



Revitalising the Roadmap: Progress and Priorities

**CWI/EAPN IRELAND
PREPARATORY WORKSHOPS
KEY MESSAGES TO THE
SOCIAL INCLUSION FORUM
2023**

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CWI/EAPN Ireland Preparatory Workshops

Key messages to the Social Inclusion Forum 2023

Introduction

The Social Inclusion Forum is part of the Government's structures to monitor and evaluate the State's strategy to address poverty and achieve social inclusion. This annual event is part of the institutional structures put in place to underpin the implementation, monitoring and on-going development of the Government's social inclusion agenda. It provides a forum for wider public consultation and discussion on social inclusion issues and the implementation of the strategy on poverty and social exclusion, in particular for people experiencing poverty and social exclusion and the organisations/groups that work with them. The Forum also provides an opportunity for engagement between officials from Government Departments, community and voluntary organisations and people experiencing poverty.

Launched in 2020, *The Roadmap to Social Inclusion 2020 – 2025* is the current national strategy and the theme of SIF 2023 is *Revitalising the Roadmap: Progress and Priorities*.

Community Work Ireland (CWI) and the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) Ireland collaborate annually to organise a series of workshops to support participation at the Social Inclusion Forum and to identify issues of concern to people affected by poverty and the organisations working with them. In 2023, four workshops were held by CWI and EAPN Ireland, two on-line and two in-person in Sligo and Roscommon, reflecting the four themes of SIF 2023:

- Core Essentials – The Cost of Living and Income Adequacy
- Social Inclusion and Children
- Social Inclusion and Older People
- Expanding Opportunities for Employment

Over 130 people registered for the workshops, with a marked difference between the numbers opting for the on-line and in-person events. In total 30 people attended the in-person workshops and 54 attended the on-line sessions. Participants came from all over the country, from a broad range of backgrounds and experiences. Each workshop provided for the opportunity for breakout room discussions.

This report highlights some of the issues emerging and suggestions for solutions and interventions. Text boxes contain the words of participants

As highlighted by participants, many of the issues that impact on poverty for different groups and communities are interconnected and need a response across Government, something some saw as lacking.

As CWI and EAPN Ireland have previously reported, the key issues participants wanted heard at the Social Inclusion Forum are not new and are not unknown. They have been stated and repeated in one guise or another at many of the SIFs and in other policy spaces.

The legacy of COVID 19, current international events and unprecedented inflation have deepened the poverty and social exclusion experienced by many people and communities to levels that will be difficult to address without immediate, consistent intervention by the State. The Government's capacity to respond to new crises with major investment, policy focus and creativity was noted with a call for a similar focus to resolve emerging and persistent challenges.

Supporting Families and Children

Roadmap Chapter: Chapter 5

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

The objective of the European Child Guarantee is to prevent and combat social exclusion by guaranteeing effective access of children in need to a set of key services:

- *free early childhood education and care*
- *free education (including school-based activities and at least one healthy meal each school day)*
- *free healthcare*
- *healthy nutrition, and*
- *adequate housing*

There should be a zero-tolerance policy for children and young people in poverty. There are significant, long-term impacts on the life chances of people that experience poverty and social exclusion as children. Addressing child poverty requires a whole of Government approach, with a focus beyond the immediate need in order to ensure long-term, sustainable goals.

Emergency measures alone won't address underlying causes of poverty.

There are examples of models that work such as the [Childhood Development Initiative](#)¹ where a different approach is being taken to ensuring that the needs of children are being met, such as providing an in-school speech and language programme that negates the need for children to join long waiting lists. There are opportunities for the extension of the programmes if the resources were available in other areas.

Childcare and early school education remains a problem for many, with a distinct lack of affordable, accessible childcare places available in many disadvantaged communities. This means that children that are unable to access the two years early education provision are starting school at a disadvantage compared to other children. A number of afterschool services have not reopened after COVID, and this is contributing to educational disadvantage, as children are not accessing homework supports, and food poverty, as children are unable to access the meals that were provided by the services. It was noted that many children are going to school hungry. Free school meals were seen as an inclusive means of addressing child hunger, if every school offered them to everyone in the school, but this is not the case and the thresholds to access the programme can be prohibitive. The example was given of one school that started a breakfast club. The expectation was that 20 students would avail of it, but upwards of 70 did. This indicates a high level of need.

With regards to education, it was noted that there are many children that are reluctant to return to school because of mental health and anxiety issues that were exacerbated by the pandemic. Other participants noted the difficulties accessing school transport and, for those with no private car, dropping and collecting children from school can be very difficult, particularly in areas where there are no alternative transport options. In some areas school attendance is falling for this and associated reasons.

