

Developing Positive Activation

EAPN EMPLOYMENT WORKING GROUP BRIEFING PAPER

This Briefing Paper on ‘activation’ aims to support local groups to understand what activation is, to inform them of what changes are being planned, and how activation can be developed in a positive way so that it brings about greater social inclusion.

What is Activation?

‘Activation’ is a major policy change which has affected social welfare systems all over Europe for the last number of years. Faced with growing unemployment, policy makers became concerned that the social welfare system was too ‘passive’ – i.e. just making payments – and that it should become more ‘active’ – encouraging/supporting/forcing welfare claimants to engage in training, education or work. In practice, activation can mean a lot of different things – from voluntary participation in career counselling, training or education, to ‘workfare’ i.e. compulsory work on a public scheme to maintain a social welfare entitlement.

In Ireland, activation policy is progressed through the National Employment Action Plan (NEAP process), which commenced initially in 1998 and was rolled out nationally in 2003. Currently, this applies only to unemployed people – i.e. those receiving Job Seekers Allowance/Benefit (previously Unemployment Allowance/Benefit). Every unemployed person, from age 16 to 64, who remains unemployed three months after ‘signing on’ is referred to FÁS for interview. Through the interview process, FÁS should offer at least one of four options to help people progress their work and training options: a job; a place on a training/education programme; a place on an employment programme, work experience; or a referral to the Local Employment Service for more intensive guidance or counselling. Unemployed peoples’ experience has often been different from this however, and not always with positive results.

If someone does not go to the interview, FÁS informs the Department of Social and Family Affairs (DSFA), and ultimately, social welfare payments can be stopped, but the Department shouldn’t do this without at least having interviewed the individual themselves.

More Activation

Recently government has set a “high level goal” to address the issues facing “those who are furthest from the labour market” – which includes not just people claiming unemployment payments, but all ‘adults of working age’ (i.e. between ages 16 to 64) who are capable of employment. In practice, this means that activation policies will be applied more widely in future. To support the wider application of activation, some key government actions include:

- FÁS is to provide targeted training and supports to groups outside the labour market, including long-term unemployed people, people with disabilities, older people, lone parents, Travellers and ex-prisoners;
- The DSFA is to introduce a new Social and Economic Participation Programme. This means staff in local Social Welfare Offices will take a more ‘active’ approach with everyone of ‘working age’ as soon as they apply for social welfare supports. This is a new role for the DSFA, and the Department says it will work with other service providers such as education, training, and social services, to ensure that people’s needs are met.

At some point in the future (no date has been set) everyone between the ages of 16-64 who is capable of work and applies for social welfare will be ‘activated’ by the DSFA when they make their application. At a minimum, discussing a person’s education, training and employment needs will be required to receive payment.

These developments have significant implications for the following groups: lone parents; qualified adults; older people; and disabled people.

Lone parents and Qualified Adults

Measures for lone parents activation are the most progressed but nothing has changed yet. It is proposed that the One Parent Family Payment would be replaced by a new Parental Allowance, which could also be claimed by 'qualified adults' (i.e. the partners of people claiming social welfare) which means that the ban on cohabitation would no longer apply. These proposals recognise that this policy can't succeed unless all necessary supports are in place, but it isn't clear how, or whether, this will be achieved.

When the family's youngest child reaches a certain age, the parent would be 'activated'. The current proposal is that when the youngest child reaches 6, the parent would have to begin meeting with FÁS to look at their work options, and should be able to access supports such as education and training. In these proposals there is a lack of clarity with regard to help with childcare. When the youngest child turns 8, the Parental Allowance would end. If the parent was still unemployed, they would have to apply for Jobseekers Allowance. As part of these changes, it is proposed that unemployed people would have to look for work which offered a minimum of 19 hours a week: currently the requirement is to seek full time work. This proposal creates significant poverty traps – a lone parent working part time on the national minimum wage could stand to lose €90 a week.

In Dublin and Cork, FÁS held 'Choices Days' for lone parents, giving information on training and employment options. However turnout was very low; FÁS has appointed an evaluator to find out why.

Key issues:

- Access to quality affordable childcare, including part-time childcare;
- Access to decent quality training and education, on a flexible or part-time basis, in local areas;
- Making work pay: ensuring that work always increases total income, and removing poverty unemployment traps, including those created by the new proposals.

Older people

For long-term unemployed people over 55, the Pre Retirement Allowance (PRETA) will no longer be available. Since April 2007 people in this situation are now claiming Jobseekers Allowance up to pension age. There are also incentives to encourage older people to stay at work after 65 e.g. they can earn up to €200 per week without affecting their pension.

Key issues:

- Upskilling, especially for workers made redundant;
- Addressing age discrimination; and
- Pension issues.

People with Disabilities

Government has set a target of having an additional 7,000 people with disabilities (who have no difficulty in retaining a job) in employment by 2010, but there have been no changes so far. FÁS has carried out a pilot project in one area, Mullingar: people with disabilities were called in for interview to look at their barriers to employment, and their options. The pilot is being reviewed to see how to develop a programme for all areas.

Key issues:

- Access to appropriate training and education opportunities;
- Proactively address discrimination e.g. 'capability focused' recruitment policies;
- Removal of poverty and unemployment traps, and other disincentives to employment.

