

# REPORT ON NAP/INCLUSION CONSULTATION SEMINAR

## LIMERICK – 24<sup>TH</sup> November 2005

A total of 59 representatives attended the Limerick NAP/inclusion consultation seminar. Attendees were drawn from a range of government departments, state agencies, community and voluntary sector organisations, as well as members of the public. The following report provides a summary of the main points raised at the seminar.

### 1. Facilitating access to employment

#### *Priorities for change*

- Enhanced cross-departmental co-operation and co-ordination of service delivery, better information on supports and services.
- Facilitate access by migrant workers to active labour market programmes and explore the accreditation of overseas qualifications.
- Promote access to further education and training for workers with low-level qualifications.
- Recognise and support atypical forms of employment such as the work performed by carers.
- Recognise and support the continuation of active labour market measures, which also contain a social inclusion component such as Community Employment schemes, and review the eligibility criteria for such schemes to increase their accessibility.

#### *What is working?*

The discussion acknowledged the significant **decrease in national unemployment rates**. Noted improvements in education and training provision included the implementation of the National Qualifications Framework and the increase in VEC Adult Guidance and VTOS schemes. **Community Employment** Schemes were widely praised both for their role in enabling marginalised groups to access the labour force and their significant social inclusion function (arising from the provision of essential community services in disadvantaged areas). A number of innovative **initiatives working to enable ex-prisoners** engage with education and employment opportunities in the Limerick region were praised.

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

A range of general points emerged in relation to the provision of education and training opportunities including:

- The need to address the continued presence of unemployment black spots in rural and small urban areas.
- The need to address low progression rates from supported education/training/employment programmes to sustainable employment.

- The shortness of the period of time that individuals can spend on active labour market programmes is not necessarily sufficient to prepare the participant to progress to mainstream employment.
- Insufficient attention to addressing the issue of youth (18-25 years) unemployment e.g. needs to develop a scheme similar to the Community Employment Scheme for this age group.
- Continued presence of barriers to participation in employment such as: the loss of secondary benefits, childcare costs and cultural barriers.
- The need for co-ordination of active labour market measures and the mainstreaming of successful community and voluntary sector pilot programmes in this area.

A more general discussion was held on the **use of labour market measures to achieve social inclusion objectives**. Some participants argued that social inclusion and labour force measures should be discrete and stand-alone, while others argued that participation in the labour force and promoting social inclusion are closely intertwined, requiring each type of measure to take account of and consider each other's objectives. Following from this, the importance of including social inclusion measures in the next National Development Plan was emphasised.

Specific issues were identified in relation to **access to education and training opportunities for low-skilled workers**. While the increased policy focus on enabling this group to access educational/training opportunities was noted, two key issues emerged:

- The inflexibility of training programme provision (e.g. full-time, day-time) often militates against the participation of full-time employees.
- Employers' attitudes to releasing employees to participate in such programmes are at times less than supportive. Participants argued that social partnership should emphasise and promote the role of small, medium and large employers in facilitating the up-skilling of the labour force.

The discussion concluded that there was a clear need for a more strategic focus on up-skilling employees with low-level qualifications.

Three particular groups were identified as vulnerable and in need of additional supports – carers, people with disabilities and migrant workers. Participants favoured allowing **carers** to access active labour market programmes (without losing their carers allowance and secondary benefits) and an increase in the number of hours which a carer may work while in receipt of benefits. While acknowledging some improvements in the level of support offered by agencies such as the Health Services Executive for carers, there was a strong sense that much more needed to be achieved by way of offering respite care and practical support to carers. Restrictions on the receipt of benefits by **people with disabilities** in employment should be eased to encourage participant in employment e.g. allow retention of the medical card and other secondary benefits. Finally, much concern was expressed regarding the need to integrate members of new Irish communities, including **migrant workers**, into Irish society and to protect them from social exclusion and exploitation in the workplace.

