



*Irish Rural Link*  
*Nasc Tuaithe na hÉireann*

# Submission to Review of NAP Inclusion Plan 2007 – 2016

## January 2019

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## Overview

Irish Rural Link (IRL) is the national network of rural community groups, representing over 600 groups and thousands of individuals committed to socially, environmentally and economically sustainable rural communities.

The National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007 – 2016 was published at a time when there was unprecedented growth in the country. The overall poverty goal was

*“To reduce the number of those experiencing poverty between 2% and 4% by 2012, with the aim of eliminating consistent poverty by 2016, under the revised definition”* i.e.

*“People are living in poverty if their income and resources (material, cultural and social) are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living which is regarded as acceptable by Irish society generally. As a result of inadequate income and resources people may be excluded and marginalised from participating in activities which are considered the norm for other people in society”* (NAPInclusion, 2006).

While this overall goal and the high level goals set out within each section of the lifecycle were ambitions, they could have been achievable by the end of the Plan if the financial crash did not happen but even when the economy did begin to recover, the vulnerable groups that NAPInclusion 2007 – 2016 was to benefit most, did not benefit and many have still not benefitted from it. After the financial crash and during the years of the recession and even thereafter, many services for the most vulnerable groups of people in our society; children, older people, migrant and ethnic minority communities were cut or had to close as a result. Social welfare payments were cut across the board with young people under 26 still on a lower payment. Other social welfare benefits for older people, people with a disability and carers were also cut or ceased and have not been fully restored or only part restored. The rates of poverty and deprivation increased as a result of the crash and still remain far above the targets set out in the NAPInclusion. Table 1 gives the headline figures of poverty and deprivation between 2012 and 2017 as set out in the annual Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC).

**Table 1: Poverty and Deprivation Rates 2012 - 2017<sup>1</sup>**

Poverty & Deprivation Rates						
	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
	%					
<b>At-Risk Poverty Rate</b>	16.9	16.2	16.7	16.3	16.2	15.7
<b>Deprivation Rate</b>	27	30.5	28.9	25.4	21	18.8
<b>Consistent Poverty Rate</b>	8.2	9	8.3	8.5	8.2	6.7

While the country approaches “full employment” and the economy is growing, the rate of growth in many rural areas is still lagging behind major urban centres. People living in rural areas are still experiencing higher levels of poverty and have higher income inadequacies’ than their urban counterparts<sup>2</sup>. The Pobal Deprivation Index published early 2018 also highlighted more rural towns and villages have higher deprivation rates and while unemployment rates overall are decreasing, these areas are still experiencing high rates of unemployment<sup>3</sup>.

The SILC report for 2017 also shows that the ‘At Risk of Poverty’ rate was higher for those living in rural areas; 17.2% compared to 15.1% for those in urban areas. While it the rates of poverty and deprivation have fallen in 2017, there are vulnerable groups of people that are still living in poverty. People who were unemployed had the highest rate of ‘at-risk of poverty’ at 42%, closely followed by individuals living in households where there was no person at work at 40.3%.

Those not at work due to illness or a disability had the highest rate of deprivation at 45.9% and those living in households with one parent and one or more children under 18 at 44.5%. This group had the highest rate of consistent poverty at 20.7%.

Fuel poverty still remains an issue for a lot of people and rural households are at greater risk of fuel poverty due to the nature of the rural housing stock, the types of fuels available, limited opportunities to switch to cheaper fuels such as gas or take advantage of bundle deals offered by gas and electricity suppliers. The SILC report 2017<sup>4</sup> showed 22.5%) of individuals at risk of poverty went without heat at some stage during 2017 while 13% were unable to keep their home adequately warm. For those living in consistent poverty, these figures were much higher with over half of individuals (51%)

<sup>1</sup> CSO SILC (2017) ‘Survey on Income and Living Conditions Report 2017’

<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2017/povertyanddeprivation/#d.en.181337>

<sup>2</sup> Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (2017) Minimum Essential Standard of Living Report 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Haase, T. & Pratscheke, J. (2017) ‘The 2016 Pobal HP Deprivation Index for Small Areas (SA)’ <https://www.pobal.ie/app/uploads/2018/06/The-2016-Pobal-HP-Deprivation-Index-Introduction-07.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> (SILC) 2017 ibid

going without heat at some stage during the year and 30.2% unable to keep their home adequately warm. These figures were an increase on the previous year.

