

REPORT ON NAP/INCLUSION CONSULTATION SEMINAR

CARLOW

A total of 56 representatives attended the Carlow NAP/inclusion regional consultation seminar on November 22nd 2005. Attendees were drawn from a range of government departments, state agencies, community and voluntary sector and members of the public. The following is a summary of the main points arising from the discussion at the seminar.

1. Facilitating access to employment

Priorities for change

It was seen as critical that active labour market policies and programmes are:

- Informed by adequate data and appropriate analysis, monitor labour market trends, and are responsive to labour market changes at the local and sectoral level.
- Supportive of the rights of migrant workers and low-income workers e.g., extend the right to access training programmes to migrant workers.
- Tailored to respond to the specific needs of vulnerable groups while recognising and responding to the level of common need amongst disadvantaged groups.
- Responsive to the continued persistence of unemployment 'black spots' and committed to the elimination of long-term unemployment. Policies should also recognise high levels of unemployment amongst specific vulnerable groups
- Inclusive of interventions and measures to build awareness among, and participation by, employers in supporting the participation of vulnerable groups in employment e.g. support work-life balance, enforce equality legislation.

What is working?

There was broad support for the range of **targeted active labour market policies and programmes** (ALMPs) and acknowledgement that participation in paid employment was key to combating poverty and social exclusion. The Community Employment Scheme - the value of which was said to equally accrue to the individual participant and the broader community - and Employment Support Schemes for People with Disabilities were identified as two particularly successful schemes. Participants also welcomed the increase in individually tailored measures and employment supports developed through the National Employment Action Plan (NEAP). Participants emphasised the importance of ensuring that local employers and support agencies inform local employment programme structures and implementation processes. The additional financial supports made available to those returning to the labour market (e.g. Family Income Supplement, Back to Work Allowance) were welcomed, as were improvements in the provision of and access to childcare supports (with particular acknowledgement of the role of County Childcare Committees).

What is not working and how should things be done better?

Active labour market policies and programmes should be more closely linked to mainstream educational programmes and private/public sector employment to facilitate the transition of

individuals from education/training programmes to mainstream employment. Participants called for enhanced **career guidance programmes** to support the transition of second and third level students from education to employment.

Active labour market policies and programmes must recognise the continued existence of unemployment; in particular, persistent unemployment amongst marginalised groups. Such policies and programmes must be **flexible and responsive to the needs of the individual**. **Key vulnerable groups** identified include Travellers, the long-term unemployed, particularly those in rural areas, and migrant workers. Participants called for additional programmes and resources to support the participation of these groups in employment and training opportunities.

A general theme was the need to review the income ceilings applicable to secondary benefits to overcome the perceived disincentive to progression to employment caused by the loss of such benefits when a certain level of income is reached. It was suggested that a **phased reduction in benefit payments** would better support those transitioning from welfare to work. It was noted that many still experience difficulties **accessing information** on employment and training options and opportunities

2. Facilitating access to services – education

Priorities for change

- Continued focus on policies and measures to tackle early school leaving and the achievement of existing school completion targets.
- Provision of multi-annual, or long-term funding and resources for community and voluntary providers of adult and second-chance education.
- Greater connections / integration between programmes / government departments / agencies to tackle poverty and educational disadvantage.
- Enable migrant workers and all non-nationals to have access to education and training opportunities.
- Expand existing targeted education programmes to accommodate the specific needs of vulnerable groups in education.
- Provide universal access to Early Childhood Care and Education services.

What is working?

At a policy level, the focus within the Department of Education and Science's new strategy, *Delivering Equality of Opportunity*, on educational inclusion initiatives and policies was welcomed. There was broad support for **specialist intervention programmes** (e.g. community access and pre-development courses, adult guidance counselling services) supporting the participation of adult learners in education.

What is not working and how should things be done better?

A wide ranging set of proposals were advanced in respect of how educational provision and support could be improved - comments focused on:

- Educational supports and provisions for asylum seekers, refugees and migrant workers.
- Resources and funding for community and voluntary education providers.
- Policy processes and joined-up policy making.

In respect of **educational supports for vulnerable groups**, participants favoured:

- Continued focus on achieving agreed school completion targets and a reduction in early school leaving.
- Free access to adult and second chance education (including third level education) for asylum seekers and refugees. Wider provision of English language classes for those for whom English is not their first language.
- Accreditation of overseas qualifications, as appropriate, to enable skilled migrant workers access appropriate employment.
- Enhanced, co-ordinated institutional supports for third level students from vulnerable groups.
- Recognition of the value of life-long learning and support for educational provision for older people.
- Additional supports for young parents in education e.g. more affordable and accessible childcare places,
- Universal provision of childhood care and education services.

