



**01<sup>st</sup> February 2023**

**Opening Statement by Alan McGrath, Executive Director, SOLAS, to the Joint Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment.**

I would like to thank the Chair and the Joint Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment for their invitation to address the Protection of Employees Rights in Liquidations Bill 2021. I am accompanied today by my colleague Mr David Smith, Director of Construction, Quality and Green Skills. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's discussion of the scheme and to assist in any way possible.

SOLAS has responsibility for funding, planning and coordinating Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland. Through the 16 Education and Training Boards and other providers, the FET system offers access to a wide range of learning opportunities and supports in every corner of the country, regardless of background or formal education level, and a learning pathway to take you as far as you want to go. The FET system currently serves a base of around 200,000 unique learners/students per annum. Included in this are specific programmes that are in place to provide upskilling or reskilling programmes for those seeking employment. FET adopts a learner centred approach and welcomes all learners, regardless of background or previous educational attainment, including those seeking a second chance to engage with education and develop their skills further or gain new skills.

SOLAS is currently implementing a five-year FET Strategy, *Future FET: Transforming Learning*, which is built around three core objectives of building skills (for those in employment and out of employment), fostering inclusion (making FET accessible to all including marginalised learners), and facilitating education pathways for learners.

SOLAS has, over a number of years, co-ordinated and provided specialised training and educational supports to over fifteen thousand redundant workers, across ten European Globalisation Adjustment Funded programmes. Seven of these applications were submitted on foot of redundancy situations arising from the closure of facilities at :-

- Dell
- Waterford Crystal
- SR Technics
- Talk Talk
- Andersen Ireland
- Lufthansa Technik Airmotive Ireland
- PWA International

Three others related applications were sectoral related and provided supports for construction workers and apprentices who were made redundant between July 2009 and March 2010.

In broad terms the types of supports provided to the workers involved in previous schemes included: -

- A dedicated support team.
- Provision of outreach clinics on a national basis.
- Access to available training grants designed to support re-skilling opportunities.
- Engaging with public and private training providers on behalf of redundant workers.
- Career coaching and associated well - being supports.
- Financial supports for travelling and childcare.
- Financial supports for purchasing equipment for their respective upskilling programmes.

However, within this suite of supports each beneficiary could tailor their supports to maximise the programme for their own benefit, with the programmes normally lasting two years in duration.

In providing these supports, SOLAS works closely with other Government departments, agencies and bodies including the Department of Social Protection's Intreo service which provides a one-stop shop for employment services and income supports with a range of personalised supports to jobseekers.

In May 2021, Government announced a training fund to support the Debenhams workers who had faced redundancy. SOLAS was tasked with responsibility for implementing the fund. Since then, SOLAS revived the delivery model heretofore deployed to support European Funded programmes and has engaged with colleagues across Government departments and Debenhams Trade Unions, both Mandate and SIPTU, to agree the final package of supports. In parallel to discussions with stakeholders and unions, SOLAS also held a series of briefings sessions with employees of each impacted Debenhams Store.

Based on previous experience noted earlier, in 2021 SOLAS established a co-ordination unit with the sole remit of designing and implementing a suite of additional supports for those impacted by large scale redundancies. The supports which SOLAS designed and are delivering build on what individuals may receive from other state agencies.

In addition, to overseeing the Debenhams training fund, SOLAS established the Debenhams Oversight Committee. This Committee is independently chaired with agreed terms of reference and comprises of state agencies, union officials and Debenhams workers.

The package of measures that are funded for Debenhams workers can include occupational guidance and career planning support; education and training programmes (particularly addressing digital skills) and enterprise and self-employment supports. To help inform potential beneficiaries a number of information sessions (online, in person and 1-1 where required) were held around the country in late 2021 and through 2022

to explain the process and types of supports available. A number of additional information sessions will occur again from March 2023

The supports available can be categorised as follows:

- Training Grants: Allow eligible clients to avail of upskilling\ training options from the broad array of private and state providers.
  
- Career Transition Grant: designed to permit eligible clients procure the services of professional HR practitioners to assist with CV, interviews, and mentoring.
  
- Other services such as start your own business supports, with referrals to the Local Enterprise Offices.
  
- Course Equipment and Materials:
  - Supporting eligible clients to procure equipment and materials required for their course such as laptops \ iPad or related forms of equipment/materials to support their reskilling and enhance their employability.
  
- Course expense contributions which can cover
  - Travel and Accommodation: Contribution toward the cost of attending course/s or interviews.
  - Childcare: Contribution towards the costs of childcare to facilitates parent\’s attend training or upskilling programmes.
  - Stationary.

SOLAS also provides support and guidance to clients daily, including.

- Assist client in completing fund applications.
- Guidance on required supporting documentation for client reimbursements.
- Booking courses directly with the training provider on behalf of the client.

This provides a brief overview of the Further Education and Training supports in place for those in the unfortunate position of becoming redundant. I thank you Chairman and the Committee members for the opportunity to contribute to the consideration of this important piece of legislation and look forward to contributing further to the discussion.

**[Ends]**