



**COUNCIL OF
THE EUROPEAN UNION**

Brussels, 13 June 2013

10775/13

SOC 456

"I/A" ITEM NOTE

from: Presidency
to: Permanent Representatives Committee (Part I) / Council
Subject: Conferences organised by the Irish Presidency
- Information from the Presidency

Delegations will find attached information on the outcomes of conferences and other events organised during the Irish Presidency, in view of the EPSCO Council on 20 June 2013.

**Irish Presidency Events and Conferences in the field of
Employment and Social Policies**

- **Informal meeting of Ministers for Employment and Social Affairs**
7- 8 February 2013, Dublin

- **Roundtable Discussion of EU Ministers with responsibility for Homelessness**
1 March 2013, Leuven, Belgium

- **Forum on Partnerships and Local Governance –OECD-LEED / Irish Presidency conference: *Implementing change: A new local agenda for jobs and growth***
26-27 March, 2013, Dublin – Kilkenny

- **Women’s Economic Engagement and the Europe 2020 Agenda**
29-30 April 2013, Dublin

- **Occupational Safety & Health (OSH) Conference - Small Business and Workplace Safety and Health – The Challenge; The Opportunity**
29-30 April, 2013 Dublin

- **Conference on the Social Investment Package: Investment, Innovation and Involvement**
2-3 May 2013. Leuven, Belgium

- **Senior Labour Inspectors Committee Thematic Conference on ICT Systems and Labour inspection**
21-22 May 2013, Dublin

- **European Conference on: European Social Fund Contribution to Labour Market Activation**
28-29 May 2013, Dublin

Irish Presidency - Note on Conferences

Informal meeting of Ministers for Employment and Social Affairs

7 - 8 February, 2013, Dublin

The Informal Meeting of Ministers for Employment and Social Policy was co-chaired by Minister for Social Protection, Ms Joan Burton, TD and Minister for Jobs Enterprise and Innovation, Mr Richard Bruton, TD. Ms Kathleen Lynch, TD, Minister of State with responsibility for Disability, Older People, Equality & Mental Health was also in attendance together with the Employment and Social Protection Ministers from across the EU 27.

The theme of the meeting was “getting people into work” with a focus on youth employment. It comprised separate meetings with the EU Social Partners and the Social Platform and also included 3 parallel Workshops chaired by Irish Presidency Ministers on:

- active inclusion for jobless households with a focus on youth initiatives,
- key actions for future skills needs in ICT, and
- labour market engagement of older women.

Youth Guarantee

The Informal meeting provided a valuable input towards subsequently reaching agreement on a Council Recommendation for a Youth Guarantee at the EPSCO Council on 28 February. This was a major priority for the Irish Presidency. The informal meeting gave Ms Joan Burton T.D., Minister for Social Protection, the opportunity to listen to issues raised and concerns expressed by the Member States with a view to finding an agreed solution that would be acceptable to all parties and, most importantly, to support the young people of Europe.

Ministers also agreed that it was crucial for Member States to work with all actors to ensure that those young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEETS) have access to the services available to start them on a pathway to work.

Public Employment Services

The meeting provided Ministers with an opportunity to discuss for the first time a proposal for an integrated European public employment services bench learning initiative which had been prepared by the European Network of Heads of Public Employment Services (HoPES). Ministers acknowledged that the public employment services (PES) were at the forefront of the fight against unemployment across Europe. It was agreed that greater and more focused cooperation between Public Employment Services would lead to an improved sharing of best practice across Member States and that the European HoPES Network should continue, with the support of the EU Commission, to develop a more detailed proposal on the bench learning initiative.

Workshop on active inclusion for jobless households with a focus on youth initiatives

At a workshop hosted by Minister Burton, Ministers discussed appropriate policy responses to the labour market and poverty difficulties faced by jobless households - which account for 10 per cent of the European population - in the context of the Europe 2020 Strategy. In particular, ministers emphasised the importance of active inclusion strategies, combining income support, activation and services, in providing an integrated response to the multi-faceted needs of jobless households, all of which are core elements of the Europe 2020 Strategy.

