

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM CHOIMIRCE SHÓISÍALACH, FORBAIRT POBAIL AGUS TUAITHE AGUS NA HOILEÁIN

JOINT COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL PROTECTION, COMMUNITY AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE ISLANDS

Dé Máirt, 23 Márta 2021

Tuesday, 23 March 2021

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 6.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 6.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Joe Carey,	Paddy Burke,
Paul Donnelly,	Róisín Garvey,
Claire Kerrane,	Paul Gavan,
Marc Ó Cathasaigh,	Eugene Murphy,
Éamon Ó Cuív.	Mark Wall.

Teachta / Deputy Denis Naughten sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Roadmap to Social Inclusion: Discussion

Chairman: I welcome all the Members. At the outset, I remind members of the joint committee that in order to have a duly constituted meeting and for it to proceed members are required to join the meeting remotely from within the defined precincts of Leinster House. I ask members and witnesses to turn off their mobile phones as they interfere with the recording system. As members are participating remotely from their offices, I ask that they would click on the raise hand icon at any point if they wish to contribute during the proceedings of the meeting and remain on mute until such time as I call them to speak.

I now turn to the main item on our agenda which is the discussion on the Roadmap to Social Inclusion. In this regard, I welcome the Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development, Deputy Joe O'Brien, and his officials - Ms Geraldine Hurley, assistant secretary at the Department of Social Protection, Dr. Dermot Coates, the chief economist at the Department of Social Protection, and Ms Bairbre Nic Aonghusa, assistant secretary at the Department of Rural and Community Development.

Since 1997, as a country, we have put in place successive national strategies focusing on the reduction of poverty and social exclusion in society. Today we will look at and discuss the current strategy, which is the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025. There are many different ways that we can measure poverty and deprivation but for me the most basic measure is hunger. We need to start addressing it by focusing on our children.

No child should go to bed hungry. A child will never reach his or her full potential if that child sits at a school desk hungry. According to a study by the State agency *safefood*, 10% of the population lives in food poverty yet we, as a food producing country, dump nearly 2 tonnes of food every minute. While there has been a welcome expansion in the school meals programme, what impact has Covid-19 had on the children who relied on these school meals not to go hungry? It is not just about hunger. It is also about the types of foods that families can afford to buy, which is contributing to the HSE figures indicating that one in five five year old children is either overweight or obese.

It is clear to this committee that Government policy can make a positive difference in addressing the fundamental issue of hunger, and improving people's lives and broader society as a whole. The roadmap has a stated ambition to reduce consistent poverty to 2% or less, and to make Ireland one of the most socially inclusive countries in the EU. With that in mind, I look forward to hearing from the Minister of State as to how likely we are to achieve this ambition.

Members of the committee and of the Houses have absolute privilege in respect of the statements made to either House of the Oireachtas or before the committee. By virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses, in this case, officials present in the precincts of Leinster House, are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the evidence they are required to give to the committee. If, in the course of the committee proceedings, witnesses are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and they are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against a Member of either House of the Oireachtas, a Member outside the House, or an official by name or in such a way as to make him, or her identifiable.

I call on the Minister of State, Deputy Joe O'Brien, to make his opening statement.

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien): I thank Deputy Denis Naughten, the Chair of this joint committee, and the committee members for the invitation to appear before the committee and provide an update on the implementation of the Roadmap for Social Inclusion.

I have responsibility for policy areas in two Departments which are complementary - social inclusion and community development. 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 as well which commits to its rigorous implementation.

The roadmap is a five-year whole-of-government strategy with the ambition of reducing consistent poverty 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 support for workers and their families, the expansion of employment opportunities to all who are in a position to work, continued improvements in supports for children, older people and people with a disability, ongoing investment at community level, and ensuring access for all to basic services that we all need to thrive. Under the current conditions within the economy and 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 duplicate 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 commitments to be delivered, in some cases by individual Departments and in others by a number of Departments working in collaboration, such as the Department of Social Protection and the Department of Justice to implement the additional three weeks parental leave in April this year and will be extended to seven weeks over the subsequent three years.

Implementation of many of the roadmap commitments is under way and a number are 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, and the publication of the volunteering strategy, as I mentioned.

There has also been progress in the development of the new employment services strategy, the successor to Pathways to Work; the provision of €5 million 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 next week; the development of a ten-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, among other changes, increases to the qualified child rates which will benefit some 419,000 children at a cost of €59 million in 2021; adjustment of the income thresholds for the working family payment with some 48,000 families benefiting in 2021 at a cost of €21 million; an increase to the living alone allowance which will benefit some 22,000 people; and, an increase to the weekly rate for the fuel allowance benefiting some 375,000 people at a cost of €36 million in 2021. I was also pleased that budget 2021 included a provision for new pilot community development projects with funding of €1 million available in 2021. Applications for this fund are currently open.

As Minister of State in the Department of Social Protection, I have responsibility for the community employment, CE, scheme, Tús and the rural social scheme. These schemes meet a number of departmental objectives, including supporting long-term unemployed people in returning 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 CE schemes and over 7,000 participants in Tús and the rural social scheme since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020. Funding for CE, Tús and the rural social scheme will amount to more than €500 million in 2021. During each period of level-5 restrictions, CE 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, the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, and I announced a further CE and Tús contract extension for those participants who are affected, up until 2 July 2021. Over 7,000 CE and Tús participants are benefiting 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 that CE schemes continue to offer those 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 members of the Roma community.

The social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP, is a €190 million 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. This type of work will be more important than ever as we recover from the pandemic.

I am chairing 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 sector. The group first met on 11 November 2020 and the second meeting is scheduled for this day next week, 30 March.

At the first meeting, I highlighted the need for collaborative work between Departments to drive the delivery of commitments. I asked members to consider how Covid-19 has affected people who are experiencing deprivation and 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 the programme for Government ambition is to reduce the national consistent poverty rate in Ireland to 2% or less by 2025. 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%. It is fair to say that if we reach that rate of poverty, it will be lowest ever in the history of the State and before it. The current rate of consistent poverty in Ireland, based on 2019 figures, is 5.5%. This rate is higher for more vulnerable groups, such as children, lone parents and people with a disability. Over the next four years, we will need to reduce the national figure significantly to achieve the targets set out in the roadmap.

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 in which the pandemic and public health restrictions first impacted on our lives in 2020.

It is important to state 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. I will 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 commitments related to social inclusion, such as the ending of direct provision and the introduction of a new regularisation scheme for undocumented migrants. Additional challenges have come to the fore in the last year in the context of the pandemic. The principles of just transition and climate justice need to be reflected in a plan for social inclusion. We have a new Department with a key role to play in the promotion of social inclusion. In this context, I am delighted that my colleague Deputy Harris, the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, has agreed to develop new commitments for inclusion in the roadmap. I acknowledge his commitment to social inclusion in his portfolio.

The roadmap includes a commitment on the production of an annual report on progress against each commitment. Work on the 2020 annual report is well under way and will be presented to this committee for discussion once it has been submitted to the Cabinet committee on social affairs and equality for consideration.

On 12 March, we passed a significant milestone, marking a full year since we entered lockdown as part of our efforts to deal with the spread of the Covid-19 virus across Ireland. During the past 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, leading to a Covid-adjusted unemployment rate, which includes the 465,000 persons receiving the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, of just under 25%. Many of those currently receiving the PUP will return to employment once the economy reopens. We will need to focus attention on providing employment supports to those whose jobs will not return, but also to those who were unemployed prior to the arrival of Covid.

