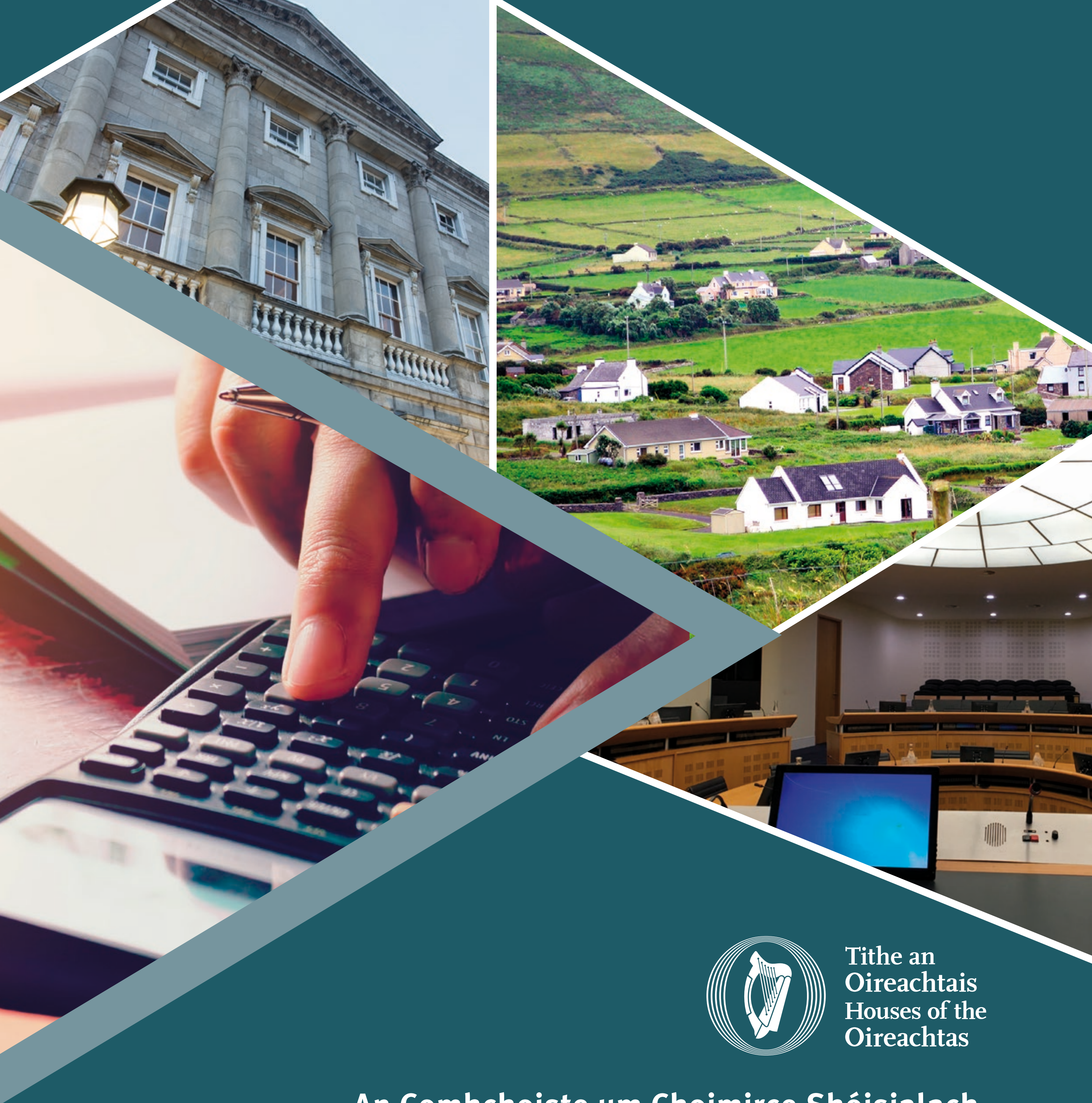

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Tuarascáil: Aighneacht Réamh-Bhuiséid chuig an Roinn Forbartha Tuaithe agus Pobail

Iúil 2021

Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands

Report: Pre-Budget Submission to the Department of Rural and Community Development

33/JCSPCRI/006

July 2021

Membership

The following Deputies and Senators are members of the Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands of the 33rd Dáil Éireann and the 26th Seanad Éireann.

Sen. Paddy Burke
Fine Gael

Jackie Cahill T.D.
Fianna Fáil

Joe Carey T.D.
Fine Gael

Joan Collins T.D.
Independents 4 Change

Paul Donnelly T.D.
Sinn Féin

Charles Flanagan T.D.
Fine Gael

Sen. Róisín Garvey
Green Party

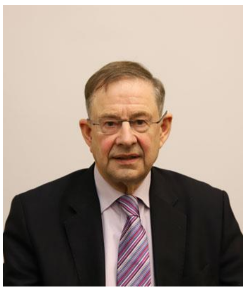
Sen. Paul Gavan
Sinn Féin

Claire Kerrane T.D.
Sinn Féin

Sen. Eugene Murphy
Fianna Fáil

Denis Naughten T.D.
Independent
Cathaoirleach

Marc Ó Cathasaigh T.D.
Green Party



Éamon Ó Cuív T.D.
Fianna Fáil

Sen. Mark Wall
Labour

Cathaoirleach's Foreword

The Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands today publishes its Pre-Budget submission to the Minster for Rural and Community Development to assist their deliberations during the negotiations for Budget 2022. The Committee publishes its report alongside a similar report submitted to the Minister for Social Protection. The Committee is of the opinion that Oireachtas Committees should have the ability to inform and partake in the pre-budget process and publishes this report to that effect.

Local Communities, particularly the towns, villages, and rural area throughout Ireland, are the backbone of life in Ireland providing jobs, tourism, and housing to a significant part of our population. Throughout its examination the Committee was informed by several stakeholders, and brought its own knowledge about, several schemes and initiative in rural Ireland and local communities that must be protected if life in these areas is to be promoted and protected. Many of these initiatives are discussed in more detail in the report.

During its investigation of the issue the Committee placed a call for public submissions and received 13 such submissions from interested organisations and individuals. I would like to thank all those who submitted their views to the Committee. Similarly, the Committee held three public engagements on the topic, and I would like to thank all who attended to inform the Committee's deliberations. I would also like to thank Deputy Paul Donnelly T.D. who acted as our rapporteur on this report for his hard work and dedication to the topic, and the staff in the Committee Secretariat for their assistance.

The Joint Committee has made 45 recommendations throughout the body of the report and is committed to ensuring these recommendations are implemented to ensure the continued development of rural Ireland and local communities during Budget 2022.

The Joint Committee will continue to engage with both the Minister, and the Department of Rural and Community Development, throughout our Work Programme, and it is my intention that we will seek regular updates from the Department on the implementation of the recommendations set out in this report.

Denis Naughten T.D.
Cathaoirleach
27 July 2021

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Recommendations

1. The Committee recommends that multi-annual (three- to five-year) funding arrangements are established to facilitate and better enable long-term planning, assist effective staff recruitment and retention, and thereby deliver better and more sustainable services;

2. The Committee recommends the funding of services and supports on a full-cost-recovery basis, to fund core costs, provide adequate employee remuneration, train and develop staff, and make provision for pension contributions where appropriate;

3. The Committee recommends that the Department of Community and Rural Development engages with the Department of Health and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to ensure that provisions are made for sustainable terms and conditions to support staff retention and progression in HSE-funded Sect. 39 and Tusla-funded Sect. 56 organisations;

4. The Committee recommends that the Charities VAT Compensation scheme is extended and provided with greater funding;

5. The Committee recommends that the cost of regulatory and compliance requirements is provided for in all funding agreements for the charitable and voluntary sector;

6. The Committee recommends that all compliance and regulatory requirements are reviewed in 2022 to ensure that no duplication of the process occurs;

7. The Committee recommends that a dedicated training and development strategy is developed and fully funded for the charitable, voluntary and community sectors in Budget 2022;

8. The Committee recommends that funding be provided to ensure that staff in State funded community and voluntary organisations are provided with the same supports and conditions typically provided to public servants;

9. The Committee recommends that a dedicated fund of €2 million is provided for in Budget 2022 that is earmarked for mergers between organisations;

10. The Committee recommends that financial assistance and training supports are provided in the first instance to support public and private sector employers to encourage staff to work from home or from remote working hubs;

11. The Committee recommends that each Government Department and Agency includes in its annual report a metric on remote working, actions to achieve the 20% Government target, and further actions to increase it thereafter;

12. The Committee recommends that the funding for Western Development Commission is doubled in Budget 2022;

13. The Committee recommends that the definition of Rural Enterprise is expanded to ensure it is supporting as many business opportunities as possible;

14. The Committee recommends that the Department of Rural and Community Development develops a policy to repurpose existing agricultural buildings for rural enterprise;

15. The Committee recommends that business development in rural Ireland is not hampered by the planning process, which does not always take into account local needs and circumstances;

16. The Committee recommends that funding for the Local Improvement Scheme is doubled, at a minimum, in Budget 2022;

17. The Committee recommends that the Minister for Rural and Community Development engages with the Minister for Transport to provide funding for roads under the Local Improvement Scheme, particularly in view of the damage caused to rural roads due to climate change;

18. The Committee recommends that the eligibility criteria for the Local Improvement Scheme is revised to ensure that it includes access to any road that serves more than two farms, houses or a combination of both;

19. The Committee recommends that an extra 100 places are provided through new projects under the Community Services Programme in 2022 with up to 25 projects being supported;

20. The Committee recommends the restoration of the refund from the Department of Rural and Community Development to schemes to pay for the full minimum wage and employers PRSI as pertained up until 2012;

21. The Committee recommends that an extra allowance be payable to schemes on the Islands to cover the difficulties of Community Service Programmes on islands earning other income;

22. The Committee recommends that €10 million be put in place to provide direct funding for major and minor capital development works on the islands as well as providing funding to co-finance or provide leverage funding with other State bodies and local authorities in providing vital infrastructure on the islands. This would help islands overcome the delay in prioritising projects due to cost benefit analysis favouring projects on the mainland;

23. The Committee recommends that current funding for the Islands air and ferry services are increased to cover increased costs and develop new and improved services to the islands;

24. The Committee recommends that a new air service initially three days a week to Inishbofin is funded in Budget 2022, particularly as Inishbofin already has an airstrip;

25. The Committee recommends that increased funding is provided for Community Development Projects on the islands in Budget 2022;

26. The Committee recommends that the Community Enhancement Fund is increased to €10 million from €4.5 million to provide inter alia for the capital development and major refurbishment of community facilities arounds the country;

27. The Committee also recommends that extra funding should also be provided for the losses incurred by such centres due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This should be made available to all eligible premises and not on a bid basis;

28. The Committee recommends that the CLÁR Fund is increased by €10 million in Budget 2022 and continues to increase over the next four years so that it can make a significant impact on the capital deficits of infrastructure in CLÁR areas;

29. The Committee recommends that extra funding is provided for the Walks Scheme to fund 70 walks in 2022 – up from a target of 59 in 2021. This would allow more walks to be incorporated into the walkways scheme. This target should increase on a yearly basis thereafter;

30. The Committee recommends that after 13 years of a pilot scheme the Mountain Access Scheme be extended throughout the state over the next four years and that funding be provided to do so;

31. The Committee recommends that €44 million is provided in Budget 2022 for the LEADER programme;

32. The Committee recommends that an island based Local Action Group is established to administer the LEADER programme on the Country's off-shore islands;

33. The Committee recommends that grant aid on the islands for private individual projects increases from 50% to 85% and community projects from 75% to 85%;

34. The Committee recommends that the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund is used as a vehicle to develop rail projects in rural areas;

35. The Committee recommends that the Department of Rural and Community Development liaises with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to fund and develop a number of pilot schemes to examine 'living above the shop' in towns and villages;

36. The Committee recommends that the Minister for Rural and Community Development engages with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage with regard to provision of dedicated and supported independent living accommodation for older people separate to the current social housing needs;

37. The Committee recommends that funding provided for Tidy Towns and other relevant schemes are used to promote long-term biodiversity and that no funding is used to fund initiatives that damage biodiversity;

38. The Committee recommends that funding and support should be available for the establishment of Age Action groups in rural areas;

39. The Committee recommends that the Department of Rural and Community Development engages with Elder Home Share with the aim of piloting an expansion of this scheme in a range of communities;

40. The Committee recommends that the Department of Rural and Community Development provides funding for the development of Digihubs to promote community engagement and provide assistance to those who are attempting to access services online for the first time;

41. The Committee recommends that funding is provided for 'Train the Trainer' courses to train local tradespeople to pass on their knowledge. These individuals could then provide upskilling courses and workshops to those engaged with the Men's and Women's Sheds networks;

42. The Committee recommends that the Department of Rural and Community Development engages with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and Irish Water regarding the abolition of the installation fee for the connection of Water Bottle Refill Stations in Irish Communities;

43. The Committee recommends that the Department of Rural and Community Development engages with Local Authority Waters Programme on the national roll out of Water Bottle Refill Stations and liaises with Tidy Towns and the Green Schools programme to determine if they can be involved in this initiative;

44. The Committee recommends that funding is provided for the provision of 24 hour accessible defibrillators in all towns and villages across the country; and

45. The Committee recommends that Grant Aid is provided to businesses that have a defibrillator on their premises to transfer that defibrillator to an outdoor unit so that it is accessible throughout the day.

