



MID-TERM REVIEW OF THE ROADMAP FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION 2020-2025

December
2022

Report on Stakeholder Consultation



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Introduction

In June 2022 Ipsos was commissioned by the Department of Social Protection to undertake stakeholder engagement as part of the Mid-Term Review of the Roadmap for Social Inclusion.

This engagement exercise involved a number of mechanisms, including:

- A public consultation process (online survey, with the option of written submissions);
- Engagement with the Roadmap Steering Group – 4 qualitative in-depth interviews;
- A survey among representatives across various government departments;
- Facilitation of a 1-hour session at the Social Inclusion Forum 2022 to obtain feedback from participants;

This report presents the findings from these four elements in the engagement process.

The feedback received as part of this exercise typically focussed on macro issues relating to social inclusion rather than necessarily being assigned to specific goals or commitments. This is likely reflective of significant concerns in relation to major challenges to social inclusion that exist currently – specifically challenges in relation to housing provision, and the rising cost-of-living. It is believed that these factors in combination have created a deterioration in poverty and social inclusion during 2022.

However, in preparing this report the researchers have aligned the findings to the goals of the Roadmap and tied them to specific commitments where relevant.

All written submissions provided to Ipsos as part of this engagement exercise have been provided to the Department of Social Protection.

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Approach Used

This exercise draws together information from a variety of sources and various techniques were used to gather the feedback.

The first stage in the process was a session at the Social Inclusion Forum 2022 held in Balbriggan, Co. Dublin on 22 June 2022. At this session Kieran O’Leary of Ipsos presented details of the stakeholder consultation process and asked that attendees engage with the process and promote it accordingly to ensure that the public consultation exercise was as broad as possible.

Groups at the session were then asked to note the main issues and thoughts under three key themes relevant to the Roadmap:

- Cost of living;
- Supporting communities; and
- Employment and expanding the opportunity for all who are able to work.

Each table noted their comments on paper and these were gathered by Ipsos staff at the end of the session for data entry and thematic analysis.

The second stage involved a public consultation exercise which commenced on 6 September. Those wishing to make submissions were invited to either complete a short online survey hosted by Ipsos through gov.ie, or make a submission by email directly to Ipsos. Twenty-two submissions were received by email and a further twenty received through the online survey. These typically came from representative organisations and other social inclusion stakeholders, with a small number of personal submissions made by members of the public.

The third stage involved four qualitative in-depth interviews with key external stakeholders involved in the delivery of the Roadmap. These were conducted online via Microsoft Teams during late-November and early December.

The final stage invited submissions from Government Departments, including those with specific commitments in the Roadmap as well as others. Twelve submissions were received – ten through an online survey, and two via email directly to Ipsos.

General Perspectives on the Roadmap

The general view from this consultation exercise is that the Roadmap for Social Inclusion is a major step forward and commitment by the State to address the issue of poverty. It was broadly welcomed by stakeholders when published, and while there may not be universal agreement on the specifics of the commitments outlined in the Roadmap there is universal agreement that the target to reduce the consistent poverty rate to 2% or less of the population is suitably ambitious.

This mid-term review comes at a point following a period of widespread change, both in Ireland and internationally. The Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the ongoing cost-of-living increases have all changed the context in which poverty and social exclusion are considered.

Of particular note across the submissions is that the level of state financial support provided to those in need of it during the Covid-19 pandemic means that it can be difficult to measure specific progress in the reduction of poverty as these payments temporarily lifted many out of poverty. However, the removal of these supports and the subsequent rises in the cost-of-living are felt by some to have worsened the poverty situation considerably with an expectation among many that this will be confirmed when updated indicators are available.

However, in spite of this the general view is that the overall target of 2% or less should be retained and should remain the ambition for all involved in delivering the Roadmap.

While the overall ambitions of the Roadmap are broadly agreed upon, there are some concerns among participants around various commitments. These concerns centre on two issues – firstly, the rationale for individual commitments and their link to poverty reduction; and secondly, the number of commitments related to the publication of reports or policies without going further to a commitment on the delivery on the outcomes.

These are both expanded on throughout this report, but in general the feedback from a number of stakeholders was that there is uncertainty about the process used to ensure that commitments are adequate to meet targets as well as the process to demonstrate and prove their effectiveness. Furthermore, there is considerable frustration that commitments are not updated to reflect the need to enact the findings of a published report. This is particularly evident in feedback received in relation to the Cost of Disability report published in 2021.

