

CAPITALISING ON DIVERSITY AND EMPOWERMENT

EQUAL Development Partnerships that have been working on the themes of diversity and empowerment in 20 different Member States came together in Belfast, on 13 June. They were joined by representatives of Managing Authorities and National Support Structures and together the 120 delegates developed the messages to be presented to a Policy Forum that will be held in the same city, at the end of 2007.

SETTING THE SCENE

In her opening speech to this Exchange Event called EQUALising the Workplace - Diversity in Action, Dr Aideen McGinley, Permanent Secretary of Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland, highlighted the reason behind this EQUAL European Mainstreaming Platform. Aideen said "My Department is aware that it has not got all the answers and is eager to learn of new and innovative approaches from which we might benefit. Lessons from the EQUAL programme are gradually emerging and identifying such innovative approaches will help to inform future policy initiatives." Many other agencies that have a responsibility for regional and national employment, inclusion and integration policies in the Europe Union are in a similar situation and so the overall objective of the activities organised by a Steering Group, led by Northern Ireland and involving Latvia, Malta, Flanders and Portugal, is to determine and then promote the most successful EQUAL approaches on diversity and empowerment.



The four opening speakers (A. Lo, W. Faber, A. McGinley, M. Wilson) supporting the Building Blocks of EQUAL

Walter Faber, the Head of the EQUAL Unit at the European Commission, responded to Dr McGinley's introduction by indicating that "The new Regulation on the ESF is very clear on the two issues that concern us today: we must ensure that the EQUAL experience is not lost; and that funding for action to develop diversity in the labour market and the workplace can be provided." In his contribution, Walter stressed that building on diversity required preconceptions to be dismantled and individuals to be empowered to take an active part in their own process of

inclusion into society and work. During this initial plenary session, the participants also heard from Anna Lo, the first ever member of an elected assembly in Ireland who comes from a minority ethnic background, and Monica Wilson, the outgoing President of the European Union of Supported Employment and the Chief Executive of Disability Action. Anna spoke about how training in English, computing and home care had assisted the social and vocational integration of individuals from her Chinese community, whilst Monica gave a brief but detailed overview of Northern Ireland's equality legislation, which is considered to be the most advanced in Europe.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE WORKSHOPS

The remainder of the day was spent in workshops building a strong case to engage the interest of those decision makers and representatives of employers and trade unions who will attend the Policy Forum. The Workshops focussed on three different groupings – individuals who are the project's beneficiaries, employers and finally bridge builders from integration agencies such as social security bodies, employment services, careers agencies and training providers. Whilst concentrating on diversity, empowerment, which one of the [building blocks](#) of EQUAL, was a cross-cutting theme as:

- The first workshop "Empowerment of vulnerable groups" looked at the "individual" aspect;
- The second Workshop "Working with Employers" pointed up the importance of providing opportunities for employees to take responsibility for their work, as this produced more commitment and better results; and
- The third Workshop "Building the bridges" considered the "environmental" aspect, as integration agencies have to at least respect or strengthen the individual's empowerment.

The Workshops all followed a similar pattern. There was a Chair who kept the proceedings on time by encouraging all the participants to make short and succinct contributions on their successful approaches and these included the two presentations from representatives of the DPs that were chosen by the lead Member States to introduce the theme in each Workshop. In addition, an Active Rapporteur kept a note of the most important points and also quizzed and probed the DPs about their approaches and the assessment of their results. All of these key actors in the Workshops had had [a chance to meet](#) some weeks before the Exchange Event.

THE INITIAL MESSAGES

The first Workshop, in Belfast, raised the issue of meaningful involvement under the slogan "Nothing for us without us" or, in other words, "Don't do it for us, do it with us." This pointed up the fact that **it is not enough to involve advocacy organisations or agencies that claim to represent the interests of particular target groups, the end users have to be involved in discussions on issues that have a direct impact on their lives.** For this involvement to be meaningful, the end users must be briefed to take part in debates with decision makers and those who are in positions of power must be prepared to acknowledge the experience, aspirations and needs of these users. During the Workshop, EQUAL DPs were able to describe a number of cases where **by taking the opinions and insights of beneficiaries seriously, considerable improvements can be made to the formulation and development of policies relating to their social and vocational integration.**

The second Workshop, agreed that **initial contact with employers is often most effective when it is based on a two pronged approach that combines raising employers' awareness of the need to comply with the provisions of employment and equality legislation with an attempt to convince them of the benefits of diversity.** Employing people from disadvantaged groupings can appeal to employers' sense of corporate social responsibility, especially when the advantages are explained in a language that they can understand such as an improved image and a larger customer base leading to increased profit. The Workshop identified a range of resources that had been developed by EQUAL DPs to support employers in recruiting people from diverse groups and in meeting their legislative requirements. These included toolkits, questionnaires, films, charters and codes of behaviour and competence mapping exercises. It was also noted that employers' federations were important allies in promoting diversity, as individual employers or enterprises subscribe to these bodies and respect their views and recommendations. In addition, this Workshop felt that **significant advances could be made through the introduction of diversity requirements into public procurement tendering processes.**

The final Workshop was very clear that empowerment must always be approached from both the individual and the environmental perspectives and here the term environmental relates to the practices of integration agencies. These **agencies should listen to the customer's viewpoint and should increase his or her capacity to make choices and to transform those choices into action.** The Workshop believed that quality standards for the operation of these agencies such as EFQM would not, in their own right, guarantee an empowering environment and that it was necessary to embed empowerment within the quality principles of the agency. Finally, the Workshop made a plea that **cooperative working should be promoted and that this should result in committed integrated partnerships that involve all the key players including the beneficiaries.** It was suggested that the term shareholders rather than stake holders should be used, in this respect, to describe the members of such partnerships, as it tends to suggest that all have an equal involvement.

In closing this Exchange Event, John Neill, the Chair of the Steering Group, looked forward to the Policy Forum that will be held at the [Wellington Park Hotel](#) in Belfast between 28 and 30 November 2007. He also indicated that, in the meantime, more work will be done on refining the messages to be presented at this forum and on assembling additional supporting evidence. He

explained that a full report on the event will be posted on the [Northern Ireland EQUAL website](#) and encouraged participants to send further contributions to info@equalni.org

The Steering Group would also be delighted receive e-mails at info@equalni.org from other EQUAL DPs that were not represented at the Exchange Event but have practice and experience to share on the topics that were explored by the three Workshops.