

# REPORT ON NAP/INCLUSION CONSULTATION SEMINAR

## CARRICK - ON - SHANNON – 30<sup>TH</sup> November 2005

The Carrick-on-Shannon NAP/inclusion consultation seminar was held on November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2005 and attended by 53 representatives drawn from government departments, state agencies, community and voluntary sector and members of the public. The below is a summary of the main points raised by the seminar attendees, many of which discussed the extent to which NAP/inclusion related policies and structures respond to the needs of those experiencing poverty in rural and small urban areas.

### 1. Facilitating access to employment

#### Priorities for change

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

- Develop interventions and measures to build awareness among and the involvement of employers in supporting the participation of vulnerable groups in employment.
- Recognise the commonality of support needs amongst vulnerable groups but also respond to the specific needs of each group.
- Support the participation of vulnerable people in the planning and development of programmes.

#### *What is working?*

There was broad support for the range of **targeted active labour market programmes** (ALMPs) in particular, measures for vulnerable and marginalised groups. Schemes identified as working well included:

- Supported Employment Initiative.
- Community Employment Scheme.
- Social Economy Programme – although some reservations were expressed regarding the long-term sustainability of the employment opportunities generated by this programme. The transfer of this Scheme to the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs was welcomed.
- Community Development Projects (as developed through the Community Development Strategy Programme).

General improvements in inter-agency working as evidenced by increased inter-agency co-operation in service delivery were welcomed.

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

A strong theme emerging from this workshop was the need for policies and programmes to recognise the particularities of rural unemployment and poverty. Policies should recognise the diversity of needs that exist even in areas of small population both across and within vulnerable groups. Programmes and structures must respond to and engage with these

needs to be successful. The extent to which active labour market policies and programmes, including existing schemes such as the Social Economy Programme, are (a) generating sustainable employment and (b) responding to emerging and future trends in rural unemployment was questioned. A specific example presented related to Primary Health Care projects, which operate on a three-year cycle but are primarily staffed by workers on one-year placements through Community Employment schemes.

Many suggestions were proposed in respect of improving the structures supporting the operation of active labour market policies and programmes including:

- Better data collection and management information systems to ensure an adequate flow of information on rural poverty and to support rural poverty mapping.
- Improved information sharing and use of data systems by relevant statutory agencies: this would raise awareness of the range of agencies working in an area, supporting inter-agency working.
- As a key agency in this area, FAS should provide a best practice model for other agencies, lead the way in providing customer friendly services (e.g. flexible opening hours, flexible training courses) and act as a 'gateway' to other services.
- Provision of diversity awareness training to front line service providers.

It was strongly argued that active labour market policies and programmes must be **flexible and responsive to the needs of vulnerable groups** with Travellers, the long-term unemployed and migrant workers identified as being particularly at risk of exclusion from education and training opportunities. A specific issue was the appropriateness of current incentives offered through existing employment and training schemes to encourage the participation of **Travellers**. Suggestions referred to the need to:

- Develop adequate financial incentives to encourage participation.
- Generate more self-employment opportunities, as this is often the preferred employment option of Travellers.
- Tackle the discrimination frequently faced by Travellers in attempting to access mainstream employment.
- Overcome barriers posed by overly high entry requirements for training and education courses, as many Travellers are unable to meet these requirements.

In respect of **migrant workers**, there was a strong sense that in the event of an economic downturn, these workers would become the 'new poor'. Measures should be taken to ensure the integration of these workers into the wider community and to enable them to increase their skill levels through participation in language training, etc. The Habitual Residency Condition was identified as a barrier to accessing services for immigrants, including Irish citizens returning to the country after long periods abroad, and should be reviewed.

## 2. Facilitating access to services – education

### *Priorities for change*

- Enhanced resources for educational services for people with disabilities.
- Renewed commitment to tackling barriers to participation in education experienced by vulnerable groups e.g., lack of, or inability to access, transport and childcare services.
- Review the system of income supports supporting participation in education.
- Prioritise investment in early childhood care and education services and in primary level education.