There was agreement that there needs to be a significant level of investment in early childhood development to ensure that all children have the supports they need to reach their full potential.

Homelessness continues to be a massive crisis in Ireland, and the increasing numbers of homeless children needs to be a priority. The impact of the ending of the no fault eviction ban is already having a disastrous impact, with worrying long-term developmental delays and mental health impacts for children and young people. When it comes to the housing crisis, we need to see the government reacting with the same urgency and devotion of

¹ <https://www.cdi.ie/>

resources it did with the [COVID-19] pandemic and [the invasion of] Ukraine. The response to Ukraine shows the possibilities for cross-Government concerted effort. This is a crisis and proactive and sustainable approaches are needed.

Overcrowding is common and even more common in communities such as the Traveller and Roma communities and for children living in Direct Provision, where many live in substandard accommodation with no safe places to play. This is having a hugely detrimental impact on a whole generation of children and young people. It was noted that children in Direct Provision and those in other types of emergency accommodation can be moved, generally at short notice and without consultation. This can have a very damaging effect on children.

Children can be moved at short notice to a completely different part of the country and be expected to settle in a new school. It is very damaging.

A key area of concern regarding children and social exclusion is effective access to adequate healthcare. It was noted that the habitual residency condition, maximum/minimum thresholds, and age groups can impact and/or restrict access to healthcare.

The mental health of children and young people is an acute crisis. Services are under-resourced and there are long waiting lists for them, if they exist at all, which is the case in many areas, particularly rural areas. Participants reported that children suffering from acute anxiety have been referred to youth services as the mental health services are only seeing very acute children and young people. However, the absence of early intervention means that many of these children are getting worse as they wait to be seen.

Participants, while agreeing that emergency measures such as free meals and food banks can be, and are for many, essential, felt they are no substitute for long-term, sustainable approaches to addressing intergenerational poverty, and the structural causes of poverty.

Participants called for significant action to be taken to ensure that children are enabled to reach their full potential. Systems such as those developed by the Childhood Initiative should be expanded and extended to all areas.

There needs to be a whole of services approach in order for the Child Guarantee to work.

Employment

Roadmap Chapters: Chapters 2, 3 and 6

Roadmap Goals: Give everyone who can work the opportunity of employment as a means to improve their well-being, and to ensure that workers are treated fairly and paid fairly and that work continues to be the best route to social inclusion

It was noted that though the unemployment rate is currently relatively low, there are significant numbers of people that still cannot access work opportunities for a variety of reasons. In rural areas, job opportunities are scarce and even scarcer if there is a reliance on public transport, itself non-existent, expensive or inaccessible, particularly in rural areas.

Working conditions for migrant workers was seen as a major issue. It was highlighted that migrant workers frequently do not receive the national minimum wage and are often not aware of their rights and can be exploited by employers.

Many (migrant workers) are completely exploited, working seven days a week, and twelve-hour shifts at times. Many are afraid to report in case it impacts on their status. Something needs to be done about educating them on their rights.

Temporary workers such as seasonal workers often do not get their correct welfare entitlements and are often misinformed that they cannot apply for social welfare. This was flagged as a particularly big problem for people with English as a second language, or who don't have English. The important role of advocates in supporting people to know and access their rights was highlighted.

Recognition of qualifications is a big problem for refugees, migrants and people seeking international protection. Better methods of recognition of past experience and qualifications are needed. The option of a tailored transition programme was suggested.

Unemployment among refugees, including those from Ukraine, was highlighted as an issue. More is needed in terms of targeted supports, including effectively supporting language acquisition as one of the key measures of integration, but also in terms of supports around documentation and general information provision to ensure people know their rights and how to access essential services.

Older people, disabled people, members of the Traveller and Roma communities, migrants, people from other ethnic and racial minorities and others can find it very difficult to identify employment opportunities and can face discrimination in the workplace. The lack of a current Traveller specific employment strategy was raised as an issue, with the particular barriers for disabled Travellers mentioned. Specifically, discrimination in recruitment processes was highlighted with equality legislation seen as protecting people in employment, but not effectively protecting them in the recruitment process.

Young people can also face discrimination and it can be difficult to get work experience and/or to afford transport to jobs, even if transport is available. Carers, too, can find it difficult to access or return to the workforce given their caring responsibilities and the unpredictable nature of the work they do to care for family members. The strict enforcement of the means test for carers allowance is acting as a disincentive to work.

