

# REPORT ON NAP/INCLUSION CONSULTATION SEMINAR

## - MULLINGAR

A total of 62 representatives attended the Mullingar NAP/inclusion consultation seminar. Attendees were drawn from government departments, state agencies, community and voluntary sector, as well as members of the public. The following report provides a summary of the main points raised in the discussions held in each workshop at the seminar.

### 1. Facilitating access to employment

#### *Priorities for change*

- Review the interaction of the social welfare and taxation systems to remove employment disincentives.
- Provide additional support and resources for active labour market programmes.
- Ensure that employment policies and programmes are cognisant of and responsive to differences in rural-urban unemployment trends and characteristics.

#### *What is working?*

Participants welcomed enhanced **interagency co-operation** as demonstrated through area partnerships and the High Supports Process (H.S.P.) but noted that these require further development. There was broad support for the range of **targeted active labour market programmes** (ALMPs) and acknowledgement that participation in paid employment was key to combating poverty and social exclusion. Particular initiatives referenced as working well include: the Rural Social Scheme, Community Employment Scheme, Jobs Initiative, Employment Support Schemes for People with Disabilities and the enterprise allowance. Schemes such as the Business-Training Programmes, which support participants to **develop sustainable employment opportunities**, were welcomed.

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

Accurate and **accessible information** on the opportunities available for those excluded from the labour market was deemed essential. Such information should be literacy proofed and available in a range of mediums and languages.

The continued presence of a '**benefits trap**' suggests that a review of interaction of the social welfare and taxation systems is necessary to remove potential disincentives to participation in active labour market measures. Active labour market policies and measures should be flexible in structure and responsive to the needs of those attempting to balance participation with caring responsibilities, etc.

Greater inter-agency and inter-sectoral co-operation was viewed as essential to ensuring the continued **up-skilling of Irish workers**. Employers were viewed as having a significant role in ensuring employees access to training and up-skilling opportunities. Participants favoured **greater co-operation between second level schools and state training agencies** such as FAS to ensure that early school leavers are directed to ongoing training that is suitable for their needs.

## 2. Facilitating access to services – education

### *Priorities for change*

- Adopt a rights-based approach to educational provision.
- Targeted training and education initiatives for vulnerable groups.
- Provision of support systems to enable ‘hard to reach’ groups participate in education and training.
- Enhanced data and monitoring systems to track and assess individuals’ progression through mainstream and alternative education.
- Support for community-based alternative education programmes.

### *What is working?*

Educational supports and programmes for those at **risk of educational disadvantage** and/or early school leaving were praised e.g. School Completion Programme, Homework clubs, outreach teachers, Junior Education Centres, Homestart, Youth Diversion Projects, FETAC courses, VTOS programmes. It was generally agreed that these initiatives were successful where in place but should be expanded nationwide and allocated multi-annual funding.

New developments in **adult education** provision were welcomed, such as:

- The appointment of Community Education Facilitators by Vocational Education Committees (VEC).
- Improved access to adult education through VEC Community Training Centres.
- Better provision of adult literacy services.

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

General and specific comments were offered in relation to perceived weaknesses in mainstream primary and second level education: the curriculum was overly academic, class sizes were too large, there was a lack of specialist educational support services. It was believed that these weaknesses contributed to negative educational experiences for many vulnerable children. Participants called for:

- A reduction in class sizes at primary and second level.
- Universal access to early childhood care and education services.
- An increase in breakfast/after-school/ homework clubs.
- The development of an individual learning plan for children in education reflective of their individual skills.

More resources should be allocated to support **adult education** in recognition of the priority given to lifelong learning in Irish public policy. Adult educational provision should recognise the range of barriers that can preclude participation, such as lack of transport, difficulties in reconciling caring responsibilities with participation, the accessibility of training centres and programmes for people with disabilities, etc. The state should develop and promote models of good practice for educational services to support them to engage with

hard-to-reach and vulnerable communities. The economic costs of participation in education and training were felt to exclude low-income earners and those dependent on social welfare payments. The eligibility criteria for accessing educational income supports were considered to be overly rigid (e.g. requirement that one is a full-time student) and exclusionary of many.

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

#### ***Priorities for change***

- Adopt a rights-based and holistic approach to the provision of health and care services.
- Equality proof health policy and service provision.
- Prioritise the development of data, monitoring and evaluation systems to enable measurement and tracking of health service outputs.
- Acknowledge and resource the community and voluntary sector's role as providers of community health services.

