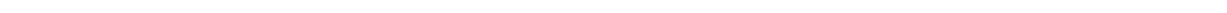# REPORT ON EUROCITIES MUTUAL LEARNING EVENT 'FIGHTING UNEMPLOYMENT OF PEOPLE AGED 45+ AND 21ST CENTURY SKILLS DEVELOPMENT'

## MADRID
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# Contents

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Long-term unemployment (LTU), older age profiles and rapidly changing skills demand on the labour market, all come together as major challenges for public employment services and the various stakeholders they work with. While numbers vary greatly, the overall trend across Europe's cities is for general employment rates to be falling, while for those who are unemployed it is an increasingly longer-term experience.

The city-level of governance and action is the frontline for dealing with these challenges, where concrete people experience specific outcomes, and measures are implemented in practical terms. This makes cities necessary actors in any effective approach to tackling LTU.

In a context of rapid technological change, increasing digitization is both an opportunity and a threat, as technology offers new creative and cost-saving ways of engaging with beneficiaries, but also raises a risk of exclusion for those less equipped to use it — particularly among the older.

Long-term unemployment situations typically involve multiple causal factors and multiple barriers to overcome — e.g. health, accreditation of qualifications, childcare, transport, and so forth. Thus, effective practices are consistently based on holistic views of what the challenges are and of how to help.

It also emerged from the event that taking into account the emotional and psychological dimension of long-term unemployment is key to effectively supporting people out of it. Conversely, the attitudes of others, particularly among employers, towards the older and the long-term unemployed are also major factors to be dealt with; stigma is still a major societal issue and much remains to be done to move awareness and attitudes in a more helpful direction.

The possibilities are significant for cities to cooperate, so as to learn from each other, and also to build a more coherent front as collective interlocutors with other levels of administration. In this regard, the example of the Spanish Forum of Cities for Employment is possibly one to follow elsewhere.

Cities clearly need to engage in substantive experimentation if they are to break through the many entrenched barriers around LTU. Accordingly, adapting regulatory frameworks to allow for needed experimentation by city administrations is a necessary element in the path forward. Similarly, better understanding the undesired incentives stemming from rigidities in current benefit schemes, and reforming them, is a key area where breakthroughs can be made in tackling LTU.

On a European level, the European Pillar of Social Rights, and lessons learnt from the implementation of initiatives such as the Youth Guarantee, offer cities new tools for advancing agendas in favour of ever more inclusive labour markets.

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Across Europe, over 40% of unemployed people have been out of work and looking for a job for more than one year, increasing the risk of poverty, social exclusion and inequalities.

Long-Term Unemployment (LTU) is emerging as a major issue for economic and labour market recovery, for, as general unemployment rates are mostly falling, those who are unemployed are increasingly LTU. There are multiple risk factors associated with LTU, each requiring its own understanding and suitability of response.

Older workers have their own particularity in relation to LTU, as when they become unemployed, they have higher risk of remaining so .

Cities and local administrations are on the front-line when it comes to supporting the unemployed, and so in support of its members EUROCITIES organised the Mutual Learning Event 'Fighting Unemployment Of People Aged 45+ And 21st Century Skills Development', in Madrid, 27-28 September 2018. The event was attended by representatives of the cities of Barcelona, Ghent, Gijon, Lille, Madrid, Milan, Nantes, Seville, Terrassa, Tirana, Utrecht, Valladolid, a broad range of stakeholders and social partners concerned with employment issues in the city of Madrid, and representatives of the European Commission and Parliament.

A key European dimension of the event was its being the occasion for Madrid to become the first European city to sign a pledge to support the European Pillar of Social Rights.

## 2. ON THE MUTUAL LEARNING METHODOLOGY

The term 'peer learning' has different meanings depending on one's professional training and context. However, at its heart is the concept of 'peers' i.e. people who have a similar function within an organisation, learning from one another. In urban development, the fact that so many cities face the same challenges, means that peer learning is an important and powerful mechanism. However, to operate well the process requires careful thought, preparation and execution.

In this brief paper we explain the approach to peer learning employed in the Eurocities Long Term Unemployment Working Group Peer Learning session which took place in Madrid on September 27th and 28th 2018.

