



European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) Ireland

Submission to “Reinforcing Social Europe”

EAPN Ireland input for an Action Plan to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights

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On November 17th 2020 the European Pillar of Social Rights will be 3 years old. The Pillar of Social Rights, composed of 20 Principles structured around 3 categories; represents the fundamental and basic rights of people living in Europe across a range of areas including equal opportunities and access to the Labour Market, fair working conditions, social protection and inclusion. The pillar further develops the foundation of the European Union that recognises and promotes the ideals, that economic and social progress are not and should not be considered as mutually exclusive. The implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights is more important than ever, as countries across Europe are seeking to minimise the devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has highlighted to people globally the vital importance of essential services during a crisis period, the necessity of valuing and protecting our workers, and the importance of social inclusion and an adequate income for households, in order for society and our economy to remain afloat and in operation for the benefit of all.

In Ireland according to the [Survey of Income and Living Conditions 2018](#) particular groups in society are more likely to experience consistent poverty; this includes single adult households under 65, with a consistent poverty rate of 13.6%, single parent households at 19.2%, those who are unemployed 27.6% and people not at work due to illness or disability at 21.3%. These figures lie well above average consistent poverty rate of 5.6% in Ireland, which amounts to almost 280,000 people. Poverty levels are also disproportionately high for members of the Travelling community, migrant communities, asylum seekers and people who are homeless, groups that are not officially included or sufficiently represented by official poverty statistics in Ireland. The European Pillar of Social Rights contains commitments, which the Irish Government has signed up to, alongside other EU member states, that offer assurances to the most marginalised and vulnerable households in society. In context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the crisis of poverty in Ireland, a crisis that has not yet seen poverty levels in Ireland return to 2008 pre-economic crash levels, the need to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights is more urgent than

ever, however it will take significant and dedicated action by the Irish Government to ensure meaningful progress and reform. Eliminating poverty and strengthening social and economic rights in Ireland, as per the European Pillar of Social Rights, must involve an integrated, interdepartmental anti-poverty strategy, that aims to address inequality, by recognising the vital importance of social policy and legislation around income adequacy and public service provision, as fundamentals to a sustainable response in order to eliminate social exclusion.

Please note: EAPN Ireland supports and has inputted into the consultation response from EAPN Europe. The EAPN Europe response can be found [here](#).

In this submission EAPN Ireland will focus on the national context in relation to the EPSR principles and what we are calling for the principles to achieve within Irish society.

1: Access to Essential Services (Connected to Principle 20 in addition to 19,16,18,11)

Accessing essential services that are affordable and adequate is essential to the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights in Ireland. In Ireland low income households are more likely to rely on public services almost exclusively and lack the economic means to engage with private sector service provision, for example, in the areas of health, housing, education, childcare, social and residential care.¹ The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the vital role that public services play as the structural backbone to a civilised society, which has the capacity to meet the needs of all those who require services and support. The Irish Government must recognise that in order to rebuild our economy and facilitate a return to full employment, education, social, economic, and community participation, there must be sustained and direct investment across a range of public services. In the long term, this will involve an examination of Ireland's taxation system including the introduction of measures to broaden the tax base. Access to essential services is represented by principle 20, under the theme of Social Protection and Inclusion, within the European Pillar of Social Rights. Below we examine Health service provision and Housing in Ireland and what the Irish Government must do to honour EPSR commitments in these areas.

1.1 Access to universal Healthcare (Principle 16)

The right to access healthcare has been at the forefront of Irish society since the COVID-19 crisis hit Ireland in March 2020. The operation of a two-tiered health service in Ireland is an anomaly in Western

¹ <https://www.esri.ie/system/files?file=media/file-uploads/2018-10/CB201718.pdf> p85

Europe and has been found to exacerbate health inequalities, which sees people with health insurance receiving favorable treatment and access to health services and diagnostics.²The Coronavirus pandemic has further exposed these inadequacies and inability of the two tiered healthcare system in Ireland to respond to a national and global medical emergency in a manner that effectively manages and addresses a crisis, providing health care for all who require it and not just those who can afford it.

A part of a national response to the COVID-19 crisis the Irish Government chose to integrate the public and private health care system in order to ensure that people could access medical treatment based upon need rather than ability to pay. It is increasingly apparent that Ireland's two tiered health care system is not fit for purpose during a time of crisis. It is estimated that the cost of integrating the public and private health care system, to the Irish exchequer, has resulted in a spend of approximately €115 million per month.³ A more efficient and sustainable response to universal healthcare is required to ensure that health inequalities in Ireland are addressed and eliminated. [Sláintecare](#) represents a Government led ten-year programme in Ireland for reform of health and social care services. The implementation of the Sláintecare strategy must play an important part in addressing the disparities and inequalities of a two tiered health care system in Ireland.