### *What is working?*

A range of measures in relation to educational provision for two broad groups – people with disabilities, early school leavers and adult learners were identified as working well. In relation to children and **people with disabilities or special needs** the following were praised:

- Individual learning plans developed by educational psychologists for disabled children.
- Development of a tailored curriculum for children with special needs.
- Increased numbers of resource and special needs teachers for primary and second level schools.
- Participation and integration of children with disabilities or special needs in mainstream education.
- An identified instance of best practice was the development of third level access programmes for people with disabilities by Sligo Institute of Technology and St Angela's College, Sligo.

In respect of **measures to combat early school leaving and increase participation in adult education**, the following were felt to work well:

- The School Completion Programme in second-level schools.
- Increase in variety of types and levels of academic programmes available to second-level students e.g., development of the Leaving Certificate Applied.
- Expansion in adult education opportunities, the focus on life-long learning and greater use of technology to support participation e.g. e-Learning and distant learning.
- Specific training and education programmes for early school leavers or those seeking to return to education/training such as Youthreach, Post Leaving Certificate Programmes, Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme and the Back to Education Scheme for lone parents.

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

In relation to the **participation of children and adults with disabilities or special needs** in education, participants argued for: (a) greater resources for disabled children and those

with behavioural and learning difficulties children and (b) improved disability awareness training for teachers and service providers. Suggested improvements included an increase in the number of resource and special needs teachers and the development of specific programmes, with reference to international models of best practice, to encourage and enable children with disabilities to transition from second to third level programmes. The lack of training and education opportunities in rural areas for people with a learning disability who have completed second-level education was also noted.

**Lack of access to suitable and affordable childcare and transport** options in rural areas was identified as a major barrier to accessing education, training and employment, particularly for women. Education and training services should do more to **engage men**, particularly older, unemployed men, in their services. The provision of **income supports for early school leavers** engaged in specific training programmes, e.g. Youthreach, was seen in some instances to act as a disincentive to children to remain in mainstream education. It was felt that the Department of Education and Science should review its role in the provision of such supports. A general point made was the need for **greater investment in primary level education**, a reduction in class sizes and a greater focus within the school curriculum on physical education, health and mental health. It was felt that discipline, bullying and absenteeism problems in schools must be addressed. A number of general points were made in reference to third level education, specifically calls to consider the reintroduction of third level fees and an increase in third level education grants.

### 3. Facilitating access to services – health and care

#### *Priorities for change*

- Greater co-operation and co-ordination in service delivery across the relevant service providers including a commitment to multi-disciplinary teamwork.
- Recognise the needs of vulnerable groups and prioritise funding and service development to support these groups e.g. people with disabilities, carers.
- Increased investment in men and women's health services e.g. breast cancer screening.
- Mainstreaming of community and primary health care projects.
- Provision of full medical card for all children aged less than 5 years.
- Enhanced focus on mental health services.

#### *What is working?*

Participants identified a range of successful local and regional services operated by community and voluntary organisations e.g. **rural transport schemes** such as Rural Lift and the Social Car Scheme run by Community of Lough Arrow Social Project and a visiting service to older people in their own home. Successful services fully or partly funded by statutory agencies and organisations included: **Health Services Executive funded packages of care** to support the elderly living in their own home, the purchase of respite care for families with caring duties and the involvement of people with learning disabilities in social and leisure activities; establishment of a local Well Woman's clinic; funding of self advocacy courses for people with learning disabilities; and County Council funded

community wardens. Participants also spoke favourably of the **Primary Care Course for Travellers** (currently operating in Sligo town) and favoured its expansion.

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

An overall theme emerging from the discussion was the importance of **mainstreaming successful pilot projects** that are responsive to local needs and the needs of vulnerable groups e.g., successful local home-visiting programmes developed for older people should be expanded to cover all areas within a region and offered to other isolated groups. A related point was the need to create a **single over-arching funding structure** to fund pilot projects in health and care services. Finally, the need for meaningful integrated and multi-disciplinary service delivery was emphasised, as was the need to encourage volunteerism.