**Principles**

The Eurocities Peer Learning session was framed by a series of principles, as follows:

- Openness and transparency – Those presenting city examples were encouraged to be open and honest, and to reflect on the challenges they have faced, rather than only on successes.
- Reciprocity – the notion of exchange is at the heart of the peer learning process. Those presenting city cases have the opportunity to gather feedback and reflections from their audience. In this sense, the process provides a micro-consultancy opportunity for presenters, who can seek suggestions for improvement from other participants.
- Effective engagement and interaction – city presenters were encouraged not to use PowerPoint. Instead, they were invited to adopt more of a story-telling approach in small groups. This encourages interaction and real-time exchange.

**Practical steps**

Structured preparation is an important component of any effective peer learning session. In this event, we had two rounds of exchange, in each of which, participants had the opportunity to hear about city interventions aimed at tackling long-term employment. In the first, the focus was on Madrid, whilst the second widened the perspective to Barcelona, Gijon and Ghent.

In advance, each presenting city was asked to provide written information on their case, in a consistent format. This was circulated to participants prior to the event, by way of context.

The city story-telling sessions adopted a World Café model, whereby participants rotated in groups so that everyone heard each city story. Each 'rotation' allowed time for the city to share its narrative, as well as space for questions and discussion. This was conducted in English and Spanish, with formal interpreting support on Day 1 and lighter buddying input on Day 2.

Following the second round of city stories, participants were organised in mixed groups and given the task of helping to refresh the Eurocities policy statement on city approaches to tackling long-term unemployment. Support tools for this included a summary of the statement, and a series of questions for participants to consider: Has the policy context changed? Does the guidance for cities remain relevant? Is there anything you would remove or add?

At the end of this activity, each group presented its conclusion to the others. There was a great deal of consistency in the final messages, but also some important distinctive points from each group. This led to a full and comprehensive discussion.

These group activities were interspersed with techniques aimed at teasing out individual views. Such activities are important, as they underline the fact that learning is taking place at different levels – at the individual, organizational and city level, in this case.

The first such activity was an 'opinion line' where participants were asked to agree or disagree with a statement, then exchange their reaction with the group. This activity is highly interactive and often generates a stimulating exchange.

The session closed with a 'domino' activity where participants record their most important learning point together with the action they will take with it once they get back home. They record this on a sheet of paper split like a domino – and then 'play' their domino on the floor with the group. This fun personal exercise is a good energizer to conclude such sessions.

### Reflections and Next Steps

This was the first Peer Learning session of its type. Overall, the model worked well, and it has potential for wider application with the LTU working group and beyond.

The current context for employment lends itself particularly well to peer-to-peer exchanges. The challenges of decarbonisation, digital platforms, AI and other disruptive drivers mean that cities face significant issues – each of these is a gamechanger, but combined, they represent a whole new employment paradigm. Happily, there are also opportunities. For example, although much of the current debate focuses on potential job losses, many cities are starting to actively worry about how they will replace retiring baby-boomers in the labour market.

Across Europe, cities are struggling to make sense of this new context. Some are further ahead than others. The future is already here, it's just not evenly distributed. Consequently, through the peer review model Eurocities has a significant opportunity to add real value to its members' activities in this key policy space. The basic framework developed for the Madrid session – structured preparation, an emphasis on storytelling combined with evidence, collaborative outputs – is one which can be utilised in future activities either at the same size or even drawing in larger city numbers. By facilitating such a peer-learning approach, Eurocities can also mobile the considerable asset-base existing within cities as a driver for innovation and change.

Eddy Adams, Learning Facilitator
October 2018

## 3. WHERE WE ARE, WHERE WE ARE GOING, AS A WORKING GROUP

WG chair: Celine Schroeder, Nantes Metropole, WG vice chair: Belen Garcia Diaz, Madrid

**Policy Discussion**
At the EUROCITIES WG members meeting — Thursday, 27 September at Fernando Lázaro Carreter Cultural Center, Madrid — LTU discussion principally revolved around the following practical concerns for cities:
- Target groups not registering with public employment services (PES) and people not participating in programmes cities design for them. Possibly overcoming this through the use of more contemporary communication channels (phone apps etc.).
- Digital divide issues - barriers for some users in accessing increasingly digitalised PES services, particularly for older LTUs.
- Regional employment policies not matching city priorities and needs – the need for city-specific PES and employment policy design.
- The non-inclusion of cities in the ESF+ proposals so far, and the lack of transparency of the European Semester process and how to influence it. Members would like support from EUROCITIES to better understand European Semester.
- Work quality/conditions - e.g. the frequency in Barcelona of short-term contracts, of say a month or so, particularly for 45+ job seekers.
- The significance of the LTU issue for member cities - e.g. more than 40% of Madrid's unemployed are long-term.
- Holistic - opportunities stemming from the more holistic approach proposed for ESF+, connecting policies for employment with poverty and inclusion.
- Urban Agenda - Klaas Ballegeer of Ghent presented on the Urban Agenda's Partnership on Jobs and Skills, highlighting the lack of funding earmarked for implementing its conclusions.

