



An Roinn Coimirce Sóisialaí
Department of Social Protection

Report of the Social Inclusion Forum 2021

*“Implementing the Roadmap for Social Inclusion:
reducing poverty and improving social inclusion”*

September 2021

Report of
Social Inclusion Forum
12th to 16th April 2021

Published by
Department of Social Protection
Áras Mhic Dhiarmada
Store Street
Dublin 1

ISBN: 978-1-908109-60-6
Department of Social Protection
Dublin, Ireland
September 2021

Acknowledgements

The Department of Social Protection wishes to acknowledge the work undertaken by the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) Ireland and Community Work Ireland (CWI) in the organisation of the pre-Forum regional workshops. These workshops bring people together to prepare their contribution to the work of the Social Inclusion Forum.

The support and input of our colleagues in the Department of Rural and Community Development in partnering with the Department of Social Protection for the 2021 Forum is also acknowledged.

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 the many people who belong to these communities whose experiences help their organisations to contribute to the work of the forum.

Appreciation is extended to the workshop facilitators, presenters and note-takers: Tricia Keilthy, Saoirse Brady, Bríd O'Brien, Paul Ginnell, Amanda Slattery, Eileen O'Keefe, Clare Deane, Joe Saunders, Ann Irwin, Paul Dockery, Jamie Kennedy, Bernie Reape and Paul Geraghty.

Sincere thanks are also expressed to Jane Watson and Abbie Henderson from Morrow Communications for their assistance and technical support in hosting the Forum online for the first time.

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



Minister Joe O'Brien, speaking at the 2021 Social Inclusion Forum

As Minister of State with responsibility for implementing the Roadmap for Social Inclusion, it was with great pleasure that I opened the 2021 Social Inclusion Forum on 12 April. Given the public health restrictions in place at that time due to COVID-19, it was not possible to hold an in-person event. Notwithstanding these restrictions I am very pleased that the Forum proceeded online, in a virtual format for the first time. This event provided the opportunity for people experiencing poverty, the groups that represent them, officials from Government Departments and those with an interest in social policy, to come together. It provided an opportunity for attendees to discuss the Roadmap for Social Inclusion and to pose questions to officials from a range of Government Departments. Attendees were still able to gather to discuss areas of key concerns in the workshop groups that took place over the course of the week.

This was the first time that the Forum was held following the publication of the *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025: Ambition, Goals, Commitments* in January 2020. It was not possible to hold the event in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions. However, that allowed us to re-imagine the event in an online format, allowing people from across the country to attend. The appetite and enthusiasm for the Forum was evident throughout the week with 245 people

attending the Opening Plenary session, over 100 attendees at each of the four workshops and 153 attending the Closing Plenary session.

In developing the programme for the Forum, I was keen to ensure it focused on the implementation of the Roadmap for Social Inclusion, as it is the overarching national policy for poverty reduction and social inclusion. In order to be effective, policy documents must be discussed, debated and implemented with input from those who are most impacted or are the focus of the policy in question. Feedback on the effectiveness and appropriateness of a policy is vital for successful implementation. For those of you who attended the Forum, I can assure you that your views matter and will be taken on board, not just by my own Departments but across Government.

This report will be sent to the members of the Social Inclusion Roadmap Steering Group, which is responsible for monitoring the implementation of the Roadmap. As Chair of this Group, I will be asking the Steering Group members to ensure that the report is brought to the attention of relevant areas within their Departments. And over the coming months, I will request updates from Departments on the issues raised to make sure that they remain on the agenda.

I look forward to the 2022 Forum. This will hopefully be an in-person event and one that will deliver another successful and thought-provoking set of discussions.

Joe O'Brien T.D.

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

Contents

Acknowledgements	iii
Disclaimer	iii
Foreword.....	iv
1. Introduction.....	1
Social Inclusion Forum 2021	1
2. The Opening Plenary Session	2
Opening Address: Minister Joe O’Brien, T.D.....	3
Progress under the Roadmap for Social Inclusion, 2020-2025	5
Feedback from Pre-Forum Workshops.....	6
Working at the Community Level.....	8
Moderated Q&A Session.....	9
Closing Comments.....	9
3. Forum Workshop Discussions	10
Workshop 1: Core Essentials – Healthcare, Housing, Energy and Food (Chapter 8).....	11
Workshop 2: Supporting Families and Children (Chapter 5)	13
Workshop 3: Expanding the Opportunity of Employment (Chapter 2)	15
Workshop 4: Making Sure Voices are Heard.....	17
4. Closing Plenary Session.....	19
5. Post Event Work.....	26
Appendix 1: Forum Agenda.....	27
Appendix 2: Participating Organisations.....	29

1. Introduction

The theme of the 2021 Forum was “*Implementing the Roadmap for Social Inclusion: reducing poverty and improving social inclusion*”. This is the first Forum to be held since:

- The *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-25: Ambition, Goals, Commitments* was adopted by Government and published in early-2020.
- The arrival of COVID-19 Ireland in March 2020 leading to public health restrictions impacting on economic and social activities with significant pressures across the health system.
- The formation of a new Government and the publication of a new Programme for Government in mid-2020.

Reflecting the strong working relationship between the Department of Social Protection and the Department of Rural and Community Development, the event was organised in collaboration by both Departments. In addition, the European Anti-Poverty Network Ireland and Community Work Ireland, worked with the Departments throughout the planning of the event.

Social Inclusion Forum 2021

The annual Social Inclusion Forum is a national event, at which people 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.

The Social Inclusion Forum 2021 took place online, for the first time due to COVID-19 restrictions, from 12th to 16th April 2021, with over 350 people from Government Departments, communities and various organisations from around the country attending the 2021 Forum over the week.

