



European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) Ireland

Submission to the National Economic Plan

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“Resilience is the ability not only to withstand and cope with challenges but also to undergo transitions in a sustainable, fair, and democratic manner”.

-Commission Communication to the European Parliament and the Council - 2020 Strategic foresight Report, Charting the course towards a more resilient Europe

EAPN Ireland welcomes the opportunity to submit to the National Economic Plan. We believe the National Economic plan represents an opportunity for the Irish Government to introduce social and economic reform that will enable Ireland to move towards a progressive and socially inclusive society, ensuring that those who are furthest behind are not left behind. In order for Ireland to thrive in a post pandemic world, the National Economic Plan must in reality actively represent a National Economic and *Social Plan*. It is regressive to believe that economic growth alone can provide the resolution to the ongoing difficulties Ireland will continue to face as the fall-out from the social and economic lockdown of 2020 become more apparent. It is important that the National Economic Plan recognises how important social cohesion and social inclusion will be to ensure that our recovery addresses the inequality and poverty that serve only to hinder growth, both societal and economic, if left unaddressed.

The European Commission Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy for 2021 indicates that the European Semester and the new Recovery and Resilience Facility are intrinsically linked. The assessment of the recovery and resilience plans will be checked against Country Specific Recommendations for 2019 and 2020. (For Ireland this includes Recommendations on secure employment opportunities for marginalised groups, the construction of social and affordable housing, universal primary care and the need to address digital inequality)The strategy also emphasises that national ownership will be a key prerequisite for the successful implementation of the National Economic Plan and “to ensure lasting success at national level and credibility at European level.”¹

In order to ensure national ownership of Ireland’s recovery, the National Economic Plan must recognise the anti-poverty commitments that Ireland has signed up to, including the European Pillar of Social Rights, the Global Sustainable Development Goals and specifically to reduce consistent poverty to 2% or less by 2025 as part of the Government strategy, the Roadmap for Social Inclusion. In particular, the European Pillar of Social rights provides a framework for policy development under the National Economic Plan, one which recognises the founding ideals of the European Union, that economic and social progress are intrinsically linked. National ownership also means that those who were behind prior to the pandemic must not be left further behind as collateral in the recovery process. The need for equity as part of this process ensures that it is not just the recovery of an economy but also the recovery of a society. It is imperative that we do not return to the way things were before. It is imperative that moving forward Ireland recognises the importance of addressing poverty and inequality which consistently serve as barriers to economic and societal growth.

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<file:///C:/Users/Irene%20Temp/AppData/Local/Microsoft/Windows/INetCache/Content.Outlook/AYQ3VB5U/Annual%20Sustainable%20Growth%20Strategy%202021.pdf> p13

1: Economic Social and Environmental Sustainability

1.1 Investment in Essential Public Services

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.² 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 employment, education and wider 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 Irelands taxation system including the introduction of measures to broaden the tax base. Achieving economic, social and environmental growth can only be achieved on a sustainable level through ensuring access to essential public services and income adequacy. The National Economic Plan must harness opportunities for reform and renewal by committing to progressive social policies. Ireland was in the midst of a crisis of poverty prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. It is clear that we cannot go back to the way things were before. The SILC survey for 2019, revealed once again, that year on year the same groups in society are living in consistent poverty. While consistent poverty in 2019 was 5.5% for the overall population, consistent poverty for Children was 8.1%; for unemployed people 20.2%%; for those not at work due to illness or disability 18.1%; and households with one adult and children under 18 years old had a consistent poverty level of 17.1%.³

Economic growth should not preclude social progress. Access to affordable and adequate public services, as well as income adequacy, ensures that households can participate fully in society therefore ensuring a sustainable economy, including in communities that need it most. The existence of poverty in Ireland must be recognised within the National Economic Plan, as poverty serves as a barrier to social and economic progress.

1.2 Poverty Proofing the National Economic Plan

The response to poverty and social exclusion represents the values of a compassionate and civilised society. The National Economic Plan should be poverty proofed in order to assess its impact on households and groups in society most at risk of poverty and ensure that it does not result in an increase in poverty but instead supports the delivery of the poverty reduction target in the Cross-Government Roadmap for Social Inclusion. Poverty proofing the National Economic Plan Poverty will ensure that its implementation does not have any unintended negative consequences for those in society who are most marginalised, therefore further perpetrating inequality. The failure to address poverty, is an offense to the human rights and dignity, and at odds with the anti-poverty commitments that Ireland has already signed up to, including the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Global Sustainable Development Goals. Research shows that the failure to lift households above the poverty line costs the exchequer over €1.2 billion in poor health outcomes associated with poverty. A significant proportion of state spending is allocated to support people in poverty unable to afford basics through social assistance (€592.7 million) and housing supports (€912.5 million). In education, €549.7 million euro is spent every year dealing with the legacy effects of early

