



An Roinn Coimirce Sóisialaí
Department of Social Protection

Report of Social Inclusion Forum 2023

‘Revitalising the Roadmap: Progress and Priorities’

October 2023

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Social Inclusion Forum
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Sincere thanks are owed to all the organisations and people who took part in the Forum and offered their insights and proposals. The Department is also mindful of those people who were unable to attend but whose experiences contributed to the forum through informing the work of community organisations.

Appreciation is extended to the workshop facilitators (Tracey Noone – Irish Rural Link, Stephen Moffatt – Barnardos, Carol Baumann – Irish Local Development Network, and Issy Petrie – Society of St. Vincent de Paul), presenters (Nat O'Connor – Age Action Ireland, Naomi Feely – Children's Rights Alliance, Brid O'Brien – Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed, and Robert Thornton – Vincentian MESL Research Centre) and Departmental note-takers (Stephen Connolly, John Owens, Aoidean Delaney and Stephen McGreal).

Sincere thanks are also expressed to Alan O'Sullivan and Gareth Hogan in Audio Visual Services for their assistance and technical support in hosting the Forum in a hybrid online and in person format.

Disclaimer

The views contained in this report reflect those of the speakers and the participants at the Social Inclusion Forum and do not necessarily represent the views of the Department of Social Protection, the Government or its various departments.

Foreword



As Minister with responsibility for Social Inclusion, it was a great pleasure to hold the 2023 Social Inclusion Forum.

I am deeply appreciative of those who took the time to participate, whether online or in person at the Forum, or by attending one of the preparatory workshops facilitated by the European Anti-Poverty Network Ireland and Community Work Ireland.

The *Programme for Government: Our Shared Future* recognises the Social Inclusion Forum as ‘an important means of promoting engagement between people experiencing poverty and social exclusion, the community and voluntary sector and Government’. It is imperative for us, as policymakers, to listen to the views of those who are most impacted by or the focus of our policies.

This event focuses on the *Roadmap for Social Inclusion*, which outlines Government’s ambition to reduce consistent poverty to 2% or less by 2025. The theme of the 2023 Social Inclusion Forum was ‘Revitalising the Roadmap’ and, following an extensive consultation process, I believe we have achieved this. I am very pleased that we were able to publish the mid-term review of the *Roadmap* to coincide with the Forum.

We have made considerable progress since the launch of the *Roadmap* in 2020 – 39 of the 69 commitments have been achieved, with work on the remaining commitments ongoing. The mid-term review of the *Roadmap* acknowledges that significant challenges remain and there is still much work to do, particularly in the context of recent persistent increases in the cost of living. In this regard, a number of commitments have been revised and added to better work to reduce poverty and

increase social inclusion as part of the mid-term review process.

It is important to highlight that the Social Inclusion Forum does not exist in a vacuum. It is much bigger than the one-day event and the resulting report. It forms part of a cycle that allows us to reflect on what has worked well in the past and where greater focus is needed in the future. For me, as Minister, what I hear at the Forum informs my input to Budget preparations. This report will be sent to members of the Social Inclusion Roadmap Steering Group, which oversees the implementation of the Roadmap, and, as Chair of the Steering Group, I will ask members to ensure the report is brought to the attention of the relevant areas within their respective Departments.

The Government is fully committed to the implementation of the Roadmap. The Minister for Social Protection, Heather Humphreys, T.D., and I will continue to look at targeted measures for the most vulnerable groups to ensure that no-one is left behind in the ongoing implementation of this vital national strategy.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Joe O'Brien". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Joe" and last name "O'Brien" clearly distinguishable.

Joe O'Brien T.D.

Minister of State with responsibility for Social Inclusion
Department of Social Protection

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Introduction

The annual Social Inclusion Forum is a national event, at which people directly affected by poverty and social exclusion, as well as the community organisations representing them, come together with officials from relevant Government Departments, the Minister for Social Protection, and the Minister of State with responsibility for Social Inclusion. It allows for discussion about progress in the implementation of the Roadmap for Social Inclusion, the national strategy for poverty reduction and improved social inclusion. The 2023 event was organised by the Social Inclusion Division of the Department of Social Protection, with the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) Ireland and Community Work Ireland (CWI) as event partners.

EAPN Ireland is a network of over 170 groups and individuals working against poverty. It is the Irish link to the European Anti-Poverty Network, which brings together civil society organisations from across the European Union to put the fight against poverty at the top of the Irish and European policy agenda.

Community Work Ireland is a national organisation that promotes and supports community work as a means of addressing poverty, social exclusion and inequality, and contributing to the creation of a more just, sustainable, and equal society.

Social Inclusion Forum 2023

The 2023 Social Inclusion Forum was held on 1st June in the Radisson Blu Royal Hotel, Golden Lane, Dublin. It was the 18th Social Inclusion Forum and the second to be delivered in a hybrid format. Over 150 people participated in the event, with over 110 attending in person and 40 participating online.

The theme of the 2023 Forum was *“Revitalising the Roadmap: Progress and Priorities”*. It focused on the work that has been done to date, the progress that has been made and the priorities for the for the remaining life cycle of the Roadmap

following the mid-term review.

The Forum consisted of five workshops – four in-person and one online – bookended by opening and closing plenary sessions. The opening plenary included a welcome address by Minister for Social Protection, Heather Humphreys, T.D., feedback from the regional workshops and an update on the progress of the *Roadmap for Social Inclusion* and its mid-term review.

The workshops allowed participants to discuss some of the themes from the Roadmap - Supporting Older People; Social Inclusion and Children; Core Essentials (including income adequacy, energy and food poverty); and Employment (expanding opportunities and ensuring work pays). The online workshop covered all of these topics.

