

Introduction

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions is the federation for trade unions on the island of Ireland. Nearly 800,000 workers are represented by ICTU, 200,000 of whom live and work in Northern Ireland.

ICTU seeks to achieve a just society - one which recognises the rights of all workers and citizens to enjoy the prosperity and fulfilment which leads to a good quality of life. Quality of life embraces not just material well-being, but freedom of choice to engage in the arts, culture and all aspects of civic life. This vision applies in the context of Ireland, Europe and the wider world and challenges the existing economic order.

Congress will strive to achieve economic development, social cohesion and justice by upholding the values of solidarity, fairness and equality.

Some 34 unions are affiliated to ICTU in Northern Ireland, representing workers across public and private sector workplaces. In membership terms, ICTU is the largest civil society organisation in Northern Ireland.

We would request that our response is viewed as being representative of our 200,000 members and that it is weighted accordingly.

We would like to take this opportunity to endorse responses made by our affiliate unions, including UNITE and INTO. We would also like to endorse the responses made by the Forum for Adult Learners in Northern Ireland, the Women's Policy Group and the Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group, ICTU is represented on all of these groups.

Background

NIC ICTU welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation.

Given the economic and social challenges which face Northern Ireland, it has never been more important to consider our skills and lifelong learning policy and infrastructure.

However, we would argue that a skills strategy for Northern Ireland cannot sit in isolation and must be taken forward alongside a proper industrial strategy for Northern Ireland as well as taking consideration of strategic equality strategies currently under development by the Department for Communities working with a range of stakeholders, including the trade union movement.

As outlined below, we would also recommend that a Skills Strategy must sit alongside a properly resourced Childcare Strategy which provides high quality, affordable and accessible childcare structured around work.

- **Recommendation: Skills Strategy should sit alongside an Industrial Strategy for Northern Ireland as well as Strategic Equality Strategies and resourced, affordable and accessible childcare structured for work.**

General Comments

Congress welcomes the commitment to empower and engage the workforce, we also agree that the issues of low skills and low pay must be properly addressed, however this involves proper and substantial investment as well as proper engagement with employers, trade unions, sectoral organisations and other key stakeholders in civil society.

We believe that an ambitious and properly funded skills strategy also has the potential to address deep seated issues and inequalities. In this regard, whilst we acknowledge the policy commitment to consider expanding childcare subsidy to enable participation in lifelong learning, we are disappointed that the strategy fails to address fundamental labour market barriers and inequalities including the totally inadequate system of childcare in Northern Ireland. It is well documented that women disproportionately bear the responsibility for caring, including childcare, and this responsibility together with the woeful nature of childcare supports leads to women being more likely to work in lower paid, part time work or in exiting the labour market completely.

Without a commitment to comprehensively address Northern Ireland's failure to provide publicly funded, accessible childcare, structured around work this Skills Strategy is doomed to fail.

- **Recommendation: Develop a childcare strategy which provides affordable and accessible childcare structured to facilitate participation in the labour market.**

Empowering and Engaging the Workforce

Northern Ireland has a serious problem with low pay with 1 in 4 workers earning below the Real Living Wage. In Northern Ireland 40% of workers in food manufacturing, 55% of residential care workers and 60% of workplace cleaners earn below the living wage.

Our ideas for a post pandemic recovery are comprehensively outlined in our policy paper [No Going Back A New Deal for a Safe and Secure Future for All](#) which not only analyses priority issues, but also offers solutions for a stronger economy and more equal society.

We welcome policy developments and initiatives which address these issues and are interested to learn more about the policy areas outlined in the consultation, particularly in relation to the 'business pledge' and the 'better jobs pledge'.

We note the commitment given that the better jobs pledge would be designed by employers and trade unions and look forward to early engagement with the Department in relation to this.

In advance of this engagement, we would offer the following comments:

Addressing the challenges facing Northern Ireland, including in relation to skills and lifelong learning, requires structured engagement with the key stakeholders, including the trade union movement. ICTU has called for an extension of the Northern Ireland Engagement Forum which was established by the Northern Ireland Executive during the COVID crisis and which brought all of the major stakeholders around the table including employers, statutory agencies and the trade union movement.

We recommend that an appropriately structured Engagement Forum is established permanently to facilitate input and engagement on an ongoing and structured basis to key government policy.

The importance of job quality has been recognised in Northern Ireland. Specifically, the draft Programme for Government published just prior to the collapse of the Assembly in 2016 had included a commitment to increase the number of people working in ‘better jobs’ and to track the quality of work in Northern Ireland via a ‘Better Jobs Index’.

Such a measure does not currently exist, although a commitment remains for its development. There has, however, been little information to date as to what might be included in the final ‘Better Jobs Index’, how it will be presented or the steps being taken to reach a consensus on the metric that will be used. This is made all of the more complicated by the fact that there is no commonly agreed set of metrics used to describe job quality, track it over time, compare it between different contexts or groups of people and analyse whether the quality of jobs is improving or worsening.