² <https://www.esri.ie/system/files?file=media/file-uploads/2018-10/CB201718.pdf> p85

³ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2019/povertyanddeprivation>

experiences of child poverty and on measures to prevent children now experiencing the longer-term impacts of educational disadvantage.⁴

Below are recommendations from EAPN Ireland that will ensure a just and sustainable recovery for everyone in Ireland post COVID-19.

1.3 The Right to Healthcare for All

The Coronavirus pandemic has exposed the inadequacies and inability of a two-tiered healthcare system 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. The operation of a two-tiered health service in Ireland is an anomaly in Western Europe and has been found to exacerbate health inequalities, which sees people with health insurance receiving favourable treatment and access to health services and diagnostics.⁵

In contrast, those who cannot afford to obtain private insurance, find that limited and ineffective access to health services proves detrimental to health outcomes. We see that life expectancy at birth of males living in the most deprived areas in Ireland was 79.4 years in 2016/2017 compared with 84.4 years for those living in the most affluent areas. The corresponding figures for females were 83.2 and 87.7 years.⁶ This links in with a wider context provided by [the Social determinants of health](#), which encompass a range of experiences intrinsic to the human lifecycle, and includes the environments in which people are born into, grow up within, live in, work and age in. These determinants are a reference point for many of the health inequalities between communities, regions, and different countries.

EAPN Ireland believes that the implementation of Sláintecare is an important part of addressing the inequalities perpetrated by public/private health care provision. There also needs to be recognition and action on a Government level, to address the specific and diverse needs of communities who are most vulnerable to health inequalities and groups who are most affected by deficiencies within health care provision in Ireland. In 2020 EAPN Ireland published the findings from its health research project entitled ***Giving Health Inequality a Voice***. The project, funded by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, explores how the social determinants of health, poverty, and ill-health, intersect to create health inequalities. The report proposes recommendations that will help to improve the health outcomes of people and communities that are marginalised, by strengthening how our national health strategies address health inequality and how they are delivered locally.

The emergence of a COVID-19 crisis within our care and nursing homes served to remind us that health care is only as effective as its response to those who are most at risk in an emergency situation, including older people and people with disabilities, who often live within congregated settings. At one point during the COVID-19 crisis, 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).⁷ Across Europe, members of the Travelling and Roma communities have also been greatly impacted by COVID-19. The Council of Europe issued a press statement calling on Governments to ensure equal protection and care for Roma and

⁴ <file:///C:/Users/Irene%20Temp/Downloads/The%20Hidden%20Cost%20of%20Poverty%20Full%20Report.pdf> p8

⁵ <https://www.feps-europe.eu/attachments/publications/1845-6%20health%20inequalities%20inner-hr.pdf> P46

⁶ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/in/mdi/mortalitydifferentialsinireland2016-2017/>

⁷ https://merrionstreet.ie/en/NewsRoom/News/Statement_from_the_National_Public_Health_Emergency_Team_22nd_April.html

Travellers during the pandemic.⁸ The dysfunction and inherent racism of the Direct Provision system in Ireland has been laid bare in recent times, with the most basic aspects of social distancing unable to be sufficiently implemented due to unsuitable and cramped living conditions. The health risks to these groups are compounded by the ongoing social and economic deprivation and discrimination they experience on an ongoing basis. The coronavirus has brought to light the depths of the structural inequality that exists in Ireland. The impacts of COVID-19 will be felt within our health system for some time yet and the Government must provide a health service that responds to and accommodates the needs of all, especially those who are experiencing ongoing marginalisation and social exclusion.

EAPN Ireland recommendations

- The implementation of Sláintecare as part of ensuring 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.

1.4 The Right to Housing for All

The lack of Government investment in the construction of dedicated public housing to meet the demands of the social housing list and the pivotal role the private sector now plays in response to the housing needs of low-income households, has perpetrated a housing and homelessness crisis in Ireland. A recent report indicates that between June 2014 and December 2019 there was an increase of 349% in the number of families in emergency accommodation in Ireland, from just over 300 families to a total of 1,548 families. There has been progress made in reducing family homeless figures during the COVID-19 crisis, in May 2020 the number of families in emergency accommodation had been reduced to 1217.⁹ In August of 2020 the figure was 1120 families.¹⁰ The Government must utilise the National Economic Plan to adopt measures that will focus on continuing a downward trend only in homelessness figures.

