

# REPORT ON NAP/INCLUSION CONSULTATION SEMINAR

## Donegal –1<sup>st</sup> December 2005

The Donegal NAP/inclusion consultation seminar was held on 1<sup>st</sup> December 2005 and attended by 69 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 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:

- The anti-poverty and social inclusion function of the Community Employment Scheme is recognised and that the scheme is expanded.
- The eligibility criteria for secondary benefits are reviewed to ensure that they support the transition of welfare dependents into sustainable employment.
- The eligibility criteria for the Back to Work Allowance are relaxed to allow those who are unemployed for less than five years access to the scheme.

#### *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. Particular schemes identified as working well included:

- Job Club Centres.
- FAS and VEC training programmes.
- Community Development Programmes.
- Provision of childcare facilities for FAS trainees.
- Provision of childcare and eldercare allowances to support the participation of vulnerable groups, particularly lone parents and carers, in education and training opportunities.

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

A strong theme was the change in employment opportunities in Co. Donegal following the decline of textiles and fishing as sources of well-paid, sustainable employment. It was seen as essential that regional employment and training programmes identify and support sustainable employment in suitable sectors e.g. tourism, hospitality. Greater co-ordination between state agencies working in this broad area was crucial (e.g. provide a common allowance and supports for participants in training interventions regardless of the lead agency) and it was suggested that County Development Boards play a lead role in driving the development of sustainable employment.

**Flexible** education and training programmes were needed to support the participation of the unemployed and those with caring responsibilities in second-chance education and training. **Lack of public transport** emerged as a key barrier to participation in education and employment opportunities and greater integration of services by transport providers was vital. Dismay was expressed at **cutbacks in Community Employment schemes and Community Development Programmes**, with cutbacks in the former seen to have resulted in a loss of labour market opportunities for people with disabilities. More adult education provision was called for, particularly in rural areas. It was suggested that FAS could play a greater role in supporting individuals in obtaining work experience by providing temporary insurance cover for individuals while in employment. The **decline in apprenticeship** opportunities for young people was attributed in part to the policy whereby those wishing to become apprentices need to get sponsorship from an employer – it was argued that FAS should review this requirement.

## 2. Facilitating access to services – education

### *Priorities for change*

- Mainstream models of best practice.
- Equitable targeting of resources and supports for all levels of education.
- Increased resources to support the participation of children with special needs in mainstream education and a commitment to early intervention to support these children and their families.
- Address the issue of use of school facilities outside of school hours e.g. insurance.

### *What is working?*

Four specific programmes - Lifestart, Parents and Kids Together, Youthreach and the Better Education Support Programme - working variously with disadvantaged pre-school children and their families, primary school students and early school leavers were identified as working well.

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

**At primary school** level, particular weaknesses were identified including: poor literacy levels amongst primary school leavers, a failure to recognise the various intelligences that children may possess, a lack of supports for the diagnosis and assessment of children with special needs, and a lack of remedial and other resources for schools with small student populations. **Increasing numbers of early school leavers** were notable in Co Donegal, however there was only one Education Attendance officer for the county. Participants called for better co-ordination between mainstream and alternative education services and community Gardaí to identify children and young people at risk. It was noted that community groups were increasingly unable to offer adult education programmes due to a lack of resources primarily funding. Nevertheless, there remained a clear need for alternative education programmes for vulnerable or isolated groups.

Participants argued for a range of improvements including:

- The **development of localised responses** to meet the needs of the local population.
- Greater **co-ordination amongst agencies/services** charged with providing transport, education and employment to enable vulnerable groups to access and participate in these services.
- Expansion of early school leavers programmes (e.g. VTOS) across the entire county and a lowering of the age requirements for eligibility for such schemes.