Workshop on Job rich recovery: key actions on future skills needs and employment in ICT

This workshop chaired by the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Mr Richard Bruton TD, focused, in particular, on the employment opportunity presented by the ICT sector and on ensuring that Europe mobilises to fill the 700,000 unfilled ICT job vacancies that are projected to arise by 2015.

Reflecting the Irish Presidency theme of stability, jobs and growth, Ministers agreed that alongside austerity there must be an equal focus on growth opportunities and on ensuring job rich recovery in Europe. Ensuring that the European workforce is equipped with the skills required to take advantage of employment opportunities in ICT and other growth sectors will be crucial.

Ministers were informed that while the number of ICT practitioners has continued to grow at 3% per annum, despite the economic crisis, ICT job vacancies remain unfilled notwithstanding the high levels of unemployment in Europe; if European skill sets are properly aligned with the skills needs of the ICT sector, this could generate significant employment opportunities for young people, as well as opportunities for other workers to upskill or to convert to ICT jobs.

Expert presentations drew on the real world experience of a large ICT multinational (IBM) and a small Irish ICT company (Version 1), both selected because of their recent experiences of transforming their businesses and of seeking the ICT skills needed to grow and prosper. Following the EPSCO Informal, Minister Richard Bruton subsequently participated in the launch of the major EU initiative “*The Grand Coalition for Digital Jobs*” in Brussels on 4th March, 2013.

Workshop on Older Women and Europe’s Labour Market – working together for the Needs of All

Ms Kathleen Lynch, T.D., Minister of State for Disability, Equality, Mental Health and Older People, chaired a workshop on the detachment of older women from the labour market and the impact this has on their pension and risk of poverty in older age. The Minister noted that there was still a lack of in-depth research on the retention of older women in the workforce. She noted that the women of Europe are particularly well-educated and while women needed the security of an income in older life, Europe also needs to derive full benefit from their capacity to contribute to growth and competitiveness – a “win-win” situation for all.

Ministers from across Europe shared their experiences, noting that attitudinal changes are important. This encompassed career choices for girls, perceptions that only women can provide caring in the family setting and attitudes to older persons within the labour force. A number of countries outlined successful positive steps they had taken.

Ministers agreed that there is a need for considerable future research and policy actions to encourage older women to remain in, or re-attach to, the labour market. All Ministers were in agreement that the benefits for the women personally were also benefits for economic growth and competitiveness.

Meeting with Social Partners

The Presidency also invited the EU Social Partners to meet with the trio of Presidency Ministers (Ireland, Lithuania and Greece), European Commissioner László Andor and representatives of the EU Employment Committee and the Economic and Social Committee to present the views of their respective organisations on the contribution of skills development to finding and remaining in employment. The meeting discussed current challenges to promoting skills development with the EU Social Partners, especially as regards the adaptation of education and training systems to reflect labour market needs.

The EU Social Partners confirmed their shared interest in enhancing the responsiveness of education and training to labour market demands. Employer and trade union organisations also called for improvements in the accessibility to lifelong learning opportunities and the attractiveness of vocational education systems and apprenticeships schemes. They also agreed on the importance of promoting real “hands on” experience in the workplace through apprenticeships, traineeships and higher education internships. The EU Social Partners jointly acknowledged the importance of skills development as a contribution to competitiveness and growth. The European Employment Strategy provided the means for effective exchange of experience amongst Member States on measures to bridge the gap between education and work.

Meeting with Social Platform

The Irish Presidency invited the EU Social Platform to meet with the trio of Presidency Ministers (Ireland, Lithuania and Greece), Commissioner Andor, representatives of the EU Employment Committee and the Economic and Social Committee and the chair of the Social Protection Committee.

The theme of the meeting was *what the EU can do to improve access to jobs for those furthest away from the labour market*. It was recognised that for people that are furthest from the labour market an integrated approach, including income support, activation and social services, is necessary.

Roundtable Discussion of EU Ministers with responsibility for Homelessness

1 March 2013, Leuven, Belgium

This roundtable discussion was hosted by the Minister for Housing and Planning, Ms. Jan O’Sullivan TD, under the auspices of the Irish Presidency and was attended by representatives from 23 States along with Commissioner Andor. The purpose of the discussion was to bring added focus to the EU’s involvement in the area of homelessness, to discuss issues of common interest and future cooperation so as to signal the strong support amongst Member States towards addressing and tackling the issue of homelessness.