The closing plenary included a summary of the key points raised at the workshops, an address by Senator Eileen Flynn, a moderated questions and answers session, and reflections on the Forum by the Department of Social Protection's Secretary General, John McKeon, before a final address by Minister of State with responsibility for Social Inclusion, Joe O'Brien, T.D.

The full Forum Agenda, including the list of speakers, can be found in the Appendix to this report.

1. The Opening Session

1.1 Opening Remarks: Teresa Leonard, Deputy Secretary General, Department of Social Protection



Teresa Leonard, Deputy Secretary General of the Department of Social Protection, officially opened the 2023 Social Inclusion Forum, welcoming those who were there in person and those viewing online, and outlined the agenda for the day.

1.2 Opening Address by Heather Humphreys, T.D., Minister for Social Protection and Rural & Community Development



Heather Humphreys, T.D., Minister for Social Inclusion and Rural and Community Development, gave the opening address. After welcoming attendees, she emphasised the importance of the Forum, to her as Minister for Social Protection and in its inclusion in the Programme for Government. The engagement of those both experiencing social exclusion and those working in communities is essential for the success of the Forum. Minister Humphreys thanked the participants of the four pre-Forum workshops organised by EAPN Ireland and Community Work Ireland.

Minister Humphreys noted the event focused on the Roadmap for Social Inclusion and outlined the Roadmap's broad aims and the key target to reduce consistent poverty to a rate 2 per cent, or less, by 2025. The Minister outlined the societal changes since the Roadmap was published in 2020, such as the Covid-19

pandemic, the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine and its impact, and the pressures posed from increases in the cost-of-living. The Minister welcomed the publication of the mid-term review that day. The mid-term review assesses the progress made and provides an opportunity to refocus and prioritise actions for the remaining period of the Roadmap.

Minister Humphreys thanked those who contributed to the mid-term review, including IPSOS, the independent organisation that undertook the review, and the ESRI who analysed and reported on the indicators used to measure the targets in the Roadmap.

The Minister summarised by saying that of the 69 original commitments contained within the Roadmap, 39 were achieved and the remaining 30 were already in progress. Examples of commitments achieved included the implementation of the National Childcare Scheme, the increase in parent's leave and benefit from two to seven weeks, increases in welfare payments and the expansion of the School Meals Programme. Minister Humphreys stated that hot school meals will be extended to all DEIS primary schools from September 2023 and a phased roll-out to all primary schools will commence in 2024.

The Minister then spoke on the official measure of poverty in Ireland, which comes from the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC). The most recent data showed a disappointing increase in the Consistent Poverty rate from 4 per cent in 2021 to 5.3 per cent in 2022. Minister Humphreys advised that the survey data collection period was prior to Budgets 2022 and 2023 changes, each of which delivered significant measures to mitigate the effects of the rising cost of living. The Minister remarked that it is encouraging that independent research by the ESRI indicated that Budget 2023, combined with additional one-off measures, was effective in protecting the incomes of most households from rising prices over the winter.

The Minister noted that statistics do not provide a full picture and assured that Government does listen to feedback received at the Forum. Key issues raised at the 2022 Forum were income adequacy, energy poverty and childcare. Hence, Budget 2023 included the largest Social Protection Budget in the history of the state with supports amounting to almost €2.2 billion. The Government also recently established a new unit under the Department of the Taoiseach to coordinate efforts to reduce child poverty and the Minister welcomed that a number of officials from that unit were present at the Forum.

In keeping with the theme of this year's Forum, the Government had identified priorities to focus on over the remaining lifetime of the strategy. Examples given included improving access to work for those who are able to do so by delivering on commitments in Pathways to Work, the continued roll-out of the National Childcare Scheme and the Connecting Ireland Rural Mobility Plan.

Minister Humphreys concluded by thanking those attending and looked forward to hearing views and experiences expressed today at the workshops.

1.3 Feedback from Pre-Forum Workshops



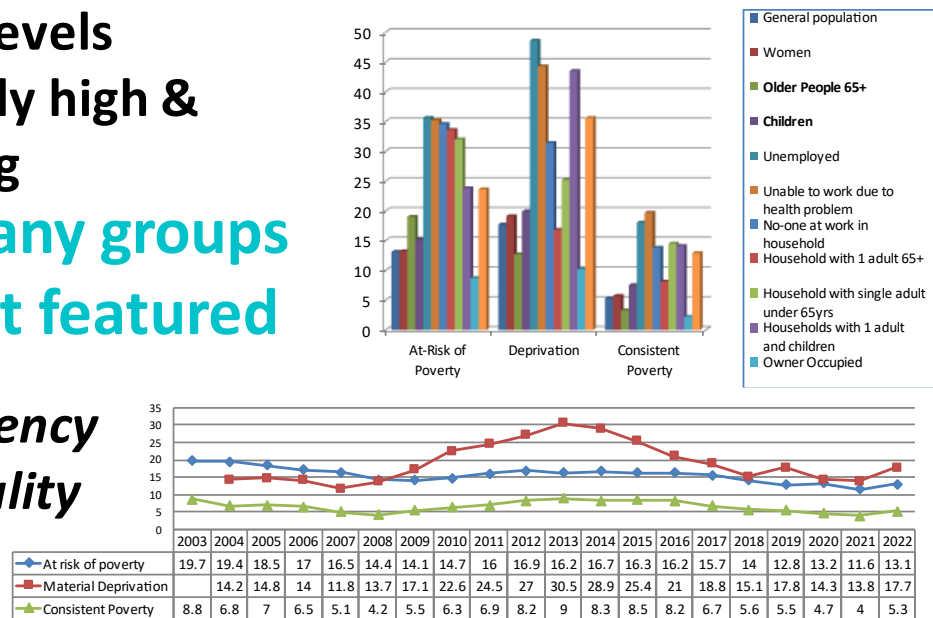
Prior to the Forum, Community Work Ireland (CWI) and the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) Ireland held two online and two in-person workshops reflecting the four workshop themes of this Social Inclusion Forum. Over 130 people attended the workshops from different areas of the country. Ann Irwin (CWI) and Paul Ginnell (EAPN Ireland) delivered feedback from these sessions, along with representatives of local community groups.