In response to the economic impact of the pandemic and the associated public health restric-

tions 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 whose employment was affected by the crisis. To date, these critical supports, which include the PUP and the wage subsidy schemes, have resulted in cumulative expenditure of over €11 billion.

The positive effect of these interventions is reflected in an ESRI report published last year. It examined the impact of the Covid 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 pandemic policy responses, household income fell by 3%, on average. This was in comparison with an estimated fall of 7% in the absence of these responses.

In addition to these measures, the State has put in place a comprehensive suite of business supports for Irish employers. This is important to refer to in today's context owing to the key role of employment in social inclusion. These measures include, among others, the Covid restrictions support scheme, the Covid-19 credit guarantee scheme, the Covid-19 working capital scheme, the apprenticeship incentivisation scheme, the commercial rates waiver and the warehousing of deferred tax debts. Combined, these supports continue to relieve some of the financial pressure weighing on Irish employers as they navigate the economic crisis.

All of this underscores the importance of the roadmap for social inclusion. While it was developed and approved before the 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, economy and society find their way through this pandemic and move out the other side. While we must, and should, focus on economic solutions, they have to be developed within the broader context so the most vulnerable within our society will not become more marginalised or be left behind.

Chairman: I thank the Minister of State. He has given us a very comprehensive outline of the various strands. That the Minister of State responsible is chairing the social inclusion steering group clearly shows the determination of the Government. The first member who has indicated a desire to speak is Senator Burke.

Senator Paddy Burke: I thank the Minister of State for his comprehensive and detailed report. I welcome him and his staff to the meeting. I welcome the report and the roadmap. It is a great document. It is great that there is a minimum commitment and that it is extensive, with both food and clothes being given rather than just funding. I also welcome the fact that the Minister of State is chairing the group. It is significant.

There is quite a lot of support for people. Do all the people in need know where supports are available? One would nearly need a PhD to go through all the areas, across all the Departments, including the Department of Justice and the Department of Social Protection. Is there an easy way for people to find out where to get all of the assistance? That needs to be made available because it is the most vulnerable people who cannot access those things.

I welcome the roadmap as a way forward. I also welcome that there will be a review in 2022, rather than leaving it until much later, such as until 2025. It is a great idea and very welcome.

Deputy Joe O'Brien: I thank the Senator. He makes a fair point. There are many supports available. There are a couple of points I would make in response, particularly in the context of

the past 12 months. Intreo offices have remained open. They are open at least three mornings a week in most communities. That is the first thing I would say to a person who ask me what they are entitled to, apart from asking them to outline their circumstances. There are offices open across the country and people can drop in to them. Obviously, we are primarily directing people to access online information. I am not going to tell people to look at the website because they know that it is available. In terms of having a person with whom to interact on a one-to-one basis such that the complexity of a situation can be described, examined and considered and the appropriateness of the various payments can be considered, I make that additional point about the Intreo offices.

There have been fairly significant public information campaigns in the past 12 months, particularly around the PUP. Access to the PUP is quite broad; many groups can access it. That message has been going out on pretty much every channel we can use to get the message across.

If we are speaking about people who are in difficult situations and who may not be fully *au fait* with their entitlements, I draw attention to SICAP. The latter is operated by 49 local development companies across the country. They are in every community. They have workers embedded in communities who know where the vulnerabilities lie in those communities. Their services have remained accessible during this time, although not necessarily in the same open-door manner as the Intreo offices. Those are the three initial responses I would offer on the fair point raised by the Senator.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I thank the Minister of State for his opening statement. It is really welcome that we are having this discussion. It is the first such discussion we have had in the Oireachtas, given that the roadmap was published and then the general election was announced very soon thereafter. I suppose the opportunity for a much wider discussion on the elements of the roadmap and the proposals put forward in it kind of fell away. Of course, as has been referenced, Covid then came along and made a bad situation worse in terms of poverty and deprivation. We must bear in mind that the previous roadmap ended in 2017 but we had to wait until 2020 for this new roadmap. For those reasons, and particularly in light of the impact of Covid, we need a great sense of urgency in terms of meeting the commitments in the roadmap.

The roadmap contains a list of 69 commitments. How many of those are fully complete? How many of them have missed the timeline for completion, necessitating slight changes to the timeline? The level of monitoring is very important. Aside from the steering group, is there any other level of monitoring in the context of achieving and meeting the commitments? I am very concerned that the steering group has only met once. I appreciate that a meeting is scheduled for next week. If this issue is to be a serious priority for the Government and if the steering group is going to oversee and manage the commitments as they are outlined in the Minister of State's the opening statement and the related documentation, then it needs to meet more than once or twice a year.

The upcoming review in 2022 is welcome. Does the Minister of State envisage that the document will be updated in any way at that stage in light of the impact of Covid and several of the commitments contained in the roadmap? For example, there is a focus on the national minimum wage and keeping that as a floor, yet in the programme for Government there is a move towards the living wage, which, of course, is welcome. Will that aspect be considered or updated in the context of the review?

I was very surprised by the fact that so many of the social welfare rates are set below the poverty line. I know several stakeholders flagged this issue. There is no mention of bench-

marking to adequacy or the minimum essential standard of living. I am really concerned about that. We have social welfare rates that are below the poverty line and if nothing is included in terms of how to lift people out of poverty, that is of concern. The European Anti-Poverty Network, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed and Social Justice Ireland all made that point in respect of this document when it was published. I would like to see us moving towards an evidence-based approach to social welfare rates such that it would be, at least, about protecting people from poverty, rather than having the political football of a €5 increase each year. That should be a basic aim of any social protection system.

A much greater focus is needed on lone parents and their levels of consistent poverty and deprivation, which increased in 2019. I know that increase in deprivation was across the board but it is particularly embedded for lone-parent families and I believe that needs to be examined. Maintenance has a role to play. Sinn Féin has repeatedly put forward the need for a statutory child maintenance service. I hope the maintenance review that has been set up will report shortly and consider that issue.

A small section of the roadmap deals with the issue of food poverty. Unite the Union recently published proposals relating to deprivation that include information on food poverty. A figure of 680,000 people living in food poverty is outlined. What figure is the Department working off in terms of the level of food poverty? This is obviously a significant issue that we need to examine more closely. We need to have figures that are as accurate as possible.

The Minister of State mentioned community employment and the extension given to those who are currently on the scheme in terms of the end of their contract. Those who are on community employment and other schemes have missed out on time on those schemes, on training opportunities and on work experience as a result of Covid. Is an extension being considered in light of the loss of time on the schemes? In fairness, those on the schemes have missed out.

On fuel poverty, as the Minister of State is aware, the fuel allowance was extended last year. Is that being looked at for this year? The current period is due to finish next month. I ask the Minister of State to give the committee an indication in that regard.

Deputy Joe O'Brien: The Deputy made a good opening point regarding the delay in getting the roadmap back on the agenda as a result of the election situation and then Covid. I was eager to get the group together as quickly as possible before Christmas. To answer her question, I will address monitoring as well what has been done and what is in progress. Of the various commitments, eight have been achieved, six have been achieved with ongoing delivery, 52 are in progress and three are yet to commence. That is a reflection of the fact that momentum on this only really began since the Government came into office and that many of the Departments involved had much of their resourcing pulled in a different direction. Those tend to be the Departments that have been particularly at the forefront in the pandemic. Social protection, health and children cover the majority of the commitments and so the Department of Social Protection, the Department of Health and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth have had a lot of resourcing pulled in a different direction.