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.¹¹ These findings will be exacerbated by recent lockdown measures that have further restricted families already living in overcrowded and inappropriate accommodation.

The lack of certainty and security within the private rental market, especially for families with children, has been demonstrated by the Government response to the COVID-19 crisis through amendments introduced within the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020. These amendments placed a moratorium on rent increases and evictions for a three-month period. While these measures have been welcomed, it serves to expose the high risk posed for those who have formed their home, by choice or otherwise, within the private sector market. Concerns have also been raised around the build-up of rent arrears during the pandemic and an increase in evictions when the moratorium is lifted. It has become increasingly clear that the availability of affordable housing, for the benefit of social inclusion and as a response to poverty, can no longer remain at the behest of for-profit private sector provision.

⁸<https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/governments-must-ensure-equal-protection-and-care-for-roma-and-travellers-during-the-covid-19-crisis>

⁹ https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/homelessness_report_-_may_2020.pdf

¹⁰ [homeless report - august 2020.pdf \(housing.gov.ie\)](https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/homeless_report_-_august_2020.pdf)

¹¹<https://www.rcpi.ie/news/publication/the-impact-of-homelessness-and-inadequate-housing-on-childrens-health/>

Ireland has a history of state funded social and affordable housing programmes and public housing supply. This is clearly stated and reflected within Irish housing legislation (such as the Housing Act 1966, Housing Act 1988) which places Local Authorities and Approved Housing Bodies at the forefront of providing secure accommodation for those with a social housing need. The current over reliance on the private market is at odds with the long-established culture of housing provision in Ireland, one that has historically recognised the duty of the State to provide public housing as a means of preventing homelessness and as a response to poverty. The European Commission has recommended, in the aftermath of the current emergency, that the Irish Government must aim to increase the provision of social and affordable housing as a matter of primary concern. The current climate of uncertainty provides the government with an opportunity to urgently address the housing crisis by reclaiming the state's role in directly providing long term secure quality accommodation. This is congruent with commitments within the European Pillar of Social Rights, principles to which the Irish Government has signed up for, which recognise the right to adequate housing and shelter for all who need it.

EAPN Ireland Recommendations

- Enshrining the right to housing in the constitution (as per Portugal, Spain and the Netherlands)
- To place a statutory responsibility upon the 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 Assistance Payments 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.

2: Addressing the Digital Divide to Ensure a Just Digital Transition

2.1 The Right to Education for All

The restrictions introduced to curb the spread of COVID-19 have accentuated issues around pre-existing education and digital inequality in Ireland, which leaves some groups and communities with much lower educational outcomes, and related opportunities in life. This issue must be addressed as part of the National Economic Plan, in order to ensure the move to digitalisation leaves nobody behind. The move to online education and working from home and revealed a divide between those who can engage with work, online learning and supports, and those who cannot. Some of the obstacles contributing to the digital divide include access to regular and efficient internet access, a lack of economic means, and issues around digital literacy. The lockdown and the need for home schooling has increased pressure on households and individuals already living in challenging circumstances, such as children living in homeless accommodation, within the Travelling community, and in direct provision centres, who are often trying to learn and study without separate space and a lack of appropriate facilities. In a time where internet access is presumed to be readily available to all, for many low-income families, struggling with the high cost of utilities and rent, access to a laptop and broadband represent luxury items. It is important to note that educational costs are one

of the main reasons people seek out support from Community and Voluntary sector organisations such as [SVP](#).¹²

Families and communities have been bombarded with new information and messaging from many different sources to help stop the spread of COVID-19. For people with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs, this has been a particularly challenging time. This will continue as the move to digitalisation continues. People in need of literacy supports will experience difficulties in accessing services online, including the COVID -19 services and supports operated by the Department of Employment and Social Protection. The European Council Recommendations for Ireland 2020-2021 has called on Ireland to address digital inequality including within the education sector.¹³ It is clear that educational inequality is a part of the ongoing poverty crisis in Ireland and must be addressed as part of the National Economic Plan. The Government, via SOLAS is now in process of developing a new 10 year Adult Literacy Strategy. The National Economic Plan must work in tandem with the outcomes of the consultation process on the Literacy Strategy and the development of the strategy itself, to ensure both work together to address adult literacy and a just digital transition for those with literacy issues.

