



Briefing Paper on Key Issues: April 2008

1. Why a Community Sector Employers' Forum (CSEF)?

The CSEF was set up to seek solutions to a range of common problems facing employers in the sector. The reasons for these problems vary from the lack of HR expertise in particular among small employers, to the multiplicity of government programmes funding the community sector with their different approaches to coverage of employment costs. Currently no mechanism exists either inside or outside the formal national partnership process to enable community sector employer issues to be tabled. Given the size of the community sector with an estimated 50,000 people employed by organizations working for social inclusion¹, this is a major gap.

2. Background to the Development of the Community Sector Employer's Forum

The CSEF was developed through the Dublin Employment Pact's Equal at Work project which ran from 2004 to 2007 with the support of the EU Equal Programme. The Equal at Work project worked with 50 partners across the major employment sectors – the private sector, health sector, local authorities and the community sector.

a) identifying community sector employment issues

Initial research into HR policies and practices and working conditions² identified a range of issues which needed to be tackled within the community sector in terms of

- a) lack of HR support in particular to small employers across the sector
- b) lack of adequate pay and conditions resulting in recruitment and retention difficulties for employers
- c) problems for employers in terms of effective management of their organizations arising from the lack of coherence on coverage of employment costs between government funding programmes; and from cycles of annual project funding.

b) responding to the issues

In 2005/6 Equal at Work carried out a study to identify the supports needed by employers to tackle the issues outlined above. Two types of responses were identified:

- i. A forum to enable employers to network and to seek to tackle common problems they faced.
- ii. accessible information on HR, covering practices, policies, legislation.

¹ 'The Community and Voluntary Sector in Ireland: An Overview: Briefing Note prepared by the Equal at Work'.
Hibernian Consulting November 2006

² 'Report on research into HR policies and practices in community and voluntary organisations' Ballymun Job Centre
March 2004

'Report on working conditions in the community and voluntary sector and its relationships with the state'
Unique Perspectives, march 2004



- i. **Community Sector Employers' Forum:** The forum was set up as a membership organisation open to all community and voluntary sector employers. Membership now stands at 100. The purpose of the Forum is to improve the quality of community sector employment through facilitating employers to come together to:
- Network: sharing information/supporting each other in problem solving
 - Raise awareness on employer responsibilities and the supports available
 - Identify common priority issues for community sector employers and seek ways to tackle these.

The CSEF was inaugurated in June 2007, is incorporated as a company limited by guarantee and has an elected board of directors. Since inauguration the CSEF has organised events for its members to share information, identify priorities and introduce them to the supports available to employers. Representatives of the LRC Advisory service and its Workplace Mediation Service, for example, have presented an outline of their services to CSEF members.

The priorities set out below in section 2 were established through consultation with employers at a number of events. Initial discussion took place at a members' meeting in October 2007. At a conference facilitated by Equal at Work in November 2007 '*Setting the Agenda: Employment Standards and Conditions in the Community Sector*' CSEF held two consultative workshops with employers. The emerging priorities were later endorsed at the first CSEF AGM held in February this year.

The CSEF has established relations with IBEC and with ICTU, SIPTU and IMPACT all of whom are supportive of the development of a voice for community sector employers.

- ii. **The Employer Resource Bureau for the Community Sector,** This web based employer resource is a service which the CSEF offers its members. It was launched last April with the aim of enabling employers to comply with employment, equality and health and safety legislation. The resource is being widely used (with over 1,500 visits a month) and is receiving extremely positive feedback. Regular updates on new case law, guidelines and policies are widely circulated. The resource is available at www.erb.ie

3. Key issues for CSEF Members

In the course of consultation with members, three priority issues were identified and two cross cutting issues as set out below

- a) **Pension provision for employees:** Employers wish to provide a pension contribution to all their employees. Currently not all government funding programmes provide for an employer pension contribution leaving a significant number of community sector employees without adequate pension coverage.



- b) **Appropriate pay scales.** In order to recruit and retain skilled staff, employers wish to remunerate employees in line with appropriate pay scales. While some government funding programmes support pay scales, this is not the practice across the board.
- c) **National pay agreement increases:** Employers wish to pay national pay agreement increases to all their employees. Not all government funding programmes currently facilitate such payment.

Cross cutting issues

- d) **Multi-annual funding:** in order to manage their organisations more effectively, employers need to receive multi annual funding rather than annual project funding. This is a central requirement in terms of staff recruitment and retention. Currently, some but not all government funding programmes fund on a multi-annual basis.
- e) **Equitable treatment of employees:** given the different practices in relation to coverage of employment costs across government funding programmes and given that community sector employers receive funding from a range of programmes, many employers have to offer less attractive conditions to some of their employees in comparison to others carrying out similar work. Lack of equitable treatment between employees can cause serious tensions in the workplace.

4. A Partnership model

Resolving the above issues will present challenges and we suggest an appropriate mechanism involving all relevant parties will be needed. No such mechanism currently exists as community sector employers have no voice during national pay talks. IBEC has clarified that during pay talks they operate as the voice of the private sector rather than of employers more generally. Given the relationship between employers, government funding programmes and the trade unions which represent community sector employees, we would envisage such a mechanism as involving all three parties.