I never know when I will be called to the school or have to go for an appointment with my child. No employer is going to give me that flexibility and if I take a chance and try to work, I am in danger of losing what little I get on the carer's allowance for a job I may not be able to keep up.

The failure to realise the rights of many disabled people was highlighted. This included the inadequacy of the Disability Allowance which was seen as a poverty trap, the failure to recognise the many hidden costs for disabled people and discrimination when seeking employment. It was emphasised that disabled people are looking for a hand up not a handout and that Ireland must begin with the effective and meaningful implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Person with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and its relevant articles. Recent reports from the European Disability Forum highlight the starkness of barriers disabled people

face. Ireland has the highest employment gap within the EU and one of highest rates of unemployment – two in every three people with disabilities face unemployment. The lack of real sanctions for companies that do not meet their targets for employing people with disabilities was raised as an issue to be addressed so that there are meaningful consequences for companies that fail to meet their obligations.

Disabled people also face challenges in terms of a lack of information and support around dealing with discrimination and with regard to employers' duties and obligations to people with disabilities, such as in the context of their obligation to provide Reasonable Accommodation. Having access to appropriate supports to enable people to work is crucial.

Transport, the lack thereof and/or the huge costs associated with running a private car, are significant barriers to people accessing employment, particularly if they live in rural areas or towns where public transport is almost non-existent. In addition, people can face barriers at the start of their job search with a dearth of opportunities in many areas. Strong concerns were raised by a number of people about the impact of centralising decisions by Community Welfare Officers, which was meant to help prevent bias, but in practice has led to massive delays in getting payments, resulting in difficult situations for many people.

What I want to say is more to do with unemployment. I work with a lot of people who are unemployed or underemployed where the supplementary welfare payment is needed, but now people are waiting longer, so someone may have no money for six weeks. They have nothing in the meantime.

The point was raised that that you are not entitled to receive the national minimum wage if you are employed by a close relative (for example, a spouse, civil partner or parent), or in a statutory apprenticeship, or aged under 20yrs.

There are administrative burdens in terms of accessing social protection, navigating the system can be very difficult. Specifically for disabled people, there is a functional capacity burden on the disabled person to show how their disability impacts their day-to-day life. This can be a demeaning and humiliating process. There is a lot of complexity, which can be very difficult for some cohorts.

A number of proposals were made that could help address exclusion from employment, including:

- implementing a system of quotas during recruitment so that a proportion of positions are targeted at migrants, Travellers, disabled people and others that experience discrimination. This would be similar to the well-established quotas such as for women in politics and the public sector.
- Reforming recruitment processes so applicants do not have to include private information in CVs that can be used to identify and exclude minorities.
- make greater efforts to inform migrant workers about their rights.

Exploitation and harassment in the workplace were raised as a huge issue, particularly for vulnerable employees such as migrant workers. This included inappropriate behaviour such as sexual harassment by colleagues or guests in hospitality. More is needed in terms of looking at employer and employee expectations, and awareness of what constitutes inappropriate behaviour. People are currently quite afraid to say anything in case they lose their jobs. Training is a crucial support, in terms of personal development, mental health, confidence building training, what should you expect in employment. The INOU were recommended as providing very good training support.

In terms of access to necessary supports, it is difficult for people to know what supports they are entitled to.

Labour market activation programmes need to be looked at in terms of how effective they are in reality. SICAP was seen as a good example as there is recognition within the programme that the journey into employment can take a significant length of time, and so wrap around supports and wellbeing supports need to be strong.

In terms of referrals to programmes, worries were raised in relation to referrals to Tús, which is completely different from how people come to the Local Area Employment Service (LAES). The biggest concern outside of the fear that people have, is non-engagement. As an outcome for LAES, 20% of people need to move into full time employment for 35 hours per day for 17 weeks. This is unrealistic when people are really distanced from the labour market. Labour market activation needs to be about supporting people into employment that will initially work and then make it more available.

A key point raised is the intensive engagement that is needed for people furthest from labour market and the long journey to employment it can be for many. Many people need supports, including targeted, tailored supports and a holistic, person-centred approach is needed rather than the current target driven approach.

Education and training schemes need better funding and resourcing to bridge gaps e.g. the cost of food and transport, etc. so that these factors are not a barrier to people engaging. There needs to be serious investment in promoting a positive approach.

The inadequacy of wages was also seen as an issue for many.