Paul opened the presentation by stating that there is growing concern that recent crises have led to a worsening rate of poverty and exacerbated existing social inclusion issues. He stated any failure to invest in early interventions is detrimental to communities and families as well as being more expensive to the State in the long term. Paul presented poverty trends up to and including 2022 and noted that figures are not available for all disadvantaged groups. He stated difficulties in access to

social protection and services is an issue for some people and these hard to reach and marginal people need to be focussed on.

**Poverty levels
worryingly high &
increasing**
**Many groups
not featured**

**A consistency
of inequality**



Paul outlined several interlinked issues under **core essentials** that were repeatedly raised in the pre-forum workshops:

- The need for affordable and accessible healthcare – waiting lists are unacceptable
- Income inadequacy – gap between the cost of living and welfare rates, and the minimum wage and a living wage
- Homeless and food banks have almost become normalised

Paul relayed a comment from a workshop participant:

*Heat or Eat - People are forced to choose
between eating and heating - it is much worse
than we thought, way beyond what we could
even imagine*

before inviting a Forum attendee to speak of her experience:

“I am a woman. I am a mother. I am a carer. I am a migrant who has lived in Ireland for 16 years. We need to do more so that people like me know their rights and that we have access to any help and support that we are entitled to. We need information to be in plain language. A lot of people from marginalised communities cannot access some supports just because of difficulties in understanding the system.”

Ekaterina, SIF participant

In relation to **employment**, Paul highlighted the following issues that had been raised:

- Disproportionate levels of unemployment for some groups – disabled people, Travellers, Roma
- Some people are experiencing poor working conditions and discrimination, harassment and exploitation in the workplace.
- Lack of transport means accessing employment can be difficult for people living in rural areas.
- The quality of person-centred approaches to those distant from the labour market is crucial.
- Community Welfare Offices were in some ways centralised which made assistance more remote and caused delays.

Jeyald, a community worker, was called on to speak on this subject:

“My thoughts are: responding to the labour market shortage with the displaced skill mobility – which means recruit and successfully integrate into the labour market providing a win-win for both employers and employees.”

Jeyald, SIF participant

Ann Irwin, Community Work Ireland, presented outcomes from the remaining pre-forum workshops. Ann introduced Fiona, a disability activist and a disabled woman on the IHREC commission. Ann relayed Fiona's comments on the added cost of disability, the difficulty in finding suitable work and her opinion that the disability allowance is a poverty trap which didn't help people like her to live life to their full potential.

Ann then spoke on the topic of **children**, a major issue being the scarcity and cost of childcare places, particularly in disadvantaged communities. Many childcare facilities have not reopened following the pandemic. Furthermore, access to healthcare for children is disproportionately difficult in poorer areas, particularly access to mental health services. Rural areas in general have issues with access to all services with lifelong impacts on children. Ann stated the need to migrate from emergency measures to sustainable approaches to address intergenerational poverty. A whole of government approach is needed to succeed with the Child Guarantee.

"People at the moment can't even afford the basics. The result is that children and young people are being left behind and are being discriminated against. We seem to be moving the goalposts on what is acceptable...People are embarrassed to say but they need foodbanks for the basic needs."

Ann Lacey, SIF participant

Ann outlined how detrimental inflation is for **older people** living on a fixed income. Access to services is an issue across the country, but particularly for those living rurally. As increasing numbers of older people live in rented accommodation, there is a need for secure and affordable accommodation. State pension payments should provide an adequate income that is benchmarked against inflation.

Maura was invited to speak about the difficulties older jobseekers face:

"I am in my early 60's and I am looking for work which is nearly impossible. I have over 30 years experience in hospitality, I have a degree. I want to use my skills in an office environment but find it extremely difficult. As a widow, I appear to be excluded from a lot of the schemes. Employers do not seem to be willing to give on the job training. Three to six months training schemes would be ideal."