**Direction of the Employment Working Group**

Discussion on the future of the WG centred on the following:
- Reinforcing and deepening the WG as a platform for exchange and transfer of practice.
- Adding to the WG meetings a dimension of support for members' project development — providing a regular space to present project ideas and proposals, get feedback on these, and use the WG as a vehicle for project partner search.
- Creating more political 'buy in' - involving elected officials in the events and creating parallel contents and activities for political figures.
- Alternative formats to the traditional meeting report and final outputs.
- More transversal exchange - pursuing logical synergies for exchange with other WGs, particularly the Economic Development or Knowledge Society Forums.
- Engaging more cities into the working group.
- Involving national government in the meetings.
- Provisional topics of interest for 2019: skills development, fighting long-term unemployment, reactivation of inactive and/or unregistered people and discouraged workers, adult education, big data in local development, overcoming digital barriers/skills gaps.

## 4. PULSE TAKING — LTU IN CITIES IN 2018

In a structured dialogue activity, participants were briefed on the findings of EUROCITES' 2015 policy paper "Fighting long-term Unemployment: The contribution of European Cities", and produced the following feedback on two questions.

Q1: Considering the developments since the initial guidelines were produced, what important context points are important to add/underline?
- The economic picture has shifted, but remains highly uneven. Some parts of Europe have strong growth, whilst others continue to struggle.
- The arrival of significant migrant numbers has impacted strongly in many cities. There are many consequences - including the presence of highly qualified migrants who are not permitted to work.
- Societal and employer prejudice - particularly against certain groups (migrants, women, LGBT) remains a strong labour market barrier.
- There remains a stigma to being long term unemployed - societal and amongst employers.
- The long-term unemployed are much less visible than other groups. The political priority has been elsewhere - youth, migrants.
- City administrations lack some of the necessary competencies to deal with the LTU challenge.
- Many courses are short-term fixes which only recycle the LTU through different programmes.

- Many LTU people face a wide range of psycho-emotional challenges – low levels of self-esteem, low confidence, poor motivation etc.
- Many over 45s have weak digital skills.
- LTU can be prevalent in deprived areas where transport links to the labour market are poor.
- Benefits systems remain inflexible.
- There is 'skills inflation' in labour market demand, whereby employers ask for ever increasing qualification levels.
- People are working for longer as the retirement age rises.
- New sectors and ways of working are emerging – Digital Platforms (Uber, AirBnb etc) as well as the Social and Solidarity Economy. New models of work linked to these are unfamiliar and digital platforms also contribute to increased levels of insecurity and precariousness.

Q2: What recommendations would you make to the key actors, at the different levels of government?
- Focus on changing employer perceptions relating to older LTU people – good case study examples include the Barcelona Activa use of modern communications campaigning, or the Gijón example of awarding employers who employ seniors – and using them as sectoral ambassadors. (Cities)
- Learning from the Madrid IED Innovation Lab experience, creating user-friendly, fun ways for older people to get familiar with new technology. (Cities)
- Develop more personal action plans linked to the social and solidarity economy – the MARES Madrid UIA project provides a good example (Cities)
- Continue to invest in the development of integrated services – and encourage and reward employees who work across traditional departmental silos (Cities and Member States).
- Extend the Youth Guarantee offer to LTU people of all ages. (EU)
- Pilot more flexible welfare models. (Member States)
- Expand the regulatory framework for innovative pilots and experiments. (Member States and cities)
- Explore the opportunities for cities to pilot tax and other preferential financial incentives to encourage employers to take on LTU people. (Cities)
- Encourage cities to mobilise collectively — considering the model of the Spanish Cities for Employment — to strengthen the city voice when funding decisions are being made, particularly in the development of new Operational Programmes. In doing so, ensure that vulnerable groups are a priority in the new OPs. (Cities, Member States and EU)
- Develop assessment tools for 21st century skills and needs - involving close dialogue with employers. (Cities and Member States)
- Embed ICT, social media and soft skills in all education and training programmes. (Cities)