Participants called for National Employment Action Plans to recognise and accommodate atypical forms of employment usually pursued by those seeking to reconcile work and caring responsibilities. Flexible childcare provision (e.g., sessional care services) was seen as a key support to facilitate lone parents participation in active labour market programmes. The Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme was seen as a valuable support for those looking to re-enter employment/education but at present it fails to provide childcare for those not participating in active labour market education and training programmes.

## 2. Facilitating access to services – education

### *Priorities for change*

- Commitment to developing and funding long-term educational disadvantage initiatives and measures.
- Development of individual and tailored educational disadvantage measures for vulnerable groups.
- Develop appropriate data and information management systems to inform educational policy e.g. monitor progress and achievements of children within education at key transition stages
- Provision of multi-annual funding for community and voluntary providers of adult education, mainstream proven successful initiatives, developed integrated service delivery across different sectors.
- Provide the necessary range of educational, health and psychological services to support the education of children with special needs and behavioural difficulties in mainstream education as appropriate.
- Increased provision of targeted adult-education/further education opportunities for hard to reach groups such as migrant workers and adult males.

### *What is working?*

There was broad support for a range of **specialist intervention and support programmes** such as Early Start and the School Completion Programme. A key point emerging from the discussion nevertheless was the necessity to develop and fund these programmes over a significant period of time. Previous learning has shown that the benefits arising from participation in these programmes accrue in the long, as opposed to the short, term.

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

A key issue was the need for **resources to follow ‘the learner’** rather than being tied to a particular cycle or programme of education. Therefore, if a child is identified as requiring specific educational supports at the point of entry to mainstream education, such supports should be made available to the student throughout their time in education regardless of the level and type of education e.g. supports should follow students with disabilities throughout their educational experiences. The discussion also considered the **management process for the mainstreaming of successful pilot project**. It noted that this process often resulted in the loss of a number of the characteristics that contributed to a project’s success e.g., flexible provision, focus on small number of participants etc. The falling participation rate of adult males in adult education and further learning opportunities was noted with concern.

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

#### Priorities for change

- Increased support for family carers and general care services (e.g. home help, etc).
- Development of community based health services to address geographical isolation of remote communities from essential support services.
- Development of targeted primary and secondary health services (including outreach strategies) to access hard-to-reach communities and those with special needs.
- Services for the elderly and support for community and voluntary organisations service providers.
- Implementation of a national mental health strategy and development of associated rehabilitation and therapeutic services.
- Identification of carers as a vulnerable group within NAP/inclusion.

#### *What is working?*

The valuable assistance for **carers** offered by local-based carers support groups was acknowledged. While the introduction of the home care subvention was welcomed there were calls for an increase in its basic rate.

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

Participants argued for the inclusion of **carers** as a vulnerable group within NAP/inclusion and for improvements in the range of supports offered to carers including income supports, respite care and access to education, training and employment opportunities. Particular issues included:

- The lack of follow-up care provided following the discharge of patients from hospitals, including a lack of recuperation/step-down services in nursing homes.
- The low number of regional and local nursing home places.
- The lack of regulation and inspection of long-term care facilities.

**Care of the elderly** was a strong theme across the discussion. The role of the community and voluntary sector in providing vital services to the elderly was acknowledged, as was the need for more state support for these organisations. The extension of the **home help service**, including further home help training and its accreditation, would, it was felt, considerably aid community-based eldercare. There were many calls for improvements in regional and local **mental health care services**. These services were seen as vital to combat the growing incidence of suicide, self-harm and depression in rural and small urban communities. An increase in services such as substance/alcohol rehabilitation units was also considered necessary.

A strong theme was the difficulties encountered by those living in remote rural areas in **accessing primary and secondary health services**. Such difficulties were attributed to: (a) the large geographical distances patients had to travel to access services; and (b) a lack of

consistency and continuity in service provision. Specific gaps were identified in relation to the provision of healthcare services for Travellers, migrants and children with special needs.