In reviewing the Roadmap the mid-term review may need to place particular emphasis on two particular areas that are suggested to have a significant impact on social exclusion, and both are reported by many stakeholders to be worsening with time.

The first of these relates the challenges in housing provision which are reported to impact on many aspects of social inclusion. The second relates to the rising cost of living, particularly in terms of the widening gap between social transfers and the costs of essential items. Both of these are discussed in further detail throughout this report, however are highlighted here as they are the two most commonly reported challenges across public submissions received.

Goal One: Expanding the Opportunity of Employment

Current Relevance of this Goal

The ESRI report “Profiling Barriers to Social Inclusion in Ireland” identified that belonging to a jobless household was among the most significant obstacles to social inclusion, both in Ireland and internationally. The report notes that belonging to a jobless household is the barrier most commonly reported by SICAP beneficiaries and was reported by over 40 per cent of SICAP clients.

Since the launch of the Roadmap in 2020 the nature of employment has fundamentally changed. Throughout 2020 and 2021, many experienced unemployment for reasons related to the restrictions introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic. Most have since returned to employment and progress in this respect has been encouraging, particularly when compared to the period following the financial crash in 2008.

However, feedback received as part of this stakeholder consultation exercise places a particular focus on the long-term unemployed and that it is important that the Roadmap does not overlook the pre-pandemic labour market issues that remain. This factor, it is felt, can be lost in the focus on the encouraging return to “full employment” following the pandemic period.

It is well-understood that issues of unemployment and underemployment do not impact on all groups equally and some groups are identified through this consultation as requiring a particular focus. Disabled people, those from ethnic minority groups and unemployed people aged under 25 or over 55 were all identified by stakeholders as specific groups that the Roadmap needs to consider when ensuring quality and secure employment for all individuals.

Many aspects of the way in which people work have also changed since 2020. There is now greater flexibility in work than ever before. This is most clearly evident through the many workers who now work remotely or through some hybrid workplace/home arrangement, providing greater flexibility in working arrangements for some and making it easier to balance many aspects of work and family lives.

However, flexible working arrangements also exist through the increased “gig economy” nature of work for many workers and more flexible working contracts. Although the consultation exercise did not identify any quantifiable measurement of such, it was felt that increasing number of workers were moving into this more precarious form of working arrangements.

Progress Made Since the Roadmap was Launched

Commitment number 8 states that a new National Childcare Scheme was to be launched in November 2019, and progress towards improved provision of childcare was noted by a number of stakeholders as a key success of the Roadmap.

The additional funding and resulting opportunities provided through the National Childcare Scheme are welcomed and have improved the employment opportunities for those for whom access to suitable childcare has been a barrier to securing employment – as well as providing a range of other benefits for both the child and the family.

However, further progress is sought by many stakeholders in order to improve the employment opportunities for women in particular with a specific focus on women on who may not have social or family supports (e.g. lone parents) or may be limited to the extent to which they can access childcare due to affordability reasons.

The current challenges in the childcare sector are identified as being symptomatic of a general underfunding of childcare

The longer-term ambition for many remains the objective to ensure free access to early childhood care and education. Furthermore, it is desired that these services are provided directly by the state rather than through private market operators.

A Renewed Focus towards 2025

In general, the feedback received in respect of this goal was that many of the commitments could be enhanced through greater ambition to address the structural deficits that limit the opportunity of employment for many.

As with other goals it is felt that many of the commitments are not outcome-focussed but instead related to the publication of other policies, which in themselves do not improve employment opportunities. In developing outcome-focussed commitments it is a strongly-held view that the success of these need to be measured against specific sub-group targets which are lacking within this particular goal. In this respect, targets for the unemployed (and the long-term unemployed) are necessary in order to deliver real progress for key groups.

Of particular importance in this regard is that a focus on “full employment” does not align with a fully inclusive labour market (the core ambition of this Roadmap). While the country overall may achieve “full employment” many of the groups largely excluded from employment or have significant difficulties in accessing employment (or employment that is of sufficient quality) may be overlooked and experience a situation that is largely unchanged.