In this respect, the report from the RSA and the Carnegie Trust titled ‘Measuring Good Work’ provides a useful summary of existing measures of job quality and also gives policy pointers for the development of a measure of job quality. These should be noted in the context of the development of a Better Jobs Index and also for the purposes of the Business Pledge identified within the consultation document.

Measuring Good Work recommends that seven dimensions should be used to assess quality of work annually by the UK Government, and presented via a dashboard.

These include:

- pay and benefits
- job design and the nature of employment including job security;
- health and safety at work;
- work-life balance;
- social support and cohesion;
- employee voice and representation.

Research conducted on job quality by the Nevin Economic Research Institute supports this approach. As NERI outlines, when a number of measures of job quality are collapsed together not only is the nuance lost and variations in particular indicators masked behind an average, but also as a result it is more difficult to determine the correct policy levers to improve particular aspects of job quality.

The *Measuring Good Work* report also recommends that consideration needs to be given to the concept of a minimum baseline of job quality. This recommendation is particularly important in the context of the Skills Strategy proposals. The Department is recommending the development of a ‘Better jobs Pledge’ but the question must be posed as to better than what?

If the Better Jobs Pledge is to have serious and lasting impact, there must be proper and structured engagement with trade unions and employers taking into account the recommendations outlined above.

This approach is very much in line with the commitment in New Decade New Approach which promises

There will be an enhanced focus within the Programme for Government on creating good jobs and protecting workers’ rights. The parties agree that access to good jobs, where workers have

a voice that provides a level of autonomy, a decent income, security of tenure, satisfying work in the right quantities and decent working conditions, should be integral to public policy given how this contributes to better health and wellbeing by tackling inequalities, building self-efficacy and combating poverty.

We welcome the commitment to enhance rights to avail of education and training and look forward to early engagement in relation to this new legislation. However, this is only one in a number of legislative changes that we would wish to see brought forward by the Department.

We recommend a comprehensive review of employment rights legislation in Northern Ireland, particularly important in the post Brexit context. We believe that this approach is consistent to the commitment laid out in New Decade New Approach, as outlined above. The Labour Relations Agency convened employer employee roundtable which brings the trade union movement and employer bodies together to look at employment rights and industrial relations is currently working on a new employment rights model for NI. Given this key stakeholder engagement it is crucial the Department for the Economy takes on board the recommendations in the context of this strategy and that the NI Executive acts upon any recommendations in this area from such a body.

Whilst we welcome the recommendation that employers availing of public funds must sign up to the Business Pledge, we do not agree that this should only apply to businesses of 50+ employees. We would also wish to see how the commitments agreed to under the Business Pledge would be monitored, reported and enforced.

Just Transition to a net zero economy

While urgent, the transition to a net zero economy and society is a long-term undertaking. Ensuring that the skills system is fit for purpose will require comprehensive audits, consultation and collaboration across all Government levels, education providers, industry and trade unions. Market-measures alone will not bring about successful change, the state must engage in systematic planning to anticipate the future skill needs of the green economy.

Given the scale of the challenge of a transition to a net zero economy, social dialogue which facilitates genuine input by stakeholders into decision making will be vital in this transition. A well-resourced permanent body similar to the Just Transition Commission in Scotland with an ongoing remit to provide practical expert advice and research can take a longer-term view on economic development and industrial policy while at the same time advising on current issues such as the recovery from the Covid-19 crisis. Northern Ireland should look to creating a mechanism which facilitates ongoing social dialogue between social partners/stakeholders.

We also note a substantial mismatch in skills, with significant underused skills that could be useful in the green economy. We advocate an approach from government that recognises these skills gaps and provides the support necessary to ensure that workers can avail of these opportunities.

Recommendations:

- **Establish an appropriately structured *Strategic Engagement Forum* on a permanent basis to facilitate engagement between key stakeholders and government.**

- **Early engagement with the LRA convened Employer/Employee Round Table, particularly in relation to the advanced work on a model for employment relations in Northern Ireland.**
- **Conduct a comprehensive review of employment rights with a view to establishing a progressive employment rights landscape for Northern Ireland.**
- **Give full realisation to the Commitments on workers' rights and creating good jobs, as articulated in New Decade New Approach agreement.**
- **Consider the Better Jobs Pledge within the framework outlined above.**
- **Establish a Just Transition Commission, similar to Scotland to bring forward recommendations, including those in relation to skills and lifelong learning, required to successfully transition to a net zero economy.**

Apprenticeships

We agree with comments made by UNITE the Union in respect of the importance of Apprenticeships:

We need to see a much greater emphasis placed on the role of Apprenticeships in sustaining craft skills within the labour market. These needs to be quality apprenticeships with day one rights and entitlements and the legitimate expectation for the trainee of a job at the end. The move towards a reliance on vocational training being provided exclusively by the Further Education sector has been to the cost of partnership-based Craft and Trade training bodies and to the huge detriment of our labour market, risking the future of high-skilled advanced manufacturing. What is more, the traditional employment-led training providers included boards which brought together employers and trade unions to oversee provision and guaranteed trainees receiving the skills needed by employers. They were also protected receiving information on the importance of trade rates and the role of trade unions in safeguarding incomes of skilled workers. Those who receive training under the current regime are often only released from training to enter a labour market with little protection or collective organisation. If skills are to be valued and a generation of young workers protected – this situation must be addressed with urgency.

We would also recommend that the Department considers recommendations made by Professors Ballentine and Gray and Dr Rouse in their [Working Paper for ARK](#) on Apprenticeships in Northern Ireland.

The draft Skills Strategy confines considerations of gender inequality to addressing issues within the STEM industries. Whilst this is important, such approaches fail to address many of the structural inequalities in apprenticeship policy and framework.

Ballentine, Gray and Rouse remark:

Since 1995, apprenticeships have formed the mainstay of UK government policy for vocational education and training. To that end, they are recognised as an important tool for social mobility and workforce upskilling (Newton et al., 2012). Apprenticeships offer employees improved employment prospects, higher earnings over their lifetime and greater occupational mobility. For employers, they offer an increased and steady supply of skilled labour, in addition to improved recruitment and retention.

A wide range of analysis, however, suggests that apprenticeship programmes may reflect existing inequalities in labour market participation and as a policy intervention which establishes career paths and trajectories, may actually serve to consolidate and reinforce gendered inequalities (Sosenko and Netto, 2013).

Conversely, well targeted interventions in this area offer the prospect of offsetting and disrupting gender differentials which result in locking in lower pay, gendered occupational segregation and unequal labour market participation. While occupational segregation restricts choices for both men and women, the jobs that are likely to be done by women are more likely to be associated with low pay and limited potential for career progression. This is sometimes referred to as the ‘five C’s’: cleaning, catering, cashiering, clerical and caring. Occupational segregation has also been implicated as a key component of a gender pay gap, which places women at greater labour market disadvantage and pension poverty (Close the Gap, 2015).

Understanding the gender impact of apprenticeship policy therefore enables government to identify the steps that are required to address occupation segregation, narrow gender gaps and disrupt gendered inequalities.

Recommendations:

- **Invest in the apprenticeship framework so that it is a high quality and valued training pathway for all ages.**
- **View apprenticeships as an opportunity to address structural inequalities in the labour market, taking on board the recommendations made by the ARK report above.**

Policy Levers and the Union Learning Fund

Whilst we agree that Government alone cannot solve the low skills, low pay issues, we do not agree that ‘the role of government is limited to promotion and awareness raising campaigns, as well as incentivising businesses, particularly small businesses, where resource constraints pose a significant barrier to engagement.’

We would argue that Government has significant policy levers at their disposal which could make a real difference. For example, investing in the Union Learn Fund programme, would not only contribute towards the upskilling and engagement of the existing workforce but would also reinforce the culture of lifelong learning.

The Union Learning Fund (ULF) for Northern Ireland was established in 2002 to promote activity by trade unions in support of the Government’s objective of creating a learning society.

Trade unions, through the ULF projects, have long been in an ideal position to assist and encourage a wide range of learning. The focus of this learning ensures that employees develop the skills needed to carry out their work to the best of their ability, thereby opening opportunities for them to progress within their workplace and develop a successful career. Furthermore, the ULF has reached employers of all kinds, and of all sizes. It has engaged large multinational corporations and smaller privately-owned businesses. It spans the public and private sectors.

One of the ULFs key aims is to widen participation and break down barriers to learning in the workplace by supporting projects which focus on social inclusion and engagement of non-traditional

learners. Regardless of age, race, gender, class, sexual orientation, religion, belief, disability or nationality, ULF projects work hard to ensure all workers have an equal chance to up-skill or learn something new at work.

The ULF recognises the key role that trade unions can play in engaging individuals or groups of people who have been disadvantaged or excluded from education. Recent research by the Learning and Work Institute [Levelling up skills after coronavirus: The role of trade unions and social partnership in workforce training](#) demonstrated significant evidence both in the UK and internationally – linking trade unions and collective bargaining to higher employer investment in skills.

Furthermore, the research demonstrated clearly, that unions are particularly effective at engaging lower skilled workers in training. The report further points out that building a social partnership approach will assist in levelling up skills and prosperity across the UK after the coronavirus crisis. The trade union movement through the ULF has a key role to play in helping the Government meet the targets it has set for improving the skills levels of the NI population.