The current pandemic and ongoing poverty crisis has impacted particular groups disproportionately; this includes older people and people with disabilities, groups who are more likely to reside in congregated setting. Nursing homes and other long-term residential facilities account for almost 59% of virus-related deaths, according to the figures released by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE).⁴ Members of the Travelling community and people residing in direct provision are living in overcrowded and inappropriate accommodation, where the lack sufficient personal space and sanitary facilities, leaves these particular groups vulnerable and exposed to ongoing health issues and less likely to have access to dedicated health care provision around their needs. This further highlights the importance of a health system in Ireland that responds to the diverse needs of marginalised and disadvantage communities throughout Ireland. The right to health care in Ireland must encompass the health care needs of marginalised groups and a universal one tiered healthcare system.

In honour of principle 16 within the European Pillar of Social Rights, we are calling on the Irish Government to:

²<https://www.feps-europe.eu/attachments/publications/1845-6%20health%20inequalities%20inner-hr.pdf> P46

³ <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/2020-04-16/3/>

⁴ https://merriestreet.ie/en/NewsRoom/News/Statement_from_the_National_Public_Health_Emergency_Team_22nd_April.html

- Provide Adequate resources on a Government level to ensure the implementation of Sláintecare as part of the introduction of a single tiered universal health care system that aims to facilitate affordable, quality, and efficient access to health services, with a focus on reducing health inequalities for those on low incomes and within marginalised communities.

1.2 Access to Social and Affordable Housing (Principle 19)

Ireland is in the midst of an ongoing housing and homelessness crisis, which originated from the economic crash of 2008. As of May 2020, there are 1217 homeless families in Ireland, including 2787 children⁵. The current over reliance on the private sector market for low income housing has perpetrated a housing crisis throughout Ireland. The lack of long-term housing accommodation as resulted in a disproportionate use of private sector short term accommodation as a means of housing homeless families. Research indicates that use of hotels as emergency accommodation is having a detrimental impact on the ability of infants and young children to meet developmental milestones, with children not having enough space to learn to crawl or walk; not being able to properly chew due to lack of cooking facilities; as well as mental health difficulties in children and adult.⁶ These findings will be exacerbated by recent COVID-19 lockdown measures that have further restricted families already living in overcrowded and inappropriate accommodation. Emergency measures which have been brought in by the Irish Government in response to the COVID-19 crisis regarding a moratorium on evictions and rent increases have recently been extended to protect households renting within the private rented sector, however homeless charities across Ireland have expressed concern that once the moratorium is fully lifted this will lead to an avalanche of homeless households and families seeking accommodation in an already overstretched and expensive housing market. (Research indicates that Dublin is the 5th most expensive city in Europe in which to rent.⁷)

The new Programme for Government in Ireland, published in June 2020, recognises the need to move away from an over dependency on the private sector for housing supply. This is a welcome acknowledgment on a government level however the manner in which the newly established government plans to execute this commitment is less clear. The dominance the private sector now has in providing accommodation for low income households is at odds with the culture of housing provision in Ireland. The role of the state in directly providing housing as a means to address poverty and for the

⁵ https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/homelessness_report_-_may_2020.pdf

⁶ <https://www.rcpi.ie/news/publication/the-impact-of-homelessness-and-inadequate-housing-on-childrens-health/>

⁷ <https://www.eca-international.com/news/april-2020/dublin-remains-the-fifth-most-expensive-for-rental>

benefit of social inclusion has long been established across Ireland. This is reflected in housing legislation in Ireland including the Housing Act 1966 and Housing Act 1998, which recognises the important role Local Authorities and Approved Housing Bodies have in the provision of low income housing. The European Commission has recommended, in the aftermath of the current COVID-19 emergency, that the Irish Government must aim to increase the provision of social and affordable housing as a matter of primary concern for the period 2020-2021.⁸

The new government must place the state's role in housing provision for those with a social need at the forefront of housing policy as we move forward. Addressing the housing and homelessness crisis in Ireland must involve facilitating and investing in a social and affordable housing programme via local Authorities and Approved Housing Bodies, as well as utilising public lands for the purposes of non-profit low income housing. This is in line with the commitments the Government has signed up to within the European pillar of Social Rights, principles that recognize the right to housing and assistance for the homeless. The role the private market plays in the provision of low income housing in Ireland should only be viewed as an accompaniment and an addition to a non-profit public housing programme, which should be placed at the core of housing policy for households with a social need. In line with the right to housing support as per the EPSJ, we are asking the Irish Government for the following.