During the course of the broad discussions it was acknowledged that, while primary responsibility for tackling homelessness lies with individual Member States, homelessness is a shared problem across the EU. In an effort to reduce the risk and magnitude of homelessness, and building on the Commission’s Social Investment Package, it was agreed that Member States and the Commission should work to strengthen coordination across six principles:

- **Principle 1 (Develop and Share Knowledge and Best Practice)**
There is a need to develop and share knowledge about homelessness so as to greatly improve the quality of homelessness responses at a national, regional, and local level.
- **Principle 2 (Core Elements for Response)**
Integrated, housing-led, long-term homeless strategies, including comprehensive preventive measures should be put into place at the appropriate level in each Member State.
- **Principle 3 (Funding)**
An adequate level of funding to confront homelessness and enable continuous, high-quality provision of services, involving private investors, partnerships and collaborative approaches, if possible, should be provided. Better utilisation of EU financing instruments to combat homelessness is recommended as a priority on a national and EU level.
- **Principle 4 (Common Reference Framework)**
A comprehensive reference framework for homelessness can improve the capacity for data collection, comparison and analysis.
- **Principle 5 (Research, Innovation and Data Collection)**
A better understanding of the homelessness phenomenon would result in improved, evidence-based policies and enhanced responses to homelessness. Research and ongoing development of knowledge, and innovative approaches to the problem are required.
- **Principle 6 (Implementation and Monitoring)**
The development and implementation of national homelessness plans should be encouraged, and advice and expertise should be made available where required. Adequate measurement and reporting mechanisms on policy implementation are vital to ensuring the quality of service provision and identifying improvements and efficiencies. The Commission should support and facilitate Member States in their efforts to combat homelessness through implementation of the Social Investment Package in a defined way.

It was also recognised that there is a need for further meetings of Ministers with responsibility for homelessness under the auspices of future Presidencies. Such meetings could discuss issues relating to specific target groups such as migrants, domestic violence and women experiencing homelessness.

Forum on Partnerships and Local Governance –OECD-LEED conference and Irish Presidency: *Implementing change: A new local agenda for jobs and growth*
26-27 March, 2013, Dublin – Kilkenny

The 9th Annual Meeting of the OECD LEED Forum on Partnerships and Local Governance took place in association with the Irish Presidency and the involvement of Yves Leterme, OECD Deputy Secretary-General, Richard Bruton, Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation and Phil Hogan, Minister for Environment, Community and Local Government. The event was co-hosted by the Irish Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, the Department of Social Protection, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and Pobal (a not-for-profit organisation with charitable status that manages various funding programmes on behalf of the Irish Government and the EU). The OECD LEED Programme is actively engaged with the Irish Government providing guidance on its current reform of labour market and training policy delivery, local strategies for youth employment, as well as local government reform. The Forum meeting provided an opportunity to review the first results of this work in light of international experiences.

Summary of key messages

The preliminary findings of the OECD review of Ireland (*Local Job Creation: How Employment and Training Agencies can Help*) presented by John Sweeney, Senior Policy Analyst, National Economic & Social Council, Ireland, showed that forums for bringing stakeholders in local economic development, training and employment together are weak and that more flexibility in the management of employment policy is needed to support policy integration on the ground and better adaptation to local needs, including improved responsiveness to employers' needs. In this context, experiences from the US and Canada could be useful as they show that the gap between demand and supply of skills can be narrowed through increased local flexibility and autonomy that can foster partnerships to connect workforce and economic development and help create jobs.

Training for a broad range of sectors is widely available in Ireland, delivery methods are diverse and there are examples of successful work with employers in raising skills (i.e. *Skillsnet*). However efforts to improve skills utilisation by employers are small scale. Major concerns with youth unemployment have not translated into national/local youth strategies. The experience of Northern Ireland in addressing the NEET challenge presented by Stephen Farry, Minister, Department for Employment and Learning as well as recent efforts to improve engagement with employers, through Workforce Development Forums and the *Success through Skills – Transforming Futures* strategy, are noteworthy.