In terms of monitoring, the group has met once and will meet again next week. There is a great deal of interaction in between meetings as well. For example, I have met the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Harris, between meetings and there is ongoing engagement of officials between meetings as well. A great deal of the work is done between meetings. When the group gathers it is about catching up on what has been done but much of the work is progressing during meetings as well. It is not the case

that work is dropped for a couple of months and picked up again for a day or two; it is very high on my agenda. It is a large part of my work and something I work on in one way or another every week. There is a constant push behind it.

In terms of other monitoring mechanisms, the main one is the annual report on which I report to the Cabinet committee on social affairs and equality. This committee can play a role in that regard. I would welcome appearing before the committee periodically to update it on progress. I think that would help momentum in implementation of the report as well to have regular public scrutiny of it. I would be happy to do that.

On the review in 2022 and whether I would envisage the document being updated, I would expect so, particularly in the context of some of the things I have outlined and on which the Deputy made some good points as well in terms of the living wage. There are things in the programme for Government that are progressive and can be included in a revised roadmap. I outlined a number of other reasons it needs refreshing as well. The core of what we need to do is here in terms of the poverty targets in particular.

The Deputy mentioned benchmarking. It is referred to in the roadmap. There is a proposal to introduce benchmarking on the pension side. In terms of where that is at, it is not hugely progressive, but it is there in terms of something that we can push. Following work on the pensions commitment, there is a commitment to look at other social welfare rates as well. I would be an advocate of benchmarking. I agree with the general point in terms of how rates are raised in a political realm rather than based on the facts of people's incomes and the gap in people's incomes.

I take the Deputy's point in regard to lone parents. The Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys, and I met a group of representative organisations some weeks back, where we discussed some of the issues which the Deputy touched on, which I might touch on briefly now. On child maintenance, there is an ongoing review in that area which was flagged at that meeting. There has been some progress made on some of the issues that were raised by the group, but the child maintenance side is getting attention and a public consultation on it was recently opened as well. It is an issue that is recognised as one that we need to work on. There are other issues such as changes to lone parent supports when the youngest child turns 14 that we are looking at, and the area of employment and education and the difficulties on that side. A range of issues were discussed at that meeting that we are taking seriously. Lone parents are one of the three groups that I would see as needing particular attention. The other groups are people with disabilities and children.

On food poverty, one the benefits in terms of the steering group is that it is a type of inter-departmental group as well in terms of the social inclusion roadmap looking at all Departments. Food poverty is one of those issues that cuts across a number of responsibilities and possibly is one that nobody is necessarily putting up their hand to claim. That is the situation I am in now. We need to take ownership of food poverty in terms of where we are going to go with it. There is a lot being done in the Department of Health. The Chairman mentioned Safefood. I met with it before Christmas in regard to some of its work in this area. I am not sure of the Unite figures. I think I read the report the Deputy spoke about, but I do not recall the figures.

On the Departments figures, they are patchy. One of the pieces of work that needs to be done is to define food poverty more clearly. Food poverty is complex. I am not saying that to bat it off. It is in part about cash in the pocket, but is about accessibility as well. There are a lot of extenuating circumstances that add to food poverty, some of which people would never

think of. For example, something as simple, or as far removed, as planning can have an impact on food poverty. In my constituency there are sprawling housing estates on the edge of towns where there are no decent shops nearby but there are two or three chip shops that are much more accessible than the decent shop. It is in that regard that planning is an issue.

My intention is to write to all Departments asking them to assess their relevance in terms of food poverty. The Department of Health stands out in this regard, as does the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, but other Departments have a role to play. Food poverty stood out, particularly after the first meeting of the interdepartmental group, as an issue that needs to be pulled together. We are doing quite a bit on it in terms of the hot school meals. The sum of €65 million is budgeted for this year for school meals, which is very substantial. That is having a real impact. It was notable that during the pandemic when schools were closed, food provision carried on and parents picked up the food from the schools or it was delivered to them. This signals that there is something really wrong on that side of things. It manifests itself not just in the supports we provide, but in the need on the other end of the range scale with older people which, again, was highlighted by the pandemic.

The Department of Rural and Community Development provides supports to a number of organisations that facilitate meals on wheels. For example, we support FoodCloud, which is the main distribution point for much of the funding that comes from the Department of Social Protection through the Fund for European Aid for the Most Deprived, FEAD, programme. We support a number of community services programmes that implement that programme on a local basis. Last year, Irish Rural Link was provided with a grant to do national co-ordination work in regard to meals on wheels. The Department of Health is very much in this space in terms of the meal on wheels for older people. I am glad that the issue of food poverty was raised. It is a serious and tricky issue. We have arms out there that are working on it, but we need a clearer picture on the extent of it, we need to see what we are missing and we need to pull it together in a more coherent way.

On community employment, CE, I have heard that people who have completed a number of modules are concerned that because a lot of the training is not happening at the moment and they are due to finish up on the scheme in July, they may not be able to get a full qualification. I have been reassured that if people have to exit their CE contract, which will be the case for some, Intreo will deal with them. The officers in Intreo will go through the suite of training options available to them, with a clear intention of ensuring that what training has been done is not lost but built upon. There are financial incentives to support that, the training support grant being the most obvious, but also the back-to-education allowance at another level.

I cannot give the Deputy an update on fuel poverty. I am aware that there is a potential for extending the fuel season coming up in the next couple of weeks, but I do not have an update on whether a decision has been made. I hope I have covered the issues raised by the Deputy.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: Deputy Kerrane is getting as bad as Deputy Ó Laoghaire on the education committee in terms of having asked all of the questions I had written down, but I will forge on. We were asking about the specific commitments in the roadmap. In his introductory remarks, the Minister of State spoke about these being front-loaded. He gave some details to Deputy Kerrane. Would his Department be able to provide us with a note in this regard? The Minister of State said that some are completed, some are in train and some have not begun as yet. Will the Department provide us with a note so that we can go through it with different co-

loured highlighters? If there has been front-loading, which of those that have not been reached are priorities? Which are the ones the Minister of State really wants to complete? Which of those he really wants to get to have not yet been actioned at all? He has indicated that there will be a review. I hear that this will happen in early 2022. Are we talking about the first, second or third quarter? I just want to tie the Minister of State down on that.

He has rightly identified that what he is talking about is very interdepartmental. Looking through the roadmap and looking at his introductory comments, I feel it chimes greatly with the well-being indices project that is under way. One of the high-level goals relates to building inclusive communities. I was looking at the OECD model and civil engagement is one of the areas in which we score really badly in the OECD rankings, on which we might base our well-being indices. Will the Minister of State comment on that? I do not know if it amounts to a question.

To look at the broad thrust of where we are going, there was some discussion about benchmarking. Social Justice Ireland suggests that we should benchmark core social welfare payments at approximately 27.5% of the average wage. In budget 2021, we very much went after the most vulnerable cohorts when providing specific funding. That was merited, particularly in the context of Covid when a great many pandemic unemployment payments were in the mix, which may have muddied the waters. With regard to the general approach, does the Minister of State believe we should continue to specifically target particular cohorts or would we better off looking at an increase in general social welfare payments? Which approach does he believe would give us the best bang for our buck with regard to alleviating poverty?

