



Ireland's European Structural and Investment Funds Programmes 2014-2020

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Annual Implementation Report 2021

Implementation of Ireland's Operational Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning 2014-2020



Citizens' Summary



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

The Youth Employment Initiative (YEI) is supported under PEIL 2014-2020

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	4
Background	4
Structure of the Operational Programme	4
Priority 1: Promoting the attainment of sustainable and quality employment through relevant upskilling measures and supporting labour mobility	5
Priority 2: Promoting social inclusion and combating discrimination in the labour market	5
Priority 3: Investing in education, training and life long learning with a view to upskilling and re-skilling the labour force	5
Priority 4: Youth Employment Initiative	6
Priority 5: Technical assistance	6
Priority 6: Fostering crisis repair in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its social consequences and preparing a green, digital and resilient recovery of the economy	6
NATIONAL CONTEXT – Key Recent Developments	7
Overview of the Irish Labour Market.....	7
Sectoral Employment.....	8
Educational Attainment Thematic Report 2021	8
Government Policies/Initiatives during 2021	9
Progress towards our EU 2020 Targets	11
PROGRESS TO DATE	13
INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITY UPDATES.....	15
Priority 1	15
ETB Training for the Unemployed	15
Springboard and ICT Conversion Courses.....	15
Intra-EU Mobility.....	16
Priority 2	16
Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP).....	16
Youthreach.....	18
Garda Youth Diversion Projects (GYDP)	19
Young Persons’ Probation (YPP) Projects	20
Disability Project - Ability Programme	21
Integration and Employment of Migrants	22
Tus Nua Project	22
Gender Equality	23
Priority 3	23
Third Level Access.....	23
Back to Education Initiative (BTEI)	24

Adult Literacy	24
Priority 4	25
Back to Work Enterprise Allowance Scheme	25
JobsPlus Incentive Scheme	26
Community Training Centres (CTCs)	26
Defence Forces Employment Support Scheme	27
Youth Employment Support Scheme	27
Priority 5	28
Technical Assistance	28
Priority 6	28
Supports for the reopening of schools	28
Provision of laptops to disadvantaged students	28
EVALUATION ACTIVITY.....	29
Specific Skills Training (part of ETB Training for the Unemployed)	29
Other Evaluation Activity	29
INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION.....	30
Aontas STAR Awards.....	30
EU Funds Website	31
Europe Day.....	32
Public Awareness Survey	32
HORIZONTAL PRINCIPLES.....	33

INTRODUCTION

Background

Ireland's Operational Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning (PEIL) involves investment of €1.037 billion over the period 2014-2020, comprising €484.5 million from the European Social Fund (ESF), an equal amount from the Exchequer and just over €68 million from the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI). The Programme focuses on activation of the unemployed, improving social and labour market inclusion, enhancing education attainment, and tackling youth employment. An additional investment from the EU Commission was allocated to the PEIL Operational Programme in 2021 of €88.3m under REACT-EU (Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, bringing the total programme amount to €1.125 billion.

This Citizens' Summary accompanies the PEIL Annual Implementation Report (AIR) for 2021 which will be submitted to the European Commission in accordance with the relevant Regulations by 31 May 2022. It is the 7th Citizens' Summary produced under PEIL.

Structure of the Operational Programme

The PEIL Operational Programme (OP) has 6 Priorities, each addressing one of the thematic objectives set out in the ESF Regulation No. 1304/2013 and the REACT-EU Regulation No. 2020/2221 as well as a Technical Assistance Priority, as follows:

- **Priority 1:** Promoting the attainment of sustainable and quality employment through relevant upskilling measures and supporting labour mobility
- **Priority 2:** Promoting social Inclusion and combating discrimination in the labour market
- **Priority 3:** Investing in education, training and life long learning with a view to upskilling and re-skilling the labour force
- **Priority 4:** Youth Employment Initiative
- **Priority 5:** Technical assistance
- **Priority 6:** Fostering crisis repair in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its social consequences and preparing a green, digital and resilient recovery of the economy

The PEIL OP was amended, following the approval of the Programme Monitoring Committee, by Commission Implementing Decision of 31 November 2021 to programme Ireland's 2021 tranche of REACT-EU funding. REACT-EU (Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe) is additional EU funding made available to 2014-2020 Cohesion Policy programmes to respond to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and to prepare a green, digital and resilient recovery of the economy. In November 2021, the European Commission approved the creation of a new priority (Priority 6) within the ESF PEIL to support the continuation of safe and inclusive education and training in a COVID-19 pandemic context.

Priority 1: Promoting the attainment of sustainable and quality employment through relevant upskilling measures and supporting labour mobility

€274 million, or 24% of the total investment under the Programme, is assigned to Priority 1, which tackles unemployment and enhance labour mobility, via the following activities –

- **ETB Training for the Unemployed:** provides a range of vocational training courses to meet the needs of unemployed people and job-seekers.
- **Springboard:** provides part-time higher education opportunities in areas where there are identified skills shortages and where sustainable employment opportunities may arise as the economy recovers.
- **ICT Skills Conversion:** provide graduates from other skills areas with the opportunity to upskill or reskill through 1 year full-time Conversion Programmes in core computing/programming skills.
- **Intra-EU Mobility:** supports EURES Ireland, which promotes labour mobility across the EU.

Priority 2: Promoting social inclusion and combating discrimination in the labour market

€298 million, or 26% of the total investment under the Programme, is assigned to Priority 2 to activities to support active inclusion measures, to promote equal opportunities and to combat discrimination, via -

- **Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP):** tackles poverty and social exclusion in local communities.
- **Youthreach:** provides education, training and work experience for early school leavers.
- **Garda Youth Diversion Projects:** supports young people at risk of/or involved in criminal and/or anti-social behaviour.
- **Young Persons Probation Projects:** engages with young offenders in local communities.
- **Disability Project (Ability Programme):** a pre-activation programme for young people with disabilities.
- **Integration and Employment of Migrants:** promotes active inclusion and enhanced employment possibilities for vulnerable legally resident migrants.
- **Tus Nua Project:** promotes independent living and positive reintegration into the community for women leaving prison and other female offenders.
- **Gender Equality:** supports women wanting to return to the labour market and women entrepreneurs.

Priority 3: Investing in education, training and life long learning with a view to upskilling and re-skilling the labour force

€241 million, or 21% of the total investment under the Programme, is assigned to Priority 3 to promote life long learning through the following activities –

- **Third-Level Access:** supports disadvantaged students and students with disabilities to pursue third level education.
- **Back to Education Initiative (BTEI):** provides part-time learning opportunities for those with less than second level education.
- **Adult Literacy:** provides increased access to literacy, numeracy and language tuition for adults.

Priority 4: Youth Employment Initiative

€204 million, or 18% of the total investment under the Programme, is assigned to the YEI to tackle youth unemployment and implement the Youth Guarantee by providing job, education and training opportunities to young people aged 15-24 who are not in employment, education or training (NEET). YEI funding was provided for use in those regions, including Ireland, where youth unemployment levels exceeded 25% during the reference year of 2012. The specific YEI funding allocation for Ireland of €68 million is matched by equal amounts from our European Social Fund (ESF) allocation and from the Exchequer, giving an overall allocation of €204 million.

The following activities are funded under the YEI (it should be noted that in relation to some of these schemes, not all of their activities are aimed exclusively at under-25s):

- **Back to Work Enterprise Allowance Scheme (BTWEA):** promotes the self-employment prospects of long-term social welfare recipients.
- **JobsPlus Incentive Scheme:** incentivises employers to offer employment opportunities to the long term unemployed.
- **Youthreach:** provides education, training and work experience for early school leavers [completed in 2017].
- **Community Training Centres (CTCs):** provides early school leavers with further education and training opportunities.
- **Defence Forces Employment Support Scheme:** a 10 week training programme of military and educational orientated training.
- **Youth Employment Support Scheme (YESS):** work experience programme with integrated learning and development plan.

Priority 5: Technical assistance

The technical assistance Priority deals with the operation and administration of the overall programme and has an allocation of €20 million, or less than 2% of the overall funding.

Priority 6: Fostering crisis repair in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its social consequences and preparing a green, digital and resilient recovery of the economy

Ireland's 2021 tranche of €88.3 million REACT-EU funding has been programmed under this Priority of the Programme and represents 8% of its total investment. The support will focus on:

- **Measures introduced to support the reopening of schools** The *Roadmap for the Full Reopening of Schools* sets out a range of measures to facilitate the safe return of primary and post-primary students to school for the 2020/21 year.
- **The provision of laptops to disadvantaged students in further and higher education.** As part of a package of COVID-19 pandemic supports for the higher and further education sectors, funding was provided to education providers for a once-off COVID-19 pandemic grant to support disadvantaged students in accessing ICT devices.