Introduction

The Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands (the Committee) publishes this pre-budget submission with the aim of informing and effecting the Budget 2022 process in a way that is beneficial for the State and its citizens.

In quarter one 2021 the Committee put out a public call for submissions from interested individuals and organisations to inform its pre-budget scrutiny. The Committee received 13 submissions from interested parties and subsequently held three public engagements on the topic. The Committee has published the following report based on its own knowledge, the information received and it's engagements with stakeholders. This report is submitted to the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Committee has made 45 recommendations regarding Budget 2022.

Department of Rural and Community Development

In 2021 the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) had an allocated budget of €352 million. The Department is responsible for Rural Development, Regional Improvement, the Charitable Sector and most recently the Island Communities. Specifically the Committee focussed on the following topics: -

1. Adequate and Sustainable Support for the Charitable and Voluntary Sector;
2. The Cost of Compliance;
3. Comprehensively Resource New Strategies for the Community and Voluntary Sectors and Social Enterprise;
4. Implement the Recommendations of the Independent Review Group on the role of Voluntary Providers in Publicly Funded Services;
5. Develop a Framework for Collaborative Working and provide resources and supports for Mergers;
6. Remote Working;
7. Regional Job Creation;
8. Rural Enterprise;
9. Local Improvement Scheme;
10. Community Services Programme;
11. Islands;
12. Community Enhancement Programme;
13. CLÁR;
14. Rural Recreation;
15. LEADER;
16. The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund;
17. Renewing Towns and Villages;
18. Supporting and Connecting Communities;
19. Tackling Rural Poverty and Isolation; and
20. Community Emergency Response Systems.

These areas are discussed in more detail in the sections below and include recommendations to the Department of Rural and Community Development for consideration during discussions regarding Budget 2022.

Adequate and Sustainable Support for the Charitable and Voluntary Sector

There are approximately 33,000 organisations in the charitable and voluntary sector and 11,000 of these are registered charities. During its engagement with The Wheel, the national association of community and voluntary organisations, the Committee was informed that over half of its 1,900 members reported a drop in income during the COVID-19 crisis. The Committee was also informed that research published by the Charities Regulator showed that 70% of organisations surveyed reported that maintaining budgets was the biggest challenge they faced. Funding levels continue to be a challenge for the sector and the Committee is of the opinion that the sector must be sufficiently resourced to safeguard the essential role they play in a functioning society. The Committee was informed that cuts to the sector were on average 43% after the financial crash in 2008 and that these cuts have not been fully reversed. The Committee was also informed that most funding is provided on an annual basis, making long-term planning, including staff retention, difficult for the sector. The Committee supports The Wheel's call for a multi-annual funding framework to be developed for the charitable and voluntary sectors to ensure sustainable long-term planning is possible. The following recommendations have been proposed by The Wheel to support the long-term development of the sector and the Committee supports and endorses these recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Committee recommends that multi-annual (three- to five-year) funding arrangements are established to facilitate and better enable long-term planning, assist effective staff recruitment and retention, and thereby deliver better and more sustainable services;
2. The Committee recommends the funding of services and supports on a full-cost-recovery basis, to fund core costs, provide adequate employee remuneration, train and develop staff, and make provision for pension contributions where appropriate;
3. The Committee recommends that the Department of Community and Rural Development engages with the Department of Health and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to ensure that provisions are made for sustainable terms and conditions to support staff retention and progression in HSE-funded Sect. 39 and Tusla-funded Sect. 56 organisations; and
4. The Committee recommends that the Charities VAT Compensation scheme is extended and provided with greater funding.

The Cost of Compliance

The Committee was informed that pre-COVID-19 one of the biggest challenges facing the sector was the cost of regulatory and compliance requirements. The Wheel stated that, in its experience, the sector does not oppose the level of regulation, however, it is difficult to fundraise for compliance requirements and no specific funding is provided by the State for these essential activities. The Wheel suggests in its submission for a process to streamline the regulatory and funding-related compliance requirements and that the cost of compliance would be supported as an earmarked component of any statutory funds that are made available. The Committee supports this recommendation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

5. The Committee recommends that the cost of regulatory and compliance requirements is provided for in all funding agreements for the charitable and voluntary sector; and
6. The Committee recommends that all compliance and regulatory requirements are reviewed in 2022 to ensure that no duplication of the process occurs.

Comprehensively Resource New Strategies for the Community and Voluntary Sectors and Social Enterprise

The Committee also heard of the need to resource new strategies for the community and voluntary sector. The Committee was informed that there is no comprehensive training strategy for the sector and that there is a need to increase the amount available to the sector from the National Training Fund to go towards developing such a strategy. The Committee notes that the wider public service has a dedicated training and development strategy and is of the opinion that the community, voluntary and charitable sector is in need of a dedicated fund to ensure the work carried out by these organisations can continue.

RECOMMENDATION

7. The Committee recommends that a dedicated training and development strategy is developed and fully funded for the charitable, voluntary and community sectors in Budget 2022.

Implement the Recommendations of the Independent Review Group on the role of Voluntary Providers in Publicly Funded Services

The Committee discussed the report published by the Independent Review Group established to examine the role of voluntary organisations in publicly funded health and personal social services, published in January 2019[1]. The discussion centred around State-funded initiatives, provided by Section 39 organisations through funding received by the Health Service Executive (HSE), where staff are not provided with the same supports, resources and conditions typically provided to public servants. The Committee is of the opinion that this should change not just for Section 39 organisations but for organisations that are funded by the DRCD.

RECOMMENDATION

8. The Committee recommends that funding be provided to ensure that staff in State funded community and voluntary organisations are provided with the same supports and conditions typically provided to public servants.

Develop a Framework for Collaborative Working and provide Resources and Supports for Mergers

The Committee was informed how collaboration and mergers can be good for the sector. Mergers are not necessarily about saving money but about providing a more effective service by streamlining services and avoiding duplication. However, the Committee acknowledges that while there are many benefits to mergers there are also additional costs associated with them. The Wheel, in its pre-budget submission, recommended that a dedicated €2 million budget for mergers is provided for in Budget 2022 and the Committee supports this recommendation.

The Committee is also of the view that similar organisations should examine merging, where possible, their administration. It may be possible with the development of remote working for public bodies or the Office of Public Works to accommodate a clustering of organisations on such a basis.

RECOMMENDATION

9. The Committee recommends that a dedicated fund of €2 million is provided for in Budget 2022 that is earmarked for mergers between organisations.

[1] Report of the Independent Review Group established to examine the role of voluntary organisations in publicly funded health and personal social services

Remote Working

In *'Our Rural Future'*[2], the State's rural development plan for the next five years, remote working is expressed as a priority for the Government. The Department intends to develop a network of 400 remote working hubs nationwide. The plan states the intention to provide funding to Local Authorities to bring vacant properties in Town Centres back into use as remote working hubs. Remote working is also part of the public service strategy and it is the Government's intention to have 20% of work carried out by public servants completed remotely by the end of the year[3].

The Committee is of the opinion that additional financial assistance and training support should be provided for public and private sector employers to support employees working from home and digital hubs/coworking hubs in local towns. Each Government Department and agency should include in its annual report a metric on remote working and actions to increase it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

10. The Committee recommends that financial assistance and training supports are provided in the first instance to support public and private sector employers to encourage staff to work from home or from remote working hubs;
11. The Committee recommends that each Government Department and Agency includes in its annual report a metric on remote working and actions to increase it thereafter.

Regional Job Creation

Funding for Údarás na Gaeltachta, the Western Development Commission (WDC) and regional tourism initiatives are vital to the development of rural Ireland. The WDC is funded directly by the Department of Rural and Community Development and therefore the Committee is of the opinion that it's funding should be increased.

RECOMMENDATION

12. The Committee recommends that the funding for the Western Development Commission is doubled in Budget 2022.

[2] Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025

[3] Making Remote Work: National Remote Work Strategy

Rural Enterprise

The Committee is of the opinion that the definition of Rural Enterprise within the county development plans needs to be expanded in order to support additional business opportunities for rural areas. Rural Enterprise has often been defined as businesses or small scale industry projects or services which are related to normal rural activities. It is vital that the definition is expanded to include activities such as digital technology services, forestry services and forestry by products, woollen industry and by products, food & drink production and associated retail activity in rural areas outside of towns and villages. There is also an opportunity to repurpose existing agricultural buildings for such uses and this should be Government policy.

It is also important to recognise that there is a large number of substantial businesses located in rural Ireland and that the development of rural businesses and their location should be considered for planning on a case by case business. There is little point in having rural development policies and then stymying rural development through the planning process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

13. The Committee recommends that the definition of Rural Enterprise is expanded to ensure it is supporting as many business opportunities as possible;
14. The Committee recommends that the Department of Rural and Community Development develops a policy to repurpose existing agricultural buildings for rural enterprise; and
15. The Committee recommends that business development is rural Ireland is not hampered by the planning process which does not always take into account local needs and circumstances.

Local Improvement Scheme

The Local Improvement Scheme (LIS) provides funding to help local authorities carry out improvement works on private and non-publicly maintained roads. The LIS is funded by the DRCD and is an important part *of Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025*. The Committee is of the opinion that the funding should be increased and that this could be met by the same level of funding being provided by the Department of Transport. The Committee is also of the opinion that the eligibility criteria should also be reformed to ensure that any road that serves more than two farms, houses or a combination of both would be eligible for the scheme. The Committee is also aware of increased waiting lists for the LIS and is of the opinion that increased funding would help to tackle this.

RECOMMENDATIONS

16. The Committee recommends that funding for the Local Improvement Scheme is doubled, at a minimum, in Budget 2022;
17. The Committee recommends that the Minister for Rural and Community Development engages with the Minister for Transport to provide funding for roads under the Local Improvement Scheme, particularly in view of the damage caused to rural roads due to climate change; and
18. The Committee recommends that the eligibility criteria for the Local Improvement Scheme is revised to ensure that it includes access to any road that serves more than two farms, houses or a combination of both.

Community Services Programme

The Community Services Programme (CSP) supports community businesses to provide local services and create employment opportunities for disadvantaged people. It provides financial supportto community companies and co-operative to help with the cost of hiring staff. The target for 2021 is that it would support 446 projects and support the employment of 1779 full time and 1058 part time staff.

The Committee believes that this programme should be enhanced to provide more employment opportunities for people from disadvantaged backgrounds, as the cost of creating places is small because of the savings to Jobseeker Allowance. This has many co-benefits including a reduction in morbidity which has a long term impact on rates of disability claims. The Department of Social Protection already has firm evidence of the negative impact of long term unemployment on people’s physical and mental health and this scheme helps to address these issues.

RECOMMENDATIONS

19. The Committee recommends that an extra 100 places are provided through new projects under the Community Services Programme in 2022 with up to 25 projects being supported;
20. The Committee recommends the restoration of the refund from the Department of Rural and Community Development to schemes to pay for the full minimum wage and employers PRSI as pertained up until 2012; and
21. The Committee recommends that an extra allowance be payable to schemes on the Islands to cover the difficulties of Community Service Programmes on islands earning other income.

Islands

The transport services to the islands air and sea are the equivalent to roads on the mainland and without good services to the islands they will not realise their full potential.

The Committee is of the opinion that the current funding to the Islands ferry and air services is not sufficient to cover increased costs and leaves no possibility to create new and improved air and ferry services to the islands (including initiating an air service to Inishbofin, which already has an air strip, three days a week) as well as to fund other current expenditure on the islands.

The Committee recommends that the payment to the Community Organisations on the non-Gaeltacht islands be improved to ensure they can function properly as the main drivers of development on non-Gaeltacht islands.

Infrastructure of many types particularly piers and harbours are vital to island living. Attracting necessary capital investment from other state bodies can also be problematic because of the unit cost of building on an island and their small population.

RECOMMENDATIONS

22. The Committee recommends that €10 million be put in place to provide direct funding for major and minor capital development works on the islands as well as providing funding to co-finance or provide leverage funding with other State bodies and local authorities in providing vital infrastructure on the islands. This would help islands overcome the delay in prioritising projects due to cost benefit analysis favouring projects on the mainland;
23. The Committee recommends that current funding for the Islands air and ferry services are increased to cover increased costs and develop new and improved services to the islands;
24. The Committee recommends that a new air service initially three days a week to Inishbofin is funded in Budget 2022, particularly as Inishbofin already has an airstrip; and
25. The Committee recommends that increased funding is provided for Community Development Projects on the islands in Budget 2022.

Community Enhancement Programme

The Committee is of the opinion that additional funding should be provided for capital development and major refurbishment of community facilities arounds the country. This should include investment in energy saving mechanisms to increase the BER energy rating of these buildings and to develop renewable energy for the same.

The Committee is also of the view that extra funding should also be provided for the losses incurred by such centres due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Committee is of the view that this should be made available to all eligible premises and not on a bid basis.

