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EU Network of  
Independent Experts  
on Social Inclusion

Assessment of the implementation of  
the European Commission  
Recommendation on **active  
inclusion**

[A Study of National Policies](#)

Ireland

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Assessment of the implementation of the  
European Commission Recommendation on  
**active inclusion**

[A Study of National Policies](#)

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**COUNTRY REPORT - IRELAND**



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## Summary

Ireland could be said to be on the way to designing and putting in place a strategy for the active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market. This is somewhat one-dimensional though being spearheaded by (and largely limited to) a reform of the activation-oriented services (principally job search, placement, training provision). Rather than an integrated approach, I would characterize the Irish approach as 'cross-cutting' in that it addresses often in the same process a number of policy areas, and undertakes administrative reform but this is not in the integrated way intended by the Recommendation. The recently-introduced Action Plan for Jobs and the Pathways to Work Programme are both relatively strong attempts at developing and implementing an integrated approach but they are still sectoral.

The main relevant actions in regard to activation have been:

- Introduction of an active case management and profiling services for benefit recipients of working age by the Department of Social Protection;
- The reform and consolidation of job-placement services and related provisions for the unemployed in the Department of Social Protection and the effective separation between job placement and training provision (the latter being moved to the Department of Education and Skills);
- Scaling up, targeting and further diversifying training and work experience offers. The creation of new Community Employment places as part of the response to the crisis, and the rolling out of a new job creation programme, the Community Work Placement Initiative (Tús) are noteworthy developments.

With the integration of FAS employment services and the Community Welfare Service into the Department of Social Protection, there has been a restructuring of the way the different departments operate but this is focused on labour market activation solely.

In terms of adequate income support, the level of financial support for the unemployed has been cut back (by between 8 and 10% over the last three years) and the system of income support for the unemployed has not been reformed, leaving some benefit or poverty traps intact. Thirdly, there has been little or no attention to improving access to quality services apart from the measures relating to employment placement for the unemployed. This is the weak point of the three elements of the Recommendation in Ireland, not least because access to quality services is being imperilled by continuous cut-backs in essential services. Hence, overall I could not say that Ireland has implemented the Recommendation in a balanced manner.

It is difficult to identify a single impetus for change. Some of the proposals have been in the system for a period of time. The economic crisis and the change of government have both served to progress them as has the agreement with the EU/IMF programme. It is difficult to attribute a strong role to the Recommendation in this, especially as the three-fold EU framing of active inclusion has still not taken hold in Ireland. Part of the reason for this is that there is no 'owner' or sponsor or driver of activation in the Irish administrative system.

The following are my main recommendations:

- (1) Ireland needs to be strongly encouraged to develop an integrated perspective on the three strands. A particular weakness at this stage is access to quality services and developing that in its own right as reforms proceed but also integrating it into the concerns around active inclusion. I suggest that either a review group be set up by the three main relevant departments (Social protection, Enterprise, Trade

and Employment and Education and Skills) or else that the National Economic and Social Council be asked to review existing provision and develop a plan for better integration.

- (2) The stakeholder process in Ireland needs to be reconstituted. In the many years that this existed, it made a major contribution to economic planning and labour-market related development. There is a major role and need for it in relation to active inclusion. Some efforts to engage with employers, trade union representatives and people who are unemployed or their representatives are now urgent. Social and economic dialogue and inclusive planning are crucial to recovery in Ireland and to putting in place a sustainable plan for future developments.
- (3) Measures to monitor and evaluate developments also need to be strengthened. Programme effectiveness needs particular attention. In addition, the Irish authorities should introduce social impact assessment as a normal part of decision making and also involve stakeholders in this (and other ways) and to make the results of social impact assessment public.

As regards the three elements:

#### *Active Inclusion*

While the existing reforms are to be welcomed, the extent to which there is sufficient focus on skills upgrading and skills development of the unemployed needs to be reviewed. In addition, a whole range of support services for inclusive labour markets also need to be put in place (especially childcare). Ireland should be encouraged to think in terms of an infrastructure of support services.

#### *Adequate Income Support*

The interaction between different elements of the benefit system (broadly conceived) needs to receive greater attention, especially the extent to which the current system generates benefit traps.

#### *Access to Quality Services*

Access to quality services should be recognised as a goal in its own right in Ireland but also as part of an infrastructure for employment and welfare development. As well as making this a priority, a stronger review process of the impact of the cut-backs and reforms on access to services needs to be put in place. The model being developed through the NEES, which has a strong personalised services orientation, should be reviewed for possible roll-out to other services.

#### *Recommendation for EU*

The EU needs to call Ireland to account in regard to the degree to which it has implemented the Recommendation. In addition, Ireland should be asked to streamline the many different strategies and plans which it now has and the administrative arrangements.



## 1. Integrated Comprehensive Strategies

### 1.1 Comprehensive policy design

There has been a significant approach to policy redesign in Ireland, although the 'right mix of the three strands' as defined in the EU active inclusion strategy has not been the defining concern or source of momentum in Ireland. There has been a concern about synergies and trade-offs, visible for example in the NRP and NRP Update but reform has proceeded on a basis that has focused especially on active labour market policies and adequate income to a lesser and somewhat independent extent. The issue in regard to the latter has been affordability, with some concern about work incentives but only secondarily. Recognition of the need for reform to make the system more 'activation friendly' has been percolating in Ireland for some time and there have been a number of studies and advisory reports (NESC 2005, 2011; McGuinness et al 2011) which have called for such reform. A jobs programme and activation-oriented labour market and welfare reform were stated aims in the Programme for Government of the current government also. They were also among the commitments made in the EU/IMF Programme of Financial Support for Ireland.

