



Mr Denis Naughton
Chair of the Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community
and Rural Development and the Islands
Leinster House
Kildare Street
Dublin 2
D02 XR20

26 March 2024

**Re. Recommendations of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection,
Community and Rural Development *Report on the Progress of the Sustainable
Development Goals***

Dear Denis,

I am writing to you in response to the recommendations pertaining to the Department of Social Protection contained in the Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands *Report on the progress of the Sustainable Development Goals 2023*. I agreed to provide further updates on these recommendations during a debate on the report in the Dáil in February.

As you are aware, a whole-of-Government approach has been adopted for implementation of the SDGs in Ireland, with each Minister having specific responsibility for implementing individual SDG targets related to their Ministerial functions. The Department for the Environment, Climate and Communications has overall responsibility for promoting the SDGs and overseeing their coherent implementation across Government, including the development of the National Implementation Plans and reporting frameworks.

The Department of Social Protection has been identified as the lead Department in relation to five specific targets under three separate goals.

Under Goal 1, which relates to poverty, the Department leads on targets 1.2 and 1.3, which are:

Target 1.2 *By 2030, reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions.*

Target 1.3 *Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable*

Under Goal 8, which relates to employment, the Department is the lead on

Target 8.6 *By 2020, substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training,*

and co-lead, with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, on

Target 8b *By 2020, develop and operationalize a global strategy for youth employment and implement the Global Jobs Pact of the International Labour Organization*

Under Goal 10, on reducing inequality, the Department leads on

Target 10.1 *By 2030, progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average.*

The report contained 17 recommendations. Responses on recommendations 1 to 11 have previously been supplied to you by the Department of Rural and Community Development who have primary responsibility in relation to these.

A response to recommendations 12 to 17 is set out in the attached appendix. As there is a whole-of-Government approach to implementation of the SDGs a number of the responses include inputs from the Departments of Transport and Rural and Community Development, as well as the Department of Social Protection.

We will continue to collaborate with colleagues across Government to further embed the SDGs into our future policies and strategies.

Yours sincerely,



Joe O'Brien T.D.

Minister of State with responsibility for Social Inclusion
Department of Social Protection

*The Minister is a Designated Public Official under the Regulation of Lobbying Act, 2015
(details available on www.lobbying.ie)*

Appendix g

12. The Committee recommends that social welfare rates should be benchmarked against a minimum standard such as the MESL and indexed to preserve the spending power of people on fixed incomes over time.

One of the benefits of the work of the Vincentian MESL Research Centre, which is funded by the Department of Social Protection, is that it provides an analysis of the different levels of income needed for a wide range of household types, including the different costs that arise for households based on location.

Last year in accordance with a Government decision, the Department submitted to Government a report on the smoothed earnings approach to the indexation of State Pensions. This report was an important input into the Budgetary process.

Budget 2024 increased all core weekly social welfare rates by €12 from January 2024. However, when combined with the cost-of-living lump sum measures that were also introduced, on an annualised basis a pensioner received far in excess of the smoothed earnings indexation rate.

The Department of Social Protection will in 2024 submit a report to Government on the smoothed earnings approach to indexation of State Pensions as an input into Budget 2025 deliberations, in addition a report on benchmarking working age payments will also be produced by the Department.

13. The Committee recommends that the CSO present more disaggregated data to make clearer the progress being made in tackling poverty across particular groups in our society to ensure that we are achieving a key priority in the SDGs of reaching the farthest behind first.

The Central Statistics Office (CSO), in collaboration with all Government Departments, have prepared a series of statistical publications which monitor and report on how Ireland is progressing towards meeting its targets under the SDGs. The CSO is currently updating these statistics, and previous reports can be found on the CSO website.

14. The Committee recommends further research be conducted on the topic of income adequacy among those on fixed incomes in rural areas, with specific attention given to the issues of transport deprivation and fuel poverty.

Recent Budgets have prioritised measures to address increases in the cost-of-living particularly as it relates to fuel poverty, these include:

- One off payments of €300 (Budget 2024), and €400 (Budget 2023) to Fuel Allowance recipients,
- Energy credits totalling €450 (Budget 2024) and €600 (Budget 2023) to help reduce electricity bills for all domestic electricity customers.

In recognition of the important role transport has in addressing poverty and social inclusion a new commitment was added to the Roadmap for Social Inclusion, following a mid-term review of the strategy which was published in 2023, to Deliver expanded Transport for Ireland (TFI) Local Link services and further integrate TFI Local Link service with other existing public transport services.

The Department of Social Protection funds a large body of research that looks at, inter alia, income levels and adequacy. This includes funding the work of the Vincentian MESL Research Centre at the Society of St. Vincent de Paul to develop and calculate the Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) on an annual basis for rural and urban areas, including transport costs.

