




THE EQUALITY AUTHORITY
AN tÚDARÁS COMHIONANNAIS

Equality Works for SMEs



The Equality Mainstreaming Unit is based in the Equality Authority and was set up under the Human Capital Investment Operational Programme 2007-2013. Its specific aim is to facilitate and support institutional change within small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and the vocational education and training sector, by strengthening their capacity to combat discrimination, to promote equality and to accommodate diversity.

1. Why is Equality and Diversity Important for SMEs?


SMEs account for 95-99% of the business population worldwide and account for a large and growing share of employment in OECD countries (op. cit). SMEs play a vital role in Ireland's economy. What is more, many private sector workers in Ireland work for SMEs 250,000 businesses employ half the private sector workforce or 700,000 people (SFA, 2011). SMEs' attitudes to equality can affect large numbers of people in Ireland both as customers and as workers.

Many SMEs have been market leaders in promoting equality. Small business owners are more likely than other members of the public to be concerned by equality outcomes.¹

These SMEs recognize that there is a well established business case for investing in equality and diversity.² Investment by organisations in initiatives that promote equality and foster diversity has substantial benefits for both employees and employers. Equality policies can enhance organisational performance. Workplaces that have equality policies are less likely to discriminate against employees. Their workers are more committed, enjoy better job satisfaction and experience less stress.

¹ C. Ferguson, S. Finch, and O. Turczuk, 2007-08 Citizenship Survey – Race Religion and Equalities Topic Report, Department for Communities and Local Government, 2009.

² K. Monks, The Business Impact of Equality and Diversity, Equality Authority, 2007




Taking action on equality brings benefits for SMEs in terms of:

- ◆ Improved productivity
- ◆ Increased market share as focusing on equality for customers helps a business to understand its customers better
- ◆ More innovation and problem-solving
- ◆ A better reputation with staff, suppliers and customers
- ◆ Better work environment for staff
- ◆ Reduced risk of damaging discrimination cases.

So investing in equality makes good business sense!

This publication presents case studies of actions taken by SMEs on equality. It shows how they have benefited from taking action on equality. These SMEs were supported through a scheme for SMEs run by the Equality Mainstreaming Unit, overseen by the National Framework Committee for Equal Opportunities at the level of the Enterprise.

282 SMEs were provided with funding to engage an equality expert for up to five days to help them develop good equality and diversity policies and practice.



The scheme enabled SMEs:

- ◆ To review their current procedures;
- ◆ To develop equality policies for staff and customers;
- ◆ To receive equality training and to develop an equality training strategy;
- ◆ To put in place an equality infrastructure;
- ◆ To put systems in place to comply with equality legislation and reduce the risk of discrimination cases.

When we reviewed the scheme in 2010, SMEs told us that they had benefited from the scheme in terms of improved workplace relations and better understanding and knowledge of legal and practical aspects of equality. They also found the process enjoyable and interesting. In order to bring some of those experiences to life and to share the learning that arose, the Framework Committee commissioned this booklet to highlight good practice from companies that have availed of support through the SME Grant Scheme over the past few years.

2. SMEs take action on equality and diversity

Six case studies of SMEs that gained significantly from their involvement in the National Framework Committee for Equal Opportunities at the Level of the Enterprise Grant Scheme are presented below. They comprise a mix of private and not-for-profit companies engaged in different sectors. While their core business activities are very different, there are common factors which helped shaping positive outcomes. These include:

- Openness to examining gaps or weaknesses in relation to equality and diversity;
- Commitment to good practice and continuous improvement, openness to new learning and new ways of working;
- Commitment to involve all staff in equality and diversity policy formulation and implementation;
- Strong emphasis on bringing policy to life by way of practical and enjoyable initiatives;
- Improved staff relations, involvement and communication.



2.1 Carlton Clinic

The Carlton Clinic in Bray Co. Wicklow is a medical centre offering general practitioner and other medical/health services. It employed 31 staff at the time of the equality consultancy in 2008. The consultancy led to the development of an in-house equality policy and all staff receiving equality training on an ongoing basis.