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

##### Priorities for change

- Recognise the role of housing policy in supporting the development of sustainable and healthy communities e.g. proof housing developments for access to services and goods.
- Address barriers to implementation of Traveller Accommodation Programmes and implement a monitoring and reporting system to track progress.
- Continued focus on supporting inter-agency planning and service delivery and including local communities in decision-making.
- Local authorities social and affordable housing action plans should prioritise and respond to the housing needs of the most vulnerable groups.

##### *What is working?*

In general, improvements were noted in **processes to link local authorities with their tenants** and the wider community. Particular praise was given to Tenant Liaison Officers and community-based Estate Management Officers, which were felt to effectively link both the local authorities and local authority tenants thereby promoting greater understanding and better communication between these communities. Participants called for the appointment of a Liaison Officer to all local authority housing estates. The shared ownership initiative was considered successful. The implementation of **RAPID** was considered to have promoted greater interagency co-ordination and service delivery with particular successes noted in the provision of play and recreational facilities in local communities. Another inter-agency initiative considered to be of some success was the **Homelessness Forum** and the Voluntary Housing Forum (in Limerick).

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

Key themes were the need to ensure that social and affordable housing obligations were fulfilled, address the marginalisation of disadvantaged rural and urban local authority housing estates and the achievement of obligations in respect of the provision of appropriate accommodation options for groups with particular needs such as Travellers.

The ongoing **marginalisation of disadvantaged local authority housing estates** was noted with concern: the movement of long-term residents to private estates and the increase in privately-owned but rented housing were felt to contribute to the decay in community fabric. The implementation of Part V of the Planning Act was felt to have failed in a number of areas largely due to the provision enabling private housing developers to buy themselves out from the requirement to provide a certain percentage of social housing in private developments. Participants called for increased social housing investment plus a commitment to the provision of necessary community facilities and services on all existing and new estates and the development of a range of housing types in recognition of the housing needs of various individual groups (e.g. people with disabilities, single men, lone

parents, the elderly, etc). The concentration of local authority housing in urban centres was considered a key factor in the growing number of rural residents moving to urban areas in order to access social and affordable housing. Participants called for **more social and affordable housing in rural areas** and warned against an over-reliance on voluntary-led provision (e.g. through the Voluntary Housing Scheme) to meet this need. Specific concern was expressed with regard to the lack of progress in meeting **Travellers accommodation needs** and what was perceived as a lack of commitment on the part of the respective authorities to appropriately consult with, and involve, Travellers in the associated decision-making processes.

Participants also called for greater financial resources to be directed towards ensuring that **essential repairs and maintenance** is conducted on the housing of elderly local authority tenants and those who live in private housing, where these persons are not able to meet the full costs of such repairs, etc. Finally, participants called for improved, multi-annual funding of community groups and facilities in recognition of the key role such groups and services play in developing sustainable communities.

## 5. Facilitating access to resources – income supports

### Priorities for change

- Address the lack of flexibility in social welfare schemes, in particular the interplay between the social welfare and taxation systems in order to remove barriers to participation in active labour market programmes and employment opportunities.
- Introduce a Cost of Disability Payment to meet the additional costs arising from living with a disability.
- Identify carers as a vulnerable group within the next NAP/inclusion.
- Continual commitment to providing targeted information on social welfare rights and entitlements.

### *What is working?*

Targeted and adapted active labour market programmes in rural areas such as the rural Social Scheme, which is targeted at low-income farm families, were felt to work well.

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

The interplay between the social welfare and taxation system was a focus of much discussion. In particular, participants widely agreed on the need to address existing employment disincentives by, for example, allowing those returning to work to retain secondary benefits such as the medical card for longer and a higher level of income. A low level of take-up of supplementary income supports was noted particularly amongst those eligible for Family Income Supplement and the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance. This was partly attributed to a lack of awareness of the supports and the associated red tape in applying for them.