- Enshrine the right to housing in the constitution (as per Portugal, Spain and the Netherlands).
- To place a statutory responsibility upon the state Land Developments Agency to facilitate the construction of Social and Affordable Housing, with priority given to the provision of social housing units via Local Authorities and Approved Housing Bodies.
- Ensure that Housing support payments such as HAP (Housing Assistance Payment) are aligned with any increases to market rents on a national basis.
- Facilitate Approved Housing Bodies and Local Authorities to capitalize on any increase in the availability of accommodation units, due to the collapse of short-term rental model therefore moving short term units with license agreements into long term leasing agreements with tenancy agreements for the purposes of social housing.

⁸https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/2020-european-semester-csr-comm-recommendation-ireland_en.pdf

2.0 Access to Adequate Social Protection (EPSR Principle 12,13)

Regardless of the type and duration of their employment relationship, workers, and the self-employed, have the right to adequate social protection. In Ireland the term social protection generally refers to social welfare payments as well as supports and services, on offer from the Department of Social Protection, for those who are unemployed, in low paid employment, unable to work due to sickness or disability, or in receipt of supports due to specific personal circumstances i.e. people who are carers.

EAPN Ireland has consistently called for the introduction of benchmarking social welfare rates to adequacy in order to provide people with a life of dignity. The right to an income that enables people to participate fully in society is enshrined in international human rights and within the Global Goals for Sustainable Development. This right does not differentiate regarding the sources of income, whether through employment or social welfare. The European Pillar for Social Rights states that *'everyone lacking sufficient resources has the right to adequate minimum income benefits ensuring a life in dignity at all stages of life'*

EAPN Ireland believes that social welfare rates should provide the following:

- Achieve the [Minimum Essential Standard of Living](#)
- Lift people above the poverty line. (In Ireland research indicates that this is represented as an income of €263 per week in 2018)

The Minimum Essential Standard of Living in Ireland represents the standard below which nobody should have to live. It represents the amount required to meet basic physical, social, and psychological needs of a household. It is based upon rigorous research conducted by the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice. VPSJ are members of the European Reference Budgets Network. The Minimum Essential Standard of Living Research disputes the narrative that social welfare rates in Ireland are high, this is not the case when the cost-of-living in Ireland is taken into account and the expected reach of payments is calculated in response to the basic goods and services required by households. Below we see provisional results from MESL research 2020 for urban households. The full research will be available in due course.

Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2020 for selected social welfare dependent households (Urban)

Urban			
EUR			
Household Type	Needed	Actual	Gap
2 parents 2 children 1 pre- school, 1 primary	484.01	477.20	-6.81
2 parents 2 children one primary one secondary	570.44	486.49	-83.95
1 parent 1 child primary	315.35	287.38	-27.97
1 parent 2 children 1 primary 1 secondary	452.67	364.98	-87.69
Single adult working age living alone	249.90	203.00	-46.90
Single Pensioner Living Alone (non-contributory)	257.75	266.69	8.95
Pensioner Couple (non-contributory)	326.74	487.19	160.45

The results for MESL 2020 indicate once again that households in Ireland in receipt of social welfare with children are amongst those who are furthest away from achieving income adequacy. Households on social welfare with children and single adult households are more likely to living in “*deep inadequacy*”, meaning, “*consistently inadequate income doing without what is required to meet basic needs, to take part in normal activities, and to participate in society.*”⁹ The MESL research revealed that deep inadequacy is exclusively found in households headed by one adult (such as single working-age adults and lone parent households, the vast majority of which are led by women) and households with older children.¹⁰

The MESL Research consistently shows that many household types on social welfare are not in receipt of an income that allows them to meet basic household needs. This is in contrast to the announcement from the Irish Government in March 2020 of a non-means tested Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) in response to the economic fall-out of COVID 19. The initial COVID-19 Pandemic Payment, set at flat rate of €203 per week was revised upwards to €350 per week in light of extensive criticism received due to the inadequacy of the original amount versus the cost of living. Whilst the u-turn was a welcome response, it serves to highlight awareness on a Government level in Ireland of the need for social welfare payments to reflect a realistic amount in line with living costs. The decision to raise the PUP payment to €350 per week introduced the operation of a two-tiered welfare system in Ireland, with a higher rate of payment available to those made unemployed during the pandemic, but not for those accessing social welfare prior to the pandemic. Many people, such as people who experience higher living costs as a result of having a disability, are expected to survive on inadequate social welfare payments for the rest of their lives, and struggle with poverty and social exclusion as a result. The experience of COVID-19 has highlighted this inequality.

