



Building a Quality Public Employment Service



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INTRODUCTION

Over the last six years, the INOU has researched unemployed people's experiences of the Intreo model delivered through three different employment services – Intreo itself, the Local Employment Service and JobPath. In formulating this document, we have drawn significantly from the conclusions and recommendations arising from this work and the recommendations arising from our 2017 Conference, 'Best Practice in the Delivery of Employment Services' to map out an employment service that best meets the needs of unemployed people and others using the service.¹

The conclusion of our employment services research is particularly timely as the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) is currently considering how best to configure Ireland's Employment Services. The INOU has consistently highlighted both the need for and the key role played by the employment services in assisting unemployed people to find decent employment.

A PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT SERVICE

The INOU contends that the service should be a public employment service. At a time of increasing employment and falling unemployment, assumptions can be made that fewer resources will be required to provide an inclusive public employment service. However, it is essential that adequate funding is available to fully resource the effective running of a quality public employment service. It is also important that there is flexibility within the employment service to deal as effectively and speedily as possible with any significant downturn or recession.

A Public Employment Service is one that is open to and available to everyone of working age who wishes to avail of the service including:

- Unemployed people in receipt of a Jobseeker's payment
- Unemployed people not in receipt of a Jobseeker's payment
- People working part-time
- People who are underemployed
- People out of work and in receipt of other Social Welfare payments
- People working in low-paid jobs
- People looking for a change of career
- People who are very significantly distanced from the Labour Market

¹ https://www.inou.ie/download/pdf/inou_conference_report.pdf

Universal and tailored to individual's needs

The Public Employment Service should, we believe, be a high quality employment service to which there is universal access, but where the actual service delivered is tailored to the specific needs and circumstances of the individual. This focus would be in keeping with Future Jobs Ireland 2019,² which has as one of its deliverables to "Enhance the career advice service provided through the Public Employment Service to include offering support to those currently in employment who may need to identify new opportunities as a result of technological and other changes." (p57)

A public employment service that is open to everyone of working age was envisaged under Pathways to Work 2016-2020 and further extended under Future Jobs Ireland 2019. Employment services must strive to meet their Public Sector Duty obligations and ensure that their services pro-actively include all potential users of their services. It is also important that there is flexibility to ensure that employment services can quickly adapt to a changed situation. Incorporating active inclusion into the work of the employment service would assist in this regard.

The INOU recommends that the Public Employment Service should be a national, fully accessible service. We are not being prescriptive in outlining how the national employment service should be constituted, rather we are focussing on the key components of a quality Public Employment Service (PES).

The delivery of effective employment services is a professional discipline in its own right that requires a specific set of skills, knowledge, experience and competencies. Such a service should be well paid, one that people aspire to work for and stay in and one that offers career progression development opportunities.

KEY COMPONENTS OF A QUALITY PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT SERVICE

- 1 Values and principles
- 2 Clear communication
- 3 A positive approach
- 4 Proactive support
- 5 Building relationships and networking
- 6 Co-operation
- 7 Building links with employers
- 8 Provision of clear, accurate and timely information
- 9 Good data collection and monitoring
- 10 Suitable and supported staff

1. Values and Principles

The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) commits in its Statement of Strategy³ to putting the service user at the centre of its services. In order to give further effect to this commitment, the INOU recommends that this is underpinned by a number of key principles including: a core belief in the potential and capacity of people using the service; a commitment to treat (and be treated by customers) with respect and an ethos of working in partnership with the person whereby decisions are client-led, well informed and mutually agreed. We also believe that this needs to be underpinned within a framework that actively promotes equality and social inclusion.

It is also evident that working in partnership and collaborative working with a wide range of education and training providers, community organisations and other groups is an important key component of a highly functioning employment service. Other key components include effective recruitment; matching of staff to the requirements of their roles; an ethos of continuous professional development and effective management.

