



PLANET – The Partnerships Network

Submission to the Department of Enterprise, Trade & Employment regarding the

Review of the National Employment Action Plan 2003-2005

Introduction:

4,189 men and women became active clients of the LESN under the EAP process in 2004.

This submission is from the PLANET Employment Services Policy Committee. The members of the committee represent the Local Employment Services network, enterprise officers and all other Partnership staff involved in employment support measures.

PLANET - the Partnership Network has evolved over the past 12 years with its origins in the regular meetings of the original twelve PESP Area - based Partnership Companies. The PLANET Network is now a registered Co-operative representing the 38 Partnerships Companies and Dublin Employment Pact, which are part of the current National Development Plan under the Local Social Inclusion Programme (LDSIP), 2000-2006.

The submission is a broad outline of the main issues of concern regarding the National Employment Action Plan (NEAP), Partnership/LES experience of it and also recommendations for improvement into the future.

Context:

In the foreword to the NEAP 02-05, the then Minister, Mary Harney, noted that the plan would “complement the Sustaining Progress agreement” and support the principles of the EU Employment guidelines developed out of the Lisbon strategy. The plan is first and foremost an “Irish response to the European Employment Guidelines”, which in turn aims to make the EU, “the most dynamic, knowledge based economy in the world by 2010.”

With an unemployment rate hovering around the 4.4% mark, the value of a joined up/integrated and progressive plan to support the most vulnerable people into work is no less than it was in 2002. The European Employment Guidelines sought Ireland and other EU states to focus on three key areas:

- Job Creation
- Lifelong learning
- Gender Equality

The NEAP has sought to address all three areas through various initiatives identified in the plan for the period 2003-2005. One of the most important aspects of the plan was the attempt to synergise the efforts of a number of agencies in the delivery of services, including DSFA, the LESN and FAS.

Partnership/LESN Experience of the NEAP:

In this section we aim to highlight the common experiences of the NEAP by Partnerships/LESN across the country since the programme was started.

- In a number of cases, NEAP clients referred to Partnerships/LESN were unsure of the reason for their referral and concerned that their benefits would be stopped. As a consequence, there was evidence of a slowness to participate in the programme and motivations levels were at a low point initially.
- Low placement into mainstream employment was noted in a number of areas due to a number of factors such as social as well as mental health issues, poor literacy level, low self esteem, access to transport and so on.
- Some areas noted that there was a lack of user-friendly interagency support mechanism to support individual client progression and a failure to pool the resources from all the agencies involved in the roll out of the NEAP
- PLANET welcomes the pro-active participation of the LESN in the NEAP and the channelling by GAS and DSFA of NEAP clients through to the LESN
- Some areas have noted that the NEAP is being used as a negative tool to engage clients and there have been cases where protocols were not being followed such as DSFA failing to interview clients before stopping their payments. In other cases, clients, such as ex-prisoners, were listed for the NEAP after receiving payments for only two weeks. A consequence of clients coming onto NEAP too early, i.e. less than 6 months unemployed, is that the LESN cannot access the DSFA TAT fund to support client progression.
- Most areas reported a satisfactory reporting arrangement between the LESN and FAS/DSFA. This applied both in terms of formal and informal reporting.
- The potential of the LESN service/resource is being more clearly appreciated by the other agencies involved in the process such as the DSFA.

- LESNs are more easily able to reach and support target groups that were difficult to reach in the past
- Some Partnerships have expressed concerns about the impact of the NEAP prioritisation of job seekers on the Live Register on other groups currently distant from the labour market. The progression supports for groups such as lone parents, people with disabilities, early school leavers aged less than 18.5 years are limited as a result of the NEAP. This situation does not assist the achievement of social inclusion objectives.

PLANET notes that the FAS Labour Market Review 2004 reported that the “NEAP process of referral of unemployed persons from DSFA has been relatively successful thus far but that the exit rate from the live register has been declining over the plan’s lifetime”. It further notes that FAS considers that “the challenge now is to activate difficult-to-place clients, some of whom may be stuck in a cycle of state supports/intervention. A targeted financial incentive to encourage employers to recruit the long-term unemployed would be desirable.” PLANET shares this view but also considers that there has been an insufficient focus on, and investment in, meeting the needs of difficult to place clients. The significant reduction in ALMPs and the lack of clarity about the future of such programmes has been most unhelpful in this respect. There is a need to develop a range of strategies at local level to respond in a more comprehensive way to the needs of such job seekers, including those not currently on the live register.

Through the LESN Network an analysis of the level of involvement in the NEAP amongst LESNs was undertaken. The following information, from 21 LESNs, is of note:

- 8 areas take direct referrals direct from DSFA
- 13 take referrals through agreements with FAS
- 1 area takes referrals directly from DSFA and FAS

The number of referral slots per week varies from 2-16. Some areas have an agreed number of minimum referral slots per week. Two areas have no agreed number of minimum slots... The average number of referral slots (Per Week) is 8.

In 2004 of the 21 areas that provided feedback – 4,189 men and women became active clients of the LESN under the EAP process in 2004

Ongoing Barriers to Progression:

While we have referenced a number of the difficulties experienced by NEAP clients we identify below additional critical factors that have prevented more significant progression into mainstream employment for NEAP clients, most notable being:

- The loss of the JI programme as a progression route
- Poor work history
- Personal history including time spent in prison
- Poor Education attainment levels, including poor literacy
- Addiction difficulties (alcohol, drugs, etc)
- Physical/Mental Health issues
- Access to childcare and transport
- Low self esteem
- Low wages in mainstream employment, particularly in rural areas reduce the incentive to move from social welfare payments and the add-on secondary benefits, e.g. medical card.
- There is still a lack of knowledge, amongst the client group, of the benefits of the programme. More user-friendly information is required here.

Recommendations for the improvement of the NEAP:

The key recommendations from PLANET's Employment Services Policy Committee are;

1. A multi-agency approach needs to be the corner stone of the plan.
2. Ongoing and improved co-ordination, at national and local level, between the DSFA, FAS, and Partnerships/LESNs is the key factor in ensuring the NEAP will become even more relevant to the target group.
3. There needs to be a user-friendly interagency support mechanism for individuals' progression needs. A flexible approach will increase the progression rate into mainstream employment.
4. The DSFA TAT fund should be an additional facility/resource under the NEAP to support client progression regardless of the duration of the DSFA payment.
5. Under the NEAP, there should be a clear incentive for clients and potential employers to "buy into" the plan.
6. There needs to be clearer information for clients communicated to clients as to the value of the programme for their future progression and it should not be presented as a negative option.
7. The current prioritisation of resource, such as FAS training places, for NEAP clients should be reviewed following an assessment at local level of the needs of other job seekers who are currently very distant from the labour market.

8th February 2005