In order for Ireland address poverty and honor our Anti-Poverty commitments such as the European Pillar of Social Rights, and to mitigate the negative impacts of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, income adequacy must be considered as a priority ambition across Government departments in Ireland.

We are calling on the Irish Government to honour the commitment to Principles 12 and 13 within the European Pillar of Social Rights through the following:

⁹https://www.budgeting.ie/download/pdf/mesl_2019_update_report.pdf p16.

¹⁰https://www.budgeting.ie/download/pdf/mesl_2019_update_report.pdf p15

- The progressive realisation of benchmarking social welfare rates to adequacy, represented by Minimum Essential Standard of living.

3.0 Access to Decent work and Fair Wages (EPSR Principle 5 and 6, connected to Principles 2,3,4,8)

Jobs traditionally with low pay have played a prominent role in ensuring the social and economic structures in Ireland have remained intact during the recent times of crisis, as the term “essential worker” has become part of the national vernacular throughout 2020. The term essential worker includes frontline health care workers, social care workers, childcare workers, retail staff, transport workers, factory workers, to name but a few. The need for fair wages has become increasingly evident in recognition of the essential role played by employees in low paid jobs during the COVID-19 crisis.

In honour of the commitments within the European Pillar for Social Rights around secure employment and fair wages the Irish Government must move towards placing the living wage on a statutory basis. ensuring that those who are currently earning minimum wage will go on to receive an income that meets the minimum Essential Standard of Living, that is, earnings that will provide for the basic physical, psychological and emotional needs of a household. The minimum wage for Ireland is €10.10 per hour, in contrast [The Living Wage](#) in Ireland is currently set at €12.30 per hour.¹¹ The Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) research findings for 2019 revealed that the ability of a households to meet a Minimum Essential Standard of Living on minimum wage earnings is extremely limited and relies upon the availability of numerous in-work supports and services, this includes welfare supports, access to a secure tenancy with a differential rent, as well as access to the Community Childcare Subvention Scheme.¹² These findings for minimum wage households represent a “best case scenario” outcome, which is dependent upon full-time steady employment and the availability of a range public services, such as social housing unachievable across the board for minimum wage households within the current climate in Ireland.

The Irish government must also implement an employment Strategy that assists Ireland to respond in a progressive manner to employment activation, which facilitates meeting Ireland’s antipoverty commitments. Pathways to Work is the Government's overarching policy framework for Activation and Employment and its revision is due to cover the period 2020-2024. It must be formed in recognition of the many households impacted by the corona virus pandemic but also those who were

¹¹https://www.livingwage.ie/download/pdf/living_wage_2019_-_4_page_document.pdf

¹²https://www.budgeting.ie/download/pdf/mesl_2019_update_report.pdf p29

living in poverty prior to the pandemic. It is essential that a new Pathways to Work strategy maintains its original aim to address and respond to the needs of households who have been long term unemployed and those distant from the labour market. This is particularly important for groups such as women, people with disabilities, older people, people from migrant backgrounds, Roma and Traveller communities. The new Pathways strategy provides an opportunity for the Irish Government to instigate employment activation measures that adopt an holistic approach, which promotes values that lead people to decent secure work with adequate earnings as a means of lifting people above the poverty line and promoting social inclusion, therefore honouring the Government of Ireland commitment to the implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights. We believe the Irish Government should implement the following:

- An holistic person-centred approach to the provision of employment services and supports via a revised Pathways to Work strategy, which leads people to access decent work, recognising the implications of the COVID_19 emergency, while maintaining focus on those who were distant from the labour market prior to the pandemic.
- A move towards placing the Living Wage on a statutory basis.

4.0 Education and Lifelong Learning (EPSR Principle 1)

Ireland is currently facing a crisis in educational inequality, accentuated by the ongoing pandemic and a move to homeschooling for a significant portion of 2020. As a result learning has become increasingly dependent upon access to technology and efficient broadband. Though schools have begun to re-open in Ireland, we cannot ignore the digital divide that has been highlighted by the introduction of homeschooling in response to the threat posed by COVID-19.