Accessing (quality) employment remains a particular problem for many groups, and marginalised groups in particular. Those from ethnic minority groups (including immigrants, those living in direct provision, Travellers and those from the Roma community) are identified as experiencing particular barriers in securing employment. The conscious and unconscious biases faced by these groups are identified as amounting to discrimination. While eliminating this is identified as a priority area for this goal, it is not supported by a particular commitment.

Actions being taken in general have changed considerably since the development of the Roadmap. It is noted that two particular policies - Future Jobs Ireland and Enterprise 2025 - are outdated and should be removed. They have been superseded by the Economic Recovery Plan, the implementation of which is being monitored by the Department of the Taoiseach

Goal Two: Ensuring Work Pays

Current Relevance of this Goal

The background to this consultation exercise was one of a high and accelerating rate of inflation, particularly in terms of core essentials such as housing, fuel and food. This was characterised as a cost-of-living crisis which is acutely felt by those on low incomes. As such, many of the submissions to this consultation focussed on income adequacy and the general role of income in reducing the rate of poverty.

“The cost of living crisis is an issue of adequate income”

This issue is not unique to this particular goal and impacts on the progress towards achieving other goals across the Roadmap. However, this is acknowledged across many submissions received suggesting that a sufficient income is a core component in eliminating social exclusion. A perception exists that by placing further attention on the issue of income adequacy within the Roadmap, considerable strides could be made in terms of reducing the level of poverty.

Two related themes emerged in terms of income adequacy, both linked to a strong desire to deliver on the requirements to ensure the Minimum Essential Standard of Living as advocated by the Vincentian Partnership and others. Firstly, a need to benchmark social welfare payments in a meaningful way, and secondly a need to ensure a living wage.

“Progress towards ensuring a minimally adequate income will be fundamental to ensuring progress towards a truly inclusive society”

Progress Made Since the Roadmap was Launched

As the period since the Roadmap was launched was dominated by the challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic, submissions in respect of progress in income adequacy focussed on income supports provided during that period.

The income supports provided during the pandemic were universally welcomed and many were encouraged by the level at which payments were set. These were particularly important in ensuring that the numbers of unemployed people at risk of poverty did not increase significantly over this period.

However, it is noted that by setting the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) at a level higher than, for example, Jobseekers Benefit implies that the levels of payment being made under these benefits is currently insufficient. This perception is likely accentuated by the rising cost of living that has occurred since the end of the pandemic.

“Our response to the pandemic shows the difference adequate social protection payments make – without these vital supports twice as many unemployed people would be living at risk of poverty (CSO – SILC 2021 data). The removal of Covid-19 income supports has brought payment back to an inadequate level and below what is required to meet a Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL)”

The recent government announcements of developing a Living Wage are identified as demonstrating encouraging progress towards delivering on the principles of income adequacy. However, it is noted that the Roadmap includes a focus on minimum wage and it is suggested that this will need to be updated to reflect any change of focus, should this occur.

A Renewed Focus towards 2025

Feedback received suggested that this particular goal should be strengthened further in the remaining period of the Roadmap. In general, it is felt that the Roadmap downplays the importance of income in reducing the level of poverty, and instead places greater focus on services necessary to overcome the challenges caused by income inadequacy. This was described by one individual who participated in the exercise, they portrayed the Roadmap as “more enthusiastic about dealing with the symptoms of poverty than it is about dealing with the causes”. This sentiment is echoed across many submissions which identify the need to increase income levels as being fundamental in the ambition to reduce the level of poverty.

“Income inadequacy [is] a challenge that is not properly dealt with across the Roadmap, it’s goals and commitments. Yet for social inclusion to become a meaningful reality for people who are unemployed and other people reliant on a social welfare payment it must be addressed.”

A key element informing the success of this will be the approach that is taken to the benchmarking of working-age income supports. The approach used will need to be transparent and based on an evidence-led process rather than being informed by other factors.

“Any increase below the rate of inflation is effectively a reduction in support”

Some encouragement was taken in this respect in comments made by Minister O'Brien at the Social Inclusion Forum that a quantitative approach to addressing income adequacy may not in itself be sufficient and that measurements that incorporate the lived-experience of many vulnerable groups. While this is not unique to the issue of income adequacy it is a particularly important consideration in respect of this issue.

