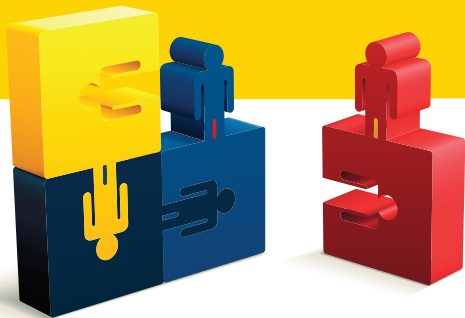




# The EU's role in SOCIAL & EMPLOYMENT issues

*This leaflet is a brief guide to how the EU is involved in social and employment policies. It is one of a series of leaflets which are designed to provide information about the EU to people living in Ireland*





## THE EU AND THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

The Irish government is mainly responsible for the social and employment policies which apply in Ireland. The EU is involved in some of these policies, it influences others and it provides financial support in some cases. The EU has a specific role in legislation dealing with equality and health and safety. The following is a summary of the ways in which the EU is involved in or influences social and employment policies.

## CO-ORDINATION OF POLICIES

The EU is involved in co-ordinating employment policies and social protection and social inclusion policies. In these areas, the EU and the Member States agree common aims and objectives and the EU monitors the achievement of those objectives. These aims are not legally binding - in effect, they constitute a political agreement. The Member States then decide how they can achieve those aims - they set out their plans in national reform programmes, action plans or strategy reports. The EU then analyses these plans, monitors their implementation, evaluates what has been achieved and provides inter country comparisons and examples of best practice.

## EMPLOYMENT

Europe 2020 is the EU's growth strategy for the coming decade to help the EU and the Member States deliver high levels of employment, productivity and social cohesion.

The strategy includes 5 ambitious objectives to be reached by 2020. Each Member State has adopted its own national targets in each of these areas.

One objective is to increase the employment of 20-64 year-olds across the EU to 75% by 2020. Ireland has set a national target of 69-71%.

The process of developing employment policies works as follows:



### *Employment Guidelines*

The employment guidelines proposed by the Commission and approved by the Council, present common priorities and targets for the national employment policies. Employment guidelines since October 2010:

- Increasing labour market participation of women and men, reducing structural unemployment and promoting job quality
- Developing a skilled workforce responding to labour market needs and promoting lifelong learning
- Improving the quality and performance of education and training systems at all levels and increasing participation in tertiary or equivalent education
- Promoting social inclusion and combating poverty

### *National Reform Programmes*

Each member state then draws up a National Reform Programme. This describes how the guidelines are to be put into practice in that state.

Ireland's **National Reform Programme** is available at:

[http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/eng/Department\\_of\\_the\\_Taoiseach/Policy\\_Sections/Economic\\_and\\_Social\\_Policy/Economic\\_Policy/National\\_Reform\\_Programme/](http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/eng/Department_of_the_Taoiseach/Policy_Sections/Economic_and_Social_Policy/Economic_Policy/National_Reform_Programme/)

### *EU Co-ordination*

The Commission and the Council then jointly examine each NRP and present an annual **Joint Employment Report** to the European Council. The European Council may decide to issue specific recommendations to particular countries.



The Commission publishes an **EU Annual Progress Report**. This identifies the strengths in different national programmes with the aim of promoting the exchange of good ideas. It also highlights areas where there are shortcomings and it may identify changes which are considered necessary.

## SOCIAL PROTECTION AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

The social welfare system in each EU country is the responsibility of the individual government. So, the Irish government sets the rules about who qualifies for benefits and how much those benefits are. The EU is involved in setting the social security rules only to the extent necessary to ensure that migrant workers are not discriminated against in the country in which they work and to require that social security contributions paid in one Member State may be used to help qualify for benefits in another. Similarly the pensions, health and long term care systems are the responsibility of the individual governments and they make the rules about access and financing. Again, the EU has a role in protecting the interests of migrant workers.

The EU is, however, involved in co-ordinating the policies in the Member States in order to ensure that the aims of the Europe 2020 Strategy may be furthered. One of the five EU headline targets of the Europe 2020 Strategy relates to the promotion of social inclusion, in particular through the reduction of poverty.

## *European platform against poverty and social exclusion*

The European platform against poverty and social exclusion was launched in 2010 and is part of the Europe 2020 Strategy.

