

Department of Social Protection Floor 1,
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29th September 2025

To whom it concerns,

Cork Chamber welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Department of Social Protection's public consultation on the Pathways to Work 2026 – 2030 strategy.

Cork Chamber represents 1,200 members together employing 130,000 people throughout the city, metropolitan area and county. Our vision is to lead a transforming and ambitious Cork City and County, and our purpose is to unite, represent and support our members and community. Our direction is guided by our formal pledge to uphold the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Cork Chamber has also been designated an SDG Champion by the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment for 2024 – 2025.

Cork Chamber's advocacy efforts are guided by the views and priorities of our partners, and are shaped by our continuous engagement with members, our Board and key stakeholders in Cork City and County.

Promoting workforce participation, as well as upskilling and reskilling opportunities is a key priority for Cork Chamber's members, and the Chamber is proud to participate in a number of initiatives that support the achievement of these goals. Cork Chamber collaborates with educational institutions across the Cork region, as well as community and stakeholder groups, to help bridge the gap between employers and individuals seeking employment and upskilling opportunities, particularly those who may be facing additional barriers to accessing these opportunities.

Yours sincerely,



Conor Healy

CEO

1. What progress do you feel has been made in achieving the aims and commitments set out in Pathways to Work 2021-2025?

Considerable positive progress has been made towards reducing the number of individuals in long-term unemployment in recent years, as well as in reducing barriers to work for certain groups.

However, some of this progress can be attributed to the economic growth and development seen in recent years and it is therefore vital that the new strategy safeguards against any potential negative impact that changing geopolitical and economic circumstances may have on this positive trajectory.

Cork Chamber is proud to support a number of initiatives that facilitate engagement between Cork's business community and those seeking employment or upskilling opportunities, as well as projects that help to promote access to information and awareness of available supports for employers.

For example, Cork Chamber has partnered with SECAD on the WorkAbility Cork: Inclusive Pathways to Employment Programme. The programme aims to create opportunities for individuals with disabilities, providing them with the tools and supports needed to allow them to achieve their employment goals. As part of this programme, the Chamber collaborates with local employers to source opportunities for those participating in the programme and supports them in accessing these opportunities.¹ Such collaborations play an important role in promoting social cohesion in local areas, while also supporting individual employees to reach their full potential.

In addition, Cork Chamber is also a partner of the Cork Access Network and became the first formal partner from the business community to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with Cork City's Education and Lifelong Learning Partners in 2024. Cork Chamber's participation in the initiative serves to highlight the essential role of businesses in fostering a culture of continuous education. All project partners work together to mitigate against educational disadvantage in Cork City where possible, with project partners working across four broad pillars of access, namely further and higher education, community, the workplace, and schools.²

The value of these initiatives, both for the business community and the wider community in Cork, is clear and Cork Chamber is committed to building on the success of these initiatives to promote active participation and inclusion in the workforce and in society.

¹ Cork Chamber, <https://www.corkchamber.ie/workability-cork/>

² Cork Learning City, <https://www.corklearningcity.ie/>

2. What are the key challenges facing the Irish labour market that Pathways to Work 2026 – 2030 will need to address over the lifetime of the strategy?

Particular consideration should be given to emerging sectors that may require new skills or ways of working and could be supported through new approaches to upskilling and reskilling. AI and digital industries, as well as the green energy sector, are two key examples of evolving sectors that will require new skills and talent in the years to come. Geographical considerations will be important in this regard too; Cork, for example, has a key role to play as a leading hub for the growing green energy sector, and upskilling and reskilling opportunities in this sector should be prioritised in the region.

As noted in the consultation document, however, the evolution towards greater digitalisation can also have a potentially negative impact on workforce participation, increasing marginalisation for those not equipped with the skills required to meet the needs of a green and digital economy. In this regard, upskilling and reskilling should be prioritised to ensure continued workforce participation, particularly in sectors and roles that may be more vulnerable to automation and digitalisation.

Rising business costs and increasing administrative burdens are key areas of concern for many in the business community, potentially impacting firms' ability to allocate resources and funding to employment and upskilling supports. In this regard, ensuring that government funding is made available where possible to support continued pathways to employment and upskilling is important. Fostering connection between employers and external agencies and community groups who offer supports in this area should also be prioritised.

In this regard, the suggestion to develop an 'inventory of employment support measures and programmes' is particularly welcome. It is critical that employers can access information regarding available supports in a timely and efficient manner, particularly in an era of increased economic uncertainty globally.

3. Are there any changes that you would suggest for Pathways to Work 2026 – 2030, considering the potentially changed economic circumstances? This can include suggestions on the high-level ambitions, strands of action, specific commitments and targets or overall strategy design.

Continuing to strengthen partnerships between business representative organisations, educational institutions, community groups, state agencies and other relevant stakeholders should be prioritised to ensure that the new strategy continues to meet the needs of individuals, as well as the demands of a rapidly evolving labour market. Such collaboration is particularly important in a rapidly growing city region like Cork, with the projected economic and population growth requiring enhanced infrastructure and resources in areas like healthcare and construction. Ongoing cooperation can help to

ensure that upskilling and resourcing are directed towards the sectors and geographic regions where they are needed most.

Furthermore, in an era of increased digitalisation and online supports, digital tools should be utilised fully to improve the accessibility of employment supports and upskilling courses and resources. Providing more flexible modes of learning and ways of working may be beneficial to individuals seeking employment or upskilling opportunities, and access should be tailored to individual needs as much as possible. Offerings such as micro-credentials should be expanded to enhance flexible opportunities for upskilling; such courses can provide a cost-effective way for participants to acquire specific, in-demand skills.

4. Do you have any suggested actions to help improve the employment prospects and outcomes of people underrepresented in the labour market (such as people with disabilities, migrants, lone parents, members of the Traveller and Roma communities, among others)? This can include, for example, actions in relation to the Public Employment Services, training and employment supports and programmes, the social welfare system, and/or engagement with employers.

Ensuring that routes to employment and upskilling opportunities are as accessible as possible for individuals is vital. Communication and informational campaigns regarding available opportunities can play an important role in this regard, as well as tailored supports to meet individual needs where possible. In this regard, partnerships and collaborations between community groups, businesses, education providers and state agencies should be prioritised to help foster links between individuals seeking employment and upskilling opportunities and the organisations that can provide these opportunities.

Promoting access to supports offered by external agencies or community organisations would also be beneficial, particularly for SMEs who may not have the internal resources to provide a wide range of supports for employees in-house.

Existing initiatives play an important role in bringing various stakeholders together and should be further supported where possible. For example, Cork Chamber is a member of the Age Friendly Alliance in both Cork city and county, which promotes policies and initiatives that support older people, including opportunities for reskilling to enable continued workforce participation among older people where appropriate.

Providing flexible modes of accessing upskilling and educational opportunities, as well as employment, insofar as possible is also important to ensure that individuals can access such opportunities in a manner suited to them. The provision of ongoing support to individuals taking up employment or upskilling opportunities should also be

considered in order to promote retention and continued workforce participation. Ongoing support for employers following the initial employment of individuals can help to support ongoing workforce participation. This could include access to training programmes or equipment that can help support individual needs and preferred ways of working.

Funding provision to support the participation of minority groups in third level education is another important consideration. At present, further education institutions must reapply each year to secure funding for programmes that support the education of these groups. This short-term model limits their ability to invest in both staff and participants, as there is no guarantee of funding beyond one or two years. A more sustainable, long-term funding approach would enable education providers to build continuity, strengthen outcomes and better support pathways into employment.