RECOMMENDATIONs

26. The Committee recommends that the Community Enhancement Fund is increased to €10 million from €4.5 million to provide inter alia for the capital development and major refurbishment of community facilities arounds the country; and
27. The Committee also recommends that extra funding should also be provided for the losses incurred by such centres due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This should be made available to all eligible premises and not on a bid basis.

CLÁR

CLÁR areas, by definition, are those areas which have suffered the largest population decline in 1926. They are therefore largely rural areas with a low population where necessary services are often not provided as their population base ensures that they are at the end of a large queue for development. This perpetuates the decline of these areas. The objective of CLÁR was to try and reverse this situation.

In its original iteration the purpose of CLÁR funding was to provide leverage capital funding across a wide range of capital investments to improve the chances that vital basic infrastructure would be provided in these areas. Investments included the water, sewerage, roads, countryside and village renewal, LIS on a matched basis, electricity, schools, health centres, sports facilities, rail (the WRC) etc. With an increased emphasis on cost-benefit analysis and return on investment the least populated areas are consistently being denied vital infrastructure for development.

RECOMMENDATION

28. The Committee recommends that the CLÁR Fund is increased by €10 million in Budget 2022 and continues to increase over the next four years so that it can make a significant impact on the capital deficits of infrastructure in CLÁR areas.

Rural Recreation

As a result of COVID-19 there has been a rapid increase in the growth and interest in Rural Recreation of all types. Significant extra funding needs to be provided for this sector to provide improved facilities and services. Two major schemes the Department have are the Walkways Scheme, which provides maintenance money for "way marked ways" to farmers, and the Mountain Access Pilot Scheme whose aim is to provide agreed access to uplands in return for basic recreational infrastructure such as stiles and carparks.

RECOMMENDATIONS

29. The Committee recommends that extra funding is provided for the Walks Scheme to fund 70 walks in 2022 – up from a target of 59 in 2021. This would allow for more walks to be incorporated into the walkways scheme. This target should increase on a yearly basis thereafter; and
30. The Committee recommends that after 13 years of a pilot scheme the Mountain Access Scheme be extended throughout the state over the next four years and that funding be provided to do so.

LEADER

LEADER is a programme that was launched in 1991 by the European Union (EU) and its Member States to support private enterprises and community groups in rural areas to increase economic activities and quality of life in their communities. LEADER was assigned funding of €44 million in Budget 2021 and this was administered through 29 Local Action Groups (LAGs). Funding is provided for projects based on economic development, the rural environment or social inclusion. Projects are also required to align with the Local Development Strategy of their communities.

The Committee notes that previously there was a specific LAG for the island communities. The Committee is of the opinion that it is important to have an island based LAG to administer LEADER funding to island projects, as they would be best placed to determine the need for specific projects on the islands. Currently an LAG based on the mainland administers funding for island-based LEADER projects and the Committee is of the opinion that this is not in the best interest of island communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

31. The Committee recommends that €44 million is provided in Budget 2022 for the LEADER programme;
32. The Committee recommends that an island based Local Action Group, is established to administer the LEADER programme on the Country's off-shore islands; and

33. The Committee recommends that grant aid for private individual projects is increased from 50% to 85% on the Islands and community projects from 75% to 85%.

The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund

The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF) is part of Project Ireland 2040. The Government has committed €1bn to the fund for the period 2019-2027. The allocation for this year is €87m. The Fund was established to provide investment to support rural renewal, strengthen and build resilience in rural communities and assist the regeneration of towns and villages with a population of less than 10,000 and outlying areas.

The RRDF prioritises investments of scale which would not otherwise be delivered without the additionality provided by the Fund, and projects that are outside the scope of funding of existing schemes. In this context projects are likely to be multi-annual and multi-faceted, involving a number of elements or phases as part of a strategic plan.

The URDF (Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF) has already been used as a vehicle to attract funding to heavy rail projects and the Committee is of the opinion that a similar approach should be taken with the RRDF.

RECOMMENDATION

34. The Committee recommends that the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund is used as a vehicle to develop rail projects in rural areas.

Renewing Towns and Villages

Renewing rural towns and villages is a key part of *Our Rural Future*. The Committee is of the opinion that there is an opportunity for additional housing in rural areas and town centres by utilising exiting space on main streets that are above shop units. People may have previously lived in these spaces, however, the Committee is of the view that current health and safety, and fire regulations have made these spaces unihabitable. The Committee is of the opinion that bringing these existing units back into residential use will assis the aim of renewing Ireland's town and villages.

RECOMMENDATION

35. The Committee recommends that the Department of Rural and Community Development liasises with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to fund and

develop a number of pilot schemes to examine 'living above the shop' in towns and villages.

The Committee remains concerned that the housing needs of rural Ireland's older population are not fully considered in local development plans. The Committee is of the vioew that the true housing needs of older people are not fully documented as not all older people who may wish to downsize or avail of purpose built accommodation to suit their needs are on the housing lists which often inform these developments. The Committee is of the opinion that a more detailed examination of the issue of housing for older people in rural Ireland is required to inform the plans of Local Authorities, Approved Housing Bodies and the relevant Government Departments.

RECOMMENDATION

36. The Committee recommends that the Minister for Rural and Community Development engages with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage with regard to provision of dedicated and supported independent living accommodation for older people separate to the current social housing needs.

The Committee is of the opinion that the protection of biodiversity is an important part of renewing towns and villages. The committee notes that the Programme for Government states: *"Prioritise the upkeep and expansion of parks, green spaces, and other recreational infrastructure, for community enjoyment and biodiversity enhancement".* The Committee is of the view that this could best be achieved by incorpoting biodiversity measures into community spaces such as playgrounds and parks. The Committee is also aware of the funding that is provided for community groups and Tidy Towns and is of the opinion that funding initiatives must include conditions to support biodiversity.

RECOMMENDATION

37. The Committee recommends that funding provided for Tidy Towns and other relevant schemes are used to promote long-term biodiversity and that no funding is used to fund initiatives that damage biodiversity.

Supporting and Connecting Communities

The Committee is of the opinion that rural isolation is a significant issue in Ireland, particularly for older people. The Committee is of the view that more needs to be done to encourage socialisation and engagement within local communities.

RECOMMENDATION

38. The Committee recommends that funding and support should be available for the establishment of Age Action groups in rural areas.

The Committee is also aware of initiative such as Elder Home Share, an organisation that matches older people who live alone with a reference checked tenant. The Committee is of the view that this often allows older people to remain independently in their homes for longer and provides companionship for both the homeowner and the tenant.

RECOMMENDATION

39. The Committee recommends that the Department of Rural and Community Development engages with Elder Home Share with the aim of piloting an expansion of this scheme in a range of communities.

As more public and personal service move online the Committee is of the opinion that digital supports need to be provided to those who are not computer literate. The Committee is of the view that Digihubs should be established within communities to support thos who need assistance accessing services online. This could be set up by using existing community infrastructure to provide the space while encouraging members of the local community to volunteer and get involved.

RECOMMENDATION

40. The Committee recommends that the Department of Rural and Community Development provides funding for the development of Digihubs to promote community engagement and provide assistance to those who are attempting to access services online for the first time.

Tackling Rural Poverty and Isolation

The Committee is of the opinion that rural poverty and isolation are two issues that need to be addressed in order to revitalise local communities and rural areas. The Committee is of the opinion that current services and community groups could be used to provide more services. The Committee notes that there are Men's and Women's Sheds around the country. The Committee is of the view that these could be utilised to provide training courses in local communities using local knowledge. For example, if 'Training the Trainer' courses were provided to local tradespeople, these could then teach new skills via the Men's and Women's Sheds network.

RECOMMENDATION

41. The Committee recommends that funding is provided for 'Train the Trainer' courses to train local tradespeople have to pass on their knowledge. These individuals could then provide upskilling courses and workshops to those engaged with the Men's and Women's Sheds networks.

The Committee is also of the opinion that fresh drinking water provided through a series of publicly installed water fountains could be used to promote sustainability in Irish towns and villages. The Committee is of the view that this initiative has been successful in the areas where they have been installed. However, there are many barriers to installing a refill station, including the costs. For example, there is an initial connection fee of approximately €2,500 payable to Irish Water in the first instance. The Committee is of the view that initives such would assist the State in meeting the Sustainable Development Goals and that one aspect of State infrastructure should not be charging the State for community facilities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

42. The Committee recommends that the Department of Rural and Community Development engages with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and Irish water regarding the abolition of the installation fee for the connection of Water Bottle Refill Stations in Irish Communities; and
43. The Committee recommends that the Department of Rural and Community Development engages with the Local Authority Waters Programme on the national roll out of Water Bottle Refill Stations and liaises with Tidy Towns and the Green Schools programme to determine if they can be involved in this initiative.

Community Emergency Response Systems

The Committee received a submission from Roscommon Rapid Response regarding the provision of defibrillators in dedicated outdoor spaces that are accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week. As the Committee understands it the current survival rate of those experiencing a cardiac arrest outside of a hospital setting is 5% per 5,000 people. The Committee is of the opinion that the provision of accessible defibrillators would greatly help to increase the survival rate. The Committee is also aware that a number of defibrillators are located in private business around the country and therefore are not accessible at all times of the day. The Committee is of the opinion that supports should be provided to those business to assist in transferring their defibrillator to a secure outdoor facility.

RECOMMENDATIONS

44. The Committee recommends that funding is provided for the provision of 24 hour accessible defibrillators in all towns and villages across the country; and
45. The Committee recommends that Grant Aid is provided to businesses that have a defibrillator on their premises to transfer that defibrillator to an outdorr unit so that it is accessible throughout the day.

Appendix 1: Terms of Reference

Scope and context of activities of Select Committees (DSO 94 and SSO 70)

DSO 94

(1) The Dáil may appoint a Select Committee to consider and, if so permitted, to take evidence upon any Bill, Estimate or matter, and to report its opinion for the information and assistance of the Dáil. Such motion shall specifically state the orders of reference of the Committee, define the powers devolved upon it, fix the number of members to serve on it, state the quorum, and may appoint a date upon which the Committee shall report back to the Dáil.

(2) It shall be an instruction to each Select Committee that—

(a) it may only consider such matters, engage in such activities, exercise such powers and discharge such functions as are specifically authorised under its orders of reference and under Standing Orders;

(b) such matters, activities, powers and functions shall be relevant to, and shall arise only in the context of, the preparation of a report to the Dáil;

(c) it shall not consider any matter which is being considered, or of which notice has been given of a proposal to consider, by the Joint Committee on Public Petitions in the exercise of its functions under Standing Order 125(1) [1]; and

(d) it shall refrain from inquiring into in public session or publishing confidential information regarding any matter if so requested, for stated reasons given in writing, by—

(i) a member of the Government or a Minister of State, or

(ii) the principal office-holder of a State body within the responsibility of a Government Department or

(iii) the principal office-holder of a non-State body which is partly funded by the State,

Provided that the Committee may appeal any such request made to the Ceann Comhairle, whose decision shall be final.

(3) It shall be an instruction to all Select Committees to which Bills are referred that they shall ensure that not more than two Select Committees shall meet to consider a Bill on any given day, unless the Dáil, after due notice to the Business Committee by a Chairman of one of the Select Committees concerned, waives this instruction.

[1] Retained pending review of the Joint Committee on Public Petitions.

SSO 70

(1) The Seanad may appoint a Select Committee to consider any Bill or matter and to report its opinion for the information and assistance of the Seanad and, in the case of a Bill, whether or not it has amended the Bill. Such motion shall specifically state the orders of reference of the Committee, define the powers devolved upon it, fix the number of members to serve on it, state the quorum thereof, and may appoint a date upon which the Committee shall report back to the Seanad.

(2) It shall be an instruction to each Select Committee that—

(a) it may only consider such matters, engage in such activities, exercise such powers and discharge such functions as are specifically authorised under its orders of reference and under Standing Orders;

(b) such matters, activities, powers and functions shall be relevant to, and shall arise only in the context of, the preparation of a report to the Seanad;

(c) it shall not consider any matter which is being considered, or of which notice has been given of a proposal to consider, by the Joint Committee on Public Petitions in the exercise of its functions under Standing Order 108 (1) [1]; and

(d) it shall refrain from inquiring into in public session or publishing confidential information regarding any matter if so requested, for stated reasons given in writing, by—

(i) a member of the Government or a Minister of State, or

(ii) the principal office-holder of a State body within the responsibility of a Government Department, or

(iii) the principal office-holder of a non-State body which is partly funded by the State,

Provided that the Committee may appeal any such request made to the Cathaoirleach, whose decision shall be final.

[1] Retained pending review of the Joint Committee on Public Petitions

Functions of Departmental Select Committees (DSO 95 and SSO 71)

DSO 95

(1) The Dáil may appoint a Departmental Select Committee to consider and, unless otherwise provided for in these Standing Orders or by order, to report to the Dáil on any matter relating to—

(a) legislation, policy, governance, expenditure and administration of—

(i) a Government Department, and
(ii) State bodies within the responsibility of such Department, and

(b) the performance of a non-State body in relation to an agreement for the provision of services that it has entered into with any such Government Department or State body.