#### ***What is working?***

The operation of regional public health services, primary care initiatives and the focus on building health communities was praised. Specialist initiatives targeted at vulnerable and hard to reach groups such as Traveller Liaison Officers were felt to work well and should be expanded nationally. There was an improved awareness of mental and physical health issues in general across the broad community and a growing acknowledgement of the value of a holistic approach to health and health promotion.

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

There was some disappointment with what was considered the slow pace of implementation of agreed national strategies and plans. Policy analysis should focus on the outcomes arising from health reforms and funding changes i.e. the impact of change. This should be supported through enhanced data collection and analysis of change at national, departmental and regional level to ensure an accurate overall picture of the health system's functioning and develop an evidence-base to guide policy planning and service delivery. Service delivery should be driven by a rights-based approach and guarantee universal access to health services. Specific attention should be paid to facilitating hard-to-reach groups to access health services.

Participants requested additional supports for carers. An increase in public long-stay facilities and community care facilities was recommended. An active, outreach health promotion strategy together with more community based counselling and therapeutic services was seen as key to addressing the problems of suicide and substance misuse in rural and urban areas.

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

#### ***Priorities for change***

- Increase in social housing output targets.

- Implement agreed Traveller Accommodation Programmes across all local authority areas.
- Support and resource the role of voluntary organisations in working with local authorities to develop local, community-led responses to accommodation needs.

### *What is working?*

It was generally agreed that while the development of Traveller accommodation plans was working well at national level, their implementation at local level plans by local authorities was less successful due in part to a lack of grassroots support. Participants praised the progress made by the voluntary and statutory sector in developing partnership approaches at local level to the housing of vulnerable groups.

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

An **increase in the NAP/inclusion social and affordable housing targets** was considered essential, as current targets are not reflective of the high level of demand. For example, 30 housing starts are planned in Tullamore for the coming year however, there are 400 households on the local authority housing waiting list. Social and affordable housing and other such accommodation should be designed in consultation with the ultimate end users to ensure that it is accessible and appropriate to their needs. The **development of sustainable communities** arose with participants emphasising the need to develop mechanisms that require developers (public or private) to equip new and existing housing developments with adequate community facilities plus the necessary resources to fund these facilities (e.g. fund the cost of a community worker). A **range of supports** was considered necessary for low-income local authority tenants including: pre-tenancy courses, courses in parenting, budgeting, home management etc. It was suggested that the completion of a pre-tenancy course be compulsory for those who wish to receive social housing. It was generally agreed that **housing allocation lists** and procedures should be more transparent and accountable. Participants called for **more transition and/or sheltered accommodation** options to support people in transition, e.g. patients leaving psychiatric care.

## 5. Facilitating access to resources – income supports

### *Priorities for change*

- Improved policies and measures to support the reconciliation of work and family life.
- Review the operation and integration of basic social welfare supports and secondary benefits to remove disincentives to participation in employment.
- Poverty proof income support policies.
- Tackle youth unemployment and require early school leavers to participate in active labour market programmes.

### *What is working?*

Significant improvements were noted in respect of the Department of Social and Family Affairs' general overall level of **customer service**, particularly the provision of client information and development of outreach activities to reach vulnerable groups. One

participant noted the increased efficiency achieved in respect of making timely payments to welfare recipients. Improved supports for carers were acknowledged in particular, the introduction of the **respite grant**.

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

Participants acknowledged the value of existing income supports but argued that large numbers of welfare recipients remain in poverty. Increases in the level of the following allowances and benefits were recommended: Fuel Allowance, Living Alone allowance, Family Income Supplement, half-rate Maternity Benefit and the Child Dependent Allowance. Some participants' felt there was a noticeable rise in food poverty and argued for the supply of food vouchers to all welfare dependents to address this.

There was widespread agreement that the operation and integration of basic social welfare supports and secondary benefits be reviewed to ensure that policies are facilitating people's participation in employment and/or training. Continuing discrimination against minority groups (e.g. Travellers) was considered a significant barrier to breaking the cycle of welfare dependency amongst vulnerable groups.

Other suggested improvements included:

- A review of the Back to Work Scheme to assess its impact in enabling people to move to full-time, sustainable employment.
- Explore measures to reconcile work and family life.
- Review the implementation of the Habitual Residency Condition with a view
- Extend welfare entitlements to migrant workers.
- Increase the numbers of hours of employment that a carer may work and retain the carers' allowance.