AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS AGUS SCILEANNA | DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Circular letter 0076/2011

To: The Chief Executive Officers of Vocational Education Committees

Interim Protocol to enable referral of unemployed people to Further Education programmes funded by the Department of Education and Skills

Introduction

1. The Government has embarked on a programme of institutional reform as part of labour market activation policy, the objective of which is to prevent the drift into and reduce long-term unemployment. Chief amongst these are the establishment of the National Employment and Entitlements Service (NEES) and the establishment of a new further education and training authority – SOLAS. NEES is designed to be a 'one stop shop' public employment and benefits service for unemployed people and SOLAS is designed to bring a unifying and central management structure to the further education and training sector.

Purpose of this Circular

2. As part of this programme of institutional reform, protocols will be agreed between NEES, SOLAS and Vocational Education Committees (VECs)/Local Education and Training Boards (LETBs) to ensure that the NEES can refer unemployed people to suitable education and training opportunities at appropriate intervals in accordance with case management activity. However, pending full establishment of both NEES and SOLAS, as well as the completion of the amalgamation of VECs into LETBs, the Government has decided that interim protocols should be agreed by 31 December 2011 so that they can be fully implemented on full establishment of both bodies. This circular is intended to act as that interim protocol.

3. The circular sets out some of the elements that should be contained in the local protocols and in two Appendices, gives an overview of Further Education, and a summary of each programme, including eligibility criteria.

Background to the Protocol

4. It is acknowledged that VECs, D/SP and FÁS are already engaged in a significant programme of transformational change. It is also acknowledged that there is already a formal referral process for unemployed people into FÁS training programmes under the National Employment Action Plan (NEAP), which is underpinned by IT systems and shared data. Finally, it is acknowledged that significant numbers of unemployed people already access further education programmes, through recruitment by VECs, informal referrals from welfare offices, and on a self-service basis.

5. The protocol is not intended to replace the formal FÁS referral process or be its equivalent or to replace existing local protocols between VECs and welfare offices. Instead, this protocol is intended to complement that formal referral process. It should build upon existing referral protocols, where they exist. It should facilitate access by unemployed people to relevant and useful further education opportunities as part of their progression pathway.

Requirements of a Local Protocol

6. In order to implement this protocol, VEC CEOs should nominate a relevant staff member to act as a VEC contact person for the purposes. This could be the Adult Education Officer (AEO), Education Officer (EO) and/or the AEGI Co-ordinator/Counsellor. The D/SP regional/local offices should nominate contact personnel as well. This could be the County Employment Facilitator or Employment Services Manager. These contact points should arrange a familiarisation session for Employment Service Office and Social Welfare Local Office personnel with relevant VEC staff – AEGI staff and/or programme directors/co-ordinators/managers, as appropriate.

7. From the familiarisation session, VECs and welfare/employment service offices should agree relevant contact points, based on the aims and objectives of the various further education programmes, and the different courses being provided under those programmes, so that welfare offices can ensure access by unemployed people to relevant further education programmes, from their offices. This means that the local protocol should identify who manages each further education programme so that an appropriate referral can be made, e.g. for a referral to an adult literacy intervention, the Adult Literacy Organiser or AEGI Information Officer, as appropriate. In establishing the appropriate referral points, the protocol could build on enhancements to the NEAP and feedback from the piloting of D/SP's new client profiling capability in order to better align referrals with appropriate programmes.

8. The AEGI Information Officer/other relevant VEC staff member could maintain a noticeboard in local welfare offices and/or arrange for information stands on signing-on days, in consultation with welfare office staff. Welfare office staff could maintain regular contact with VEC staff (and vice-versa) in relation to referrals in order to establish if contact or enrolment has taken place and to update on progress, e.g., completion or progression to another programme.

9. The SOLAS Implementation Group will seek an update on progress in implementation of this interim protocol for the end of the first quarter of 2012.

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Appendix 1
Background on Further Education

Post Leaving Certificate (PLC)
The Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) Programme is a self-contained whole-time learning experience designed to provide participants with specific vocational skills to enhance their prospects of securing lasting, full-time employment or progression to other studies. The programme caters for young people who have completed their Leaving Certificate and adults returning to education.