The Forum consisted of four workshops held across the week bookended by the Opening and Closing Plenary sessions. The Opening Plenary included a presentation on the development of the Roadmap, feedback from the regional workshops, and a moderated Q&A session.

The workshops provided an opportunity for participants to discuss some of the themes from the Roadmap for Social Inclusion: Core Essentials – Healthcare, Housing, Energy and Food; Supporting Families and Children; Expanding the Opportunity of Employment; as well as Making Sure Voices are Heard. Finally, the Closing Plenary included a summary of the key points raised at the workshops alongside an address to attendees by the Minister for Social Protection, Heather Humphreys T.D.

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

2. The Opening Plenary Session



to listen to the views expressed during this year's Forum in his new role as Minister of State with responsibility for Social Inclusion. He underlined how his role in the Department of Rural and Community Development links closely with the Community and Voluntary sector through the important work supported under the Social Inclusion and Community Action Programme (SICAP).

In his address Minister O'Brien referenced the degree of change the country has undergone since the Roadmap was published which further highlighted the importance of Roadmap commitments. The Minister underlined the Roadmap's metrics and targets for measuring progress on commitments, but the most important target is to achieve a consistent poverty rate of 2 per cent, or less by 2025.

Minister O'Brien outlined Budget 2021 measures which target lower income families including:

- a €10 increase per week in the Working Family Payment income threshold for families with 1-3 children;
- the removal of the €425 earnings threshold for the One Parent Family Payment;
- an increase in the rates of Increase for a Qualified Child (IQC);
- a €20 increase per week in the earnings disregard for Disability Allowance;
- increases to the weekly living alone allowance and to the weekly fuel allowance;

He also pointed to the importance of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment and Wage Subsidy Schemes rates in protecting incomes for those whose employment is impacted by COVID-19 restrictions.

Minister O'Brien closed by thanking all those involved in the Forum for their work in preparing for and running it, as well as all participants for attending.

The second interactive question put to attendees was "*What is your awareness of the Roadmap for Social Inclusion?*" As the graphic below shows, there was a strong awareness of the strategy amongst the attendees.



Progress under the Roadmap for Social Inclusion, 2020-2025

Dr. Dermot Coates, Chief Economist, Department of Social Protection delivered a presentation on the Roadmap for Social Inclusion, outlining the ambition of the Roadmap to:

“Reduce consistent poverty to 2% or less and to make Ireland one of the most socially inclusive countries in the EU.”

He gave an overview of the development of Roadmap, which included engagement with stakeholders at the Social Inclusion Fora, Community and Voluntary Pillar meetings and the Pre-Budget Fora over a two-year period. An update on progress to date was provided, with 14 of the 66 Commitments either completed, or completed with ongoing delivery, and 48 of the remainder in progress at the end of 2020. Due to COVID-19, some Commitments have revised timeframes for completion, and two communications campaigns on return to work supports were deferred to refocus on campaigns in relation to COVID-19 supports.

Examples of delivery under the Roadmap for Social Inclusion¹

Delivery to date



There have been several notable areas of delivery, including:

- An additional three weeks of Parent's Leave and Parent's Benefit are available to each parent of a child born or adopted on or after 01 November 2019 (bringing the total to five weeks).
- Extensions to Hot School Meals programme for 2021. 189 schools, including 171 DEIS schools were recently chosen for this programme in 2021. Hot School Meals funding also continued during the recent Easter holidays.
- Publication of new National Volunteering Strategy 2021 - 2025 in December 2020.

He explained Roadmap governance arrangements, which include the Steering Group which includes representatives from all Government Department and the Community and Voluntary Sector, as well as well as monitoring at Cabinet, Senior Official and Departmental level, and by the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands. The Roadmap is also subject to a mid-term review which will take place in 2022.

Feedback from Pre-Forum Workshops

In advance of the Forum, a series of four workshops, each based on one of the Forum workshop topics, were held online led by Community Work Ireland (CWI) and the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN). These workshops, which were attended by over 200 people from around the country, were held between 15th and 23rd March 2021. These important pre-Forum sessions ensure that the voices of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion, and the groups that represent

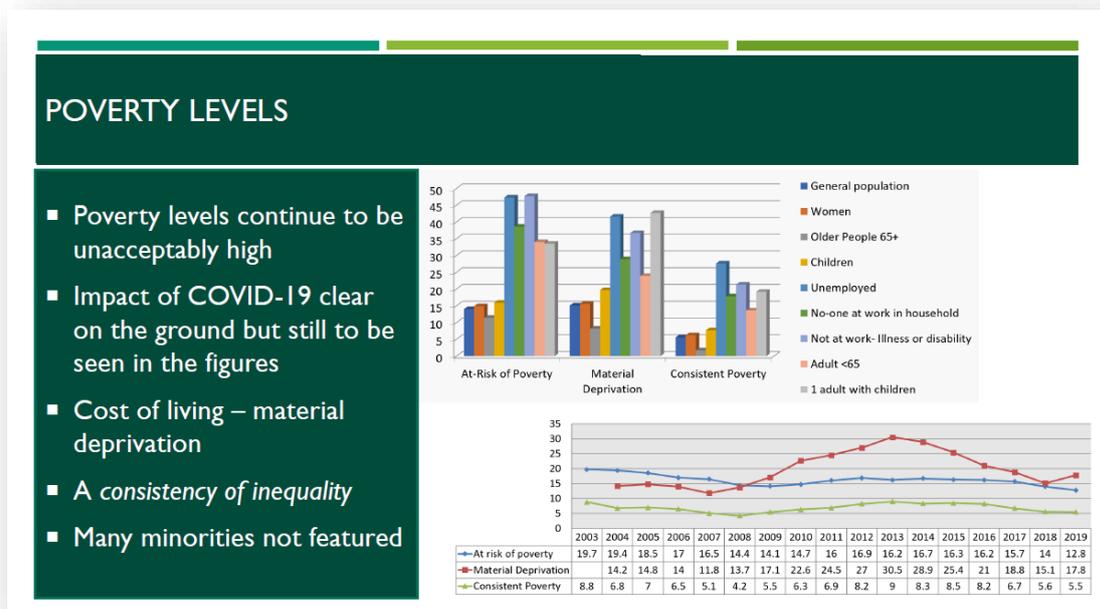
¹ Slides included in this report were taken from presentations given during the Forum plenaries and workshops, which were later circulated to all attendees

them, are heard at the Forum.