The impact of the knowledge based economy on communities who need to place more emphasis on attracting talented people and generating an atmosphere that encourages innovation was highlighted by Edward Blakely, Professor of Urban Policy, United States Studies Centre, University of Sydney, Australia.

OECD experience shows that rural-urban partnerships are useful to support job creation in rural areas provided there are improved rural business related services e.g. financing loan programmes, innovative service delivery schemes with fiscal incentives and regulation (to encourage private sector entry into certain areas) and participation of a wide range of stakeholders.

The Australian experience on regional, rural and remote employment strategies was presented underlining the importance of individualised, personalised assistance; strong employer engagement, partnerships and collaboration, and strong performance framework designed to adapt to the needs of the local labour market.

The Forum highlighted the need for a strategic approach both at national and local levels to combat youth unemployment and reduce NEET rates.

Women's Economic Engagement and the Europe 2020 Agenda 29-30 April 2013, Dublin

In its programme on gender equality during the Irish Presidency, the Department of Justice and Equality focused on the economic engagement of women and economic growth, linking to the Europe 2020 agenda and to our overarching theme of "jobs, growth and stability".

This Conference aimed to encourage debate among key decision-makers on the important issues of gender equality and the economic engagement of women, with a focus on the attainment of the employment objective of the Europe 2020 Agenda¹.

The Irish Presidency had previously held a workshop on the economic engagement of older women during the Informal Meeting of EPSCO Ministers while women's labour market participation was a theme for the public policy debate on the European Semester at the February 2013, EPSCO Council. The active engagement of many of the Member States in the latter discussion and subsequent references to the issue in the Conclusions of the March meeting of the European Council endorse the importance of this topic in current economic policy debate, as well as to the gender equality agenda.

¹ To raise to 75% the employment rate of women and men aged 20-64 by 2020.

The conference was thematically organised around five inter-linked sessions which are relevant to women's economic engagement and advancement, namely:

- (i) *More Women in the Workforce – Making Sense for Business and the Economy;*
- (ii) *Women Returning to Work – A “Win-Win” for Women and for the Economy;*
- (iii) *Challenges for Women in the Workplace – Working Together to Overcome the Barriers,*
- (iv) *Towards the Top – Advancing Women in the Workplace,* and
- (v) *Striking out Alone – Women and Entrepreneurship.*

Key speakers came from the European Commission, OECD, EMCO, SPC, Eurofound, the public and private sectors, including a number of major multi-nationals; the academic world and the social partners. Over 110 overseas participants attended, coming from all Member States while a further 120 national delegates took part in many lively presentations.

The main conclusions of the conference were as follows:

- Recent OECD research points to the benefits to economic growth of increasing women's labour market participation. At present in the EU, 46 million women in the age group 20 to 64 years are outside the labour market, compared with 25 million men – a gender gap of 21 million women, who should be encouraged to return to the workforce to help advance economic growth in Europe and to avoid the risk of poverty, especially in older years.
- The highly-educated female population in Europe is not being sufficiently encouraged or facilitated to retain their attachment to the labour market. This represents an under-utilisation of women's education, of human capital and of potential talent. The demographic crisis which Europe is facing over the coming decades makes it imperative that we realise the full potential of our workforce.
- The lack of affordable, quality childcare and flexible working arrangements, continue to have an impact on the role of women in the workplace. The uptake of parental leave and of flexible working hours is still low for men; as is their participation in the sharing of family and caring responsibilities.
- Within companies, both public and private, a long-hours culture, patriarchal attitudes and persisting gender stereotypes also impact on the participation and advancement of women. Women remain under-represented in senior decision-making positions. Addressing this imbalance will require many employers to review their workplace culture and attitudes. The Conference heard evidence from a major multinational which had benefited significantly from the elimination of negative attitudes and gender stereotypes.

- Despite making up 52% of the population of Europe, women represent only a third of the self-employed and of all “business starters”. As entrepreneurs are recognised as being crucial to the economic growth and prosperity of Europe, the specific focus on female entrepreneurs in the European Commission’s new Strategy is to be welcomed and should be fostered actively in Member States.