Older People

Roadmap Chapter: Chapter 4

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

The situation with regards to inflation and the rise in the cost of living are significant concerns for older people and their representative organisations. Any once-off payments or increases in allowances are swallowed up by the rising costs of almost all items, and, it was highlighted, not everyone qualified for the bonus. There is a fear that while inflation may stabilise, it is unlikely to decrease, so that older people will face bills at their current level for the foreseeable future.

The once-off payments just about covered the additional costs for older people – there was no real benefit or gain for most. Older people have a high degree of cynicism – they view this government as being totally out of touch with their lives

Fuel poverty, food poverty, substandard accommodation and being ‘stuck’ renting as people age were issues of considerable concern. Access to health care, dental care, transport, social activities and in-home supports to live independently were also raised as particularly challenging for many older people. Many of these issues were exacerbated by where someone lives – the lack of services for those living in rural areas and the distances that need to be travelled to access services that those in larger urban areas take for granted was highlighted.

Secure, appropriate and affordable accommodation is essential for older people. Many are on fixed incomes that do not increase sufficiently to meet inflation, cost of living, etc. This is currently a problem for older people who are renting and is likely to increase as more and more people remain in rented accommodation as they cannot afford to buy. It was particularly noted that appropriate accommodation needs to be culturally appropriate to communities such as Travellers in general, but particularly for older Travellers. The Mica crisis in Donegal and other areas was also highlighted. This is having an impact on housing, and people’s ability to purchase property they have been living in for years and is an increasing concern as people age.

It was suggested that security of tenure and a rent cap needs to be provided to older people and others on fixed incomes. Housing Assistance Payments need to increase as they are not adequate and people are left with little choice but to pay top-ups.

For older people in rural areas, the free travel pass is a joke – there is no transport to access. An allowance should be paid in lieu of the pass to those that live in rural areas and where there is no public transport.

The aim of the integrated Care Programme for Older Persons, to develop and implement integrated services and pathways for older people with complex health and social care needs, shifting the delivery of care away from acute hospitals towards community based, planned and coordinated care was needed. This would improve the quality of life for older people by providing access to integrated care and support that is planned around their needs and choices, supporting them to live well in their own homes and communities but was highlighted as being very far removed from the reality for older people, many of whom have no choice but to opt for nursing home care, which is ultimately a greater expense on the State than providing adequate in-home care. The inadequate pay of care workers was also raised in this context.

Early intervention, before issues reach a chronic stage and proactive measures to support people to live active, healthy lives as they age were highlighted as critical and would be, even in the medium-term, more cost effective than treating issues when they reach chronic or acute stages. Interventions and supports in the areas of financial education and planning for retirement, health education, addressing barriers to eating healthily such as cost/income adequacy were suggested.

The State Pension is often the only source of income for older people. It needs to be set at a level that provides an adequate income, and benchmarked appropriately to account for inflation and rises in the cost of living.

Older people living in rural communities face additional barriers. Examples were given of the lack of public transport, post office closures, bank closures, and digitalisation of many public services, and the impact this has both in terms of their ability to access essential services and in terms of isolation, mental health, etc. The stigma related to people in rural areas was highlighted as people very often know each other and this increases the level of perception/fear of stigma. This can be seen with meals on wheels, where older people may not want to avail of this necessary service if they are concerned that the appearance of a labelled 'Meals on Wheels' van outside their home will have the neighbours talking.

There needs to be a reframing of ageing, as outlined in the Age Action report, *Reframing Ageing - The State of Ageing in Ireland 2022* to achieve a vision for older people of a society that *enables all older people to participate and to live full, independent lives. This means removing ageism and other barriers that stop people participating or living to the full. It also means providing the necessary supports for people to achieve their potential. Everyone is entitled to have their basic human rights respected, protected and fulfilled, regardless of their age.*²

Core Essentials: Cost of Living and Adequate Income

Roadmap Chapter: Chapter 8

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

As stated at the Social Inclusion Forums in 2021 and 2022, access to adequate and affordable healthcare, accommodation, energy and food are all interlinked and central to health, wellbeing and to the life experiences of people, families and communities. When people and families are poor, they cannot access these core essentials, and this has a significant impact on their lives. Affordability and adequate income are intrinsically linked and need to be addressed together.

The issue of inadequate incomes was highlighted with the gap between the minimum and living wage and between what is needed to be over the poverty line and social welfare a subject discussed at all the workshops. The low level of welfare levels and the discrepancy between welfare rates and the cost of living were highlighted as being inadequate to ensure people can live in dignity, particularly in the case of young people that receive a lower rate and disabled people, for whom there is little compensation for the added costs associated with having a disability.