Towards Positive Activation

Recognising the full range of barriers to employment

Employment can be a key route out of poverty, but to achieve that goal, activation must address the real difficulties faced by people trying to find employment, for example:

- **Appropriate jobs:** Without jobs in local areas, activation cannot succeed. Alternatively, there may be jobs, but which require skills that unemployed people haven't the opportunity to acquire, or which don't provide enough flexibility e.g. lone parents often need part-time employment because of the cost of childcare, and can't do irregular shift work;
- **Training:** Everyone needs access to training, from people who left school without qualifications to workers who need to retrain or develop their skills. But training can be difficult to access, e.g. parents on the school run can't do FÁS training that starts at 8.30am, and in rural areas, there's often no training available at all;
- **Discrimination:** Discrimination, including by employers or employment services, remains a relevant issue. While discrimination on the grounds covered under legislation is illegal, it doesn't mean it doesn't happen. Also people can be discriminated against because they come from a certain area, or because they have been unemployed for a long time;
- **Caring:** People with caring responsibilities – either for children or for adults in need of care such as older people or a person with a disability – can find it very difficult to find flexible employment and/or good quality, affordable childcare or other caring supports;
- **Poverty Traps:** Too often the fact is that work doesn't pay – people can lose entitlement, and/or see their income fall or fail to increase as a result of taking up employment;
- **Health:** Health problems, including addiction issues, can be major barriers to employment;
- **Supports and Services:** Access to public services can play a vital role in enabling participation in the labour market e.g. public transport (or lack thereof) can determine the range of jobs open to a person, particularly in rural areas and for people with disabilities. Workplace supports can play an important enabling role in addressing a range of barriers, including disability. A further example is lack of small business start-up supports.
- **Informed decision-making:** To make properly informed decisions, that will support sustainable labour market participation, people need access to be able to assess the value of different choices across their lives: a 'one stop shop' approach to quality, accessible, comprehensive and interactive information provision still hasn't been achieved.

Ensuring that activation is effective in reducing poverty and social exclusion

If employment is to be a real route out of poverty, activation must focus on developing people's abilities, enabling engagement in appropriate labour market activity and making work pay. Rather than a 'job first' focus to activation, focusing on 'education/training first' supports skills development, so as to secure sustainable employment that positively contributes to improving people's lives. Also important is that the activation process targets employers as well as employees – employers have the ability (with supports in some instances) to address some of the barriers faced by unemployed people.

Where activation has a strong record of achieving positive outcomes for participants, there is no need to use the threat of cutting benefits to force people to take up unsuitable options. Reliance on 'sanctions' such as stopping payments not only deprives people of vital income, it shows that the process is failing its target group. Sufficient income to live in dignity and participate in society is a basic right which should be respected.

The ultimate test of successful activation is whether it helps people escape poverty for good.

Elements of a positive model of activation

There are some elements which are very important in developing a positive activation model:

- **Jobs:** Only decent quality jobs can provide a route out of unemployment. Balanced regional development and retraining and upskilling are critical elements of ensuring that those who need work have access to reasonable employment opportunities.
- **High quality services:** To comprehensively address the range of barriers to employment, public services must be accessible to everyone, and flexible enough to fully meet the diversity of needs. Service providers must respect peoples' identity and needs. For those with caring responsibilities, real access to quality, affordable, flexible childcare and appropriate supports for carers, are vital.
- **Social welfare:** To make work pay, poverty and unemployment traps must be eradicated and supports with costs associated with returning to work should be included. *Activation* must guarantee that people will be better off financially.
- **Information:** Good quality information provision supports risk taking in relation to employment. Comprehensive and interactive information about how choices affect income, entitlements, and opportunities for further development, need to be provided at a single point of access.
- **Discrimination:** Legal remedies are rarely a realistic solution to the issue of discrimination. A more proactive approach to creating equality in the labour market is required, including addressing exclusionary recruitment practices, and increasing flexible employment options.
- **Implementation:** A 'joined-up' approach is vital – all relevant organisations, in the public, private and community sectors, must work closely together at both local and national level. To develop successful and effective programmes, target groups must be included in design and implementation, in particular membership representative organisations. Long-term outcomes must be monitored effectively, particularly the impact on tracking poverty.

For more information:

The following organisations are members of the EAPN Employment Working Group; each organisation is working on different aspects of activation. For more information, contact:

Organisation	Phone	Email	Web
EAPN Ireland	01-8745737	paul@eapn.ie	www.eapn.ie
Age Action Ireland	01-4756989	policy@ageaction.ie	www.ageaction.ie
Congress Centres Network	01-8897707	kathleen.mccann@ictu.ie	www.ictu.ie/html/centres/centres
Dublin Employment Pact	01-8788900	poconnor@dublinpact.ie	www.dublinpact.ie
Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed (INOUE)	01-8560088	policy@inoue.ie	www.inoue.ie
Migrant Rights Centre Ireland	01-8897570	edel@mrci.ie	www.mrci.ie
National Women's Council of Ireland	01-8787248	oraloc@nwci.ie	www.nwci.ie
One Family	01-6629212	cmurphy@onefamily.ie	www.onefamily.ie
OPEN	01-8148860	cloftus@oneparent.ie	www.oneparent.ie