In respect of resources and **funding for community and voluntary education providers**, participants favoured:

- Development of multi-annual funding streams to support the work of community and voluntary providers.
- A review of the financial support structures for those participating in back to education schemes e.g. review the eligibility criteria for the Back to Education Allowance with the objective of increasing the number of eligible lone parents and low-income worker recipients.

At a policy and implementation level, participants called for:

- Sufficient resources to implement the Department of Education and Science's Educational Inclusion Strategy and the linking of its measures and implementation with relevant national strategies.
- Monitoring and data analysis mechanisms to track children's progression between primary and secondary level education and to monitor early school leaving. This data should also inform long-term policy planning.

3. Facilitating access to services – health and care

Priorities for change

- Adopt a rights-based, holistic approach to health service delivery.
- Greater co-operation and co-ordination in service delivery across the relevant service providers.
- Recognise the needs of vulnerable groups and prioritise funding and service developments to support them e.g. people with disabilities, carers.
- Enhanced primary and secondary health services e.g. A&E services.

What is not working and how should things be done better?

A range of suggested improvements and alterations to a number of specific services and provisions emerged from the broad discussion. A general theme was the need to develop a holistic, rights-based approach to service delivery and provision. A second general theme was the importance of building awareness amongst the wider public and health service providers of the needs of vulnerable groups particularly carers, people with disabilities, low-income families and lone parents.

A number of specific improvements were advanced in respect of the following:

- *Medical card coverage:* Review the eligibility criteria for the medical card as the loss of the medical card can act as a major disincentive to participation in employment among low-income families.
- *People with disabilities:* Introduce a Cost of Disability Payment and increase the number of respite care schemes.
- *Carers:* Abolish the mean-test for the Carers Allowance; greater supports should be made available to carers, particularly those in isolated communities e.g. more community care schemes, supports for those caring for family members at home.
- *Men's health services:* Prioritise increased take-up of men's health services among vulnerable groups.
- *Access to services:* Address the issue of inadequate public transport supports for those living in isolated and/or rural areas and the negative impact this may have on access to public health services. Suggestions include: provide taxi vouchers to vulnerable groups in remote areas, extend the Rural Transport Initiative.
- *Policy processes, monitoring and analysis:* Adopt a rights-based approach to service provision and promote greater co-ordination and integration of policies and services across government departments.

4. Facilitating access to resources – housing

- Prioritise the link between housing policy and the development of sustainable communities.
- Ensure that new housing developments provide access to basic services such as childcare, transport, play areas, etc.
- Social and housing outputs and allocation systems must respond to the changing profiles of those seeking access to such housing.
- Mainstream instances of best practice in developing and delivering joined-up and integrated policy making and service delivery initiatives
- Provision of long-term funding support for community and voluntary social housing providers.

What is working?

Respondents welcomed the increased **provision of social and affordable housing** while noting that the attendant long waiting lists effectively ensures the long-term exclusion of some from suitable housing. Local Authority **Tenant Liaison Officers** were praised and it was suggested that the Scheme should be expanded to cover all local authority tenants and estates. Improvements in access to emergency housing and accommodation options were noted; for example, the meeting of NAP/inclusion targets for the provision of emergency accommodation. Other examples of best practice and improvements included the work of **Regional Homeless Officers**.

What is not working and how should things be done better?

The importance of ensuring that diverse policies and programmes contribute to the **development of sustainable communities** was emphasised. Housing policy must support the development of sustainable communities through for example, requiring that all new housing developments build and fund the provision of basic community facilities.

The insufficiency (and inappropriateness of some) of the current **supply of social and affordable housing** was a second theme. Participants:

- Wanted a **diverse supply of housing** to meet the needs of various groups and for the allocation system for local authority housing to recognise the individual and common needs of members of such groups.
- Did not favour **the sale of existing local authority housing stock** as this lessened the choices and opportunities available to vulnerable groups to access affordable accommodation.
- Argued that **Travellers accommodation needs** are not yet being met in many areas. Participants called for greater consultation by the relevant providers with Traveller groups to ensure the supply of adequate accommodation options.
- Greater support for elderly persons, who previously bought local authority homes, with the maintenance and upkeep of their housing.

Finally, the need to develop adequate policies and processes to facilitate working relationships between the various organisations and sectors involved in the provision of social and affordable housing at national and local level was emphasised. **Enhanced inter-agency working** was seen as central to addressing many of the weaknesses in current provision.

5. Facilitating access to resources – income supports

Priorities for change

Income adequacy

- Increase basic social welfare adult payments to provide an adequate income and facilitate the participation of welfare recipients in society.

Welfare to work (participation in education/training)

- Review the operation and integration of basic social welfare supports and secondary benefits to ensure these do not act as a disincentive to participation in employment and/or training.
- Specific suggestions in this regard include: extend the eligibility period for secondary benefits (e.g. rent supplement) for those transitioning from welfare to work; review the earnings disregard ceiling for recipients of the One Parent Family Payment; provide a medical card for all low-income families with children; extend the Community Employment scheme; review the operation of the Family Income Supplement scheme; and streamline the interaction of various secondary benefits.