“The mid-term review should adopt an expansive and inclusive approach to measuring income adequacy and in-work poverty, considering a variety of quantitative indicators as well as qualitative data on the lived experience of structurally vulnerable groups.”

Goal Three: Supporting Older People

Current Relevance of this Goal

Social exclusion affects older people in a variety of ways, and while economic and income poverty are equally important issues for this group as they are for many others, the issues identified by this consultation impact on their ability to participate fully in society.

These issues are reflected in other goals, but impact on older people in different ways. They include access to services, digital exclusion, discrimination through ageism and for other reasons, energy poverty, food poverty, housing, and social participation within their communities.

A number of submissions noted considerable frustration in terms of progress towards the ambitions for older people. One group suggested that “Ireland has in fact gone backwards in terms of both poverty and social exclusion for older people since January 2020”.

The Covid-19 pandemic and associated restrictions such as cocooning are identified as having had a greater impact on older people. These include issues related to loneliness and isolation, in addition to longer-term issues related to restricted access to healthcare services during the pandemic.

Progress Made Since the Roadmap was Launched

Progress towards the ambitions for older people stated in the Roadmap has been slow and this is acknowledged in the Report Card January 2020-September 2021 as three of the seven commitments were dependent upon the delivery of commitment 22.

The submissions received reflected this and did not note considerable progress in respect of older people. However, the reliefs provided in Budget 2023 such as the expansion of the eligibility criteria for payments such as the Fuel Allowance are particularly welcomed in the context of the current economic environment.

A Renewed Focus towards 2025

The most recent SILC data indicates that older people are noteworthy in terms of the increases experienced across all poverty rates – at risk of poverty, deprivation, and consistent poverty - between 2020 and 2021. As the estimated inflation data by household characteristics shows that older people are experiencing among the highest inflation rates it is assumed that poverty rates for this cohort have increased further during 2022.

The current economic context means that there is considerable focus in the submissions on increasing income levels in order to sufficiently address the challenges presented by the rising cost-of-living. The submissions identify that the commitment to benchmark the state pension needs to be a particular priority, however that this needs to be expanded immediately to cover other welfare payments.

“It is notable that the inadequacy of fuel, telephone and electricity allowances can have a considerable impact on welfare and social inclusion which should not be overlooked. The mid-term review offers an opportunity for a reappraisal of this position, taking into account the immediate impact of the sharp rise of the cost of living on structurally vulnerable groups.”

Beyond income adequacy issues there are calls within the submissions for a focus on care, specifically to act upon the commitment to establish a Commission on Care. In light of the impact that Covid-19 restrictions have had on both the physical and mental health of older people (as highlighted in the HSE Interim Report on the Impact of Cocooning Measures on Older People), this is seen as particularly important and needs to examine both short-to-medium term considerations related to wellbeing, and longer-term considerations in terms of the provision of care.

The provision of suitable housing is covered by a separate goal. However, this is identified through this exercise as an issue that presents unique challenges for older people. As older people are more likely to live in older buildings, this results in “increased amounts of maintenance required but which often goes undone due to lack of funds”.

Furthermore, the need for housing adaptations as people age and to ensure energy efficiency places additional pressures on those who lack the resources to make necessary improvements meaning that increasing numbers are expected to be living in homes that are both unsuited to their needs (impacting on their ability to continue living independently at home) and are not compatible with the ambitions to improve energy ratings of Irish homes.

Overcoming issues related to digital exclusion are identified as a further area for focus. As many services (both public and private) move increasingly online this is presenting a particular challenge for older people, many of whom may not use the Internet or lack sufficient confidence to engage with services in this way. Increasing digital literacy and providing “one-stop-shops” to ensure ease of access to related services for older people are particularly important in this respect.

Goal Four: Supporting Families and Children

Current Relevance of this Goal

This goal has the stated ambition of reducing child poverty in Ireland as well as ensuring that all families have the opportunity to participate fully in society.

Feedback from the consultation exercise identified this particular goal as the one that has seen the most progress since the Roadmap was launched and encouraging steps have been made in respect of reducing poverty levels in general and addressing issues related to food poverty and childcare in particular. However, significant opportunity remains to build on the momentum established over the past few years.