NATIONAL CONTEXT – Key Recent Developments

Overview of the Irish Labour Market

In 2020, with the introduction of public health-related restrictions on activity, at its peak in May 2020, over 1 million people in Ireland were in receipt of income support payments from the State. As restrictions eased, the numbers receiving payments fell; subsequent lockdowns saw numbers surge again, although not to the levels seen in May 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic continued to have a considerable impact on the Irish labour market in 2021.

The following labour market indicators compared position in Q4 2021 to Q4 2020:

- the labour force increased by 214,800 or 8.9% to €2.633 million;
- employment increased by 229,100 or 10.1% to €2.506 million;
- the employment rate, for those aged 15 to 64, increased by 6 percentage points to 73.0%;
- the participation rate increased by 4.5 percentage points to 65.1%. The participation rate measures the share of the total population aged 15 years and over who are in the labour force. The labour force consists of people who are in employment and those who are unemployed;
- the number of hours worked per week increased by 9.6% or 6.8 million hours from 70.8 million hours in Q4 2020 to 77.6 million hours in Q4 2021;
- the unemployment level decreased by 11,900, standing at 127,000 persons using the traditional International Labour Organisation (ILO) method of calculating unemployment; the COVID-19 pandemic adjusted unemployment was 195,313 for December 2021, an decrease of 273,342 (or 58.3%);
- the unemployment rate (using traditional methods) decreased by 1 percentage point to 4.9%; the COVID-19 pandemic adjusted unemployment rate decreased by 12 percentage points to 7.4% in December 2021;
- the number of people deemed long-term unemployed was 44,300 in Q4 2021 and the long-term unemployment rate was 1.7%. In Q4 2020, these figures were 36,800 and 1.5% respectively. At the end of 2020, people who were long-term unemployed accounted for 26% of the unemployed, by the end of 2021 this figure had risen to 35%;
- the youth unemployment rate (using traditional methods) decreased by 4 percentage points to 10.2%; and
- in terms of those aged 15-24 years, the annual rate of those not in employment, education or training (NEET) rate decreased by 2.2 percentage points to 7.8%.



Sectoral Employment

Employment increased in 12 economic sectors in the year to Q4 2021 with the level of employment in a number of sectors exceeding the levels from the same quarter in 2019. These include the:

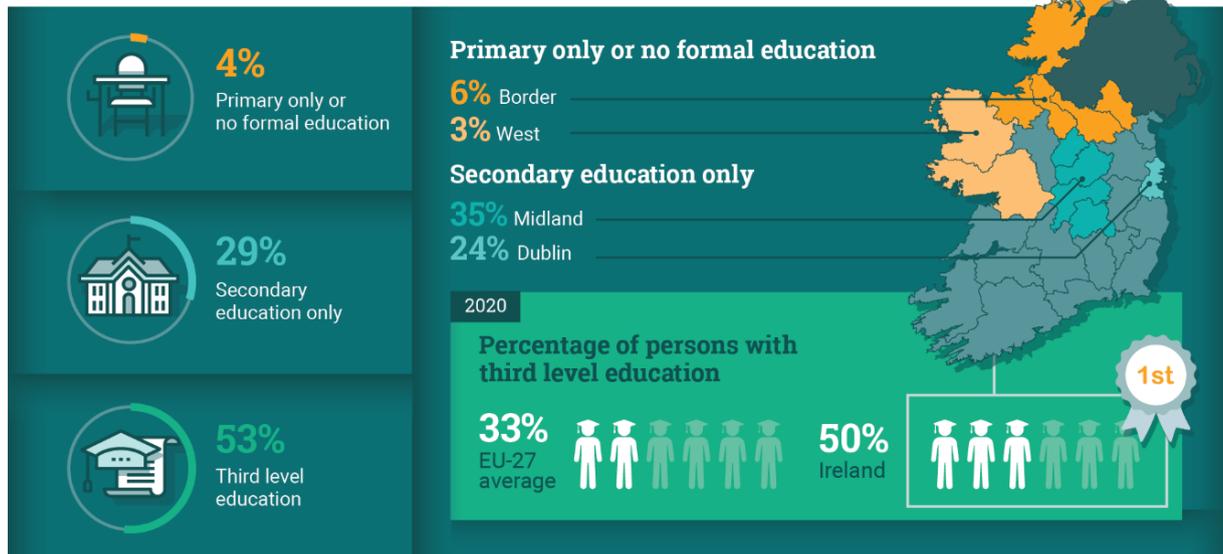
- Information and Communication sector which was 30.9% or 39,400 higher in Q4 2021 when compared to Q4 2019
- Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities sector which was up 22.8% or 32,200 when compared to Q4 2019

Some sectors have not yet recovered fully from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the most notable of these are the:

- Administrative and Support Service Activities sector which was 14.6% or 16,300 less in Q4 2021 than it was in Q4 2019
- Accommodation and Food Service Activities Sector, which was down by 9.7% or 17,300 from Q4 2019

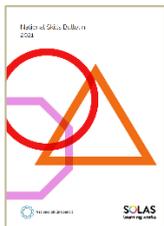
Educational Attainment Thematic Report 2021

As in previous years, the CSO's *Educational Attainment Thematic Report 2021* reported that higher educational attainment levels are linked with higher employment rates. This was most notable for persons aged 25-64 years with a third level qualification - this cohort had an employment rate of 85%, compared to a rate of 32% for people with no formal education/primary education. Conversely, those with no formal education/primary education had an unemployment rate of 11%, compared to a rate of 4% for those holding a third level qualification. The proportion of those aged 25-64 years old with a third level qualification was 53% in Q2 2021, while 4% reported that they had primary education/no formal education only.



Government Policies/Initiatives during 2021

A number of relevant Government policies, and recent actions, are set out below.

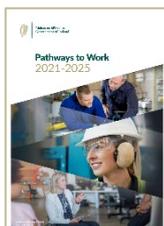


The *National Skills Bulletin 2021* (published in October 2021) was produced by SOLAS on behalf of the National Skills Council. The analysis spans 95 occupational groups and examines a range of labour market indicators.

The Bulletin noted the substantial disruption that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was continuing to have on the Irish labour market. The Bulletin identified shortages for some occupations, however it noted that they were primarily limited to roles in sectors which have been largely unaffected by COVID-19 pandemic restrictions including IT, science and engineering, health and skilled crafts. The Bulletin also noted that, as occupational data was not available for those in receipt of income support payments, it was difficult to assess the available supply of skills and/or labour in sectors which were particularly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic such as accommodation and food, wholesale and retail, construction and administrative support services.



An *Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025* was launched in April 2021. The aim of the Plan is to deliver “an apprenticeship system that is flexible and responsive, providing a strong value proposition for employers and potential apprentices, is attractive and easy to engage with, and delivers high standards and sought after qualifications.” The five main objectives of the Plan include: a high quality and innovative approach; employer driven responses; apprenticeship for all; a valued option and a single coherent system.

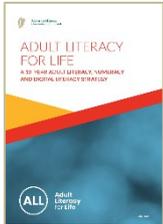


Pathways to Work 2021-2025 was published in July 2021. It is the Government’s national employment services strategy. The aim of the strategy is to assist people back to work as the economy and labour market recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Pathways to Work’s goal is to ensure that as many job opportunities as possible are filled by people who are unemployed.

The strategy sets out how the Public Employment Service can deliver effective services in a post-COVID-19 pandemic labour market, with increased demands for such services among those who have permanently lost jobs as a result of the pandemic.

In addition, the strategy is designed to support those unemployed before the pandemic, those looking to return to work or join the workforce and those facing additional barriers to work, in order to promote better job opportunity outcomes for all.



Adult Literacy for Life, a 10-year adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy strategy, was launched in September 2021. The Strategy aims to ensure that every adult has the necessary literacy, numeracy and digital literacy to fully engage in society and realise their potential.

The Strategy makes a number of commitments across four pillars to: ensure people can understand their needs and where to go to meet them; that they can access all of the learning and support they need: that the learning and support available can expand to meet this challenge; and that people and communities are empowered to make a real difference to their lives.

The aims of the Strategy include:

- Increasing in the number of learners engaging with literacy and language support by 20,000 by expanding the range of courses available over the first half of the strategy's lifetime;
- Reduce the number of adults in Ireland with unmet literacy needs, from 18% to 7%;
- Reduce the number of adults in Ireland with unmet numeracy needs from 25% to 12%;
- Reduce the share of adults in Ireland without basic digital skills from 47% to 20%.