As a direct result of the equality consultancy, Carlton Clinic's equality policy is now integrated into day-to-day patient care and workplace practices including marketing, communications, staff welfare and recruitment. Some of the practical steps taken included reviewing its patient/publicity information to ensure that illustrations on handbooks and websites were representative of diversity and that the content clearly communicated its equality and dignity at work policies and procedures. The Clinic has also organised cultural nights to celebrate food and music of staff's countries of origin. Equality issues are kept on the agenda through the staff newsletter. The Carlton Clinic also has its equality policy on public display and has produced an abbreviated form of its full equality policy for day-to-day use.

Carlton Clinic reported immediate benefits including a much better understanding of legal rights and responsibilities in the recruitment and employment of staff and a much greater appreciation of culture and age related sensitivities and accommodation of diversities. The Clinic noted that it took time for the benefits of their investment in equality strategies to fully emerge:

'What is striking now is how much better we are at the business part of our practice. We are growing our clinic in a very difficult climate and that growth is strongly linked to our commitment to equality. We have patients from all over the world and from increasingly diverse backgrounds. The equality work we engaged in helped us understand and better anticipate the needs of our patients. For example, everyone in our practice

from reception staff through to medics are much more aware of the timing of periods like Ramadan and of the impact of fasting on patient behaviour. We are also aware that staff may need to schedule time off for particular cultural celebrations or special periods.

At a more general level, the Carlton Clinic believes that the equality process they engaged in has led to them becoming more aware, empathic and sensitive with patients:

'If somebody comes in the door in a hostile frame of mind our default position is that there may be something major going on for this person that we know nothing about – they may be bereaved or frightened – and we approach them from that view point thanks to our staff training in equality. We are also very clear that our staff must also at all times be treated with respect. This is communicated strongly on our website in our literature and in the clinic and directly by staff if an incident arises. The entire organisation has benefited. We have seen a huge reduction in the number of incidents at reception as a result and patient relations at the front desk and with medical staff are greatly improved.'

The clinic has also expanded its services to provide clinics on men's health and women's health and has incorporated the advice of gay members of staff to ensure that members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community would feel welcome and included as patients.

'The equality work we did acted as a real spur for us – I'm not sure we would have addressed this area – or at least for a time – if we hadn't developed our awareness of difference and dignity, and if we hadn't got to such a good place of openness and trust within the team.'

The Clinic also reported that the equality work it commenced under the scheme has led to changes in how it resolves complaints or manages issues that arise:

'We listen to both sides in a dispute and are completely focused on the facts of the incident – not on the personalities – and on establishing what happened.'

Carton Clinic strongly recognized the benefits of the scheme:

'It's a really worthwhile scheme and it reaps tangible business benefits instead of being a drag on resources. Our business has grown strongly in the two years since we engaged in the scheme and our quality of life at work has improved greatly. It has contributed strongly to our organisational culture of fairness and equality at work – our staff team has become much closer everybody is aware of the importance of equality – it is not a just a slogan on the wall; it is part and parcel of who we are and how we do things. It has also been a lot of fun compared to other areas like health and safety.'

2.2 Moulding Technologies Ltd.

Moulding Technologies Ltd. is a manufacturing company based in Edgeworthstown Co. Longford and employs 21 staff. Its business is in mould design, injection moulding, painting and finishing services.

According to its CEO, the equality consultancy led to a number of new initiatives within the company including the development and implementation of an equality policy in consultation with staff:

'There is a large Eastern Europe population living locally and most of our staff are from Latvia and Poland. Prior to the equality consultancy we had not been aware of the need for translation of key documents and the need for external


(independent) translation service. We also didn't realize either how important it was to facilitate staff to celebrate their special national days – Latvia Day for example. We are much more aware of equality issues now and have made solid commitments in our equality policy which are displayed on the walls'.

As a result of the equality consultancy, Moulding Technologies Ltd. ensured that no staff had to work a night shift on Latvia Day and assigned it as a floating day that staff could take off as a national holiday. It introduced a number of other diversity friendly initiatives including a choice of translator and the translation of employment contracts and terms of employment into the first language of its workers. An independent workplace representative was assigned to deal with any concerns arising including equality issues. Some changes to work practices were also introduced:

We started looking at the way some of our work tasks had become strongly sex-typed – there was a strong tendency – particularly on the production lines for some jobs to be performed by guys and others by women. We started exploring work rotation systems so that everyone got a chance to learn different roles and skills and we are now very strongly focused on multi-skilling, which despite some minor teething difficulties, has had benefits for everyone in terms of job quality, flexibility and the autonomy of staff.