The consultations were clear in that efforts to reduce child poverty need to consider it as a “whole household” issue rather than initiatives targeted solely at the child. It is also clear that efforts to address child poverty – more than any other area – require a cross-governmental approach, possibly co-ordinated through a child poverty office.

Progress Made Since the Roadmap was Launched

Recent SILC data identifies that child poverty fell between 2020 and 2021, however it is noted that without Covid-19 income supports poverty rates in general would be higher, and that poverty risk for the 0-17 age group in particular, benefitted more than other age groups from the income supports provided during this time.

However, aside from this some significant progress is noted in a range of areas related to children and families.

Some of the actions taken to address food poverty are identified as extremely beneficial and welcome developments. The launch of the pilot hot school meals in particular is singled out across a number of submissions and identified as delivering better quality food and having a positive impact on children in terms of attendance at school, physical health and emotional/psychological wellbeing. Related actions to address food poverty including establishing the working group on food poverty and the various investments and other developments that have arisen as a result are all welcomed.

Other developments that have been identified as progressive include an increase in the Back to School Allowance, restoration of in-work supports for one parent families and targeted supports for families through the National Childcare Scheme.

A Renewed Focus towards 2025

Three key themes arise through the submissions as requiring focus in the remaining years of this Roadmap – housing, childcare and the benchmarking of welfare payments.

While the issue of housing is not unique to children and families it is noted that “children are the fastest-growing homeless population in Ireland” and that the “effects of homelessness on children is profound” with global evidence suggesting that homelessness in children is associated with multiple negative physical, mental and behavioural health outcomes. The desired progress in respect of this significant challenge is discussed in greater detail in respect of Goal Seven with a focus on state investment in social housing.

There is strong desire throughout a number of submissions to increase the share of GDP spent on childcare (noting that it is low by international standards) and moving to a publicly funded model of childcare.

A number of issues created by perceived shortcomings in the childcare infrastructure are noted in respect of other goals such as those relating to access to employment and the provision of services. However, in respect of this aspect of the Roadmap it is noted that this is “essential to ensure affordability for lower income parents and provide high quality early childhood education for all children, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds.”

The private market-driven nature of a large component of childcare provision in Ireland is deemed unsustainable in the long-term, particularly in terms of catering for lower-income families. The current challenges within this sector are deemed to be symptomatic of under-funding that can only be addressed through large public funding, and preferably public delivery of these services.

The benchmarking of social welfare payments is identified as a crucial component in reducing child poverty, as it is across other groups in the population. In this respect it is noted that child poverty is an issue of household poverty, so benchmarking all welfare payments (not just those related to children) is critically important in reducing child poverty. However, indexing Child Benefit payments in conjunction with other welfare payments will play a key role in reducing poverty levels.

An opportunity to build upon the success of the pilot hot school meals programme and expand it further is encouraged. There is noted to be considerable momentum in this respect that could be harnessed – particularly in targeting “holiday hunger” and addressing the inability of children to access an adequate supply of nutritious food outside of school term times.

As with all aspects of social inclusion, addressing the issue of child poverty requires a cross-governmental approach with all stakeholders operating towards a single child poverty strategy. This is felt to be challenging currently as some aspects within child poverty are shared across multiple government Departments. One possible consideration to overcome this challenge is to establish a child poverty office with clear responsibility for delivery of this strategy.

Goal Five: Supporting People With Disabilities

Current Relevance of this Goal

Issues relating to disability received considerable focus across the submissions received with a wide variety of submissions received in particular from various organisations representing the interests of people with disabilities.

The feedback across the submissions was generally consistent and identified that limited progress had been made across the three ambitions within this goal – reducing poverty rates, improving employment outcomes and delivering better services.

Furthermore, the submissions noted a general welcoming of the findings of the Cost of Disability report, however there was considerable frustration that these had not yet been acted upon in order to reduce the financial burden on those with a disability.

The considerable risk of poverty to those with a disability is highlighted across various submissions. This is due to a number of potential vulnerabilities due to both to the extra cost of disability combined with significant challenges in participating fully within employment.

“The combined effect of the extra cost of disability and the difficulty in accessing the labour market or precarious conditions for people with an intellectual disability contributes to their exposure to poverty.”

The importance of a renewed focus on disability is highlighted through an increase since 2020 in the consistent poverty rate among those with a disability (from 16.2% to 19.2%) while at the same time the national average declined from 4.6% to 4%.