Since the NAPInclusion was published in 2006, carbon tax was introduced on all fossil fuels and home heating oil. This has impacted most on low income households. It is much harder for such households to switch to greener energy alternatives as many are either renting in Local Authority housing or private rented accommodation or do not have the financial resources to make the necessary changes to their homes to make them more energy efficient.

The lack of essential public services in rural areas such as transport and infrastructure such as broadband, continue to exclude people, especially marginalised groups from fully participating in society and contributing to the economy.

Ireland were one of the lead countries in the signing of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's). The first goal is zero poverty. The Government must stay committed to achieving this goal and the new NAPInclusion must ensure that vulnerable groups must be safeguarded from any future recessions and experience the same hardship they have experienced over the past ten years. The new NAPInclusion must ensure that people are lifted out of poverty and given the tools and skills to help them do this.

## High Level Goals

Again, like the overall goal, the majority of the high level goals and actions to implement them for each life stage outlined in NAPInclusion 2007-2016 failed to be achieved with some being reversed as a result of cutback during the recession.

## Children:

The Vision set out for Children in NAPInclusion 2007-2016 is

*'A Society where children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own; where all children are cherished and supported by family and the wider society; where they enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realise their potential'* (pg. 30 NAPInclusion, 2007)

The High Level Goals include the provision of adequate income supports for children and education as a key indicator of future life chances and opportunities.

Over 104,000 children are living in poverty across the country and there were 3,811 children in emergency homeless accommodation as of November 2018<sup>5</sup>. This does not

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<sup>5</sup> Department of Housing and Planning (2018) Homeless Statistics Week of 19-25 November 2018  
[https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/homeless\\_report\\_-\\_november\\_2018\\_0.pdf](https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/homeless_report_-_november_2018_0.pdf)

include children in domestic violence centres or those living in overcrowded or unfit accommodation.

Child Benefit is the only universal welfare payment and is available to parents regardless of income. It therefore prevents poverty traps and is an extremely important source of income to families, especially those who are on low income or in receipt of other social welfare payments. In 2007 Child Benefit was €160 per month, this was cut during the recession and did not see an increase for a number of years. It has remained at €140 per month since 2017 with no increase announced in Budget 2019.

As mentioned above, households of one-parent and one or more children under 18 are the group most likely to be living in consistent poverty and experiencing deprivation. One-parent family allowance not only saw a cut during the recession, but there was also changes to the structure of the payment when a child reached a certain age. This put extra financial strain on one parent families and in turn on childhood poverty. While we welcome the increase in Budget 2019 of the one parent family payment to €237 for children under 12 and to €240 for children over 12 years and over. Budget 2019 is the first Budget that the Government has acknowledged the higher cost of children in post primary school.

### **Healthcare**

While every child under 6 now has free GP care, waiting lists for surgeries, unless family has private health insurance, continue to remain an issue. Mental health services for children and adolescence remain far below the standard set out in '*A Vision for Change*'. With the number of children living in poverty and those living in emergency accommodation, the impact of this on children's mental health in the future will have a knock on effect on mental health services. Vacancies in the mental health sector must be filled and staff retained and ensuring waiting times to see the CAMH's team are reduced is essential.

### **Education**

The NAPInclusion 2007-2016 acknowledges the importance of education for the future incomes and opportunities for children and young people. The target set out in the plan was to cut to halve the proportion of pupils in primary schools with serious literacy difficulties from 27%-30% to 15% by 2016. During the recession, there were cuts to school budgets, cuts to special needs assistants in schools and resource teachers has made it more difficult for children with literacy and other learning difficulties get the extra help they may need. Also, waiting times for educational assessments for children can be extremely long, with families who have the financial means to go private can have assessments and supports in place in a number of weeks. These waiting times must be reduced and the necessary supports in place for children, especially for children most in need of such supports must be reduced.

We are now in the digital era and children are expected to use internet for homework and it can be a way to help them learn and study. However, for children living in rural areas this is not always possible with the lack of high speed broadband. There are also schools in rural areas that do not have access to reliable internet. This is putting such students at a disadvantage. The rollout of broadband to all homes and schools in rural areas is essential.

## People of Working Age

The NAPInclusion 2007-2016 was published at a time when the unemployment rate in Ireland was at its lowest at 4.8%. The following year, unemployment began to increase and continued to rise thereafter for a number of years, reaching 21% before it began to fall.