Moulding Technologies has experienced a number of tangible business benefits linked to its involvement in the SME equality scheme:

'We have a very happy workforce and very low turnover of staff and no issues with absenteeism. There is a high level of mutual trust in the company and good open communications. We don't have or need 'clock in' systems'. The level of trust and the quality of dialogue was always good but it definitely improved as a result of the consultancy – both staff and management now



have a very good understanding of each other's requirements. There is very good flexibility and respect on both sides, if a guy needs time off to attend to some personal business we do everything we can to facilitate that and in turn, I know if I need to call on someone unexpectedly on a Saturday morning, for example, there will be more than a willingness to come forward.

Moulding Technologies reported significant business and equality benefits from its introduction of multi-tasking which was prompted by the equality consultancy:

'There is much less gender stereotyping in the workforce now – everyone is rotated across different roles and has the range of skills needed. Team-working has improved. Employees have more pride in their work, are able to take on more responsibility and have enhanced skills. It has been fantastic in terms of our flexibility and business responsiveness. Multi-tasking has also been great for the workforce in terms of their autonomous – they can organize their own rostering and schedules to a large extent, making it easier for those with family responsibilities and making for much better work- life balance for everyone.'

2.3 Walkinstown Association

Walkinstown Association was founded in 1967 by a group of parents and friends in response to a need for community based services for people with learning disabilities. It provides residential and respite care and a variety of other support services to people with learning disabilities and their families. At the time of the consultancy in 2008, Walkinstown Association employed 93 staff.

As a result of the consultancy, Walkinstown Association developed its equality policy and engaged its line managers in equality training who in turn fed back that learning to their work teams. Equality training was also

introduced to induction for new staff and all staff members are expected to sign up to an ethics code which is strongly informed by equality. Some of the practical steps taken to embed equality in work practices include the establishment of an equality committee (which is still active) and a regular equality newsletter to staff and service users. Walkinstown Association's recruitment and selection policy was reviewed by the equality consultant and improved to reflect equality law and good practice. It posted regular equality content on its website and links to the Equality Authority, Work Life Balance Ireland and other relevant bodies and information.

'When we were writing and implementing our policies we ensured that the equality theme was strongly reflected in all our aims and activities. We found the sessions with the consultant to be very helpful. In addition to the formal policies and procedures we also got involved in the more celebratory and fun side of equality. We held cultural food days, which were a great success, staff engaged in Africa Day, and we set up a cultural movie club. We also piggybacked some equality activities onto social inclusion week.'

Walkinstown Association attributes the organization's positive orientation to and strong uptake of equality policies and practices to the highly consultative approach that was practiced internally:

We held focus groups with staff to find out directly what the issues were for them across the nine equality grounds and what they felt should be done to improve equality practice in the organization. They came up with a number of suggestions, many of which have been implemented, including a number of cultural events and ideas for the equality newsletter.



In terms of tangible outcomes that can be strongly linked to the scheme, Walkinstown Association has a clear and universally understood equality policy and it also has designated contact people to defuse and/or deal with incidents as they arise. It believes that the process it engaged in, as part of the equality consultancy, was instrumental to its success in achieving an Excellence Through People Mark in 2009:

We are a rights based organization and as such we were pretty well attuned to equality and open to the process. However, it had major benefits to us in terms of how we engage with our clients, how we are perceived internally and externally – we are a lot more confident about our systems and procedures than we were and this is a better place to work as a result.

2.4 O’Neill Healthcare

O’Neill Healthcare is a leading supplier of specialist medical products including communication aids, posture, seating and mobility devices. At the time of the consultancy in 2008, O’Neill Healthcare employed 15 staff.

The consultancy led to the development of a new company policy and procedures manual, which incorporated equality policies, values and strategies. All staff has a copy of the company policy manual and its core messages are on the back of staff business cards and displayed throughout O’Neill Healthcare’s workplace. Following the consultancy, O’Neill Healthcare reviewed its building/workplace and made modifications to ensure that it is fully accessible to all:

‘This was something we really needed to do as the nature of our business is such that many of our customers have reasonable accommodation needs’.

According to O'Neill Healthcare, the equality consultancy helped make management aware of its knowledge and procedures gap around employment law:

'After the equality scheme, we paid for a HR consultant to be brought in to work with us to improve further our systems. We discovered grey areas to do with situations like maternity and redundancy that we had yet to experience and which may have turned into compliance issues in the absence of clear policies. As a result, we have now a very comprehensive and clear staff manual that details the company's position on all aspects of employment and equality and the response from staff has been very positive. The amount of effort and resource went into it but it was money well spent and we are getting it back with interest.'

