MAINTAINING MOMENTUM:
IMPLEMENTING THE ROADMAP FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION

CWI/EAPN IRELAND PREPARATORY WORKSHOPS KEY MESSAGES TO THE SOCIAL INCLUSION FORUM 2022

Maintaining Momentum: Implementing the Roadmap for Social Inclusion
Preparatory Workshops
Key messages to the Social Inclusion Forum 2022
Introduction

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

Launched in 2020, *The Roadmap to Social Inclusion 2020 – 2025* is the current national strategy and the theme of SIF 2022 is ***Maintaining Momentum: Implementing the Roadmap for Social Inclusion.***

Community Work Ireland (CWI) and the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) Ireland collaborate annually to organise a series of workshops to support participation at the Social Inclusion Forum and to identify issues of concern to people affected by poverty and the organisations working with them. In 2022, four workshops were held by CWI and EAPN Ireland, two on-line and two in-person in Galway and Dublin, reflecting the four themes of SIF 2022

- Core Essentials – the cost of living and income adequacy
- Supporting Communities
- Social inclusion and children
- Social inclusion and disabled people

Over 120 people registered for the workshops, with a marked difference between the numbers opting for the on-line and in-person events. In total 26 people attended the in-person workshops and 54 attended the on-line sessions. Participants came from all over the country, from a broad range of backgrounds and experiences. Each workshop provided for the opportunity for breakout room discussions.

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

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

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

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

Core Essentials: Cost of Living and Adequate Income
Roadmap Goal: to ensure that all people can live with confidence that they have access to good quality healthcare, housing, energy and food.
Chapter within Roadmap: Chapter 8

As stated in 2021, access to adequate and affordable healthcare, housing energy and food are all interlinked and central to health, wellbeing and to the life experiences of people, families and communities. When people and families are poor, they cannot access these core essentials, and this has a significant impact on their lives.

If anything, the situation for many families has deteriorated since last year and many people who have never had to look for support before are presenting to community organisations and charities because inflation, currently at an unprecedented 7.8%, is pushing them into poverty.
There was agreement that people are falling into poverty easily because of rising costs and finding it very difficult

We would have seen an increase in the reliance on foodbanks during COVID, but it is much deeper now

to get back out of poverty. Many people are struggling on low and inadequate incomes and dependency on the ever-increasing number of foodbanks is growing. Any unexpected expenditure items – such as a visit to the doctor or a hospital bill – can make it impossible for many people to make ends meet. Energy poverty and the inability to heat homes is a real issue for many people.

There was an urgent call for the State to intervene in relation to inflation and the rising costs of basic items. Participants highlighted that the state stepped in during the pandemic to protect people's incomes and poverty data highlights the positive impact of this. A similar response is required in light of the high levels of inflation. Participants also highlighted that ensuring an adequate income for everyone is an ongoing issue and not just linked to the current inflation crisis. The importance of the Minimum Essential Standard of Living was highlighted. Housing and accommodation were particular talking points. In that context, security of tenure was noted as

Income adequacy is a polite way to talk about poverty and that we need political will to address it.

essential to a sense of security for tenants but wholly inadequate in Ireland. Emergency accommodation was noted as being particularly damaging, particularly for children for whom long-term damage is a critical concern. The affordability of rent for older/retired people is an emerging phenomenon in the context of falling home ownership. Those working in this area noted the poor state of some accommodation being made available to rent. The right to quality housing is a fundamental right and should be acknowledged as such with a call for a greater focus on building public housing on public land.

Cycling through different short-term rental accommodation affects wellbeing, access to education, mental health – all aspects of people's lives.

Over-crowding is an issue with situations of three generations in one house

There needs to be much more concerted action to address the issue of Air B&B, where families are in tourist accommodation and tourists are in homes.

We see people moving into very shoddy housing and they have no choice – it is either that or homelessness

There was particular mention for the poor standard of Travellers accommodation and the lack of Traveller-appropriate accommodation. It was suggested that local authorities should be required to report on their progress in supplying accommodation for Travellers and should be sanctioned for lack of progress.