### 1.2 Integrated implementation

The main relevant measure to report here is the transfer, under the terms of the Social Welfare (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2010 (which took effect from January 2011), of a number of large labour market support programmes to the Department of Social Protection. These included the PES, the Community Employment Programme and other employment-related supports which were formerly operated by the National Employment and Training Authority (FAS). A new National Employment and Entitlements Service (NEES) has been established. This is intended to integrate income support and employment schemes within a single department and to strengthen the focus on job activation and synchronize it with welfare payment provisions. It is also intended to facilitate the development of greater engagement with recipients, including the introduction of more active case management approaches such as profiling. There has taken place also a second integration in that the staff working on the discretionary emergency support income stream – the Supplementary Allowance – have also been integrated into the Department of Social Protection (they previously functioned under the auspices of the Health Board). This should serve to make for improved integration of the social assistance provisions. Both forms of integration – but especially the former – constitute a big if first step towards integrated implementation of welfare and income oriented supports and services in Ireland.

The weak point of integrated implementation in Ireland pertains to the other services mentioned in the Recommendation: training, housing support and social housing, childcare, long-term care services and health services. While training provision for the unemployed has been the subject of a lot of concern and significant reform effort, the fact that it is now to be co-ordinated by the Department of Education and Skills does not per se make for a more integrated planning and delivery, although it may represent an improvement in other respects. The other services outlined above continue to be operated in silo fashion and there are no particular attempts to my knowledge to improve their coordination, although of course they are the subject of recommendations in the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016.

### 1.3 Vertical policy coordination

Ireland has a centralised welfare system and a centralised public employment service (one size fits all). There is a local dimension to services. For example, the Local Employment Services (which have been operating since 1996 and are set up under Area partnerships and funded by the Department of Social Protection). These are local, generally non-strategic services focused mainly on advice and information to members of the local community. Horizontal integration was a bigger issue in Ireland, but this is now being addressed with the transfer of the PES to Department of Social Protection and establishment of NEES.

### 1.4 Active participation of relevant actors

This is a weak point in Ireland currently and is one that has got weaker over the three year period since the Recommendation was issued (which loosely corresponds to the period of the recession).

There is no permanent dialogue or partnership between this government and the stakeholders in Ireland at the present time. This was also the case for much of the last three years; social partnership is in abeyance, having started to be more or less 'run down' from the onset of the recession. All the indications are that the only 'consultation' undertaken for the NRP and the NRP update was a request for submissions from the voluntary sector. To my knowledge two submissions were made – one by EAPN and one by the umbrella group Community and Voluntary Pillar. According to a representative of the latter: "We received confirmation of receipt of our submission but no other communication apart from my contact with them asking if we would have the opportunity to comment on a draft. There were no meetings."

Hence nothing approaching consultation could be said to have taken place. This may be because it was an NRP update. But it may also be drawing from a movement away from consultation in Ireland in recent years. Social Justice Ireland for example (2012: 46) in commenting on the consultation around last year's NRP suggested that: "There was little evidence that the consultation had any impact on the proposals made in the final version of the National Reform Programme". The participatory structures – in general or in relation to consultation and dialogue with the social sector – are not in place in Ireland at the present time and there appears to be little or no political will to engage in social dialogue.

In regard to the question of whether provision for the involvement of stakeholders in an operation sense, my judgement is that there is no new ground being broken here either. I fail to see active participation of all relevant actors (including those affected by poverty and social exclusion, the social partners, non-governmental organisations and service providers) in the development, implementation and evaluation of strategies.

## 2. Description and Assessment of the Impact and Cost Effectiveness of Measures Introduced or Planned under the 3 Strands

### 2.1 Background

At 14.3% in April 2012, Ireland's standardised unemployment rate is among the highest in the OECD area. Unemployment remains stubbornly high. Apart from this three other features of unemployment in Ireland merit emphasis. The first is the level of long-term unemployment which is quite rapidly on the increase. At the present time some 180,000 people have been on the Live Register for 12 months or more, meaning that long-term unemployment has increased over the last three years by nearly

400%. In 2011 alone, the numbers in this situation increased by some 25,000. The average time spent on the Live Register is some 21 months at the present time. A second notable feature is youth unemployment. With some 80,000 unemployed people under the age of 25 years, Ireland is one of the worst performing EU/OECD members in this regard. Thirdly, there is Ireland's comparatively high prevalence of jobless households. Measured in 2006 (on the basis of EU-SILC data), some 10.8% of adults in Ireland were living in jobless households compared with an EU average of 9.1% (De Graaf-Zijl and Nolan, 2011). Moreover, in Ireland the chances of being income poor if one lives in a jobless household are among the highest in the EU (ibid). Single-adult households in a jobless situation are especially vulnerable to income poverty in Ireland.

After more than a decade of strong contributions to demographic growth, net migration has turned negative, with an estimated cumulative outflow of 76,000 (around 1.7% of the total population) from April 2008 to April 2011 (OECD 2011). Arrivals to Ireland have gone back to the levels of the early 1990s, and emigration has increased markedly, especially among Irish nationals where it has tripled. While migration can play an adjustment role in increasingly integrated European labour markets, especially if it is short-term, the fact that close to 90% of emigrants are youths and prime-age workers bodes ill for Ireland's recovery. In addition, the permanent departure of high-skilled graduates will take a high toll on economic performance in Ireland (ibid).

