



**Submission by PLANET- The Partnerships Network
to the
Labour Force Development Division,
Department of Enterprise, Trade & Employment.**

1. Context:

In the light of changed economic circumstances and more restricted government budgets, from 2002 onwards, there has been a concerted effort to reduce the numbers of participants on CE and JI programmes across the country. PLANET, the representative body of the area partnership boards, 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 last year's 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 set nationally.

Within the context of sustaining a social inclusion focus, it is critical that government preventative interventions such as CE and JI, are maintained. According to Department of Finance figures for July 2004 there were 26,134 people involved in active labour market programmes (ALMPs). These included the following:

- 20,494 people on CE programmes across the country.
- A further 10,023 people are participating in various FAS training initiatives and training programmes.

In PLANET's discussions with Minister Fahey, last year, the issue of reshaping active labour market programmes had been discussed as well as establishing a new programme that will support those who have difficulty in progressing into mainstream employment.

We understood from the Minister that the end of year participation (for 2003) on CE would be approximately 20,000 and we would insist that the number is not reduced below this mark. The consultation paper, prepared by the DETE, refers to a total participation level across all the ALMPs, of 25,000 people. From what we understand this figure would include those on JI as well as Social Economy.

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

A key issue for PLANET is how existing ALMP's and including the Rural Social Scheme should be structured to best serve the individuals involved. On a linked point, communities as well as voluntary organisations still need core funding support of such government programmes. Whatever the outcome for CE and JI programmes, it will not resolve the long-term issue over funding of 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. The consultation paper notes that social economy as a concept could be broadened thus allowing it to act as a means to provide "for community and voluntary organisations that are providing essential community services". It is a concept that we would welcome if it addresses the long term funding issues for community and voluntary groups.

3. Progression from CE & JI programmes:

The Area Partnership Boards have been deeply involved in CE and JI across the country and had 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.

Similar to the groups identified in the DETE Consultation paper, there are two groups that we identified for the non-progression category:

1. The over 55 age group
2. Those with a 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 group, i.e. the long-term unemployed, 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 could be facilitated in the context of the three tiered CE programme as outlined in the consultation paper.

A proper balance between work experience and training needs to be achieved for the mutual benefit of the participant and sponsor alike. 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 and JI can increase their progression target if the proper work/training balance is kept at an equilibrium.

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.

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:

Individual Examples of the benefits of the JI programme:

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. Social Economy Programme:

The programme has provided a valuable resource to communities to establish enterprises that could not otherwise have existed. We would endorse the primary recommendation of the WRC review that the objective of the SEP “should be sustainable employment within the enterprise rather than progression”. The current FAS social economy model needs to strike a balance between supporting a key community economic service and supporting enterprises that have the potential to succeed. As suggested earlier, the DETE should consider broadening out the SEP as a means of providing support for community and voluntary organisations “that are providing essential community services”. The Social Economy enterprises provide essential mainstream work experiences for people that would be far removed from the workplace.

It is important that the DETE continues to support the SEP and utilise the inputs of the National Social Economy Monitoring Committee to full effect. To utilize the resources of the Committee, we would argue that it should meet on a regular basis. We understand that the last meeting was held in April 2004.

6. 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 did offer 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. It still has an important role in rural areas, particularly for those individuals that are not eligible to participate in the Rural Social Scheme(RSS).

- 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.
- In relation to the Community Service Programme, as discussed by Minister Fahey, we would agree that such a programme still has a validity where progression is not a viable option due to geography or the participants circumstances.
- In general, CE must continue to be used as an effective tool in encouraging people back to work, education and in the participation in local community activities.

7. Long Term Funding of Community/Voluntary Groups:

PLANET notes that cuts in CE & JI programmes as well as the Departments previous 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. A broadened Social Economy programme could be the mechanism for this.

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. 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 interest of both the individual and communities. There needs 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 blunt 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 DETE and FAS as to how the current and proposed programmes can be best shaped to benefit individuals and communities into the future.

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