The needs of older people, it was highlighted, tend to be ignored and they are accused of 'living too long'. The support infrastructure is family or private-sector based and there is a lack of accessible public infrastructure that provided the supports sufficient to allow older people to live independently. Electric scooters were noted as a particular danger to older people and disabled people and need to be controlled. Concerns were expressed around meaningful participation and influence at the community level, despite complaints and reassurance of response from local authorities, nothing seems to change. People feel they are expected to accept ongoing issues of reduced safety and illegal behaviours in their community.

In relation to health, the link between health and other issues needs to be acknowledged in a better way than is the current situation. Health, it was noted, is not just the absence of illness and all the core, basic essentials are required or people to live a healthy live. The particularly low life expectancy of Travellers was highlighted. The lack of affordable counselling and other mental health supports was noted, particularly in relation to the increased levels of anxiety since the pandemic. The roll-out of Primary Health Care Centres was noted but they need to operate in a way that mirrors the needs of the community it which it operates. This means longer opening hours. The social prescribing approach was also seen as positive, linking health professionals and community groups.

Access to services is key to freeing up disposable income. In Ireland, many services taken for granted as free at the point of access in other counties, need to be purchased here. There was consensus that investment in services is as important as access to an adequate income, but that income is a priority in the immediate term as improvements to services will take time.

> *We need to purchase our services in this country…people wouldn't need as much money if services were affordable.*
> *The Irish system is built on having cash to pay for everything as we have not invested in services. This leads to an increased importance of issues like retaining the medical card. There is a need to invest heavily in services. We also need to invest heavily in those furthest behind.*

The poor experience of services by many people and communities was also noted. The consistency of this poor experience, that includes micro-aggressions, misinformation and redirecting and the increasing inaccessibility of the 'right people to talk to', cannot be ignored and should not be underestimated. These experiences have a real impact of people's lives.

The eradication of zero-hour contracts, which are still common, and the introduction of a living wage that is linked to inflation, are seen as a critically important response, particularly to in-work poverty.

There was consensus that current supports for a just transition are focused on the middle class and those with already relatively high-income levels. There was a call for an increased focus on poor people and poor communities and enabling affordable access to fuel, energy and transport, rather than subsidising electric cars for middle class people. It was also noted that the emphasis on transition needs to shift towards a corporate and structural level, as placing such responsibility mostly on individuals at a community level is inefficient and insincere in the climate emergency.

Social Inclusion and Disabled People

Roadmap Goal: improve social inclusion of people with disabilities by reducing poverty rates, improving employment outcomes and delivering better services – changing the narrative from disability to ability.

Chapter within Roadmap: Chapter 6

The additional cost of living for disabled people was a key talking point. It was noted that the recent *Cost of Disability Research Report* estimates that the additional costs associated with disability ranges from €9,482 per annum to €11,734. The additional €5 in social welfare payments announced as part of the last Budget went nowhere near facilitating people to meet these additional costs and recent inflation has compounded the issue.

The cliff that older disabled people face in relation to supports and grants was noted with a number of people highlighting that, as soon as a disabled person reaches the age of 66 years, they are no longer eligible for supports that facilitate their independence – they age-out of these entitlements.

The barriers that the built environment, and associated rules, poses to disabled people was also highlighted. In one incident, a location for teaching English as a second language is a protected structure that is inaccessible to wheelchair users who could potentially be providers and users of the service.

The Personal Assistance Service was highlighted as crucial for disabled people, but the lack of access to and adequate PA Service was a factor in the social exclusion of many. A specific example of the lack of an adequate PA Service was the fact that a disabled person loses their right to a Personal Assistant when they leave education, making it very difficult for that person to access employment.

If a person needs a PA to access education, they need it to access employment – how is the State to live up to its goal of reducing poverty rates and improving employment outcomes if they do not provide a PA service, which is essential

The system of support for disabled people in Ireland is modelled on family-based care. There was agreement that this can deny disabled people independence and adulthood and the model need to be radically changed.
There was a suggestion that quotas for employing disabled people need to be expanded in the public service and extended to private employers. It also needs to be acknowledged that not all disabled people will be able to work and social welfare needs to be adequate to keeping them out of poverty.