It will require significant investment on a Government level to address educational disadvantage across Ireland. The education sector has seen in recent years schools increasingly relying upon voluntary financial contributions from parents in order to raise finance, and also sees Ireland with some of the largest classroom sizes in Europe and amongst the lowest capital investment in education, as revealed in a 2019 study spanning across 35 countries.¹³

¹³ https://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance/EAG2019_CN_IRL.pdf

The educational divide in Ireland, which existed prior to COVID-19 as part of the ongoing poverty crisis in Ireland, has the potential to leave many groups and communities with lower education outcomes and related opportunities in life. Education costs as a whole place a significant burden on low income households on an annual basis, it is important to note that educational costs are one of the main reasons people seek out support from Community and Voluntary sector organizations in Ireland such as St Vincent De Paul.¹⁴

Alongside increased investment in order to address educational disadvantage, the Government must also recognise those with literacy and digital needs, as part of honouring principle 1 of the EPSR. The newly established Government in Ireland has, as part of the Programme for Government, committed to a 10-year strategy for adult literacy, numeracy, and digital skills, committing to develop and implement a strategy within the first year of Government. It is vital that this strategy adopts a whole of Government approach to literacy, digital, and numeracy skills over the next 10 years and is informed by ongoing consultation with relevant education and literacy bodies, those in need of literacy supports, and service users. This is in line with recommendations from The European Council for Ireland 2020-2021 which has called on Ireland to address digital inequality including within the education sector.¹⁵

In line with the principle 1 of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the right to Education Training and Life-long learning we are calling on the Irish Government to implement the following:

- Short term: Establish a properly resourced taskforce to identify measures to support children and young people in disadvantaged schools negatively impacted by Covid-19 with the aim of introducing measures to prevent educational disadvantage, including a focus on digital literacy across the life cycle and ensuring all learners in direct provision and emergency homeless accommodation are equipped with the necessary IT tools to continue learning.
- Expand on existing government measures to address the digital divide, on a longer term basis, providing all low-income households with access to online teaching and pre-printed resources.
- Develop a Whole-of-Government Strategy for literacy, numeracy and digital skills over the next 10 years with a National Literacy and Numeracy implementation group and budget.

¹⁴<https://svp.ie/news-media/news/calls-for-help-with-education-costs-to-svp-increas.aspx>

¹⁵https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/2020-european-semester-csr-comm-recommendation-ireland_en.pdf p9

- Longer term: An annual increased investment of €200 million to provide all children with free primary and secondary education.

5.0 The Inclusion of People with Disabilities (Principle 17 and 18 also linked to principles 3,4,5,12)

Social protection and inclusion represents the third area of the Pillar of Social Rights and is particularly relevant to groups that have been marginalised within society. The inclusion of people with disabilities is a designated right under area 3 of the Pillar. For the Irish Government there are a number of areas that need to be addressed in order for the inclusion of people with disabilities in Ireland to be fully and meaningfully realised. Ireland has one of the lowest rates of rates of employment for people with disabilities in Europe. (32.2%, well below the EU average of 50.6%).¹⁶ In order to address the low rates of employment for people with disabilities across Ireland, the Government must ensure the full implementation of *The Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities* alongside effective measures for making work pay for people with disabilities. The extra living costs People with disabilities incur result of living with a disability, must be recognized by the Irish Government and adequately reflected in the rates of social welfare available. It is important that the Irish Government publishes, as soon as possible, research from the Department of Social Protection around the cost of living with a disability and that this research informs relevant policy development pertaining to the full integration of people with disabilities into Irish society.

Alongside income adequacy, the Government must facilitate access to services that enable Independent Living for people with disabilities. This enables people the freedom to make their own choices in life, many disabled people in Ireland achieve this through a Personal Assistance Service (PAS). Currently there is no legal right to a PAS in Ireland. This limits the choices available to disabled people, including access to employment and other public services, which leads to the high levels of poverty experienced in Ireland for people with disabilities. In order to remove the many obstacles faced by people with disabilities, it is clear that the Personal Assistance Service must be placed on a statutory basis, including a clear ring-fenced annual budget solely for the PAS, separate from home care and home help supports. This would ensure that Independent Living can become a viable option and lived reality for people with disabilities, allowing for full engagement with all aspects of society.

¹⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/2020-european_semester_country-report-ireland_en.pdf38

In honour of Principle 17, the inclusion of people with disabilities, we are calling on the Irish Government to:

- Ensure the full implementation of recommendations within *The Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities*.
- An increase of €20 a week to Disability Allowance and other disability payments as a temporary measure, until the Cost of Disability study is completed and can be used as the basis for a proper cost of disability provision.
- Place the Personal Assistance Service on a statutory basis, alongside ring-fenced funding, separate of home care and home help supports.