It was generally felt that much more could be done to support carers. Specific suggestions included:

- Increasing the number of hours that a carer can work, while retaining the Carers Allowance.
- Crediting those in receipt of the Carers Allowance with PRSI contributions.
- Identifying carers as a vulnerable group within NAP/inclusion.
- Developing a ‘cost of care’ package for carers.

Participants also called for increased attention to be given to tackling issues such as:

- Income supports for the elderly e.g. provide a year long Fuel Allowance.
- Development of equitable maintenance and income supports for separated parents.
- Indebtedness amongst low-income families.
- Up-skilling of workers with low-level qualifications including the provision of literacy and numeracy training.
- Review the work permit system with a view to allowing the employee to hold the work permit.
- Discrimination in the workplace.
- Income supports to facilitate school retention and completion amongst children from disadvantaged families.

## 6. Rural and urban issues

### Priorities for change

- Focus on developing preventative policy and programme measures within NAP/inclusion to address identifiable long-term social and economic issues of concern e.g. integration of members of new Irish communities, early school leaving.
- Provide community policing in rural and regional areas and involve the local community and relevant organisations in the monitoring and implementation processes such as the policing committees.
- Tackle inadequate public transport infrastructures in rural and urban areas experiencing population growth.
- Tackle the barriers to participation in active labour market programmes faced by those living in remote and/or disadvantaged regional urban areas e.g. lack of public transport, childcare, etc.
- Review the implementation of the RAPID and CLAR programmes and consider their expansion to cover ‘new’ areas of disadvantage and need.
- Commitment to the mainstreaming of successful pilot initiatives and to the provision of long-term funding to support their work.

### *What is working?*

There was general praise for the **Rural Transport Initiative** and agreement that it should be expanded and made accessible to participants in active labour market programmes. Achieving this objective would require those managing the Initiative to work closely with the

representatives of education and training providers such as FAS to ensure that the service is responsive to service users needs and allow service costs to be spread across the relevant agencies.

It was acknowledged that the implementation of the **RAPID and CLAR** programmes had made some positive contributions to improvements in service delivery and allocation of resources to disadvantaged urban and rural areas. However, a review of these programmes was considered timely to assess their implementation and impact and to consider whether the areas selected for inclusion in the programmes were still the areas of highest need. The need for the state to commit and support long-term strategies and resources to tackle disadvantage was emphasised. **Community development projects and family resource centres** were seen as meeting key gaps in service provision and community facilities in remote rural areas. Similarly, the development of mobile training facilities that cover rural areas were welcomed.

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

Rural transport and transport in new urban areas was acknowledged as being below par. It was acknowledged that **access to public and private transport** is a rural and urban issue – its lack is a significant barrier for people who need to travel within rural and urban areas to access employment, training or social support. As towns expand, new urban transport systems must be developed and such systems must be widely accessible and responsive to the needs of different users.

The **changing nature of agriculture** (in particular, the decline in agricultural employment) was considered a potential factor contributing to the exclusion of those who previously may not have experienced poverty or social exclusion. For example, Co. Limerick used to have a strong agricultural sector, but changes in single farm payments and declines in farm incomes place a new cohort at risk of poverty. This may undermine the social fabric of rural areas, and isolate farmers and farm families. There is a clear need for national, regional and local policy to include preventative measures to tackle the potential growth in poverty and social exclusion across the communities affected by these changes.

It was strongly agreed that anti-social behaviour and substance misuse are problems faced by both rural and urban communities. Participants favoured the development of a security-led and social response to these problems i.e. more **community policing plus community facilities** for young people, rehabilitation places, etc. Participants argued that:

- Communities should be involved in the development of community policing policies.
- Community police should be named individuals, responsible for named areas. They should be trained in the needs of their designated community.
- A level of commitment / consistency is needed to ensure that there is continuity over time in terms of the areas that community police are responsible for. This will enable them to build strong relationships in the community.