The equality consultancy had very strong direct and indirect impact on work practices in O'Neill Healthcare. Some of the changes that were instituted following the consultancy and related activities include the introduction of factually (target) based HR reviews, the lengthening of probation periods, changes to flexi-time and a greater emphasis on work-life balance.

One of the Directors noted significant improvements in her capacity to manage the business as a result of the consultancy and related activity:

'If issues arise we are all clear on what the procedure is and because our HR systems have improved beyond recognition, issues are less likely to arise. As a consequence, I am freer to drive sales and marketing which are my strengths and I enjoy my job much, much more. My productivity and staff productivity has improved noticeably.'

She also emphasised how the participatory approach to the consultancy and HR review helped develop a strong team spirit within the company:

'There has been a 100% improvement in workplace relations – everybody is clear about their role, collective and individual responsibility and what is expected of them. We are all on the same page; we have a unified sales team. There is a great free flow of ideas and positive energy to make the business the best in its field – office politics have virtually disappeared in line with one of our goals which is to be a no drama, slick company.'

'We constantly ask ourselves, what is the differential – what makes our company different - what makes it good? This brings us back to our core values, which are about ethical behaviour, quality, efficiency, fairness and giving it a go – being proactive. The work we did with the Equality Authority started us out on a journey that couldn't have happened at a better time. In terms of tangible benefits, our business is now in good shape because we were open to dealing with areas that had been neglected. We needed to do our homework, take on the challenge of re defining ourselves in terms of roles, responsibilities and values, and start living or upholding those core values. We are a much more equal company now and we communicate better. It is a fairer more equitable and much better place to work.'

O' Neill Healthcare is confident about its future despite the downturn in the economy.

'Any gaping holes have been plugged. Everybody has pulled together to help the business survive in a torrid environment. We are not going to roll over; we are up for the challenge of beating this recession and winning new markets.'



2.5 Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown Leisure Centre, Monkstown Co. Dublin

Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown Leisure Centre (DLRLS) is a community leisure facility comprising a swimming pool, sports fields and a gym. When it engaged in the scheme in 2008 it employed 36 full and part time staff. The consultancy coincided with a major organizational change for Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown Leisure Centre (DLRLS), which was in the transition from being an individual service located in Monkstown to a group of services located at different venues in South County Dublin.


The activities that DLRLS engaged in as a result of its engagement with the scheme included developing an employee handbook and a HR department, updating its equality policies /procedures and engaging in equality training. The consultant helped DLRLS to review its physical accessibility. DLRLS also developed a customer charter and an evaluation system incorporating customer feedback.

Before its involvement in the scheme, DLRLS already had a strong commitment to equality. Its involvement in the scheme strengthened that commitment and clarified how it could best express that commitment in its dealings with customers and staff.

DLRLS's involvement in the scheme led to increased awareness of client needs and the upskilling of its staff in attracting and facilitating those clients that can find it more difficult to access exercise facilities, including older people, those with severe health problems and those with disabilities.

It engaged in outreach work in the community to encourage older people to use its services and developed specific exercise programmes and leisure sessions for groups with special needs.

DLRLS expanded its engagement with GPs and the rehabilitation hospitals in the county to encourage them to refer suitable patients. It further developed and expanded its cardiac rehabilitation programme for those



who have suffered a heart attack or have had a cardiac intervention such as coronary stenting or cardiac surgery. The programme offers patients combined information sessions, risk factor management and monitored exercise programme three times a week for eight weeks. The staff running the programme has been sent on specialised training accredited by the British Association of Cardiac Rehabilitation training.

'What we are trying to do from an equality point of view, is to provide for all the different exercise and leisure needs in the diverse community we serve from the cradle (or prenatally to be more precise) to the grave. If you come in here on a Wednesday morning you will see a wide range of groups enjoying the facilities with tailored programmes for older people, cardiac patients, those with special need and others. We also employ staff with special needs and provide work placements. This is a great environment to be in even on a part-time or voluntary basis as there are so many social and health benefits from belonging to somewhere like this – particularly at the moment when the external environment is so difficult'.

