

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment

Opening statement by
Anna Shakespeare, Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Pobal

Wednesday 22 February 2023

1. Introduction

My name is Anna Shakespeare and as Chief Executive of Pobal, I would like to thank the Chair and the Committee for the opportunity to come before you today; to contribute to the work of the Committee by sharing key data and provide an overview of the inclusive employment programmes we administer providing supports to people with disabilities.

Our work ranges from programme design to implementation support, financial administration, and governance of funding allocations. We promote quality enhancement amongst local community groups, develop programme and system management tools and we work to ensure funded projects operate within agreed guidelines. Our role is not one of policy development, but we do provide feedback on programme operations, good practice case studies, evaluations and demographic information that support Government Departments in making policy decisions. Today we hope to share some of the learning from the Programmes Pobal supports with the Committee.

2. Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)

Led by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, the goal of AIM is to create a more inclusive environment in pre-schools, so all children, regardless of ability, can benefit from quality early learning and care. The model achieves this by providing universal supports to pre-school settings, and targeted supports, which focus on the needs of the individual child, without requiring a diagnosis of disability. It sets the tone and context for an inclusive future by supporting peer learning of children with or without a disability in an inclusive setting.

AIM commenced in 2016, since then, it has helped tens of thousands of children with a disability to access and meaningfully participate in the Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (ECCE) in pre-school settings nationwide. The model has been recognised internationally and has won awards for both excellence in practice, and inclusive policy.

The number of children who have been supported under AIM since the introduction of the programme in 2016 till the end of January 2023 is 24,241.

3. Ability Programme

The Ability programme was co-funded under the European Social Fund and the Government of Ireland during its first two years of operation from 2018 to 2020.

The aim of the programme was to bring young people with disabilities, aged 15 to 29 who were not work-ready, closer to the labour market using a range of person-centred supports.

- The programme was implemented nationally and supported participants in every county in Ireland
- The programme supported a total of 2,195 young people with disabilities – 83% of the programme target (2,662 participants)
- 1,755 young people with disabilities were supported to either find employment (373), enter into education and/or training (778) or become better placed to look for employment (604)
- 861 participants gained a qualification while on Ability
- A third of participants who were unemployed when they started Ability found employment after they exited, and a further 44% were actively seeking employment

An evaluation of the programme has made 24 recommendations that will inform future policy and programme design.

Work is presently underway to develop the Ability Successor programme, with €36m funding sought for a new Disability Employment Focussed Measure under ESF+. It is envisaged that the successful projects will receive funding for 5 years (2024 – 2028). In the interim a number of Dormant Account Funding Measures have been made available.

4. Dormant Accounts Funding Measures

The Department of Social Protection made a Dormant Accounts Funding Measure available in 2021 to support people with disabilities to improve their employment skills, advance their education or start their own business. 43 projects received funding benefiting almost 2,300 participants, including 27 of the Ability Programme providers.

- The focus was on providing supports to people with disabilities to start their own business
- The measure formed a key part of Government's new 'Pathways to Work' Strategy in particular 'Working for All' Leaving No One Behind
- Projects were of 16 months duration to 31st Dec 2022

A number of employment related achievements reported by organisations to date include:

- Employer engagement and supports
- Building a more inclusive workforce
- Skills development and career guidance
- In January 2023 an additional provision of €5m was announced to fund projects where 38 of the 45 projects sought an extension to 31st Dec 2023

As part of the Dormant Accounts Fund (DAF) Action Plan for 2020, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection invited applications from community and voluntary organisations who wish to support and improve the employment opportunities

for Family Carers, including Young Carers and Persons with a Disability. The purpose of this funding was to:

- Assist Family Carers and Young Carers to build and retain contact with the labour market (incl. self-employment opportunities) and training/educational opportunities
- Assist persons with a disability(s) to engage with the labour market (incl. self-employment opportunities) and training/educational opportunities

The total fund for this measure was €5m.

A total of ten organisations with a remit of supporting people with disabilities were funded under this measure.