In regard to the structure and operation of the three strands comprising the Recommendation, among the problems facing Ireland prior to any major reform were the following:

- Ingrained and high levels of long-term unemployment;
- With regard to income support, the flat-rate nature and unlimited duration of Irish unemployment benefits imply higher replacement rates at low wages and (in international comparison) as unemployment duration rises (OECD 2011). Disincentive effects are therefore stronger for low-skilled workers and the long-term unemployed, adding to the risk of entrenching high structural unemployment;
- Inadequate linkages between the receipt of a range of benefits (especially the subsistence benefits covering fuel allowance, rent, child-specific needs and medical needs) and inadequate attention to addressing benefit and poverty traps;
- Ineffective job search assistance;
- Ineffective training provision (mainly due to a lack of match between the person's education level and the training provided) and blanket referral to the job placement agency after three months on Jobseeker's Benefit (McGuinness et al 2011);
- Missing tools, data/intelligence (on both the job seekers and the needs of enterprises) and other resources to operate an effective activation programme (ibid);
- Little or no compulsion for people to engage with the activation services;
- Wide variation in programme effectiveness. McGuinness et al (2011) found that the programmes most likely to increase the job prospects of their participants were in the areas of job search training and high skilled programmes with strong links to the labour market. However, in the past, the majority of training effort was concentrated in the provision of less effective low level specific skills and in general skills training.
- The existence of a number of agencies to deal with benefits, activation and training and loose linkages between the two major co-ordinating agencies: the Department

of Social Protection and the Training and Employment Authority (FAS); no sharing of IT infrastructure between the agencies;

- For the applicant/recipient, duplication in the application process between the different agencies;
- An over-focus on training programmes as the main prong of activation policy;
- Weaknesses in how conditionality is implemented;
- Compared with other OECD countries, Irish spending on ALMPs has been heavily tilted towards direct job creation programmes. The largest one is the Community Employment (CE) scheme, which gave part-time occupation in the provision of non-market services for local communities to over 21,000 participants at end-2011 (more than 1% of the labour force) (CSO 2012b). The result, after rather long participation spells on the scheme (3 years on average, more for older workers), is often a return to long-term unemployment (McGuinness et al., 2011);
- Many of the existing welfare supports were not designed with their implications for employment participation in mind;
- Government support for childcare, both direct and through the tax system, has not been well targeted in recent years (Department of Social Protection 2010: 23);
- Lack of progression in the system - the share of each 5 year age cohort from age 25 to 65 years who are long-term dependent on the main assistance payments only varied by 1 percentage point in the late 2000s, from 4.5 to 5.4%, although the composition by scheme of each age cohort varied (ibid). This suggests a long term structural problem in the system, where progression either between welfare schemes or to supported employment/FÁS has been non-existent for a large group of customers over many years.

Before the changes are set out, there is another point to be made here about the fact that active inclusion is not a term that has resonance in public discourse in Ireland. Its closest concept in Ireland is the notion of the 'developmental welfare state' which was pioneered by the National Economic and Social Council in 2005 (NESC 2005). This develops the idea of three over-lapping welfare state activities: services, income support and activation/innovation. One of its central organizing concepts is that of the life cycle. Tailoring to the specific needs is also one of its underlying principles. Since it was first mooted, the framework of the developmental welfare state has been adopted (albeit loosely) in various government policies, most notably in the National Action for Social Inclusion. This Plan articulates 12 high level goals across the lifecycle covering services, income support and activation/innovation. The fact that there is no 'home' discourse or concept that can readily incorporate the notion of active inclusion is important to note in the context of progressing these ideas and policies in Ireland. In addition, the scale of the challenge is accentuated by departmental/institutional structures which historically have separated out the three strands.

### **2.1.1 Measures for those who are eligible for work**

The main measures include the following:

- Introduction of an active case management and profiling services for benefit recipients of working age by the Department of Social Protection. It is estimated that some 130,000 claimants will be interviewed on an individual basis and some 30,000 interviewed on a group basis in the forthcoming 12 months. In addition some 150,000 people will be processed through the new profiling system (Probability of Exit (PEX) from unemployment) during the forthcoming 12 months;

- The attempt to put in place a programmatic approach to re-employment, training and upskilling primarily focusing on the long-term unemployed, under the very recently-introduced Pathways to Work programme;
- The introduction of greater compulsion into the income support system for the unemployed by virtue of: a) signing a contract of rights and responsibilities which, among other things commits to a progression plan; b) the introduction of sanctions for non-compliance, mainly in the form of benefit cuts but also possible disqualification;
- Scaling up, targeting and further diversifying training and work experience offers. Relevant initiatives include the continuation of the Community Employment (CE) scheme, introduction of a new Community Work Placement Initiative (Tús), the consolidation of an internship programme and the expansion of further education opportunities for those in receipt of a range of social welfare payments;
- The introduction of greater IT support infrastructure and centralized administration centres.

Of the 434,000 people on the unadjusted Live Register in March 2012, some 81,440 were on activation programmes of some sort. This represents an increase of 10,000 on the previous year. The majority of these (some 30,000) were on education courses; the next most common form of activation was community employment schemes (on which some 21,812 were occupied); followed by full-time training for unemployed people (9,535) (CSO 2012b). The Government has committed to some 85,650 job placement or work experience initiatives in 2012 including JobBridge, the National Internship Scheme, Tús, the Rural Social Scheme and the Jobs Initiative.

Experts are asked to describe *briefly* and assess steps taken since 2008 to ensure that persons whose condition renders them fit for work receive effective help to enter or re-enter and stay in employment that corresponds to their work capacity.

In relation to the principles set out in the Recommendation, the following is my considered opinion:

- (a) support of the implementation of fundamental rights – I think that rights principles have been respected in Ireland as reforms have proceeded;
- (b) promotion of gender equality and equal opportunities for all – gender equality has not figured prominently as a concern or consideration in the reforms. But the existing equality architecture continues;
- (c) take careful consideration of the complexities of multiple disadvantages and the specific situations and needs of the various vulnerable groups – in general the complexity of disadvantage is recognised in Ireland although with cut-backs affecting vital social services policy reform seems to be less cognisant of the complex nature of inequalities as compared with the past;
- (d) take due account of local and regional circumstances and improve territorial cohesion – this is not a big issue in Ireland;
- (e) are consistent with a lifecycle approach to social and employment policies so they can support intergenerational solidarity and break the intergenerational transmission of poverty – this is taken account of in Ireland and in fact Ireland's national anti-poverty strategy is built on a life cycle approach.