It is funded by the Department of Education and Skills. There are 32,688 PLC places nationwide, enabling around 38,700 people to participate in courses. 90% of PLC provision is in the VEC sector but there is some in a number of voluntary secondary and community and comprehensive schools. There are just under 200 approved PLC centres nationwide.

Most PLC courses are of one year's duration. However, some PLC courses provide for progression over 2 years and a small number are of 2 years' duration. Since 2008, no new courses that are not at FETAC Level 5 or 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) have been approved, but some existing PLC courses offer certification from other bodies, like City & Guilds or BTEC. All approved PLC courses are listed on www.qualifax.ie .

Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS)
VTOS is targeted at unemployed persons over 21 years of age. Its primary target groups are the longer-term unemployed, the low-skilled and disadvantaged. It aims to give participants education and training opportunities which will develop and prepare them to go into paid employment or on to further education opportunities leading to paid employment.

There are currently almost 6,000 places available nationwide. VTOS is delivered in both Core (stand alone) and Dispersed (Post Leaving Certificate) modes, at NFQ levels 3 – 6. People can combine Junior and Leaving Certificate subjects and FETAC modules under VTOS.

If eligible, participants receive a training allowance in lieu of their welfare payment as well as travel and meal allowances and can access childcare and guidance supports. Tuition, books and material are provided free of charge.

Youthreach
The Youthreach programme provides two years integrated education, training and work experience for unemployed early school leavers without any qualifications or vocational training who are between 15 and 20 years of age.

The programme is funded by the Department of Education and Skills. There are almost 6,000 places available nationwide under the Youthreach umbrella. Almost 3,700 of these places are provided by VECs in just over 100 Youthreach centres. The majority of the remainder of places are provided by FÁS in Community Training Centres.

The programme usually provides two years integrated education, training and work experience. Basic skills training, practical work training and general education are features of the programme, and the application of new technology is integrated into all aspects of programme content.

There is a strong emphasis on personal development, on the core skills or literacy/numeracy, communications and IT, along with a choice of vocational options and a work experience programme.

Learners on the Youthreach programme are entitled to receive training allowances. Additional allowances for meal, travel and accommodation are also available.

Back To Education Initiative (BTEI)
The overall aim of the BTEI is to increase the participation of young people and adults with less than upper 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 enables providers to increase participation through a wider range of flexible options which are appropriate to the particular circumstances of learners, enabling them to combine family, work or personal responsibilities with learning opportunities.

The BTEI enables providers to expand provision of courses leading to certification at NFQ Levels 3 and 4, provide a link to full-time further education and training and offer progression from literacy and community education programmes. It also facilitates participation in ICT training. The BTEI's primary target group is adults who have not completed upper second level education, particularly the so called "hard to reach" that experience strong barriers to participation.

In the current context, the BTEI enables providers to address the skills needs of unemployed people, in particular the priority groups identified in the Government's activation agenda, and to develop part-time education and training opportunities for low skilled people in employment to gain qualifications. The BTEI targets individuals and groups that experience particular and acute barriers to participation and are more difficult to engage in the formal learning process. A list of these groups is set out below:

- Adults and young people aged over 16 who left school with low or no formal qualifications or low literacy levels;
- The unemployed, particularly the priority groups identified as part of the Government's activation agenda;
- The long-term unemployed and those at risk of becoming long-term unemployed, especially those in the older age groups;
- Those not in work but not eligible to be on the Live Register;
- Those in the workplace with basic skills needs;
- Disadvantaged women who have particular experience of barriers to participation;
- Disadvantaged men, including those experiencing rural isolation;
- Lone Parents and others with caring responsibilities that may prohibit their participation in full time courses;
- Travellers;
- Homeless People;
- Substance Misusers;
- Ex-offenders;
- People with Disabilities; and

- People for whom English is not the mother tongue, who require language and literacy supports.