EAPN Ireland Recommendations

- Longer term: An annual increased investment of €200 million to provide all children with free primary and secondary education.
- 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.
- Ensure the Adult Literacy Strategy encompasses a whole-of-government approach to address literacy issues, numeracy and digital skills over the next 10 years with a National Literacy and Numeracy implementation group and budget

3: Opportunities for Reform and Renewal

3.1 The Right to Adequate and Accessible Social Welfare Supports

The social welfare system in Ireland plays a critical role in providing support to households with inadequate incomes. This has become even more apparent in the past few months with over 530,000 people accessing the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) in April 2020.¹⁴ In order to address and respond to the poverty crisis in Ireland, one that existed in advance of and will continue to exist post-Coronavirus, EAPN Ireland believes that access to adequate and accessible social welfare supports is an important aspect of societal equality. In order to ensure adequacy of social welfare, EAPN Ireland has consistently called for welfare payments to be benchmarked at a level that lifts people above the poverty line and provides them with a Minimum Essential Standard of Living. The [Minimum Essential Standard of Living](#) (MESL) is based upon annual research conducted by the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice and represents the income required to purchase the basic goods and services that meet a household's minimum physical, social, and psychological needs. The MESL research for 2019 revealed that despite social welfare payments gradually moving closer to adequacy in the past number of years, payments are still inadequate for many, with specific households experiencing long term "deep inadequacy", meaning, "*consistently inadequate income doing without what is required to meet basic needs, to take part in normal activities, and to*

¹²<https://svp.ie/news-media/news/calls-for-help-with-education-costs-to-svp-increas.aspx>

¹³https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/2020-european-semester-csr-comm-recommendation-ireland_en.pdf p9

¹⁴https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/parliamentaryBudgetOffice/2020/2020-04-26_the-covid-19-pandemic-employment-and-unemployment-supports_en.pdf

*participate in society.*¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

The findings of the 2019 MESL research are in contrast to the announcement 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, equivalent to a Jobseeker's main claimant, received extensive criticism due to the inadequacy of the payment versus the cost of living. In response, on March 26th, the Government announced that the PUP payment would increase to €350 per week. While we welcome this higher level of support, this u-turn by the Government essentially 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.

It is vital that the Government introduces benchmarking social welfare to adequacy as an aim and ambition for progressive realization. Benchmarking social welfare to adequacy ensures that households can afford to purchase the basic goods and services they require, it is a socially progressive measure and also an investment in Ireland's economy, particularly the economies within disadvantaged areas.

EAPN Ireland Recommendations

- Progressively realise the benchmarking of social welfare rates to adequacy, in order to lift people above the poverty line and provide them with a Minimum Essential Standard of Living.
- Ensure that social welfare payments are accessible to all who need them, without any unnecessary restrictions or conditions.

3.2 The Right to Access Adequate Wages

The coronavirus pandemic saw the term “essential worker” immediately entering into the national vernacular. It has become apparent that many of our essential workers are individuals working on or close to minimum wage, yet the services and supports they are providing represent the fundamentals of a functioning and civilized society. Despite the important work currently being done by low paid employees across Ireland, where they are operating on the front line of a pandemic, exposing themselves and their families to the risk of infection, many of them are doing so for approximately €10.10 per hour. This is the minimum wage as it has been set in Ireland for 2020, in contrast [The Living Wage](#) in Ireland is currently set at €12.30 per hour.¹⁷ The Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) research findings for 2019 revealed that the ability of a household 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.¹⁸ These findings for minimum wage households represent a “best case scenario” outcome, which is dependent upon full-time steady employment and the availability

¹⁵https://www.budgeting.ie/download/pdf/mesl_2019_update_report.pdf p16.

¹⁶https://www.budgeting.ie/download/pdf/mesl_2019_update_report.pdf p15

¹⁷https://www.livingwage.ie/download/pdf/living_wage_2020_4_page_annual_paper.pdf

¹⁸https://www.budgeting.ie/download/pdf/mesl_2019_update_report.pdf p29

of a range public supports, such as social housing. This is unachievable across the board for minimum wage households within the current climate.

The current emergency has served to highlight that inadequate wages do a grave disservice to the essential role low paid employees have in ensuring our social and economic structures, supports and services, remain intact and in operation for the benefit of us all. Income adequacy must play fundamental part in ensuring Ireland can move forward in a progressive manner post COVID-19 and must be deemed as a priority for Government, via the National Economic Plan, for 2020 and beyond.

