

Ireland

Ireland – A Work First Perspective

*Ballymun Job Centre



A Work First Perspective

- 1. Now we have Explored & Compared used local & national educational VET- programs (used by the partners) focused on (long term) unemployed young adults we have to outline the possibilities to adapt them to a Work first /work placement approach in the country of the partners (to be formalized with certificates)...**

Welfare reforms have been a common feature in EU member states for a considerable amount of time but never more so since the recent recession. New policies were drawn up throughout Europe to reverse the dramatic rise in the unemployment rate and the dependence on welfare. These new policies have understandably had an impact on the Irish social welfare approach. There has been a radical shift of emphasis towards a reintegration of individuals who have previously been long-term unemployed into the labour market. To facilitate this, the previously distinct institutions have been conglomerated into one service, under the banner of Intreo. There have been a number of initiatives implemented to attempt to reduce the unemployment rate, both in terms of the long-term unemployed and youth unemployment. These have been highly successful to date and the unemployment rate has been reduced significantly. This short paper will attempt to examine these different initiatives in detail, and to investigate whether a Work First based approach would be compatible with the current social welfare environment in this country. The central theme of the article will be towards suggesting that although many of the schemes tend towards a work first approach already, certain initiatives, such as the Community Employment scheme, would only need slight adaptation to conform to the Work First philosophy.

In Ireland, the Pathways to Work policy was launched in 2012 and focussed on tackling long-term unemployment, reducing the numbers on the Live Register and complementing the Action Plan for jobs that was designed to stimulate employment growth. Historically, the Department of Social Protection (DSP), which is responsible for the delivery of social welfare benefits in Ireland, would be considered a passive institution and generally not actively involved in encouraging the job seeker into employment. Their primary function was to dispense benefit payments to recipients. The Pathways to Work policy set out a comprehensive reform approach and the DSP became more active in reintegrating the unemployed job seeker into employment (Department of Social Protection, 2015).¹

The Pathways to Work programme set out to merge the institutions involved in reintegrating the jobseeker and placing them under one “Department Umbrella”. The policy engages with the job seeker by setting them on a path of activation. This activation process includes profiling the client, calling them in to attend scheduled appointments and the introduction of the “social contract”. This contract outlines the rights and responsibilities between the job seeker and the State (Department of Social Protection) and is agreed through the Record of Mutual Commitment. The “Department

¹ See Department of Social Protection (2015) *Pathways to Work 2015*. Dublin: Department of Social Protection.

Umbrella” merged the Community Welfare Service, the Department of Social Protection, the employment and community service of the national training agency (FAS) and included a transformational reorganisation of the VET Sector. The programme set out to transform and modify the training and education institutions by becoming more aware of labour market needs, designing and developing new programmes, such as Momentum and Springboard, and creating links with employers by offering blended learning programmes e.g. Positive2Work. There were also increases in government employment schemes e.g. Community Employment, Gateway and Tus. The JobBridge initiative, First Steps, JobsPlus, and an increased number of other internship schemes were also introduced as a way of incentivising employers to take on future employees from the Live Register.

If full time employment is difficult for the individual to attain, then the employment services would direct the client into further training or education. This method was seen as an improvement to unmotivated idleness, which can become a dehumanising factor for many individuals. This strategy could be described as a “human capital development” approach. The goal is to assist benefit recipients by raising the education and skill levels of long-term unemployed individuals. This approach also emphasises sustainability and flexibility during an economic transition, whilst expanding the range of job openings available to the individual, to allow the opportunity for greater career mobility.²

Ballymun Youth Guarantee Scheme (BYG)

During Ireland’s EU Presidency, the European Parliament had asked the European Commission to implement preparatory actions to support the execution of pilot Youth Guarantee schemes in member states. Ireland’s youth guarantee approach is outlined in *Pathways to Work: The Implementation of the EU Council Recommendation for a Youth Guarantee* (2015). This document highlights the most recent structure of the social institutions in Ireland, especially in relation to the perceived distance between education and employment and how the current social welfare systems engage with young unemployed individuals.³

In September 2013, the Ballymun Youth Guarantee Pilot Scheme (BYG) commenced. The scheme was based on the premise that an active approach that is adapted to the idiosyncratic needs of the individual client is more effective than the original model based on passive enforcement. The ultimate goal is the personal sustainability of the individual’s own career path and to encourage them to accept an offer of work, training, or further education that is of a reasonable standard of quality. The scheme was open to residents of Ballymun aged between 18 and 24 who had previously registered with the Department of Social Protection’s Intreo service. Participants were accepted on the basis of a one-to-one meeting with a mediator within four months of registration to the service (See Devlin, 2015).⁴ The ultimate goal was to provide participants with an offer of education, training or employment within four months of entry onto the live register.