Credit facilities

- Tackle financial isolation.
- Stricter regulation of moneylenders.

Policies and structures

- Identify lone parents as a vulnerable group within NAP/inclusion.
- Provide more resources to support organisations providing direct services and information to vulnerable groups e.g. Money Advice and Budgeting Services and Citizens Information Centres.

Supports for the elderly

- Introduce a voucher system to contribute to the cost of private care for those who cannot access places in public care facilities.
- Contribute to the cost of installing adequate home security systems for elderly people.

What is working?

The Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS) and Citizens Information Centres were recognised as providing invaluable, community-based, direct and confidential services to those experiencing poverty and/or social exclusion. Nevertheless, it was agreed that these

services needed to be better publicised to raise awareness of their existence. Entitlements to secondary benefits (e.g. medical cards) were seen as very valuable to social welfare dependents.

What is not working and how should things be done better?

Current **income supports for low-income families** were considered to be insufficient to meet basic needs or to enable recipients to participate fully in society. While payments were considered inadequate, the right to selected secondary benefits was seen as very valuable for welfare dependents. It was recognised that the fear of losing such benefits acted as a disincentive to those looking to move from welfare to work. A key related issue was the fact that those who did move from welfare to work typically moved only into low-income employment, which did not compensate for the loss of benefits. A specific suggestion was to review the current earnings disregard ceiling for those in receipt of the One Parent Family Payment as it is considered too low. The need for front-line service staff to recognise the right of claimants to income support services was emphasised, as was the need for transparent and accountable decision-making amongst service providers, particularly in relation to decisions on individual's entitlements to discretionary payments.

A second theme was the need for the system of income supports to support the participation of those dependent on such payments in **education and/or training**. Key points included:

- The need to streamline the interaction of different benefits/income supports schemes.
- The importance of providing a system of tapered income supports to support the transition of welfare recipients to sustainable employment.
- Concern at the low level of take-up of the Family Income Supplement.
- The need to review Employment Support Schemes for People with Disabilities to remove potential benefits traps arising when recipients' income from employment reaches a certain level.
- Support with childcare costs was recognised as central to enabling low-income families access education and training.

Greater recognition of **women's experience of poverty** was deemed important to understand for example, the difficulties faced by those who have caring responsibilities in accessing employment. Finally, respondents argued for improved income supports to assist families responsible for the private care (whether within the family home or private nursing home facilities) of elderly people.

6. Rural and urban issues

A strong message emerging from this workshop was the need to separate the consideration of urban and rural poverty issues within NAP/inclusion to ensure that policies and structures recognised the different needs of those experiencing poverty in rural and urban areas.

Priorities for change

- Enhanced rural proofing of policy processes and structures and the collection of data on rural poverty.
- Development of regional employment infrastructure supports to attract greater industrial/manufacturing employment to rural and regional areas.
- Development of sustainable employment opportunities in rural areas in response to the decline in agricultural employment.
- Establish an adequate infrastructure to support those living in rural areas and experiencing difficulties in accessing employment (including long distance commuters). These groups share similar needs in some instances for example, they require access to affordable, high quality and flexible childcare, public and private transport.

What is working?

Specific initiatives identified as working well in rural and urban areas included the Rural Transport Initiative, RAPID, active labour market programmes, and investment in early school leaving, after-school and pre-school initiatives.

What is not working and how could things be improved?

Rural areas and smaller urban areas in the regions were perceived as having failed to benefit from the employment opportunities and growth generated by the Celtic Tiger. New employment opportunities were heavily centred within major urban areas with a corresponding failure to generate new rural employment opportunities. A commitment to the generation of sustainable, **rural-based employment opportunities** was viewed as essential to tackling rural poverty and social exclusion, particularly in light of the decline in full-time agricultural employment opportunities.

Basic service provision (such as access to adult education, primary health care services, childcare) in isolated rural areas is inadequate and the isolation this generates is exacerbated by the lack of rural public transport, which increases individuals' difficulties in accessing the limited services available. **Access to rural transport** was a major theme. Participants called for:

- Greater resources for the Rural Transport Initiative.
- Commitment to improving the accessibility of public and private transport for people with disabilities, the elderly, etc.
- The waiver of the peak hour transport restriction associated with the Free Travel Pass to enable holders to use transport services to access vital services.
- The introduction of a taxi voucher/waiver system to enable people in isolated rural areas to access public transport services.

Finally, the issue of anti-social behaviour, much of which was seen as arising from substance/alcohol abuse, was raised. Participants favoured an increased Garda presence in rural areas and a commitment to the implementation of the National Drugs Strategy, which itself should be focused on responding to emerging needs in rural and urban areas.