(2) A Select Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order shall also consider such other matters which—

(a) stand referred to the Committee by virtue of these Standing Orders or statute law, or
(b) shall be referred to the Committee by order of the Dáil.

(3) The principal purpose of Committee consideration of matters of policy, governance, expenditure and administration under paragraph (1) shall be—

(a) for the accountability of the relevant Minister or Minister of State, and
(b) to assess the performance of the relevant Government Department or of a State body within the responsibility of the relevant Department, in delivering public services while achieving intended outcomes, including value for money.

(4) A Select Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order shall not consider any matter relating to accounts audited by, or reports of, the Comptroller and Auditor General unless the Committee of Public Accounts—

(a) consents to such consideration, or
(b) has reported on such accounts or reports.

(5) A Select Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order may be joined with a Select Committee appointed by Seanad Éireann to be and act as a Joint Committee for the purposes of paragraph (1) and such other purposes as may be specified in these Standing Orders or by order of the Dáil: provided that the Joint Committee shall not consider—

(a) the Committee Stage of a Bill,
(b) Estimates for Public Services, or
(c) a proposal contained in a motion for the approval of an international agreement involving a charge upon public funds referred to the Committee by order of the Dáil.

(6) Any report that the Joint Committee proposes to make shall, on adoption by the Joint Committee, be made to both Houses of the Oireachtas.

(7) The Chairman of the Select Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order shall also be Chairman of the Joint Committee.

(8) Where a Select Committee proposes to consider—

(a) EU draft legislative acts standing referred to the Select Committee under Standing Order 133, including the compliance of such acts with the principle of subsidiarity,
(b) other proposals for EU legislation and related policy issues, including programmes and guidelines prepared by the European Commission as a basis of possible legislative action,
(c) non-legislative documents published by any EU institution in relation to EU policy matters, or
(d) matters listed for consideration on the agenda for meetings of the relevant Council (of Ministers) of the European Union and the outcome of such meetings,

the following may be notified accordingly and shall have the right to attend and take part in such consideration without having a right to move motions or amendments or the right to vote:

(i) members of the European Parliament elected from constituencies in Ireland,
(ii) members of the Irish delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and
(iii) at the invitation of the Committee, other members of the European Parliament.

(9) A Select Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order may, in respect of any Ombudsman charged with oversight of public services within the policy remit of the relevant Department consider—

(a) such motions relating to the appointment of an Ombudsman as may be referred to the Committee, and
(b) such Ombudsman reports laid before either or both Houses of the Oireachtas as the Committee may select: Provided that the provisions of Standing Order 130 apply where the Select Committee has not considered the Ombudsman report, or a portion or portions thereof, within two months (excluding Christmas, Easter or summer recess periods) of the report being laid before either or both Houses of the Oireachtas.[2]

[2] Retained pending review of the Joint Committee on Public Petitions.

SSO 71

(1) The Seanad may appoint a Departmental Select Committee to consider and, unless otherwise provided for in these Standing Orders or by order, to report to the Seanad on any matter relating to—

(a) legislation, policy, governance, expenditure and administration of-

(i) a Government Department, and

(ii) State bodies within the responsibility of such Department, and

(b) the performance of a non-State body in relation to an agreement for the provision of services that it has entered into with any such Government Department or State body.

(2) A Select Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order shall also consider such other matters which –

(a) stand referred to the Committee by virtue of these Standing Orders or statute law, or
(b) shall be referred to the Committee by order of the Seanad.

(3) The principal purpose of Committee consideration of matters of policy, governance expenditure and administration under paragraph (1) shall be—

(a) for the accountability of the relevant Minister or Minister of State, and

(b) to assess the performance of the relevant Government Department or a State body within the responsibility of the relevant Department, in delivering public services while achieving intended outcomes, including value for money.

(4) A Select Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order shall not consider any matter relating to accounts audited by, or reports of, the Comptroller and Auditor General unless the Committee of Public Accounts–

(a) consents to such consideration, or

(b) has reported on such accounts or reports.

(5) A Select Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order may be joined with a Select Committee appointed by Dáil Éireann to be and act as a Joint Committee for the purposes of paragraph (1) and such other purposes as may be specified in these Standing Orders or by order of the Seanad: provided that the Joint Committee shall not consider-

(a) the Committee Stage of a Bill,

(b) Estimates for Public Services, or

(c) a proposal contained in a motion for the approval of an international agreement involving a charge upon public funds referred to the Committee by order of the Dáil.

(6) Any report that the Joint Committee proposes to make shall, on adoption by the Joint Committee, be made to both Houses of the Oireachtas.

(7) The Chairman of a Joint Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order shall be a member of Dáil Éireann.

(8) Where a Select Committee proposes to consider–

(a) EU draft legislative acts standing referred to the Select Committee under Standing Order 116, including the compliance of such acts with the principle of subsidiarity,
(b) other proposals for EU legislation and related policy issues, including programmes and guidelines prepared by the European Commission as a basis of possible legislative action,

(c) non-legislative documents published by any EU institution in relation to EU policy matters, or
(d) matters listed for consideration on the agenda for meetings of the relevant EC Council (of Ministers) of the European Union and the outcome of such meetings,

the following may be notified accordingly and shall have the right to attend and take part in such consideration without having a right to move motions or amendments or the right to vote:

(i) members of the European Parliament elected from constituencies in Ireland,

(ii) members of the Irish delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and

(iii) at the invitation of the Committee, other members of the European Parliament.

(9) A Select Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order may, in respect of any Ombudsman charged with oversight of public services within the policy remit of the relevant Department consider—

(a) such motions relating to the appointment of an Ombudsman as may be referred to the Committee, and

(b) such Ombudsman reports laid before either or both Houses of the Oireachtas as the Committee may select: Provided that the provisions of Standing Order 113 apply where the Select Committee has not considered the Ombudsman report, or a portion or portions thereof, within two months (excluding Christmas, Easter or summer recess periods) of the report being laid before either or both Houses of the Oireachtas.[2]

[2] Retained pending review of the Joint Committee on Public Petitions

Powers of Select Committees (DSO 96 and SSO 72)

DSO 96

Unless the Dáil shall otherwise order, a Committee appointed pursuant to these Standing Orders shall have the following powers:

(1) power to invite and receive oral and written evidence and to print and publish from time to time—

(a) minutes of such evidence as was heard in public, and
(b) such evidence in writing as the Committee thinks fit;

(2) power to appoint sub-Committees and to refer to such sub-Committees any matter comprehended by its orders of reference and to delegate any of its powers to such sub-Committees, including power to report directly to the Dáil;

(3) power to draft recommendations for legislative change and for new legislation;

(4) in relation to any statutory instrument, including those laid or laid in draft before either or both Houses of the Oireachtas, power to—

(a) require any Government Department or other instrument-making authority concerned to—

(i) submit a memorandum to the Select Committee explaining the statutory instrument, or

(ii) attend a meeting of the Select Committee to explain any such statutory instrument: Provided that the authority concerned may decline to attend for reasons given in writing to the Select Committee, which may report thereon to the Dáil, and *(b)* recommend, where it considers that such action is warranted, that the instrument should be annulled or amended;

(5) power to require that a member of the Government or Minister of State shall attend before the Select Committee to discuss—

(a) policy, or
(b) proposed primary or secondary legislation (prior to such legislation being published),

for which he or she is officially responsible: Provided that a member of the Government or Minister of State may decline to attend for stated reasons given in writing to the Select Committee, which may report thereon to the Dáil: and provided further that a member of the Government or Minister of State may request to attend a meeting of the Select Committee to enable him or her to discuss such policy or proposed legislation;

(6) power to require that a member of the Government or Minister of State shall attend before the Select Committee and provide, in private session if so requested by the attendee, oral briefings in advance of meetings of the relevant EC Council (of Ministers) of the European Union to enable the Select Committee to make known its views: Provided that the Committee may also require such attendance following such meetings;

(7) power to require that the Chairperson designate of a body or agency under the aegis of a Department shall, prior to his or her appointment, attend before the Select Committee to discuss his or her strategic priorities for the role;

(8) power to require that a member of the Government or Minister of State who is officially responsible for the implementation of an Act shall attend before a Select Committee in relation to the consideration of a report under Standing Order 197;

(9) subject to any constraints otherwise prescribed by law, power to require that principal officeholders of a—

(a) State body within the responsibility of a Government Department or
(b) non-State body, which is partly funded by the State,

shall attend meetings of the Select Committee, as appropriate, to discuss issues for which they are officially responsible: Provided that such an office-holder may decline to attend for stated reasons given in writing to the Select Committee, which may report thereon to the Dáil; and

(10) power to—

(a) engage the services of persons with specialist or technical knowledge, to assist it or any of its sub-Committees in considering particular matters; and

(b) undertake travel;

Provided that the powers under this paragraph are subject to such recommendations as may be made by the Working Group of Committee Chairmen under Standing Order 120(4)(*a*).

SSO 72

Unless the Seanad shall otherwise order, a Committee appointed pursuant to these Standing Orders shall have the following powers:

(1) power to invite and receive oral and written evidence and to print and publish from time to time –

(a) minutes of such evidence as was heard in public, and

(b) such evidence in writing as the Committee thinks fit;

(2) power to appoint sub-Committees and to refer to such sub-Committees any matter comprehended by its orders of reference and to delegate any of its powers to such sub-Committees, including power to report directly to the Seanad;

(3) power to draft recommendations for legislative change and for new legislation;

(4) in relation to any statutory instrument, including those laid or laid in draft before either or both Houses of the Oireachtas, power to –

(a) require any Government Department or other instrument making authority concerned to –

(i) submit a memorandum to the Select Committee explaining the statutory instrument, or

(ii) attend a meeting of the Select Committee to explain any such statutory instrument: provided that the authority concerned may decline to attend for reasons given in writing to the Select Committee, which may report thereon to the Seanad, and

(b) recommend, where it considers that such action is warranted, that the instrument should be annulled or amended;

(5) power to require that a member of the Government or Minister of State shall attend before the Select Committee to discuss–

(a) policy, or

(b) proposed primary or secondary legislation (prior to such legislation being published),

for which he or she is officially responsible: provided that a member of the Government or Minister of State may decline to attend for stated reasons given in writing to the Select Committee, which may report thereon to the Seanad: and provided further that a member of the Government or Minister of State may request to attend a meeting of the Select Committee to enable him or her to discuss such policy or proposed legislation;

(6) power to require that a member of the Government or Minister of State shall attend before the Select Committee and provide, in private session if so requested by the attendee, oral briefings in advance of meetings of the relevant EC Council (of Ministers) of the European Union to enable the Select Committee to make known its views: Provided that the Committee may also require such attendance following such meetings;

(7) power to require that the Chairperson designate of a body or agency under the aegis of a Department shall, prior to his or her appointment, attend before the Select Committee to discuss his or her strategic priorities for the role;

(8) power to require that a member of the Government or Minister of State who is officially responsible for the implementation of an Act shall attend before a Select Committee in relation to the consideration of a report under Standing Order 168;

(9) subject to any constraints otherwise prescribed by law, power to require that principal office-holders of a –

(a) State body within the responsibility of a Government Department, or
(b) non-State body, which is partly funded by the State,

shall attend meetings of the Select Committee, as appropriate, to discuss issues for which they are officially responsible: Provided that such an office-holder may decline to attend for stated reasons given in writing to the Select Committee, which may report thereon to the Seanad; and

(10) power to-

(a) engage the services of persons with specialist or technical knowledge, to assist it or any of its sub-Committees in considering particular matters; and
(b) undertake travel;

Provided that the powers under this paragraph are subject to such recommendations as may be made by the Working Group of Committee Chairmen under Standing Order 107(4)(a).

Appendix 2: Meeting Dates and Witnesses

The Joint Committee held three public engagements with a range of stakeholders during the course of its pre-budget considerations. These engagements are detailed below.

5 May 2021	
Family Carers Ireland	Ms Catherine Cox: Head of Communications and Policy Ms Clare Duffy: Policy and Public Affairs Manager
The Society of St Vincent de Paul	Ms Trisha Keilthy: Head of Social Justice and Policy Ms Issy Petrie: Research and Policy Officer

12 May 2021	
The Wheel	Ms Deirdre Garvey: Chief Executive Officer Mr. Ivan Cooper: Director of Policy
Community Gardens Ireland	Ms Maeve Foreman: Co-Chairperson Mr. Donal McCormack: Co-Chairperson

19 May 2021	
Irish Local Development Network	Ms Adeline O'Brien: Chairperson Mr. Joseph Saunders: Chief Executive Officer

Appendix 3: Submissions Received by the Committee

Caitríona McClean

Submission to Joint Committee relating to Wellbeing

Introduction:
The Taoiseach today (22nd March 2021) announced on RTE that consideration is being given to enhancing Wellbeing as a priority of Government in context of the prolonged lockdown 2020 and 2021. What follows is a brief outline of a proposal aimed at acknowleding the efforts of the general public, and at the same time stimulating local economies and facilitating community re-engagement.

Brief outline of proposal:
The proposal involves encouraging households to visit local shops and restaurants, including bookshops and cafes, as well as florists and garden centres when the lockdown allows.
Households are asked to choose a gift in any of the categories mentioned, and the Government will match their spending up to €100 per household.