Bureaucracy is disabling – the system is disabling

How bureaucracy and lack of access to services disables people living with a disability was a key talking point at the online workshop on this theme. Examples were given of various forms, such as the application form for the Housing Assistance Payment, that are so difficult as to make it necessary to seek support to complete them. This and other unnecessary difficult and bureaucratic access points to services serves to increase dependency on others and reduce the independence of disabled people. The lack of accessible and affordable transport was also noted as a key barrier to independence and social inclusion.

The challenges faced by parents of disabled children were also noted. Parents are forced to advocate for even basic access to services and for equality and have to constantly fight for their rights. Access to education for children with autism was highlighted as a particular difficulty.

Access to housing is a major issue for people with disabilities. Many are on the Housing Waiting Lists longer than is the norm as much of the housing that is available is not accessible, and the cost of disability is not taken into account in calculating their incomes. It was proposed that all new housing should be accessible to start with.

Supporting Families and Children

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

Chapter within Roadmap: Chapter 5

The voice of the child needs to be heard and listened to. The lived experience of children and young people living in poverty needs to be recognised and responded to. These children and young people have no influence on their situations, and being denied basic needs such as a home, adequate income and developmental opportunities, also denies them from participating fully in society and will have a long-term impact on their life chances. Spaces for meaningful participation are not available to them.

There needs to be a mechanism for the voice of the child to be heard

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The needs of children and families have greatly increased. This increase is not just COVID-related, although this has had a significant impact. Broader issues, such as housing, waiting lists for essential services, etc, are contributing to the complexity and severity of these needs. This is creating increased pressure on staff and projects in the community. Staff are making huge efforts to meet these needs, often going beyond the remit of what they're being funded to do as the issues cannot be ignored. Children with additional needs are being left behind in the absence of early interventions and excessive waiting lists. Many children with additional needs are 'aging out' of entitlements without ever receiving the required support, further disadvantaging them. The commitment of staff is recognised in many instances as the only thing that is keeping things going, but there is a growing worry that this level of need has not been observed in the community before and the challenges seem to be multiplying.

Many children 'age out' of early intervention before the actually get it

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Access to an adequate income was recognised a fundamental essential to children and families. Households with children continue to experience serious inadequacy, notwithstanding the increasing cost of living. There needs to be a recognition that this extends beyond the role of the Department of Social Protection, and there needs to be ownership across government departments, as was planned in Government policy such as Better Outcomes Brighter Futures. Children and young people in rural areas experience additional challenges such as the cost of transport to school and other services. This is forcing families to make very difficult choices, for example between transport and food.

Affording life is the new norm, this sort of living is having a huge detrimental effect on family mental health

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In relation to the EU Child Guarantee, the Irish state must respond in a more comprehensive manner to child poverty. Clearly child poverty is linked with the income, but there are multiple other areas that counteract the detrimental impact of poverty on children, such as access to nutritious food in school, summer programme and other such initiatives.

Adequate provision and availability of quality childcare has been cited as a serious issues contributing to the many challenges that children and families are facing, reinforcing exclusion. Childcare and early years education is an essential component of quality family support, it serves several purposes and, in its absence, limits the role and usefulness of the family support 'offer'. With this in mind, there was a fear that funding streams with a narrow 'employment activation' focus, will exclude many children from these settings and their carers from the provision of family support.

Particular concerns were raised about the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) as it excluded many families from benefiting from it as they were social welfare recipients. There were several examples given of local projects having to secure additional funding from Tusla and others to ensure children could continue to avail of their childcare provision. There were concerns also, that the NCS could inadvertently force some childcare settings to

close due to its operational/access criteria. Severe shortage of space in childcare provision for all age ranges is a major difficulty across the country.

