



General Guidelines
For
First Steps Placements
March 2017

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Introduction

In 2013 the EU adopted a Council Recommendation to member states on a Youth Guarantee. The Recommendation encourages member states to:

“Ensure that all young people under the age of 25 years receive a good-quality offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship within a period of four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education”

In this context, one of the specific actions outlined in the Irish Pathways to Work document to implement the EU council recommendation was to introduce a ‘developmental internship’ for young people under the age of 25 years. Participants on First Steps must be jobseekers between the ages of 18-24 years old, and must not be in Employment, Education or Training.

The First Steps programme was initially launched in February 2015, and has been reviewed on an ongoing basis since. The current programme now provides for an initial 1,500 placements of 3 months with an option to extend this period to 6 or 9 months.

First Steps participants will receive, through the Department of Social Protection, an internship allowance equivalent to their weekly social welfare payment with an additional top-up allowance of €52.50 per week as a contribution towards expenses arising from their participation on the programme.

Participants on the programme will work closely with their case officer throughout this activation process, initially meeting with them to prepare a Personal Progression Plan (PPP), which will outline their immediate and long-term goals and activities to support them on their journey to full employment. The case officer is the key link person for the jobseeker throughout the process, and they will be in contact with the participant, the Host Organisation (HO) mentor/work buddy and any other support professionals, before, during and after the placement. The case officer will meet with the Host Organisation every month to review its experience and to address any issues arising.

The Host Organisation mentor and case officer will guide and manage the workplace experience and work with the participant to identify and agree a set of learning outcomes and training objectives that will be achieved before the end of the placement. This can be linked to the objectives outlined in the jobseeker’s Personal Progression Plan (PPP).

Depending on the sector and the specific business section in which a participant is placed, an individual would expect to be given the opportunity to learn various day-to-day work activities such as:

- Basic office type tasks, such as using a computer, answering phones, working with office printers, photocopiers, filing systems and other basic office admin tasks.

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- Learn about stock control, warehousing, complete manual handling training, learn about safety clothing, safety procedures, how to operate machinery etc.
- Good general work habits such as time management and communication skills.

In addition, during the course of their placement the participant will:

- Receive in-house training from the Host Organisation on their in-house procedures, processes, systems, etc.
- Receive further training identified during the course of the placement to be of benefit to the progression of the participant. This training to be delivered or procured by the Host Organisation.
- Be provided with supports as required by a DSP case officer or other care professional during the course of their placement.

Participant Eligibility Criteria

The First Steps programme is targeted at young people who face difficulty in entering the labour market. First Steps is aimed at young people who are not currently engaged in employment, education or training (NEET).

Participation on the scheme is wholly voluntary, although placements will be offered and suitable candidates will be encouraged to participate accordingly.

To qualify for participation on First Steps, a candidate must be:

- (a) Aged between 18-24
- and
- (b) Be unemployed for at least 12 months
- or**
- (c) If unemployed less than 12 months be considered by a case officer to face a significant barrier in his/her efforts to find work
- and
- (d) Referred by a case officer

Qualifying payments for participation on First Steps include the following:

Jobseekers Allowance, Jobseekers Benefit, One Parent Family Payment, Jobseeker Transition Payment, Disability Allowance, Blind Person's Pension and signing for Credits.

Time spent on Active Labour Market Programmes (ALMPs) will count towards eligibility for First Steps, provided the programme has been completed in full and the person was 18 years or older while on the programme and is in receipt of a payment immediately prior to the First Steps placement.

Casual Claimants

Casual claimants cannot participate in the First Steps scheme¹.

¹ A casual worker is a part-time worker who works on a casual basis. Casual part-time workers are those with fewer than 13 continuous weeks' service who are not in regular or seasonal employment, or are casual, based on a collective agreement to that effect.
(<http://www.citizensinformation.ie>)

Selection Process for First Steps Participants

The Department will take care to identify suitable participants for the First Steps scheme. Consideration will be given to the nature of the barriers being experienced in identifying a suitable placement and preparing the young person to take up the opportunity. These will include, but are not limited to:

- Poor educational attainment
- Low levels of personal or technical skills
- Personal, behavioural or health issues
- A history of substance abuse
- A lengthy period of unemployment
- Homelessness or instability of residence

A critical success factor will be the young person's motivation. Therefore participation, although offered and encouraged, will be voluntary. Engaging with the participant to stimulate and maintain motivation will be a key responsibility of the case officer and the Host Organisation's mentor.

In the first instance, First Steps placements will be offered to clients who, in the view of the Department's case officers, already have, or can develop the level of motivation necessary to sustain the placement and make the most out of the opportunity that is being offered.

Post-programme supports

Post-programme supports will also be provided by the Department. Those participants who remained unemployed will be helped to develop their Personal Progression Plan (PPP) by their designated case officer, and they will continue to meet the case officer at least once per month, who will assist the jobseeker with their job-search, or help the participant to progress onto a suitable training, education or employment programme.