I was a Census enumerator for the last Census, and I was appalled at the standard of accommodation

Participants highlighted the need for a broad realisation of the core problems associated with inadequate access to food, accommodation and other essentials for people experiencing poverty. Homelessness and food banks continue to be massive issues and are becoming/have become normalised in a very worrying fashion. Many participants noted the rise in the dependency on food banks. One Dublin foodbank initially expected to cater for 50-60 families, but within weeks had reached its maximum capacity with over 200 families attending.

² <https://www.ageaction.ie/reframing-ageing-state-ageing-ireland-2022-#:~:text=Age%20Action's%20vision%20is%20a,or%20living%20to%20the%20full.>

Access to technology is no longer a luxury but a necessity and digital poverty was highlighted as a distinct issue but also a barrier to accessing other essential services, including children who are supposed to study and access materials online.

Short term measures, such as the energy subsidies provided by the Government, are needed, but they are not sufficient to address the issues in the long term. More proactive approaches and whole of government work is needed to effectively address the underlying and root causes of poverty and social exclusion. It was also felt that Government should put more efforts into targeting supports.

Regulation of energy prices is urgently required, and schemes to retrofit houses needs to be fast-tracked.

The state should have intervened with energy companies and reduced costs, rather than just asking nicely for energy companies to lower their prices.

More focus is needed on health in the context of poverty and social exclusion. Health is both impacted by and impacts on poverty and social exclusion – it is a vicious circle. Communities such as Roma and Traveller communities, those in Direct Provision, those who are homeless, and many others are particularly at risk and more supports to allow better access to food and other essentials are required.

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

Notwithstanding criticism of the fact that food banks have become common-place and normalised, it was suggested that the food stuffs provided by food banks needs to more accurately reflect the needs of families. There was a suggestion that vouchers that would enable people to purchase their own food would be more appropriate.

Access to primary and emergency healthcare, dental care and other health services are expensive and/or unavailable and/or have long waiting lists. Participants reported having to wait for up to three weeks for a doctor's appointment. This lack of early intervention is resulting in exacerbated conditions that subsequently require higher levels of care. This is regarded as a significant waste of resources.

Homelessness is also now seen as normalised, as is Direct Provision, despite political commitments to end both. More broadly, there is an issue with people being forced to stay in temporary and/or emergency accommodation. It was noted that precedent suggests that what is established as a temporary provision ends up becoming long term or permanent.

While the root causes need to be addressed, it is clear that we also have to meet people's immediate needs, but we need to avoid situations where temporary emergency provisions become long term permanent "solutions"

There needs to be more of a focus on groups that are particularly experiencing economic deprivation and other forms of poverty. Disabled people, people living in Direct Provision, Travellers, Roma and lone parents are amongst the groups at highest risk of poverty and deprivation. The additional costs for those with a disability is well known but is all but ignored by the State.

The most marginalised groups need to be supported otherwise the commitments of the Roadmap are meaningless and/or will not be achieved.

A particular major issue that made food and other essentials a problem for people living in Direct Provision was that of the absence of control. People in Direct Provision or other emergency accommodation are constantly made to feel aware that the focus of management is on commercial issues. It was highlighted that a lot of centres, even those that are newly opened, do not adequately provide for the essential needs of people. Particular problems were encountered during Ramadan when many Muslim people faced a situation where the food was not provided after sunset, which made life very difficult for many.

The need to factor in our climate obligations, such as carbon footprint targets, was highlighted. It was agreed that these will impact most on people who were already disadvantaged and that no one on low wages is ever going to be able to afford to make the necessary changes without effective State support. The need for a much more concerted focus on climate justice and just transition that is truly just was highlighted.

Human rights and equality are critical to the achievement of Just Transition and climate change action. We call on the Government to prioritise resources to advance rights in Ireland and to provide leadership internationally to ensure that “no person and no place shall be left behind (IHREC Policy Statement on a Just Transition)”³

There is a need to significantly increase the investment in just transition in its broadest sense and a targeted approach to the distribution of resources towards the most marginalised, and therefore the most at risk, communities.

Energy poverty and transport poverty were seen as huge issues. In rural areas, a car is essential but is a huge expense and impacts on the cost of getting to work. The switch to electric cars, along with increased carbon tax, excise, etc. are major concerns for rural communities. The energy crisis will continue for a lot of families in these contexts.

There is a lot of talk about the money that the government has. There is a need to invest that money now to alleviate current problems and to help avoid bigger problems at a later date. Supports need to be targeted at those that need them most.

³ <https://www.ihrec.ie/documents/policy-statement-on-a-just-transition/>
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