Administration:
The vouchers would be delivered by An Post. A voucher with unique post code would be sent to all households. The printing and adminsitration to be undertaken by Social Protection or Dept of An Taoiseach. The retailer would accept the voucher,and redeem the value (assuming a face value of €100 per voucher) as a VAT return credit. The scheme would remain open and vouchers valid for minimum of 3 months from issue.

Benefits:
There would be a positive psychological impact contributing to Wellbeing. The impact on the local economy would be positive. For each euro the government spends the household matches it.

Cost:
The nominal cost of the initiative is approximately €120m on a once off basis. However the real cost is much less as the scheme simultaneously stimulates spending which may not have happened otherwise, and the cost to Government is in terms only of some VAT returns foregone which are partly the outcome of stimulated spending.

ENDS

Community Gardens Ireland

1. Executive Summary

Community Gardens Ireland is a network of community gardens and allotments on the island of Ireland. In existence since 2011 it aims to support and promote community gardens in Ireland and Northern Ireland.

Internationally, the evidence-based benefits of community gardens are many, from the proven physical, mental health and well-being benefits to educational, environmental and cultural gains. There is also evidence that they hugely increase social capital by encouraging active citizenship and social connection, help reduce health inequalities, and contribute to reducing anti-social behavior, thus making communities safer.

The Local Government Act 2001 and the Planning and Development (Amendment) Act, 2010 addresses the provision of allotments by local authorities and the planning around them.
Additionally, the 2020 Programme for Government committed to working with local authorities and local communities to develop community gardens, allotments and urban orchards.

Despite the proven benefits, existing legislation and commitment in the form of the current Programme for Government, there is no country-wide policy in place to increase the number of allotments and community gardens. The existing legislation also provides little protection for communities or duties on local authorities.

In urban areas the amount of land available for allotments and community gardens will become increasingly scarce. Community Gardens Ireland's own recent survey of its members highlighted that the majority of community gardens surveyed had temporary licences which can have large implications for funding purposes, some were on temporary sites zoned for housing and many struggled to obtain funding for garden infrastructure.

Currently, no funding method is available for communities to avail of capital funding for land in local areas. This submission therefore calls on the Joint Committee on Social Protection,
Community & Rural Development & the Islands to

a) assign a figure of approximately €500,000 per annum to be allocated for local authorities to purchase land specifically for community growing purposes. This would ensure more permanent locations be set up for community gardens and allotments and facilitate a long term vision for allotments and community gardens in urban areas, rather than relying on limited local authority owned land.
b) It also calls for the creation of a specific funding scheme similar to the Clár programme for community gardens and allotments in urban areas.

Both of these initiatives would provide long-term outdoor support to communities in areas hit hard by the current pandemic, consistent with the 2020 Programme for

Government and the COVID-19 Resilience & Recovery 2021 plan for The Path Ahead.

2. Community Gardens Ireland

Community Gardens Ireland (http://cgireland.org/) is a network of community gardens and allotments on the island of Ireland. In existence since 2011, it aims to support and promote community gardens in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Through its website, social media presence and annual gatherings it provides a way for community gardeners to share resources and exchange ideas. Community Gardens Ireland is operated entirely on a voluntary basis by a committee representative of gardens and allotments throughout Ireland.

Internationally, the evidence-based benefits of community gardens are many, from the proven physical, mental health and well-being benefits, to educational, environmental and cultural gains. They add to the Green Canopy of cities and urban areas, and there is also evidence that they hugely increase social capital by encouraging active citizenship and social connection, and contribute to reducing anti-social behavior, thus making communities safer. Increasing the availability of green space, trees and access to nature also helps reduces health inequalities.

In February and March 2021, Community Gardens Ireland organised a survey of member organisations to find out how secure their projects were, who owned their sites, what kind of licences they had and where their funding came from. Some key findings from this survey are summarised in No. 5 below, and relevant tables included in Appendix 1.

3. Legislation

Allotments and Community Gardens have a long history in Ireland with legislation passed within the first few years of the Irish Free State in the Acquisition of Land (Allotments) Act, 1926. This act outlined the responsibilities of local authorities to seek land for the provision of allotments when representations have been made to them. Changes were made in 1934 to this act, to include provision for those who could not afford allotment. These laws were repealed in 1994.

More recent legislation which covers the provision of allotments includes the Planning and Development (Amendment) Act, 2010 for local development plans, and the Local Government Act, 2001.

Amenity, recreation and other functions.

67.—(1) In accordance with and subject to *section 66*, a local authority may take such measures, engage in such activities or do such things (including the incurring of expenditure) as it considers necessary or desirable to promote the interests of the local community in relation to the matters indicated in *subsection (2)*.

(2) (*a*) The matters referred to in *subsection (1)* are—

(vi) allotments, fairs and markets, and related amenities, facilities and services,

Local Government Act, 2001, Section 67 'allotment' means an area of land comprising not more than 1,000 square metres let or available for letting to and cultivation by one or more than one person who is a member of the local community and lives adjacent or near to the allotment, for the purpose of the production of vegetables or fruit mainly for consumption by the person or a member of his or her family;

Amendment of First Schedule to Principal Act.

77.— The First Schedule to the Principal Act is amended—

13. Reserving land for use and cultivation as allotments and regulating, promoting, facilitating or controlling the provision of land for that use.",

and

(*b*) in Part IV by the substitution of the following for paragraph 8:

Planning and Development Act, 2010, Section 77

4. Government Support for Allotments, Community Gardens, Urban Orchards and Community Food Initiatives

The 2020 Programme for Government called out support for the following:

Programme for Government
Our Shared Future

Programme for Government –
Our Shared Future

government and emerging EU policy.

- Establish an Independent Agriculture Appeals Review panel in legislation, as a priority, and ensure that the panel includes participants with practical knowledge and experience of farming.

International Market Diversification and Trade

As Ireland is a small open economy, exporting food and drinks produce to over 180 countries internationally, we recognise the importance of international markets and trade.

We will:

- Seek to protect existing markets and open new markets.
- Support the promotion of sustainable, high-quality Irish produce in premium target markets, to give our farmers a competitive advantage.
- Firmly defend Ireland's interests in international trade deals that may emerge, working with our network of colleagues in the European Commission and representatives in the European Parliament.
- Work closely with the agri-food sector to secure access to priority markets and to avail of opportunities that existing markets such as China and Japan afford the sector.

We will:

- Promote short, efficient routes to market that connect small food producers to the consumer and provide advisory, investment and marketing support for those who wish to diversify into new products.
- Support local authorities to expand the number of farmers' markets, farm shops and food emporiums; and support the formation of community-owned markets in all towns, showcasing local food produce from local farmers, growers, and food producers.
- Work with local authorities and local communities to develop community gardens, allotments, and urban orchards.
- Encourage schools and colleges to provide access to land where students can grow their own food.
- Support the small food producer, providing support for on-farm diversification enterprises and investment in local processing facilities, allowing farmers to sell their products into the local and wider domestic markets.
- Examine how other countries have been successful in developing premium markets from family-farm produce.
- Introduce local food procurement policies for the public sector to encourage the availability of nutritious, locally sourced food in public sector areas such as schools, hospitals, government buildings, and prisons.

- Work with local authorities and local communities to develop community gardens, allotments, and urban orchards.

In addition, the most recent COVID-19 Resilience & Recovery 2021 plan for The Path Ahead calls out support for community food projects as follows:

COVID-19 Resilience & Recovery 2021
The Path Ahead

- A programme of "citizen empowerment" wellbeing activities and initiatives will be delivered by Local Authorities with local partners, including activities supporting healthy living, physical activity, community food, creativity, managing chronic diseases and positive ageing.

5. Community Gardens Ireland Survey Findings

In February and March 2021, Community Gardens Ireland conducted a survey of allotment and community gardens groups throughout Ireland. The results from the survey were presented at the AGM of Community Gardens Ireland on 13th March 2021, some key tables of results are included in Appendix 1, and the full results are available at http://cgireland.org/community-gardens-ireland-survey/ .

A. Licence and funding

Of note in the survey results were the issues surrounding the type of licence currently set up for community gardens or allotments. About 80% of gardens who responded highlighted that their licence is not permanent – this has large implications for funding purposes.

For example, LEADER funding requires organisations to have at least a five year lease, with a similar lease required for funding requirements for the recently launched Farming Biodiversity €1.25 million initiative under the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine's Rural Development Programme. The majority of community gardens and allotments would therefore not be eligible for these schemes.

An excellent funding scheme is in place for community gardens and allotments in Ireland through the Clár funding scheme, section 3a. However, this is solely for small scale rural schemes, and therefore excludes all urban areas.

In the survey, in addition to insecurity of tenure, the member organisations of Community Gardens Ireland also called out issues in relation to a lack of funding for various projects including public liability insurance and garden.

B. Zoning risks

In addition, the member organisations of Community Gardens Ireland highlighted that some sites are currently assigned as residential or mixed use. This poses a risk to the use of these locations as construction on local authority owned land is ramped up.

Community Gardens Ireland supports the use of residential land for the purpose of building homes as part of the Programme for Government, but equally seeks for replacement landto be set aside well in advance. In urban areas, one impact from increase construction activities will be that the amount of land available for allotments and community gardens will become increasingly scarce.

Currently, no funding method is available for communities to avail of capital funding for land in local areas. Feedback from elected officials is that local authorities would often be reluctant to purchase land for this purpose, despite the huge community benefits from community gardens or allotments. The cost of land in urban areas is also considerably higher than rural areas, which would also imply that local authorities are less likely to purchase land for this purpose given the additional cost.

It is safe to assume there will be future impact to local communities from the future removal of community gardens and allotments for housing purposes. Therefore, there is a role for central government to step in and provide community facilities where the local government is not able or willing to provide capital funding for this purpose.

Also, it was noted that in 2020 there were more planning permissions submitted for apartments compared to houses for the first time area (See Appendix 2). Currently there are no planning requirements for apartments to include a space for a community garden in the design. Apartments have a key role to play in the housing of residents in urban areas, but equally there is a role for outdoor amenities such as parks, community gardens, allotments and urban orchards for residents in built up areas to avail of.

6. Funding Proposal for Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community & Rural Development & the Islands

To prevent this becoming an issue, Community Gardens Ireland propose the following:

A. Community Gardens Ireland propose that the Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community & Rural Development & the Islands assign a figure of approximately
€500,000 per annum to be allocated for local authorities to purchase land specifically for community growing purposes.

B. Community Gardens Ireland propose that the Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community & Rural Development & the Islands create a specific funding scheme similar to the Clár programme for community gardens and allotments in urban areas.

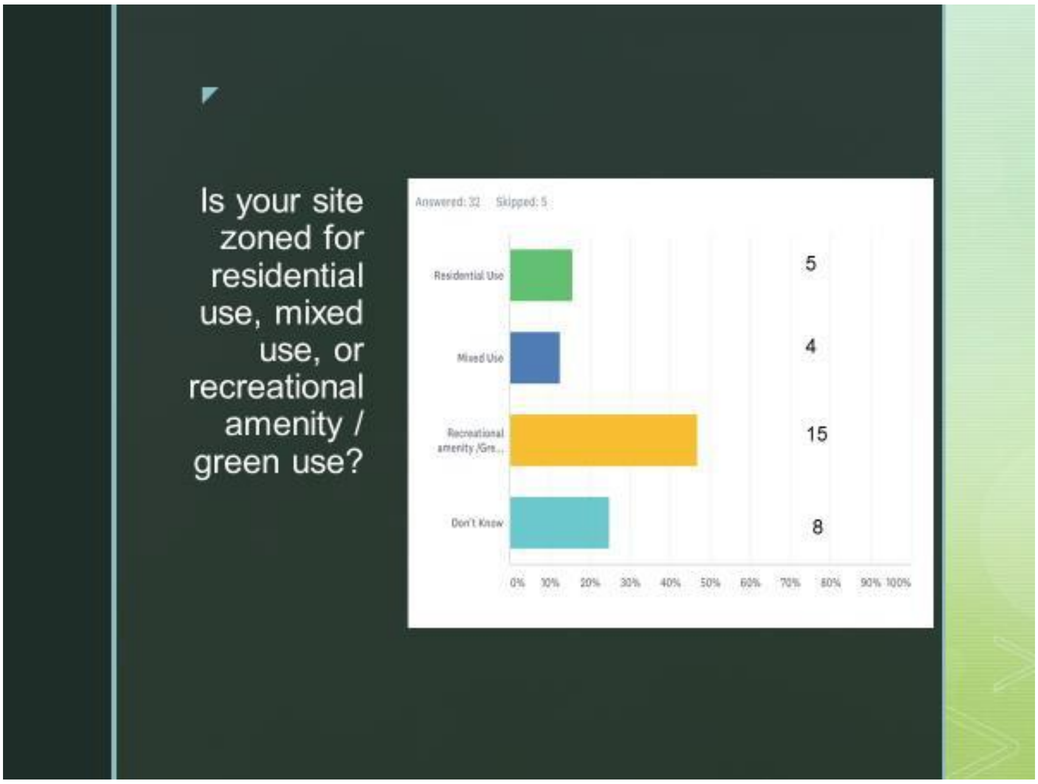
7. Funding Rationale

The rationale for this is that it would ensure additional permanent locations be set up for community gardens and allotments. It would also allow a long term vision to be set up for allotments and community gardens in urban areas, rather than relying on limited local authority owned land.