The equality consultancy led to a number of improvements in the accessibility of the centre:

'While we had disability parking spots for example, the consultant pointed out that they were not particularly well located – we repositioned them close to the entrance. The footpaths were made more wheelchair friendly as were doorways and reception areas. We also improved the visibility of signage and made the lavatory facilities fully accessible for those with physical disabilities'.

The centre is equipped with hoists and other equipment so that wheelchair users and those with particular accessibility issues can be accommodated to use the swimming pool and other facilities. The staff is very aware of different needs and the accommodations required.

In terms of the organizational impacts, involvement in the scheme helped DLRLS to document its HR/equality policies and procedures and transfer its positive learning to other centres that were in the process of merging with it:

'The consultant helped us draw up equality based HR policies and procedures and validated the equality work we had already commenced, but which had been fairly ad-hoc up until then. The consultancy helped raise our awareness and facilitated us to improve our planning around equality. This was of great benefit when the merger took place and the HR function was established as most of the work had been done. Another great benefit was that we were able to replicate what was working in Monkstown from an equality perspective, at other centres. The south east coast is now very well served for accessible leisure centres and we are very proud of our role in helping bring this about.'

DLRLC strongly recommended that other SMEs improve their equality approach:

'Our experience has been that the investment we made in training our staff to fully cater for cardiac patients, older people and other groups with special/different needs has been enormously worthwhile. It has improved our responsiveness to the various needs in our community, has transformed our business and made it recession proof.'

'Two years on and we can now see the benefits of seeing the plans through – it has been really good for our staff and for our community but it has also been really good for business. Our attendance numbers are up, our centre is full utilized – we are operating at full efficiency because we welcome and cater for all the needs in our community.'

2.6 Focus Ireland Homeless & Housing Charity

Focus Ireland is a Homeless & Housing Charity providing crisis support to homeless people and those at risk, and managing circa 650 units of permanent, short-term and emergency accommodation. It has hubs in Dublin City, Limerick, Waterford, Cork and Sligo. At the time of the consultancy it employed 277 staff.

The Focus Ireland equality consultancy led to the development of equality and diversity policies that were integrated with overall HR policy and disseminated to all staff by way of induction training and team presentations:

'We established an Equality Committee, which comprised a cross-section of staff across the organisation. Our first task was to raise awareness around anti-racism, so we began rolling out anti-racism in the workplace training in 2008, and we still deliver programmes in this to date. We would like in the near future to focus particularly on our customers, and what we can do there – for example around access policies and practices.'

The Focus Ireland Equality Committee has responsibility for organisational monitoring of equality and equality awareness-raising, including the organization of regular equality events. It hosts a stand at Focus Ireland's annual agency day, which is attended by all employees. The aim is to raise awareness around the diversity within Focus Ireland.

Recruitment practice has also been influenced and enhanced by the consultancy exercise:

'We now request information from ethnic minorities and those who may have disabilities at the application stage on how we might best support their needs.'

The HR team is strongly involved in equality promotion and has run a number of anti-racism workshops and dignity in the workplace training events since the equality consultancy took place. It also mentors and

coaches line managers in dealing with grievances related to equality issues on an ongoing basis. A number of staff has been trained to deliver anti-racism training so that they can disseminate their learning to their teams:

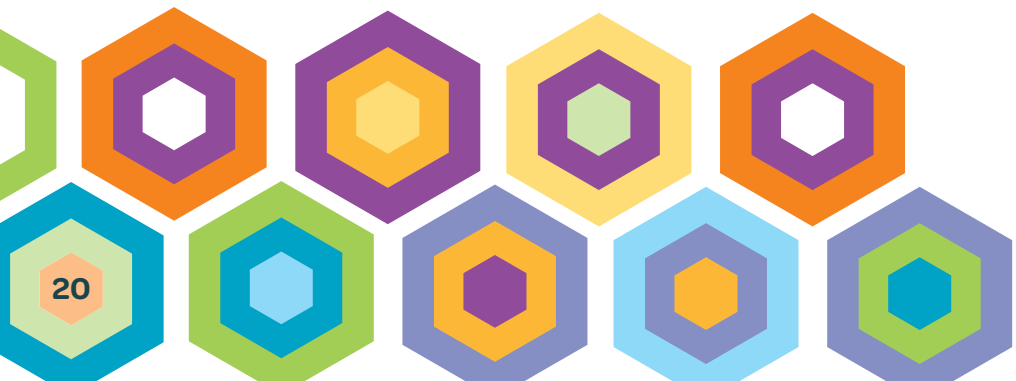
'This comprehensive approach to generating awareness of equality issues throughout the organization has enabled us to resolve equality issues through competent management and appropriate policies'

Focus Ireland found the consultancy exercise beneficial in terms of good HR practice, but also more interesting and enjoyable than expected:

'We learned about the different ways in which we can positively approach and encourage diversity in the workplace. The feedback from staff has been one of surprise and interest, particularly from our anti-racism training, in that there was a marked difference between what they now know, and what they were reading about it in the various media'.