Progress Made Since the Roadmap was Launched

The key area of progress has been in achieving the commitment to publish a report on the cost of disability. The findings outlined in this report are generally welcomed and highlight the significant additional financial burden placed on disabled people due to their situation. This financial burden is often difficult to overcome due to lower levels of participation in the labour market.

“However, publishing a report that documents and assesses a policy issue and problem is not the same as taking action to address that issue and the impact it has on, in this case, disabled people.”

Addressing this significant challenge can be done through increasing welfare rates and other financial supports for those with a disability, as well as making it easier for people with a disability to secure employment – either through self-employment or as an employee.

With this in mind the forthcoming increase in the minimum target for the employment of disabled people in the public service from 3% to 6% is welcomed and provides an opportunity for the public service to lead by example in the employment of disabled people.

A Renewed Focus towards 2025

There is considerable opportunity to improve the lives of those with a disability through ensuring further progress on the ambitions of the Roadmap. The submissions outline a number of specific actions to be considered in order to deliver on this.

The key priority is to act on the findings of the Cost of Disability report through a disability payment. This is seen as critical in order to neutralise the disadvantage experienced by disabled people in this respect. Further, in establishing this payment it is seen as necessary that it – and other disability payments – are benchmarked in a meaningful way against other payments/incomes to ensure that the gap that is experienced does not widen further.

The issue of means-testing of disability payments is raised as a concern and is identified as a mechanism that undermines dignity, independence and autonomy. It is felt that the means-testing mechanisms being used are distressing and discourage individuals from taking up paid employment.

Increased supports for access to employment are also seen as crucial in improving social inclusion for this group, both in terms of improving earnings potential as well as playing a more active role in society. A specific focus in this respect is on supports for self-employment which through greater levels of flexibility offers particular benefits to suit a diverse range of needs for disabled people.

Another focus is suggested on access to finance for housing adaptations. A significant frustration exists through the retrospective nature of these payments meaning that many necessary adaptations are unaffordable for intended recipients. This presents significant challenges in terms of maintaining independent living.

In delivering on this it is key that sub-group targets are set and that “a focus on averages” is “complemented by a strong focus on sub targets and the poverty and deprivation rates of certain groups”. These sub targets need to ensure a level of ambition that is at least equal to the target levels set for the population as a whole – this is felt to be lacking from current targets for disabled people.

Goal Six: Build Inclusive Communities

Current Relevance of this Goal

The Roadmap highlights the importance of the “thriving community and voluntary sector” in empowering communities to address social exclusion. As Ireland and the wider world continues to experience major disruption to the fundamental structures within our society caused initially by the Covid-19 pandemic and more recently through the war in Ukraine and rising cost-of-living, the activities of the community and voluntary sector is seen as even more important now than ever before.

The Roadmap continues to play a key role in encouraging increased funding and resource provision in this area, and delivery on the commitments and activities set under this goal are seen as vitally important.

Progress Made Since the Roadmap was Launched

As is the case with many aspects of the Roadmap it is identified as being difficult to judge sustainable progress in this goal due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Issues related to the rising cost-of-living and the large numbers seeking refuge in Ireland having been displaced by the war in Ukraine.

However, it is felt that the recent crises have demonstrated clearly the importance of the Community and Voluntary sector and that increased focus over the remaining period of the Roadmap is needed on funding and other supports to organisations operating within this sector.

A Renewed Focus towards 2025

A specific commitment is given to develop an implementation plan to deliver on the objectives of tackling loneliness and isolation. These are two issues that are felt to have worsened considerably over the course of the period of Covid-19 restrictions, particularly among groups such as older people and those with chronic illnesses who needed to cocoon or among those living alone who lost access to particular social outlets.

While restrictions on social engagements were removed almost a year ago, many have not reengaged in social activities or community engagements and have become increasingly isolated. The Covid-19 period has left a lasting legacy in terms of increasing loneliness and isolation which has recently been further worsened by the rising cost-of-living leading many to cut back on social activities.

Feedback from the consultation exercise indicates that progress in delivering a plan on tackling loneliness and isolation is even more important in 2022 than it was during the time when the Roadmap was designed.