² <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/Publications/Publication-files/Future-Jobs-Ireland-2019.pdf>

³ https://www.welfare.ie/en/downloads/Statement_of_Strategy_2017-2020.pdf (p.4)

KEY VALUES AND PRINCIPLES

- 1 Belief in the potential and capacity of the person
 - 2 Respect and dignity
 - 3 Informed choice
 - 4 Working in partnership with person using the service
 - 5 Working in partnership with other organisations, including education and training providers and a range of community and statutory support agencies
 - 6 Actively promoting equality and social inclusion
- Enabled by:
- Ethos of continuous professional development
 - Effective recruitment
 - Good management

4. Proactive support

The value of a proactive employment service, where the employment service works in partnership with the person using the service, is considerable. We know that where the employment service and the unemployed person work to an agreed approach, the proactive job-searching supports provided by the Employment Service Officer⁴ have a very positive impact.

The INOU strongly contends that the primary focus of the employment services should be on assisting and supporting unemployed people to find decent employment. For an employment service to work best, it must be seen as more than an activation service.

Employment Services work best, we believe, when the full range of supports help the person using the service to, ultimately, secure employment. An integral part of these supports include guidance; information; and job searching which should incorporate proactive assistance in identifying suitable job vacancies and/or training and education programmes, and have effective links with employers. The role of a mutually agreed Career/Progression Plan or pathway to achieving the person's desired job is also critical in this regard.

2. Clear communication

The importance of clear communication between the Public Employment Service and the individual is difficult to overstate. This is important at all stages of the process, from the initial letter, text and/or email communications with the individual, through to engagement and effectively communicating the purpose and rationale for the different aspects of the work of the service. All communications with people who are using the service should be conveyed clearly and be plainly understood.

3. A positive approach

It is imperative that from the start of the process people are engaged with in a positive and constructive way. At the forefront of an employment service's messaging should be how it can practically assist a person to find suitable work, training or education options.

The initial letter is a great opportunity for the employment service to highlight the range of services it provides; to demonstrate its success in supporting people back to work or education and training; and to inform unemployed people of the range of back to work supports and incentives that are available.

5. Building relationships and networking

Working in partnership with other organisations including education and training providers, community groups and other state agencies can assist employment services staff in having a greater awareness of available local supports. This may be particularly useful if employment services staff are signposting or referring people using their service to other services and support groups.

The INOU recommends that employment services, and education and training providers meet on an on-going basis, including at practitioner level. These ongoing networking meetings can be very positive, and are, we believe very useful in giving practical effect to building partnerships and improving working relationships between services.

⁴ The term 'Employment Service Officer' is used as a generic term and includes the Case Officer, Mediator and Personal/Employment Adviser delivering an Intreo model in Intreo, the LES and JobPath.

6. Co-operation

There are a number of vital elements that are required for an optimum Public Employment Service. One that is absolutely key is co-operation. We have indicated earlier the importance of building networks, meeting with relevant organisations etc., but it is also important that employment services work co-operatively.

The DEASP in reconfiguring employment services from 2020, should give due consideration to how certain factors can give rise to competition rather than cooperation between employment services. The manner in which outcomes for employment (and related) services are measured and the process for competitive tendering can often result in competition rather than co-operation between employment services. Yet to address the issues of those most distanced from the labour market requires a high level of cooperation between all the relevant local stakeholders.

7. Building links with employers

An integral aspect of the work of an employment service is to develop and maintain effective links with employers.

A key aspect of the work of the employment services should focus on linking with employers to gain a full understanding of the hard and soft skills, work experience, education and training required to successfully undertake the roles that employers are seeking to fill. This, in turn, should enable the employment services to support individuals to develop and attain the skills, qualifications and competencies required by employers. Good matching of people looking for work to jobs that they are suited to and looking for, is one key indicator of a quality public employment service.

8. Providing accurate, clear and timely information

The Irish social welfare system is complex and can be very difficult for people to understand. The complexity of the welfare-to-work system can lead to people being apprehensive in relation to seeking out relevant welfare-to-work information. It is very important that people using employment services are provided with accurate, clear and timely welfare-to-work information. We know,

from our work on a daily basis, that accurate, clear and timely information can be critical in ensuring an unemployed person has a full understanding of their financial situation upon taking-up work.

The INOU recommends that each employment service office should develop the capacity to provide a high level of welfare-to-work information and ideally each employment service office should include an expert Welfare-to-Work Information Officer.

9. Good data collection and monitoring

Improved data collection systems are important to provide key data for the State and the services themselves. An increased emphasis on improved data collection, allied to more effective monitoring and evaluation, will better capture learning within the Public Employment Service. It is vital that the good practice throughout the employment service is disseminated widely and the overall system is continuously improving.