The Minister of State has already spoken extensively about fuel poverty. As a primary school teacher, I believe the Department of Education has a significant role in this regard. The Minister of State referenced the hot school meals programme. I will close my remarks by saying that today is a day when percentages which sound smallish are being identified as great ambitions. I refer to the 7% year-on-year reductions in emissions and the 2%. It is easy to say 2% but it deserves acknowledgement. I know the Minister of State is driving this agenda. It is a tremendously ambitious target. If achieved, a reduction of 2% in the fuel poverty rate will, as the Minister of State said, be one of the most important things achieved under the programme for Government. That is not a question, I am just commending the Minister of State and the Department for taking on this job of work and driving it forward. Deputy Joe O'Brien is the right man for that job. I am sorry, I am probably rambling slightly but I did ask a couple of questions during my contribution.

Deputy Joe O'Brien: With regard to priorities for the coming year, I will go back to the fuel poverty side of things, mainly because it is one of the commitments that is a bit scattered and needs someone to pull it together. Many of the other commitments sit fairly squarely in particular Departments, including many which sit in our own Department of Social Protection. With regard to other priorities, we will be looking towards budget 2022, building up to it and seeing what we can do. With regard to the review in 2022, I do not want to predict the time of year at which it will come but I am eager for it to be completed earlier rather than later.

The Deputy makes a good point on the well-being indicators. While I talk a lot about the 2%, other indicators beyond just income are used within the roadmap. On the education side of things, there is a target in respect of retention rates, particularly in DEIS schools. That is a big factor with regard to social inclusion and poverty as well. We have targets for employment engagement for people with a disability. These are particularly important. Active citizenship rates are also included, as is housing quality. There are other markers included beyond income.

These do tally somewhat with the well-being indicators the Deputy has mentioned.

The Deputy mentioned specific targeting and general social welfare payments. We need to do both. We will follow the research and the data but the gap about which we are talking and the target we wish to reach will require something dramatic. We need to target those three groups which are just way above the average level and we need to consider the general base rates as well.

On the civil engagement side of things, it is important to mention that in a few weeks' time, from 12 to 16 April, we are holding the annual social inclusion forum virtually. It is usually held in person. Even as we speak, last week and this week, both the European Anti Poverty Network Ireland and Community Work Ireland have been talking to local community groups across the country about the content and shape of that week. I will certainly listen to and attend as many of the workshops as I can. The civil engagement side of things is really central in how we prioritise. I will take at least some of my lead with regard to prioritisation from what comes out of that forum. I think I have touched on most of the Deputy's points.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I thank the Minister of State for his statement and for the work that is going on. I wish him well as chair of the implementation group. I will draw attention to a couple of broader issues which I would like to address. In the statement, it is said that the State needs to play a role in delivering supports and services. It also says that it should not seek to displace the community and voluntary sector and talks about focusing on enhancing the existing community and statutory partnerships, saying that such partnerships are essential for better outcomes for communities and so on. It also says the Government is committed to strengthening partnerships. Many of those community, voluntary and charity sector bodies and agencies have never had their full funding restored. There have also been issues with some of the workers. I met some workers who were formerly section 39 workers and who are now section 56 workers. These were transferred to Tusla but have never had their salaries restored. As chair, will the Minister of State be able to bring that up with the group? I know this is not related directly to his brief, but these people are providing really essential services in the community and it is unfair that section 39 workers will have their salaries restored by the end of 2022 while these people have been somehow forgotten.

Covid was talked about as being a leveller but, when we look at the information and statistics being made available every day, we can see that those in working-class communities have been hit much harder by the virus and its impacts. We need to ensure that the services, agencies and charities supporting and helping these communities are reinforced. I would like to see funding restored to some of those. There is also a real case to increase this funding.

Towards the end, on the final page of the statement, there is something that really concerns me. It reads, "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." I am concerned because the last time we were in such circumstances and when the State coffers were under severe pressure, was during the collapse of the so-called Celtic tiger. Unfortunately, the community, voluntary and charity sector took the brunt of the cuts, as did the workers. Is there a commitment not to go back to those days when the first instinct was to cut services for those most disadvantaged, those most vulnerable and those in working-class constituencies? I hope that statement is not something that will come to pass for those communities.

I refer to community development projects. What was said is welcome. Many communi-

ties are on the margins, such as Travellers, the Roma community and people who have come into this country. I have had a lot of meetings with people who have talked about funding. Many organisations are looking for multiannual funding which would allow them to plan. The documentation states that the Department is looking for people to come forward with three-year plans. However, there is only a guarantee of funding for one year. That creates huge difficulties for agencies and people. How can one get someone who is full of energy to leave a position and join another project which they may want to work with when he or she is only guaranteed a one-year contract even though the Department is looking for three-year plans?

A lot of community and voluntary groups come to me to talk about the fact that there are virtually no training or capital budgets. We are asking community development projects to start up but no capital costs are being covered. It is something that needs to be addressed. If we are setting up a new community development project, possibly within an existing community development project or as an add-on or an enhanced part of the work it is doing, we have to think about funding agencies and projects to the fullest extent. A business would never start up without having some of its costs covered. That is not the way a business would operate. I do not think the community sector should operate in that way.

As I said I wish the chair of the group well and look forward to him coming back to the committee. As Deputy Kerrane said, a meeting twice a year is probably not enough. If the committee had an opportunity to delve deeply into the issue and ensure the programme is delivered that would be good.

Chairman: Does the Minister want to come back in?

Deputy Joe O'Brien: Funding for the community and voluntary sector is very topical. I attended an event earlier today. The Wheel in Carmichael recently published a consultation report on the needs of the community and voluntary sector. Funding was probably at the top in terms of what the needs were.

The need for multiannual funding is recognised in our five-year community and voluntary sector strategy. We have a multiannual funding programme. It is the support scheme for national organisations. I understand and accept that is not applicable to everyone and totally accept that the multiannual funding side, or lack thereof, makes it difficult for organisations to plan, attract and retain good people in the long term. That has been recognised officially and we are working on it.

The ongoing difficulty is that we are constrained by an annual Government budgetary situation as well. Trying to build in multiannual funding is always tricky, but has been done with the SSNO. I would be interested in growing that funding scheme.

I would need to have a conversation with the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, about section 39 organisations. I am interested in setting up meetings with all of the line Ministers regarding the relationships they have with their key community and voluntary organisations. I would be happy to make the case to him on that. I know it is an ongoing issue and a report with recommendations was published some time ago. Interestingly, at the event I attended today section 39 organisations and the Catherine Day report were mentioned.

Regarding my communications with other Ministers on this, I wish to flag that last month I wrote to all Ministers to ask them about their level of engagement with community and voluntary organisations, with a view to benchmarking, to use the word that was used in a different

context, and measuring the level and quality of engagement. That was all with a view to bulking that up.

A big part of my job is liaising with other Ministers to try to broaden and deepen their understanding and appreciation of the community and voluntary sector. The exercise I have started is something I will carry out every year. Bilateral meetings will also form part of that in order to build understanding across Government.

To be fair, the Deputy mentioned that in the previous recession the community and voluntary sector took a hit. There is a lot of evidence already to suggest that the approach this time will be different. The clear manifestation of that is the fact that last year the stability fund involved a significant commitment of €45 million to the sector. That was followed up by an additional €10 million in the budget. Last month it was announced that we will open a new scheme, on a smaller scale, totalling €10 million this year. I can say all of the things I want, but money is being put in place and the evidence is there in terms of there being a different approach this time to the community and voluntary sector.

I take the Deputy's point on only one year of funding being granted for community development projects. He mentioned training budgets. In respect of the five-year community and voluntary sector strategy, there is a cross-sectoral group comprising different Department officials and representatives from the community and voluntary sector. It prioritised three things to focus on this year. At the top of that list was training. Within that area, it prioritised three areas in particular. The first is community organisations that are volunteer-based and board members of community and voluntary organisations, because there is an issue with retaining board members, board members feeling stretched and so on. Another strand is LCDCs, in particular the PPN members.