Progress towards our EU 2020 Targets

Europe 2020 was the EU’s ten-year growth and jobs strategy, launched in 2010. Five headline targets were set for the EU to achieve by the end of 2020; three are relevant to this Programme and the positive progress made in relation to Ireland’s targets is set out in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Employment and education indicators

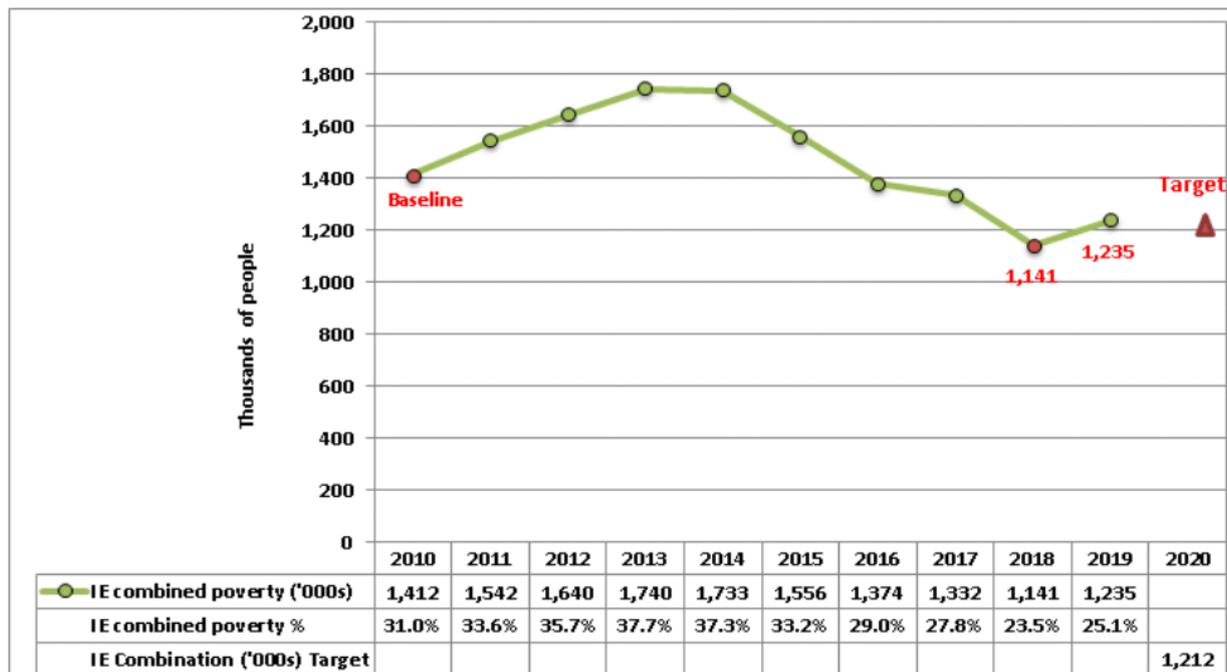
Indicator	Position in 2010	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Target 2020
Employment							
% 20-64 year olds in employment	64.7%	71.3%	72.9%	74.0%	75.0%	72.1%	69-71%
Education							
Early school leavers	11.4%	6.9%	6.1%	5.0%	5.1%	5.0%	8%
Tertiary attainment of 30-34 year-olds	50.1%	52.3%	53.3%	56.3%	55.4%	58.1%	60%

Source: Eurostat

The employment target and the early school-leavers target were exceeded (since 2016). Third level education attainment of 30-34 year olds reached 58.1% in 2020 (males 54.7% and females 61.2%), which while exceeding the EU-27 average of 40%, fell short of the 60% target. The target was however exceeded in 2021, when the Irish rate reached 62% (males 58.5% and females 65.4%),

Ireland’s contribution to the Europe 2020 poverty target is to reduce by a minimum of 200,000 the population in ‘combined poverty’. Combined poverty is the combination of consistent poverty, at-risk-of-poverty and basic deprivation. A person is in ‘combined poverty’ if they are either income poor or subject to basic deprivation. As measured using national data, the population affected by combined poverty (see Figure 1) was 25.1% in 2019, compared to 23.5% in 2018. This figure reflects an increase in basic deprivation (up 2.7 percentage points to 17.8%), despite a decrease in the at-risk-of-poverty rate by 1.2 percentage points to 12.8%. Nominally, this equated to 1.23 million people and represents a decrease of 177,000 people on the 2010 baseline figure. When the 2020 data is available, this level would need to have reduced further in order to achieve Ireland’s contribution to the Europe 2020 target. It should be noted that the current rate represents a decrease of approximately 504,000 people on the peak 2013 rate (1.74 million people).

Figure 1: Combined poverty rates



Source: DSP/Social Inclusion Division data for 2019; the Social Inclusion Monitor for 2019 (latest)

PROGRESS TO DATE

The PEIL OP was amended following the approval of the Programme Monitoring Committee, by Commission Implementing Decision of 9 December 2020 to:

- (a) apply a co-financing rate of 100% to expenditure declared in ESF payment applications during the accounting year starting 1 July 2020 and ending 30 June 2021 for priority axes 1 to 4 in the PEIL OP, pursuant to Article 25a(1) of Regulation (EU) 1303/2013, as introduced by the Regulation (EU) 2020/558 under the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative Plus; and
- (b) transfer €60 million of the ESF resources available for programming for the year 2020 to the ERDF to support the cost of supplying essential Personal Protective Equipment for the Irish healthcare system for use in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic pursuant to Article 25a(2) of Regulation (EU) 1303/2013, as introduced by the Regulation (EU) 2020/558 under the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative Plus.

The application of a 100% co-financing rate to expenditure declared in ESF payment applications during the 2020-2021 accounting year did not have any impact on the delivery of the activities for participants. However, availing of the 100% co-financing did result in the overall allocation being fully drawn down on the basis of expenditure on Payment Applications to the end of 2019 or earlier. Accordingly, a number of smaller activities were removed entirely from the OP and no activity will be claimed for the calendar years 2020 and 2021. This means that no participants can be reported for the activities that were removed and no participants can be reported for 2020 or 2021 for priority axes 1 to 4.

The PEIL OP was further amended, following the approval of the Programme Monitoring Committee, by Commission Implementing Decision of 31 November 2021 to programme Ireland’s 2021 tranche of REACT-EU funding. REACT-EU (Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe) is additional EU funding made available to 2014-2020 Cohesion Policy programmes to respond to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and to prepare a green, digital and resilient recovery of the economy. In November 2021, the European Commission approved the creation of a new priority (Priority 6) within the ESF PEIL to support the continuation of safe and inclusive education and training in a COVID-19 pandemic context.

The financial progress made to-date is shown at Priority Level in Table 2 below. The payment applications submitted have resulted in 97% of the original EU contribution being drawn down and in receipts of €533 million from the Commission as at the end of December 2021. As the most of the activities have been delivered, it is not envisaged that any additional payment applications will be submitted in the 2021/2022 financial year (ending 30 June 2022). It is expected that payment applications for Priority 6 (REACT-EU) activities will be prepared and submitted in the 2022/2023 financial year.

Table 2: Financial Progress

Priority	Revised Allocation	Revised EU Contribution	EU Contribution in PAs made to Date
1	€274,040,738	€137,020,369	€134,641,264
2	€297,615,568	€148,807,784	€138,211,005
3	€241,084,508	€120,542,254	€115,274,037
4	€204,436,257	€136,290,838	€137,858,243
5	€20,000,000	€10,000,000	€7,923,917
6	€88,334,963	€88,334,963	€0
Total	€1,125,512,034	€640,996,208	€533,908,466

The updated progress in terms of participants on ESF activities during the years 2014 to 2019 is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Participants on PEIL ESF Co-funded Activities - update

PEIL 2014-2020	AIP No.	All participants 2014-2019
ETB Training for the Unemployed	ESF 1.1	54,964
Intra EU mobility	ESF 1.5	21
Priority 1 Total		54,985
Social Inclusion and Activation Programme (SICAP)	ESF 2.1	51,844
Youthreach	ESF 2.2	6,183
Garda Youth Diversion Projects (GYDPs)	ESF 2.3	9,830
Young Persons Probation (YPP) projects	ESF 2.4	571
Tus Nua project	ESF 2.8	75
Priority 2 Total		68,503
Third Level Access	ESF 3.1	52,245
BTEI	ESF 3.2	76,109
Adult Literacy	ESF 3.3	120,078
Priority 3 Total		248,432
Back to Work Enterprise Allowance (BTWEA) Scheme	ESF 4.1	336
JobsPlus Incentive Scheme	ESF 4.2	976
Youthreach	ESF 4.5	7,971
Community Training Centres (CTCs)	ESF 4.8	3,046
Defence Forces Employment Support Scheme	ESF 4.9	108
Priority 4 Total		12,437
Overall Total		384,357

INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITY UPDATES

Priority 1

ETB Training for the Unemployed

The courses provided under this activity include:

- **Specific Skills Training** courses which are employment-led and lead to qualifications that offer learners both generic skills and skills specific to particular jobs or occupations,
- **Bridging/Foundation courses** for people who have left school early, or for other reasons need broader-based, generic skills training and
- **Traineeships** or occupational-specific training courses, typically of 9 months duration that use a combination of off-the-job and structured on-the-job workplace training.