Maura, SIF participant

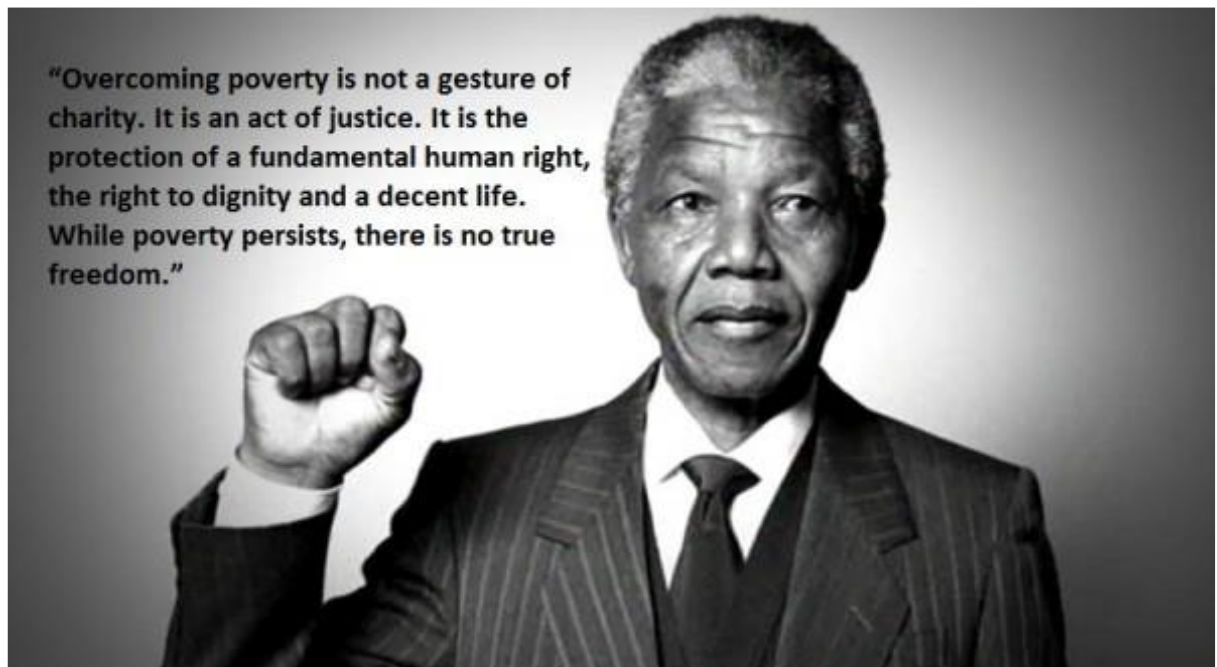


Ann addressed the issue of climate change which was raised in several workshops. There was a call to assist the marginalised communities that are most affected by climate change and have the least resources to adapt. She also stated all workshops noted the importance of voice, participation and community development.

Laurie Whelan, a development worker with the SICAP programme, said:

“Community work works. Community workers work with the community to develop actions and goals that actually result in really vibrant communities working together.”

Ann concluded with a quote from Nelson Mandela:



1.4 Progress of the Roadmap for Social Inclusion and its mid-term review by Roshin Sen, Chief Analyst, Department of Social Protection



Roshin Sen, Chief Analyst in the Department of Social Protection, provided an outline of the mid-term review of the Roadmap for Social Inclusion, which reviewed the progress in the implementation of the Roadmap, assessed the existing ambitions, goals and commitments and reviewed the existing indicators. Consultation informed all aspects of the review, with Ipsos appointed by the Department to undertake independent stakeholder engagement via a range of mechanisms, which included:

- A session at the 2022 Social Inclusion Forum;
- A public consultation process, which ran from September to October 2022 and received 42 submissions from a variety of organisations and individuals;
- Four qualitative interviews with key external stakeholders; and
- A survey of Departmental representatives.

A report on the findings of this consultation process by Ipsos was published on the 1st June, to coincide with the Social Inclusion Forum, and is available on www.gov.ie.

The ESRI undertook a review of the Roadmap indicators, of which there are two sets: EU level targets (consisting of a relative ranking and an absolute target) and national targets. This review was published on www.gov.ie and the ESRI's website on 1st June.

Feedback from stakeholders, received as part of the consultation process, looked for sub-targets for specific groups such as people with disabilities. Roshin noted that while this was not considered appropriate in the context of a mid-term review, relevant available data will be included in the annual Social Inclusion Monitor and future progress reports and report cards. On foot of the review a new commitment, 71, was added for the publication and implementation of the Equality Data Strategy. This aims to improve the data available on particular groups such as employment among the Travelling community and will help to inform the development of future targets. In addition, future research will include a focus on lived experiences as part of research programmes.

Roshin detailed the enhancing of current commitments as well as the addition of new commitments for the remaining period of the Roadmap. These included:

- enhancing paid parental leave
- assisting access to education
- improving transport in rural areas to enhance employment
- continuing SICAP and developing a successor
- continuing the implementation of the Work Integration Social Enterprises
- marking progress through reporting on the introduction of the Living Wage (60% of hourly median wages) by 2026
- improving participation and access to cultural activities through the Cultural

and Creative Strategy 2023 – 2027

- expanding TFI Local Link services and fully integrate this into existing public transport networks
- developing a successor to the National Social Enterprise Policy to further empower communities
- publishing a Digital Inclusion Roadmap to map the Governments approach to address barriers to digital inclusion
- delivering on the actions set out in the Energy Poverty Action Plan and report annually to Government.

These commitments were devised to address the changed environment since the publication of the Roadmap in January 2020. New figures on an enhanced range of measures would be published in the next Social Inclusion Monitor. Roshin then looked forward to the future, stating that issues outside the scope of the mid-term review, as well as issues raised at the Forum, will inform the development of the next Strategy.

Next steps



- **Social Inclusion Monitor**
 - new indicators in relation to housing, childcare, and health to be added, as well as further disaggregated poverty statistics and the impact of social transfers.
 - Publish alongside Progress Report and Report card in Q4 (in line with last year)
- **Roadmap Steering Group**
 - Commitments in relation to implementing strategies and action plans are very broad— we need to identify the key areas to focus on that are most relevant to reducing poverty and improving social inclusion
- **Successor strategy**
 - 2.5 years left in the existing strategy – we will need to start thinking about developing the successor next year! Need to use this time effectively

2. Forum Workshop Discussions

The four workshop topics were based on goals within the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025 and provided attendees with the opportunity to discuss the topics in more detail. Each workshop had the same structure with a brief introduction by the workshop facilitator and a short scene-setting presentation provided by a representative from the Community and Voluntary sector. Attendees then had an open discussion and were asked to identify key issues which were reported back to the Closing Plenary session.

Workshop 1: Supporting Older People

Roadmap Goal 3: To protect the incomes of older people through the delivery of the commitment to benchmark State pension payments

Facilitated by Tracey Noone, Irish Rural Links/Meals on Wheels

Presentation by Nat O'Connor, Age Action Ireland

Nat O'Connor, of Age Action Ireland, presented on the poverty rates amongst older people, their lived experience and the benchmarking of pensions. He suggested that the "smoothed earnings" method of benchmarking the State Pension was likely to be the best solution going forward, but a larger immediate increase of around €25 per week was needed to catch up on the spending power lost.