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

#### Priorities for change

- Adopt a holistic approach to health.
- Improve access to health services and address the issue of long consultant waiting lists and long waits for access to specialised tests.
- Rural proofing of health policies.
- Implement the national mental health strategy.
- Joined-up service delivery at inter-agency and inter-departmental level.
- Provide additional financial supports to people in rural areas to enable them to access health services in recognition of the longer distances they may have to travel, lack of access to public transport etc.

#### *What is working?*

The **Rural Transport Initiative** was considered a successful initiative and participants called for its expansion across the region.

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

**Lack of regional health services** (e.g. screening) was identified as a major contributor to poor health outcomes amongst the rural population. Difficulties in accessing services (e.g. long waiting lists for consultancy appointments and health tests) were aggravated by the lack of input sought from rural populations with regard to national level health policy. It was noted that **rural proofing** and the collection of **disaggregated data for rural areas** would go some way towards developing the necessary monitoring and analysis structures to identify deficits in service provision and poor health outcomes.

A perceived lack of state support for those fulfilling **caring roles** was noted, as was an over reliance on families and volunteers to provide care. There were calls to make the conditions for receipt of Carers Allowance/Benefit less restrictive (e.g. removal of the requirements that carers work no more than 10 hours a week in paid employment) and for an increase in sheltered and supporting housing options for the elderly. Participants called for the introduction of a Cost of Disability Payment, a requirement that new housing developments are fully accessible and increased funding and resources for services working with **people with disabilities** such as the Donegal Centre for Independent Living.

Other comments focused on the need to improve the access of low-income families to medical cards, develop stronger, local mental health systems, implement local level drugs task forces, and finally, better provision of information suitable for those with low literacy levels.

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

##### *Priorities for change*

- Address the lack of affordable social and housing accommodation options for low-income families in rural areas.
- Development of sustainable communities in rural and urban areas.
- Additional sheltered accommodation services for those discharged from hospitals with mental health difficulties.
- Increase the supply of long-term accommodation options for the homeless.

##### *What is working?*

Voluntary housing associations were said to work well. One feature praised were improvements in the mediation service between landlord and tenants. A more joined-up, inter-agency approach to the provision of information on housing needs was noted.

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

Concern was expressed about the proliferation of holiday homes in rural and scenic areas, particularly in Donegal. Particular concerns were noted in relation to the adequacy of the service infrastructure to support large numbers of such homes and the inflationary effect of such developments on land prices in rural areas.

It was felt that there was a **lack of suitable accommodation options for vulnerable groups** and those with special needs namely, people with mental health difficulties, the homeless and Travellers. Some argued that the extent of the problem of homelessness was hidden by the numbers remaining in hospital and institutional care and by those in private rental accommodation and in receipt of rent supplement. Particular deficits were noted with regard to the provision of sheltered accommodation for those with mental health illnesses as well as inadequate hostel and emergency accommodation for the homeless. Travellers face additional barriers (not faced by other groups) in accessing social and affordable housing – in order to apply for local authority accommodation, Travellers must be resident in the county for 18 months before they included on the housing list. The lack of social and affordable housing was in part a result of the high number of unoccupied local authority housing units unavailable to let due to the need to carry out essential repairs. An extensive programme of refurbishment would make these units suitable for reoccupation and would help to reduce numbers on the housing waiting list. Ongoing investment in existing housing stock was necessary and participants call for the Health Services Executive and the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs to continue to support housing repairs and maintenance. Finally, participants called for an increase in the income threshold for rent supplement.

## 5. Facilitating access to resources – income supports

### *Priorities for change*

- Integrated public service provision.
- Increase the take-up of Family Income Supplement.
- Expansion of Social Economy Programmes.
- Additional income supports for carers, low-income families with children, migrants and asylum seekers.
- Extend entitlement to pension to those working in the home prior to 1994.

### *What is working?*

The registration of private landlords under the Rent Supplement Scheme was viewed positively as it was hoped that this would lead to a rise in the regulation of private rented accommodation and the standardisation of rent levels.