ESF co-funding ceased at the end of 2019, but the activity continued in 2020 and 2021.

As we moved into the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Further Education and Training (FET) sector faced similar significant challenges and barriers to learning that were first experienced in 2020. There has been a concerted effort to move learning online, ensure a safe return to physical centres in many cases, and generally to support learners in every possible way. Despite the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic courses and programmes continued to be delivered and became more accessible to learners through increased online and blended learning delivery and new courses and programmes were introduced across a range of programmes. The following are the percentages of new starters in 2021 compared to 2020 for each strand of ETB Training:

- Specific Skills Training: 121%
- Bridging/Foundation: 161%
- Traineeships: 100%

Springboard and ICT Conversion Courses



Springboard commenced as an initiative to help unemployed and previously self-employed people remain as close as possible to the labour market by accessing free part-time flexible higher education and training opportunities to upskill or reskill in areas where there are skills shortages and where sustainable employment opportunities may arise as the economy recovers. This is actioned through the funding of places on courses that are at levels 6 to 9 on the National Framework of Qualifications and are provided by public and private higher education providers across the country.

Providers and courses are selected for funding through an annual competitive calls process. Since 2015, Springboard courses and ICT conversion courses have been run as a joint initiative under the banner brand Springboard+. Courses may lead to full awards but there may also be minor awards or special purposes awards. All courses provide job-readiness training and most offer the opportunity for work placement, project-based learning or industry site visits where appropriate. The eligibility criteria was extended to those in employment wishing to upskill or reskill (2017) and was further extended to include all people irrespective of their employment status (2018). Returners and those in receipt of certain allowances, including Jobseekers Benefit, continued to be able to access courses free of charge. Level 6 courses remained free to all participants and for employed participants on courses NFQ level 7 – 9, 90%

of the course fee was funded by the Government and the ESF, with participants required to contribute just 10% of the fee.

Springboard and ICT Skills were two of the Activities where no funding requests were submitted to the Commission following the application for 100% funding for 2020 and the Commission Decision of December 2020.

All Springboard+ 2020/2021 courses commenced online as planned and continued to be delivered by the Course Providers. There was little or no disruption to the delivery of Springboard+ 2021/2022 courses which are being delivered both online and blended on-campus. As with the previous year, there was a significant demand for places resulting in quite a high number of enrolments.

Intra-EU Mobility



The Intra-EU Mobility Co-Sponsored Placement Programme, under EURES Ireland's EYE (Experience Your Europe) Initiative, offered jobseekers an opportunity to upskill and gain experience through a work placement in another European country. The programme supported jobseekers in taking up a work placement in Europe for up to 12 months. During this time the jobseeker was co-sponsored by EURES Ireland and the employer offering the work placement.

The programme was administered by EURES Ireland, the European Employment Services section of the Department of Social Protection.

The ESF co-funding for Intra-EU Mobility ceased at the end of 2017, but the activity continued on up to and including 2020.

The programme came to a natural end, having run from 2015-2020. The countries where the placements were undertaken were Belgium, Czech Republic, Cyprus, Germany, the Netherlands and Poland. A reactivation of the programme is not envisaged at this time.

Priority 2

Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP)



The Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) 2018 – 2022, which is the successor to the 2015 – 2017 programme, was launched on 20 April 2018. It aims to tackle poverty and social exclusion at a local level and is managed locally by 33 Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) with support from Local Authorities. Programme Actions are delivered by Programme Implementers (PIs) across 51 Lots. PIs work with Local Community Groups to create more sustainable communities and with disadvantaged individuals providing help through lifelong learning supports, employment supports and personal development supports.

ESF co-funding ceased at the end of 2019 (The ESF Managing Authority availed of the COVID-19 pandemic response initiative by the Commission), but the activity continued in 2020 and 2021.

The COVID-19 pandemic, and its associated public health restrictions, continued to have a significant impact on SICAP implementation in 2021. Schools shut for a significant amount of time; businesses closed and there were restrictions on travel. Food insecurity persisted as an issue for households, albeit at a lesser level than 2020, and was pronounced among target groups. SICAP Implementers reported complex issues presenting in clients such as anxiety, financial insecurity, social isolation, and the digital divide, among others.

Despite these challenges, the SICAP targets were exceeded by the end of 2021, with a total of 2,646 Local Community Groups (LCGs) and 26,483 individuals supported. SICAP has almost reached pre-pandemic levels of engagement with individuals.

The data from 2021 shows that there was an increased focus on, and engagement with, harder to reach groups. There was an increase in the proportion of Travellers and Roma on the SICAP caseload; an increase in the proportion of long-term unemployed and an increase in the proportion of people on the caseload who face multiple barriers to social and economic exclusion. Overall, this demonstrates a small, but positive, trend for SICAP.

Progression rates for individuals started to rise in 2021, though are still some way off pre-pandemic targets. 38% of individuals took part in lifelong learning activities and 19% received pre-start up self-employment supports. 6% got a job. 527 activities were delivered for children and families, an increase from 2020, but a decrease of 27% pre-pandemic, reflecting the challenges of engaging with this cohort through lockdowns and school closures. 4,550 parents and guardians and 31,392 children and young people were supported in 2021.

Changing needs/innovative responses:

Across the country the SICAP programme quickly adapted to changing community needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. It's traditionally in-person, one-to-one services moved online and, given the high level of disadvantage among its key target groups, additional efforts were made to ensure people could access these services.

New priority needs that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic included:

- Food Poverty
- Mental Health and Isolation
- Digital Exclusion/ Digital Poverty

Across the country, programme implementers (LDCs) delivered innovative, collaborative and community-led solutions to these emerging needs, both through direct service provision, and through indirect support of local community groups. Further case study examples (including links to more detailed case studies) are provided below for each of these key areas of emerging need.

Food Poverty

In Cavan, Breffni Integrated coordinated a county-wide Food Hub initiative (more information [here](#)), while LDCs across the country delivered food parcels and provided shop and drop and meals on wheels services to disadvantaged families and older people. Case study examples include:

- Carlow Development Partnership (more information [here](#)),
- Ballyhoura Development Company (more information [here](#)),
- Cork City Partnership (more information [here](#)),
- Donegal Local Development Company (more information [here](#)),
- Dublin Inner City Co-op (more information [here](#)),
- Laois Partnership Company (more information [here](#)),

- Leitrim Development Company (more information [here](#)), and
- Sligo Leader Partnership Company (more information [here](#)).

Island communities faced specific food security challenges during the pandemic due to reliance on mainland deliveries for their food supplies. In West Cork, Comhar na nOileain Teoranta developed a farmers market on Cape Clear island, which sold only local produce (more information [here](#)), and the South West Mayo Development Company ran a polytunnel project on Clare Island, which helped to ensure fresh vegetables for islanders during the pandemic (more information [here](#)).

Mental Health and Isolation

In terms of mental health, disadvantaged groups and older people were particularly affected by the COVID-19 lockdown measures. A number of LDCs provided a friendly call service (e.g. Cork City Partnership, more information [here](#); IRD Duhallow, more information [here](#)) and phone based crisis counselling services (e.g. Carlow Development Partnership, more information [here](#)). The Kilkenny Leader Partnership delivered a community/peer-led response to the need for local 'out of hours' services for those with mental health issues, through the collaborative establishment of a local 'Crisis Café' (more information [here](#)).

Other LDCs focused on specific disadvantaged groups. For example, The PAUL Partnership in Limerick, in collaboration with DORAS and the Limerick Mental Health Association, developed specific mental health supports for men living in Direct Provision (more information [here](#)). The Waterford Area Partnership developed the 'Waterford Women's Creative Cocoon-COVID-19 Project', which promoted creativity, positive mental health and wellbeing and education, and was specifically targeted at disadvantaged women, with a focus on those affected by rural isolation (more information [here](#)).

Offaly Local Development Company took an innovative approach to addressing lockdown isolation through an outreach initiative that brought socially distanced bingo, music and exercise classes to residential estates and nursing units around the country (more information [here](#)).

Digital Exclusion

Due to pandemic measures, most services, public and private, were moved online. This exacerbated the digital divide and, for marginalised groups and individuals who tend to lack digital skills and access to digital technology (e.g. WIFI, laptops, smart phones), it erected further barriers to accessing services.