The group welcomed the energy grants and the allowance to rent a room for up to €14,000 per annum without this impacting any social welfare payments. They also acknowledged the efficiency of the Covid vaccine roll out for older people.

The following points, on the issues facing older people, were raised in subsequent discussions:

- The impact of the cost-of-living increases, the costs of adapting houses and medical costs. While medical cards are available, they are means tested.

- The increasing number of older people who rent their home is concerning, with the State pension insufficient to cover the cost of private rental. Energy and food poverty can be a consequence of high housing costs.
- Older people have issues accessing credit for home repairs and other essential maintenance. Interest free loans, as offered in Limerick, could be offered nationwide.
- There is a digital barrier faced by older people. The move to online and centralised services can mean it's difficult for older people to access them.
- Financial organisations forcing the download of their app is particularly problematic for some older people. There is also an additional cost associated with the requirement to have a smart phone.



The key points reported back to the closing plenary by Tracey Noone were:

- Restore the spending power of the State Pension to pre-2020 levels with a call for a significant increase in the Budget this year, and benchmarking of 34 per cent to follow by 2025.

- Remove barriers to digital inclusion with particular emphasis on public services and financial services. Access to credit would have to be addressed to help people solve their own problems.
- Introduce a “Commissioner for Older People” to oversee whole of government response to the issues facing older people. While everyone acknowledge that work was being done it was felt this was needed to give them a specific voice.

Workshop 2: Social Inclusion and Children

Roadmap Goal 4: To reduce child poverty in Ireland and to ensure that all families have the opportunity to participate fully in society.

Facilitated by Stephen Moffatt, Barnardos

Presentation by Naomi Feely, Children’s Rights Alliance



Naomi Feely, Children’s Rights Alliance, provided a background of the work of her organisation and outlined the poverty statistics for children in Ireland. Participants acknowledged progress has been made in the past 12 months, with the expansion of DEIS schools and of the hot school meals programme, the rollout of free

schoolbooks scheme for primary school children and the establishment of the child poverty unit in the Department of the Taoiseach.

The facilitator asked if there are any new challenges or issues to consider. The following concerns were raised:

- Overcrowding in schools.
- Lack of access to childcare and healthcare in some areas.
- There are a number of issues for Travellers including:
 - Poor facilities on halting sites – lack of water, toilets, play areas.
 - Lack of separate data on Traveller children.
 - Discrimination when applying for employment.
 - There are some drug related issues in the community.
 - Difficulty accessing education for older teens.
- Homelessness and the use of food banks is a big problem, and negatively effects mental health.
- Children are bullied and discriminated against when they don't have the necessary equipment for sports.

Participants proceeded to suggest solutions to these issues, which included:

- More Government funding for volunteers and an exchange programme for sports equipment which improve access to sports.
- One system for Garda vetting would be useful. A lot of different roles need separate vetting, and it is time-consuming.
- An information hub, like CIB, and a services map, would help people identify services in their local area and share initiatives nationwide.
- Social Welfare rates need to be increased to provide families with sufficient income to support themselves.
- Homelessness is a big issue and there is an urgent need to increase the supply

of social housing. Emergency accommodation is needed in more places outside of city centres.

- More translators and interpreters are needed in local offices and health settings. Some children are missing school to translate for their parents.

Finally, the group agreed on key points which were reported at the closing plenary by Stephen Moffatt:

- Prioritise housing - this can help reduce some other barriers that families and children face. Having a home and a safe space is a basic need.
- Departments and services need to work together and take a holistic approach.
- More services are needed on the ground - more doctors, nurses, dentists, mental health professionals, childcare places.
- Social welfare benefits need to be more inclusive. For example, Child Benefit is not available for children in direct provision.
- A breakdown of data is needed for all groups in the Survey on Income and Living Conditions, especially the Traveller community.

Workshop 3: Employment – Expanding Opportunities and ensuring work pays

Roadmap Goal 1: Give everyone who can work the opportunity of employment as a means to improve their wellbeing

Roadmap Goal 2: To ensure that workers are treated fairly and paid fairly and that work continues to be the best route to social inclusion

Facilitated by Carol Baumann, Irish Local Development Network

Presentation by Bríd O'Brien, INOU

Bríd O'Brien, INOU, opened the workshop with a presentation on the progress achieved to date on the employment specific Roadmap goals to: (1) Give everyone who can work the opportunity of employment as a means to improve their wellbeing, and (2) Ensure that workers are treated fairly and paid fairly and that work continues to be the best route to social inclusion.



The workshop had a constructive discussion where a number of points were raised:

- Employment is harder to access rurally as public transport is scarcer and private transport prices are often a barrier to work.
- Benefits/secondary benefits should not be automatically withdrawn when they find a job, which is often lower paid employment.
- Employment for people with disabilities in Ireland is the lowest rate in Europe - employers should be further incentivised to hire people with disabilities.
- Ukrainians entering the workforce is a positive development but people in Direct Provision are missing out on job opportunities, it's important that a two-tier system doesn't emerge.
- The term 'Full Employment' should be defined. Homeless people also have jobs but can't access accommodation.
- The new Contracted Public Employment Service is convoluted and based on outputs, formerly it was a person-centred service.
- The journey from welfare to work is not linear. It can take different directions, for example, welfare to training to work, welfare to training back to welfare to work.