The volunteering strategy published last year commits to supports. Again, there was quite a significant bump in funding for volunteering last year. It is the best bang for buck one can get in terms of investment in volunteering. This is not just a phrase. The evidence is there to show that a small amount of money put into volunteering will reap multiples in terms of benefits. We are in a good place in terms of having a full volunteering centre in each county by the end of this year and a set of policies and support around that. Volunteering Ireland in key in that regard.

I also wish to flag the fact that the strategy was launched last year but the implementation group has started to meet. The implementation phase of the strategy has started and supports and training are part of that. I ask the Deputy to shout if I have not covered any of the issues he has raised, but from my notes here I believe I have touched on most things.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I wish to come back in on one issue. Former section 39 organisations that have been transferred to Tusla are now called section 56 organisations. They have not had pay restoration even though there has been an agreement with section 39 organisations which are still in the same position.

Deputy Joe O'Brien: Okay. I will commit to following up on that. I do not know the details.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: Go raibh maith agat.

Senator Mark Wall: I thank the Minister of State and his staff for attending and all the staff in both Departments for all the work they have done in the past year. It has been mentioned by all members of the committee but it is always important to say thanks because what they have

gone through has been considerable.

I am glad that other members raised the issue of a living wage and that the Minister of State referenced it too. It is important that our conversations are about a living wage rather than about a minimum wage with a minimal increase. I welcome the fact he is talking about a living wage, which we all should be talking about.

The national childcare scheme was referenced. What is the status of that? Covid has probably taken over in importance, given that many people are working from home, but pre-Covid it was a big issue for many people, particularly in the commuting counties where people were paying almost a second mortgage in childcare costs. That cannot continue for these people when we emerge from Covid. They get up very early in the morning and take their children to crèches far away to avail of childcare services. Where does that fit into the report and will the Minister of State provide an update on it?

There have been a couple of conversations about providing a one-stop shop for bereavement supports. Has the Minister of State considered that? It has been raised in various conversations but particularly during Covid, it has been a big issue for many people trying to avail of different aspects of the bereavement process. What is the status of that?

I return to the issue of carer's allowance. The measures in the most recent budget were welcome but the carer's means test has not been updated since 2008. I continue to hear from people who cannot avail of the carer's allowance. To give a quick example, I was recently contacted by a woman who had to give up work to care for her husband. The couple still have a mortgage and are trying to live off a carer's allowance payment, which is simply not good enough to cover a mortgage. That is being replicated throughout the country, with estimates suggesting that about 30,000 people are outside the threshold for the carer's allowance but are giving care. We have to reconsider the means test because the issue is affecting so many people.

The Minister of State and some members mentioned food poverty. One issue I have come across during the pandemic relates to community groups who have sprung up and are providing food parcels to people throughout rural Ireland. Many such community groups have found people who were not known to them before and who are living by themselves in isolation. This has been a terrific response by the groups to help these people out. The Minister of State mentioned the meals on wheels campaign and indicated he has been talking to its representatives. I am aware the HSE has partially funded some of those meals but I ask him to re-examine the matter. These community groups have sprung up in response to the pandemic. Some of them provide 80 or 90 meals a day in various corners of County Kildare, where I am from, but it is happening in every county. Perhaps the Minister of State will examine that issue and include the groups in the meals on wheels campaign he mentioned.

Turning to the social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP, I welcome the work it does in my county. The current SICAP will end in 2022 and there is €39 million for 2021. What plans are there for the new SICAP? What is the status of it?

I raise the issue of what were formerly referred to as RAPID areas. These are socially deprived areas, which I have worked in for a long time. In my opinion and that of many others, we need to target those areas heavily. Can that issue be examined? We need to look at it.

I welcome the extension of the CE schemes. I have come across people in CE schemes whose medical cards had been cancelled because they could not provide an end date, and in

fairness to the Minister of State, he resolved that issue by extending the scheme. It is a simple issue but it is very important for those in the scheme. Nevertheless, we continue to have problems for people who are 61 or 62 years old and are not yet near their pension age but are coming to the end of their CE time. Are there plans for those people? They may be three or four years away from drawing down their pension and do great work within their community. They may have been working in the scheme for six or seven years but may feel they cannot go anywhere else because they are so used to that way of life. The Minister of State might comment on that.

Like other members, I wish the Minister of State well. This is very important work and I look forward to further engagement.

Chairman: I apologise to the Senator and to viewers on Oireachtas TV. For some reason, while we in the committee room could see him, he could not be seen by viewers on the television.

Senator Mark Wall: Maybe they were better off.

Deputy Joe O'Brien: I could see the Senator throughout his contribution. I thank him for opening with the remark about the staff and I echo it. The Department and the staff have not only been on the front line throughout the pandemic but adapted extraordinarily quickly and dealt with an extraordinary volume of applications. The difficulty of that cannot be overstated, so I appreciate the Senator acknowledging that.

On the national childcare scheme, I can give the Senator some statistics but if he wants to clarify what information he is seeking, I can revert to him with it. A total of 92,000 active applications have been submitted, comprising 57,000 income-assessed applications relating to 67,000 children and 34,000 universal applications relating to 36,000 children. About 3,000 providers have been contracted to provide the national childcare scheme. I have some further information on it to hand but if the Senator wishes to ask a follow-up question, I will see whether I have what he seeks rather than read through all the information front of me.

On the one-stop shop for bereavement supports, if I recall correctly, the Senator's colleague has raised the issue in the Dáil with the Minister, Deputy Humphreys. I will check with her and get an answer for the Senator.

I will take away the Senator's point on the carer's allowance and the means test not having been updated since 2008.

On food poverty and the meals on wheels campaign, that too is something I will take on board. To backtrack a little to my earlier point about writing to the various Departments to see what they are doing in this area, I envisage and hope that out of that we will develop some kind of a working group. I hope the Department of Health might be involved in that, although I do not want to pre-empt anything, given that the request has not yet been made. It is at such a forum that I can bring the specific issue of the funding for meals on wheels that the Senator raised.

I thank the Senator for mentioning SICAP. We do not speak enough about it but brilliant work is being done throughout the country. We are at very early stages of thinking about what the new SICAP might look like but there will be a consultation process on that. It is something I am personally eager to develop because SICAP has a very significant impact on communities throughout the country and it is important we get the next iteration of it right. There have been some calls for the current SICAP to be extended because of Covid and we are examining whether that is an option.

My understanding is that RAPID areas no longer exist in many respects and that they have been replaced to a great extent by the Pobal deprivation index, which is much more detailed in terms of the data used to assess deprivation. The community enhancement programme has replaced RAPID areas. The programme grants sums of money annually to local community development committees, which are on the ground and know best where to direct the money. The committees grant the funding to local groups and to the need as they see it.

On the CE schemes and the age group the Senator mentioned, there is the service support stream as well, which can offer options to people in that age group to allow them to continue working to pension age. My latest update on that was that that allocation for the service support stream places, which allows people to reach pension age, was not fully used, nationally at least. It can be at local level but there is some scope to trade the allocation, within regions at least. I am putting on the Senator's radar that the service support stream might be an option for some of the people he mentioned. I have touched on most of his points but does he want to come back to me on any of them?

Senator Mark Wall: No. I thank the Minister of State. I may send him something on the national childcare scheme.

Senator Paul Gavan: I thank the Minister of State for his detailed presentation and the really good level of engagement we have had over the past hour or so. A lot of ground has been covered so I will be relatively brief.