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are essential to support effective monitoring and data collection. It is important that these targets retain a strong focus on sustainable job outcomes for people using the service. For people more distanced from the labour market, the concept of 'Distance Travelled' is important. It provides a mechanism for both the individual and the service provider to assess progress in the individual's life. Indicators for 'Distance travelled' need to be incorporated within Public Employment Service targets.

10. Suitable and supported staff

Similar to employment services effectively matching people using their service to suitable jobs, it is essential that employment service staff have the necessary skills and aptitude and are an 'excellent fit' for their jobs.

The Public Employment Service needs to develop Person Specifications outlining the skills, experience, knowledge, aptitude, education qualifications and competencies necessary to successfully undertake the range of different roles required to deliver an effective service.

There are a range of roles and positions required to effectively deliver a high quality employment service. These include Employment Service Officers, Guidance Officers, Employer Liaison Officers and a Welfare to Work Information Officer.⁵ The Employment Service Officer role, in particular, is critical in ensuring the effectiveness of the service and requires a broad range of skills and attributes including inter-personal skills; guidance skills; knowledge of the local labour market and recruitment practices and knowledge of local training and education courses programmes etc. It would also be useful to have a Guidance Officer within each employment service who provides expert guidance, both as an internal resource to Employment Service Officers as well as to people using the service. We have also recommended, as part of a proposed pilot, the inclusion of a Client Liaison Officer.

In addition to staff having the necessary expertise to do their job effectively, those who are working in employment services in frontline positions and/or who are regularly meeting or working with people using their service should also have excellent interpersonal skills. We also believe that employment service staff should be able to empathise with people using their service, particularly people who are long-term unemployed and distanced from the labour market. Knowledge and understanding of how unemployment impacts individuals should inform the nature of the service being provided.

It is also important that employment services provide their staff with up-to-date Information Technology and other resources to ensure that they can effectively meet the needs of people using their service. This includes utilising IT systems that can, within GDPR parameters, ensure sharing of information where appropriate and the provision of extensive e-based guidance, job-searching and other career and employment related on-line resources.

High support employment service teams

Employment services provide a range of employment and employment related supports for people using their service. We know that people using these services can have other more pressing needs – housing, health etc. – whereby job-seeking is not necessarily the person's first priority. In a context of increased employment and falling unemployment, the provision of 'wrap around' services will be required for some people using employment services. We believe there is considerable merit in the development, on a pilot basis initially, of a High Support Employment Service Team that includes a range of professional and specialist supports including expert employment services staff, psychological, medical and health supports; and, a dedicated person to act as a Client Liaison Officer whose job would be to act as a link person between the service user and the wider services that they may require.

The development of High Support Employment Service Teams we believe will be vital for some people who are long-term unemployed and those who are more distanced from the labour market who would require a range of additional supports and services to assist them to access decent employment. This will be particularly important as employment services start to engage with a wider range of people.

The Swedish model, Ung Komp offers a template for developing a holistic, multi-competence team based Employment Service that we recommend could be usefully adopted in an Irish context, initially on a pilot basis.

⁵ As outlined on p5/6

SWEDEN: BEST PRACTICE FROM THE UNG KOMP PROGRAMME

- Multi-competence, co-located team with very significant collaboration within the team.
- The multi-competent team's approach is a holistic one that focusses on the person's whole-life situation, rather than a narrow employment or education based approach. This includes ensuring that the team is the link to addressing a person's housing situation, and, if applicable, their use of drugs, alcohol or gaming habits.
- The team meets regularly to discuss cases and find new pathways for unemployed people.
- Maintaining dialogue is very important.
- The team is always available to each other and to participants.
- For the staff, the importance of patience and endurance was emphasised. It is very important to build a good base with the person and this takes 2-3 meetings, which involves an Employment Officer and one other Staff member.
- A key aspect of the programme is personal support, to help clients with whatever support they require.



IRISH NATIONAL ORGANISATION OF THE UNEMPLOYED

ARABY HOUSE

8 NORTH RICHMOND STREET

DUBLIN 1

D01 WY49

Tel: 01 856 0088

E-mail: info@inou.ie

Website: www.inou.ie

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