Occupational Safety & Health (OSH) Conference - Small Business and Workplace Safety and Health – The Challenge; The Opportunity; 29-30 April, Dublin

This Conference was held in Dublin in conjunction with the Good Practice Awards of the EU OSHA Agency (Bilbao) integrated into the programme. Overall, some 200 delegates and award winners attended with 130 delegates attending the full conference.

The Conference theme - Small Business - was chosen because the contribution of SMEs is critical to the success of the economy in all Member States. The conference explored the importance, the contribution and the further potential of good safety and health management to business success.

The Conference was opened on April 29th by the Irish Minister for Jobs Enterprise and Innovation, Richard Bruton, TD, who urged businesses and regulators to ensure that balance was struck between ensuring the protection of workers from injury and ill health and the application of workplace safety and health legislation in a manner that befits the small business environment.

EU Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, László Andor, presented awards to companies from across Europe for their demonstration of good practice in working with partners, including workers and others, in risk prevention. Commissioner Andor spoke of the robust outcomes from the evaluation of the EU Commission Strategy on Safety and Health, 2007 – 2012 which was due for immediate publication. Following on from this, there is to be an EU wide consultation process on future plans and strategy.

A selection of award winners representing small businesses participated in a panel discussion on how they have approached their work in risk prevention and the measures taken to successfully involve others.

On the second day, the Small Business theme was thoroughly explored by speakers representing employer bodies, worker bodies, governments and the EU Commission. In addition, case studies were presented by speakers representing small and micro companies in Finland and Belgium. Examples of special support initiatives were presented by both EU OSHA and Ireland. A lively panel discussion with all the main players confirmed the challenges that remain if worker safety and health is to be a natural and accepted part of doing business in Europe.

Outcomes:

Research suggests that greater attention to informing and involving workers in risk assessment is needed and there are some differences in outcomes between the small and the large firms which may disadvantage those working in the small and micro enterprise on safety and health aspects. The Commission reported that work has yet to be concluded on the assessment of the benefits of written risk assessments. Meanwhile the cost of workplace accidents continues to challenge businesses and small and micro enterprises have other technical difficulties which can make it more difficult for them. A greater need for all the players to work closely together was identified as progress requires cooperation between labour inspectorates / enforcement agents, employer bodies, workers and others representing the small and micro companies.

There was employer support for ensuring that interventions are demand led rather than supply led. An enforcement perspective suggested that the more important aspect in labour inspection was the attention to risk and the degree of it, rather than size of company. Examples were given of the need in the construction industry to involve the wider stakeholders as they have considerable influence and, without them, progress cannot be made. There was a consensus that there are many tools and supports available to employers, that these need to be promoted and used by employers and that the often quoted complexity of managing safety and health in the workplace may be overstated. Greater innovation was also called for.

The Commission reiterated its commitment to the principle of “Think Small First” but this was not to reduce legal accountability at the business level. There are ways of simplifying the process without a cost to worker safety and health. A key aspect must be the full involvement of both employers and their employees.

Conference on the Social Investment Package: Investment, Innovation and Involvement 2-3 May 2013. Leuven, Belgium

The Social Investment Package was adopted by the European Commission on 20 February 2013. This Conference was organised by the Irish Presidency, in co-operation with the EU Commission² and with the co-operation of Eurofound. The aim of the Conference was to present the Social Investment Package to a target audience of Member States' officials, elected representatives, civil society, social partners, the private sector and others. The conference was attended by about 240 participants.

The Conference was addressed by Commissioner Andor who underlined the key role of social investment for the modernisation of national welfare systems and for overcoming Europe's employment and social crisis. Joan Burton TD, Minister for Social Protection who hosted the Conference on behalf of the Presidency, also reiterated the importance of social investment.

The Conference put forward proposals for action to spur social investment across Europe. Participants emphasised the importance of local and regional partnerships for the implementation of the Social Investment Package.

The main conclusion of the conference was that people are Europe's biggest asset and only by investing more and better in women and men, from birth to old age, will Europe get out of the crisis, and ensure credibility and legitimacy.