The model of practice adopted in the BYG required that an adequate range of opportunities were available (in terms of both the overall capacity and the diversity of need being presented), and that

² See Bruttel, O., and Sol, E. (2006) ‘Work First as a European Model? Evidence from Germany and the Netherlands’, *Policy and Politics*, 34 (1), pp. 69-90.

³ Intreo (2014) *Pathways to Work: The Implementation of the EU Council Recommendation for a Youth Guarantee*. Dublin: Department of Social Protection. Available at: <http://www.welfare.ie/en/downloads/youth-guarantee-implementation-plan.pdf> [Accessed 23 June 2015].

⁴ Devlin M. (2015) *Policy and Practice, Key Learning from the Ballymun Youth Guarantee Project*. Dublin: Department of Social Protection.

offers were modified in such a way as to provide responsive and flexible supports for young people's engagement, retention and (where relevant) completion (See Devlin, 2015).⁵

The BYG recognised the diversity of young people and that their readiness for employment varied enormously. A particular focus of the BYG was to increase the variety and volume of options available to meet the disparate needs of the young people. The Local Implementation Group identified potential shortfalls in certain areas, particularly in the National Framework of Qualifications Level 3 interventions and work-experience opportunities. The National Steering Committee were prompted to adjust the eligibility and entry requirements to Active Labour Market Programmes (ALMP) i.e. Community Employment. This offer was very attractive to participants as it was a job, it was an increase from one's current benefit payment, and included an opportunity to take up extra training. 'Many of the options available are stepping stones along a structured and supported pathway to sustainable employment. The length of that journey will vary enormously from client to client' (Devlin, p. 16).⁶ While any immediate results can potentially be ascertained without much delay, as the client has clearly commenced the programme, any subsequent influence may not necessarily be evident for the immediate future and thus cannot be established within the duration of the BYG initiative.⁷ The evaluators of the pilot made recommendations that this way of working with the most marginalised individuals was an enabling factor for them that subsequently supported good outcomes for the clients involved (See O'Reilly, 2015).⁸ It seems that the perpetuation of these schemes, and others like it, could potentially lead to the empowerment of future generations of individuals in a position of unemployment, and appears to be a valid stepping stone into the workforce.

Over 700 young people participated in the pilot. By March 2015, six out of ten young people took up an offer of education or further training. Four out of ten participants took up an offer of a job or an employment scheme, such as the Community Employment Scheme (the age restriction was reduced to less than 25 years specifically for the BYG and this has remained in place following the BYG).

Community Employment Scheme

The Community Employment (CE) scheme was implemented to help people who are long-term unemployed and/or experiencing other issues of disadvantage. It is a programme that offers part-time work (19.5 hours per week) and temporary placements. The jobs are based within local communities in voluntary organisations and public bodies. The individual maintains the placement for one year (although extensions are available upon Department of Social Protection approval). The scheme assists them in enhancing and developing both their technical and personal skills which can then be used in the workplace. Training is also available within the scheme and is provided within a Quality Assurance framework. Participants receive a €20 increase on top of their current social welfare payment and they are strongly supported throughout their placement by a CE supervisor. After the placement, participants are encouraged to seek permanent part-time and full-time employment elsewhere, based on the experience and new skills they have gained while in the Community Employment scheme.⁹ The only downfall to the scheme is that participants must be over

⁵ Devlin M. (2015)

⁶ Devlin (2015), p. 16.

⁷ See Devlin (2015).

⁸ O'Reilly, O. (2015) *Ballymun Youth Guarantee Pilot Scheme - Evaluation*. Dublin: Department of Social Protection.

⁹ Citizens Information (2015) Community Employment Scheme. Available at: http://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/employment/unemployment_and_redundancy/employment_support_schemes/community_employment_scheme.html [Accessed June 29, 2015].