EAPN Ireland Recommendation

- Progressive realisation of moving from statutory minimum wage to the statutory living wage at a minimum, as recommended by the Living Wage Technical Group.

3.3 The Right to Legislative Protection from Discrimination: Socio-economic Status

The coronavirus pandemic has been touted as the great equaliser, whereby race, culture, income, and social status, become irrelevant to the risks posed by and health implications of the virus. In reality this is not the case, the virus serves to augment existing inequality for many, including those experiencing unemployment or homelessness, those with under-lying physical and mental health conditions, people with disabilities, lone-parents, older people, women, people suffering from addiction, people experiencing domestic violence, people in need of literacy and learning supports, and members of marginalised and disadvantaged communities. The crisis reveals to us the disparities between households with the capacity, for example, to work and engage with education from home, to provide for a standard of living that continues to meet all basic household needs, and the households falling deeper into poverty, trying to mitigate what it means to experience a pandemic alongside stigma, disadvantage and discrimination. In a post-pandemic society, it is important to recognise and address the role that discriminatory attitudes and practices play in perpetrating the cycle of poverty and social exclusion.

Many groups in society have protection against discrimination under law, but those who experience discrimination due to their socio-economic status do not. EAPN Ireland is calling for socio-economic discrimination to be included as a ground for discrimination within Irish equality legislation. Individuals and communities experience socio-economic discrimination, on the basis of 'a socially identifiable status of social or economic disadvantage resulting from poverty, level or source of income, homelessness, place of residence, or family background.'¹⁹ The 2019 research report on socio economic discrimination by Altogether in Dignity Ireland entitled ["Does it Only Happen to Me"](#) describes participants experiencing socio-economic discrimination due to their address, their appearance, their race and ethnicity, the fact that they were unemployed or suffered from addiction. The discrimination was wide ranging, from difficulties accessing public services to profiling when entering a shop or restaurant. One participant described how, based upon hearing his accent, others immediately make assumptions about his level of education and therefore automatically think, *"I can treat this person how I want because no one's going to listen to their complaints."*²⁰

In order to address socio economic discrimination, it is necessary for the Employment Equality Acts 1998 to 2015 and the Equal Status Acts 2000 to 2015 to include a 10th ground of discrimination on the basis of a person's socio-economic background so as to provide protection for the many people who experience socio discrimination. EAPN Ireland notes the significant move in other European countries towards extending the mandate of equality bodies to cover socio-economic status

¹⁹<https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/bill/2017/87/eng@initiated/b8717d.pdf> p5

²⁰<http://17october.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/SES-Discrimination-Report-ATD-Ireland-Sept-19.pdf> p26

grounds. An overview of equality legislation, revealed that legislation in 20 of the 35 European countries covered, provide protection against discrimination on a ground related to socio-economic status.²¹ Removing the discriminatory obstacles that exist for specific communities seeking to access employment, education, supports and services, through appropriate legislative amendments and legal remedy, will assist in the collective effort to move towards a more equal and inclusive society, which encourages and supports the participation of everyone.

3.4 The Right to an Empowered and Active Community Development Structure

“Community development and community empowerment no longer meant building cohesion and solidarity and responding to community needs. The meaning of these words was replaced to describe the “self-activation of individuals” de-contextualised from their economic and community context.”²²

The need for resilient and empowered communities is more important than ever, the community spirit and solidarity on the display throughout Ireland is one of the positive aspects to these challenging times. The response to COVID-19 recognised the place a localised response had in assisting and protecting those most in need of support within our communities. These initiatives nationwide have inspired an increased sense of social solidarity and emphasised the importance of a strong community fabric and local participation. However, it is important to recognise that many communities experienced the pandemic from a position of disadvantage. As the crisis point passes, the Government must seek to put in place sustainable and long-term structures around our communities that will ensure those most in need are not left behind during the inevitable recovery period. This must involve a firm commitment to properly funded community development programmes within disadvantaged communities

It is estimated that between 2008 and 2011 disproportionate cuts were made to the community and voluntary sector by the Government, estimated at between 35 to 41%,²³ far higher than cuts made to other sectors, (of approximately 7%). Budget cuts were accompanied by changes in how community development programmes were funded. A top-down individualized service delivery approach replaced more collective forms of engaging communities, in identifying their own priorities, and working as key actors with others to bring about the changes that are needed to improve the lives of people in their communities. A Government commitment has been made in the five-year strategy to support the Community and Voluntary sector in Ireland for the period 2019-2024, including a sustainable funding model for ‘*core funding for autonomous community development and local development at local level, including employment of professional community workers*’.²⁴ We also welcome the commitment in the Programme for Government to introducing a number of projects similar in approach to Community Development Projects and the initial allocation of €1 million in Budget 2021. This is an important first step to build on.