- Older workers should be offered 3-6 months 'on the job' training. It was acknowledged that the Work Placement Experience Programme (WPEP) offers a gateway to the labour market for those with criminal convictions but needs further promotion.
- When apprentices reach 23 years of age they become liable to pay full transport fares, a technicality causing difficulties.

At the closing plenary, Carol Baumann shared the following key points arising from the workshop discussions:

- There needs to be a greater focus on the quality of employment, it should be well paid, accessible and sustainable. It should be recognised that there is a need for training. The cost of work should be acknowledged, in particular transport costs and the unique barriers for people with disabilities.
- The requirement for a social clause in procurement - State procurement should have a positive social impact.
- Employment services should remain person centred, perhaps we need to revert to pre-covid person to person services.

Workshop 4: Core Essentials – including income adequacy, energy and food poverty

Roadmap Goal: To ensure that all people can live with confidence that they have access to good quality healthcare, housing energy and food

Facilitated by Issy Petrie, Society of St. Vincent de Paul

Presentation by Robert Thornton, Vincentian MESL research centre

The workshop commenced with a presentation by Robert Thornton, Vincentian Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) Research Centre. MESL is an evidence-based benchmark used to assess the level of income required for people to live with dignity. Robert discussed the MESL basket of goods and the process

behind deciding what goods/services are added to the basket.

This was followed by a general discussion on core essentials and income adequacy, where the following points were raised:

- Investment in the provision of social services would reduce the dependency on social payments.
- Increases to social welfare payments are not enough to combat inflation.
- There is a lack of security for older people who are living in rented accommodation who rely on the State Pension.
- Already over-subscribed services have been put under further pressure since the pandemic and arrivals from Ukraine. Other services that closed during the Covid-19 pandemic have not re-opened.
- With increasing demands on housing, Irish families who offered short-term accommodation to Ukrainian families have had to extend the period of stay.

Several points were made on addressing the rising cost of energy:

- Issuing of energy supports should be more targeted. Certain cohorts, such as Travellers with no electricity, older people more reliant on gas and Pay As You Go customers, did not benefit from the universal approach of the electricity credits.
- Addressing skills shortages in apprenticeships/trades is necessary to implement energy efficient home improvements. The qualifications/degrees of migrants should be recognised more quickly.
- Private landlords should be incentivised to avail of retrofitting grants which would reduce bills for renters.
- Solar energy could be introduced at accommodation sites for the Travelling Community.



Issy Petrie, Society of St. Vincent de Paul, reported the following key recommendations at the closing plenary:

- There is a need to recognise the systemic nature of poverty and identify the underlying causes. Social welfare payments need to maintain their value in order to provide an adequate standard of living and supports should be targeted to meet the most vulnerable.
- We need to future proof our approach with investments now to tackle future issues we know are coming – such as demographic change and climate change.
- We need to recognise the strength of community-based solutions and ensure these are adequately funded.
- We need to listen to people, who are the experts of their own experience, as to what their needs are.

Workshop 5: Online Discussion covering the themes of Workshops 1 - 4

Facilitated by Rachel Doyle, Community Work Ireland
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Rachel Doyle, of Community Work Ireland, facilitated an online workshop to allow participants to discuss the four themes of the in-person workshops. Her colleague, Ann Irwin, shared the following key points arising from the online workshop:

- There is concern over the normalisation of all types of poverty - food poverty, homelessness, child poverty and issues for lone parents, energy poverty including inadequacy of retrofitting schemes. They all lead to isolation, lack of integration and a crisis in mental health. Suggested solutions to address this poverty crisis were a commitment to a minimum income, caps on the prices of essential foods and credits for public amenities, public services and transport.
- There was an in-depth discussion on the multiple struggles and barriers faced by people with disabilities. There is a constant struggle to have basic needs met, and people are no longer eligible for some disability payments once they reach 66 years of age. An urgent conversation was called for on the additional cost of disability.
- With regard to community development, there is a difficulty in recruiting and retaining staff due to relatively poor conditions and pay within the sector.

There was a call for:

- Proper investment and the recognition of staff expertise and competencies leading to decent pay and conditions.
- The removal of public tendering for SICAP
- A stronger focus on community development including mental health in future policies.



Niall Egan thanked all workshop participants, facilitators, presenters and notetakers and noted the common issues across the workshops:

- The accessibility of affordable services, which is reflected in the implementation focus of the Mid Term Review.
- The importance of data to accurately reflect lived experiences.
- The importance and strength of community-based services.
- The importance of a minimum income in employment and the role of social welfare.
- The importance of helping people with disabilities.

3.2 Presentation on ‘Community Work Changes Lives’ by Senator Eileen Flynn



Teresa Leonard introduced Senator Eileen Flynn, who was nominated to the Seanad by Taoiseach Micheál Martin in 2020 and is the first Traveller/Mincéir to serve in the Houses of the Oireachtas. Her background is in community development and activism on behalf of Irish Travellers and in solidarity with other ethnic minorities. Senator Flynn is also deeply committed to the causes of women’s rights, human rights, and equality. She is a member of the Seanad’s Civil Engagement Group, who are a diverse group of Independents with expertise from across the NGO and civil society sectors.

Senator Flynn thanked the Minister and Department for the invitation and recounted her previous experiences with the Department and the relationship that developed. The senator recounted her difficult start in social activism and explained it was part of her drive into community work, which led her to undertake her degree in community work as a mature student in Trinity College.

Senator Flynn explained some community work looks insignificant in isolation but, over time, the constant effort make a big difference. She outlined how different groups need assistance in different ways and community work in individual areas can adapt to this to bring about social justice. She called for investment in the profession of community worker.

Senator Flynn stated that inclusion should be more seen and less heard about as current recommendations and strategies are implemented. She concluded by highlighting the successes of the redevelopment of St. Michael's Estate and St. Teresa's Gardens and encouraged those working in community development to use their voice and bring people along with them.