25 (except in Ballymun) and traditionally must be in receipt of social benefit for a period of one year prior to participation.

Work First Approach

Work First is a strategy within welfare-to-work programmes that is focussed on finding work as quickly as possible. They seek to move people from social welfare into unsubsidised jobs as soon as possible and job searching is a central activity in this process. Work First begins with immediate job searching for most participants using the labour market itself as the test of employability. Then for those who fail to find a job straight away, Work First provides additional activities geared towards addressing those factors which have prevented employment. The aim is not to ensure long-term career goals but to reinforce the belief that any job is a first career step no matter how precarious this employment may be; 'any job is a good job'. Furthermore, Work First utilises a sanctions based approach as its central component rather than a model that is based on trust, which is aligned more towards a human capital development approach (See Bruttel and Sol, 2006).¹⁰

For many, idleness can be 'more tiresome and painful than work' (Lukmann, 2012, p. 630);¹¹ particularly for the young people involved. Young people who experience unemployment are not a homogenous group, they vary in their level of labour market readiness and certain clients (particularly those with multiple barriers) may require a number of interventions as part of a structured pathway to employment. Therefore, any job can be a meaningful one; even the most menial work contains skills that need to be acquired to succeed, which can ultimately become transferable to further employment opportunities. A key lesson from the Ballymun Youth Guarantee evaluation maintains that those who are furthest from the labour market seek programmes that are flexible, have meaning and purpose, require a certain level of responsibility but also a high level of support. The trust of young people is hard won and easily lost and therefore initiatives and programmes must be well planned and executed.

2. Now we have Explored this please write down the consequences and steps necessary to start a Work First model with VET-programs that operates within the framework of the local, national social system and laws of each partner country (your own country)

The aim of the Ways to Learn to Work project was to look at best practices in our country and look to see how it could be adapted to include the Work First Model.¹² The most efficient way for a Work First Model to be implemented in Ireland would be to adapt existing schemes to include a Work First approach. The Ballymun Youth Guarantee pilot and the Community Employment scheme seem to already include many of the facets of a Work First strategy. The subsequent alterations would therefore only be minor in implementation but potentially significant in its impact. The Youth Guarantee in particular has many overlapping processes, such as prior and subsequent client support, a fixed time frame, engagement with businesses and an initial assessment of the individual. These aspects all support a Work First model (Business in the Community Ireland, 2015).¹³ However, as the Ballymun Youth Guarantee pilot has come to an end, and a National Youth Guarantee Scheme is about to be implemented nationally, the most worthwhile adaptation would be to alter the Community Employment model to include a Work First ethic.

¹⁰ Bruttel and Sol, (2006).

¹¹ Lukmann, H. (2012) *The Mirage of Dignity on the Highways of Human 'Progress', The Bystanders' Perspective*. Bloomington, Indiana: AuthorHouse, p. 630.

¹² O'Reilly (2015).

¹³ Business in the Community Ireland (2015) *Youth Guarantee Pilot: Interim Review – Emerging Lessons*. Dublin: Department of Social Protection.

There are a number of similarities between Community Employment Schemes and the Work First Model.

- The emphasis is on “the job”, the participant is treated as an employee with a contract, employee handbook etc.
- The CE Supervisor is similar to the Job Coach in the Work First Model. Its function is to assist the employee in addressing the issues that have hindered progression thus far by offering “on the job” education and training; identify issues e.g. mental health, addiction etc.
- The State funds the positions and the employee receives a wage that is higher than their benefits.
- The vast majority of CE placements are in community or voluntary organisations which may not be the end career goal for the participant. However, the philosophy is that any job is a good job and that the best way to succeed in the labour market is to join it; developing work habits and skills on the job.
- There is a direct link between those responsible for benefits and those responsible for running the Community Employment Scheme.
- There are financial consequences by way of sanctions for not participating fully on the Community Employment Scheme i.e. your wages are affected if you are absent for a number of days.

In this sense, the Community Employment scheme model would constitute a firm basis to apply the Work First principles. For Community Employment schemes to work effectively the following conditions must exist:

- Funding for training courses.
- Organisations willing to take on Community Employment participants.
- Funding for Community Employment supervisors.
- If clients are to retain their social welfare payments, the Government’s relevant department needs to be involved.
- Perhaps more consolidation between training providers and employers.