In order to better connect people with local services and up to date information the West Cork Development Partnership established a website providing local area contact lists, from pharmacies and food outlets offering delivery services and support information on accessing the Pandemic Unemployment Payment online, to mental health supports and activities for children and families (more information [here](#)). In Fingal, Dublin, Empower ran the 'Connect and Include' digital inclusion initiative, which targeted children and families most in need (identified via relevant referral agencies such as DEIS schools and family support agencies), and assigned a key worker to liaise with the family and develop a bespoke plan tailored to their specific needs. Depending on assessed need, individual plans could include provision of hardware (e.g. laptops), access to tech (e.g. broadband) and/or digital literacy training, with six-month follow up visits by the assigned key worker (more information [here](#)).

Youthreach



Youthreach is the national response to the needs of unqualified early school leavers in Ireland. The programme is designed to offer two years integrated education, training and work experience for young people who have left school early without qualifications or incomplete qualifications or vocational training. The programme aims to provide participants with the knowledge, skills and

confidence required to participate fully in society and progress to further education, training and employment.

Youthreach was programmed under Priority 4 (the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI)) of the PEIL OP from 2014 to 2017, and re-allocated under Priority 2 with effect from 1 January 2018.

ESF co-funding ceased at the end of 2019 (The ESF Managing Authority availed of the COVID response initiative by the Commission), but the activity continued in 2020 and 2021.

As we moved into the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Further Education and Training (FET) sector faced similar significant challenges and barriers to learning that were first experienced in 2020. There has been a concerted effort to move learning online, ensure a safe return to physical centres in many cases, and generally to support learners in every possible way. Despite the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, courses and programmes continued to be delivered and became more accessible to learners through increased online and blended learning delivery and new courses and programmes were introduced across a range of programmes. New starter numbers in 2021 were 67% of the 2020 level.

Garda Youth Diversion Projects (GYDP)



The primary objective of the Garda Youth Diversion Projects (GYDPs) is to engage with young people at risk of/or involved in criminal and/or anti-social behaviour and provide them with targeted supports designed to enable these young people to stop their offending and become positive contributors to society. Young people are mainly referred to projects through the local Gardaí (Police).

Projects mainly work with young people aged 12 to 17, but also seek to reduce the future incidence of criminal and anti-social behaviour by providing family support services, undertaking preventative work with younger children at risk and continuing to work with young people who 'age-out' on attaining 18 years, as required and on a case-by-case basis.

ESF co-funding ceased at the end of 2019 (The ESF Managing Authority availed of the COVID-19 pandemic response initiative by the Commission), but the activity continued in 2020 and 2021.

GYDPs continued to face significant challenges in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic related public health restrictions. Public health restrictions and guidelines such as lockdowns, social distancing and mask wearing mandates impacted negatively on the activities of GYDPs. At different periods during the year key activities such as Face to Face youth work and Group youth work could not take place. In some areas, participants could not take part in planned interventions due to a lack of available transport due to social distancing guidelines preventing youth justice workers providing transport. The uncertainty of timing of restrictions meant that GYDPs had difficulty developing Case Management plans as they were unsure of what interventions they would be able to facilitate while adhering to guidelines. GYDPs also had difficulties in engaging participants unable to or reluctant to take part in interventions remotely. Participants not willing to comply with social distancing and mask wearing mandates also brought challenges.

Notwithstanding the issues GYDPs faced in 2021, they adapted to the challenges by altering how activities and planned interventions were delivered. They continued to deliver interventions and connect with participants using Digital, Remote, Detached and Outreach youth work. When the public health situation allowed for it, participants returned to Face to Face and Group youth work.

Young Persons' Probation (YPP) Projects



Young Person Probation (YPP) Community Based Organisations funded by the Probation Service in order to develop and deliver services to young offenders in their communities.

The Probation Service monitors the work of the YPP Community Based Organisations to ensure the needs of YPP clients are best met and that the work of the CBO supports the strategic direction of the Probation Service.

The YPP projects provide a range of services to young offenders in local communities, including training & education, and offender management programmes. Participants come from marginalised backgrounds and socio economic deprived areas, and require the highest levels of support and interventions. It is considered that the clients are presenting with increasingly complex issues, including mental health issues.

Four of the YPP projects are included in the European Social Fund programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning. These are:

- Le Chéile which is a nationwide mentoring service;
- Céim ar Chéim and Southill Outreach projects based in Limerick City; and
- Dóchas don Óige project based in Galway.

ESF co-funding ceased at the end of 2019 (The ESF Managing Authority availed of the COVID-19 pandemic response initiative by the Commission), but the activity continued in 2020 and 2021.

The four YPP projects continued to provide services and programmes to participants during 2021, notwithstanding the continuation of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions during 2021. Nevertheless, the organisations continued to provide crucial and innovative supports to vulnerable persons throughout the period of the lockdowns and public health restrictions. The following are some examples of how the organizations achieved this:

- From Q2 2021, Le Chéile returned to in person mentoring in line within the then public health guidelines, and for most of 2021 mentoring was delivered in person, except in limited circumstances e.g. where there were any health concerns.
- Southill Outreach were also able to return to full capacity in 2021, and the project moved to a new premises, which will enable increased groupwork. Throughout 2021, Southill Outreach operated at full capacity within the Government guidelines, including meeting young people face to face, and providing online programmes and counselling sessions where needed.
- Dochas continued to deliver its services and programs and is continuing to deliver some programmes remotely.
- Céim ar Chéim continued to provide its education programmes remotely during compulsory lockdown periods, while continuing to provide outreach support services as well as counselling services and small group activities.

The projects have flagged the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people's mental health, including the lack of structure and routine, lack of motivation, and an increase in anxiety among young persons.

Disability Project - Ability Programme



The Ability Programme ran from 1 July 2018 until 31 August 2021 and provided funding to 27 service providers across the country. The Ability Programme had an overall budget of up to €16 million from 2018 to 2021. The 27 recipient organisations worked with people with a variety of disabilities between the ages of 15 and 29.

The programme aimed to support up to 2,600 participants to develop personal and work skills through the provision of a range of person-centred supports. Its overall goal was to support participants to progress in education or training, attain meaningful social roles and/or secure employment.

The Ability Programme was one of the Activities where no funding requests were submitted to the Commission following the application for 100% funding for 2020 and the Commission Decision of December 2020.

At programme end 2,173 young people with disabilities were supported through Ability, representing 82% of the overall programme target. The level of support to service providers exceeded targets by 158%. Similarly, the number of families supported through the Ability programme peaked at 188% of the initial target.

The COVID-19 pandemic posed considerable challenges for organisations, with 23 organisations (88%) reporting the pandemic as a key challenge between June 2020 and August 2021. All Ability-funded projects continued to run their range of activities, training and supports, primarily remotely, with over half of grantees providing in-person support where feasible and in accordance with public health guidelines. Adapting to remote working, shifting services online for grantees and lack of capacity to develop and deliver the Ability programme were some of the key challenges experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Below are a number of further issues reported by Ability organisation's during 2021:

1. The recruitment of participants was impacted by the pandemic with a number of organisations reporting the temporary closure or reduction of referral agencies' services directly impacting recruitment. The longer time lag between initial referral and the registration and engagement of the participant also caused significant delays to participants starting training and work-ready capacity building.
2. All organisations reported innovative digital approaches in response to the COVID-19 pandemic related challenges including embracing new digital approaches, using digital platforms to increase access to support, increased infrastructure support and upskilling of staff. A number of organisations also noted however, that digital engagement does not suit all participants.
3. Initiatives were also implemented to maintain and/or build employer relations. However, the level of engagement was generally lower due to ongoing limitations on business and employment opportunities. For at least half of grantees (14; 52%), work placements or jobs secured by participants with the support of Ability were postponed, cancelled, or impacted.
4. Eight grantees reported participant concerns such as limited work experience, job opportunities or the lack of availability of other similar services into which they could transition.

5. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the isolation created through lockdown, impacted on vital skills acquired by participants pre-pandemic, adversely affecting their subsequent ability to return to employment.

Integration and Employment of Migrants

The objectives of the Migrants Activity are to promote active inclusion, equal opportunities, active participation and to improve employability through social inclusion employability programmes and the socio-economic integration of marginalised communities who are experiencing barriers to participation and employment. It targets EEA Nationals who are resident in Ireland and Third Country Nationals with permission to enter employment in Ireland. Following the first open call for proposals in 2016, €3.3 million of funding was made available under the Activity for a second open call for projects to commence in 2019. The five successful projects (with a four year term) were Business in the Community; New Communities Partnership; County Kilkenny Partnership; Cultúr Celebrating Diversity; and Seetec.