A well-funded and resourced Community Development Sector ensures that the most socially excluded communities can take an active part in the process of policy development and implementation and ensuring it is effective in addressing their needs and the issues they face. The reduction and elimination of poverty and social exclusion should represent the core element of the social policy process in Ireland, as a means of honouring Ireland’s anti-poverty commitments, by supporting all communities in Ireland in the name of decency and equality.

²¹<http://17october.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Analysis-of-socio-economic-status-as-discrimination-final.pdf> p33

²²http://irc-equality.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Kelleher_O'Neill_2018_Paper-on-the-Destruction-of-Community-Development.pdf

²³http://irc-equality.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Kelleher_O'Neill_2018_Paper-on-the-Destruction-of-Community-Development.pdf

p7

²⁴<https://assets.gov.ie/26890/ff380490589a4f9ab9cd9bb3f53b5493.pdf> p29

EAPN Ireland recommendations

- Put in place a dedicated programme to fund autonomous community development as per the aims of the 2019 Government strategy "[Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities](#)" - a 5 year strategy to support the Community and Voluntary Sector

4: Reskilling and Upskilling of the Labour Market in Response to the Significant Challenges

4.1 The Right to Decent Work for All

Prior to the close down of economic activity in March 2020, Ireland was looking at a 13-year low unemployment rate. As of January 2020, unemployment in Ireland has dropped to 4.8%, considered to be a 13-year low (from a high of 16% in February 2012)²⁵. The current Covid-19 crisis has seen unemployment levels across Ireland sky rocket, for example in April 2020 the rate of unemployment would have been 28.2% if people receiving the Pandemic Unemployment Payment were considered to be part of official unemployment figures.²⁶ It is important to note that the low levels of unemployment that were reported in the first quarter of 2020 are not indicative of the quality of work available to those seeking or accessing employment, (including decent work, adequate wages, consistent hours, job security) nor the labour market participation of marginalised groups. The Economic and Social Research Institute (ERSI) has predicted that Ireland will fall into recession this year, shrinking by as much as 7.1 per cent as a result of the Coronavirus crisis.²⁷ The National Economic plan has a responsibility to maintain focus on those who were experiencing poverty and social exclusion prior to COVID-19 and as a result will experience the greatest negative impacts from any impending economic recession. Part of this is ensuring that the new Pathways to Work strategy reflects the needs of those seeking to access the labour market as it emerges from the current emergency, alongside the gradual resumption of economic activity. This new economic and social backdrop, requires a reconfiguring of the strategy including employment supports and services and should be utilised as a means to inform the work of the Labour Market Advisory Council, which will now also advise on the wider labour market and employment policy challenges that face the Irish economy due to the COVID-19 emergency.²⁸

It is essential that the 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, lone-parents, older people, people from ethnic minority and migrant backgrounds and the Roma and Traveller communities. It is also important that the Government supports people to obtain basic skills as a matter of urgency. The most recent international skills²⁹ survey shows that one in six Irish adults (521,550 people aged 16 to 64) find reading and understanding everyday texts difficult: for example, bus timetable or medicine instructions. The National Economic Plan and the new Pathways strategy provides an opportunity for the Government to instigate employment activation measures that adopt a holistic approach, which promotes values that lead people to decent secure work with adequate earnings. This must be integrated as part of the National Economic Plan to ensure that economic growth work in tandem with secure decent work and adequate earnings.

²⁵ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/mue/monthlyunemploymentjanuary2020/>

²⁶ <https://www.cso.ie/en/csolatestnews/pressreleases/2020pressreleases/pressstatementmonthlyunemploymentapril2020/>.

²⁷ <https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/QECSPRING2020.pdf> P2

²⁸ <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/a2f298-minister-doherty-meets-with-new-labour-market-advisory-council-to-co/>

²⁹ <https://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/releasespublications/documents/education/2012/piaac2012.pdf>

EAPN Ireland recommendations

- Develop and implement a 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.

Conclusion

The National Economic Plan represents an opportunity for Ireland to lead on a global scale. To show what recovery and resilience within society, after a global emergency such as COVID-19, can achieve. The National Economic Plan cannot solely be about the re-establishment of a strong economy but must focus on the inter-dependence between economic growth and societal equality, in order to ensure that those in Irish society who are furthest behind are not left behind as part of the recovery.