

**Meeting of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection,
Community and Rural Development, and the Islands**

Tue, 23 March 2021, 6.30 pm

**Opening Statement by Minister Joe O'Brien,
Minister of State**

**with responsibility for social inclusion in the Department of Social Protection
and responsibility for community development and charities
in the Department of Rural and Community Development**

Good evening to you all. I would like to thank Deputy Denis Naughten, Chair of this Joint Committee and the Committee members for the invitation to appear before you and provide an update on the implementation of the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025.

I have responsibility for policy areas in two Government Departments which are complementary: social inclusion and community development. I think it is safe to say that one cannot exist without the other. This is reflected in the Roadmap for Social Inclusion which notes the important and long-acknowledged partnership between the State and the community and voluntary sector in addressing poverty, social exclusion and inequality at a local and national level.

The Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025 was approved by the then Government and published in January 2020. It is the latest in a number of successive strategies, dating back to 1997, which aim to reduce poverty and improve social inclusion in Ireland. In a matter of weeks after its publication, Ireland had to deal with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the introduction of resultant public health restrictions on our lives. Nevertheless, its implementation remains a priority, one that is reflected in the Programme for Government which commits to its rigorous implementation.

The Roadmap is a five year, whole of government strategy with the ambition of reducing consistent poverty in Ireland to 2% or less and making Ireland one of the most socially inclusive countries in the EU. This will require improvements in the provision of supports for workers and their families; the expansion of employment opportunities to all who are in a position to work; continued improvement in supports for children, older people and people with a disability; ongoing investment at community level and ensuring access for all to the basic services that we all need to thrive. Under the current conditions, with the economic, social and health challenges resulting from the pandemic, this is ambitious and will require focused and collaborative effort across Government.

The Roadmap acknowledges the range of existing sectoral strategies, policies and plans across Government and does not seek to replicate them. It aims to enhance and complement existing strategies and inform the development of new strategies, such as the recently published National Volunteering Strategy, to ensure that social inclusion is at the core of Government policy.

The Roadmap contains 66 unique commitments to be delivered, in some cases, by individual Departments and, in others, by a number of Departments working in collaboration such as the commitment by the Department of Social Protection and the Department of Justice to implement an additional two weeks paid parental leave which will take place in April 2021 and extend this to seven weeks over the subsequent three years. Implementation of many of the Roadmap commitments is underway, with a number either fully achieved or close to completion. These include

- the publication of the new Further Education and Training Strategy
- the full roll-out of the National Childcare Scheme;
- the publication of the National Volunteering Strategy, to name a few.

There has also been progress in the development of the new employment services strategy (the successor to Pathways to Work); the provision of €5m in Dormant Accounts funding to support and improve employment opportunities for carers and people with a disability; the development of the new Rural Development Policy which is due to be published in the coming weeks; the development of a 10 year Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy which was announced in September 2020; and the continued provision of the School Meals programme during 2020 including during school closures and during the summer where needed. In addition, despite the challenging economic circumstances, Budget 2021 included targeted social protection measures to help individuals and families on low incomes. This included increases to the qualified child rates which will benefit some 419,000 children at a cost of 59.2m in 2021; adjustment of the income thresholds for the Working Family Payment with some 48,700 families benefitting in 2021 at a cost of €21.4m; an increase to the Living Alone allowance which will benefit some 227,100 people in 2021 at a cost of €57.5m and an increase to the weekly rate for Fuel Allowance benefitting some 375,600 people at a cost of €36.8m in 2021, amongst others. I was also pleased that Budget 2021 included a provision for pilot Community Development Projects with funding of €1m available in 2021, applications for this fund recently opened.

As Minister of State in the Department of Social Protection, I have responsibility for the Community Employment Scheme, Tús and the Rural Social Scheme. These schemes provide for a number of Department objectives including supporting long term unemployed people back to employment, while helping to deliver vital services to local communities.

Support and funding remained in place for over 19,000 participants engaged in more than 850 Community Employment schemes, and over 7,000 participants on Tús and the Rural Social Schemes since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. Funding for CE, Tús and RSS will amount to more than €500m in 2021. During each period of Level-5 restrictions, Community Employment and Tús participants, whose contracts were due to end during the period of the restrictions, had contracts extended for the duration of those restrictions. Earlier this month, Minister Humphreys and I announced a further Community Employment and Tús contract extension for those participants affected, up until 2nd July, 2021. Over 7,000 CE and Tus participants are benefitting from these contract extensions. There will be no sudden cliff edge or cut off point for these contracts after this date. Contracts will come to an end in a phased and planned manner after this date, as the

number of new referrals to schemes increases as restrictions ease. It is particularly important, I think, that CE schemes continue to offer people who have not had a chance to be on a CE scheme in the past and who are furthest from the labour market, opportunities to develop their experience and skills in a workplace setting and carry out valuable training at the same time. It is important to be mindful of particularly marginalised groups in this regard including people recovering from addiction, Travellers and Roma.

I also want to mention the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) here. It is a €190m five year programme running from 2018 to 2022 that provides supports to help marginalised individuals and the groups that assist them. It has provided one-to-one support to over 70,000 individuals and assisted over 4,000 Local Community Groups since. This type of work will be more important than ever as we recover from the pandemic.