### 2.1.2 Measures for those who are not able to and eligible for work

The main group targeted here are claimants of the one parent benefit. Lone parents represent a sizeable group of the potential labour force with almost 4% of the working-age population in this family situation. Employment rates for lone parents are low at around 55% and they tend to be heavily dependent on social welfare payments (Department of Social protection 2010). The main changes introduced relate to the age limit of the child for the purposes of retaining the One Family benefit. In particular, the upper age limit of the youngest child for new claimants was reduced to 12 years of age from May 2012. It will be reduced further to 7 years of age on a phased basis in following years. In addition, in an effort to reduce the benefit trap, the amount of earnings disregarded for the purposes of the means test for the One Family Payment was reduced from €146.50 to €130.00 per week in 2012 for new and existing recipients. Half the weekly earnings in excess of this amount were also to be disregarded.

As I and many others have pointed out, labour market participation of lone parents hinges critically on the availability of affordable and good quality childcare. This is a need that is not currently met in Ireland. Not just the availability but the cost of childcare are large issues. Both this and the existing challenges to make work pay and to tackle in-work poverty traps associated with loss of secondary benefits need to be managed out of the system if policy is to be effective (Murphy 2008). Various poverty traps are already associated with One Parent Family Payment and Job Seekers Allowance and it has been pointed out that the proposals to transfer lone parents from the new parental allowance to the Job Seekers Allowance once their youngest child reaches the age of 8 will not address current traps and will also create new, and maybe even more intense traps (*ibid*). While such losses may be mitigated by tapering arrangements, there may still be a net loss in the transition from the new Parental Allowance to Job Seekers Allowance (as claimant or qualified adult). There are also gender issues in relation to lone parents – given that the majority are women. The gender quality considerations of the Recommendation do not appear to have penetrated in Ireland and it does not appear to be prominent in the moves towards the activation of lone mothers.

It has also been argued that an activation policy that compels lone parents to work is inconsistent with other elements of the welfare system that support full-time caring among married/cohabiting parents (*ibid*). Murphy (2008) develops what she terms a positive model of activation capable of supporting mothers and those with caring responsibilities of working age. On the basis of cross-national research she concludes that it is not activation that achieves high levels of maternal employment but incorporating family-friendly and work-life balance policy into overall labour market and activation policy. Her framework focuses on broader social inclusion rather than employment focused approaches to activation. It outlines a long term human and social capital approach, which focuses on 'education first' rather than 'work first' employment strategies. This kind of approach is validated by the fact that lone parents are overrepresented among the low paid and the lowest qualified sector of the population. Furthermore, Murphy's positive approach anchors the State's obligations to claimants in legally defined rights and standards frameworks, and ensures claimants' obligations are proportionate to the level of investment by, and obligations to, the State. The activation debate also needs to be framed in the context of the quality of jobs available to lone mothers. Nevertheless, fear of losing secondary benefits such as the medical card or rent supplement remain a barrier to employment among lone parents (Murphy *et al.* 2008: 63).

### 2.1.3 Planned measures

Further changes and more significant reform are signaled in the benefit system in an effort to streamline and increase the employment incentive, although there is considerable opposition to them. The current government has expressed its commitment to replacing seven of the most important means-tested payments within Ireland's highly categorical social welfare system with a single payment rate and common conditions for eligibility.<sup>1</sup> The argument for this are in a report published by the Department of Social Protection proposing that all payments be aligned to the Jobseeker's Allowance and apply to all new applicants for social welfare supports regardless of their reason for requesting income support (Department of Social Protection 2010). The potential change is quite extensive in reach, affecting up to a half of all social welfare beneficiaries. The proposed reform – essentially a rationalisation of payments and an attempt to foreground employment participation as a key function of the benefit system - has already begun with the afore-mentioned changes to eligibility for the One Parent Family Payment as well as payments for those on Community Employment schemes.

This is actually a complex and radical change in the Irish benefit system. There are significant difficulties involved. A key difficulty centres on the implications for income levels and hence poverty rates. Concern about this has been expressed by EAPN Ireland (2012), for example, which supports the general principle of a single payment but only on condition that existing income levels of groups or sectors of the population dependent on benefits do not decline significantly and that the correct services and supports are put in place. As EAPN sees it, the introduction of a single payment based on Jobseekers Allowance would result in the loss of secondary payments for people under some of the existing payments. These include the Household Benefit Package and free travel for people on Disability Allowance, Carer's Allowance and the Blind Pension.

A second problem or outstanding challenge in the reform is that the original report suggested that the system could not be rationalised until the appropriate set of supports and services was in place, in particular childcare and activation and training services. As yet, there has been no spelling out how these supports and services will be put in place before changing the payments or eligibility criteria. The Oireachtas Joint Committee on Jobs, Social Protection and Education (2012) recently issued a report which calls for the introduction of the payment to be delayed until the necessary supports, activation opportunities and quality jobs are in place.

EAPN Ireland makes a further important point when pointing out that the services and supports in place to address the needs of those currently on the Live-Register are already under pressure and the new National Employment and Entitlement Service is unlikely to have the necessary resources to process these and other planned changes. Adding even greater numbers to this system, including people facing a complex range of barriers, will serve to overburden an already struggling system, which is in the process of fundamental reform.