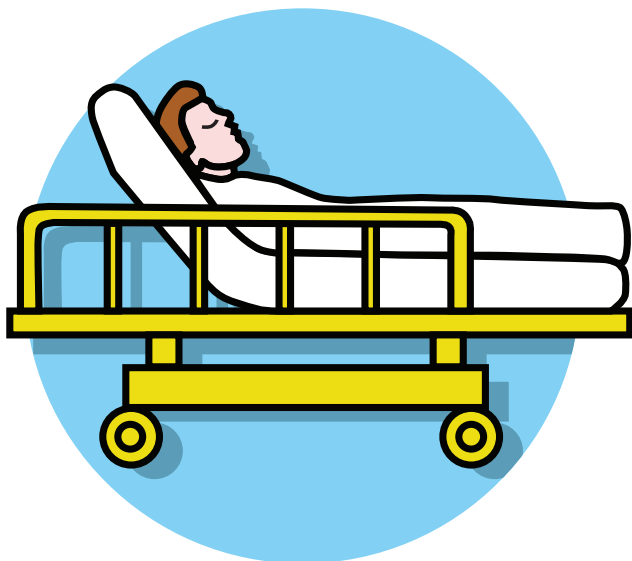
The Platform sets out the following actions to reach the EU target of reducing poverty and social exclusion by at least 20 million by 2020.

- Improved access to work, social security, essential services (healthcare, housing, etc.) and education
- Better use of EU funds to support social inclusion and combat discrimination
- Social innovation to find smart solutions in post-crisis Europe, especially in terms of more effective and efficient social support
- New partnerships between the public and the private sector

The Irish National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016 is available at:  
<http://www.socialinclusion.ie>

The Commission and the Council issue the annual Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion. This is available at:

<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=750&langId=en>





## FINANCIAL SUPPORT

### *European Social Fund*

The main way in which the EU provides financial support for employment and social policies is through the European Social Fund. This is one of the Structural Funds and it helps to finance various training and employment schemes.

Each Member State has an operational programme for the ESF for 2007 - 2013. The Commission has established guidelines for these programmes. These guidelines involve co-ordination with the European Employment Strategy and the Europe 2020 Strategy. <http://ec.europa.eu/esf>

The operation of the Structural Funds in Ireland is described in leaflet *EU Funding* in this series.

### **PROGRESS**

PROGRESS is the EU programme for employment and social solidarity 2007- 2013. The aim of the programme is to provide financial support for the implementation of the objectives of the EU in the employment and social affairs area. It has five sections: employment, social protection and inclusion, working conditions, anti-discrimination and diversity, and gender equality.



It supports the employment and social inclusion policy processes described above.

<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=987&langId=en>

## EMPLOYMENT LEGISLATION

There is a range of EU legislation on employee rights. This must be enforced in the Member States and failure to do so may result in the Member State being brought before the European Court of Justice.

### *Equal treatment for men and women in the employment area*

There are EU directives on equal pay and opportunities and in equal treatment in social welfare. There is further information in leaflet *Equality and Non-Discrimination* in this series.

### *Anti-discrimination*

The anti-discrimination provisions protect people exposed to discrimination on the grounds of sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation. There is further information in leaflet *Equality and Non-Discrimination* in this series.

### *Free Movement of Workers*

This legislation is aimed at ensuring free movement and then ensuring that migrant workers are not discriminated against and receive the same pay and benefits as native workers. There is further information in leaflet *Moving within the EU* in this series.

### *Protection of health and safety of workers*

There is a range of legislation on health and safety at work. There is a general directive which requires employers to provide a safe working environment. There are more than 20 specific directives. These include the Working Time Directive which, among other things, sets out maximum working hours and minimum holidays. There is legislation to protect specific groups of workers, for example, part time or fixed term workers, young people at work and pregnant women.

Other general labour legislation has arisen from the enforcement of other economic policies, particularly the implementation of the Single Market. There is legislation on, for example, the transfer of undertakings, insolvency of employer, collective redundancies, information and consultation of workers and their involvement through European Works Councils.

This legislation is implemented in Ireland by a number of agencies. You may get further information from:

National Employment Rights Authority  
Government Buildings  
O'Brien Road  
Carlow  
Tel: **059 91 78990**  
Lo-call: **1890 80 80 90**

Website: [www.employmentrights.ie](http://www.employmentrights.ie)

## SOCIAL DIALOGUE

Social dialogue is the term used to describe the interaction between the traditional social partners - unions and employers. They have a role in formulating policy at EU level and some of their decisions have been adopted as legislation.

Prior consultation with the social partners at European level is required before most social legislation is proposed. If the social partners negotiate an agreement on a particular matter, they can request that it be implemented by the Council. If the Council does this, it means that the agreement becomes EU law. This is how the legislation on parental leave, part-time work, fixed-term work and on working time for specific sectors came about.

General information on EU employment and social policies is available at:  
<http://ec.europa.eu/social/home.jsp?langId=en>

Citizens Information 

[www.citizensinformation.ie](http://www.citizensinformation.ie)

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