3.3 Moderated Q&A Session

Helen Johnston, of the National Economic and Social Council, introduced the questions and answers proceedings, inviting questions from participants towards the four panellists:

- **Joe O'Brien, T.D.**, Minister of State.
- **John McKeon**, Secretary General in the Department of Social Protection.
- **Louise Lennon**, Policy and Communication Officer with Irish Rural Link. Louise's work includes advocating for the needs of rural communities to Government and informing rural communities about relevant policy changes.
- **Valerie McAllorum Byrne**, Integration Officer at Fingal County Council. Valerie's role includes the implementation of the Fingal Migrant Integration and Social Cohesion Action Plan 2019 – 2024 and supporting the development of the Fingal Integration Forum.



This section presents all questions that arose during the session, and the corresponding answers, in the order they were asked.

Question/Comment

How will national Government, which has legislative basis to make Local Government accountable for social inclusion and equality, ensure that public sector duties are embedded within the operation of Local Government?

Minister O'Brien

I recently met with the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform in relation to their role. I have some responsibility in this space because of my role in implementing the National Action Plan Against Racism, one of the ways of doing this is by implementing the public sector duty at a local level. It's everyone's responsibility in Government to push it. IHREC have a role as well. My Department (of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration & Youth) has a particular role in pushing it and I am contacting relevant Government Departments in relation to this. I know Fingal County Council is one Local Authority that has done work in relation to this. County and City Management Association and Local Government Management Agency have a key role to play here.

Valerie McAllorum Byrne

From the Local Authority perspective, we always take a proactive approach to our public service duty. I applied for IHREC funding for training, and we spent two years developing a compulsory training course on intercultural diversity in the public sector. We also have a dignity and respect piece. Our services need to be as accessible as possible, for example, having many different languages available on the website and having audio options for these.

Question/Comment

If I employ a person with a disability now, I get a grant but unfortunately people with disabilities already employed by me are not entitled to the grant. There's no incentive for me. We need to look at CE schemes and training opportunities.

Minister O'Brien

We have changed the policy on CE schemes and eligibility over the past 18 months and we are open to doing it other ways if the experience, for both the individual and sponsoring organisation, can be improved. We need to look at the groups who are not currently in the labour force and do not feel CE schemes are an option for them.

Louise Lennon

We work with a lot of Meals on Wheels providers through our network and many of those providers rely on CE schemes. These schemes are delivering essential services so it's difficult when people move on. It would benefit both the participant and the service if the scheme could translate into permanent employment.

John McKeon

The Department provides a number of disability supports, including the Wage Subsidy Scheme being referred to here. There are other supports available such as the Reasonable Accommodation Fund.

Regarding CE schemes, at the time the Live Register was at 500,000, the number of people on CE schemes increased from 20,000 to 30,000. We now have around 150,000 people on the Live Register, one in five of whom are from Ukraine. The numbers available to support staffing CE schemes from the Live Register are just not there. We need to look at other cohorts which is what the Minister was referring to – those people not on the Live Register, not in receipt of a direct payment. We need to

look at ways of encouraging them to participate. Louise's suggestion that essential services be transferred from CE schemes to real employment is good and needs to be looked at.

Question/Comment

How do you think this type of forum could be rolled out at a Local Authority level?

Helen Johnston

When I worked in Combat Poverty, we did work with the Local Authorities on and there were Social Inclusion units being set up. I think there are structures within Local Authorities where it could happen.

Minister O'Brien

It strikes me that PPNs are the space for this, with the social inclusion pillar being one of the three pillars PPNs comprise of. There are examples of very good PPNs – Clare being one of these, which last year published an anti-poverty strategy.

Question/Comment

While infrastructural issues don't have a quick fix, we're running an enormous Budget surplus and could afford to put more money in people's pockets which would solve some people's issues immediately.

Minister O'Brien

I have been on the record stating what I think social welfare increases should be. There is a big decision to be made in the coming weeks on expenditure which will set the framework for the Budget. There is a difference between how much we can add on to current spending and how much we can add on to capital, that's one of the reasons why there was an emphasis on lump sums. My preference is to add on to the current spending, if possible.

Louise Lennon

We in Irish Rural Link would also call for social welfare rates to be raised. We need to restore the purchasing power of people on social welfare. Social welfare recipients in rural areas experience greater income inadequacy than people in urban areas because of the lack of infrastructure and transport. A lack of childcare and the cost and difficulties with transport can disincentivise people in rural areas from taking up CE schemes or employment. I was pleased to see transport being included in the review of the Roadmap for Social Inclusion. Once again, community work has an important role to play as local issues, such as lack of transport, can be identified more easily by people working in the community.

John McKeon

The Government has committed to a smoothed earnings approach for benchmarking pension rates and it was endorsed by the Commission on Pensions. The Roadmap states that once this is underway we will look at doing the same for other payments. We want to take the rate setting from the political pitching process to a more informed approach. Government must always retain the right to set rates as part of the Budget.

Question/Comment

The optional protocol of the UNCPRD urgently requires signing so it can be fully implemented and be legally binding. When does the State intend to do so?

Minister O'Brien

Apologies, I do not have an answer for this.

3.4 John McKeon: Reflections on the Social Inclusion Forum



John McKeon, Secretary General, Department of Social Protection spoke on the importance of policy makers hearing from the people who are impacted by their policies. He highlighted that, while there are challenges, there is a lot of good work being done. While there are problems, there are good services and good work is being done. He stated that 100 million would have been paid out by his Department while the Forum was underway to people who needed it.

