

ALIGNING NRP AND RELEVANT STRATEGIES WITH ESF THEMATIC OBJECTIVES

From the assessment of strategies and objectives above, one can see clearly that the key priorities for Ireland are

- Increasing the employment rate and the reduction of unemployment (in particular long term and youth unemployment) through increasing skills levels relevant to the labour market opportunities,
- improving education levels and
- progressing towards social inclusion objectives.

The mission and role of the ESF is directly relevant to the delivery of the necessary interventions to help get our unemployed workforce upskilled and re-skilled in order to be able to avail of emerging employment opportunities. The emergence of jobs in new sectors and the skills profile required to meet that demand in the labour market pose challenges for Ireland. The sectoral nature and skills profile of those new jobs must be matched by the training, education and upskilling offers from the systems that are producing the people to fill them. The areas where identified skills shortages exist must be targeted by relevant education, training and work experience programmes, including labour market activation programmes. Evidence of growth in self-employment and entrepreneurship must also be supported through relevant upskilling and re-skilling opportunities for those seeking to follow that path.

The ESF Thematic Objectives and the associated Investment Priorities are well suited to accommodate investment that will tackle the needs identified for the Irish labour market recovery in the NRP and Pathways to Work strategies. These are-

• Promoting Sustainable and Quality Employment and Supporting Labour Mobility

In order to promote sustainable and quality jobs, the education, training and upskilling systems must provide targeted, labour market relevant, portable and recognised skills and qualifications to the workforce. In particular, the programmes and measures delivering these skills and qualifications must target the unemployed with a strong focus on the long term unemployed, youth unemployment and re-integration of groups facing exclusion from the labour market such as women, migrants, ex-offenders and travellers. The investment priority aimed at providing access to employment for jobseekers and inactive people, including the long term unemployed and people far from the labour market also through local employment initiatives and supporting labour mobility is very relevant for Ireland. The sustainable integration of young people into the labour market, in particular those not in employment, education or training and those at risk of social exclusion or from marginalised communities is also at the centre of our challenges. The enhancement of equality between men and women in access to employment and career progression and the principles of promoting equal pay for equal work should also feature as key objectives through the ESF in Ireland. Relevant supports for promoting employment opportunities in the area of self-employment can also contribute to the achievement of our labour market outcomes in addressing the needs identified.

The ESF Operational Programme should include measures to assist in delivering on the investment priorities set out above. They could include measures across the spectrum of

training, education and work experience, as well as promotion activities and awareness raising among employers and providers of opportunities. A continued emphasis on activation schemes and innovative approaches to employment-focused measures would enhance the contribution that the ESF can make to effective solutions for the unemployed and disadvantaged groups. Support from the ESF for some mainstream skills or education programmes that are directly relevant to getting people back to jobs would also be a constructive way to deliver on this thematic objective in Ireland. Later sections of this Programme set out more clearly how specific measures or activities contribute to this.

- **Promoting Social Inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination.**

In a society where unemployment and detachment from the labour market are at severe levels, the promotion of measures that seek to tackle social exclusion, poverty and discrimination are essential in achieving the ESF objectives. For Ireland, the investment priority of active inclusion, including with a view to promoting equal opportunities and active participation, and improving employability is central to this challenge. The Needs Analysis has identified low employment rates, low participation rates, high unemployment, long term unemployment and youth unemployment and jobless households as significant factors that must be addressed. Within those factors, all affected groups need to be supported by the ESF, but those groups facing the biggest barriers to inclusion must be included. The investment priority that seeks to support the integration of marginalised communities and the investment priority that supports combating of discrimination and promotes equal opportunities also merit attention in the Irish ESF programme.

The Operational Programme should seek to support measures that have active inclusion as a focus. Measures that target those from jobless households, the long term unemployed, women returners, migrants and ex-offenders are particularly relevant. The overarching objective of getting people back to work as quickly and directly as possible must be paramount in funding decisions. Measures more targeted at tackling poverty and discrimination where an employability focus is central are particular priorities in this thematic area for the time being. This focus will be kept under review as the Programme proceeds and any adjustment in focus to emphasise more the social inclusion aspects may be considered when the economy improves significantly.

- **Investing in Education, Training and Vocational Training for skills and lifelong learning.**

The prevention of early school leaving and the promotion of equal access to education at all levels are key elements of this ESF thematic objective. These are well aligned with the Irish NRP targets under relevant headings as outlined earlier. There is still some way for us to travel to attain the NRP targets that will contribute to the EU2020 objectives as required. Therefore, the Operational Programme should seek to support relevant initiatives that are designed to bridge this gap. The investment priorities that focus on reducing and preventing early school leaving and promoting equal access to good quality early childhood, primary and secondary education including formal, non-formal and informal learning pathways for reintegrating into education and training and for improving the quality and efficiency of, and access to, tertiary and equivalent education with a view to increasing participation and attainment levels, especially for disadvantaged groups are directly of interest for Ireland. Measures such as outreach to young people, supports against the barriers to staying in education and higher education labour market activation and conversion measures can contribute significantly under this thematic objective.