Integration and Employment of Migrants was one of the Activities where no funding requests were submitted to the Commission following the application for 100% funding for 2020 and the Commission Decision of December 2020.

The introduction of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions in March 2020 necessitated that the projects amend their delivery methodology from largely classroom-based, to online delivery. This in some cases required budget amendments (e.g. switch of budget from 'room hire' to zoom licence or training for staff in online delivery). In the main, this switch was successful in retaining/recruiting participants (with increased geographical scope). Some issues were identified by projects (e.g. cost of participation in terms of equipment/broadband; broadband performance in rural areas).

Projects approved under the 2016 Calls for Proposals have concluded.

Tús Nua Project



Tús Nua provides a support service for women leaving prison and women referred from the community (with a history of offending), and in particular with safe supported housing and a positive environment as part of a 6 month supported residential programme.

The project supports participants in their transition and reintegration into the wider community. The participants in the project have complex support needs that require a holistic care plan with a specific focus on reducing the risk of reoffending and supporting personal development, education and training and tailored progression routes.

ESF co-funding ceased at the end of 2017, but the activity continued up to and including 2021.

Tús Nua continued to provide residential accommodation and programmes to female participants throughout COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and 2021, but noted that participants encountered issues such as isolation and lack of access to services. The level of referrals decreased towards the end of 2021.

Other issues that arose included a decline in participants' motivational levels, increased instances of domestic abuse experienced by female participants, and increased instances of mental health issues. There was also a reduction in engagement by members of the travelling community due to challenges

they faced with self-isolating during the pandemic and the reported increase of the virus in their community.

There are plans for the redevelopment of the site with the commitment to refurbish or provide a new building for Tús Nua.

Gender Equality

The Gender Equality Activity supports a cohort of those women who are currently detached from the labour market, in order to assist their return to the labour market. Strand A – Women Returning to the Workforce (WRW) targets women who are detached from the labour market and the objectives are to develop and deliver one or more training models to offer self-developmental training in employment related skills on a part time. Strand B – Women’s Entrepreneurship (WE) targets women who can be supported to increase the rate of women’s entrepreneurship, the objectives are to develop and deliver interventions aimed at addressing the gender gap in entrepreneurial activity through targeted supports for women’s entrepreneurship.

Gender Equality was of the Activities where no funding requests were submitted to the Commission following the application for 100% funding for 2020 and the Commission Decision of December 2020.

The introduction of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions in March 2020 necessitated that the projects amend their delivery methodology from largely classroom-based, to online delivery. This in some cases required budget amendments (e.g. switch of budget from ‘room hire’ to zoom licence or training for staff in online delivery). In the main, this switch was successful in retaining/recruiting participants (with increased geographical scope). Some issues were identified by projects (e.g. cost of participation in terms of equipment/broadband; broadband performance in rural areas).

Projects approved under the 2016 Calls for Proposals have concluded. Projects approved under the 2019 Call for Proposals are due to complete by 30 September 2022.

Priority 3

Third Level Access



This activity supports the Student Assistance Fund (SAF) and the fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD). The SAF aims to support students facing ongoing or temporary financial hardship which would otherwise negatively impact their completion of their higher education course. The SAF can be claimed for expenses such as books, rent, food, medical costs, class materials, light and heat bills, essential travel and childcare.

The FSD supports students with disabilities in overcoming barriers to participation in higher education due to disability. Support under both these objectives are offered to eligible students on full-time higher education courses. Funding can be used to provide supports and accommodations for assistive technology, equipment and software, non-medical helpers, academic or learning support, deaf supports and transport.

ESF co-funding ceased at the end of 2018, but the activity continued up to and including 2021.

Back to Education Initiative (BTEI)



The overall aim of the Back to Education Part-Time Programme (BTEI) is to increase the participation of young people and adults with less than second level education in a range of part-time accredited learning opportunities leading to awards on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) to facilitate their access, transfer and progression to other education or employment pathways.

The BTEI offers part-time provision of up to 400 hours per year, leading to certification at Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) levels 1-6. The BTEI's primary target groups are those that experience strong barriers to participation and are more difficult to engage in the formal learning process. The initiative is designed to complement other Further Education provision funded by SOLAS such as Adult Literacy, Youthreach, VTOS and Post Leaving Certificate Courses.

ESF co-funding ceased at the end of 2019 (The ESF Managing Authority availed of the COVID-19 pandemic response initiative by the Commission), but the activity continued in 2020 and 2021.

The issues and challenges faced by ETBs in relation to all its activities were as would be expected, lockdowns prevented face to face learning while during the periods where restrictions were eased, social distancing meant that reduced learner/tutor and learner/instructor ratios led to increased unit costs of delivery in many cases.

As we moved into the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Further Education and Training (FET) sector faced similar significant challenges and barriers to learning that were first experienced in 2020. There has been a concerted effort to move learning online, ensure a safe return to physical centres in many cases, and generally to support learners in every possible way. Despite the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, courses and programmes continued to be delivered and became more accessible to learners through increased online and blended learning delivery and new courses and programmes were introduced across a range of programmes. New starter numbers in 2021 were 92% of the 2020 level.

Adult Literacy

The objectives of this activity are to increase access to literacy, numeracy and language tuition for adults whose skills are inadequate for participation in modern society and the social and economic life of their communities. It targets those adults with primary education or less and whose literacy and numeracy skills do not match Level 3 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). Key target groups in this area of investment include the unemployed, particularly the long-term unemployed, disadvantaged groups, those under-35's and those formerly employed in declining sectors such as the construction sector, as well as employed adults in need of improved basic literacy, language and numeracy skills.

The importance of literacy, numeracy and ICT skills for every citizen is evidently growing, yet half of the adult population (56 percent) in Ireland have no ICT skills or can only fulfil the simplest set of tasks in a technology-rich environment. Low levels of literacy and numeracy also exist within the workforce, which can impede the introduction and dissemination of new productivity improving technologies, digitalisation and work-organisation practices.

ESF co-funding ceased at the end of 2019 (The ESF Managing Authority availed of the COVID-19 pandemic response initiative by the Commission), but the activity continued in 2020 and 2021.

As we moved into the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Further Education and Training (FET) sector faced similar significant challenges and barriers to learning that were first experienced in 2020. There has been a concerted effort to move learning online, ensure a safe return to physical centres in

many cases, and generally to support learners in every possible way. Despite the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, courses and programmes continued to be delivered and became more accessible to learners through increased online and blended learning delivery and new courses and programmes were introduced across a range of programmes. New starter numbers in 2021 were 81% of the 2020 level.

Priority 4

Back to Work Enterprise Allowance Scheme



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agus Coimirce Sóisialaí**
Department of Employment Affairs
and Social Protection

The Back to Work Enterprise Allowance (BTWEA) supports participants to engage in self-employment by allowing them to retain a reducing proportion of their qualifying social

welfare payment over two years (equivalent to 100% in year 1 and 75% in year 2). The YEI is supporting participants who are NEETs (Not in Employment Education and Training) as defined by the nationally agreed definition and under 25 at the point of commencement on the BTWEA scheme.

ESF co-funding ceased at the end of 2018, but the activity continued up to and including 2021.

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government quickly mobilised and implemented a range of income and employment support measures, including the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), to cushion the income shock experienced by workers and their employers and for those in self-employment who experienced a significant decrease in trade. These income supports have proven to be effective in maintaining incomes and insulating people against a sudden and severe income shock.

As part of these measures, Back to Work Enterprise Allowance (BTWEA) participants whose businesses were impacted by restrictions, up to temporary closure, were permitted to continue the BTWEA if they wished. The aim was to support these enterprises through this difficult period to boost their chances of survival post-lockdown. Retaining an income support was vital to ensuring the entrepreneurs supported through the BTWEA maintained their status as self-employed and were ready to restart their business as restrictions in their sectors eased.

The COVID-19 pandemic Enterprise Support Grant (ESG) payment was introduced as part of the July 2020 Jobs Stimulus package and extended the Enterprise Support Grant to self-employed recipients of PUP, or jobseekers who had an underlying entitlement to PUP, who closed their claim on or after 18th May 2020 and re-opened their business. Funding of up to €1,000 was available on a once off basis for each applicant to meet business re-start costs. In June 2021, reflecting the continued impact of the pandemic on businesses, the COVID-19 pandemic ESG was extended to PUP recipients closing their claim who had previously availed of the Grant and were again re-opening their businesses. The support was an activation measure to encourage business owners to transition back to self-employment. BTWEA recipients were also allowed avail of this payment where they met the conditions of this payment.