Adult Literacy and Community Education Scheme (ALCES)
Literacy is fundamental to personal fulfilment, active citizenship, social cohesion and employability. For the purposes of this circular, Adult Literacy is **the provision of basic education, including reading, writing and numeracy skills, and ICT for adults who wish to improve their literacy and numeracy competencies to enhance their functional participation in personal, social and economic life.**

The target cohort for adult literacy programmes are those adults with less than upper second level education. It is recognised that there are those who have upper second level education but whose literacy and numeracy skills are less than or equivalent to Level 3 on the NFQ and VECs may include this cohort for programmes. All VEC adult literacy programmes are offered free-of-charge to any person over 16 years of age who fulfil the criteria outlined in the points above.

Adult literacy programmes are generally focussed on learning outcomes at NFQ Levels 1-3. Sometimes minor awards or specific support at NFQ Level 4/5 is also provided. This will enable adults to be competent and confident in a range of skills which are essential for full and effective participation in society.

Adult literacy programmes include:

- Intensive Adult Basic Education (ITABE)
- English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)
- Family Literacy
- Workplace Literacy (for county council workers.)
- Skills for Work
- Adult Refugee Programme

Guidance
Educational Guidance is an important part of participation in Further Education programmes and this is supported by the National Centre for Guidance in Education (www.ncge.ie). Research has shown that guidance provision increases retention/completion rates in programmes. Participants in Further Education programmes can access guidance support through:

- In PLC programmes, the school guidance counsellor.
- In Youthreach, through guidance and counselling provided as part of the Guidance, Counselling and Psychological Services programme for Youthreach, and;
- In VTOS, BTEI and ALCES, through the Adult Education Guidance Initiative (AEGI), see http://www.ncge.ie/adult_guidance.htm

Appendix 2
FURTHER EDUCATION– SUMMARY OF PROGRAMME ELIGIBILITY

Programme	Objective and target groups	Full/part time/	NFQ Levels	Eligibility	Programme Duration	Income supports (depending on individual circumstances).	Educational Supports
PLC	Enable school leavers and adult returners (including the unemployed) to gain major awards to enhance employability for entry or re-entry to the labour market	Full time	5,6	Must be over 16 years old.	Academic Year (programmes are mainly one year)	Back to Education Allowance	Maintenance grant may be available. Guidance available through school guidance service
VTOS	Enable the unemployed, in particular the long-term, low-skilled unemployed avail of full-time opportunities to gain major awards at to enable progression to further education and training or higher education or employment.	Full time	3-5	Must be over 21 and more than 6 months unemployed.	Academic year – courses generally 2 years.	Participants paid training allowance in lieu of primary welfare payment	AEGI, Childcare support may be available through the Childcare Education and Training Scheme (CETS)
Youthreach	Provide early school leavers between 15 and 20 years of age with opportunities to gain major awards to enable progression to further education and training or higher education or employment	Full time	3-5	Must be aged 15-20 years.	Academic year – courses generally 2 years.	Participants paid training allowance in lieu of primary welfare payment	Counselling available, Childcare support may be available through the Childcare Education and Training Scheme (CETS)
BTEI	Provide adults, including the unemployed and in particular, those with less than upper second level education, opportunities to acquire minor awards (modules) in areas of core skills and key competences, in order to enable progression to further education and training or employment.	Part time	1-6, mainly 1-4	Must be over 16. No other set criteria, but courses are provided free of charge for people with less than second level (leaving certificate) education.	Part-time modular courses up to 17 hrs per week or 400 hours annually. Can commence at various times during year.	Participants may keep welfare payment provided they are not receiving any other training payment.	AEGI, Childcare support may be available through the Childcare Education and Training Scheme (CETS)
Adult Literacy and Community Education	Programmes are designed for the hard-to-reach, the disadvantaged, those most distant from the labour market and the low-skilled to return to education in a way that suits them. It is delivered in typical and atypical modes on a highly flexible basis and is focussed on core skills and key competences (literacy, numeracy, personal skills, and communications) to build confidence and enable progression.	Part time	1-3	Provided to people over 16 with literacy/numeracy difficulties. Community Education programmes are targeted at people who are at risk of social exclusion.	Part-time modular courses, between 2-8 hours per week. Literacy programmes can commence at various times.	Participation on A/L C/E programmes does not interfere with welfare entitlements	AEGI