

## SUPPORTING SMES

*Blanchardstown is on the western fringes of Dublin city. It is an area of rapid development with many companies setting up new branches or factories but conversely there are also very high levels of unemployment. The **Blanchardstown EQUAL** DP has been working with employers to support them in their attempts to develop a more diverse workforce that, in turn, would reduce the massive problems of social exclusion in the locality.*

In 2002, just before its EQUAL application was approved, Blanchardstown Area Partnership (BAP), in conjunction with Blanchardstown Chamber of Commerce, conducted a survey of employers on diversity and equality in their firms. It emerged from this study that over 60% of the personnel within these companies had received no Equality or Diversity training and an even higher percentage of those individuals who were responsible for selection and recruitment functions lacked such training. Blanchardstown EQUAL launched the results of the study at a breakfast briefing that was very well attended by local employers. These employers also showed a keen interest in the study's outcomes.

A group of employers was nominated from those who attended the briefing and this group was given the task of developing an action plan for one third of the work of the EQUAL DP. The group prioritised the 14 recommendations that had emerged from the study and, not unexpectedly, the first action that they decided to tackle was the design and delivery of training for staff dealing with selection and recruitment. The involvement of other employers in this training has been much higher than expected and two courses with 15 participants were delivered in 2003 and a further two took place in 2004. The DP has also held workshops for companies on "Developing and Delivering a Company Equality Policy" and regular briefings on Equality Legislation, which were requested by the employers. This has been a real "community development approach" as employers lead the action and tell the DP what they need to become more "equality aware".

The Blanchardstown Area Partnership also manages the Local Employment Service (LES). Up until recently, each LES had been more geared to the needs of job-seekers. When they first enquire at one of the LES's contact points or centres, clients are assigned a Mediator. Together they plan a development path that is intended to lead to employment and the same Mediator stays with the same client during her or his progress along this pathway.

However, Blanchardstown's LES has set up its own Employers' Unit as a one-stop-shop for companies and firms in the area. This Unit is the main link between all the services provided by the EQUAL DP and the LES and the employers themselves. The Liaison Officer from this Unit makes the initial call to the company to establish its needs and to introduce the LES concept. Then, an attempt is made to match job-ready clients with these employers. The Unit has also produced good examples of training partnerships in which employers have been brought into training programmes to work directly with prospective employees. In addition, it provides employers with information on financial and other initiatives that encourage the employment of those people who are most distant from the labour market. In fact, the Employer Unit successfully placed over 100 such people last year and increased this figure by around 50 % in 2004. In terms of the future, it is hoped to maintain and develop the members of staff who are currently working in the Employers' Unit because they could also support the types of training activities that have been initiated by the employers' group.

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