In addition, this would provide a long-term outdoor support to communities in areas hit hard by the pandemic. This would be consistent with the 2020 Programme for Government and the COVID-19 Resilience & Recovery 2021 plan for The Path Ahead.

There is no current Irish-wide policy in place to increase the number of allotments and community gardens. In the absence of such a policy, this would be a first step to a plan to increase the number of allotments and community gardens on a permanent basis.

Appendix 1: Community Gardens Ireland 2021 Survey Findings




Who owns the land your garden is on?
Majority on land owned by local councils (Belfast, Cork, Donegal, Dublin (7), Fingal, Galway, Kildare (2), Leitrim, North Down, Waterford)
8 owned by community organisations/town
5 by local businesses or farmers
4 by church organisations
The rest a mixture of abandoned land/ sold to private developer by DCC/ not sure


Source of Funding – Answers were wide & varied, indicative of hard work gardens put in to survive…
Local County Councils
CLÁR programme grant (Ceantair Laga Árd-Riachtanais - for small-scale infrastructural projects in rural areas
Community Services programme
SICAP Programme (Social Inclusion & Community Activation Programme
Community Environment Action Fund (CEAF) (Local Agenda 21)
Community Enhancement Programme (CEP) via LCDC
Local funding (e.g. Changemakers /Local Development Partnerships
Heritage Lottery Fund
Small grants from various sources
Annual Applefest Grant
Waste prevention grant scheme
Tidy Towns
Fundraising /Voluntary collections/hosting open days
Market (affected by Covid);
Seed swap/donation for seeds/seedlings
Donations of tools/seeds
Membership fees- ranged from €5 to €50

Appendix 2: Article from RTÉ in 2020 stating the record number of planning permissions for apartments

21/03/2021 Planning permission for apartments at record high

Planning permission for apartments exceed houses for first time

Updated / Friday, 30 Oct 2020 18:27

Apartments make up 51% of the total planning permissions granted last year

Planning permissions for apartments have exceeded those for houses for the first time in the country's history, according to the first report from the Office of Planning Regulator (OPR).

There were 40,252 residential units granted permission last year throughout the country with apartments making up 51% of the total.

The report from the OPR - which was set up to oversee the planning process - states that apartments are "key to sustainable urban development".

It said that the Strategic Housing Development (SHD) process was one factor in the increase as it allows large-scale developments to bypass local authorities and go straight to An Bord Pleanála.

The relaxation of rules on apartments - which included increased height and density - was another factor, it stated.

In Dublin, 86% of all residential units given the go ahead last year were for apartments compared to just 24% in Cork.

https://www.rte.ie/news/2020/1030/1174874-planning-permission/ 1/3

Appendix 3: CLÁR 2021 Scheme Outline Local Authority Measures: 3(a)

Link to 2021 Clár scheme (for rural areas only):
https://assets.gov.ie/126842/1b8caf99- c30d-493d-b425-5a1fe2a0aec7.pdf

Appendix 4: Backup information regarding the benefits of allotments & community gardens

We believe that the provision of space for the community to grow their own fruit and vegetables can help with climate change, biodiversity, pollinators, food poverty, food sustainability and help reduce obesity in families.

A. Community benefits from having allotments

Community gardens also clearly help contribute towards some of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, for example:

- **Goal 3** Good health & well-being
- **Goal 11** Sustainable Cities and Communities
- **Goal 12** Responsible consumption and production

Mental and Physical Health & Well being

The physical and mental health benefits of community and allotment gardening are well proven. Research has shown that as little as two and a half hours of gardening a week can reduce the risk for colon cancer, heart disease, high blood pressure, obesity, osteoporosis, type 2 diabetes, and premature death (Center for Disease Control (CDC), 2019) https://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2019/19_0117.htm

One review of ten papers published since 2003, which was cited by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), reported the positive effects of gardening as a mental health intervention, including reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety with participants describing a range of benefits across emotional, social, vocational, physical and spiritual domains (Clatworthy J, Hinds J, Camic PM. Gardening as a mental health intervention: a review. *Mental Health Review Journal* 2013; 18(4): 214-225). https://www.scie-socialcareonline.org.uk/gardening-as-a-mental-health-intervention-a-review/r/a1CG0000001ztthMAA

The UK's National Association of Allotment Gardeners have details on the benefits of allotments.

https://www.nsalg.org.uk/allotment-info/benefits-of-allotment-gardening/

They also include a case–control study of the health and well-being benefits of allotment gardening, with the following conclusions:

Conclusions

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that one single session of allotment gardening can improve both self-esteem and mood, irrespective of how long participants spend on the allotment, whether they have attended in the last 7 days and their overall length of tenure. Furthermore, allotment gardeners have a better level of self-esteem and mood and a reduced level of abnormal psychological functioning than non-gardeners. Thus, in order to improve health and well-being, people in the UK should be encouraged to take part in short bouts of allotment gardening. Health organizations and policy makers should consider the potential of allotment gardening as long-term tool for combatting the increasing prevalence of ill-health and local public authorities should seek to provide community allotment plots to allow residents to have regular opportunities to partake in gardening activities.

https://www.nsalg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/health-and-well-being- allotments.pdf

B. Climate Change

The provision of space for allotments and community gardens can help with climate change and biodiversity improvements.

As a benchmark, The Highland Council in Scotland have an allotment policy which was reviewed in Winter 2019 by their Climate Change team. Allotments are provided by The Highland Council, and their allotments policy has an equal aim to improve the local environments through increased biodiversity. The Highland Council acknowledge that new allotments sites will provide an increased diversity of habitats.

Aim 1: to increase the provision of allotments across the Highland Council area. Performance towards this aim will be measured by the number of new allotment sites established and the maintenance of existing sites. Our target is to establish at least 4 new sites and have identified suitable land for a further 4 sites by April 2014.

Aim 2: to improve local environments through increased biodiversity. New allotment sites will provide an increased diversity of habitats. This policy encourages planting of new hedgerows to further enhance biodiversity. Baseline measurements of hedgerow length will be performed on new allotment sites and reviewed annually.

Also, the Highland Council have highlighted the reduction of carbon emissions through the provision of allotments. By allowing members of the community and families to grow their own, our food travels less, and ultimately less journeys are undertaken by consumers.

Local Outcome 6: Carbon emissions are reduced and communities are protected from the consequences of changing weather patterns	Reduced carbon emissions, both in terms of less produce transported from producers to shops, and fewer journeys to buy produce. By providing local allotment sites, we will minimise travel needs

From The Highland Council:
https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/1210/environment/321/climate_change/10

Tree Canopy

The current tree canopy cover across County Dublin is 10%, placing it in the lower half of European city values, although there are large variations between local authorities, e.g DLR has 18.9% but the North East Inner City of Dublin has a canopy cover of only 1% compared to 10.2 % in the city as a whole. A tree canopy cover of 15% would make Dublin comparable to other European cities (*Dublin Tree Canopy Study Final Report 2017*. Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316441902_Dublin_Tree_Canopy_Study_Final_Report) (Table 2, from page 5 below)

Local Authority	Area (ha)	Canopy (ha)	Percent canopy	Percent urban
DCC	11,772	1,197	10.2	97.1
DLR	12,660	2,398	18.9	59.8
Fingal	45,806	2,996	6.5	25.7
SDCC	22,350	3872	17.3	42.2
Total	92,588	9,284	10.0	43.4

Nationally, Ireland also has the the lowest forest cover of all European countries, according to Teagasc. Land cover here is 11% while over 40% of all land in the 33 member states is wooded. (Hickey, D. (2016), https://www.irishexaminer.com/opinion/columnists/arid- 20389700.html

C. Food Poverty

The original legislation providing allotments in Irish law in 1926 were brought in to help with food poverty of the Irish people. An amendment made to the 1926 law in 1934 specifically called out that allowances be made for those who were unemployed and could not afford them.

In today's Ireland, food poverty remains – recent estimates are that 10% of Irish people live in food poverty and are not getting enough nutritious food in their diet. In addition, obesity in children and adults is at its highest levels.

Research performed by Grow It Yourself has highlighted the positive benefits of allotments in helping to combat food poverty. Grow It Yourself estimate that a family can product 135kg of nutritious fruit and vegetables per year in one plot. The provision of allotments throughout towns and villages will provide local communities with the space to grow their own, which ultimately sets children up for success later in life.

Food poverty is a complex issue which requires many aspects to help remove it from society, but the provision of land for allotments and community gardens will directly help with this.

From Grow It Yourself website: [https://giy.ie/archive/grow-your-way-out-of-food- poverty.html](https://giy.ie/archive/grow-your-way-out-of-food-poverty.html)

D. Food Sustainability & Seed Sovereignty

Food sustainability should be treated as a carrot, not a stick! There is nothing more sustainable than having the ability to grow local and eat local. Ireland's current supply chain for our supermarkets allows cheap fruit and vegetables to be imported from thousands of kilometres away.

It is common knowledge that nutrients in food start to break down after they are harvested, so the optimum solution for nutritional value is to grow, pick and eat when required.
Seasonal fruit and vegetables also taste better than compared to strawberries grown out of season for Christmas, for example.

Allotments and community gardens are not generally maintained by just one person – families often get involved. In Healthy Ireland's "A Healthy Weight for Ireland: Obesity Policy and Action Plan", a healthy diet is specifically called out as crucial for both adults and children:

> **2.1.1 Diet and nutrition**
>
> A healthy diet is crucial in maintaining a healthy lifestyle. It plays a key role in maintaining a healthy weight as well as encouraging positive lifestyles generally.
>
> The findings of Irish adult and children nutrition surveys over the last ten years show that eating habits are not consistent with optimal health. Excess consumption of saturated fats, trans fats, sugars and salt (especially from foods and drinks on the top shelf of the Food Pyramid) and low consumption of fruit and vegetables are the major problems in the Irish diet (IUNA, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2012d, 2012e).

Source: Healthy Ireland
https://assets.gov.ie/7559/2d91a3564d7e487f86a8d3fa86de67da.pdf

By introducing children to the method of growing fruit and vegetables early, they have better diets and have "food empathy", according to Grow It Yourself founder Michael Kelly: https://www.thejournal.ie/readme/gardening-tips-with-children-3217359-Feb2017/. This is evidenced by Agri Aware's successful Incredible Edibles initiative now in its 13th year (https://www.incredibleedibles.ie/) and GIY's more recent Grow at School project (https://giy.ie/programmes/grow-at-school/)

Seed Sovereignty

Ireland does not produce enough open pollinated and organic seed to meet its current needs, which are set to increase drastically, with a 200 percent increase in demand for all seed in the last year, and a 600 percent increase in demand for open pollinated untreated seed. A vibrant and responsive local seed industry will enable us to breed seeds that are better suited to the Irish climate and microclimates, and add substantial value to the operations of smallholdings, community farms, community gardens and community allotments. In the short term, a distributed network of seed production hubs is possible by using the already established community garden network, building on the strengths of self- organisation and cooperation that we display. Irish Seed Savers Association and Social Farms and Gardens NI are providing free training in this process to upskill our gardens and allotments. This is a massive step towards seed sovereignty and the building of a resilient economy, which will be increasingly necessary as the climate crisis unfolds.

E. Communities & Local Economy

Allotments and community gardens are a haven for all members of the community to shelter from daily pressures and problems. Allotments allow all members of the community to learn about the amount of work that goes into producing food to go into the food chain. Allotments provide a space for people to get physically active in fresh air, particularly those who do not have access to back gardens (approx. 10% of Irish population).

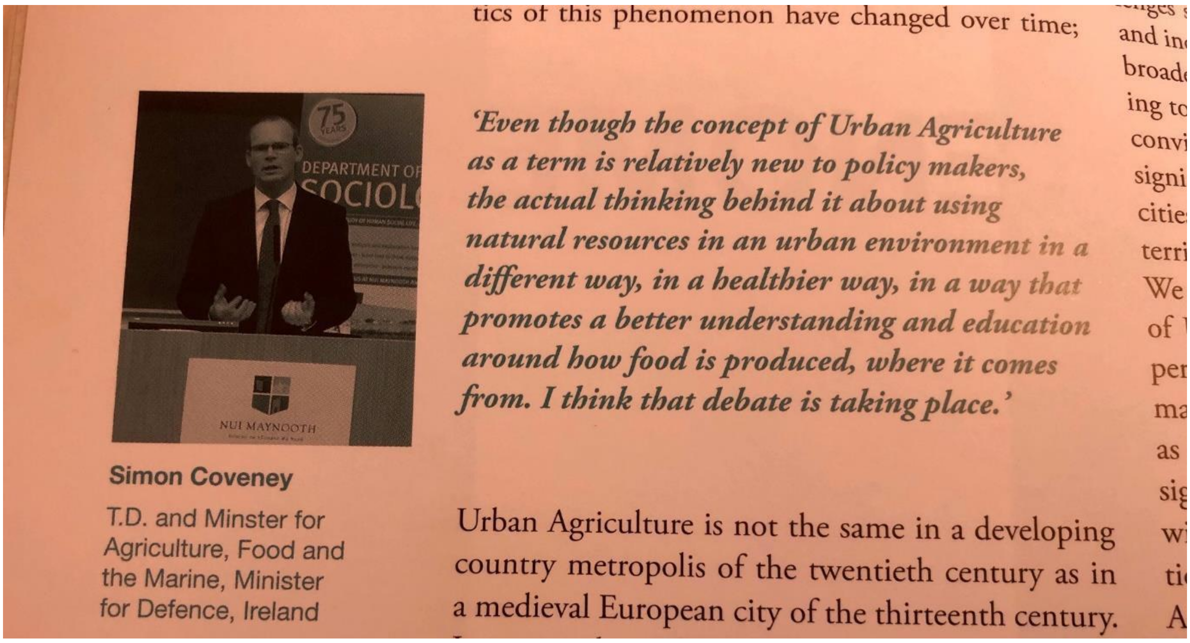
Allotments and community gardens help to promote healthy eating by encouraging locally grown organic uncontaminated fresh fruit and vegetables. Allotments also have a positive impact on the carbon footprints of local communities by improving the sustainability of food production – grow local, eat local, buy local!