Ann Irwin, CWI and Paul Ginnell, EAPN Ireland delivered feedback from these sessions, along with representatives of local community groups who deal first-hand with issues at the core of the Forum.

Ann opened the presentation stating that poverty and social inclusion issues were not unknown, however, the issues that certain people and communities face have been exacerbated rather than created by the pandemic. The data shows that there is a “consistency of inequality” as the same groups are shown to experience poverty consistently. However, poverty is experienced differently by different groups, so different strategies must target each group.

Poverty data provided following the Pre-Forum workshops



Paul provided further feedback from the workshops and the issues highlighted. These were that a lack of access to core essentials (food, energy, health, technology and housing) was shown to have an impact on those experiencing poverty,

exacerbating difficulties. An example provided by Dave Byrne of Cope Galway demonstrated how housing poverty is linked to other types of poverty and can be experienced by a cross-section of society, with some people entering habitual incidences of homelessness.

On the issue of children and families, Paul highlighted the need to retain a child poverty target, preferably at 0%. The long-term impact of COVID-19 on children was raised, alongside issues regarding access to childcare, education and mental health services. Ursula McKenna from the National Collective of Community Based Women's Networks, Monaghan highlighted the importance of engagement with those experiencing social exclusion, particularly women, to help families access services they need to move from poverty and social exclusion. The importance of access to decent jobs was raised, and the need to ensure that the long-term unemployed should not be forgotten due to COVID-19. Addressing barriers to employment was also highlighted.

The right of marginalised people to participate in decision-making around policies that affect them in order to prevent failure and disconnection was raised. Garda Gary Cogan from the Kildare Social Inclusion Committee outlined the role of Community Policing in engaging marginalised communities who often find it difficult to have their voices heard and to prevent the criminalisation of poverty. Ann closed by stating there is now an opportunity to build a better, fairer, more equal and sustainable society.

Working at the Community Level

The next speaker was Paul Geraghty from the Department of Rural and Community Development, who provided a perspective on work at community level and its impact on poverty and social inclusion. He outlined work carried out by community groups and volunteers during the COVID-19 pandemic under the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP). This included flexibility to allow SICAP workers to be redeployed into the community effort to provide practical supports

(shopping, medicine and school lunches), as well as supporting people who were the hardest to reach in a difficult time. Since January 2018 over 70,000 individuals have received supports under the programme.

Paul also spoke about Commitments under the *Roadmap for Social Inclusion*, including: the launch of the Volunteering Strategy in December 2020, the rural development strategy; Our Rural Future: 2021-2025, which was launched in the week preceding the Forum; and the work to encourage cross-Government engagement with the Community and Voluntary sector. He finished by speaking about the Department's role in the National Literacy Strategy, in particular the Digital Divide which was brought to the fore by COVID-19, endorsing a Community Development approach to delivering literacy services.

Moderated Q&A Session

Throughout the morning participants were given the opportunity to pose questions, via the chat function on the online platform. A range of these questions were put to a panel of officials from various Government Departments for response during a Questions and Answers session. Questions covered a board range of issues including income adequacy, food poverty, childcare, marginalised groups and employment supports.

The full list of questions asked at the Opening Plenary can be found in the separate annex to this report, with answers provided by the relevant Government Departments.

Closing Comments

Geraldine Hurley from the Department of Social Protection presented an overview of the four workshops which would take place over the week. She noted that each of the workshops would focus on a different theme relating to the Roadmap, with an opportunity for participants to discuss related issues.

Kevin McCarthy, Secretary General of Department of Rural and Community Development, provided the closing comments for the plenary session welcoming the strong working relation between the two Departments, reflected in the organisation of the Forum and Minister O'Brien's brief across the two Departments. He referred to the commitment of the Department of Rural and Community Development to implementing the Roadmap and to the Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities strategy which places personal and community well-being at its centre. It looks to empower and support communities through policy, to develop their own vision of a better and more inclusive community.

Kevin stated that social inclusion is at the core of all the Department of Rural and Community Development's policy initiatives, for example the Volunteering Strategy which needs to ensure that the diverse communities that make up Ireland are represented in volunteering and the Rural Development Strategy which aims to allow everyone to avail of the social, cultural and economic opportunities that exist. He closed by thanking all the morning's speakers, panellists, Forum partners, staff and participants, expressing his hope that the remainder of the Forum it would be a fruitful and engaging experience.

3. Forum Workshop Discussions

The four workshop topics were based on aspects of the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025 and provided attendees with the opportunity to discuss the topics in more detail. They were selected following discussions with the Department for Rural and Community Development, the European Anti-Poverty Network and Community Work Ireland.

Each 90-minute 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 broke into smaller discussion groups for up to 30 minutes and were asked to identify three key issues to be brought back to the main group for discussion. The

workshop attendees then had to agree five main points to be reported back to the Closing Plenary.