There are several instances where various providers of afterschool services and other family supports that closed during the pandemic and never re-opened, leaving limited availability in many communities. Staffing issues are another serious concern, with a multitude of challenges. The terms of conditions of staff in these settings needs to be addressed, as many staff are experiencing income inadequacy. Their low wages often mean that they are disadvantaged economically by working. This perpetuates the issues that families are facing in many communities, impacting negatively on children's family's health, wellbeing and prosperity.

It's all a bit grim, these are newer challenges that didn't exist before

The housing crisis is all consuming, complicating the many existing issues that children and families living in poverty face. The housing crisis is growing and is not engaged with by the state as an emergency. There are children and families living in hotel rooms for multiple years. There are 3 to 4 generations of families living in one house. There are multiple generations of the same families accessing homeless services. The significant challenges of children living in Direct Provision are well documented and families are unable to leave Direct Provision due to lack of housing. Traveller children living on halting sites experience multiple and significant disadvantages that have a detrimental effect on their physical, emotional and social wellbeing (Ombudsman for Children, 2021). Often children are **not** presenting as 'homeless' in their educational settings as there is associated shame and they are often temporarily housed outside of the community where the school is based. Homelessness is more the absence of a permanent and suitable place to live, which is a basic human right. Homelessness also creates additional problems for children and families in terms of relationships, mental health, participation in education, nutrition and wellbeing. There are lots of complications for children and families experiencing homelessness.

How can they be ready for school when they're living in these circumstances?

Supporting Communities
Roadmap Goal: empower communities to address social exclusion
Chapter within Roadmap: Chapter 7

There was a broad welcome for the (re)introduction of an autonomous community development programme and for the fact that seven independent Community Development Projects are being funded under the pilot programme to address a range of issues using a community development approach.

There needs to be a much more concerted effort to ensure that public sector bodies implement the Public Sector Duty, that imposes a legal obligation to promote equality, prevent discrimination and protect the human rights of their employees, customers, service users and everyone affected by their policies and plans. There was consensus that the levels of awareness amongst public bodies are far too low and there are no sanctions for ignoring these obligations. There needs to be determined action on this issue.

Significant concern was expressed at the emergence of a two-tier system for refugees coming to Ireland from Ukraine and those seeking international protection from other countries. Notwithstanding the ethical concerns at the differential treatment of people, deep concerns were expressed at the potential for tensions, alienation and division arising as a result and a call for supporting community work to promote multi-culturalism at local level and extending the rights and services afforded to Ukrainian people to other refugees. There was also a call for support for communities in which Ukrainians are being placed to ensure that they are supported to support those fleeing war with all the trauma associated with that. There was also a strong contention that the current voluntary effort is not sustainable and needs to be replaced with a professional approach.

The consistent poverty in which many drug and alcohol users find themselves in was raised as a considerable concern and compounded by the lack of services for people, particularly outside of the large urban areas.

There needs to be more real (as opposed to tokenistic) opportunities for communities to engage in local planning and policies that affect their lived. The experience of those participating in the workshop was that current opportunities are little more than box-ticking exercise.

The housing and accommodation crisis is causing enormous tensions and concerns were expressed that this, coupled with the current inflation crisis, may result in unrest if the State does not intervene.

The issue of data was raised and the fact that there is a requirement to collect and make available data on marginalised communities. There was also a call to use the significant amounts of information collected by the SICAP and other programmes to inform policy development and implementation.

Socio-economic discrimination was highlighted as is a reality for many people and needed to be addressed with socio-economic status added as a 10th ground in equality law. Socio-economic status relates to people's income, but also to other issues. The discrimination limits the opportunities available to people, including the opportunity to get a job and impacts on access to services including health and public transport. These experiences are highlighted in the reports 'Does it only Happen to me?'. Not everyone has the same opportunities. Socio-economic discrimination also intersects with other forms of discrimination, including that experienced by Travellers.

There was a call to extensively extend the pilot Community Development Programme on a year-by-year basis so that a critical number of projects using this approach is established.

Community development works, and we need to see an extension to the new programme if we are to meaningfully address many of the social issues that are becoming more embedded in communities