## 5. MUTUAL LEARNING HIGHLIGHTS — LTU AND CITIES

The mutual learning event took place in the Istituto Europeo di Design (IED) Innovation Lab, imbuing the sessions with an overall sensibility to the value or creativity and design in innovating approaches to unemployment. The workshop given by Khora Urban Thinkers — a Madrid social enterprise based in the Lab and a partner of the Madrid city administration — demonstrated how non-formal learning can be paired with IT tools, such as virtual or enhanced reality devices, to help the long-term unemployed in reconceptualising their approach to job seeking and their own potential.

www.khoraurbanthinkers.es

Jaime López Cossío, an expert on employment policy and services in Spain and director of technical support for the Spanish Forum of Cities for Employment, gave an overview of this national network of over 20 cities with populations over 100,000. He focused on the practicalities of how and why the Forum works the way it does — particularly with a view to potential transfer of the practice.
Key points:
- The Forum has no political character, but is rather a purely technical body.
- It has a regular structure for its meetings and internal communication.
- The network pursues 4 guiding objectives: enhancing the local dimension of employment issues, technical capacity building for its cities, supporting cooperation between administrations and PES, and improving the efficiency of labour activation via the exchange of good practice.
- A key decision from the beginning was that the operating budget comes only from member dues — 180 to 500Eur monthly, according to size.
- They follow an integrated approach to employment, meaning that other policy areas — housing etc. — are relevant, and that employment concerns all levels of public authority.
- Network activities are largely focused on mutual learning and follow a benchmarking methodology.
- Institutional contacts set the main strategic direction, around which technical support coalesces.
- The network engages with 17 regional PES.
- The Forum is the main contact for its cities with the national level, and provides them with a direct line on information on national strategy and thinking.
- The body serves as a vehicle for participants to establish personal relationships with colleagues, with whom they then work together regularly outside of the forum.

http://www.ciudadesporelempleo.es

The employment and economic development agency 'Barcelona Activa' presented its current approach to LTUs — Pla de Xoc per Aturats de Llarga Durada — notable for its innovative outreach to target groups.

The relatively high presence of short-term contracts is an issue on Barcelona's labour market. Accordingly, the plan focuses on 'quality insertion' — i.e. helping people into jobs with starting contracts of more than 6 month and emphasising transparency in all relations with employers, working conditions and so forth. Essentially the practice takes small groups, usually around 15 people, devises an upskilling plan suitable for the group and links them to employers with relevant labour needs.

Key challenges the practice grappled with were a learned helplessness induced by LTU experiences, leading to a significant reluctance to engage with the programme, on behalf of precisely the people it was meant for. The agency dealt with this hurdle by focusing on people around the person targeted, with a 'tell people you know to go to Barcelona Activa' type message, and by using less traditional communication channels — such as a popular gossip magazine. The agency also worked closely with local NGOs on outreach to the people it was targeting.

Overall, the approach insists on flexibility, following a basic plan and timings, but always allowing for these to be adapted on the basis of need and circumstance — i.e. different people needing different lengths and intensities of training, adapting communication to each group, and so forth.

http://www.barcelonactiva.cat

The northern Spanish city of Gijón presented an interesting pilot programme for LTU — centred on improving the employability of citizens over 55 and notable for its focus on raising awareness among employers.

Locally, the 45+ age group makes up over 50% of the unemployed, and the 50+ group has the lowest employment rates — with females being the majority in this cohort and typically having only secondary school education.

The programme works with people over 55, designing a 3-year itinerary for them of training activities (largely focused on generic, ICT and entrepreneurial skills), validation of qualifications, guidance, and matching and networking with employers. The plan  was drawn up in consultation with a business federation and trade unions, and benefits from 4.3M Eur in support from the ESF fund, over 3 years.

The strategy is built on two fundamental axes:
1. Validating the capacities of people with low levels of formal qualifications by providing them with training certificates.
2. Involving employers closely, working on their own attitudes toward older job seekers and the LTU, using employers as idea ambassadors to advance these attitudes among their peers.

www.gijon.es

Ghent presented an interesting initiative, taking place under the aegis of an Interreg project the city is leading, involving shifting paradigms in private sector skills training — in the delta area shared by Belgium's Flanders and the Netherlands, where a string of large commercial ports form the economic engine of this cross-border area.

The basic idea is to  protect, maintain and grow this engine, on which the whole region depends. To do this there needs to be an up-to-date skills supply, and mismatching is thus an important strategic threat. The Skills Navigator project aims to guarantee this supply of '21st Century Skills', by putting in place a system for identifying demand and tools to then support supply.