Workshop 1: Core Essentials – Healthcare, Housing, Energy and Food (Chapter 8)

12 April 2021: 2:30pm – 4:00pm

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 Tricia Keilthy, Society of St Vincent de Paul

Presentation by Amanda Slattery and Eileen O’Keefe, Ballyhoura CLG

Workshop attendees: 102 people

Workshop 1 looked at Chapter 8 of the Roadmap, *Core Essentials: Healthcare, Housing, Energy and Food*, focusing on three types of core essentials:

- Energy: home energy costs; energy efficiency in the home;
- Food: cost, quality, availability, access, skills, knowledge, facilities;
- Health inclusion: access, availability, quality, timeliness, cost.

While Ireland is relatively well positioned to offer reliable access and secure availability of the core essentials of our daily lives, some people in Irish society can struggle to access the basic essentials. For people on low incomes, access to basic essential services on a free or subsidised basis can reduce the expenses to be covered from within that low income. This means they can make that money go further.

Amanda Slattery and Eileen O’Keefe delivered a presentation to workshop attendees on Ballyhoura CLG’s support to families in the east Limerick and north Cork region during COVID-19 restrictions. They deliver over 30 programmes, focussing on three key aims of community, economic and environmental development, providing core essential supports through Child and Family support projects.

Core essentials provided by Ballyhoura CLG during COVID-19 pandemic

Project Outcomes		
Children's Rights Alliance Infant Development Fund	Remote Community Food Initiative	Covid Food Hampers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 520 Bags of Food Distributed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 57 families supported x 4 weeks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8 community groups
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 780 meals provided 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ingredients for 1 hot meal per week 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7 weekly food collections from Food Cloud
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 162KG of fresh meat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 228 meals provided 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 462 families supported
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1430KG fruit & veg 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1302 food hampers
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 224 baby food packs
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 164 children's activity packs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funded 50 Families, SICAP supported 15 extra families to participate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funded through Safefood & SICAP 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supported through Redemptorists, Foodcloud, Local Food Business & SICAP

Workshop attendees broke into 13 discussion groups to debate aspects of the workshop theme. Discussions were robust and covered a wide range of issues related to the topic. These included: the provision of services alongside a Universal Basic Income; education on basic skills; the impact of the housing crisis on health, education and food poverty; the increased cost of basic essentials (food and energy) due to the COVID-19 restrictions; difficulties experienced in accessing information about available services; and the quality and quantity of housing stock available.

The key themes which were reported back to the closing plenary were:

- Ensuring income adequacy and a minimum standard of living to prevent poverty, including energy and food poverty.
- Access to affordable services (health, education, housing, transport) and adequate information about these supports should be available to those who most need them.
- Preventing food poverty and the normalisation of food banks is important. The extension of the Hot School Meals programme outside of the school term to prevent “holiday hunger” would assist this.

- Pre-existing vulnerabilities have been exacerbated by COVID-19, including a “digital divide” for IT access and literacy, and increased household bills during restrictions.
- The need to ensure affordable housing and recognising housing as a social determinant of health and wellbeing.
- A Just Transition is needed to ensure vulnerable groups and low-income families are not excluded or driven into energy/fuel poverty.

Workshop 2: Supporting Families and Children (Chapter 5)

13 April 2021 10:00am – 11:30am

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

Facilitated by Saoirse Brady, Children's Right Alliance

Presentation by Clare Deane, Barnardo's

Workshop attendees: 96 participants

The child-specific poverty target is to lift over 70,000 children out of consistent poverty, a reduction of at least two-third on the 2011 level. This target needs to be strategically approached from many dimensions, starting with the family unit and how to improve the situation for children taking family circumstances into account. The Roadmap has a ‘whole of government’ approach which recognises the shared responsibility across Government to achieve improved outcomes, including proposals to further assist families with children.

Clare Deane of Barnardos opened the workshop with a presentation outlining issues that surround child poverty, looking at impacts that can affect both children and parents. Examples of how Barnardos tackle child poverty are: Barnardos Better Finglas ABC which assists new parents, provides parenting programmes, literacy supports, early years development supports, interagency work and social and emotional wellbeing supports; and the Barnardos response to supporting families during COVID-19 which targeted basic needs and building coping strategies.

Impacts of poverty on children as seen by Barnardos

Impacts we see in Children

- Hungry/ malnourished
- Neglected and Abused
- Developmental delay
- Impacts on Emotional, Physical and Psychological Wellbeing
- Poor School attendance/ negative learning outcomes
- Poor social skills
- Struggle to form healthy relationships in later life

 Barnardos

Participants broke out into 10 break-out groups to discuss the workshop theme. Discussions covered a wide range of issues related to this topic. These included: access to childcare for all children; the cost of and barriers to education; supports for new families; identifying groups of society where children have an increased risk of poverty; and the need to take account of the whole household circumstances when addressing child poverty.

The key themes that emerged from the discussions were:

- There should be a new national target of 0% of children in consistent poverty. The definition of child poverty should be broadened to include more holistic indicators, with specific targets for vulnerable and marginalised groups not currently captured in data.
- Increased participation and engagement of children and young people is needed in policy making structures, through outreach to engage with marginalised children and those experiencing poverty.
- Income adequacy should be ensured, with increased targeted social welfare supports to prevent families entering poverty. Increased service provision through early learning and care, education and housing, with access to more universal supports particularly for those experiencing in-work poverty is needed.

- Parental health and wellbeing are key determinants of a child’s wellbeing. More universal supports for families are needed, along with an acknowledgement of the “working poor”.
- The new child poverty target needs whole-of-government support and adequate poverty-proofing measures. A new Child Poverty Unit is required to oversee this and the implementation of the EU Child Guarantee.

