

Delivering Jobs Club Supports and Services during the Covid-19 Pandemic

The outbreak of COVID-19 in Ireland has resulted in widespread disruption to business across the country. It has also caused huge disruption to the voluntary and community sector, especially for those involved in the delivery of frontline services. In particular, Partnerships and Local Employment Services have had to rapidly adapt to match the changing working environment and also how we work directly with clients, many of whom were already unemployed or who have become so, as a result of the current pandemic.

As part of Empowers contract with the DEASP for employment services, clients are sent to us for employment supports and are often referred onto our internal Jobs Club Programme. Jobs Club is part of the LES (Local Employment Service) and offers a support service which helps people who are looking for work, to create a CV and cover letter. Clients can also do a mock or practice interview in-person, which allows them the opportunity to create effective responses, work on verbal and non-verbal communication skills and become familiar with the interview setting. The practice session also offers them a chance to improve their motivation, communication skills and overall confidence, when preparing to re-enter the world of work.

Jobs Clubs would normally run with groups of up to 10-12 people with maximum of 14 participants. All of that came to an abrupt stop, as social distancing and lockdown, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, came into place in the early part of 2020 and which is still on-going. There was a swift round of redundancies with hundreds of thousands of people losing jobs as businesses closed and many others were sent home, particularly in the retail, catering, hospitality and construction services. Some of these people never re-gained employment and are now clients of Empower, alongside the already long-term unemployed clients we are contracted to work with on an annual basis.

With rising unemployment numbers and great uncertainty about what the future would hold, Empower wanted to continue to provide a system of support for people against a backdrop of increasing lockdown restrictions and make sure that people knew they had somewhere to turn to, even in the worst of times. That it was possible to recover and find your feet again, even if meant changing careers or up-skilling or indeed just looking for a new job in your current field.

Our Call to Action

In March 2020, when the country entered a state of total lockdown, many staff in Empower worked remotely from home to continue to support clients in whatever way possible. The Job Club staff, along with other staff teams at Empower, continued their work and linked in with clients electronically via email, video chat and over the phone, to help them to create CV's and cover letters or assist them with filling out job application forms online. To this extent contractual service requirements continued to be met, even the most difficult of times. These interventions were greatly received by clients and for many, a voice at the other end of the line provided much needed support and hope to return to employment, training or education in the near future.

Although many had lost employment due to the pandemic, there was a startlingly quick turnaround of recruitment across supermarkets, distribution and care as these sectors became "the new frontline". It was clear that there was still much to be done and that clients needed our services, probably more now than ever before!



August 2020 saw the return of most Local Employment Service staff to Empowers offices in Dillon House, Coolmine Industrial Estate. The Job Club resumed its support services but not before putting certain measures into place to keep clients safe, including installing protective screens in the Job Club room in order to maintain social distancing and avoid any potential Covid-19 transmission. The floor was also clearly marked using “One Way System” graphics to direct clients in and out of the room safely.

Keeping in line with current regulations around Covid-19, all clients who visit the building are required to fill out a Covid-19 Visitor Form, answering a series of questions relating to their current state of health and well-being and this is signed and returned to Dillon House 24 hours prior to them attending for support services.

Currently there are a maximum of two groups of 4/5 clients every two weeks who take part in the Jobs Club. Participants are invited to Empower on the first day to make acquaintance with fellow members, to break the ice and establish some form of social connectedness, so to speak. The rest of the modules are delivered virtually to the group over the 2-week period. Reduced numbers mean that each participant has adequate time to link in with staff for one to one advice and the chance to speak in the group setting via video chat. Bringing people together in this way has been a lifeline to many who are currently facing prospects of unemployment and isolation.



Following all Covid-19 Safety protocols, Jobs Club clients have also had the opportunity to meet with Yvonne, our Guidance Counsellor, on a one-to one basis, to talk through any concerns they have around the interview process and conduct a Mock Interview, to allow them to practice their interview skills and techniques. This has proven to be a very useful exercise and has given clients the opportunity to discuss and answer the difficult questions, develop strategies and reduce their stress levels before an actual interview. During the mock interview, the Yvonne uses a semi-structured format rather than asking them a formal list of questions.

In addition to the mock interview session, Yvonne also works with them to tailor their CV and cover letter towards certain roles they wish to apply for, which may have been identified during the two-week programme. An After-Care service is also put in place, once clients have finished the Jobs Club and Yvonne continues to liaise with the clients via email and phone to help them identify suitable employment and training opportunities.

In line with all safety measures, clients can also use the Job Club room to apply for jobs online or conduct Zoom interviews where they have no access to a laptop at home or indeed adequate space. Most recently a former Job Club client applied for an Entry Level Technician role with multinational giant Amazon here at our offices in Empower and conducted his Zoom interview in one of the meeting rooms. The client in question was successful and was offered the job. He was extremely grateful for the supports offered to him during this process as he was unable to find the time or space at home with many younger siblings to contend with.

Job Club clients can also access laptops and other smart devices and internet packages through the Connect & Include Programme, if they are unemployed and are unable to purchase them themselves. The digital divide is very real and in the coming months, those without internet access or devices that can run newer software, will be shut out of the jobs market as they will be unable to job search or make applications to companies online. Empowers Connect & Include Digital Initiative, in tandem with Jobs Club can facilitate and teach clients, from a safe distance, how to join Zoom conferences, send and receive text messages, make video calls and undertake online training courses.

Since the beginning of the year, Empower has dealt successfully worked with 75 clients on its Job Club programme. 112 clients have had access to one to one support with the Job Club Team and 92 clients have received assistance with CV's and Cover Letters. Empower continues to remain steadfast in the delivery of its contracted services, client work and adherence to the values of social inclusion. We firmly believe that nobody should be left behind in a pandemic situation.

Coronavirus has shown us how to conduct ourselves online and demonstrated that although we are not working or delivering contracted services in the normal way, it is still possible, even under the most difficult circumstances. Digital tools such as Zoom have helped clients stay connected and informed with the staff in Empower. The Job Club Leader Maura and her Assistant, Lisa have continued to work with clients to deliver training modules and share relevant and timely information. If anything, Covid-19 is focusing clients on how to use the internet in the modern age and how to prepare for interview online. Although the ways we are substituting for in-person interaction, aren't perfect, we are seeing an explosion of creativity as clients try to use technology to bridge physical distances.

Clients have also reported back, that while in attendance at Dillon House they felt at ease at all times and that adequate precautions had been put in place to maintain their collective and individual safety. They have also been extremely grateful to the Job Club staff and indeed all of the staff teams in Empower for continuing to put their needs as people and jobseekers at the forefront of their organisational values while moving their employment support systems online.

As the virus forces us indoors, Empower has been thinking of alternative ways to deliver on our various contractual obligations. As long as it remains unwise to gather in physical spaces, Empower will create virtual spaces that can sustain clients in a time of enormous need. As a service, we use technology to meet this crisis, rather than just distracting ourselves from it.