



**Submission by PLANET- The Partnerships Network
to
Minister of State, Mr Frank Fahey, T.D.,
Department of Enterprise, Trade & Employment.**

1. Context:

In the light of changed economic circumstances and more restricted government budgets, there has been a concerted effort to reduce the numbers of participants on CE and JI programmes across the country. PLANET has been opposed to the blunt instrument of cutting places without an appropriate alternative for participants. The policy of ring fencing certain types of CE programmes such as those related to childcare or drugs task forces has had some way of reducing the impact of the cuts, but outside these sectors, the cuts appear to be applied without any clear rationale apart from the need to reduce the numbers to a predetermined level.

Within the context of rising unemployment, it is critical that government preventative interventions that CE and JI are, be maintained. According to Department of Finance figures, there are currently:

- 23,953 people on CE programmes across the country.
- 2,413 people involved in the JI programme.
- 13,576 people are participating in various FAS training initiatives and training programmes.

In PLANET's discussions with Minister Fahey, the issue of reshaping active labour market programmes has been discussed as well as establishing a new programme that will support those who have difficulty in progressing into mainstream employment. We understand from the Minister that the end of year participation on CE would be approximately 20,000 and we would insist that the number is not reduced below this mark.

2. Focused Support for Participants v Support for Community/Voluntary Bodies:

A key issue for PLANET is how existing ALMP's and the proposed community service programme should be structured to best serve the individuals involved. On a linked point, communities as well as voluntary organisations still need the support of such government programmes. Whatever the outcome for CE and JI programmes, it will not resolve the long-term issue over the funding the work of community groups.

If FAS and DETE are refocusing CE as a progression route to assist people into mainstream employment, the issue of supporting community/voluntary services and organisations remains unresolved.

3. Progression from CE & JI programmes:

The Area Partnership Boards have been deeply involved in CE and JI across the country and have been asked by Minister Fahey to look at what new supports/programmes could be used to assist those who cannot progress beyond the context of the programmes that they are working within.

There are two groups that possibly come into the non-progression category:

1. The over 55 age group
2. Those with physical and/or mental disability

PLANET is opposed to the reduction of JI, as it has been very successful for the over-35 years of age, long-term unemployed, people who would otherwise be in danger of not being able to participate in the employment market in any meaningful way. Any JI participants who fail to progress into the open labour market should be facilitated into the proposed Community Service Programme.

Recent press reports have indicated that FAS will cut the contracts of those on JI who have been on the programme for 5-6 years. Approximately 300 people will be affected. Where do they go, if they do not have a job to progress too?

On a linked point, it raises the issue of the balance of work-based experience verses work based training for those who can progress and for those who have difficulty in doing so.

PLANET argues that we need to go “back to basics”, i.e. to rethink what we actually should be providing the client groups affected. A revamped CE programme and the proposed new community service programme have to be thought out carefully in order to benefit the participant and the sponsor alike.

4. JI Programme:

PLANET argues that the JI programme should be maintained as it has an excellent track record in progression. To illustrate this point, we have outlined some examples from around the country as well as good case studies of progression.

Examples of Progression from the JI programme:

Outlined are just a few examples of progression rates from a cross section of JI programmes around the country:

- Drogheda: 82% of participants have progressed into employment. 68 people have participated in the programme to date.
- South Dublin (Southside Partnership Area): In excess of 80% of participants on JI have progressed into mainstream employment and education.

- Dundalk: 80% of participants progressed into mainstream employment from JI. 70 participants participated in the programme to date. 4 progressed into employment in Year 1, 11 in Year 2 and 41 in Year 3. Participants are in the JI programme for a three-year period. There are currently 54 participants in the most recent programme.
- Galway City: 43 participants have participated in the programme since it started. Of which, 24 (56%) have moved onto mainstream employment, two examples of the success of the programme in Galway are as follows:

Case Study A:

A woman in her late forties when she started on JI. Has had mental health and confidence issues. Progressed from CE to JI (despite her concerns about her ability to handle full time work). Gained in confidence and spirits. Is now working full time in the open labour market. Without the time and support given with programmes such as CE and JI this woman would more than likely be claiming Disability Allowance – instead she is now realising her full potential.

Case Study B:

A participant, also in her late forties has been on the JI for three and a half years. In her first year had absolutely no interest in training of any sort. Took some time to mention she had literacy issues (though it became apparent to colleagues and supervisor). During the three years she made three attempts at literacy classes and the ECDL (with the knowledge and support of her computer tutor). She completed her ECDL this year and will return to literacy classes in September to take English at Leaving Certificate level. Her work as personal assistant (her third placement) has opened up her employment options and she has done relief work for a disability organisation. With sufficient confidence in her literacy will be able to find work in the open labour market

Case Study C (Dublin - North Clondalkin):

A Dublin participant commenced employment on Job Initiative last year (2002) as Grounds person with the North Clondalkin Canal Project. He has lived in North Clondalkin for 16 years, and was unemployed for 8 years before he started JI. Since starting JI, the participant has successfully completed gardening and landscaping courses. He is one of the nine people currently training on the FETAC (Foundation Level Horticulture Course) at Sunflower Gardens in Clondalkin each Tuesday. This course provides training not only in Horticulture, but also in Personal Effectiveness, Jobsearch and IT skills. The course commenced in November 2002 and finished in April 2003.