Workshop 3: Expanding the Opportunity of Employment (Chapter 2)

13 April 2021 2:30pm – 4:00pm

Roadmap Goal: Give everyone who can work the opportunity of employment as a means to improve their well-being.

Facilitated by Bríd O'Brien, Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed

Presentation by Joe Saunders, Irish Local Development Network

Workshop attendees: 112 participants

While the COVID-19 pandemic radically affected the labour market with the closure of entire sections of the economy, the Government is committed to creating an environment for healthy job growth. It is accepted that employment provides the best means of reducing poverty, but we cannot rely in a passive manner on the market to create quality and sustainable jobs, as envisaged under the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. While the Action Plan for Jobs, Future Jobs Ireland and Enterprise 2025 set out to create sustainable work, the employment services strategy, Pathways to Work, sought to ensure that as many of these jobs as possible could be taken up by people who were excluded from employment.

Joe Saunders from the Irish Local Development Network opened the workshop with a presentation on expanding employment opportunities for all. This was followed by workshop participants breaking into 8 discussion groups. Discussions covered a wide range of issues including the inclusion of employers in the development of strategies and how financial supports relating to returning to work need to be

promoted. Barriers to work including childcare and transport, as well as the considering alternatives to full-time work were also discussed. Specific supports for certain groups in society were considered, along with soft skills training for those entering the workforce.

The key themes that emerged from these discussions were:

- The rollout of the Local Employment Service (LES) is welcome, but it must ensure that schemes are client-focused and meet individual needs. A holistic approach similar to the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) was recommended.
- Specific employment and childcare supports are needed for vulnerable groups who face additional barriers to employment, including discrimination.
- Early career-guidance interventions and tailored employment guidance is important. Pathways, such as the SICAP *My Journey Distance Travelled Tool*, give a sense of ownership and utilise a person's capabilities and strengths.
- Barriers to education and employment in rural areas need to be addressed. These include lack of transport links, broadband connectivity and matching people's skills with the jobs available in their area (whether urban or rural). Social enterprise can play an important role in this area.
- Greater engagement and communication with local stakeholders is needed to ensure supports are targeted at the right people at the right time. There can be a lack of cohesion, which can impact negatively on participation and lead to exclusion.

Workshop 4: Making Sure Voices are Heard

14 April 2021 10:00am – 11:30am

Social Inclusion is achieved when people have access to sufficient income, resources and services to enable them to play an active part in their communities and participate in activities that are considered the norm for people in society generally.

Facilitated by Paul Ginnell, European Anti-Poverty Network

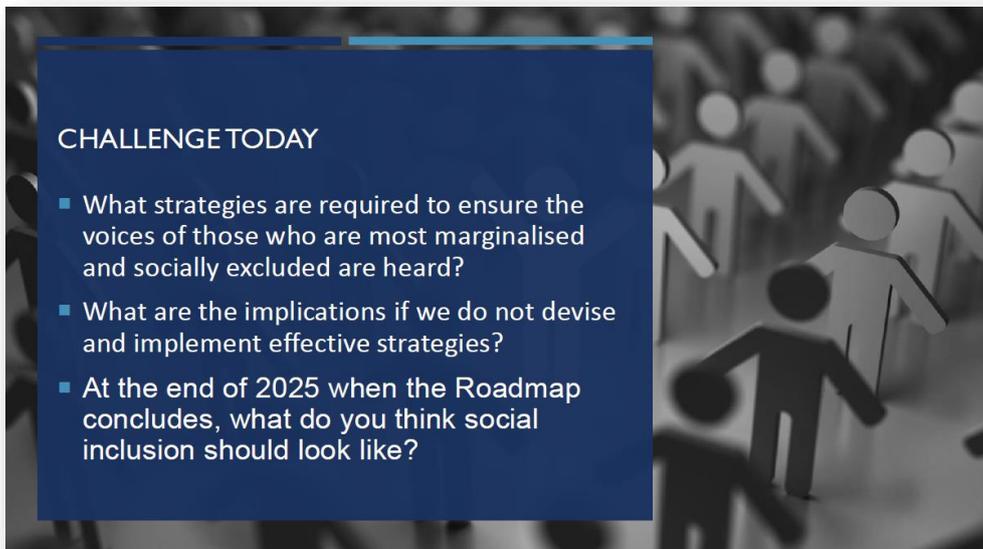
Presentation by Ann Irwin, Community Work Ireland

Workshop attendees: 101 participants

There are groups in society who face additional, and sometimes unspoken, barriers in accessing and taking up employment opportunities. Cultural and social norms, inherited biases and legacy service deficiencies work against people from identifiable minority groups being accepted as equal participants in the labour market. This can, understandably, impact negatively on motivation and behaviour at an individual level.

Ann Irwin from Community Work Ireland opened the workshop with a presentation on the challenges in ensuring that all voices are heard. She highlighted that a one size fits all approach does not work, and that this must be incorporated into strategies.

The challenges in ensuring that marginalised voices are heard
outlined by Community Work Ireland



Participants broke into 10 groups to discuss the topic. Following frank and in-depth discussions, they reported back the main points from their groups. It was felt that Public Participation Networks need to be consistent in their engagement with groups across all regions. While strategies and policies were welcomed, participants believed they need to be implemented with meaningful targets and proper engagement with relevant groups. There were discussions around diversity education in schools and for those providing services to remove stigma and bias. Barriers to engagement at regional and community level were also discussed.

The key themes reported back to the closing plenary from this workshop were:

- Everyone has a right to participation in policymaking, but it must be meaningful and avoid “box-ticking”. A co-creation approach is necessary in policy making at all levels based on set standards.
- More should be done to include diverse and marginalised voices. The Public Sector Equality Duty should be implemented, and socio-economic status should be included as a 10th ground in equality legislation.

