

Consultation response for the Department of Employment and learning on;

The proposed new Employment Programme for Northern Ireland- Steps to Success NI

October 2012

Introduction

The Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association has over a 1300 members from the independent retail sector in Northern Ireland who generate in excess of £3 billion turnover every year and employ over 30,000 staff.

NIIRTA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this review. This proposal is relevant to our members and NIIRTA will actively encourage members to provide their view through the consultation questionnaire.

Northern Ireland is a small business economy with 98% of all business classified as 'small'. The independent retail sector is the biggest sub-sector of that economy and plays a crucial role as the backbone of the private sector.

1. Objectives for the Programme

- A.** NIIRTA believes that these objectives are realistic and achievable although we believe that there are still important aspects of the Steps to Success programme that need to be prioritised and highlighted as key objectives for the programme.
- B.** The most important objectives that we would consider in place at present would be to target those most in need through ensuring these participants achieve quality support to enable them to gain employment.

There is an overall need to build the right market for the future and in doing so, supporting all the relevant retail sectors through long term investment, competition and the creation of a market that is inclusive and fair. This provides clarity and dedication for everyone involved including the contractor, providers and participants. In order to create the right market for the future a level of resilience needs to be shown in terms of future changes such as the introduction of universal credit and increased unemployment levels.

In order to achieve value for money it is important to focus on the employment outcomes rather than the processes involved. The outcomes for this programme will determine whether it has been a success. In order to create an efficient and effective

scheme the programme should set achievable targets on the level of participants entering the programme.

- C. The prioritisation of an objective focusing on the enhancement of a person's skills through the entering of the programme in order for the participant to gain full time employment should be considered. This is the underlying aim of the programme and it should be made clear that a person will enter the scheme in order to become more employable. This supports the need to enhance skills and qualifications in order to achieve the same goal, e.g. people without Maths or English at GCSE level could be trained.

Programmes such as Essential Skills are already in place which offers learning opportunities that can enhance someone's skills in terms of maths and English or computer skills. It should be suggested that these programmes work hand in hand in order to develop a person's employability to their greatest potential.

NIIRTA thinks that more emphasis needs to be put on the employers and how they can benefit. This will therefore encourage employers to employ someone through the programme.

2. Entry to the programme

- A. Yes we feel that automatic entry is right.
- B. NIIRTA feels that any individual who wishes to volunteer for early access should be able to do so at anytime otherwise motivation may be lost.
- C. Yes we agree that the proposals for ESA and IB claimants are right.

3. Programme approach

NIIRTA agree with the minimum service guarantee as this provides support and value for money. A flexible approach offered by providers would mean it would be easier for participants to gain employment and shows a higher level of dedication from the provider. Although the client's needs, should to be prioritised the same dedication from the client is needed in order to achieve quality experience and value for money.

In order to ensure this a monitoring programme needs to be put in place.

4. Duration of the programme

- A. This also expresses concerns as to whether the same quality and beneficial experience can be gained.

Although clients should not have to carry out a specific maximum number of hours NIIRTA suggested that a minimal number hours should be carried out per week in order to ensure the client is benefiting from the training.

NIIRTA disagree with the removal of the 'top up' of £15.38 to clients benefits. The removal of this will only decrease people's incentive to enter the scheme and the overall number of hours a person will work. In order to motivate a participant it should be suggested that the 'top up' on a person's benefit can only be gained when a certain number of hours is reached per week.

- B. Yes we agree with the possible extension from one year to eighteen months for clients that seek additional support or assistance as long as both the provider and the client are still benefiting and experience is still being gained.

5. Contracting

- A. A more focused approach may offer greater benefits to providers in a single contract area and a more consistent approach may be created. However, NIIRTA is concerned as to the areas that may prove to be disadvantaged. Areas not within close proximity to the contract area may be seen as neglected.

As suggested in the feasibility study the programme may be more viable with two or more competing contractors. This will also give the opportunity for sub-contractors over the region to get involved.

- B. NIIRTA agrees with the recommended contract lengths of three years with the possibility of two extensions of one year each.
- C. We agree that allocating clients to the contracted providers on a random basis may overcome certain barriers but cannot see how this can undermine the programme. A client appointed to a provider on a random basis may not gain very valuable experience and the provider may not benefit to the same extent. A client should be appointed to a more relevant position (if possible) which suits the participant and complements the skills that a person may already have. This would mean the client is gaining relevant experience and the provider is the beneficiary.

6. Supply Chain Management

- A. NIIRTA agrees with contractors being assessed on the breadth and depth of their supply chains. This assessment will ensure local delivery presence across Northern Ireland and therefore potentially affect NIIRTA members and smaller community based organisations who may get involved and at present face lack of support across the country

By accessing contractors supply chains can ensure that smaller sub-contractors can benefit from the leading contractor providing financial support to the smaller organisations.

- B.** We agree that contractors should be expected to demonstrate how smaller organisations are being supported. Supporting smaller organisations support the efforts in gaining employment. Supporting these smaller industries in what is a fragile economic state highlights the important that these sub-contractors are prepared for and that they can handle these larger and longer contracts.
- C.** Along with maintaining the delivery of proposals a code of conduct would ensure the inclusion of sub-contractors. NIIRTA supports this as it ensures the safeguarding of smaller organisations involvement from the start. To ensure that this is maintained, the code of conduct needs to be precise and forceful in order to benefit all stakeholders involved.
- D.** NIIRTA would like to see more innovative ways of supporting sub-contractors as well as smaller organisations who get involved. This support should come in the form of financial support and stability. We would also like to see increased management and efforts into enhancing the position of the sub-contractor.

7. Balance of Service and Outcome Funding

- A.** The proposed 60/40 split between outcome and service payments as a portion of the total provider income seems reasonable if the economy was stabilised. Many areas due to the recession have lost both large and small scale businesses. This split seems too much when jobs are so scarce and unemployment has recently reached an all time high.
- B.** The proposal of higher payments for higher performance and higher payments for those participant groups that have to overcome multiple barriers seems fair as this will create incentives for a organisation to be successful though the programme. This enticement will mean there will be greater chances for equal concentration for participants from all areas.

8. Support Fund Contract

- A. NIIRTA agrees with the support fund being aligned to the Employment Service Regional structure and divided into three areas, as long as the funding is openly available to be distributed when necessary to either the provider or the participant.
- B. We believe that the support fund should cover the expenses of any provider or participant who are disadvantaged in terms of funding due to meeting the criteria of the programme. The support fund should be distributed where apparent benefits can be seen in aiding a person complete the programme.

Glyn Roberts

Chief Executive