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

The development of **integrated services provision** across the public services would greatly lessen the administrative burden for both the service provider and service user. Participants called for a greater focus on developing and expanding the basic stages of provision across Departments and agencies: (i) physical co-location of services and (ii) design and implementation of shared IT systems across public services. In support of this, public services should improve their public information systems to ensure that users receive all relevant service information and access to all relevant entitlements. Participants called for the application of a **standardised means test** to all benefits and services, regardless of the service provider.

It was felt that there was a national failure on the part of policymakers to recognise the importance of the jobs carried by those on **Community Employment and Job Initiative schemes**, many of which lay at the heart of social provision in rural communities. Particular value was placed on the benefits arising to participants' well being and the vital role played by the schemes in promoting active participation in the community.

While **Family Income Supplement** was viewed as a useful income support for low-income, working families there were concerns that its take-up was not being maximised due to a lack of awareness and complicated application procedures. Suggestions for improving its take-up included:

- Automatically notify those who are eligible for the Supplement when they rejoin the workforce.
- Greater promotion of the scheme by employers to employees.
- Joint identification by the Department of Social and Family Affairs and the Revenue Commissioners of working families with children who are eligible but have not applied and automatic rebates to such families.

The perceived inadequacy of the **basic rate of social welfare** payments was discussed: many called for an increase in these payments, including increases in the Child Dependent Allowance and the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance. It was argued that the eligibility criteria for Child Benefit should be extended to cover all students in full-time education up to the age of 22. Participants called for an increase in the weekly fuel allowance for elderly people and the introduction of a national waiver for refuse charges for low-income families. Many considered the system of direct provision for asylum seekers to be inadequate and called for a review of the implementation of the Habitual Residency Condition. Finally, a range of specific suggestions were made in relation to income supports for **carers** including:

- An increase in the Carers Allowance over and above that of basic social welfare payments. The payment should be tailored to reflect the number of people that a Carer may be looking after.
- Abolition of the means test for the Allowance and the ‘cap’ on eligibility for receipt of Carers Benefit.
- Greater provision of respite care.

## 6. Rural and urban issues

### *Priorities for change*

- Expansion of the Rural Transport Initiative Scheme to facilitate access to health services, education, training and employment.
- Provision of Broadband services to rural areas.
- Increase the resources supporting Social Inclusion Measure Working Groups in recognition of their role in promoting the co-ordination of services at local level.
- Ensure continuity of funding for services developed through Interreg and PEACE programmes.
- Re-examine the criteria used to define RAPID and CLAR areas and to select Dormant Account funded projects.

### *What is working?*

Specific initiatives seen to work well in rural areas included the Rural Transport Initiative, the CLAR programme and Interreg and PEACE funded programmes.

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

**Basic service provision** (such as access to adult education, primary health care services, childcare) in isolated rural areas is inadequate. **Access to rural transport** was a major theme and participants called for the expansion of the Rural Transport Initiative and for greater co-ordination between transport providers and health, education and training agencies to facilitate access to employment/training opportunities, etc. A Broadband service was seen as a vital element of rural infrastructure and its hampered both the implementation of the Government’s e-Inclusion programme and the development of facilities such as distance learning, etc.

Problems were felt to be accentuated by the **lack of consideration given within NAP/inclusion to the impact of the Border and North-South issues on poverty** within the region e.g. the Border region has only one local authority with a Social Inclusion Measures Working Group or a Social Inclusion Unit. Participants called for the **border, rural and urban proofing** of policies and programmes. Access and input to policymaking was further hampered by the lack of co-ordination and integration of services and processes across the County and City Development Boards (CDBs), local authorities and the community and voluntary (C&V) sector. Greater communication within and between these parties was seen as essential to enable effective service delivery. Other suggestions included the mainstreaming of local authority Social Inclusion Units and Social Inclusion Measures Working Groups. Finally, a commitment to long-term funding of vital social services provided by the C&V sector was sought, as was funding for projects initially funded under the Interreg and PEACE programmes.