The Vision set out in NAPInclusion for people of working age was

*“To have sufficient income and opportunity to participate as fully as possible in economic and social life and there all individuals and their families are supported by a range of quality public services to enhance their quality of life and well-being”* (pp 40, NAPInclusion, 2007).

The high level goals for this cohort over the ten years of the plan included increasing employment and participation of those who were on long-term social welfare into education, training and employment and to maintain the relative value of the lowest social welfare rate at least at €185.80 in 2007 terms.

Following an emergency Budget in 2008, many people in receipt of social welfare saw their weekly payments cut. A new rate of €100 was introduced for people under 25 years. It is only in the last three years that there have been small increases in job seekers benefit and allowances. In 2019, weekly jobseekers benefit and allowance for people over 26years will increase to €203.00, while for 18 -24years will receive €112.70.

While Irish Rural Link welcome the increase in payments it is insufficient to meet basic standard of living for a lot of people and for those living in rural areas it is even more insufficient.

The Vincentian Partnership Annual Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL)<sup>6</sup> for 2018 continues to show households living in rural areas have higher income inadequacies than their urban counterparts. These higher costs are primarily related to higher transport and home energy costs. The table below shows the gap between income inadequacies for household types in rural and urban areas.

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<sup>6</sup> Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (2018) ‘Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2018’ [https://www.budgeting.ie/download/pdf/mesl\\_2018\\_update\\_report.pdf](https://www.budgeting.ie/download/pdf/mesl_2018_update_report.pdf)

## Income Inadequacies by Household Type in Receipt of Social Welfare Payment

Household Type	Rural	Urban
2 Parents with 1 infant	-€75.83	-€25.78
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 pre-school, 1 primary)	-€55.35	-€1.28
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 primary, 1 secondary)	-€126.50	-€74.30
2 Parents with 3 Children (1 infant, 1 pre-school, 1 primary)	-€70.90	-€21.61
2 Parents with 4 Children (2 primary, 2 Secondary)	-€205.91	-€145.71
One Parent with 1 child (Primary school)	-€101.57	-€25.03
One Parent with 2 Children (1 pre-school, 1 primary)	-€81.94	-€7.17
One Parent with 2 Children (1 primary, 1 secondary)	-€153.08	-€80.19
Single Adult living in Private Rented Accommodation	-€84.83	-€47.38

*Source: Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (VPSJ) 2018*

The overall unemployment rate in the state continues to fall, with most recent figures in the Labour Force Survey for Q3 2018<sup>7</sup> showing unemployment rate now stands at 6%. While this decrease is very welcome, there are still disparities in the rate of unemployment across the country. Unemployment rates in the South East, Mid-West Midlands continue to remain above the state average at 8.6%, 7.2% and 7.1% respectively. Results from Census 2016 showed that small towns had higher unemployment rates than larger towns. Of the larger towns across the country, Longford had the highest unemployment rate between 2011 and 2016 at 30%. Long-term unemployment still needs to be addressed, although lower than previous years, 34% of those who are unemployed are so for over a year or more. There are certain groups of people who are more at risk of being unemployed and long-term unemployed. Lone parents, people with disabilities, older people can find it harder to gain permanent or regular employment and therefore remain at risk of living in consistent poverty and deprivation.

While reducing the unemployment rate and getting people back to work the quality of jobs created are just as important that just getting people off the live register. In rural areas the quality of jobs available tend to be lower than in urban area, with a higher number of people employed in lower paid sectors. Many jobs in retail/wholesale, hotel

<sup>7</sup> CSO Labour Force Survey Q3 2018

<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/lfs/labourforcesurveyquarter32018/>

and catering, tourism are zero contracts. In rural areas, these are the jobs many people work in as there is very little alternative unless they commute long distances to work, which is not always an option for people. The Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice MESL<sup>8</sup> for 2018 shows that income inadequacies are felt by households who were working on minimum wage with these inadequacies larger for households in rural areas for most of the household types looked at.

Youth unemployment continues to remain high at 14.9%. Getting young people into employment, education or training now needs to be a priority as does helping those with disabilities enter the workforce. Just under a quarter of part-time employed are underemployed, with more women underemployed than men.

The next NAPInclusion must ensure that every opportunity is given to marginalised groups of people that they can have equal access to the labour market, education and training, that everyone that is able to work can work and barriers to work that this cohort encounter are removed.

