

**Minister of State Stanton's visit to Business in the Community Ireland to
mark their selection as Ireland's emblematic project for the 30th
Anniversary Celebration of Cohesion Policy in Europe**

8th May 2018 @ 14:30

Speaking Note for Minister

(1,193 words – 9 minutes)

“Good Afternoon Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here at the offices of Business in the Community Ireland to mark the selection of the EPIC programme as Ireland's emblematic project for inclusion in the programme of events planned by the EU Commission to celebrate 30 years of European Union Cohesion Policy.

The importance of the European Union's Cohesion Policy cannot be overstated. It is the EU's main investment policy supporting job creation, competitiveness, economic growth and sustainable development in regions and cities across the Union. Cohesion Policy is, in essence, the means by which the EU strives to improve the quality of life of EU residents, including our migrant communities. EU Cohesion Policy is delivered through funding mechanisms including the European Social Fund without which we would not be celebrating the success story that is the EPIC programme.

I am particularly pleased to see BITCI's EPIC programme chosen by the EU Commission as Ireland's standout example of how government, business and non-profit partnership can use EU Funding for the benefit of society. EPIC not only provides our new communities with the tools to seek and find employment but - what is equally important - it provides an introduction to the social and work environment in which migrants will operate into the future. The success of EPIC is in large part due to the work and dedication of all those involved and it is of no small significance that it has been recognised as part of the 30 Years of Cohesion campaign from among many other projects across all EU countries.

This recognition is well deserved. I had the pleasure of attending the Graduation Ceremony of the EPIC Programme in October last year where I had the opportunity to speak with many of the diverse group of migrant participants and hear, first-hand, their testimonials about the EPIC programme and how it has opened up new avenues of opportunity for them. I also had the opportunity to meet the tutors, teachers and key business partners who collaborate with Business in the Community on the EPIC programme. People who give of their time freely and who spoke to me of how much personal satisfaction and reward they get out of their involvement. This is a key message we all need to take from the recognition being given to the EPIC programme today. There are rewards to be gained in investing in people that transcend mere monetary gain. There is the reward of living in a safe and fair society where difference and diversity is celebrated and harnessed for the greater good, not used as an excuse

to deny people opportunity. There is the reward of knowing you or your organisation may have changed the lives of individual participants and their families for the better. The reward of knowing you have kept your country to the fore in terms of the global migrant integration.

And we **are** to the fore in Migrant Integration. Don't just take my word for it. In the latest Eurobarometer report on migrant integration, published by the EU Commission last month, Ireland scored very highly among our fellow EU Member States in a number of categories. Most notably, we ranked first among all EU States in terms of the public's perception of how well migrants are integrating into the host society. That tells us we are doing something right. It tells us that at community level the Ireland of the "Céad Míle Failte" still exists despite developments elsewhere in the world.

However, there is still plenty of room for improvement. The Eurobarometer report also shows that countries could be doing more to promote migrant integration and better communicate what is being done in the area to the general public. Furthermore, we know from available research that labour market outcomes here in Ireland could be a lot better for certain cohorts of migrants, and we can see clearly that the level of migrant representation in public office and in the public service remains disproportionately low.

These are all areas that the Government is determined to address through its Migrant Integration Strategy – A Blueprint for the Future. The Strategy, now 15 months into its three year lifespan, contains 76 different actions across a variety of themes. One of the key themes of the Strategy, and I would say one of the key pillars of integration in general, is the theme of employment and pathways to work. Under this theme, there is a variety of actions in the Strategy aimed at preparing vulnerable and disadvantaged migrants for entry into the labour market and providing employment opportunities for them. These actions are being delivered by a range of actors including, the Public Appointments Service, Educational Training Boards, SOLAS - the Further Education Training Authority, and of course the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, which has recently commenced the development of a new three-year National Action Plan for Social Inclusion.

My own Department also plays an important role in meeting the employment related integration needs of migrants, both through the coordination work of the Office for the Promotion of Migrant Integration (OPMI) and the integration funding programmes they manage with the help of our EU Funds unit.

All of which brings us neatly back again to EPIC, and the Business in the Community Ireland team. Business in the Community Ireland was supported from 2008 to 2016 through funding from the OPMI amounting to €3.9 million. They are currently jointly supported by OPMI and the European Social Fund's

PEIL programme (*pronounced “pell”*) with €1.9 million in funding which will see the programme delivered to 1,280 people in coming years.

Indeed it is no surprise that the EU Commission chose the EPIC project as a standout example of how EU funding can further the aims of Cohesion Policy. The EPIC programme clearly demonstrates what can be achieved when the business community works in collaboration with government actors and the volunteer sector to help achieve the goals of national and European migrant integration policy. It is cohesion in action.

The Programme delivers to the individual too. The services provided by EPIC include intensive pre-employment and integration training, Individual career guidance, mentoring, motivation and support during the job application process. In 2016 alone, 338 participants from 64 countries engaged with the EPIC programme. In 2017, over five hundred participants benefited from the programme. So far this year 147 people have already participated and a third of these have already found employment. Many of these participants live with families. Participants’ husbands, wives, brothers, sisters, sons and daughters all stand to benefit from their relative’s involvement with EPIC. That’s not just hundreds of beneficiaries ... that’s thousands and that’s worthy of recognition and celebration.

To all of you working in Business in the Community Ireland, to all who continue to give their time to the EPIC Programme, including teachers, tutors, and mentors from within the business community, and to the participants, I offer you my sincere thanks for your continued efforts, and I congratulate you once again on your selection as Ireland's representative project in the forthcoming EU "Cohesion30" celebration programme.

Go raibh mile maith agaibh go léir.