Increased Investment in the Union Learning Fund will contribute to many of the Skills Strategies priorities and objectives – upskilling the existing workforce, reaching hard to reach learners, promoting ICT skills to those digitally excluded and promoting good working relationships between employers, unions and providers of further education and lifelong learning. ICTU would argue that additional investment in the ULF is money well spent.

To date, ULF projects have engaged with and helped thousands of workers to access and gain qualifications. Over 10,000 workers have gained Essential Skills qualifications in Numeracy, Literacy or IT. A further 30,000 have completed other up-skilling qualifications, industry recognised qualifications, or CPD. Many of these people are engaging in learning for the first time since leaving formal education.

The Union Learning Fund has a proven track record in engaging workers and employers in reskilling and upskilling.

Despite this notable success, the ULF is working under considerable constraints – we recommend that the Department invest in the ULF as a key way of delivering on the Skills Strategy. For example, the removal of a one-year budget would allow for focused project plans, enabling learner progression to be identified and supported year on year.

Recommendations:

- **Maintain the Union Learning Fund with increased multi annual funding.**
- **Promote Collective Bargaining as a way to encourage employer investment in skills.**

The Skills Barometer

We are concerned that the Skills Barometer (Barometer) was used as the “primary evidence base” to develop the proposed Strategy. A Working Paper published by the Ulster University research team consisting of Prof. Ann Marie Gray, Joan Ballantine and Dr. Michelle Rouse, considered that the Barometer only considers economic value in terms of productivity and may assign lesser economic value to skills associated with social care.

This is an issue for the Strategy as the Barometer's inability to view economic value outside of productivity means that it "remains under responsive to an impending skills crisis in the social care sector". The 2019 Skills Barometer report¹ predicted 'Caring Personal Services' to be a notable contributor to job growth in the next decade, yet there are no plans in this Strategy to deal with this forecasted demand. This is a very significant oversight.

Even though it indicated that 'Caring Personal Services' was going to be one of the largest contributors to job growth in the next decade, the Barometer cannot predict the skills required to meet that demand. This is echoed by the contents of the Strategy and the Report - neither of which prepares for the impending skills crisis in social care nor the predicted care crisis.

Congress agrees with the recommendations made by the Northern Ireland Women's Budget group that career pathways and pay progression are put in place for low-paid, precarious work like care, and that funding is increased for apprenticeships that are considered highly skilled yet require low-level qualifications, such as social care apprenticeships.

An additional and significant blindspot in the Barometer's analysis is that upskilling is netted out of the forecast of future skills requirements. In a 2015 report on the Barometer, it was mentioned that upskilling was not considered when predicting future skills requirements based on the belief that, "these individuals are already in the labour market, will remain with their current employers after training and do not represent additional supply to the labour market." Because upskilling is netted out of the forecast, the Barometer does not look at the benefits of increasing the skill set of those already in the workforce. Social care apprenticeships, though highly-skilled, need low levels of qualifications. The exclusion of upskilling from the Barometer's predictions means that women with low-level qualifications that need to upskill to perform their duties, like many in social care, are going to be disproportionately impacted.

Whilst the Strategy refers to upskilling and reskilling opportunities for individuals already in the workforce, it is unclear how that need will be assessed when the Barometer's analysis, which was the "primary evidence base to develop [the] draft strategy," does not factor in upskilling.

The Skills Barometer is not fit for purpose for the reasons outlined above. Basing a skills strategy on a forecasting tool which does not factor in upskilling the existing workforce and which ignores the caring sectors is foolhardy at best.

Recommendations

- **The Department must correct the significant gaps left by using the Skills Barometer as the primary evidence base for this draft strategy.**
- **Proper career pathways and appropriately funded vocational training, including apprenticeships must be put in place for neglected sectors such as caring, including childcare and social care. In addition, the Department should engage with the trade union movement**

¹ Ulster University Economic Policy Centre. 2019. *NI Skills Barometer 2019*. (<https://bit.ly/3joO7nv>)

and employers to put in place sectoral agreements to address the shockingly low levels of pay and poor terms and conditions which often dominate in these sectors.

Governance arrangements

ICTU welcomes the acknowledgement that trade union representatives should be present on the Skills Councils and would suggest that to make a meaningful contribution that this is in equal number to employer representatives.

We also welcome the establishment of a working group to examine and make recommendations on equality matters within skills policy and delivery. We recommend that this group has a wide Terms of Reference to include making recommendations on how the skills strategy can contribute to addressing structural inequalities such as occupational segregation, the gender pay gap, low pay and precarious work. These issues should be a standing agenda item for the Skills Council and at least two representatives from the sub group should be on the Skills Council.

Recommendation

- Ensure balanced representation of trade unions on the Skills Councils. Ensure trade unions are represented on sub groups.