Access to public transport, broadband and childcare for people living in rural areas continue to exclude many people from participating fully in society and some unable to take up employment as a result of this. It can also prevent them from accessing education or training. A study by Cullinan et al (2013) found that for every 10 kilometres of travel distance, the likelihood that individuals would participate in higher education decreased by 2.7%. Therefore, a prospective student living 50 kilometres from a higher education institution is 13.5% less likely to participate in education at this level.

For women who may have being out of the workforce for a while or never had the opportunity to take up a training course or third level education, community education providers place a lot of emphasis on those essential 1:1 and peer supports, literacy, creating the supportive environment etc. It can be daunting to move from that environment into the higher education arena so recognition of the need for those supports for many learners is essential. Community education can play a bigger role in helping people, who are furthest from the labour market acquire the necessary skills to either go on to gain a higher education qualification or enter the workforce. At present, community education providers are not core funded and this makes it more difficult for them to plan their services, which in turn makes the service unstable.

The new NAPInclusion will need commitment from whole of Government to ensure that the necessary public services are in place; public transport, broadband, childcare, education and training supports so every person regardless of where they live have equal access to job opportunities as well as education and training.

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<sup>8</sup> Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (2018) ibid

## Older People

The Vision set out for Older People in NAPInclusion 2007 – 2016 is

*“That supports are provided, where necessary, to enable older people to maintain their health and well-being, as well as to live active and full lives, in an independent way in their own home”*

A number of high level goals were set which included increased investment in community care services for older people; home care packages and enhanced care services to support them to live independently in the community for as long as possible. It also set out to maintain payment rate of €200 per week, in 2007 terms.

Following the publication of the Plan, people over the age of 65 saw a number of cuts to the supports they were receiving, both to income supports and to home care and community care services.

Cuts to the telephone allowance, medical cards and introduction of prescription charges as well as reductions in household benefit packages. While medical card eligibility has improved and prescription charges have decreased, many of the allowance have not being fully restored, such as the telephone allowance.

In ten years there has only being a 30 to 40-euro increase in the state pension. The contributory pension rate for 2019 is €248.30 while non-contributory pension will be €237. Again, for older people living in rural areas, it is more difficult to meet a basic standard of living. A pensioner living alone in a rural area in receipt of a non-contributory pension has an income inadequacy of €55.71 per week compared to pensioner in an urban area who has an income adequacy of €8.59. For contributory pension recipients in rural area this inadequacy in income is €45.24 compared to an adequate income of €18.20 for their peer in an urban area. This is mainly due to extra costs incurred living in a rural area such as transport and fuels costs. For example, meeting the transport needs of rural pensioner households requires a car – this can add an additional €59 per week (due to fuel, maintenance, insurance, etc) to the MESL budget for a lone pensioner in a rural area compared to no direct transport costs for a lone pensioner in an urban area (VPSJ, 2018).

While free travel for people over 65 was maintained, people in rural areas do not get to use this on a regular basis, if at all. IRL continue to call for a travel allowance for people who do not get to use their travel card to cover some of the cost of taxis and hackneys. Public transport in rural areas/Local Link is still not accessible on a regular basis and more improvements must be achieved in this.

Cuts to homecare packages during the recession and home help hours has had a negative impact on older people with people still having to go to nursing home to be cared for or relying more on family and neighbours. With the launch of SlainteCare in 2018 and Action plan due to be published early 2019, the shift towards regional and community delivery of healthcare is one of the key aims of the Plan. A public

consultation on Home Care Scheme was launched in 2017, with no publication as yet from the Department of Health on such a strategy. The change to community healthcare outlined in Slaintecare has to happen so that people can remain in their own home and live independently as they age.

Ireland has an ageing population, with the number of people over the age of 65 increasing by 19.1% from 2011, with this number projected to increase to approximately 1.4 million by 2046 (CSO, 2016). The number of people over the age of 85 also increased in the five years to 2016. There was a total increase of 67,555 people over the age of 85 years between 2011 and 2016. This number is expected to double by 2031 and the number over the age of 80 years to dramatically increase to between 470,000 and 484,000 in 2046.

Being cared at home and in the community where they live is the preferred option for older people, their families and indeed the state. There are a number of vital community services, such as meals on wheels already in place that can play a bigger and complement the delivery of healthcare in the community.

