

PAPER: CONFERENCE

EQUAL FROM PRACTICE TO POLICY, PROMOTING EQUALITY IN THE LABOUR MARKET (LESSONS FROM THE EQUAL COMMUNITY INITIATIVE)

OVERVIEW AND PERSPECTIVE

IMPLEMENTING INTEGRATED SERVICE PROVISION

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Active labour market programmes (ALMPs) for the unemployed are premised on a set of goals for which there is consensus; to reduce unemployment and income disparities and to increase the State's economic production and growth. There are challenges in reaching these goals. At the core of this is the need for the shift towards a more 'enabling state' that provides more targeted supports, greater individual responsibility, flexibility and accountability. Both the National Economic and Social Council in its 'Development Welfare State' and the National Economic Social Forum in its publications 'Creating a More Inclusive Labour Market' and 'Improving the Delivery of Quality Customers Services' advocate the need for ensuring better coordination and inter-agency cooperation to meet this aim.

The fundamental nature of recent changes in the economic, social and cultural fabric of Irish society has forced service deliverers, public or otherwise, to seriously examine what services we provide; how we provide those services and to evaluate their effectiveness and efficiency in meeting our changing customers' needs and demands. What is clear is that for the Irish State to successfully achieve labour market inclusion for all its citizens, it will not succeed if left to any one agency. Complex problems require multi-dimensional responses. The value of EQUAL is that it provided a range of 'practices' that showed policy makers **how** this could be done, as already pointed out by the Minister earlier this morning.

I suppose at this stage, it is important to note that integrated service provision is a term and a concept that is widely used across many disciplines. However, for our purposes, here today, we will define integrated service provision as the **connection of disparate services**, at both local and national level, to enhance the capability of service providers to meet users needs.

Fundamentally, implementating integrated services provision is about organisational change and the central challenge about any change programme is not strategy, systems nor culture, it is about changing people's behaviour. While these other areas are important, the core problem is what people do, and the need for significant shifts in what people do. EQUAL, fostered integrated service provision by providing actions to change what people within organisations previously did. It

said what we previously did was not to the maximum benefit of the user and we can do this differently. It is really a playground in different doingness (if there is such a word).

For example, the North East EQUAL initiative engaged in a joint interviewing strategy between FÁS, DSFA, VEC and LES. From the users perspective this meant that they did not need to attend a multiple of interviews to access the programme that would best meet their current needs. This strategy was further developed by FÁS in initiatives undertaken for disabled people in the Midlands (using the same approach involving FÁS, DSFA and HSE) and in the four initiatives we undertook for individuals in receipt of OPFP in Dublin and Cork (FÁS, DSFA and LES). North East EQUAL also used an integrated approach towards developing strategic links with the community to attract and reach disinfranchised individuals back into the labour market. Kildare EQUAL also demonstrated such an approach in attracting Lone Parents and Women Returners into the labour market. Such integrated approaches to community outreach must be a part of any labour market policy and process going forward if we are to achieve effective activation of other groups as laid out in Towards 2016, the NDP and the Government Programme.

EQUAL shows use how services can, and should proactively implement integrated services provision. Through use of protocols, mapping, common language, establishing networks and developing frameworks to provide co-ordinate service delivery.

The Blanchardstown Initiative (under Round I) used common protocols between service providers to support the progression of drug users between services as appropriate to their needs.

One of the recommendations contained within the NESF report on Delivery of Quality Customer Services is the need to map the user journey through provision to identify gaps in perceptions of what is provided and what the service user needs. EQUAL Youth commenced with a mapping exercise of current education, training and employment services provision for ESL, providing baseline data on how services operate and what needed to be improved. To do this, they developed what is called a 'common language' among early school leavers. This common language supports the use of a standard referral and web-based tracker system of individuals accessing supports. You're EQUAL also did a similar mapping exercise for services relating to offenders and ex-offenders.

Clare Life Long Learning developed a network of complementary structures and services to encourage adults back into education. You're EQUAL for ex-offenders. TSP developed a framework to coordinate

integrated service delivery for young asylum seekers, assuring a continuum of support among disparate organisations. Case Management as a tool for coordination has also been highlighted.

However, extracting the lessons from the EQUAL initiatives and applying them unilaterally across a range of organisations in order to provide integrated service provision has challenges.

Inter-agency working and service provision to counter social exclusion needs to be analysed against the historically changing character of organisational work and user engagement. Like any change programme it demands new norms and practices within all the organisations involved. This involves horizontal working across local organisations, generally on planning and delivery. However, it also involves working vertically, involving national Government and other local government and or agencies to change. If we think about the time, resources, and energy required at local level to negotiate, facilitate and instigate horizontal service implementation, the same amount of resources, energy and time must be applied to working vertically. Often 'policy-makers' are not involved in these initiative at the beginning, so time to transfer the learning from EQUAL and apply it their own organisational context needs to needs to be facilitated.

It is clear that there is a greater need for coordination within organisations, as much as there is a need for coordination across organisations. This raises issues of capacity-building, staff competencies, communication, information-sharing and common language within those organisations.

At a policy level inter-agency working is promoted as a 'self-evident good' but strategy and operation remains problematic. Boundaries between agencies, expressed in disparate goals, perspectives and priorities, often impede interagency working. EQUAL provides us with the tools and practices that we could use to overcome these issues.

Finally, there is a need to recognise that mainstreaming innovative learning is a complex process, involving facilitation of best fit within an organisation context (it is not about funding continuation of a project as a whole). It takes time. As a result projects often end prior to mainstreaming taking place (irrespective of the value-added) and the nuances in the learning are lost. Clear strategies to encourage collaboration vertically needs to be developed and implemented over the next coming months if the practices in integrated service provision, developed under EQUAL, are to influence and impact on how we provide our services in the future.

In summary, EQUAL projects, NESF and NESC have argued the need for integrated service provision. Joined-up delivery provides the multi-faceted supports required to facilitate access, participation and progression within the labour market for marginalised individuals. This means that we must all work together to ensure integrated service delivery to our users. EQUAL projects have championed this way of working, and have demonstrated that while both effective and efficient, it is also challenging. It is not a process that should be underestimated – it is challenging, complex and an evolutionary.