I wish to make one key point. I suspect the Minister of State may agree with me on it but it will be interesting to hear what he has to say. On allowances and social welfare payments, the jobseeker's allowance was €197 in 2009 a week and today, nearly 13 years later, it is €203 a week. There is a huge gap there and previous speakers referred to it. I have a simple question on this issue. If we are serious about social inclusion, then is a significant increase in that welfare rate not an absolute necessity in this coming year? I cannot see how all the important things the Minister of State mentioned can be delivered without that type of seismic move. He used the word "dramatic" earlier. This increase has to happen, otherwise we will end up talking about good intentions again. Respectfully, I think the Minister of State will agree that is not good enough at this point. I would like a clear statement from him on what needs to happen to those social welfare rates, given that so little has happened to them over the past decade.

I am not entirely happy with how the Department defines poverty. It is significant that organisations like Social Justice Ireland come up with much higher figures for poverty, such as the figure of 680,000 people, including 200,000 children, living in food poverty. How will the Minister of State's policy address the key issue of in-work poverty? In my experience as a trade unionist and, indeed, in my current job, the issue of people who are working for a living but are not managing to earn a living is a massive problem for us. I will give one simple example. When we increase the cost of fuel, people on the minimum wage cannot access fuel allowances. While it might seem that we are covering and protecting people, we are not. People at the lowest levels of pay do not get any additional money. I am concerned about how the overall policy will address the issue of in-work poverty because it seems to me that the goalposts have, for the most part, been shifted below the minimum wage.

I am intrigued about the seven high-level goals in the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025. The second goal is to ensure work pays and fair pay and conditions for workers. Can the Minister of State tell us what specific actions the Department has taken in the context of ensuring fair pay and conditions for workers? It is a genuine, serious question. When we talk

about fair pay and conditions for workers, the elephant in the room is that Ireland, unlike most other countries in the European Union, does not have a right to collective bargaining. In that context, how does a private sector worker get a pay increase? It is not there. We know that, for an awful lot of people, pay has remained static over the past decade.

The other problem is that the Government - not the Minister of State personally, I hasten to add - has set its face against collective bargaining. In fact, it wrote to the European Union only a few weeks back to ask that an upcoming directive be watered down to a recommendation, just in case collective bargaining may be somewhat strengthened. As already stated, the elephant in the room is collective bargaining. What specific actions is the Department taking to ensure fair pay and conditions for workers? We know we have one of the largest low-pay sectors anywhere in Europe. I again thank the Minister of State for his time.

Chairman: I again apologise to the Senator and to viewers on Oireachtas TV for the fact that we cannot see him on screen.

Deputy Joe O'Brien: On Senator Gavan's first point, I agree that the base rate needs to go up. I will say that very often people have associated financial supports as well, such as an increase for a qualifying child, child benefit, other supports outside of my Department, such as the housing assistance payment, medical cards and so on. However, I agree with the Senator that we need to do something significant about the base rate.

On the Senator's point about in-work poverty, I refer to commitment 20. We have a target to further improve Ireland's EU ranking for in-work poverty by reducing it to 2%. This is a real issue and I am glad the Senator has raised it. This speaks to the issue I raised earlier on having other sub-targets as well, but I recognise in-work poverty is certainly an issue. From my engagement with officials in the Department, I know they recognise that. There are also efforts to address it in the context of the working family payment and the threshold relating to it.

The living wage is the Senator's main point. There are things my Department can do but there are also things that other Departments can do. That is where the living wage and pay rates in general come in. One of the reasons we have the interdepartmental group is so that we can join the dots with regard to how we support work from an income support point of view in the Department of Social Protection, but also from the wage rate point of view in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

Is there something else I have not touched on, brief as my answers were?

Senator Paul Gavan: I will be very brief and I appreciate the Minister of State's answer. On the issue of how his Department has ensured that work pays through fair pay and conditions for workers, my concern is that as workers do not have a statutory right to collective bargaining in this State, unlike most of Europe, they are at a distinct disadvantage. Workers in many sectors have no means of getting a pay rise. It is a reality that many workers have not had a meaningful pay rise in over a decade.

Deputy Joe O'Brien: Collective bargaining does not come within the remit of the Department of Social Protection, rather it is a matter for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. I am happy to bring the issue, and what is happening in that regard, to the table at next week's meeting.

Senator Eugene Murphy: This is a really important topic. The Minister of State has given the impression that he will certainly work well on this and make an all-out effort to try

and eliminate poverty, particularly among children. I saw figures recently which indicated that there are more than 200,000 children in poverty, much of which is food poverty. The worrying and frightening thing is that if one checks the figures, one can see that poverty is actually rising. There are up to 50,000 extra children in poverty now compared with nine or ten years ago. That should not be happening.

I will not repeat much of what has been said, but I will make a very strong point about the importance of the school meals service. Unfortunately, there are households in which children do not get proper meals. I am not being judgmental of anybody but at least we know schools are providing meals. Even if the school meals service is not there, schools and teachers are very good. I have been involved with schools and know for a fact they will make an awful lot of effort if they feel a child is neglected, is not bringing lunch to school or has not had a proper breakfast. Schools and teachers will pull out all the stops to look after such children.

It is very important that this programme was extended. If children are coming to school and getting meals, at least we know that they are not being totally neglected. I certainly worry that many more children will be neglected and in food poverty when this lockdown is over. We all have to work to get rid of child poverty. It should not be happening in our country. One of the main measures to achieve this is the programme for giving meals to children in schools. That is extremely important. It is shocking to listen to the contributions, including that of the Chair, about the amount of food that is being dumped. We all say from time to time that no one should go hungry. There are lots of schemes in place but it would be great if we could do something about all that food that is being dumped. I am sure it could be used to extend the school meals service.

Chairman: There seems to be a problem with the connection to the Upper House. I apologise that we did not see Senator Murphy on screen. I also I apologise to our viewers.

Senator Eugene Murphy: The Chair should count himself lucky. He sees too much of me.

Deputy Joe O'Brien: I thank the Senator for emphasising the importance of that programme and I know the Minister is committed to it as well. I understand she will be making an announcement soon on the extension of that programme. It is something we will be looking to build on because it has a direct and tangible impact for people who need it most. I reiterate the point from earlier that even during lockdown and when schools were closed, children and parents who wanted to pick up food were being facilitated. It is an impactful programme and one that I would be interested in growing.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I will be brief because I have to make a television appearance in a few minutes. I listened carefully to all of the contributions, which have been positive. However, one of the objectives is to extend employment opportunities to all who can work. Once again, and for the 15 millionth time in politics - this is not just directed at the Minister of State but it has been directed at all my colleagues over the years - we have a class of people who will never get or who are unlikely to get commercial employment, who want to work and who make a good contribution when they get opportunities on schemes such as Tús, the rural social scheme or community employment schemes. I am wondering if we can collectively plead that this basic right to work, to make a contribution and to get up in the morning with a purpose will be granted.

When the Tús scheme was set up, it was done so backwards to the way it is at the moment. The idea was that one did three years on a community employment scheme. Then if one did

not get commercial employment through activation, one would move onto a Tús work scheme where one would be able to effectively continue without being trained into some job one was never likely to get. All of our community centres, outdoor facilities and so on are maintained by people on these schemes. This is work that has to be done and it is not work for the sake of work but it gives people a sense of self-worth and, properly done, it also gives them a bit of extra income. I am begging that this would be looked at because it is the main thing that would help a lot of people who are begging us to stay on schemes when they come to the end of them. It is not a problem getting people to go on a scheme but it is a problem allowing people to stay on one.