A further point to be made is that the proposal does not sufficiently acknowledge that social welfare payments are meant to respond to a diverse set of needs (including along with inadequate income, lone parenthood, providing care to ill or elderly adults, disability, illness and unemployment). In addition, it represents a downgrading of family considerations as a basis of a claim to social assistance and in more general terms a homogenization of the basis of claims to welfare (centred on availability to work).

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<sup>1</sup> The contingencies include unemployment, lone parenthood, caring, blindness, disability/illness and widowhood.

The role of other benefits – such as the Family Income Supplement (FIS) – the benefit payment for those on low wages – has not been factored into the reforms either, especially its role in potentially mitigating some of the income losses associated with the proposal to move to a single payment.

At the height of the economic boom some 8-9% of households had no working age person at work (Department of Social Protection 2010: 26). In relation to jobless households and the problem of long-term unemployment there are two points to be emphasised: that both long-term unemployment and jobless households tend to be associated with a layering of problems and disadvantages; to get these and other people into employment requires a broad infrastructure of support services. In general neither of these has informed policy making in Ireland and the latter is especially problematic.

## 2.2 Adequate Income Support

As elsewhere poverty and deprivation are complex phenomena in Ireland. One of the significant points of note in the Irish poverty scenario is that, while there is no one unified source of data to link the welfare, income and work domains, the available evidence indicates that around a tenth of the population are in persistent poverty due to worklessness.

Key elements of the background are as follows:

- Between 2000 and 2010, minimum welfare payment rates were doubled. The weekly rate for a single person by 2010 was €196, or €208 with fuel allowance;
- Over the same period, median incomes and the at-risk-of-poverty threshold increased by 44%; however, there was peak of 66% in 2008, but this fell back again in 2009 and 2010;
- Minimum income was two-thirds of the at risk of poverty threshold in 2000, by 2010 the gap was eliminated. This was due to: welfare rates rapidly catching up with rising median income in the early period and in last two years, welfare rates being maintained, while median income fell;
- As a result, the poverty reduction effect of social transfers in Ireland is now 60% excluding pensions, or 69% with pensions. This is among the highest poverty reduction effects of EU Member states.

In the current times, Ireland faces new and severe challenges for adequate income. The first is the requirement to reduce government expenditure, especially welfare supports which account for around 40% of the total government expenditure. This has led to reductions in welfare rates and child income support in 2010 and again in 2011.

A second challenge is to rationalise the diverse range of categorical welfare schemes for the working age population into a single scheme. This reform is considered to be especially important in order to support people back into employment. A further challenge is to reform child income support which has been the subject of considerable review and discussion for at least a decade. In addition, there are large financial disincentives associated with secondary benefits. These include supports for rents in the private rented sector. The Department of Social Protection is working with local authorities (who have responsibility in Ireland for social housing) to ensure that more people with long-term housing needs are moved away from getting rent-related payments from the Department of Social Protection, and instead receive long-term housing support. The latter is designed to have lower disincentives.



Over the course of the last 3 years, two major changes in income support for the unemployed have been introduced. First, as mentioned benefit levels have been cut – by about 8-10% since 2010.

Secondly, as mentioned, greater conditionality has been introduced. This centres upon a disqualification for receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance where the person refuses an offer of suitable employment. It also includes a provision to reduce the rate of Jobseeker's Allowance or Supplementary Welfare Allowance for applicants who refuse to participate in an appropriate course of training or to participate in a programme under the National Employment Action Plan. Prior to this, the legislation centred only on a requirement for a recipient to be seeking a job and be available for work and did not express the conditionality requirements in such explicit terms as is now the case.

In regard to the three criteria set out in the guidelines:

- resources are adequate: benefit levels are not set or reviewed on this basis in Ireland, although account is taken of inflation levels and relative wage rates when changes are being made (typically in the annual budget procedure). The main criteria of late anyway are affordability linked with employment incentivization and social justice/fairness;
- resources are linked to activation: this has been strengthened in Ireland in recent years and the move to introduce a single payment for all those in receipt of means-tested assistance has strong connotations of activation;
- an incentive to work is preserved: the incentive to seek employment for persons whose condition renders them fit for work has been strengthened in Ireland by the introduction of stronger conditionality (as mentioned above).

## **2.3 Inclusive Labour Markets**

This, defined to include activation policy as well as measures to address a problematic labour market, has seen the greatest reform in Ireland. The discussion is divided between employment-oriented and activation-oriented measures.

### **2.3.1 Outline of the main developments**

In regard to employment, the Action Plan for Jobs, announced in February this year, includes more than 270 (generally small-scale) actions to be implemented in 2012 to improve supports for job-creating businesses and remove barriers to employment creation. It therefore takes an indirect approach to employment creation. The Plan is the first instalment of a multi-year process which aims to increase the number of people at work in Ireland by 100,000 by 2016. It also aims to make Ireland 'the best small country in the world in which to do business'. There is a strong focus on the support of small and medium enterprises with administrative reform targeted for this and other purposes. Particular sectors are targeted for growth, although arguably not the food sector sufficiently. While the concerted focus on job creation is a welcome step, the Action Plan pins most of its hopes on a pick-up in the global market. It appears that much in the Action Plan is a continuation of an old strategy in Ireland: the attraction of new overseas companies. It certainly cannot be faulted for ambition but it does seem unrealistic to expect some 100,000 jobs to be created in less than 4 years. The Plan is a relatively blunt instrument in regard to inclusive labour markets – there is nothing much in it that targets either the most vulnerable workers or the unemployed. However, a number of measures have been taken by the new government to improve the situation of the former, in particular the reversal of the cut to the minimum wage.