- Public Participation Networks are vital but are often too large to meaningfully address the challenges in social inclusion and represent marginalised groups.
- Effective Community Development takes time and needs expertise and resources. It needs more qualified community workers, as well as programmes and services designed to suit a community's needs. There is a need to rebuild a programme for autonomous Community Development. The role of Community Development in challenging policy needs to be respected.
- Participation strategies need to be supported and implemented locally to ensure the participation of marginalised voices, with guidelines for front-line staff to promote engagement/participation and training on equality/diversity. Improving digital/literacy skills to enable tech solutions for engagement should be focused on.
- Visible results are needed to reflect the contribution and effort of communities, community workers and organisations. This would encourage further participation and representation and help overcome disillusionment. "Nothing about us, without us!" Agreed strategies must be implemented.

4. Closing Plenary Session

The final session of the Social Inclusion Forum 2021 took place on Friday, 16th April from 10.30am to 11.30am. It was attended by 153 participants, many of whom had attended sessions throughout the week. A poll of the attendees at the closing plenary found an almost even split between those that had attended the Forum in previous years (49%) and those who were attending for the first time (51%).

The session was opened by Kevin McCarthy, Secretary General of the Department of Rural and Community Development. He reflected that the events of the past year had shown the value of community and the importance of working together centrally and locally. He noted that social inclusion is threaded through the work and policies of the Department of Rural and Community Development, most recently evident in the new rural development policy '*Our Rural Future*', published in March 2021. He stressed the importance of dialogue and consultation with local development and

community development groups and the Community and Voluntary sector through events such as the Forum and the planned rural ideas fora and rural youth assembly. He thanked the attendees for their contributions throughout the week, noting that his Department would be keen to learn from the contributions made at the workshops and from the Forum as a whole.

Minister Heather Humphreys, speaking at the 2021 Social Inclusion Forum



Heather Humphreys T.D., Minister for Social Protection welcomed everyone to the closing session of the Forum. She observed that this online Forum was a very engaged event with large numbers attending all sessions and active participation and discussion throughout the week. This level of interest and engagement provide clear evidence that reducing poverty and improving social inclusion remains a priority.

Minister Humphreys stated that, while the Roadmap for Social Inclusion, 2020-2025 was published at the start of 2020 following a period of strong economic growth, there was still considerable work to be done at the time in tackling poverty and social exclusion. When COVID-19 arrived, the Government introduced the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) to address the immediate impact on household

incomes of workers who had temporarily lost their jobs. PUP has supported over 850,000 people at a cost of €6.5billion to the end of March 2021.

Minister Humphreys indicated that more than €5 billion has also been provided in the form of wage subsidies, alongside a range of other Government measures to support individuals and businesses impacted by the pandemic.

Minister Humphreys said it will take time to gather and process final data on the medium to long term health, economic, social and poverty impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. But data and research published since the beginning of the pandemic indicate that the social protection system is important in supporting those on low incomes and has softened the impact of pandemic related unemployment and temporary layoffs.

Under Budget 2021 specific measures to support individuals and families on low incomes were introduced by Government. Many deliver on commitments in the Roadmap, such as:

- An increase to the Working Family Payment income threshold for families of up to three children, benefitting some 48,700 families in 2021 at a cost of €21.4m.
- The removal of the earnings threshold for the One Parent Family Payment;
- An increase in the rates of Qualified Child Payment, benefitting some 419,000 children at a cost of €59.2m in 2021;
- An increase in the Disability Allowance earnings disregard to €140 per week;
- An increase to the weekly living alone allowance benefitting some 227,100 people in 2021 at a cost of €57.5m.
- An increase to the weekly rate for Fuel Allowance, benefitting some 375,600 people at a cost of €36.8m in 2021.

Minister Humphreys highlighted other initiatives where progress has been made in delivering on commitments in the Roadmap including:

- An additional €5.5 million for the extension of the Hot School Meals Programme to include primary school pupils who had been availing of cold lunches, extending the scheme to a record 35,000 students.
- An additional three weeks of Parent's Leave and Parent's Benefit now available to each parent of a child born or adopted on or after 1st November 2019.

As restrictions are lifted and more people are vaccinated, Minister Humphreys said that we can look forward to more people returning to employment. She mentioned the July Jobs Stimulus measures which would assist this, including an expanded Public Employment Service, a new Work Placement Experience Programme, 35,000 further Education and Training and Higher Education places, an increase in places on the CE and Tús schemes and expanded access to and funding for JobsPlus, Back to Education Allowance and Back to Work Enterprise Allowance. These will benefit the long-term unemployed as well as those impacted by COVID-19 public health restrictions.