In order to embed the social investment approach in EU and national policies, it was agreed that there should be an emphasis on the long-term benefits of early intervention and prevention, which are part of the social investment approach. The provision of comprehensive and integrated services should also be improved, as well as the balance between activating policies and adequate income support.

² The Conference was funded under the European Union Programme for Employment and Social Solidarity - PROGRESS (2007-2013).

In order to ensure that social innovation delivers in pursuing policies oriented towards social investment, it was agreed that partnerships and alliances between social innovators and stakeholders, as well as knowledge sharing, should be strengthened. Information and communications technologies are a key avenue for pursuing this goal. Social entrepreneurs are also important actors for social investment by bringing in resources, expertise on the ground, and innovative solutions to communities' needs.

Senior Labour Inspectors Committee Thematic Conference on ICT Systems and Labour inspection; 21-22 May, Dublin

This thematic conference titled “ICT Systems and Labour Inspection” was organised by the Irish Health and Safety Authority in association with the Senior Labour Inspectors Committee. The aim of the Conference was to allow for the sharing of developments in the field of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) that were designed to support inspection activities, supporting workplace compliance and aids to education and use of social media with reference to Occupational Safety and Health.

Information on a total of 16 different systems and applications was shared through formal presentations, demonstration of active systems and discussion. Within the conference there was a particular emphasis on the lessons learned by the countries that had developed and implemented these ICT systems.

System functionality included:

- Web based platforms that managed all inspection activity including daily activity and evaluation and control of inspection activity.
- Systems for prioritising workplace inspections based on the creation of an individual rating of each workplace based on a range of set variables.
- Use of “Tablets” to record and allocate inspections to inspectorate staff.
- Online interactive risk assessment tools as an aid to employers that can be adapted to the specific needs of States or sectors.
- Systems for on-line learning interactive tutorials to deliver efficient and effective training and learning on health and safety in the workplace.
- Systems that allow inspectorates to consult company information held on data systems of other inspectorates which allow enforcement and regulation to be carried out from the perspective of Government as a whole and not an individual inspectorate.

- The use of Smart Phone applications to assess the physical work environment such as light and noise.
- The use of social media as a means to provide and share information, answer questions and engage in dialogue with employers and employees on health and safety issues.

Clear examples of ICT systems that are now developed and being actively used by Labour Inspectorates within Europe with an aim to improve inspection efficiency, reducing the burden on employers and advance e-learning in the area of Occupational Safety and Health were evident.

The range of systems presented was impressive and similar areas are being examined by different countries. Many have brought their systems to a functional stage. It was clear that such systems can be of benefit to many if not all inspectorates and employers.

Outcomes:

The key outcome from the thematic conference was the fact that there is the potential for the use of new and developed Information and Communication Technology systems such as those presented/displayed during the thematic conference to aid inspection efficiency and effectiveness and reduce employer burden not only on a national basis but also on a Europe wide basis. The challenge now is to look for opportunities and determine how to take action to achieve such potentials.

European Conference on: European Social Fund Contribution to Labour Market Activation 28-29 May 2013, Dublin

A Conference titled European Social Fund Contribution to Labour Market Activation was organized by the Department of Education and Skills, within the framework of the Irish Presidency.

The presentations and the ensuing discussions concluded that the following are key messages for those managing and planning ESF Programmes;

- Identification of skill gaps is key to successful labour market activation measures.
- Close cooperation is required between the education and industry sectors to identify the labour market skill gaps to ensure that the labour market is in position to service the industry needs. This would reduce the time delays between returns to normal levels of economic growth and increased employment because the labour market would be *job ready*.
- Involvement of regional and local bodies is key to understanding the labour market and industry needs at those levels.

- Education and training intervention at a young age is more likely to have positive employment and social inclusion results and is proven to be more economic than interventions in later years.
 - Member States with a tradition of dual education and training systems appear to have better employment outcomes than other Member States. The move to introduce dual system structures was not considered too complex, but the cultural change required in Member States that did not have a dual system tradition is such that transition may be a significant challenge.
-