A further measure, agreed as part of the National Recovery Plan, concerns a range of structural reforms in the labour market aimed at removing barriers to employment creation and disincentives to work. These involve, inter alia, a commitment to review

the framework of Employment Regulation Orders (ERO) and Registered Employment Agreements (REA) wage-setting mechanisms within a period of three months. The terms of reference for the independent review provide a clearer picture of the issues which it is being asked to address. These stipulate that the matters to be taken into account should include the current levels of domestic competition and the international competitiveness of the sectors covered by EROs and REAs; price and wage movements in the economy and in major trading partners; and the impact of EROs and REAs on labour market flexibility and sustainable employment across the economy (especially during weak economic conditions). The Government is committed to taking urgent action, including making any legislative provision which may be necessary, following its consideration of the recommendations from the Review. This initiative has become controversial in recent weeks since it transpires that the number of workers covered by these measures (previously not recorded) is considerable – some 300,000, or over 16% of the employed workforce.

It is activation which has seen the most significant changes/reforms in Ireland. There have been a number of initiatives and for ease of exposition these are best seen in terms of institutional reform and reform of programme provision.

To take institutional reform first, this has been very significant and has proceeded along the lines of integrating and streamlining the income support and job/training placement functions and separating these from the planning and operation of education and training. There have been a number of initiatives.

In 2011, the Department of Social Protection announced the establishment of a new National Employment and Entitlements Service (NEES), as provided for in the Programme for Government. The objective is to integrate the provision of employment services and benefit payment services within the Department and in so doing to ensure that the payment of income supports to people who do not have a job is directly linked to the task of supporting such people in their pursuit of employment and related opportunities and improving their life chances. As part of this approach the Department is seeking to change its focus from the passive provision of transaction based services (claims processing and payments) to the active case management of clients. Under the case management model the Department will work with clients to prepare, execute and monitor a personal progression plan. This progression plan will have a number of elements, for example, an income support-plan, a skills/training development plan and an employment plan. Clients will be expected to engage with this approach and failure to engage will lead to a reduction or cessation of benefit payments. Associated with this FÁS employment services and community programmes and the HSE Community Welfare Services (CWS) have been integrated into the Department.

Secondly, a new Further Education and Training Authority has been introduced. Known as SOLAS it replaces the Training Division of the existing training authority FÁS. The new authority operates under the aegis of the Department of Education and Skills and its function is to co-ordinate and fund the range of training and further education programmes which will be available countrywide. The new body will oversee a shift away from skills provision for traditional occupations like construction, and has a greater focus on training and education programmes which prepare jobseekers and other learners for occupations in growth areas like the services, ICT, medical devices, food and biopharma sectors. It is planned that there will be close cooperation between SOLAS and DPS/NEES in order that those on the Unemployment Register will be systematically referred to further education/training programmes. However, over time, the intention is that the current Training Centre network will be transferred to the regional Vocational Education Committees (VECs), which will ultimately be responsible for the delivery to the public of an integrated framework of both further

education and training services. The VEC structure is also being reformed, a significant element of which is a reduction in the number of such Committees from 33 to 16.

A second set of initiatives has focused on activation understood in terms of the placement of the unemployed in employment or opportunities to enhance their employment experience or training. Again a number of initiatives have been undertaken.

One is the National Internship Scheme - JobBridge - announced in May 2011 by the new government. This replaced a similar scheme - the Skills Development and Internship Programme introduced in 2010 by the preceding government. It is aimed at people who have been on the Unemployment Register for at least three months and who are unable to get a job without experience, either as new entrants to the labour market, or after training or education, or as unemployed workers seeking to learn new skills. The internship is for a six or nine month period in organisations in the private, public or community or voluntary sectors which have a minimum of one employee. During the placement participants receive €50 in addition to their existing social welfare payment and they retain all of their secondary benefits. The Government has made provision for up to 5,000 places to be supported under this programme at an estimated cost of €13m in a full year. The measure is clearly designed to counter the effects of the current economic downturn but could also give rise to positive longer term benefits in line with Employment Guidelines 8 and 10. As the Department of Social Protection is paying the allowance to interns, there is no direct cost to participating organisations.

Complementing this is a new work placement scheme – known as Tús – which was also introduced by the new government in 2011. This is oriented to the long-term unemployed (defined as those of the Live Register or in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance for 12 months or more). These receive a top up payment of €20 in addition to their welfare benefit and they retain all of their secondary benefits. The work placements are proposed and provided by community and voluntary organizations which are engaged in the delivery of services in urban or rural areas. The organizations must provide good quality work opportunities that are considered to be of benefit to the community. Participants work for 19½ hours a week and the placement lasts for 12 months – after the placement ends they cannot participate on the Tús again for a further three years. Some 5,000 placements are to be made available annually.

In the higher education sector, the Higher Education Springboard Programme was launched in May 2011. It provides 6,000 higher education places for unemployed people. The places are on a range of part-time courses from certificate to master's degree levels - Levels 6 to 9 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). The Springboard programme is aimed at people who have previously been employed in construction, manufacturing or other sectors of the economy where employment levels are unlikely to recover to pre-recession levels. Courses are offered in information and communication technology (ICT); the green economy and qualifications for the bio-pharma/pharmachem sectors. There are also some courses aimed at developing innovative business and entrepreneurship skill.

Fourthly, the newest activation measure is the Pathways to Work programme. This is targeted at people who are long-term unemployed or likely to become so and is in essence an attempt at activation by: (a) more intensive and earlier engagement with them and (b) trying to direct them to emerging vacancies and work placements and vice versa. A key objective is to prevent the drift into, and to reduce, long-term unemployment. This is a major initiative, the implementation of which required the introduction of a number of supporting measures, some of which required new

legislation. The Department of Social Protection will have responsibility for implementing the strategy, which is based on five strands:

- more regular and ongoing engagement with the unemployed;
- greater targeting of activation places and opportunities;
- incentivising the take-up of opportunities;
- incentivising employers to provide more jobs for people who are unemployed; and
- reforming institutions to deliver better services to the unemployed.

