

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE EDC 01-01(p7)

Date: Wednesday 17 January 2001

Time: 2.00-5.30pm

Venue: Committee Room 1, National Assembly for Wales Building

Title: Implementation of the EQUAL Community Initiative in Wales

Purpose

1. To seek the Committee's views on the priorities for the EQUAL Initiative in Wales.

Summary/Recommendations

2. A first draft of the Wales EQUAL Implementation Plan is at Annex 1. This sets out the labour market and policy context for EQUAL and provides a framework for implementing the initiative. Chapter 4 details the priorities which have been identified to date in consultation with partner organisations. The Committee is invited to offer views on the appropriateness of these.

Timing

3. The Wales EQUAL Plan will be finalised by mid February 2001 and will then be submitted to the GB EQUAL Monitoring Committee for approval. The programme will get underway in March 2001.

Background

4. EQUAL is a new European Community human resource initiative which aims to develop innovative ways of combating discrimination and inequality in connection with the labour market, through transnational co-operation. The initiative has a strong emphasis on dissemination and influencing the policy making process and will have a particular focus of equality issues associated with gender; disability; race or ethnic origin; religion or belief; age and sexual orientation. The initiative will also support the social and vocational integration of refugees (asylum seekers).

4. DFEE is leading the development of the initiative on a GB wide basis, in consultation with the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Executive. Members have already received copies of the draft GB EQUAL programme (EDC –15-00 refers) and this is currently being negotiated with the Commission. The GB document provides for a separate Wales Implementation Plan, overseen by a Wales Management Committee and supported by a ring-fenced allocation of resources. This is likely to be around £12m for the period 2001 – 2006 and the overall value of the programme in Wales, including matched funding, will be around £24m.
4. A first draft of the Wales Implementation Plan is at Annex 1. This represents work in progress but provides the labour market context for the initiative in Wales; highlights some of the key policies which EQUAL will support (e.g. Communities First; the Entrepreneurship Action Plan; Future Skills Wales etc); identifies priorities for development work in Wales and provides a framework for implementing the initiative. The Wales EQUAL Liaison Group is overseeing work on the Wales Plan – this is a partnership group which brings together representatives from the private, public and voluntary sectors and includes the statutory equality commissions and the main equality representative organisations. Separate consultative meetings have also been held with a range of organisations, including the CBI; Chambers of Commerce; FSB; TUC Wales; EOC; CRE; DRC; Age Concern; Disability Wales; AWEMA and the Wales Co-operative Society. The Objective 1 and 3 Monitoring Committees have also been given the opportunity to comment on the priorities. The Equality of Opportunity Committee is also considering the draft plan and it will be finalised by mid February. It will then be formally submitted to the GB Monitoring Committee for approval and the programme will get underway in spring 2001.
4. A question and answer brief on EQUAL is at Annex 2.

Consideration

4. EQUAL can be distinguished from the mainstream Structural Fund programmes by its emphasis on **innovation** and its **transnational** dimension. The initiative is not simply about getting beneficiaries into employment or learning opportunities (although this would be a useful bi-product), it is essentially about trialling and testing new ways of tackling discrimination and inequality in the labour market in partnership with other Member States and learning lessons which can inform policy development.
4. The initiative will encourage integrated, thematic based approaches to tackling the complex and multi-dimensional problems faced by the different target groups, rather than supporting projects which focus on the needs of particular target groups. The priorities identified in Chapter 4 are set out according to the thematic fields of activity identified in the EU regulations covering EQUAL. These are based on the pillars of the

EU employment strategy set out in the Amsterdam Treaty (i.e. employability; entrepreneurship; adaptability and equal opportunities).

4. In determining the focus of the programme in Wales, we need to be realistic about the scale and range of the development work which can be supported within the funding available. Consultation with partner organisations has inevitably identified a rather long list of priority areas. This is to some extent understandable, as the relative position of the target groups in Wales is generally worse than that across GB on most objective indicators. Levels of unemployment and economic inactivity are generally higher and qualification levels are generally lower. Our aim should be to identify a manageable number of priority areas which are most relevant to our needs and which afford the greatest potential for lessons to be learned through development work carried out in partnership with other Member States. EQUAL should not seek to duplicate activity which can be equally as well taken forward through the mainstream Objective 1 and 3 programmes.