5. CE Programme:

If CE is going to become a more focused active labour market programme, it must provide the following:

- Training to suit client abilities and training that will meet labour market demands, i.e. by providing training, with certification, in areas where there is a market demand for labour
- Training hours should be increased and the resources of the FAS training centres reoriented to meet the needs of CE participants.
- Proper support for CE sponsors needs to be provided to allow them ensure they can give the training time to participants while not undermining the work time that the sponsor is getting from participants under the programme
- More structured liaison between LES, FAS employment services and FAS community services would assist in increasing progression rates.
- There has to be recognition by FAS that progression is not always possible if mainstream job opportunities are not there to begin with. Many rural parts of the country do not have the capacity to offer viable mainstream employment for participants to move onto.
- In a rural context, the CE programme provides an opportunity for social interaction, as well as confidence building for small holders and the rural unemployed.
- CE offers an opportunity for low-income farmers in receipt of Farm Assist supports to train and gain valuable work skills which will offer farmers the opportunity to avail of off-farm employment and break the rural poverty cycle.
- PLANET would argue that at least 60% of CE participants should be allowed to remain on the CE programme, with the balance of participants moving to the new community service programme, where applicable.
- It must continue to be used as an effective tool in encouraging people back to work, education and in the participation in local community activities.

6. Community Service Programme (CSP):

With the possibility of upwards of 40% of CE participants being transferred onto this programme, it would appear that the principle participants targeted might be the over 55 age group and those with physical and/or mental disabilities. The thinking of the Department seems to be that the new programme would also encompass those in rural areas where there are few alternative forms of employment, particularly in the private sector.

PLANET would propose the following in regard to the new programme:

- Participants must be selected under clear criteria, coming from the objective of what is the best support that can be given to the individual concerned.
- Training provision must be given equal priority to that of the revamped CE programme.
- Work provided to participants via the Community/Voluntary sector must be recognised as real work that is allowing the individual to contribute and participate within the community in which they live.
- The programme must offer participants the opportunity to progress into mainstream employment if they so wish.

- Community/Voluntary Groups acting, as sponsors must be given proper support from FAS when taking on participants under the CSP.
- The CSP must be constructed as an attractive and viable alternative for those who are unable to progress through CE.
- Participants should not feel stigmatised or made feel different. Their work must have a value and be presented as such by both FAS and sponsor alike.
- National Guidelines on the programme need to be developed but that can be interpreted, with sufficient flexibility, at a local level for the benefit of sponsors, participants and FAS.
- In rural areas designated as disadvantaged, special consideration should be given to families on low incomes.

7. Long Term Funding of Community/Voluntary Groups:

PLANET notes that cuts in CE & JI programmes as well as proposals for a new programme have highlighted the issue of the funding of community/voluntary groups. These programmes were originally introduced to cover gaps in local services, education and so on. We would propose that the Department of Enterprise, Trade & Employment in conjunction with the Department of Community, Rural & Gaeltacht affairs establish a core funding budget to assist groups in providing services to their community while not affecting the remits of the CE programme or the proposed community service programme.

8. Conclusion:

Both CE and JI have provided a valuable service to the unemployed and to local services, businesses, communities and government over the last number of years. The progression rates have been positive. The recent round of cuts to both programmes and the manner in which they have been handled by FAS & the Government, have had a negative impact on sponsors and participants alike. If CE is to be revamped and a new community service programme put in place, it should not be solely on the basis of budgets but on what is in the best interests of the individual. There need to be constructive dialogue with partnerships and other relevant bodies by FAS regarding the restructuring of programmes and where the needs are most obvious. By imposing cuts without consultation or even implementing a new programme without prior discussions, there will be detrimental impacts for communities and participants alike. Consultation is key to any changes in CE and JI or in the introduction of new programmes.

For example, the rationale of ring fencing of childcare places under CE, while reducing numbers across the board on CE programmes in other areas is a crude instrument. We note that the NDP/CSF evaluation of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme recommended that the EOCP should aim for an increase in the number of childcare staff supported through the programme. Would it not be better to use the EOCP funds to support more professional staff places for childcare facilities in disadvantaged areas? Any saving under CE would be used to reduce the impact of CE cuts in non-ring fenced areas.

The JI programme has had a positive impact for those over 35 who are long term unemployed with good progression rates across the country. Any changes to this programme must be undertaken with the interests of the individuals concerned. JI should be allowed run its course rather than dropping the programme, which has

had such positive results across the country. From our analysis, there is no clear rationale for the current cuts in JI apart from one of budget limitations.

PLANET would welcome the opportunity for further discussion with the Minister and FAS as to how the current and proposed programmes can be best shaped to benefit individuals and communities into the future.

September 2003