Drawing on international best practice, targeting and incentivising are key elements here. It has quite good targeting towards the most vulnerable sectors – especially young people and low-skilled workers as well as legal migrants – and is therefore especially to be welcomed in the context of poverty and social exclusion. Its targets are ambitious – aiming at reducing the average duration of being on the unemployment rolls from 21 months to less than 12 months by 2015 and to move some 75,000 of the currently unemployed into work by 2015. However, it appears that increased levels of engagement will mainly target those who are newly unemployed and in a number of pilot areas, in the first instance. This means that the vast majority of people currently on the live register will not benefit from an improved service. There are also plans to target activation measures at approximately 15,000-20,000 people who are long-term unemployed per year, up until 2015. It should be noted that the scale of these interventions is modest, with over 180,000 people currently classed as being on the Live Register for more than one year.

### **2.3.2 Assessment of the measures**

According to Kelly et al (2012), the central flaws in Ireland's activation regime have yet to be addressed. There are several aspects to this.

One concern is the lack of plans to commence activation for all clients immediately upon commencement of a claim for Jobseeker's Benefit or Allowance (ibid). Kelly et al (2012) are also concerned at the absence of a rigorous system of monitoring whereby job seekers would be required to update their case-workers on progress at frequent specified intervals. A third problem concerns staffing levels. The OECD in 2009 argued that the Irish public employment system did not have sufficient staff to implement a system of frequent and regular monitoring interactions with the unemployed. Staff numbers at the Department of Social Protection have recently been augmented by the transfer of Community Welfare Officers from the Health Service Executive and of Employment Services personnel from FÁS. Nevertheless, Kelly et al (2012) point out that it is unlikely that the Department has expanded its capacity sufficiently to implement a much enhanced activation role to an greatly enlarged clientele, given that the numbers on the Live Register have increased from about 290,000 at the start of 2009 to over 440,000 in 2012. In addition to concerns about the numerical capacity of the newly-augmented Department of Social Protection, they also raise issues about the availability of appropriate skills to deliver an effective activation service

A further set of issues relates to the continued dominance of the CE programme in work placement provision. This, along with several other similar public job creation schemes (the Rural Social Scheme, the Jobs Initiative, Tús), represents the largest and most costly element of labour market activation measures in Ireland, accounting for roughly 40% of total spending on active labour market programmes for the unemployed. It has been found to be less effective than other schemes in achieving a subsequent return to work (McGuinness et al 2011). Kelly et al (2012) suggest that there are more effective active labour market programmes and at a time of fiscal crisis, it might be better to stop regarding CE as an active labour market programme,

reallocate part of the budget to an appropriate social services heading, and recognise the very useful social services contributions performed by CE, without burdening the programme with the exacting test against which active labour market programmes should be measured – the extent to which they enhance job chances.

Kelly et al (2012) also draw attention to a potential skills and data/resources deficit in the current set-up in Ireland. In their view it is not clear that the combined efforts of the Expert Group on Future Skill Needs and an in-house FÁS research body represent sufficient resources to meet such an important challenge. They suggest that provision of ongoing up-to-date information on trends in the labour market should be central to driving the nature and content of education and training. The role of employers in the design of skill formation has been largely ignored in the *Pathways* document. They argue that systematic consultation with employers, through, for example sectoral skills councils, as found in other European countries, would be an important source of information to guide the content and nature of training in skills that would be sufficiently market-relevant to enhance trainees' job prospects. Moreover, they say that they have been concerned for some time that education and training provision for the unemployed has been excessively provider driven. This is not a design that guarantees flexible training to meet either the training needs of the unemployed or the skill needs of employers. In a context where the entire further education sector is being overhauled, with the abolition of FÁS and the Vocational Education Committees and their proposed replacement with SOLAS and sixteen local Education and Training Boards, they point out that the *Pathways* plan is silent on how the specific training needs of the unemployed are to be met efficiently and effectively.

Overall:

- While there has been some increased investment in human capital in Ireland, it is not the case that inclusive education and training policies (including effective lifelong strategies) have been put in place or that the education and training systems have been significantly adapted in response to new competence requirements and to the need for digital skills;
- Ireland scores better on development of active and preventive labour market measures with the attempts to significantly improve the activation measures for the unemployed;
- While there is review of incentives and disincentives resulting from tax and benefit systems, this could not be said to be 'continual' or 'sustained' and has not as yet led to significant reform;
- There is very little to report as regards support for the social economy and sheltered employment and to the extent to which this is true of Ireland it is due to a continuation of older measures ;
- Progress is being made on efforts to increase access to employment both in terms of measures to work with the unemployed and also through providing financial incentives for employers to recruit;
- Efforts to tackle labour market segmentation, ensure quality jobs and promote job retention and advancement are under-developed in Ireland as a response to the crisis. Issues of quantity rather than quality predominate, especially in the new measures announced this year.

## 2.4 Access to Quality Services

High-quality public services have for long been a work in progress in Ireland and the recent budgetary cuts place these in greater jeopardy. Access on the part of some of those on low income is especially imperilled by the most recent round of cuts and additional charges (as operationalised in Budget 2011 and 2012 especially). The NRP

and the NRP Update place little emphasis on services and engage in remarkably little discussion of services. Education is an exception here in that they are more explicit about education-related targets in relation especially to social inclusion. Health is noticeably absent and it is not clear either the extent to which the planned initiative on child poverty will have a focus on services.