I heard the Minister of State's response to the question on RAPID. I would like to tease this issue out further. It did not matter what way the statistics were done, the same areas came up. The Minister of State may remember the famous Trutz Haase index. On one occasion I had someone from Trutz Haase in the office and I was shown an interesting experiment. He said it was amazing that if one puts in the areas of the country that buy the fewest tickets from Ticketmaster, it will be more or less coterminous with the RAPID areas. I told him he was coddling, he showed me quite a few areas that I threw at him and it worked more or less perfectly. The point I am making is that regardless of how one looks at it, the same areas always come to the fore in this regard. Those areas all have major problems. That does not mean that individual poverty does not exist in other places but where one gets huge concentrations of disadvantage, that disadvantage feeds itself and creates a massive community of problems beyond the individual.

Perhaps the Minister of State would give a commitment that he will come before the committee some day - if the committee invites him and he agrees - to discuss this issue of the urban areas that suffer the most disadvantage and nothing else. I do not care how we define them because we will wind up with the same areas if we are honest and if we do not start spreading out to everybody. This was a focused scheme. Would the Minister of State consider that?

I agree with all the points made by the other contributors. In the past ten years, the nature of supplementary welfare has changed. Family circumstances can be complex. Someone in a house could have an income and that household could still be really poor because of family circumstances. If, for example, one member of a couple is earning money and not giving it over, there can be crisis. He or she might disappear for a weekend to a hostelry or somewhere.

In the old days, the community welfare officer knew the people and had discretion but now it is all done on the basis of an eight-page formula. There is no discretion to deal with real crisis poverty and with emergencies that arise as was the case in the past. One could say that maybe there was a leakage of money that should not have been leaked, and maybe there was. On the other hand, which scenario would we prefer? Would we prefer that some money got wasted and that we rescued a whole lot of people in dire situations which, on the surface, would not pass the slow means test relating to the current supplementary welfare allowance and that some money would go to waste or that we leave those people absolutely stuck? We know that the only place those people can go in those really tough situations is to the moneylender. This is a serious issue and those are my points. Can the Minister of State keep the answers to two minutes because I have to buzz off and do a television appearance over in Buswells?

Chairman: The Minister of State might come back on that.

Deputy Joe O'Brien: I will try my best to keep my answer to two minutes. On that overall goal of facilitating work for all who can work, there are a number of categories within that where things are happening. For people with disabilities in particular, there are a couple of

Dormant Accounts Fund projects in the Department of Social Protection that are doing good work in that regard. There are also wage support schemes for people with disabilities and there are thousands of people benefiting from those.

The Deputy is getting more at community employment schemes here, however. We recognise at a local level that there are two loose cohorts of people who participate on such schemes. There are some who are more in the activation space and some who we can classify as in the social inclusion space. If I recall reading this correctly - I stand open to correction - many of the sponsors liked to retain the fluidity between those two groups. We should all be reluctant to say that someone might never work in a commercial sense as the Deputy said. We accept that some people probably never will do so but we must at least ensure that they still have the opportunity to do that. It is important that they are not prevented from doing that.

On RAPID, I am open to the Deputy's suggestion that we have a more formal discussion but we would need to frame how it would take place. It may be of interest to him that we are piloting a small number of place based leadership programmes. One is in Darndale and another in Drogheda, areas experiencing the type of deprivation and social issues to which he referred. This is about pulling together the agencies already on the ground because while much is being done on the ground, it is often done in silos and people do not talk to each other. This pilot based leadership scheme is about pulling people together, pooling resources and being more coherent. It is small and not on the scale of RAPID but as I mentioned to Senator Wall, in terms of the community enhancement programme and the use of the Pobal deprivation index, money is being targeted by local community and development committees, LCDCs, at a local level as well to community groups.

I risk disagreeing with Deputy Ó Cuív on the supplementary welfare allowance and community welfare officers. I understand from the feedback I get that community welfare officers still exercise significant discretion and flexibility. One hears cases of people not getting the support they hoped for or sought but community welfare officers are about flexibility and discretion. I am eager to see that as a reality on the ground.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The Minister of State is creating mini area implementation teams, AITs. The AITs used to involve all the agencies as well as community representatives. I would love to discuss this in detail. In my view, an excuse was used to stop focusing significant resources in the areas of highest deprivation. I am not blaming the Minister of State. He was not in politics in 2011 when certain forces got at this and decided there was too much focus on these areas and they were getting too much, despite have always been the most deprived areas in our communities. Each of us could write a list and we would all come up with more or less the same areas. We can discuss that again. I must go to do my television programme. I apologise.

Chairman: If members wish to come in again, they should raise their hand. Deputy Ó Cuív and I have considerable experience of dealing with community welfare officers. On the issue of discretion, an appeal of a community welfare officer's decision was never needed because there was significant flexibility. That has been tightened up. I accept the work the CWOs do in the Department of Social Protection is far more flexible than in other areas. I accept there is an ethos in the Department and among officials of trying to help people out. Community welfare officers are flexible but the scale of flexibility is far short of the flexibility in the past. Deputy Ó Cuív is right. Public money was probably misspent but a great deal of good work was done. We need to keep an eye on that.

Senator Paddy Burke spoke about the range of supports that are available. The Citizens

Information website is a useful tool for me, as a public representative, and for citizens. Many people are not tech savvy. Last week, the Irish Postmasters' Union spoke about the difficult financial situation its members are facing. It is seeking the introduction of an annual public service obligation for the postmasters. Postmasters and postmistresses provided a valuable service to people who were eligible for social welfare schemes by making them aware of their eligibility and assisting them in filling out the application form. It was a successful service.

In 2018, as the then Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, I gave a commitment to transfer offline services to the post office network. This service could be provided as part of the Department of Social Protection through postmasters to ensure people are aware of their eligibility for schemes. I ask the Minister of State, Deputy O'Brien, and the Minister, Deputy Ryan, to consider the broader issue in the Department.

Many members have already spoken about food poverty which I raised at the start of the meeting. The Government published its climate action legislation today. Food poverty and food waste are opposite sides of the same coin. We are dumping five and a half kilograms per day for each person who finds his or herself in food poverty. That contradiction must be dealt with. We have set targets for 2030 and 2050, which I hope we will achieve. That is the objective of the legislation. Achieving them will have a minimal impact on our global climate challenge. However, tackling food waste which, in this country, is the third biggest carbon emitter, would have an impact on our overall global emissions. Ireland is in an ideal situation as one of the biggest food producers in the world *per capita*. Initiatives such as the FoodCloud initiative have been successful. The meals on wheels model will be better co-ordinated through Irish Rural Link. Senator Wall spoke about a voluntary initiative delivering food parcels. One of the biggest challenges it faces is access to vehicles to distribute the parcels.

The Minister of State has an opportunity to set an international benchmark, working with the Minister, Deputy Ryan, to deal with both sides of the challenge, food waste and food poverty, for the benefit of people and the climate challenge we face globally. I hope the Minister of State will work with the climate side to achieve a reinvigorated approach to this. Project Ireland 2040 makes a clear commitment to address the food waste challenge.