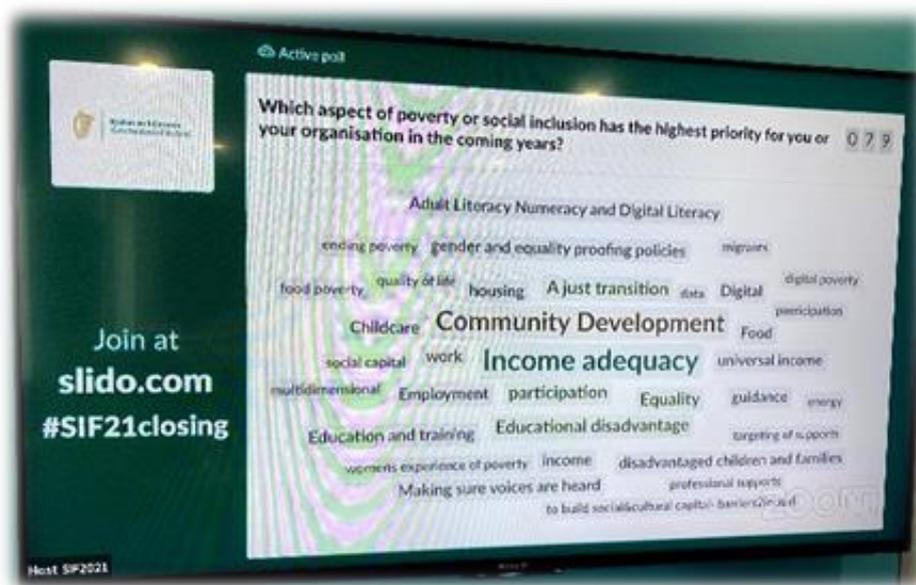
Referring to the first question posed to attendees at the opening plenary (*What does social inclusion mean to you?*) Minister Humphreys agreed that social inclusion equates to "Equality". She committed to working with colleagues across Government to deliver on commitments in the Roadmap for Social Inclusion. She also highlighted the importance placed on delivery, referring to the Roadmap Steering Group chaired by Minister Joe O'Brien and comprised of senior officials and three members of the Community and Voluntary sector, which monitors progress and reports to a Cabinet Committee.

She closed by thanking both her Departments, Social Protection and Rural and Community Development, for their continued work, and the attendees for their time and participation over the week.

Teresa Leonard, Deputy Secretary General in the Department of Social Protection chaired the session, facilitating feedback from the workshops which took place over

the week. Facilitators from each workshop presented the key points agreed at each workshop. A common theme across the workshops was access to services, alongside income supports, as an important factor in moving and keeping people out of poverty.

The final poll of the forum asked attendees “*What aspect of poverty or social inclusion has the highest priority for you or your organisation in the coming years?*” A wide range of responses were given to this question, with Community Development and Income Adequacy coming out as the most popular responses.



John McKeon, Secretary General of the Department of Social Protection addressed attendees and emphasised the value of fora such as this for informing Government Departments in relation to policy and budgetary decision-making. He noted that policy should be evidence based and that the Department used a range of quantitative data sources, Central Statistics Office, the OECD and others, to inform evidence but that it was important that this evidence was complemented by real world insights as each person’s experience of social exclusion or poverty differs meaning that policy responses need, to the extent possible, to reflect these differences. This is why there is “no one size fits all” solution to the issue of poverty.

This factor also needs to be taken into account in interpreting data. John noted that while we should acknowledge and indeed be proud of progress at a macro level – for example Ireland is one of the only countries in the developed world where income inequality is falling, and we have reduced consistent poverty from just under 10% to just over 5% in 6 years – we shouldn't be complacent. For the people who are still in the 5% group, the experience of poverty and exclusion is 100%. In addition, as we get closer to our goals the challenge becomes more complex, broad brush policy interventions may be less effective and what may be needed are tailored solutions if we are to achieve the *Roadmap* target to:

Reduce consistent poverty to 2% or less and to make Ireland one of the most socially inclusive countries in the EU.

The Roadmap is supported by the Programme for Government and John stated that it will take a whole of Government approach to implement the 66 commitments. He gave examples of commitments that are already completed including: the publication of the new Further Education and Training Strategy; the full roll-out of the National Childcare Scheme; and the publication of the National Volunteering Strategy. He also pointed out that rather than focusing on social exclusion, something to be avoided, it focused on social inclusion, something to be achieved. Towards this end, rather than focus in on a narrow range of high level poverty measures, the Roadmap now has 22 measures of performance to more fully capture the lived experience, covering housing, education, health and social participation as well as the traditional income and possession based metrics. He reiterated Minister Humphreys point that the last year has been a difficult year and thanked the Department's staff for their hard work and commitment in responding to the pandemic. He closed by thanking everyone for their continued attendance and engagement at the event and confirmed that the conference report would be submitted to the Roadmap Steering Group for consideration

A snapshot of the closing plenary speakers



Minister Joe O'Brien then closed the Forum, highlighting the discussions he had heard at the workshops throughout the week and in the overview presented at this session. These included the issues of income adequacy and a minimum standard of living, access to affordable services, and food poverty. He acknowledged the complex nature of addressing poverty and social inclusion, as well as the importance of inter-Departmental collaboration.

Examples of the work taking place highlighted by Minister O'Brien included the work of the Low Pay Commission on moving towards a living wage and the establishment of a Working Group on Food Poverty to explore the drivers of food poverty and identify mitigating actions. As society begins to re-open, he re-iterated the importance of supporting people back to work by overcoming barriers to employment. He also acknowledged the recurring theme of participation and on-going engagement, from involving children and young people in policy-making to improving representation on the Public Participation Networks and engaging with local stakeholders, as well as continued engagement with community organisations. He concluded by affirming that there would be continued engagement around the

Roadmap, including the publication of this report.