Mention must be made of the existence of a number of developments that have potentially reduced access to high quality (indeed essential) services. These include charges for service provision (re school transport for example), reductions in planned expenditure on services that are oriented to the disadvantaged sectors of the population (in education and housing especially but also health) and large cut-backs for voluntary and community services provision. Notably, the cuts to services are not being accompanied by any targets or benchmarks on quality or better value. These should be put in place and need to be the focus of a renewed programme of quality services.

In particular, they should assess the extent to which measures have ensured:

- *Availability and accessibility of services:* Given cut-backs, service availability has disimproved with increases in waiting times for health and other services and accessibility reduced also by the introduction of charges for some services;
- *Inclusive services:* I have been unable to identify new measures that signify solidarity, equal opportunities for service users and employees, and due account being taken of the diversity of users;
- *Quality of services:* Rather than investment in human capital and working conditions there is disinvestment in Ireland. Hence, other than through the greater use of technology, it is difficult to see service improvements being delivered;
- *Integrated services:* While there are definitely moves to increase the efficiency of services, social services in Ireland are largely planned and delivered separately and not in a comprehensive, co-ordinated or integrated manner;
- *User involvement:* The introduction of NEES is a definite move in the direction of tailoring services to individual need. This is a significant innovation in the Irish case where personalised focus of social services is not that well developed. User involvement is still underdeveloped in Ireland as a general principle of service provision, although a recent report by the National Economic and Social Council (NESC 2011) reported that there is a an increasing drive to focus on the needs of the service users;
- *Effective monitoring:* To my knowledge there have been no developments in regard to monitoring and performance evaluation and sharing of good practices.

## 3. Financial Resources

### 3.1 National resources

This is major issue, given requirements for financial consolidation and austerity. Welfare funding has been fairly well protected however, while ALMPs have seen an increase in expenditure. Services have been the main casualty in terms of expenditure cuts. Some of the measures put in place – like the establishment of NEES for example - should delivery efficiencies in future years. In terms of adjudging how 'successful the national authorities have been in striking the right balance between work incentives, poverty alleviation and sustainable budgetary costs', my view is that a low-grade balance has been struck. There does not appear to be a sufficient consensus around rights and living standards for the unemployed and other benefit recipients to guarantee sustainable funding for the benefit system in the long-term. I failed to

obtain information on the overall cost of implementing active inclusion strategies, the costs of each pillar and any assessments that is available assessing the cost effectiveness of this expenditure.

### 3.2 Use of EU Structural Funds

This information is not in the public domain in Ireland and after several attempts through different sources I failed to obtain it.

## 4. Monitoring and Evaluation

As far as I am aware there are no arrangements in place to monitor the implementation of the active inclusion Recommendation and the impact of the measures that have been introduced.

## 5. Recommendations

The following are my main recommendations:

- (1) Ireland needs to be strongly encouraged to develop an integrated perspective on the three strands. A particular weakness at this stage is access to quality services and developing that in its own right as reforms proceed but also integrating it into the concerns around active inclusion. I suggest that either a review group be set up by the three main relevant departments (Social protection, Enterprise, Trade and Employment and Education and Skills) or else that the National Economic and Social Council be asked to review existing provision and develop a plan for better integration.
- (2) The stakeholder process in Ireland needs to be reconstituted. In the many years that this existed, it made a major contribution to economic planning and labour-market related development. There is a major role and need for it in relation to active inclusion. Some efforts to engage with employers, trade union representatives and people who are unemployed or their representatives are now urgent. Social and economic dialogue and inclusive planning are crucial to recovery in Ireland and to putting in place a sustainable plan for future developments.
- (3) Measures to monitor and evaluate developments also need to be strengthened. Programme effectiveness needs particular attention. In addition, the Irish authorities should introduce social impact assessment as a normal part of decision making and also involve stakeholders in this (and other ways) and to make the results of social impact assessment public.

As regards the three elements:

### *Active Inclusion*

While the existing reforms are to be welcomed, the extent to which there is sufficient focus on skills upgrading and skills development of the unemployed needs to be reviewed. In addition, a whole range of support services for inclusive labour markets also need to be put in place (especially childcare). It needs to be recognised that an infrastructure of support services is required.

### *Adequate Income Support*

The interaction between different elements of the benefit system (broadly conceived) needs to receive greater attention, especially the extent to which the current system generates benefit traps.

*Access to Quality Services*

Access to quality services should be recognised as a goal in its own right in Ireland but also as part of an infrastructure for employment and welfare development. As well as making this a priority, a stronger review process of the impact of the cut-backs and reforms on access to services needs to be put in place. The model being developed through the NEES, which has a strong personalised services orientation, should be reviewed for possible roll-out to other services.

*Recommendation for EU*

The EU needs to call Ireland to account in regard to the degree to which it has implemented the Recommendation. In addition, Ireland should be asked to streamline the many different strategies and plans which it now has and the administrative arrangements.



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## Summary tables

**Table 1**

To what extent has an integrated comprehensive active inclusion strategy been developed in your Member State?												
	Comprehensive policy design			Integrated implementation			Vertical policy coordination			Active participation of relevant actors		
	Yes	Somewhat	No	Yes	Somewhat	No	Yes	Somewhat	No	Yes	Somewhat	No
<b>For those who can work</b>		X			X			X				X
<b>For those who cannot work</b>			X			X			X			X

**Table 2**

To what extent have active inclusion policies/measures been strengthened, stayed much the same or weakened since 2008 in your Member State?									
	Adequate income support			Inclusive labour markets			Access to quality services		
	Strengthened	The same	Weakened	Strengthened	The same	Weakened	Strengthened	The same	Weakened
<b>For those who can work</b>			X	X					X
<b>For those who cannot work</b>			X		X				X