Conclusion

4. The Committee is invited to comment on the priorities for EQUAL in Wales set out in Chapter 4 of the draft Wales Implementation Plan at Annex 1. In particular the views of the Committee are invited on:
 - whether the priorities identified are the right ones or whether there are additional priorities which need to be included?
 - whether there are particular Member States that we can learn from in addressing these priorities?
 - whether any of the priorities should be geographically targeted?
 - how best to ensure the mainstreaming of lessons learned?

EQUAL COMMUNITY INITIATIVE

QUESTION & ANSWER BRIEF

What is EQUAL ?

EQUAL is a new European Community human resources initiative which aims to develop innovative ways of combating discrimination and inequality in connection with the labour market, through transnational co-operation.

Which parts of Wales will be covered ?

EQUAL will cover the whole of Wales.

Why doesn't Wales have its own programme ?

EQUAL is a Member State programme and is therefore being developed on a GB basis by the Department for Education and Employment, in consultation with the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Executive. However, it has been agreed that Wales and Scotland will have their own Implementation Plans, supported by ring fenced allocation of resources. Wales and Scotland will also have their own Management Committees which will be sub-committees of the GB Monitoring Committee.

How much money is available for Wales ?

Discussion with the DfEE are ongoing but Wales is likely to receive around £12m for the period 2000 – 2006 and the overall value of the programme, including matched funding, will be around £24m.

What distinguishes EQUAL from other Structural Fund programmes ?

EQUAL is not about mainstream delivery. EQUAL offers a Europe-wide focus for experimenting with new ways of tackling the problems of inequality and discrimination. EQUAL is a testing ground for new ideas where successful results could be mainstreamed into other policies and programmes. Another distinguishing feature is the requirement for EQUAL to be trans-national and working with other countries is seen to be crucial to the Initiative's success.

Who is it designed to help ?

The Initiative will have a particular (though not exclusive) focus on equality issues associated with gender; disability; race or ethnic origin; religion or belief; age and sexual orientation. The initiative will also support the social and vocational integration of refugees (asylum seekers).

How will it work ?

The basic working element of EQUAL will be the Development Partnership (DP). A DP will work within one thematic area and bring together interested parties with relevant experience. It should involve key players such as the equality organisations, local authorities, social partners, the business sectors and other relevant public bodies (such as the WDA or the new National Council for Education & Training). DPs can be constituted of project applicants, advisors and those representing excluded groups. The work of each DP will be based on a formal agreement and work programme.

In Wales, the EQUAL Liaison Group has recommended that DPs operate on an all Wales basis.

How many trans-national partners do you need ?

Each Development Partnership will need to have at least one partner from another Member State. DPs may also co-operate with counterparts outside the European Union, for example, in candidate countries under the Phare programme.

How will the lessons from EQUAL be mainstreamed ?

Thematic Networking Groups (TNGs) will be established at a GB level for each theme within the EQUAL programme and will include policy representatives from the National Assembly for Wales, in addition to representatives from DfEE; other Government Departments; the Scottish Executive; the statutory equality organisations; social partners and Development Partnerships. All DPs in Wales will become members of the relevant TNG.

TNGs will provide advice to the Wales management Committee on Welsh DP proposals as part of the overall appraisal process. The TNGs will also participate in dissemination and evaluation at a European level.

When will the programme start ?

A GB wide first call for applications will be made in the Spring 2001. Applicants will have up to 3 months to complete the EQUAL application form. Preliminary checks on completed applications will be carried out by the Welsh European Funding Office. Applications will then be independently appraised, in accordance with the selection criteria agreed by the Wales Management Committee and GB PMC. During the Autumn of 2001, the Wales Management Committee will consider the appraisals (and the views on the TNGs) and put forward recommendations to the GB PMC on the DPs to be funded in Wales. First projects should start towards the end of 2001.