A further significant challenge exists in increasing digital connectivity and improving digital skills. Digital poverty is identified as a growing challenge that limits people's ability to engage fully with their communities and access many services which are increasingly moving online and made more difficult to access in traditional ways. It is identified as a particular challenge for older people, many of whom either do not use the Internet or lack sufficient confidence to conduct tasks online.

Narrowing the digital divide also needs to consider the way certain services present themselves online ensuring that they can be easily accessed by all users. For example, a particular challenge was highlighted of generic email addresses being used instead of telephone numbers in order to access particular services or supports. This was identified as something that made it more difficult for those lacking sufficient online skills when resolving difficulties engaging with services, particularly those with complex needs.

A specific commitment was set to minimise the impact of Brexit, particularly in terms of ensuring the maintenance of various reciprocal North-South entitlements. As the negative consequences of Brexit are becoming increasingly felt this is identified as an area requiring increased focus over the remaining term of the Roadmap. While the issue is more acutely felt among Border communities it is not unique to this region.

Particular concern is given to the proposed introduction by the UK government of an Electronic Travel Authorisation regime which is due to be implemented before the end of the period covered by the Roadmap. This is identified as an action that could be particularly disruptive across the island as a whole.

More generally, one of the lessons from the pandemic is felt to be the demonstration of the importance of the Community and Voluntary sector in responding to crises and supporting communities during difficult times. There is felt to be greater opportunity for co-funded initiatives between state services, the Community and Voluntary and local development sectors to build stronger and more resilient communities and delivering "flexible and timely engagement on the ground". Continued expansion and increasing support for SICAP and the Pilot Community Development Programme are seen as particularly important in this respect.

Goal Seven: Core Essentials

Current Relevance of this Goal

Feedback in relation to this goal focussed on three key areas: housing, the delivery of commitments within Sláintecare and issues relating to climate change and energy efficiency.

Issues relating to housing were central to many submissions received. Almost every submission received through the public consultation referenced issues relating to housing provision or related issues such as high rent payments or unstable tenure situations. Solving these issues is seen as fundamental to reducing poverty levels in Ireland and improving social inclusion.

The situation in terms of housing provision is viewed to be deteriorating considerably with time with the current position much worse than that presented in the Roadmap. This clearly heightens the sense of urgency by which a solution is desired. There is particular concern about the societal cost of the current housing situation with increasing numbers of children being born into homelessness or insecure living situations.

Overall, adequate provision of essential services is considered to be central to the elimination of poverty with unsatisfactory service provision accentuating the problems that exist with income inadequacy.

“A lack of access to affordable services works alongside income inadequacy to increase financial burden, particularly for individuals and households at the poverty threshold”

Progress Made Since the Roadmap was Launched

With considerable focus on a worsening housing situation there was limited progress noted across the various commitments within this goal.

Progress is noted in terms of food poverty, and specifically in terms of the introduction of a hot school meals pilot which has been welcomed and positive feedback from within the school community in particular is noted in one submission. The opportunity for further expansion of this programme is noted in an earlier section of this report.

Progress is also noted in rollout of climate action measures, particularly in terms of improving home energy efficiency. Again, there is eagerness to build on momentum in this area, particularly in terms of reducing the cost burden on low income and private rental households. Recent energy price increases have increased focus on this area and the urgency by which further progress is needed. This will be informed by the ongoing review of the Strategy to Combat Energy Poverty which is already delivering changes in eligibility criteria for 100% funding for those in energy poverty, as well as the new Action Plan to Combat Energy Poverty which is being brought to Government shortly.

A Renewed Focus towards 2025

A strong focus on housing over the coming years is vital in achieving the stated goals of the Roadmap. The challenges that currently exist in terms of housing represent an existential challenge to the objective of reducing poverty rates in Ireland, particularly as the current situation is leading to households having to spend an increasing proportion of their income in making rent and mortgage payments.

This is acknowledged within the Roadmap which states that “access to affordable housing and security of tenure are key factors impacting a person’s sense of wellbeing”. However, concerns exist that the situation has worsened considerably since the launch of the Roadmap and that it may not fully represent the current scale of the problem to suggest that Ireland has “a stock of good quality housing” and that the shortage of housing is “concentrated in particular urban locations”.

Delivery on the objectives of Rebuilding Ireland is of central importance to achieving social inclusion, and significant concern exists across numerous stakeholders that progress in this respect is not at the level that is required.