While communities benefit directly from the produce, the provision of allotments can also help with the local economy. Apart from an increase in the amount of seeds, plants, tools and other equipment to be purchased in local shops and local garden centres, there are other examples of allotments and community gardens helping the local economy.

In 2016, the EU-funded research on "Urban Agriculture Europe" was published which includes reference to how community gardens and allotments can help the local economy. One example included was where local residents in Rotterdam from diverse ethnic and social origins grew herbs in a community garden. These residents then sold these herbs to local restaurants and cafés, which shows the overall impact of diversity and inclusion when it comes to allotments, along with the potential for local innovation and economic improvements.

F. Urban Agriculture Europe, 2016

Quote by Simon Coveney TD (Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine in 2016) from page 16 of Urban Agriculture Europe.



tics of this phenomenon have changed over time;

'Even though the concept of Urban Agriculture as a term is relatively new to policy makers, the actual thinking behind it about using natural resources in an urban environment in a different way, in a healthier way, in a way that promotes a better understanding and education around how food is produced, where it comes from. I think that debate is taking place.'

Simon Coveney
T.D. and Minster for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Minister for Defence, Ireland

Urban Agriculture is not the same in a developing country metropolis of the twentieth century as in a medieval European city of the thirteenth century.

Family Carers Ireland
No one should have to care alone

Submission to the Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands on Budget 2022 Estimates.

Family Carers Ireland

March 2021

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Introduction

Family Carers Ireland welcomes the opportunity to submit our views to the Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands on the 2022 Budget Estimates. The submission begins by providing an overview of the policy context within which informal care is situated, the increasing dependence on family carers to meet the demand for long-term care and to support the reorientation of the healthcare system away from its traditional acute-centric model, towards primary and community-based care. In Part Two, the submission sets out the inadequacy of carer welfare rates and makes the case for the reframing of income supports for family carers. Part Three provides a summary of our proposals to the Pensions Commission on the institution of a new dedicated pension scheme for 'lifetime carers' and the principles underpinning it. Finally, Part 4 set out the proposals, relevant to the Committee's remit, that *Family Carers Ireland* would like to see delivered in Budget 2022. *Family Carers Ireland* do not have access to the data required to accurately cost all of these proposals, and as such we recommend their consideration by the Parliamentary Budget Office

Family Carers Ireland is the national charity dedicated to improving supports and recognition for family carers who provide regular, unpaid care to a friend or family member with a long-term illness, health problem or disability, including problems related to old age.

Part One – Policy Context

Government policy has long supported initiatives to maintain the care of people in their own homes. A trajectory of policies dating as far back as 1968 with the *Care of the Aged Report; The Years Ahead- A Policy for the Elderly* in 1988; the Irish Health Strategy *Shaping a Healthier Future* in 1994; the *White Paper on Supporting Voluntary Activity; Quality and Fairness, A Health System for You* and *Primary Care- A New Direction* in 2001, all emphasised the need to care for people at home, with a primary focus on the promotion of dignity and independence, as well as programmes to support family carers including informal networks, basic training and greater availability of respite. More recently, *Future Health (2012), the Seanad Report on the Rights of Older People (2012) and Sláintecare (2018)* all recommend fundamental reforms in the delivery of healthcare to bring care closer to home. These longstanding and laudable ambitions, while welcome, are entirely predicated on the availability and willingness of family and friends to take on a caring role, and to accept the many practical, financial and psychological implications that accompany it[1]. Today, 1 in 8 people in Ireland provide care. *Family Carers Ireland* estimates that this number will need to increase to 1 in 5 people by 2030 if we are to avoid unsustainable increases in paid-for community care and to meet the growing demand for care due to population ageing, an increase in the number of people living with a disability or chronic condition and to deliver the raft of policies that rightly prioritise care in the home. If we are to achieve this, then Government must recognise family carers as vital contributors to our health and social care system and as such reward, not penalise them for the care they provide. This means replacing any remaining archaic policies that penalise family caregiving, not least of which are elements of the existing pension regime that allows a lifetime carer to reach retirement age with no entitlement to a State Pension or only a reduced entitlement and the classification of Carers Allowance as a 'social assistance' payment which by definition imposes strict eligibility criteria which prevents genuine, fulltime family carers from qualifying.

Who Cares?

According to the CSOs Irish Health Survey 2019, almost 13% of Irish people (approximately 500,000) aged over 15 years provide care[2] and in doing so save the State some €20bn in avoided health and

[1] Family Carers Ireland, College of Psychiatrists of Ireland & University College Dublin (2019) Paying the Price: The Hidden Impacts of Caring, Dublin: Family Carers Ireland. https://familycarers.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Paying-the-Price-The- Hidden-Impacts-of-Caring.pdf

[2] CSO Irish Health Survey 2019. Calculation of 500,000 family carers is based on the IHS finding that 13% of respondents (N=7,621) provide regular unpaid care.

social care costs each year[3]. While data on caring is captured through the Census of Population, there is a broad acceptance that the poor wording of the question, which refers to '*unpaid... personal help,'* alongside the tendency of carers not to self-identify as a carer until well into their caring role, has led to a significant under-enumeration of carers through the Census. For example, Census 2016 identified 195,263 carers, only 4 per cent of the population. By comparison, almost 13 per cent of respondents to the CSO's Irish Health Survey 2019 (N=7,621) stated they provide regular, unpaid care. This figure is in line with estimations in the UK and other European countries. The majority of carers in Ireland are women (61%) and are aged less than 65 years (63%) with the likelihood of caring increasing with age, rising from five per cent of people aged 25-34 years to a peak of 20 per cent among those in mid- life, aged between 45-54 years.

Not only is the majority of community care across Europe provided by family carers, but the majority of family-caregiving is also carried out by women[4]. A 2019 IHREC study found evidence of the highly gendered nature of caring and unpaid work in Ireland, with the gap in care provision between men and women, at 15 hours per week, placing Ireland very far down the league table within the EU28[5]. Explanations have suggested that women are more likely to assume caregiving roles due to the gender pay gap; cultural beliefs and the traditional value of the woman as the natural caregiver. In Ireland, the role of women as the primary providers of care was so deeply ingrained in our culture it was enshrined in Article 41.2 of the Irish Constitution and perpetuated through policies such as the marriage bar, which remained in place until 1973 and fundamentally disadvantaged Irish women in terms of their financial independence and pension entitlement.

Carers in receipt of Social Welfare:

- 116,838 family carers received the annual Carers Support Grant in 2020. The grant is paid to fulltime family carers (>35 hrs p.w) caring for someone medically assessed as in need of care.
- 88,906 carers receive Carers Allowance (captured in the 116,838 figure above).
- 3,698 carers receive Carers Benefit (captured in the 116,838 figure above).

Budget Estimates for Department of Social Protection

Part Two – Need for a fundamental review of the adequacy of Carer's Allowance and Carer's Benefit

Cost to be estimated by the PBO

The inadequacy of carer welfare rates is among the most frequent cause of carer's frustration. The expectation that carers provide fulltime care – at least 35 hours each week to those medically assessed as in need of fulltime care - for just €16 more than basic social welfare rates is untenable. In fact, of the 89,000 carers receiving Carers Allowance, half receive a reduced rate due to other means, and are therefore likely to receive even less than the basic rate. *Family Carers Ireland* are calling for an overhaul of the Department's approach to family carers and a re-framing of carer income supports within the context of the States growing dependence on family carers, their 'assumption' into mainstream services and their unfavourable and disproportionate treatment when compared to other groups.

For example, an Irish citizen fostering a child receives a minimum of €352 per week (not means tested or taxable), with weekly payments of more than double this available to those fostering children with complex care needs. Foster parents are also afforded priority access to relevant State services and supports. A family carer looking after their own child with profound needs only receives a maximum

[3] Using the estimated carer population in 2020 of 499,904 and applying the 38.7 average weekly hours of care from Census 2016, means that Ireland carers provide some 19,346,285 million hours of care each week. Applying an hourly replacement cost of €20, means that if Government had to replace the care provided by family carers it would cost them at least €20,120,136,192 each year.

[4] Eurocarers, 2021.

[5] Russell, H., Grotti, R., McGinnity, F. & Privalko, I. (2019). Caring and Unpaid Work in Ireland. Dublin: ESRI.

rate of €219 per week - if they qualify at all (only 51% of all carers receive the maximum rate)[6] and access to services for their child(ren) is subordinate to children in foster care. By way of another comparison, a person on a Community Employment scheme receives a minimum payment of €225 per week, enjoys statutory employment rights including the right to annual leave and public holidays and must work just 19.5 hours per week as part of their activation programme. For a person in receipt of Carer's Allowance their weekly payment is paid at a maximum rate of €219 per week, they have no employment rights, their payment will be stopped if they are sick and cannot provide replacement care and must work a minimum 35 hours per week - many carers in fact provide round the clock care.

Grounds for a review of welfare adequacy for family carers:
- carers are the only recipients of social welfare required to work full-time for their payment receive just €16 more than the basic social welfare rate for doing so;
- in undertaking this work, they save the State billions of euro that would otherwise have to be met by the exchequer – this means that they cannot be subject to normal requirements in regard to activation measures;
- the State is consistently adding to the cost (withdrawal of certain health services and supports) and burden of care (e.g. reporting requirements under the Assisted Decision-making (Capacity) Act 2015);
- providing this care brings with it significant personal costs, including financial, health and wellbeing costs as well as longer term consequences to their pension entitlement; and
- carers bear additional costs associated with their caregiving role that are not compensated for by the State, as is the case with other welfare recipients who receive travel allowances and material and training grants, for example.

Part Three – Lifetime Carer's Pension: *Cost to be estimated by the PBO*
The following points provide a summary of *Family Carers Ireland's* submission to the Pensions Commission with regard to the institution of a dedicated 'Lifetime Carer's Pension' for carers who have provided fulltime care for more than 20 years.

- *Family Carers Ireland* acknowledges that the introduction of a ***Total Contributions Approach (TCA)*** for those who have spent time outside the paid workplace to provide care has addressed a significant number of the legacy issues attached to the Yearly Average Contribution Approach. The TCA does not however, address all issues. For this reason, we recommend the introduction of a separate non-means-tested ***Lifetime Carer Pension scheme*** to ensure no carer is denied a pension or receives a reduced rate pension due to significant periods spent caregiving.

- This scheme should be robust, with a ***legal definition of 'lifetime carer'*** that can stand up to legal scrutiny and is resistant to potential abuse being set out in statutory regulations (Ministerial Order). Individuals should be able to appeal decisions under these regulations to the Social Welfare Appeals Office.

- For the purpose of *Family Carers Irelands* submission, a lifetime carer is defined as a family carer who has provided fulltime care (at least 35 hours per week) to someone in need of care for 20 years or more. The duration of their caring role places them beyond the protections afforded by the Homemakers Scheme and the Home Caring Period Scheme.
- The contribution of all family carers, including those who provide shorter periods of care is immense and must also be recognised. *Family Carers Ireland* recommend the broad ***introduction of the TCA including the Home Caring Period Scheme***, as proposed by the National Pensions Framework, to improve pension provision for family carers who have cared for less than 20 years.

[6] DEASP 'Review of Carer's Allowance 2019'.

- The creation of a statutory ***'Family Carer Register'*** would, in time, greatly facilitate the identification of lifetime family carers for the purposes of any lifetime carer pension scheme as well as assisting in the planning and delivery of services.

- Periodic circulation of ***PRSI contribution statements*** to all people of working age that includes an explanation of their entitlement to a State Pension (Contributory) based on their existing contribution record would allow people to recognise any future pension shortfall and begin to take corrective steps while they are still of working age.

- Engagement in employment remains the most effective and sustainable way through which to secure a pension entitlement. It is therefore important that a comprehensive policy on pension entitlements for family carers should address issues such as flexible work arrangements, including transposition of the ***EU Directive on Work Life Balance for Parents and Carers***, more generous tax credits and reliefs and better access to respite and replacement care while the carer is at work.

