

**Presentation to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection**

**An update on the operation and impact of JobBridge and the Youth Guarantee**

**Presentation by Ian Power**

**President**

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Madam Chairperson, Deputies, Senators good afternoon, first on behalf of the National Youth Council of Ireland I welcome the invitation and opportunity to speak to about the operation and impact of JobBridge and the Youth Guarantee. We have engaged with many members of the committee before but for those members not familiar with our work, we are the representative body for 49 voluntary youth organisations in Ireland. Our member organisations work with and for up to 380,000 young people aged 10 to 24 years in every community with the support of 40,000 volunteers and 1,400 paid staff.

In light of the limited time available for the presentation I will focus primarily on the implementation of the Youth Guarantee. However, I would like to make a few short comments on JobBridge. As members may know we published a report “JobBridge -Stepping Stone or Dead End” last February. The report was based on both survey responses and face to face interviews with young people who had participated in JobBridge.

The findings of our report were mixed. A majority of participants were satisfied following participation and many indicated JobBridge had facilitated them in acquiring work experience, helped them get active and provided contacts and networking opportunities.

The research did identify a number of deficiencies such as poorly designed internships, inadequate mentoring, instances of unacceptable treatment of interns and a lack of clarity as to the rights of participants. Other issues which emerged included insufficient monitoring, some evidence of abuse of the ‘cooling-off period’ - leading to job displacement - and inadequate income support.

We are also concerned by the fact just 27% secured full time employment following participation in the scheme based on our study. We made 10 recommendations to enhance and improve both the quality and impact of the scheme which we believe would enhance the experience of interns, aid progression to employment and ensure public funds to support employment are being put to best use.

We had a constructive meeting with Minister Humphreys following the publication of our report to discuss our recommendations. We also welcome the decision of the Department to conduct an Evaluation of the Suitability, Effectiveness and Relevance of JobBridge. We hope, based on our study, this evaluation involves consultation and discussion with actual participants and is more than a desk research exercise.

In the context of public concern about low pay, precarious employment and poor working conditions; we must ensure the integrity of internships as a meaningful way for young people to develop skills through experiential learning. We must safeguard against exploitation by employers and ensure internships are mutually beneficial to both the employer and employee. It must also be stressed that internships should not now be defined as having no remuneration attached to them. Internships should pay the living wage where possible and employers who do so should be recognised as only doing what is right.

Our concern about quality opportunities for young people is not limited to the JobBridge scheme. Back in 2011, the NYCI was among the first organisations in Ireland to call for the introduction of the European Youth Guarantee to tackle the youth unemployment crisis.

We believe in the Youth Guarantee premise that young jobseekers should receive a guaranteed offer of a good-quality employment, education, training and/or work experience within four months of becoming unemployed as an effective way to support young people into work.

Obviously the incentive to implement the European Youth Guarantee was assisted by the potential for the drawdown of significant EU funds from both the Youth Employment Initiative and the European Social Funds. Our view that full implementation of the Youth Guarantee could make a positive difference was reinforced by our involvement with the Ballymun Youth Guarantee pilot where the number of young people on the live register fell by 29% as a result of the coordinated effort by statutory and non-statutory agencies involved.

While we have always understood the implementation of the Youth Guarantee would take time and create challenges for all involved; - we have a number of significant concerns.

* First, we are concerned about the pace, scale and level of investment in the Youth Guarantee implementation. According to the National Implementation Plan; 28,350 education, training, work experience places were to be provided in 2014 (the first year of YG implementation). Data provided by the Department indicates 23,213 education, training, work experience places were delivered in 2014, over 5,000 fewer than promised. We estimate that prior to the introduction of the Youth Guarantee in 2013 around 20,000 places were provided; therefore the extent of additional provision is inadequate in our view. We are hopeful the number of places delivered in 2015 has increased and would certainly welcome information from DSP at year end.
* Secondly, it is not solely an issue of quantity; the education and training must be of good quality, appropriate to the jobseeker and relevant to the labour market. Too often in the past jobseekers were sent on training courses solely to meet the needs of providers to fill places. A key feature of the Youth Guarantee is the Personal Progression Plan (PPP) between the young jobseeker and the caseworker in the Intreo office which is developed to meet the particular needs of the young person. The most recent data available covering the period from January 2014 to July 2015 indicates 9,073 young jobseekers completed a personal progression plan. We believe DSP should invest more time, resources and staff in the development of PPP for all young jobseekers on the live register for 4 months or more and in particular the 18,500 on the live register for 12 months or more.
* Thirdly, we are concerned the structures and partnership required to deliver the YG are not in place. We have always stated and acknowledged DSP cannot deliver this YG on their own and that all stakeholders, statutory, voluntary, private sector have a role to play. This was very evident from the Ballymun pilot where without the partnership formed; it would not have succeeded. We have not been consulted or engaged with the YG since December 2013 despite the National Implementation Plan stating that as a national partner we would be invited to participate in the delivery and/or review of the YG. We believe NYCI and our members working at local level have a role to play in supporting the YG.
* Finally, while the National Implementation Plan gave detailed commitments and figures for 2014, there are no published projections or commitments with regard to the number of places which will be delivered in 2015 and beyond. If we are to analyse the impact and effectiveness of the YG we need more data and information and an evaluation of implementation in the first two years. We need a strategy.

We welcome the fact youth unemployment has declined from an all-time high of 31.6% in February 2012 to 20.6% in the most recent September 2015 figures, but youth unemployment is still over twice the pre-crisis rate of 8-9% recorded in 2007. The rate of decline has slowed in recent months and has hovered between 20.3% and 20.6% since April 2015. We are particularly concerned about the 18,500 young people under 25 years who have been in receipt of Jobseeker's payments for one year or more. It is simply not good enough to accept as fact the youth rate is normally double the national average rate of unemployment as a reason for inaction. It would be wrong, in our view, to assume a recovering economy will solve this problem. The reality is some young people will not be able to access the jobs which will become available without the education and training and other supports promised under the Youth Guarantee.

We all know the social and financial cost and impact of unemployment, in particular the impact of long periods of joblessness on individuals, their families, communities and our society as a whole. The scarring effects of long term youth unemployment are especially damaging. As we emerge from the crisis, as our economy recovers and more jobs come on stream; investment in the Youth Guarantee makes sense and should be prioritised. All the evidence demonstrates it is not only socially just, but also economically prudent to do so.

Thank you.