A number of submissions noted that the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) and other supports are not keeping pace with current rate of housing inflation and that top-ups are becoming increasingly common and representing a growing share of individuals’ incomes. This is notable in the context of the expansion of the HAP scheme, in particular replacing Rent Supplement for those with a long-term housing need who qualify for social housing support.

Overall, it is felt that significant increases to the supply of social housing is the only meaningful solution to make the strides necessary to solve the housing situation, however other initiatives such as a “repair and lease” scheme would be helpful.

On the theme of housing and climate change there was consistent feedback on the need to improve the way in which certain households – particularly in the prioritisation of households most at risk of energy poverty and those living in private rental accommodation. It is felt that lower income households need greater supports (ideally 100% grant) to improve the energy efficiency of their household, and also there is the need for a “one stop shop” to help key audiences navigate the various options available to them in terms of retrofitting and energy efficiency.

The implementation of Sláintecare is a stated commitment of the Roadmap, and delays in this respect are a considerable frustration. Commitment to the delivery of this health reform is seen as key to enhancing social inclusion.

While progress has been made in food poverty through the hot school meals pilot, it is noted that there are difficulties making meaningful progress due to an absence of data and indicators in relation to food poverty. Further progress in this respect is sought.

Implementation and Governance

The Roadmap outlines seven commitments in respect of the implementation and governance of the delivery of the objectives. These commitments are broadly welcomed by stakeholders suggesting a commitment and determination that the Roadmap delivers on its intended targets.

Many stakeholders are particularly encouraged by the interest and commitment shown by the current Minister of State in the Roadmap and his willingness to engage with various groups to listen to their concerns. Furthermore, having dedicated senior staff within the Department of Social Protection is viewed as necessary in order to ensure delivery on objectives.

Further improvements could be made in ensuring more senior Government focus on the delivery of the Roadmap. Some suggestions in this respect included co-ordinating some of the activities within the Department of the Taoiseach and ideally ensuring cabinet level focus on the delivery of this key initiative for Irish society.

It is noted that the recent commitment by the Taoiseach to establish a child poverty office has been publicly welcomed by a number of stakeholders. This provides key evidence of the commitment of the Government to addressing poverty issues in a meaningful way and with the level of urgency expected.

While the Steering Group is viewed as a necessary and appropriate way to monitor activities of different Departments in respect of the Roadmap there is general consensus across external stakeholders and Departmental representatives that the time invested into this process could be used more effectively.

It was noted that some individuals in attendance are either not in a position to answer questions in relation to commitments while others who are in attendance do not have commitments assigned to them. As such a review of who is invited to attend these meetings may be desirable to enhance their productivity, as is a review of the frequency of meetings and agendas used.

Additionally it was viewed that the number of participants in the meeting meant that there was only sufficient time available for straightforward updates and that time could be better used to discuss issues in depth and to agree and co-ordinate activities. This would be particularly beneficial in overcoming the challenges presented by the siloed nature of work that can exist when multiple stakeholders are trying to work together to deliver on a specific goal.

In general, an enhancement of the engagement between participants in the Steering Group is viewed as desirable to improve the cross-Departmental activities that are necessary in order to deliver on the actions needed to achieve the core objective of the Roadmap. Consideration may also be given to the establishment of sub-groups consisting of senior individuals within specific Departments and external stakeholders in order to work on the delivery of particular objectives or emerging challenges.

Discussion of progress on specific goals throughout this report notes that sub-group targets are necessary to ensure that all targeted groups are benefiting from progress made in delivery of objectives. In this respect it is felt that a co-ordinated and systematic approach to data collection is lacking in many respects. Of particular concern in this regard is the absence of meaningful data for groups such as Travellers and those living in specific situations (e.g. emergency accommodation, direct provision etc.).

As a result, it is often impossible to identify the extent of poverty among particular groups, and to identify and monitor progress that is being made towards reducing poverty levels for these groups.

It is understood that the delivery of firm quantitative measurements for these groups may be challenging, and instead it is suggested that qualitative measurements could instead be used to identify the lived experience of those within these groups (as well as others for whom quantitative measurements are already available) and that this would serve as a suitable replacement both in terms of identifying needs and monitoring the impact of steps taken to improve their situations.

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