Key deficits identified in current service provision included:

- Lack of an automatic entitlement to a medical card for people with disabilities: the 'real' cost of living with a disability should be taken into account in the means test for the medical card.
- The means testing for the Carers Allowance was seen as exclusionary to many.
- Lack of additional supports (financial or respite care) for families acting as carers.
- Lack of rural transport.
- Lack of assisted living services to enable elderly people or those who require care to remain living in their own home. This could be overcome by an increase in such services and in sheltered/supporting accommodation for those who need support for independent living but do not wish to reside in long-term, residential care.
- Insufficient gender specific health services.
- Barriers to services arising from age limits: e.g. a person with a disability who reaches the age of 65 is categorised as an older person and their eligibility to services is determined by this latter categorisation. However, this may exclude them from certain services targeted specifically at people with disabilities.

Participants argued strongly that alternative methods of providing **day and respite care** for people with caring responsibilities should be examined. The **accessibility of health services** outside of normal hours was also raised: participants valued the improvements arising from the WestDoc and NoWDoc services but felt that the accessibility of these schemes should be reviewed for those living in very isolated, rural areas. Finally, participants identified a range of specific barriers to accessing services namely distance, bureaucracy, access to, and ability to interpret, information and structural problems. Participants argued strongly for the provision of clearer information suitable for those with low literacy levels, a greater focus on distributing information through Citizen Information Centres and a reduction in the administrative burden associated with applying for benefits.

#### 4. Facilitating access to resources – housing

##### *Priorities for change*

- Additional services for homeless persons including provision for homeless males, more wet hostels for people who are homeless and misusing drugs/alcohol.
- Increased provision of emergency accommodation for victims of domestic violence in rural areas.
- Reduction in the administrative burden on applicants for social and affordable housing.
- Commitment to ensuring mixed tenure on housing estates.
- Enhanced mechanisms to facilitate input of community and voluntary sector into housing policymaking e.g. use of Community and Voluntary Forums.
- Continual information training for front line service providers on housing options and rights and entitlements of service users.

##### *What is working?*

The **Traveller Accommodation programme** was considered to be making large strides in meeting the range of accommodation needs identified by Travellers. Successful characteristics included the provision of a range of different accommodation types and agreement by the relevant local authority to meet set yearly targets in respect of the provision of accommodation.

The expansion in **voluntary housing provision** was welcomed as it offers another level and type of social housing particularly suitable to support the independent living of tenants with additional support needs (e.g. the elderly, those with addiction problems). **Improvements in local authority accommodation services** were noted for example, pre-tenancy training was viewed as a positive step in developing and maintaining strong local authority-tenant relationships and supporting good practice in estate management. The representation of relevant groups (e.g. tenants, community and voluntary groups) on Local Authorities Strategic Policy Committees was felt to positively support their participation in housing policymaking.

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

Concerns were expressed with regard provision for those who are homeless and those who are currently ineligible for social housing or experiencing difficulties in accessing private rented accommodation. The stringent conditions attached to the **Habitual Residency Condition** (HRC) was believed to be a contributory factor to homelessness as it excluded applicants resident within the State for less than two years from access to supplementary benefits such as rent supplement. It was noted that many migrant workers/immigrants/returned Irish citizens were unable to meet these conditions and experienced severe difficulties in accessing affordable private rented accommodation. A review of the operation and impact of the HRC was called for. Particular difficulties in **accessing suitable accommodation were noted in relation to homeless or single, low-income males**. A key factor contributing to their difficulties was the lack of purpose-build local authority accommodation or private rented accommodation. Accordingly, many were forced to rent unsuitable accommodation e.g. a father with weekend access to his children living in a bedsit with no suitable accommodation for his children when they visit.