I am the Chair of the Social Inclusion Roadmap Steering Group, which has been established to manage and oversee the successful implementation of the Roadmap commitments. Members of the group include senior officials from each Department with responsibility for Roadmap commitments, along with

three representatives from the community and voluntary pillar. The group first met November 11th 2020 with the second meeting scheduled for March 30th.

At the first meeting, I highlighted the need for collaborative work between Departments in order to drive the delivery of commitments. I also asked members to consider how COVID-19 has affected people who are experiencing deprivation and/or poverty. It is important that those who were vulnerable or struggling before the pandemic are not left behind once we are able to lift the pandemic restrictions and the economy begins to recover.

The Roadmap ambition and indeed the Programme for government ambition is to reduce the national consistent poverty rate in Ireland to 2% or less by 2025. In my view this is perhaps the most significant commitment in the Programme for Government. Since the recording of the rate of Consistent Poverty began we have never reached a rate of less than 2%. I think it is fair to say that if we reach it, it will be lowest rate of poverty ever in the history of the State and before it. The current rate of consistent poverty in Ireland, based on 2019 data, is 5.5%. This rate is higher for more vulnerable groups such as children, lone parents and people with a disability. Over the next 4 years, we need to

reduce the national figure significantly to achieve the targets set out in the Roadmap.

Of course, one indicator can never tell the whole story. It is also important to note that, in addition to retaining a focus on the level of consistent poverty, what sets this Roadmap apart from earlier national anti-poverty and social inclusion strategies is that it incorporates a wider range of indicators to capture components of inclusion and drive the appropriate actions. These include indicators relating to employment, education, health, housing, income and active citizenship. These indicators are linked with and based on the EU standard measures for assessing living standards in Europe. Their use will enable our performance as a State to be compared with our peer States in Europe and also go some way to delivering on the Programme for Government commitment to develop a set of wellbeing indices to create a well-rounded holistic view of how our society is faring.

The 2020 Survey on Income and Living Conditions data will be published by the CSO towards the end of this year and will provide updated data on those experiencing poverty and exclusion during the period the pandemic and public health restrictions first impacted on our lives during 2020.

The Roadmap is not a static document. Many of the commitments are front-loaded, to be completed within the first half of the Roadmap's lifetime. There is a review planned for 2022 and I would be eager to conduct that as early as possible as the challenges and contexts have changed significantly since the Roadmap's initial publication. We have a new Programme for Government with very significant and new social inclusion related commitments such as the ending of direct provision and the introduction of a new regularisation scheme for undocumented migrants, additional challenges have come to fore in the last year in the context of the pandemic and the principles of just transition and climate justice need also to be reflected in a plan for social inclusion. And we have a new government Department with a key role to play in the promotion of social inclusion. In this context I am delighted to say that my colleague, Simon Harris, Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has agreed to develop new commitments for inclusion in the Roadmap. And I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge his commitment to social inclusion in his portfolio.

The Roadmap includes a commitment for the production of an annual report on progress against each commitment. Work on the 2020 annual report is

underway and will be presented to this Committee for discussion, once it has been submitted to the Cabinet Committee for Social Affairs and Equality for consideration.

On the 12th of March, we passed a significant milestone: a full year since the country entered lock-down as part of our efforts to deal with the spread of the COVID-19 virus across Ireland. During those 12 months, we have seen the health impacts as infection rates have risen and fallen. The economic impacts have been severe with large sectors of the economy closed for long periods of time, leading to a COVID adjusted unemployment rate, which includes the 465,000 persons on PUP, of just under 25%. Many of those persons currently on PUP will return to employment once the economy re-opens. We will need to focus attention on providing employment supports to those whose jobs will not return but also to those people who were unemployed prior to the arrival of COVID.

In response to the economic impact of the pandemic and the associated public health restrictions implemented to curb the spread of the virus, the State launched a number of emergency income and business supports in March 2020 with the objective of providing a level of income certainty for those most

whose employment was affected by the crisis. To date, these critical supports, which include the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) and the Wage Subsidy Schemes (TWSS/EWSS), have come to a cumulative spend of over €11bn.

The positive effect of these interventions is reflected in research by the ESRI published in October 2020. It examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on unemployment in Ireland, estimating how family incomes had changed as a result of increased unemployment. It found that, as a result of the initial COVID-19 pandemic policy responses (the pandemic unemployment payment, the wage subsidy scheme, and the reduction in the standard rate of VAT), household income fell by 3% on average. This was in comparison to an estimated 7% fall in the absence of these responses.

In addition to these measures, the State has also put in place a comprehensive suite of business supports for Irish employers. This is important to refer to in today's context due to the key role of employment in social inclusion. These measures include, among others, the COVID Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS), COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme, the COVID-19 Working Capital Scheme, the Apprenticeship Incentivisation Scheme as well as the commercial

rates waiver and the 'warehousing' of deferred tax debts. Combined, these supports have, and continue to relieve some of the financial pressure weighing on Irish employers as they navigate the COVID-19 economic crisis.

All of this underscores the importance of the Roadmap for Social Inclusion. While it was developed and approved pre-pandemic, its ambition and focus remain relevant and continue to be a priority. The coming years will no doubt bring more challenges and difficult choices as the country and the economy and society finds its way through this pandemic and out the other side. While we must and should focus on economic solutions, they have to be developed within the broader context so that the most vulnerable within our society do not become more marginalised or left behind.

Chair, I will be happy to take any questions that the members may have.