Host Organisation Eligibility and Information

Host Organisations are organisations providing placement opportunities and participating in the Scheme.

1. This Scheme is open to organisations in the private, public (including commercial semi-state) or community and voluntary sectors.
2. In order to qualify for a placement, an organisation or a local branch, must have a minimum of 1 full -time employee who is employed for 30 hours or more per week (i.e. on payroll and subject to PAYE and PRSI) in addition to the employer
3. The Host Organisation must be a legal entity and/or a charity recognised by the Revenue Commissioners (with a CHY number).
4. The Host Organisation currently may not have vacancies in the area of activity in which the placement is offered.
5. A Host Organisation cannot offer a placement in the same area of activity where redundancies have occurred.
6. The placement will not be provided to displace an employee. The Scheme Administrator (Employer Relations Division) reserves the right to review cases where it is reported that this is the case.
7. The Host Organisation may not provide a placement opportunity under the Scheme to an individual if they have an existing/previous employment relationship with the person.
8. The Host Organisation's Public/Employers Liability insurance and Motor insurance, if applicable, will cover any participants on this Scheme.
9. The Host Organisation must be fully compliant with current workplace health and safety and all other legal requirements.
10. The Host Organisation has responsibility to ensure that the appropriate process is applied to placements that require Garda vetting. Participants must agree to comply with requests for Garda Vetting where necessary in accordance with the Host Organisation's policy on Garda Vetting.
11. The table below shows the total number of placements an organisation can offer at any one time:

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Number of Full Time Employees*	Number of Placements
1-10 employees	1 placement
11-20 employees	3 placements
21-30 employees	4 placements
30 + employees	20% of the workforce to a maximum of 200 placements whichever is the smaller
* Who is employed for 30 hours or more per week (i.e. on payroll and subject to PAYE and PRSI)	

Local branch offices of national organisations e.g. large retail outlets will **not** be regarded as an individual Host Organisation for the purpose of First Steps.

The **maximum number of First Steps participants** a Host Organisation can have on the Scheme at any point in time are **20**.

- Participants will be required to participate on the Scheme for 4 days per week, with the one day set aside for meeting with their designated case officer to review their progress and participation on the Scheme. The work based placement will be for a minimum of 20, and a maximum of 30 hours per week.

The participant should be allowed time to attend interviews, meet their case officer, and visit their local Intreo Centre in order to facilitate their job seeking activities.

- Suitable (certified where possible) training, identified by the Host Organisation in conjunction with the designated DSP case officer, must be delivered by the Host Organisation to the participant during the course of the internship.
- An initial cooling-off period of 3 months will apply before another placement in the same area of activity can be offered or approved. This period will be waived if the participant enters employment with either the host, or another organisation following completion of their placement.

Exclusions

Currently placements in the apprenticeship/trade area (e.g. electrical, plumbing) are not permitted on the First Steps scheme.

Monitoring

DSP reserves the right to conduct monitoring visits throughout the duration of the First Steps scheme.

The purpose of monitoring is to ensure that the Standard Agreement has been agreed and submitted by both the Host Organisation and the Participant, and that both parties are adhering to same. During the monitoring visit the case officer will establish whether both the intern and the Host Organisation are satisfied with how the placement is progressing and offer any assistance with any issues that might arise.

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Monitoring Visits are also a mechanism for engaging with local employers and keeping them up to date with supports etc. that the Department has to offer.

The Department is committed to the continuous improvement of all its service delivery, and we recognise that key elements of continuous improvement relate to on-going monitoring and review of all schemes, including First Steps.

Finishing a Placement

The Host Organisation is required to:

- Provide a reference as per Appendix 2 in the Standard Agreement.
- Complete the evaluation form and provide the participant with a copy, both to be returned to case officer and a copy forwarded to Employer Relations Division.

If the placement finishes earlier than the Proposed Finish Date, one week's written notice must be given by either party. The Host Organisation must notify their case officer and the Policy Unit by emailing: firststeps@welfare.ie. Failure to do so may affect the participant's social welfare entitlement.

Participant Eligibility and Information

- During a First Steps placement, participants continue to receive their current rate of payment, i.e., means continue to apply, under-25 rate continues to apply and graduated rates of JB continue to apply. In addition, all participants will receive a top-up payment of €52.50 (top-up allowance) each week, and payment should be made by EFT into a bank account, where possible.

All changes in the participant's circumstances must be notified to the local Intreo Centre or relevant scheme owner as this may affect their social welfare payment. The following should also be noted:

- The top-up allowance will be paid in arrears.
- No employer top-up contributions will be allowed.

It is expected that participants will receive this top-up allowance approximately 2 weeks after commencing on the programme.

All payments of the top-up allowance will be made by the Department of Social Protection via Electronic Fund Transfer into the participant's bank account, where possible.