However, Community Employment schemes alone will not solve the problem. Employer involvement is essential. Employer involvement helps to ensure the relevance of the guidance and training aspects of the Community Employment Scheme. If we were to adapt the Community Employment schemes by including a Work First Model the following conditions must exist:

- There must be further engagement between employers and employment guidance services, and these relations must be mutually beneficial. This approach must be reflected in relevant government policies and strategies.¹⁴
- Employers need to be satisfied that the clients they employ will be appropriate for the work that they are contracted to do. Therefore, pre-employment guidance services need to be in a strong position to prepare benefit recipients for the labour market, thus ensuring that they are job ready. The employment services, who act as intermediaries between the employers and employees, should also be facilitated in this regard.
- Small to medium level businesses should be taken into consideration, and further facilitated to engage in the CE scheme process.
- The further development of the Community Employment model would be ideal, with a broader range of positions on offer and perhaps greater diversity with regard to employers.

¹⁴ See Devlin (2015), p. 29.

- The Community Employment scheme should be expanded, to perhaps include the option of increased working hours or a greater financial reward based on achievement in the classroom or workplace.
- Perhaps further sanctions could potentially be implemented for non-compliance.
- Potentially reduce the age restriction and the period of benefit receipt to facilitate the young people who are recently unemployed, and therefore prevent further long-term unemployment in the future. While the Community Employment scheme is available for individuals under 25 within the Ballymun area, and for members of the travelling community, this exception to the rule could ideally be nationalised.
- A broader definition of “community employment” would be a progressive development, to possibly include local employment within the community, such as options within retail or the food service industry.

This appears to be a viable option, as this would seem to correspond with many of the Work First characteristics that have previously been outlined (Van Schie, P., 2015).¹⁵ These include the speed at which participants are accepted into CE schemes, the intensive supervision and mandatory contact involved in the scheme, and the fixed client manager in the form of the Job Centre guidance counsellor. The finite time limit of the scheme and aftercare in the form of subsequent engagement with the client to assess their further options once the scheme has finished would also be considered as positive aspects which correspond to the Work First approach. It therefore seems likely that the CE scheme model and the Work First approach are indeed compatible.

The major barrier to utilizing the Community Employment Schemes under the Work First model is the fact that participants must be in receipt of a payment for a minimum of one year. This is because the schemes are designed to facilitate the long-term unemployed. This superfluous restriction appears to exclude young unemployed individuals from availing of this seemingly invaluable service and could potentially encourage short-term unemployed people to ultimately perpetuate their status indefinitely. The relevant bodies would need to be mobilized in altering this unsupportive constraint. While this concern was partially addressed by the Youth Guarantee Pilot for the individuals engaged in the programme, more needs to be done to mainstream this alteration.

Statutory bodies involved in the activation of unemployed people must recognise the importance of strategic partnerships amongst governments, employer organisations such as the Chambers of Commerce, Trade Unions and other organisations concerned with the progression and transition of individuals from welfare to work. These partnerships are fundamental and can really make a difference in advancing meaningful and sustainable employment for unemployed individuals. To bring high unemployment rates down, it is essential that employers, unions and governments not only dialogue together about how to achieve a socio-economic recovery, but develop specific projects and interventions, that include unemployed people.

In concluding, it appears that Work First as an approach for facilitating jobseekers into the labour market seems to be gaining momentum across Europe, and can be seen to be making a positive impact in countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom (See Bruttel and Sol, 2006, and Lindsey et al., 2007).¹⁶ Indeed, the Work First model has been firmly established in the

¹⁵ Van Schie, P. (2015) *Work First & Way to Learn to Work* [Presentation to W2L2W Partners], Breda, Netherlands, 27 May.

¹⁶ Bruttel and Sol, 2006.

Lindsay, C, et al. (2007) ‘New approaches to employability in the UK: Combining Human Capital Development and Work First strategies?’ *Journal of Social Policy*, 36 (4), pp. 539 – 560.

Netherlands for a number of years. Hopefully, we may soon be able to add Ireland to this esteemed list. While many of the procedures and policies in place do currently appear to implicitly conform to the Work First ethic, it would perhaps be beneficial if the relevant institutions would consciously and explicitly adhere to this method. It would certainly not hinder the current economic progress, and could only add to further growth.

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