- 1,033 participants were supported to engage in employment activation activities and skills development training
- 166 participants progressed into employment
- 97 employers created opportunities for people with disabilities throughout the programme
- 182 people with disabilities reporting a reduction in levels of isolation and loneliness

5. Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme

The Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) is supported by Pobal, co-funded by the Irish Government, through the Department of Rural and Community Development, and the ESF+ SICAP has two goals:

1. To support communities and target groups to engage with relevant stakeholders in identifying and addressing social exclusion and equality issues, developing the capacity of Local Community Groups and creating more sustainable communities.
2. To support disadvantaged individuals to improve the quality of their lives through the provision of lifelong learning and labour market supports. People with a disability are one of the programme's 13 target groups.

The programme is managed at a local level by 33 Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs), and actions are delivered by Local Development Companies (LDCs). SICAP applies a broad definition of disability in which the social-economic complexities of disability are acknowledged and where mental health issues are often significant. SICAP collects data on disability if the beneficiary identifies as a person with a disability when registering with the programme.

Local Community Groups that named people with a disability as their primary target group accounted for 6% (173) of the total Groups supported by SICAP in 2022. Individuals who registered as a person with a disability accounted for 9% (2,874) of the total Individuals who received direct one-to-one supports in 2022.

6. Community Services Programme

The Community Services Programme (CSP) funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development supports community-based organisations to provide local social, economic and environmental services through a social enterprise model and create employment opportunities for disadvantaged people. There are three main types of projects funded under the Community Services Programme one of which is focussed on supporting community enterprises employing people distant from the labour market including people with disabilities.

Applicants must be not-for-profit social enterprises or businesses with sufficient capacity to undertake service delivery and management of staff.

Of the 432 organisations funded in 2022, 10 services were defined as 'Services for people with disabilities', with an additional 33 services have specified in their service description that they work with people with disabilities (43 in total).

In 2021, 176 people (6%) were employed with CSP supports who were previously in receipt of a disability allowance.

A redesign of the CSP programme in 2022 has introduced a differential funding rate model. This new model looks at three distinct metrics, one of which will incentivise projects who employ from marginalised groups such as Persons with a disability.

A new Programme Call is due to be announced in March 2023 and will give priority to projects supporting the circular economy who employ from marginalised groups.

7. Conclusion

As an organisation with a social inclusion mission and to meet our Public Sector Duty obligations under the Irish Human Rights and Equality Act, we undertook an assessment of our own Equality Diversity and Inclusion in 2022 and are presently implementing our action plan. Over 6% of the 74% of Pobal employees who chose to participate in the assessment process considered themselves to have a disability. As an employer our role is to ensure that reasonable accommodations are made for these employees to ensure their continued successful engagement in the workplace.

Over the course of the last 30 years, Pobal has been working on behalf of the Irish Government to support individuals, families, children and communities. During this time, Pobal has made a significant contribution to the economy and society in supporting Government to deliver programmes to some of the most marginalised and disadvantaged individuals and communities in Ireland. We look forward to continuing and progressing this work into the future and I am delighted to take any questions from the Committee in relation to the information presented today.

ENDS

Note for the Committee

Pobal's role is to provide management and support services to 38 programmes in the areas of Social Inclusion and Equality, Inclusive Employment and Enterprise, and Early Years and Young People. We administer these programmes on behalf of the Department of Rural and Community Development, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, the Department of Social Protection, as well as the Department of Health/HSE, the Department of Environment, Climate Action and Communications, the Department of Justice, and EU bodies. Pobal also acts as Ireland's delegate to the OECD Local Employment and Economic Development Committee (LEED).

Pobal's observation is there is a demand from the disability sector for a sustainable source of core funding to continue employment initiatives for people with disability and build on successes of prior years. The programmes we administer all have an employment activation focus as their primary objective, however, in real terms this can often only be achieved with all the soft and practical supports required such as: specialised equipment, transport, adapted workplaces, training and one-to-one support. This can represent an implementation challenge in circumstances where responsibility may lie across other Votes or funding Departments.



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