

SVP Opening statement to Oireachtas Joint Committee on Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs session on ‘Caring for the elderly and disadvantaged in rural Ireland’

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul welcomes the opportunity to address the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs on the issue of supporting older people and people experiencing disadvantage in rural Ireland. As you all know, The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul exists to fight poverty and all forms of social exclusion. Established in 1844, we are the largest, voluntary, charitable organisation in Ireland with over 11,000 volunteer members operating on an all-Ireland basis, working in both urban and rural areas, and assisting both younger and older people and helping families and individuals alike.

On the ground, our focus is on a practical approach to dealing with poverty, alleviating its effects on households through working primarily in person-to-person contact by a unique system of visitation to peoples' homes. It is through this privileged position of visiting people, hearing their stories and helping where appropriate that our members earn the credibility that the Society enjoys. It is this unique position that enables us to work for social justice in a respected and effective manner, advocating for the creation of a more just, caring nation. In addition to providing direct assistance to those in need, we provide a wide range of services caring for people who are homeless, providing social housing, and operating other social support activities. Alongside our home visitation work, the Society seeks to empower people to access education, training, adequate incomes and quality, affordable public services.

In our presentation to the Committee we will outline our work with, and observations or concerns with regard to, the two groups in rural areas outlined by the Clerk: older people and people experiencing disadvantage. In our address we acknowledge that there is some overlap between these two groups, but note that many older people do not necessarily experience disadvantage, and that many people experiencing disadvantage are not older people. For both older people and lower income households generally in rural areas, **the cost and availability of transport to health appointments / hospitals and therefore the importance of rural transport services** are key in our experience, as is the **need for more energy efficient housing**. Higher living costs associated with rural life, as evidenced by the Vincentian Partnership, such as **car usage**, is also a shared concern.

Some of the other themes emerging in our work with Older People in Rural Areas are as follows:

- ‘Seniors Alert’ pendant alarm systems (formerly ‘Community Supports for Older People’)
- Being able to grow older at home through the receipt of adequate services and supports, e.g. meals on wheels, home help and the provision of more independent advocates for older people

Some of the other themes emerging in our work with Low Income Groups in Rural Areas include:

- The experience of lone parents, especially in cases where they have additional caring responsibilities, and the higher incidence of poverty among lone parents and children
- The impact of increased rents on rural housing markets adjacent to large towns and cities
- Access to education, training and employment, including adequate third level grant rates

Some of the policy solutions to the above issues relate to investment in quality, comprehensive public services which are free or affordable at the point of delivery. These require significant and sustained exchequer resources, which require robust and dependable revenue streams. In our 2017 Pre-Budget submission, we have called for enhanced delivery of social housing, early childhood care and education and energy retrofitting of homes. Adequate incomes, both in work and out of work, are also vital for low income groups. Lastly, better physical planning and more integrated communities and services are required to achieve sustainable and resilient rural communities. We will discuss the above issues in more detail during the Committee session on the 7th of December.