John spoke of how far Ireland has come, with income rising and inequality falling over the past decade, and the importance of recognising the progress made. The country favourably compares to its international counterparts currently and it is improving. The improvements in Social Protection have played a huge role in helping people with poverty, escaping poverty and contributing to the economy and society. He opined that social welfare should be viewed as an investment, not as a cost.

John referred to the positive reframing of our strategies, we are now longer looking at combatting social exclusion but how to improve social inclusion. It is something to aspire to. He referred to the social exclusion experienced by immigrants coming into Ireland and concluded by urging people to welcome immigrants who are seeking a better life for themselves and their families, in the manner that Irish people have for generations.

3.5 Closing Remarks

Minister O'Brien brought proceedings to a close by thanking everyone for their involvement in the Forum. He welcomed the increased number of representatives from various Government Departments and gave special thanks to Senator Flynn for her contribution, and to those participants involved in valuable community work.

As Chair of the Roadmap Steering Group, Minister O'Brien welcomed the publication of the mid-term review, for which he sought to make the public engagement process as thorough as possible. Updates to 17 commitments, along with 12 new commitments and two new indicators, have revitalised the Roadmap to better reflect the current challenges and the new Programme for Government.

Minister O'Brien expressed the importance of acknowledging the bigger social inclusion challenges. Homelessness and the housing crisis is a key Government priority. While direct provision accommodation has been extended to accommodate international protections applicants, the *White Paper to End Direct Provision* remains Government policy and is progressing.

The Minister reflected on areas where progress has been made. He advised of the recent launches of the *National Action Plan against Racism* and the Ireland for All fund to support actions under the plan. DEIS has expanded significantly and energy upgrades for those in poverty continue to increase in number. The Working Group on Food Poverty, which the Minister chairs, commissioned research to examine how

food poverty is addressed at a local level. The report will be published in the coming months. An 18-month pilot scheme providing a case worker service alongside emergency food provision will commence later this year. Minister O'Brien welcomed the benchmarking of pension payments, the commitment to look at how benchmarking could be applied to working age payments and the establishment of a dedicated child poverty unit in the Department of the Taoiseach.

In conclusion, Minister O'Brien commented on the unprecedented level of State intervention during his time in Government - with the pandemic, war in Ukraine and cost of living increases. Improvements to public services – the abolition of hospital charges, reduction of cap on Drugs Payment Scheme, reduction in transport costs, free primary schoolbooks – are welcome. Finally, he reiterated this thanks to EAPN Ireland and Community Work Ireland and closed the Social Inclusion Forum.

Post Event Work

This report will be published on the Department of Social Protection website, on www.gov.ie, with the link sent to all attendees. It will also be sent to all members of the Roadmap Social Inclusion Steering Group with a request that it is brought to the attention of relevant areas within their organisations.

Appendix 1: Forum Agenda

<i>Revitalising the Roadmap: Progress and Priorities</i>	
09:30	Registration, tea and coffee
10:10	Welcome and Opening Remarks Teresa Leonard, Deputy Secretary General, Department of Social Protection
10:20	Opening Address Heather Humphreys, T.D., Minister for Social Protection and Rural & Community Development
10:30	Feedback from regional workshops with people experiencing poverty and the groups working with them Paul Ginnell, EAPN and Ann Irwin, CWI
11:00	Roadmap for Social Inclusion Progress Update Roshin Sen, Department of Social Protection
11.30	Tea and coffee
11:50	Workshops: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Supporting Older People 2) Social Inclusion and Children 3) Employment – expanding opportunities and ensuring work pays 4) Core Essentials – including income adequacy, energy and food poverty 5) Online – covering all four workshop themes
13:15	Lunch
14:30	Summary of workshop outcomes
15.00	‘Community Work Changes Lives’ by Senator Eileen Flynn
15:15	Panel Q&A session, moderated by Helen Johnston, NESC
15.40	Reflections on the Social Inclusion Forum by John McKeon, Secretary General, Department of Social Protection
15:50	Closing Remarks Joe O’Brien T.D., Minister of State with responsibility for Social Inclusion
16:00	End of Forum Teresa Leonard, Deputy Secretary General, Department of Social Protection

Appendix 2: Participating Organisations

▪ Age Action	▪ Good Shepherd Ireland
▪ Age Friendly Skerries and Fingal Older Peoples Council	▪ Healthy Ireland
▪ Ballyfermot Chapelizod Partnership	▪ HSE
▪ Barnardos	▪ INOU
▪ Cavan County Council	▪ Irish Council for Social Housing
▪ Cavan County Local Development Company	▪ Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission
▪ Children's Rights Alliance	▪ Irish Local Development Network clg
▪ Citizens Information Board	▪ Irish Rural Link
▪ Clare Local Development Company	▪ Irish Senior Citizens Partnership
▪ Community Work Ireland	▪ Mental Health Ireland
▪ Cork City Partnership	▪ National Disability Authority
▪ County Wicklow Partnership	▪ National Economic and Social Council
▪ Crosscare	▪ Offaly Local Development Company
▪ Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine	▪ Pavee Point
▪ Department of Education	▪ Pobal
▪ Department of Environment, Climate and Communications	▪ Protestant Aid
▪ Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform	▪ Rehab Group
▪ Department of Rural and Community Development	▪ safe food
▪ Department of Social Protection	▪ Social Justice Ireland
▪ Department of the Taoiseach	▪ Society of St. Vincent de Paul
▪ Dublin Northwest Partnership	▪ Southside Travellers Action
▪ EAPN Ireland	▪ Sport Ireland
▪ EmployAbility	▪ St Munchins Community Centre
▪ Empower	▪ The HomeShare
▪ ESRI	▪ The Wheel
▪ Exchange House Ireland National Travellers Service	▪ Vincentian MESL Research Centre
▪ Fingal County Council	▪ Wexford PPN