- Out of pocket expenses - A Host Organisation may reimburse a participant for expenses incurred as part of the placement. However, expenses should not be provided for normal activities such as travel to and from the main location of the placement.
- Payments other than out of pocket expenses by a Host Organisation are likely to have potential Benefit in Kind impacts and may also affect an individual's social welfare status. Should this issue arise, participants and/or Host Organisations should seek advice from their local Department of Social Protection office and/or the Revenue Commissioners on this matter.
- The Department of Social Protection are not liable for any expenses arising from a placement – either in respect of the participant or the Host Organisation (other than the payment of the top-up allowance).
- For participants on Jobseeker payments, the period that they are in receipt of the First Steps allowance will be disregarded in respect of social welfare payment and, upon completion of the Scheme; the claim will resume from the point at which they left, providing they still meet the eligibility criteria. For example, an individual on jobseeker's benefit with 60 days of entitlement left on his/her claim will still have 60 days of entitlement left when their placement is completed if they resume their claim.
- Participants will be required to participate on the scheme for 4 days per week, with the one day set aside for meeting with their designated case officer to review their progress and participation on the Scheme. The work based placement will be for a minimum of 20 and a maximum of 30 hours per week.

Leave

- Annual Leave – Participants on First Steps will be entitled to all Public Holidays and 1.75 days annual leave for each month that they participate on the Scheme.
- Maternity Leave – Participants are entitled to suspend a First Steps placement early due to maternity leave. Host Organisations must enter a finish date when the participant commences maternity leave. Scheme eligibility will need to be confirmed before recommencing the placement. The top-up allowance will cease while a person is on maternity leave.
- Sick Leave – The maximum cumulative sick leave permissible over the course of a placement is 2 weeks (10 working days). Where a participant has exceeded this limit, the Host Organisation shall terminate the placement immediately. The responsibility lies with the Host Organisation to record all sick leave absences.

Participation on the programme

The Department of Social Protection is committed, under Pathways to Work to incentivise the take-up of activation opportunities.

- Jobseekers who are eligible for the Scheme will be identified and contacted by their local Intreo Centre and encouraged to, or offered participation on the Scheme.
- Jobseekers selected through this process will have, in line with the activation process, a one-to-one session with their case officer who will explain the First Steps to the jobseeker and review the various First Steps placements on offer in their local area. If the jobseeker is interested in participating on the Scheme, both parties will then select suitable placements to pursue.
- The case officer will then refer the jobseeker for an interview with the Host Organisation.
- If selected by the Host Organisation, the jobseeker will then commence the placement for a period of 3 months (this can be extended to 6 or 9 months if agreed by all parties)
- The focus of the placement is to provide a quality work experience for the participant and to continue to support them in their efforts to secure employment.
- Individuals who participate in First Steps will be given priority access during, and on completion of their placement, to supports, schemes and training courses for which they are eligible.

The Process

Please note that all correspondence with Host Organisations will be by way of email/online returns, therefore it is vitally important that organisations provide a current email address.

Selection of participants is carried out by the eligible Host Organisations who have to promote equality and prohibit discrimination in placements on nine grounds as defined in the Employment Equality Acts 1998-2011 and the Equal Status Acts 2000-2012. The nine grounds are gender (including gender identity), family status, civil status, sexual orientation, age, disability (including mental health), race (including skin colour, ethnicity and nationality), membership of the Traveller community, religion (including non-religious belief).

Host Organisations must also provide reasonable accommodation for people with disabilities and to ensure equality through preferential treatment or positive measures which promote equality of opportunity for people who may be disadvantaged because of their circumstances, or to cater for their special needs.

Where queries arise organisations may contact their designated local Intreo Centre contact details for offices can be found on the www.welfare.ie website.

1. Host Organisations can express an interest in offering a First Steps opportunity by emailing firststeps@welfare.ie, and an Application Form will be issued by return email.
2. The Policy Unit will ensure that the Host Organisation and proposed First Steps placement satisfy the conditions of the Scheme.
3. Approved placements will be viewed by Intreo Centre Activation teams.
4. The Policy Unit will immediately notify the Divisional Employer Engagement Liaison Manager of all new placements who will ask Departmental case officers to identify suitable candidates for the advertised vacancies and refer them for selection by the Host Organisation.
5. The Host Organisation will select a candidate from those referred and notify the case officer and the First Steps Policy Unit of the actual start date.
6. The Host Organisation will be issued with a Standard Agreement for the placement, which must be agreed and signed by both the host themselves and the participant.
7. The Policy Unit must be informed by both the Host Organisation and the case officer if the placement finishes early.

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8. A high level of support must be provided to both the Host Organisation and the participant throughout the placement, so in the case of referrals from multiple Intreo Centres consideration must be given to who is best placed to be the single point of contact between the DSP and the Host Organisation.
9. The case officer is the key link between the jobseeker and the Host Organisation, and should have regular communication and liaison with both parties for the duration of the work experience placement, and seek to resolve any issues that may arise.
10. The Policy Unit will issue monthly emails to the Host Organisation during the placement to confirm compliance.

Finally, the Policy Unit will issue evaluation forms to both the Host Organisation and participant on completion of the work placement.