: 26

National: 13

Number of Telephone Interviews:

Total: 66

Dublin: 34

Sligo: 32

Numbers of Working for Work distributed:

Total: 640

Dublin – 350

Sligo – 290



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