A key challenge the city is dealing with, is that the labour market now changes too fast for schools to keep  up. Thus hirers waiting for ideal candidates to come along on their own is no longer an option, and employers in the region need to shift in their attitudes and expectations, becoming more proactive in generating the skill supply they depend on.

City authorities are working on this mentality shift by presenting cogent economic arguments —e.g. calculating production losses due to lack of investment in training, etc. — and by activating employers following more proactive training policies as promotors of these practices among their peers in the business community.

An additional challenge is that the Flemish PES are governed on a regional basis. Which doesn't allow for the granular specificity of approach to its local  job market that Ghent considers itself to need. As such, the project contains an element of advocacy, by putting the Flemish authorities in closeup contact with the Dutch PES system, which allows for the kind of local level autonomy, and results, that Ghent wishes for itself.

The first phase of the project is a regional stock taking of what the new skills demand consists of, with a particular emphasis on digital skills. The plan is to then develop a tool to help job seekers evaluate their own skills — what they have and what they need — and which then directs them onto a pathway for filling whatever skills gaps are detected.

http://www.grensregio.eu/projecten/skills-navigator

As host city, Madrid showcased a range of practices in support of the long-term unemployed.

'New Skills to Train More Competent People' — presented by Jose Fran Garcia, Director of City Lab - IED Innovation Lab, and Daniel de la Cuerda Larrea, of Khora Urban Thinkers — is notable for its innovative use of virtual and enhanced reality with older LTU, aiming to reframe their perceptions of self and of their job seeking challenges.

More concretely, the practice also develops participants' capacities and familiarity with digital and 21st Century Skills. Learning is all based on the use of new technology and design-centric tools.

www.khoraurbanthinkers.es

Reorienta 45+ — presented by Juan José Adrados, of Madrid City Council, and Mario Carabaño, of Mentes a la Carta — is a whole package programme supporting the

employability of people over 45. It develops personalized pathways for participants — involving things like training courses, assessment and self-assessment tools, guidance, job seeker strategies via social media and digital tools, and so forth.

The approach stresses the importance of maintaining morale and the psychological dimension in dealing with LTU. In this regard, the practice is interesting in things like how it encourages a kind of esprit de corps among its participants and flexibility in adapting to the needs of different profiles, such as LGBT LTUs.

http://reorienta45plus.com/

iLABi (Intergenerational Laboratory of Innovation for Employment) — presented by Eleonora Barone, CEO of mYmO — is a project about innovation in helping older people towards employment through the development of business projects and entrepreneurial approaches.

The practice is interesting in terms of revolving around a changing idea of the world of work — whereby strategies of self-employment mix with standard employment, project work, and so forth. The training programme covers elements of business and project strategy, as well as things like approaches to networking or collective intelligence.

https://maresmadrid.es/proyecto/ilabi-laboratorio-intergeneracional-de-innovacion-para-el-empleo/

## 6. POLITICS & POLICY PANEL

The political highlight of the event was Madrid, as represented by Vice Mayor Marta Higueras, signing a pledge to support the European Pillar of Social Rights, and more specifically pledging to take action in favour of principle 4 on 'active support to employment' and principle 11 on 'childcare and support to children'.

In doing so, Madrid became the first city to pledge its support to the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Other highlights of the high-level panel debate 'Cities implementing the social pillar: focus on long-term unemployment':

**Maria João Rodrigues MEP**, who attended, stressed the importance of cities, and by extension EUROCITIES, in achieving the goals of the Social Pillar, in particular those concerning employment.

Rodrigues underlined that jobs are created locally, and thus the question was how, from the national and EU levels, to support local plans for employment, based on local needs.

The MEP stressed the importance of quality employment, with decent labour culture and access to social protection — as outlined in the pillar.

She argued for the EU to support investment and the aligning of ESF+ with the Social Pillar.

The Youth Guarantee, she added, has created good outcomes in many countries, and, as

such, the same approach should be implemented in support of the LTU — i.e. after a certain time guarantee them a job or training to get a job.

**Marta Higueras**, first deputy-mayor of Madrid and Councillor in the Department of Equality, Social Rights and Employment, further argued for the importance of cities to employment, based on the closeness of a local administration to the actual unemployed — "we know what's needed, we need to be involved in design of calls, not just their management". In particular, she drew attention to the looming issue of "refugees without work and residence permits, who are simply not going to go away and who are of working age — what do with them?... if they do not enter pathways to employment, they will find other ways to survive." The Vice-Mayor identified the Spanish Forum of Cities for Employment as a key actor, and argued for the body adding immigrants and older people as targets of its work.