The qualifying period (9 months for long term unemployed) was waived for PUP claimants looking to enter self-employment for a new business through the BTWEA.

Given the restrictions of 2020 and into 2021, the BTWEA has experienced a drop in new applications from people looking to commence a new business with the support of the scheme. It is envisaged that as restrictions lift and the economy reopens that the popularity of the BTWEA as an option for creating employment will increase.

There were 2,307 participants of the BTWEA scheme at the end of 2021, this compares to 4,115 participants at end 2019 i.e., pre-Pandemic. There were 1,364 new starters to the scheme during 2021 and this compares to 1,706 during 2019.

JobsPlus Incentive Scheme

JobsPlus Youth is an employer incentive which encourages employers to offer employment opportunities to the long term unemployed.



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Department of Employment Affairs
and Social Protection

The incentive is open to all eligible employers in the private, community, not for profit and voluntary sectors, including those who are self-employed who are filling new positions or vacancies arising from natural turnover. The employer must offer full-time work of at least 30 hours per week over at least 4 days. Grants are payable at €7,500 or €10,000, depending on how long the new employee was unemployed. The grant is paid in monthly instalments for a maximum of 24 months. Employers can now recruit persons under the age of 25 who had been unemployed for 4 months in the previous 6 months. Employers are paid the JobsPlus grant at the lower €7,500 rate in respect of these employees. For YEI support, all participants must come within the NEET (Not in Employment Education and Training) definition and be under 25 years of age when entering the scheme.

ESF co-funding ceased at the end of 2018, but the activity continued up to and including 2021.

The public health emergency measures introduced by the Government from March 2020 had a direct impact on the JobsPlus scheme. The reduction in JobsPlus expenditure was as a result of other support measures JobsPlus employers and employees were availing of including Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) and subsequently the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS).

JobsPlus funding was temporarily paused for the employers who availed of these other support measures. This directly affected 75% of JobsPlus employers whose scheme payments, to support 79% of JobsPlus scheme employments, were paused in 2020. The numbers of those that were funded through JobsPlus in 2021 increased and decreased in line with the differing emergency measures in place, however a 28% increase can be seen of the numbers funded from January 2021 to December 2021.

The 2021-2025 Pathways to Work Strategy has committed to increase the funding for JobsPlus recruitment subsidy to €28.3 million. The strategy also commits to providing early access to the JobsPlus recruitment subsidy for young unemployed people under 30 years of age. As a result, the sanctioned numbers that can avail of JobsPlus has been increased to 8,000 places. PUP is regarded as a qualifying payment when reviewing eligibility, where a person has an underlying entitlement to jobseeker's, and time spent on PUP will count towards the JobsPlus qualify period. The eligibility criteria have also been amended to include Jobseekers under 30 years (previously age under 25) of age. They can now qualify for the JobsPlus scheme if they have been on the Live Register for 4 months (104 days) in the previous 6 months.

Community Training Centres (CTCs)

There are 35 CTCs around the country offering programmes to young people generally between 16 and 21 years of age, who have left school without completing formal examinations or who have incomplete qualifications; who are experiencing difficulties finding a job; and who are keen to gain a qualification. Programmes include basic skills training and work experience and have a strong emphasis on literacy and numeracy training. CTC courses are full-time and participants can avail of training opportunities within a CTC for a period up to two years. CTCs, which are owned and managed by local community

groups, are funded and supported by SOLAS/ETBs.

ESF co-funding ceased at the end of 2018, but the activity continued up to and including 2021.

As we moved into the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Further Education and Training (FET) sector faced similar significant challenges and barriers to learning that were first experienced in 2020. There has been a concerted effort to move learning online, ensure a safe return to physical centres in many cases, and generally to support learners in every possible way. Despite the disruption of COVID-19 pandemic, courses and programmes continued to be delivered and became more accessible to learners through increased online and blended learning delivery and new courses and programmes were introduced across a range of programmes. New starter numbers in 2021 were 83% of the 2020 level.

Defence Forces Employment Support Scheme



The Defence Forces Employment Support Scheme targets unemployed 18-24 year olds who face significant barriers to gaining employment and seeks to provide participants with new skills, competencies and self-development that will enhance their capacity to pursue employment, work experience or further educational opportunities. The Scheme encompasses a training programme of 10 weeks duration, consisting of 5 weeks of military orientated training interspersed with 5 weeks of educational orientated training. The scheme is one of the actions in *Pathways to Work 2021-2025*.

The next iteration of the Defence Forces Employment Support Scheme was due to commence in Renmore Barracks, Galway in June 2020. However, it was necessary to postpone due to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and related Government guidance. This remained the case during 2021. No decision has yet been reached on a date or venue for the next iteration.

Youth Employment Support Scheme

The Youth Employment Support Scheme (YESS) was introduced on 1 October 2018 and ended on 12 July 2021. YESS targeted young jobseekers aged between 18 and 24 who are long-term unemployed or who face barriers to employment. The scheme aimed to provide jobseekers with the opportunity to learn basic work and social skills in a supportive environment while on a work placement. The scheme provided a supportive structure for participants, including case worker support for both placement hosts and jobseekers.

A new work placement scheme, the Work Placement Experience Programme (WPEP), was launched on 12 July 2021. The WPEP, encompassing the YESS, aims to provide work experience for jobseekers who have been unemployed, including time spent on PUP, for more than six months regardless of age. A particular objective is to provide a mechanism for those with recent work experience or with sector specific skills to pivot into new employment/jobs through additional learning with new and relevant work experience.

Existing YESS participants were given the option to transfer onto the new programme prior to its launch, subject to the agreement of both the host and the participant. If either party wished to maintain the existing arrangement, they were be able to complete their YESS scheme under the existing terms.

Priority 5

Technical Assistance

Through the Technical Assistance priority, the ESF Managing Authority continues to support the maintenance and ongoing development of the eCohesion IT system for reporting, monitoring, auditing and accounting for expenditure under the ESF. In 2021, there were 170 ESF active licences for the system. A system review of eCohesion was undertaken in 2021 in conjunction with the ERDF.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions on events being held, the ESF Managing Authority deferred the procurement of any promotional material during 2021.

The ESF Managing Authority worked as part of the ESIF Communications Committee to develop and launch the new EU Funds website, www.eufunds.ie.

In 2021, the ESF Managing Authority sponsored a Special Recognition Award for ESF co-funded projects as part of the AONTAS STAR Awards (Showcasing Teamwork, Awarding Recognition). The Awards were a unique opportunity for ESF to gain nationwide visibility and presence with a wide ranging audience of learners, communities, organisations and the media.

The ESF, ERDF, EMFF, AMIF Managing Authorities and the SEUPB co-operated to produce a special Europe Day supplement in the Sunday Independent on 9 May 2021.

Priority 6

Supports for the reopening of schools

Given the impact of schools closures on children and their families, and in particular those from a disadvantaged background or with special needs, the safe reopening of schools has been a key priority in the response to COVID-19 pandemic. The *Roadmap for the Full Reopening of Schools* sets out a range of measures to facilitate the safe return of primary (typically aged 4-12 years) and post-primary students (typically aged 12-18 years) to school. The Roadmap outlines a range of funding supports to be made available to schools to increase their capacity to minimise the risk of introduction and spread of COVID-19, including for example:

- purchase of PPE and hand sanitiser
- enhanced cleaning regimes
- enhanced supervision support to ensure physical distancing
- the employment of an aide to assist with the arrangements necessary for school reopening.

Enhanced support is provided for special classes and special schools in recognition of the particular challenges that these schools and classes face due to the complex medical and care needs of the children they cater for. These measures support schools to reopen safely and ensure the continued provision of inclusive education and training in a COVID-19 context.

Provision of laptops to disadvantaged students

A lack of access to suitable equipment is a key element of the digital divide. As part of a package of COVID-19 pandemic supports for the higher and further education sectors, funding was provided to education providers for a once-off COVID-19 pandemic grant to support disadvantaged students in accessing ICT devices. The decision to support access to laptops for disadvantaged students was made in response to issues identified by the Tertiary Education Steering Group and the associated Connectivity

Sub-group, which included participation from the representative bodies in the higher and further education sector and the Union of Students in Ireland. Funding was allocated to HEIs and ETBs with laptops then procured and distributed in line with needs on the ground. The measure supports higher and further education institutions to address the digital divide and facilitates the continued engagement of disadvantaged students in remote learning.

EVALUATION ACTIVITY

The Evaluation Plan for PEIL provides that other relevant evaluations, outside the scope of the evaluation plan itself, are planned and will take place over the course of the programming period. These evaluations are noted within the Plan itself, together with any relevant recommendations or findings. This is to ensure that all relevant stakeholders are made aware of relevant evaluation work, in the interest of transparency and emergent learning.