Deputy Joe O'Brien: I will speak to the Minister, Deputy Ryan, about both areas. The Chair makes an interesting point on how the post offices could be used. We have a network of Citizens Information offices across the country. Some of them struggle with opening hours and renting premises. I will speak to the Minister about co-operation with the post offices as there may be some merit in that. The FoodCloud accepts a lot of food that has exceeded its expiry date from supermarkets and restaurants and puts it to good use on the side of food poverty. In recent years, the FoodCloud has grown exponentially in terms of its reach and we are happy to continue to support it. I am grateful for these issues being put on the radar and I will speak to the Minister, Deputy Ryan, directly about both of them.

Chairman: Most of this country's biggest producers of fruit and vegetables are in the constituency of the Minister of State. In terms of access to and cost of food, one of the big challenges for people is eating food in season. For example, strawberries do not grow in Ireland in the middle of winter. Perhaps working with Bord Bia I suggest that every schoolchild receives an eating in season calendar in order to know when various vegetables and fruits are available. Schoolchildren could then bring a calendar home so that their parents can shop accordingly thus reducing their overall cost of food, reduce the amount of food that is wasted and benefit the growers in north County Dublin. The initiative would create national and local benefits. I leave my suggestion with the Minister of State and call on Senator Garvey to make her contribution.

Senator Róisín Garvey: I thank the Minister of State for coming here and giving of his time, particularly at this hour. Some very interesting topics have been raised. In the past I have worked with the FoodCloud and meals-on-wheels. Both entities go hand in hand. I have seen firsthand the amazing resources they supply to the community sector that create magic meals for people, which is phenomenal. We have a great example of this in Newmarket-on-Fergus, of which members may have heard, but even they cannot keep up with the volume of stuff offered by FoodCloud. Therefore, greater support must be given to companies like FoodCloud to engage with family resource centres and other areas. Some secondary schools have fitted kitchens that are perfect for cooking food. I believe that there are a couple of links missing between food waste and what can be done so we should tackle these. As we all know, we have a country full of volunteers. If a community needed hot meals and we gave a shout-out in any community in Ireland one would quickly get people running in the door to help. Perhaps greater links could be made between food waste and companies like FoodCloud.

I have an interest in food poverty. According to research conducted by *mywaste.ie* and also research done by the Green Party in green schools even children from a lower socio-economic background threw away food. So it is not as simple as believing that only well-off people waste food and poorer people do not waste food. There is an issue with the ridiculous amount of food that can be bought cheaply; it is wasted as it is impossible to eat it all.

On the point raised by the Chairman, work is being done and being piloted by green schools on a food flag as opposed to a travel, energy or water flag. The aim of the initiative is to teach children to grow food, which many schools are doing anyway, and eat seasonally. It is terrible that we need to teach adults through their children but pester power works best. I will talk to the Minister of State about the pilot scheme after the meeting.

The Minister of State does not have an easy station but he came from the community development sector and it is really helpful to have a Minister of State from that realm. He is not long in his job and he has done very well so far. It would be easy to throw all of the problems at him but there are solutions and we just need to focus on getting them rolled out. Let us get things done and resolve food poverty plus all of the things that we have touched on today. I look forward to working with him.

Deputy Joe O'Brien: I wish to comment on the input made by the Chairman. In the programme of Government, and it has started in reality, there are additional supports for the horticulture industry to fill the space where we import produce that we could grow here. I also know that my colleagues in other Departments are interested in pushing that aspect.

Specifically on the points made by Senator Garvey, food waste happens at every level. Earlier this year, we published an action plan on the circular economy and there are specific actions around food waste that needs pushing. Food wastage is complex as there are issues around accessibility, education and the income side of things.

Certainly, FoodCloud is a well run operation. To my knowledge, it has three hubs across the country and I am not sure if there is a need for more. I will raise the issue in the further discussion that will, hopefully, happen. I am not sure that the Senator heard what I said earlier so I reiterate that I propose to write to all Departments that have some sort of investment in the food poverty side of things, and the Department of Health is key in that regard. I would like to find out more about the reach of the organisations that they support in terms of the meals-on-wheels side of things that she mentioned, and find out if there is some way to assess whether there are gaps.

Senator Róisín Garvey: From my experience of community employment schemes and how they operate in my home constituency, on an annual basis each CE manager decides the programme of work for the CE scheme workers. Can the scheme take into account biodiversity and climate issues? I ask because many of the schemes involve spraying Roundup on weeds, cutting lawns and maintaining green spaces, which is great but I want them to move towards creating aesthetically pleasing spaces that protect people's mental health and are good for the environment and biodiversity. Greater linkage is necessary because money is being wasted on mowing lawns, pruning trees and cutting hedges. If we let things grow a bit wilder then it would be a win-win for everybody and save money.

In terms of CE schemes, I have been asked by quite a few farmers' wives if their husbands could join their local CE schemes because they are going mad being at home. Some farmers have moved away from farming and have very little to do yet it seems they do not qualify to participate on CE schemes. Their wives have begged me to arrange for their husbands to be allowed to participate on the schemes for a day or two per week. Has the Minister of State considered that option? Many people in rural Ireland experience loneliness and boredom, particularly farmers who live on their own or just with their wives and have no neighbours around. These farmers would love to join their local CE schemes as it would bring them into towns or villages where they could have a chat with the lads. Participation in a CE scheme is another way of integrating as opposed to just going to the pub, which we do not have at the moment. I urge the Minister of State to expand the scheme. As has been said, the voluntary sector is so valuable and these people are happy to do more work.

Deputy Joe O'Brien: The CE scheme has a fairly straightforward eligibility criteria. Being stuck at home does not rule anyone out from accessing a CE scheme. Perhaps the rural social scheme might be relevant to the people mentioned. Possibly of more relevance is the fact that there will be 3,000 additional places, which were announced as part of the July stimulus package last year. We have put initial feelers out to see how many people are interested in taking up the new places. There is interest so that could and I hope should allow schemes to be developed in new areas like those mentioned by the Senator. There is scope for doing new things under the CE scheme and we want people do to new things so there is a place for the Senator's ideas.

Chairman: Before we finish I want to refer to a comment made by the Minister in his opening contribution. He highlighted the commitment in the programme for Government both to end direct provision and bring in a regularisation scheme for undocumented migrants. I know that this is something that he has worked for a long number of years and it is something that I have had an interest in for a long number of years. I compliment him on his work to progress this particular issue. I hope that over the lifetime of this Government, we will see the end of direct provision and we will put a scheme in place to ensure we do not have undocumented migrant workers in this country. St. Patrick's Day was last week. Up to 50,000 Irish people are undocumented in the United States. We have a cohort of people here who are contributing to our society and economy, yet do not have legal status. To return to the point made earlier about community welfare officers, if these people fall on hard times, the only people they can turn to, and who have been quite helpful in some previous cases, are community welfare officers. These people have been paying tax and PRSI in many instances but because they do not have legal status, they cannot avail of the safety net that is available to every other worker in this country. I acknowledge the role the Minister of State has played to date in that respect and I look forward to working with him and his colleagues in government to achieve both of those aims.

23 MARCH 2021

I thank the Minister of State and his official for engaging with the committee. They have made a comprehensive contribution to addressing many of the issues we raised. He has given a commitment to Deputy Ó Cuív on RAPID areas and the committee will engage with his officials on that. There is also an opportunity to assist him in the area of food poverty, on which there is a lack of co-ordination. This issue straddles the two elements of the committee's remit. We are willing to work with the Minister of State in a co-operative manner to try to progress that issue on behalf of all our citizens. I thank him and his officials for their time.

The joint committee will meet on Wednesday, 31 March in private session on the Microsoft Teams platform. I thank viewers who tuned into Oireachtas TV to watch this meeting.

The joint committee adjourned at 8.22 p.m. *sine die*.