For Focus Ireland, the work enabled by the consultancy was of considerable cultural and business benefit:

'The scheme really delivered for us. It reaffirms the organisation's commitment to equality, dignity and respect for all in work, resulting in more harmonious working relations and less time lost by Managers in trying to resolve issues through more formal forums'.



3. Learning Arising

The learning from the case-studies highlight tangible and lasting cultural and business benefits.

In all the case-studies there were marked improvements in workplace relations amongst staff and with clients/ customers, and in the area of workplace productivity. Some of the firms were surprised at how interested their staff was in equality, its implications for work practices or how it should be best achieved. The highly consultative approach in the equality work seemed to be central to being embraced by the SMEs.

On a final note, if better equality knowledge and processes in SMEs can both improve business productivity and commercial outcomes in the most challenging market conditions this country has ever experienced as well as workplace culture, the case for promoting and mainstreaming equality in the SME sector is compelling.



3.1 What can I do?

This section provides some simple tips and advice about what to do if you would like to make your business more successful, harness all your employee potential and enhance your organisational performance.

Here are some quick tips. These tips are based on our work with SMEs and are designed to offer you some practical and simple first steps.

1. Think about equality and diversity and how it relates to your business – take time to consider your workforce, recruitment, customers and your management style. Remember the business benefits to having a diverse workforce!
2. Develop an awareness and knowledge of equality and diversity Issues. You can do this by:
 - Hosting an information session on equality and diversity for your staff;
 - Providing equality and diversity training at all levels for managers and employees;
 - Organising special awareness days on different equality themes.
3. Develop a systematic approach to equality and diversity in your workplace – this will not only enhance your workplace performance but may also give you a better company image and reputation.

This involves:

- Developing an Employment Equality Policy and Action Plan;
- Developing an Equal Status Policy to promote equality for your customers;
- Designating a person who will be responsible to drive forward action on equality;
- Supporting your employees in addressing equality and diversity issues on the ground.

4. Provide leadership from the top – ensure that top management support is visible and recognized within throughout the organization.
5. Review your recruitment practices to ensure that there are based on clear, objective and appropriate criteria. You can go further by proactively encouraging a more diverse candidate base for positions within your company.

These tips may help you to take the first steps to promote equality and accommodate diversity within your organization. The key is finding simple things that work and are relevant to your company's needs.

The Equality Authority has developed a number of useful guides and equality tools that can help you to take action on equality. These are listed below and are available to download on the Equality Authority's website www.equality.ie.

4. Tools and guidelines

- Guidelines for Employment Equality Policies in Enterprise
- Guidelines on Equality and Diversity Training in Enterprise
- Guidelines for Equal Status Policies in Enterprise
- Promoting Equality of Opportunity in Small and Medium Sized Enterprises
- Equality Benefits Toolkits
- Employment
- Your Customer and You: Realising the Benefits in the Private Sector
- Your Service User and You: Realising the Benefits in the Public Sector



Ireland's EU Structural Funds
Programmes 2007 - 2013

Co-funded by the Irish Government
and the European Union



EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND



THE EQUALITY AUTHORITY
AN tÚDARÁS COMHIONANNAIS

Funded by the Equality Mainstreaming Unit which is jointly funded by the European Social Fund 2007-2013 and by the Equality Authority

INVESTING IN YOUR FUTURE

The Equality Authority
Birchgrove House
Roscrea
Co. Tipperary
Phone: (0505) 24126
Fax: (0505) 22388

The Equality Authority
2 Clonmel Street
Dublin 2
Phone: (01) 417 3336
Text Phone: (01) 417 3385
Fax: (01) 417 3331

Public Information Centre
Lo Call: 1890 245 545
Email: info@equality.ie
www.equality.ie