The Department of Environment, Climate and Communications has the overall policy remit for addressing fuel poverty and funds the Research Programme on Energy Poverty (RPEP), which is a multi stakeholder research initiative, led by the ESRI, focusing on Energy Poverty in Ireland.

15. The Committee recommends that the Connecting Ireland policy is accelerated in order to tackle the issue of transport deprivation among people living in rural areas, thereby increasing their access to a range of other essential services.

The Department of Transport has responsibility for SDG Target 11.2, which relates to public transport, and provided the following response.

This responsibility reflects the 'open' public transport remit of the Department and its agencies, such as the National Transport Authority (NTA).

SDG Target 11.2 obliges that member States "By 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons".

The Department of Transport has responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. The NTA has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally. The NTA also has national responsibility for integrated local and rural transport, including TFI Local Link services and the rollout of services under the Connecting Ireland Rural Mobility Plan.

In line with commitments in a number of national strategies, including the Sustainable Mobility Policy, 'Our Rural Future' and 'Our Living Islands National Islands', the NTA has been increasing rural connectivity nationwide under 'Connecting Ireland', primarily by increasing TFI Local Link services.

Since the rollout of Connecting Ireland began in mid-2022, more than one new or additional service has been introduced per week. During Phase I in 2022, 38 new and enhanced services were implemented, while during Phase II in 2023, 65 new and enhanced services were implemented. This means that over 190 towns and villages have been connected to the public transport network, and over 280,000 people have access to new and enhanced bus services.

Connecting Ireland is helping to reduce transport deprivation amongst people living in rural areas by providing access to employment, education, healthcare, retail, and leisure, either locally or via connections to larger centres that offer those opportunities. Such access can contribute to significant improvements in the quality of life for people living in these areas. During 2024, the NTA will continue to rollout new and/or enhanced services under Connecting Ireland. As with all new services, this is subject to available resources.

Under Connecting Ireland, the NTA is developing non-conventional transport solutions in rural areas via the Community Transport Scheme and the forthcoming SMART Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) pilot. In addition to Connecting Ireland, the NTA is continuing to plan for new and enhanced Town services as well as building on the successful transport integration pilot with the HSE in Co Leitrim.

16. The Committee recommends that further financial supports be made available to counteract the additional transport costs of living on an island, from personal transport to freight and carriage costs.

Individuals who are living on an island and in receipt of a social welfare payment will have seen their weekly social welfare payment increase and they may have received one of the nine cost-of-living lump sums that were announced as part of Budget 2024.

Our Living Islands is the 10-year national policy for these off-shore islands, which was published by the Department of Rural and Community Development in June 2023. The policy recognises that access between the islands and the mainland is the most fundamental requirement for those living on the islands and is a lifeline for island communities. Affordable, frequent and safe transport services, by both sea and air, and safe piers and airstrips, are vital to island communities.

Ferry, cargo and air services to the islands are operated by private operators all year round, although the frequency of service varies from island to island, reflecting issues such as population size and user demand. The State contracts with a number of these operators to provide subsidised ferry, cargo and air services for island dwellers who use those services. Considerable improvements and enhancements have been made over the last number of years to the State funded services to the islands. Government supports of this nature in 2022 amounted to over €8.5 million. As a core commitment of the *Our Living Islands* policy, the Government will continue to subsidise ferry, cargo and air services for islanders and will review all service contracts on a regular basis to ensure the best outcomes for islanders.

During the consultation process on the policy, islanders identified further improvements to island connectivity that could help to secure the long-term viability of island communities. These included the need for additional sailings, the cost of travel and cargo shipments, transport timetables and the need for ferries to facilitate farmers' needs with regard to the transportation of livestock. Ferry congestion at piers, improved facilities for wheelchair embarkation/disembarkation from ferries, and the need for improved provision of island bus services were also referenced. These, and other initiatives related to island transport services, will be progressed through the Action Plans accompanying this policy.

17. The Committee supports the expansion of the Hot School Meals programme as an effective anti-poverty measure.

Following the expansion of the Hot School Meals programme in recent years, some 2,600 schools and organisations, covering 443,000 children are now eligible for funding. Budget 2024 provides €190.1 million for the programme. This represents over a 200% funding increase in the period since 2020.

The roll out of the Hot School Meals to all remaining DEIS primary and Special schools began in September 2023, benefiting more than 60,000 children. As part of the significant expansion plan, the remaining primary schools were contacted last year and requested to submit an expression of interest form if their school was interested in commencing the provision of hot school meals. Expressions of interests were received from over 900 primary schools in respect of 150,000 children

and late last year these schools were invited to participate in the Hot School Meals Programme from April 2024. The closing date for submitting completed applications is 1st March 2024. There will be an opportunity for other primary schools who had subsequently expressed an interest, to do so formally later this year.