Specific Skills Training (part of ETB Training for the Unemployed)

SOLAS appointed Indecon International Economic Consultants in 2018 to undertake an evaluation of Specific Skills Training (part of ETB Training for the Unemployed).

The evaluation concluded that Specific Skills Training (SST) is consistent with the National Skills Strategy and Pathways to Work, which places a strong emphasis on ensuring that Ireland has a well-skilled and adaptable labour force and the need to increase the employment focus of activation programmes.

Learners, Training Centre Managers and Employers all reported strong benefits to learners from participation in SST. In addition, the evaluation found that the cost of SST per beneficiary is relatively low compared to a number of other comparable programmes.

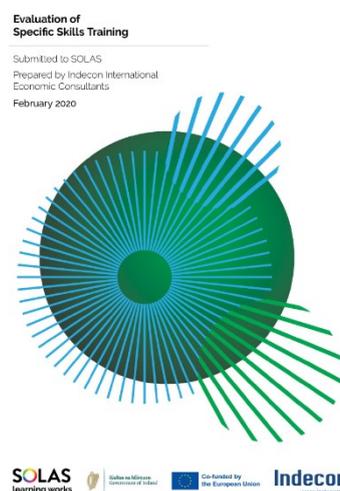
The evaluation included a Counterfactual Impact Assessment of the impact of SST on labour market outcomes 12 months following completion of the course via a comparison of labour market outcomes for programme participants and a matched control group of similar non-participants. The results suggest a positive impact of SST, with an increase in probability of employment ranging from 3.5% to 5.6%. SST appears to have the largest impact on those who have spent the lowest percentage of time on the Live Register in the preceding five years. Those who had spent longer periods on the Live Register had lower employment probabilities both in the treatment and control groups.

The overall conclusion of the evaluation is that SST still has a role to play in supporting the unemployed in returning to work or progressing on to further training or education. The evaluation makes a number of recommendations for the refinement of the programme to enhance its effectiveness and impact.

Other Evaluation Activity

Other relevant evaluations which were ongoing in 2021 include –

- An independent evaluation of the Garda Youth Diversion Programme is being carried out by Research Matters on behalf of the Department of Justice. The evaluation commenced in December 2021. The report due to be finalised in 2022.



- The SICAP (2018-2022*) Programme Review and Consultation went to tender in 2021 and the evaluation commenced in Q1 2022. The desk review and consultation process is currently underway and final report is due by end Q3 2022 (*programme runs to end 2023; review and consultation to cover 2018 to mid-2022).
- A programme evaluation, aimed at evaluating the extent to which the Ability Programme met its stated policy objectives, was undertaken. A contractor, Quality Matters, was appointed by Pobal to undertake this work. The final evaluation report was published in 2022 and is available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/service/d38c9e-apply-for-funding-under-the-ability-programme/>.

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION

Aontas STAR Awards

The STAR Awards (Showcasing Teamwork, Awarding Recognition) celebrates the positive contribution that adult learning initiatives make to adult learners, local communities and wider society. The ESF once again sponsored a Special Recognition Award for ESF co-funded projects. The Awards are a unique opportunity for ESF to gain nationwide visibility with a wide ranging audience of learners, communities, organisations and the media.

The first online STAR Awards ceremony on was held on 4 March 2021.

Seven ESF projects were shortlisted for an award, with three receiving awards at the final ceremony.

STAR Award Winners – ESF Projects

- Irish Wheelchair Association: Social Inclusion (Large Organisation)
- Blossom Ireland: Mitigating Educational Disadvantage through Innovation (during the COVID-19 pandemic)
- WALK REAL Ability Project: ESF Special Recognition Award



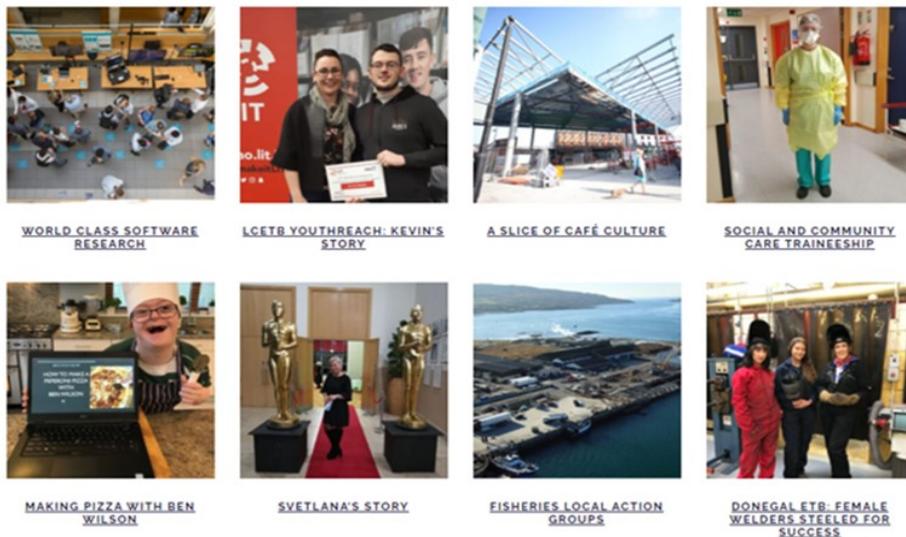
EU Funds Website



The ESF Managing Authority worked as part of the ESIF Communications Committee to develop and launch the new EU Funds website, www.eufunds.ie.

The website brings together information about EU funding for a broad range of projects and programmes covering various areas, from education, research, employment, regional development to the environment, humanitarian aid, agriculture, and the marine, among many others.

The “Stories” section of the website shares just some of the stories and experiences of people, communities, companies, and organisations that have benefited from the support of the EU Funds in Ireland, including the ESF.



Europe Day

The ESF, ERDF, EMFF, AMIF Managing Authorities and the SEUPB co-operated on a joint communications project to mark Europe Day 2021.

We partnered with the Sunday Independent to produce a special Europe Day supplement for 9 May 2021.

The supplement included contributions from MEP Mairead McGuinness and Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform Michael McGrath T.D. and stories from all of the funds.

To also mark Europe day, the ESF Managing Authority had the opportunity to write a blog post for Donegal ETB's website.

The focus of the post was the ESF, EU funding for FET in Donegal ETB and the work the ETB does to promote the ESF. The blog is available at:

<https://donegaletb.ie/blog/2021/05/04/euinyregion-2/>



Public Awareness Survey

The ESIF Communications Committee undertook a Public Awareness and Attitudes survey with the contract awarded to Behaviour and Attitudes. Final report was received in March 2021 and is available at: <https://eufunds.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Attitudes-and-Awareness-of-the-European-Funds-in-Ireland-2020.pdf>

The survey found that:

- There is strong public support for the EU in Ireland;
- Over 87% of respondents view Ireland's EU membership as a good thing and having a positive impact on the country;
- Over 3 in 4 people are aware of at least one European Fund;
- Total awareness of the ESF has increased from 38% to 40%; and
- Public Health, Environment/Climate Change, Education and Learning, and Sustainable Quality Employment are considered the most important areas for EU investment.

Public Attitudes and Awareness of the European Structural and Investment Funds in Ireland National Survey 2020



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland



There is overwhelming public support for the EU:



say that EU Funding support has had positive impact on Ireland



think that Ireland's membership of the EU is a good thing

Over 3 in 4 (77%) Irish adults are aware of at least one of the European Funds which provide support to Ireland



The top funds for awareness include Erasmus, European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) & the European Social Fund (ESF)

There is considerable consistency among Irish adults on the most important areas for EU investment:



Public Health



Environment /Climate Change



Education & Learning



Sustainable Quality Employment



of Irish adults agree that 'a regional approach to EU funding is a good idea'



believe our national interests are best supported by acting jointly with the EU in relation to either Brexit or Covid-19



HORIZONTAL PRINCIPLES

The Horizontal Principles of Gender Equality and the Promotion of Equal Opportunities and Non-Discrimination are relevant to the PEIL. Intermediate Bodies and Beneficiaries report on both HPs on an annual basis. These reports are reviewed by experts from the Gender Equality (GE) Division in the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and from the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) for each HP respectively.

There were no reports in relation to the Horizontal Principles for the year 2021 since no expenditure will be declared for 2021 and no Activities will be co-funded for the year.

Further information regarding the Operational Programme can be found on the Irish ESF website:

<https://eufunds.ie/european-social-fund/operational-programmes/programme-for-employability-inclusion-and-learning-2014-2020/>



EUROPEAN UNION
Investing in Your Future
European Social Fund

The Youth Employment Initiative (YEI) is supported under PEIL 2014-2020