Participants argued for an increase in the income disregard used in awarding the **rent supplement** to support the participation of low-income earners in employment. Participants also argued for additional state support for existing statutory bodies dealing with homelessness and warned against an over reliance on community and voluntary provision of homeless services.

## 5. Facilitating access to resources – income supports

### Priorities for change

- Expansion of Community Employment schemes and recognition that such schemes provide essential services in rural areas.
- Remove disincentives to family formation inherent within the eligibility criteria applied to the One Parent Family Payment.
- Introduce a common means test to apply across all schemes and benefits.
- Support the development of community-based care services.
- Make conditions for receipt of Carers Allowance/Benefit less restrictive.

### *What is working?*

Participants widely agreed that the **current welfare system** acted as a safety net for those experiencing difficulties. They noted improvements in **ease of access to information** on social welfare services and entitlements brought about through effective information leaflets, the appointment of Information Officer in all local social welfare offices and a commitment to **effective customer service**. Participants also noted an **increase in inter-agency** activity with increased liaison between services and agencies such as the Revenue Commissioners, Local Authorities, Health Area Executives, etc. The **Back to Education and Back to Work Allowance Schemes** were considered to work well.

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

A key issue was the perceived complexity of schemes and benefits and the administrative burden placed on welfare applicants. It was suggested that the Household Budget Package should be applied to more schemes and a common means test developed to determine eligibility for all types of social benefits and supports. Measures to improve the take-up of the **Family Income Supplement** were called for. A lack of clarity was observed in regard to the specific agency responsible for particular schemes e.g. at times it was difficult to know who was responsible for what. Specific difficulties were identified in respect of carers and lone parents and it was proposed that:

- The current limit on the number of hours worked by those in receipt of the Carers Allowance should be increased and PRSI credits given to all recipients.
- Priority be given to overcoming barriers faced by lone parents in participating in employment e.g. facilitate access to suitable childcare and/or transport.

Participants called for a greater commitment to developing **sustainable rural employment opportunities** in part to respond to the need to develop sustainable and realistic progression

routes for those participating in active labour market programmes such as the Community Employment scheme.

## 6. Rural and urban issues

### Priorities for change

- Expand the Rural Transport Initiative Scheme.
- Development of rural-based supports and structures for victims of domestic violence.
- Address rural poverty particularly long-term and youth unemployment in rural areas.
- Develop appropriate indicators for rural poverty proofing.
- Commitment to maintaining vital services within rural areas.
- Continued improvements to information access and availability.

### *What is working?*

Specific initiatives identified as working well in rural areas included the Rural Transport Initiative, Citizen Information Centres, Money Advice and Budgeting Services, Community Development Support Programmes and Partnership companies and County Development Board Social Inclusion Groups. These services were variously seen to improve access to information, help families address the issue of indebtedness and build the capacity of target groups to participate in policymaking and improved consultation processes. In general, it was felt that there was increased co-operation between statutory agencies.

### *What is not working and how could things be improved?*

It was felt that genuine political will is needed to improve investment in rural areas with some participations arguing that the decentralisation of the civil service should be used to rejuvenate economically disadvantaged areas. The development of specific **rural poverty proofing indicators** was seen as central to developing specific, tailored interventions and policies to address rural poverty and social exclusion.

**Basic service provision** (e.g. access to adult education, primary health care services, childcare) in isolated rural areas was seen to be inadequate. A lack of rural public transport was seen as exacerbating difficulties in accessing existing services. **Access to rural transport** was a major theme. Participants favoured the expansion of the Rural Transport Initiative and argued that its remit should be expanded to include the provision of transport to those who wish to access employment/training opportunities and other basic services. **Greater communication between County Development Boards and the wider community** was seen as essential to enable the latter's participation in the development of the local area. Difficulties in accessing **funding for community and voluntary** service providers were noted and it was suggested that a single, over arching funding structure should be created to fund the work of organisations providing direct services to the community. Untapped potential was noted with regard to using existing facilities to provide community oriented services (e.g. use of schools out of school hours to provide adult education/training).