5. Post Event Work

Following the event, copies of the forum presentations, along with the key points agreed at the Forum workshops and the report of pre-Forum consultations prepared by EAPN and CWI, were sent to all attendees for their information. 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

Opening Plenary Session: Monday, 12 April 2021 - 10:00am to 12noon

Welcome and opening remarks by Teresa Leonard, Deputy Secretary General, Department of Social Protection

Address by Joe O'Brien, T.D., Minister of State with responsibility for Social Inclusion at the Department of Social Protection, and Community Development and Charities at the Department of Rural and Community Development

Presentation on the Roadmap for Social Inclusion including its development, progress to date and challenges posed by COVID-19 by Dr. Dermot Coates, Chief Economist, Department of Social Protection

Feedback from pre-Forum regional sessions by Ann Irwin, Community Work Ireland and Paul Ginnell, European Anti-Poverty Network Ireland

Work at community level and its impact on poverty and social inclusion by Paul Geraghty, Principal Officer, Department of Rural and Community Development

Q&A session moderated by Teresa Leonard, Deputy Secretary General, Department of Social Protection

Overview of the four Forum workshops by Geraldine Hurley, Assistant Secretary, Department of Social Protection

Closing comments by Kevin McCarthy, Secretary General, Department of Rural and Community Development

Workshop 1: Monday, 12 April 2021 - 2:30pm to 4:00pm

Core Essentials – Energy poverty, food poverty, health inclusion policy: discussion re. causes and how issues can be addressed.

Facilitated by Tricia Keilthy (Society of St Vincent de Paul)

Presentation by Amanda Slattery and Eileen O'Keefe (Ballyhoura CLG)

Workshop 2: Tuesday, 13 April 2021 - 10:00am to 11:30pm

Supporting Families and Children: Development of a new child poverty target - what should it look like? This workshop will form part of the consultation process for the new target.

Facilitated by Saoirse Brady (Children's Right Alliance)

Presentation by Clare Deane (Barnardo's)

Workshop 3: Tuesday, 13 April 2021 - 2:30pm to 4:00pm

Expanding the Opportunity of Employment: Focus on how the Roadmap will help marginalised groups and communities affected by employment issues, through policies and programmes such as Pathways to Work and the Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme.

Facilitated by Bríd O'Brien (Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed)

Presentation by Joe Saunders (Irish Local Development Network)

Workshop 4: Wednesday, 14 April 2021 - 10:00am to 11:30pm

Making sure voices are heard: a discussion of the points raised during the first three workshops, from the perspective of the marginalised groups and in the context of the overall aim of social inclusion.

Facilitated by Paul Ginnell (European Anti-Poverty Network)

Presentation by Ann Irwin (Community Work Ireland)

Closing Plenary Session: Friday, 16 April 2021 - 10.30am to 11:30am

Opening Comments by Kevin McCarthy, Secretary General, Department of Rural and Community Development

Address by Heather Humphreys T.D., Minister for Social Protection, and Rural and Community Development and the Islands

Presentation of key points agreed at the Forum workshops by Teresa Leonard, Deputy Secretary General, Department of Social Protection

Closing address by Joe O'Brien T.D., Minister of State with responsibility for Social Inclusion at the Department of Social Protection, and Community Development and Charities at the Department of Rural and Community Development

Closing comments by John McKeon, Secretary General, Department of Social Protection

Appendix 2: Participating Organisations

Age Action	Early Childhood Ireland
Age and Opportunity	Effective Services
All Together in Dignity Ireland	Employability Clare
An Garda Síochána	Employability Dublin North
Avondhu Blackwater Partnership	Employability Galway
Ballycommon Tipperary Training Centre	Employability Louth
Ballyhoura Development CLG	Employability Midlands
Barnardos	Employability Wicklow
Cavan County Council	Empower Ireland
Changing Ireland	Enable Ireland
Children's Rights Alliance	Family Resource Centre
Citizens Information Board	Focus Family Resource Centre
Clare County Council	Focus Ireland
Clare Local Development Company	Forum Connemara
Community Work Ireland	Galway/Roscommon Education & Training Board
Cope Galway	Galway City Council
Cork County Council	Galway City Partnership
Cork Education and Training Board	Galway Simon Community
Cork Partnership	Galway Traveller Movement
County Kildare Local Partnership	Health Service Executive
CrossCare	Irish Local Development Network
Dept. Agriculture, Food and the Marine	Inclusion Ireland
Dept. Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth	Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed
Dept. Education	Involve
Dept. Enterprise, Trade and Employment	Irish Rural Link
Dept. Environment, Climate and Communications	Irish Senior Citizens Parliament
Dept. Foreign Affairs	Irish Traveller Movement
Dept. Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation & Science	Job Matters
Dept. Health	Kerry County Council
Dept. Housing, Local Government and Heritage	Kildare & Wicklow Education Training Board
Dept. Public Expenditure and Reform	Kildare County Council
Dept. Rural & Community Development	Larkin Centre
Dept. Social Protection	Limerick/Clare Education & Training Board
Dept. Taoiseach	Limerick County Council
Dept. Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media	Longford Community Resources CLG
Disability Federation Ireland	Longford County Council
Donegal Family Resource	Louth Leader Partnership
Down Syndrome Family Resource Centre	Mayo County Council
Dublin City Community Coop	Meath County Council
European Anti-Poverty Network	Meath Jobs Club
	Meath Partnership
	Monaghan Co. Council

Money Advice & Budgetary Services	Simon Community
National Disability Authority	SIPTU
National Women's Council of Ireland	Sligo County Council
National Youth Council of Ireland	Social Justice Ireland
National Economic & Social Council	SOLAS
North-West Inner-City Network	South Dublin County Council
North, East & West Kerry Development	South West Mayo Development Group
Offaly County Council	St. Muchin's Community Centre
Offaly Local Development Company	St. Vincent de Paul
One Family	Threshold
Pavee Point	Tipperary County Council
Pobal	Tipperary Education and Training Board
Portlaoise Family Resource Centre	Tipperary Tenancy Board
Protestant Aid	Tusla
Public Participation Network Tipperary	Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice
Quarry Vale Family Resource Centre	Waterford Area Partnership
Rehab Ireland	Westmeath Community Development
Roscommon Integrated Development Company	Wexford Local Development
Safefood	Wicklow County Council
Saoirse Domestic Violence Service	Wicklow Partnership