### **Meals on Wheels**

Meals on Wheels service is a critical component of the continuum of care services and one service available that enables older people to remain living in the community or to return to their own homes after hospitalisation. For those using the service it is seen as more than just a meal. It links people into other services, such as the Public Health Nurse, befriending services and other healthcare services and it can reduce rural isolation. For many, especially men living alone, the person delivering a meal may be the only person they might see in the day or week. However, there are many challenges that are hindering Meals on Wheels delivery the vital service it provides and need to be addressed to ensure older people can remain in their own homes and live independently.

The next NAPInclusion must ensure that goals set for older people are met and that the support services for older people to remain in their own home as they age and that their incomes are protected as well as supplementary welfare allowances. Again, the provision of public services such as transport, health and broadband will all be necessary to keep people in their communities as they age, especially in rural areas.

## People with Disabilities

The NAP Inclusion 2007-2016 set out a vision that people with disabilities would have

*“To the greatest extent possible, the opportunity to live a full life with their families and as part of their local community, free from discrimination”*

The high level goals set out to achieve this included increasing employment of people with disabilities who do not have difficulty in retaining a job.

As outlined in the overview, people not at work due to illness or disability had the highest rate of deprivation in 2017. The extra costs incurred to people of having a disability must be taken into consideration when calculating disability allowance and that these are not automatically lost if person takes up employment. Supports also need to be in place for employers to adapt office space if person acquires a disability.

For people living in rural areas, having a disability can be even more difficult for them to access employment, education or training because again, the lack of transport and the lack of accessible transport. It requires a lot of planning for a person in a wheelchair to travel on public transport in Ireland, with Bus Eireann buses still not having wheelchair accessible buses.

## Communities

The overall aim of NAP Inclusion 2007-2016 was to build viable and sustainable communities, improving the lives of people living in disadvantaged areas and building social capital.

The extent of this vision implemented was limited, if at all, by the financial crises and the recession that followed. With the closure of services in rural areas, emigration and still migration to the capital and other larger urban areas to get employment, many rural communities disappeared and are still trying to rebuild these communities. While the *Action Plan for Rural Development* outlines measures to achieve this and to get people back living in rural areas, progress is slow.

## Conclusion

There are many lessons that can be learnt from the NAP Inclusion 2007-2016 and the implementation and monitoring of actions set out in the plan. While external factors are often blamed for many of the shortcomings of Government to implement the plan fully, there must be measures included in the new NAP Inclusion to ensure that the most vulnerable and disadvantaged people in society are protected.

There must be commitment by all of Government to ensure that services for people are in place to allow people to fully participate in society and contribute to the economy regardless of where they live. Services such robust public transport, high speed broadband to every home and business in the country and affordable childcare must be

properly invested in. The creation of employment and quality jobs must afford people a decent standard of living and taking up employment, education or training must not make people worse off in doing so.

With an ageing population, the delivery of healthcare in the community to allow for people to remain in their own home as they age, must be a priority for Government. The building of sustainable communities and helping migrants integrate into communities is essential.

## **Irish Rural Link the Organisation**

Irish Rural Link (IRL), formed in 1991, is a national network of organisations and individuals campaigning for sustainable rural development in Ireland and Europe. IRL, a non-profit organisation, has grown significantly since its inception and now directly represents over 600 community groups with a combined membership of 25,000.

The network provides a structure through which rural groups and individuals, representing disadvantaged rural communities, can articulate their common needs and priorities, share their experiences and present their case to policy-makers at local, national and European Level.

Irish Rural Link is the only group represented at the national social partnership talks solely representing rural communities' interests.

***'Our vision is of vibrant, inclusive and sustainable rural communities that contribute to an equitable and just society'***

Irish Rural Link's aims are:

- To articulate and facilitate the voices of rural communities in local, regional, national and European policy arenas, especially those experiencing poverty, social exclusion and the challenge of change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- To promote local and community development in rural communities in order to strengthen and build the capacity of rural community groups to act as primary movers through practical assistance and advice.
- To research, critique and disseminate policies relating to rural communities including issues such as sustainability, social exclusion, equality and poverty
- To facilitate cross-border networking between rural communities

***'Our mission is to influence and inform local, regional, national and European development policies and programmes in favour of rural communities especially those who are marginalised as a result of poverty and social exclusion in rural areas.'***