**Iva Zelic**, policy officer at DG Employment, agreed with Rodrigues on the key role of Eurocities in driving the implementation of the Social Pillar and the practical need to involve cities in identifying needs and designing measures, given their obvious closeness to de facto implementation. Along these lines, she pointed out the important role cities, and exchange among cities, have played in coping with the influx of refugees into the EU.
Zelic also emphasised the need for cities to understand the increasing importance of the European Semester and its country specific recommendations, highlighting how they are becoming a tool to guide Structural Fund investments.

**Federico Muñiz**, representing the Spanish Public Employment Service, argued for the need to move away from ad hoc city exchange, towards increasingly systematised exchange of good practice.

**Esther Gómez Morante**, Councillor of Carabanchel, the district of Madrid the event was held in, used the southern district of the city, "poorer and socio-economically limited" in relation to the whole, to illustrate the practical necessity of specific place-based approaches built on granular local analyses of need. An example of such local understanding, she cited, would be the local importance, in southern Madrid, of transport costs as a barrier to target groups accessing workshops meant for them.
The councillor also brought up the issue of gender, underlining how for instance, many female jobseekers cope with specific challenges related to child care.

The panel closed with a recognition of the generalised agreement among the speakers about the role of cities in combatting LTU, and tying this to the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, as a major point of reference on the current political horizon.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

The participants of EUROCITIES' Mutual Learning event in Madrid, a broad range of city representatives and stakeholders engaged with employment issues, were consulted on what were the key learning points they were taking away from the event and what actions they were going to take, based on this learning, they were going to take going forward. The following is a compilation of the main recurring statements gleaned from participant feedback:

Learning Points
- The importance of coordinating and cooperating among different services and levels of administrations.
- The societal importance of the issue of age, with the 45+ age profile being a major factor in LTU.
- The significance of issues of discrimination and prejudice.
- The under-appreciated value of older people.
- The importance of working with employers and the private sector, and of obtaining employer commitment.
- The importance of morale and the psychological and emotional dimensions when addressing LTU.
- The need for approaches engaging with multiple partners and stakeholders.
- The value of developing generic/soft skills.
- The value of transnational exchange for professional development.
- The need for approaches addressing multiple factors and barriers.
- Opportunities for EU funding and knowledge exchange.
- The value of non-formal learning and creative, innovative tools and practices for the LTU. The value of social innovation in career guidance and employment actions.

What I'll Do With What I've Learned
- Implement practices I've learned about here in my own work.
- Share knowledge acquired at event – with my team, colleagues, partners…
- Maintain and build on networking contacts established at the event.
- Use existing partnerships to build new actions and programmes specifically for LTU.
- Identify private sector good practice of employing older workers.
- Start a peer-to-peer group among employers to work on changing attitudes and perceptions among employers. Work with opinion leaders and ambassadors within communities to change attitudes and perceptions.
- Awareness raising actions about employing older people.
- Apply for funding under EU programmes.
- Explore new IT and multimedia practices in non-formal learning for the LTU.
- Promote and advocate for city-level action in favour of employment. Pursue more bottom up approaches, harnessing local level capacities and know how.

- Give more importance to bottom up approach building on local level actions and actors.

Overall, a few general messages emerged from the various activities and exchanges taking place over two days in Madrid.

Economic recovery, or at least improvement, is widely felt. However, the importance of certain problems and issues consistently endure — such as skills mismatch, digital skills, soft skills, validation of skills and employer involvement.

The need for continued and further coordination of actors, services and different levels of administration, emerged as a vital imperative.

Clearly, tech and ICT, in all their myriad forms, continue to be a major challenge and driver of change, in terms of 21st century job skills, but also as innovative tools for delivery of job seeker support. At the same time, for some sectors of the long-term unemployed, technology and the digital represent barriers to overcome.

On the less technological side of things, human morale, and the emotional and psychological dimension of LTU emerged consistently as factors fundamental to any viable approach to combatting long-term unemployment.

Moreover, attitudes and prejudices about age and older people were widely recognised as a major factor to take into account, as is the stigma often associated with long-term unemployment.

Participants from across Europe shared interchangeable narratives about coping with rigidities — in definitions of work, job protection and services, access to benefits and a long so forth. In response, agreement was shared on the need for regulatory advances, allowing for the innovation, the trying of new things and the facilitation of experiments that are clearly necessary.

If one simple, shared theme emerged, it was the basic clash between new ways of working and old ways of doing things.