Principles to underpin a Lifetime Carer Pension

The sustainability challenges presented by population ageing and demographic change aren't unique to pension policy. The increasing care gap between the availability of informal care and the demand for care, is causing Governments across Europe to reconsider how familial care is prioritised, supported and sustained. Integral to this, is ensuring family carers are incentivised to care; have the support they need, if and when they need it, and have financial security both during their active caregiving years and into old age, if they have cared for extended periods. The following principles underpin the values that should be upheld by a dedicated Lifetime Carer Pension.

- ***Equity and Fairness:*** Family carers should be recognised not penalised for their caring years and have their contribution valued in the same way as paid contributions.

- ***Certainty:*** Family carers must have certainty regarding their pension entitlement.

- ***Transparency:*** The State Pension system should be easily understood and transparent. Family carers should have access to a periodic statement of their PRSI and credit record at intervals throughout their working years with an explanation of what this means for their eventual pension entitlement.

- ***Recognition***: Family carers should be recognised for their immense contribution. Those who have spent the majority of their working lives caring for someone in need of fulltime care should have access to a guaranteed Lifetime Carer Pension, regardless of their income.

- ***Gender Equality:*** Any method of facilitating or compensating for time spent caring should not disproportionately lock women into long-term patterns of care. Parallel policies promoting men's full engagement with care obligations should be promoted and embedded within pension policy.

Example: *Theresa is 67 years old and has cared for his sister Anne who has Down Syndrome for 31 years. Anne came to live with Theresa, her husband and five children on their family farm following their mother's death in 1990. For some of this time Theresa also cared for her mother-in-law who had dementia and died in 2001. Theresa's husband John continues to run the farm. John qualifies for a State Pension (Contributory) however due to their assets Theresa does not qualify for a State Pension in her own right or an IQA. During the 31 years she has cared for Anne Theresa didn't qualify for Carers Allowance due to the means test.*

Yearly Average Approach	Total Contributions Approach	Dedicated Carer Pension
Does not have min 520 contributions	Does not have min 520 contributions	Cared in excess of 20 years therefore should qualify for Carer Pension equivalent to full rate SPC
€0	€0	**€248.30**

Part 4 – Other Recommendations for Budget 2022:

- ***Increase Carer's Allowance income disregard to ensure those on an average industrial wage qualify:*** *Cost approximately €55m*[7]*.*

Despite the many plaudits recognising their immense contribution, genuine full-time family carers of people with complex needs continue to be denied Carer's Allowance due to the means test. These are by no means wealthy families. Only households with a *gross* total income of less than €37,500 per year will qualify for a full Carers Allowance. Those with a gross household income of between €37,500 and €62,000 qualify for a much-reduced rate. Any household with a gross income above €62,000 including savings and assets are not eligible, regardless of how considerable their cost of caring responsibilities are. These are families who typically have higher than average household costs due to caring and where very often one member has had to give up work to provide care.

While the income disregard for Carers Allowance increasing steadily during the period 2000 to 2008, it has remained stagnant for the last 13 years, meaning Government has failed to achieve the commitment set out in *Towards 2016* to expand the income disregard for Carer's Allowance so that those on average industrial incomes can qualify (p.55). Average earnings in Quarter 4, 2020 were
€826[8] while the income disregard for Carer's Allowance remains at €332.50/€665 (couple). The failure to ensure that the income disregard kept pace with average earnings is compounded by the fact that **the current rate of Carer's Allowance of €219 is €1.50 less than it was in 2009**, despite a 6.9 percent increase in the Consumer Price Index (CPI) during this period.

Carer's Allowance Income Disregard 2000 – 2021

Budget	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2006	2007	2008	2008/2021
Income Disregard											
Single	€95	€158	€191	€210	€250	€270	€270	€290	€320	€332.50	**No change**
Couple	€190	€317	€382	€420	€500	€540	€540	€580	€640	€665	
Increase	**+ 350%**										**0%**

- ***Recognise the costs of caring in the deductions allowable for Carer's Allowance and assess income on net rather than gross value:*** *Cost to be calculated by PBO*

Because the assessment of means for Carer's Allowance is applied to gross rather than net income and does not consider mortgage repayments, dependent children, college fees, Fair Deal contributions, medical costs, etc., the assessment does not reflect the reality faced by many caring families. These families may appear relatively financially comfortable based on their gross income, but are struggling to make ends meet when living expenses and the cost of care are deducted. The deductions currently allowed are limited to a €332.50/€665 weekly income disregard, PRSI, union dues, superannuation and travel expenses[9]. *Family Carers Ireland* argues that the means test should

[7] DEASP 'Review of Carer's Allowance 2019' p.33.
[8] CSO March 2021.
[9] Travel is applied at a standard rate of €15 but can be increased where appropriate.

be applied to net rather than gross income in line with the assessment applied to Carer's Benefit[10] and should include deductions similar to those allowed in the financial assessment for a Medical Card including mortgage repayments, childcare costs, nursing home costs, education expenses, and an allowance ranging from €38 to €78 for each dependent child.

- ***Increase the €20,000 disregard to €50,000 in the Capital Formula:*** *Cost to be calculated by PBO* Because the State makes no provision for the future care needs of children and adults with significant care needs, families have to do so. It is not uncommon for carers, particularly the parents of a child with a disability, to go without in order to save money towards their child's future care needs. In doing so, these carers are being penalised by virtue of the capital formula applied to savings and assets in the means assessment for Carer's Allowance. *Family Carers Ireland* is calling for the capital formula – which has not changed since 2005 - applied to Carer's Allowance to be increased from €20,000 to €50,000 in line with the Disability Allowance where the first €50,000 of capital is disregarded.

Capital Formula

Carer's Allowance (Current)		Carer's Allowance (Proposed – same as DA)	
Capital	**Weekly means**	**Capital**	**Weekly means**
First €20,000	Nil	First €50,000	Nil
Next €10,000	€1 per €1,000	Next €10,000	€1 per €1,000
Next €10,000	€2 per €1,000	Next €10,000	€2 per €1,000
Balance (over €40K)	€4 per €1,000	Balance (over €70K)	€4 per €1,000

- ***Increase the Carer's Support Grant from €1,850 to €2,000:*** *Cost approximately €19.5m.*
The annual Carer's Support Grant is an important payment that recognises the unique contribution of family carers. While the Grant can be used as the carer chooses, for many it goes towards the cost associated with caring or towards paying household bills. For some 23,157[11] full-time carers of people who are medically assessed as in need of full-time care, the Grant is the only financial recognition of the care they provide. *Family Carers Ireland* is calling for the Grant to be increased to €2,000 in Budget 2022.

- ***Extend eligibility for Carer's Benefit to include people who are self-employed***: *Cost approximately €7.5m[12].*
In line with Government's stated aim to create a supportive environment for entrepreneurship and extend eligibility for social welfare supports to people who are self-employed, *Family Carers Ireland* is calling for eligibility to Carer's Benefit to be extended to people who are self-employed or paying a Class S stamp. These people are equally likely to find themselves with caring responsibilities and therefore need the assurance of having a financial support available to them should they need to take time away from work to provide care.

[10] With Carer's Benefit the €332.50 a carer is allowed to earn is based on net income after income tax, USC, PRSI, superannuation, pension levy, union dues, subscriptions to Friendly Societies and health insurance premiums are deducted. [11] 114,000 carers received the Grant in June 2020. A total of 90,771 carers receive the Grant automatically because they receive either Carer's Allowance or Carer's Benefit. This means that 23,157 carers who receive the Grant as a stand-alone payment. Please note additional Carer Support Grants will be paid in respect of 2020 up until Dec 2021 therefore the figure of 113,928 will increase.
[12] According to the CSO 2,009,200 people were in listed as employees in 2020. At the end of 2020 some 3,698 carers received Carers Benefit, equal to approximately 0.2% of all people in employment. By proxy 331,600 people were listed as self- employed. If the same proportion of these applied for Carers Benefit that would equal approximately 663 additional carers applying for Carers Benefit which would cost and additional €7.5m.

- ***Access to DCA for children who are long term patients in hospital***: *Cost less than €1m.*
Some of Ireland's sickest children are denied access to the Domiciliary Care Allowance (DCA) because they do not satisfy the requirement that they 'live at home'. As a consequence, their parents, many of whom are forced to give up their employment to stay with them in hospital, are denied Carer's Allowance. *Family Carers Ireland* understands that steps have been taken to resolve this anomaly but urge that efforts be expedited to

ensure these families are not forced to suffer further financial hardship.

Budget Estimates for the Department of Rural and Community Development

- ***Funding Scheme for the Community and Voluntary Pillar:*** *Cost approximately €500K.*[13]

In Ireland, the contribution of the community and voluntary sector to the formulation of social policy is explicitly recognised, with the sector constituting one of the four pillars of Social Partnership. The Department of Rural and Community Development has signalled its intention to carry out a review of the *Funding Scheme to Support the Community and Voluntary Pillar of Social Partnership* in 2021. *Family Carers Ireland,* the only member of the Community and Voluntary Pillar representing Irelands 500,000 family carers, has received funding under this scheme since 2007, which has enabled us to contribute to policy making and give a voice to family carers within the social partnership structures. *Family Carers Ireland* acknowledge that the Department are obligated to undertake periodic reviews of funding schemes, and such reviews are integral to continuous improvement. However, we urge that rather than regard the review as an opportunity to abandon this funding, it is treated as an opportunity to improve it, by facilitating effective social dialogue and helping build strong and independent social partners who are conducive to purposeful discussion, constructive co-operation and effective policy formulation.

Budget Estimates lead by another Department but of relevance to the Committee

- **National Carers Strategy (inc. PfG):** *Cost to be confirmed by PBO*

Ireland's first National Carers' Strategy, published in 2012, signalled Government's commitment to respecting carers as key care partners and to responding to their needs across a number of policy areas. The Programme for Government, published in 2020, reaffirms this commitment by undertaking to refresh the Strategy with the Department of Health confirming to *Family Carers Ireland* that the refreshed strategy will be prioritised for publication in 2021. Given the period of significant health reform that we are now in the midst of, including the implementation of Sláintecare and the creation of a statutory homecare scheme (both of which are predicated on the provision of care in the home) it is critical that a refreshed National Carers Strategy and action plan for the period 2021 – 2026 is developed alongside ringfenced funding for its delivery. In terms of the Department of Social Protection's contribution, the Strategy offers the opportunity to take a 5 year approach to reframing income supports for family carers, including the classification of carer schemes and increasing the rate of payment.

- **EU Directive on Work Life Balance for Parents and Carers:** *Cost to be confirmed by PBO* Engagement in employment remains the most effective and sustainable way through which to provide financial security. While participation in paid employment is not always possible for those with intensive caring responsibilities, for carers who want to remain in employment or want to re-enter the workforce after a period of caregiving, it is imperative that reconciliation policies exist to support them to combine work and care. The EU Directive on Work Life Balance for Parents and Carers, due to be transposed into Irish law by August 2022, contains a number of important provisions for working carers, including the right to request flexible working and the right to at least 5 days Carer's Leave per year. While the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth have ultimate responsibility for the legislation, they are encouraged to interpret its provisions as generously as

[13] *Family Carers Ireland* understands that the average grant amount for each of the 17 Pillar members is €30k p.a.

possible, including providing for the payment Carer's Leave days through the social welfare system. If this is to materialise, then provision will need to be made in the social welfare estimates process for Budget 2022.

- **'Carers Guarantee':** *Cost €5.6mp.a. (Point not of direct relevance but included to make the Committee aware of the Guarantee).*

Family Carers Ireland welcomes the Programme for Government commitment to deliver a Carer's Guarantee and is calling for €5.6m in funding to be made available in Budget 2022 to begin its implementation. The 'Carers Guarantee' proposal sets out how, for an additional €5.6m in annual funding, *Family Carers Ireland* will guarantee the delivery of a core basket of services to carers across the country regardless of where they live. These services will include: access to emergency respite; intensive one-to-one support for carers in crisis; a suite of training programmes ranging from basic care skills workshops to QQI accredited 'Caring with Confidence' training; targeted support groups and networks and access to information and advocacy clinics in local community centres, primary care centres and hospitals. While led by the Department of Health, the Carers Guarantee reaches across Government Departments and has the potential to end the postcode lottery that has long characterised the delivery of carer supports and enable greater sustainability of care. *Family Carer's* Ireland notes that €2m in carer funding was announced in Budget 2021 however there is appears to be confusion as to whether this allocation is towards the Carer's Guarantee or the National Carer's Strategy. The Ministers speech refers to the funding as going *'towards more equitable access to supports'* (i.e. the Carer's Guarantee) however the €2m was given directly to the HSE and is acknowledged in their 2021 Service Plan as for the National Carers Strategy.

Appendix 1:

PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT COMMITMENTS FOR FAMILY CARERS

Social Protection	Health	Children/Disability	Revenue
- Develop a pension solution for family carers that recognises their important contribution - Protect core social welfare rates - Recognise the importance of ancillary benefits and eligibility criteria - Improve outcomes for those with caring responsibilities	- Update the National Carers Strategy - Establish a commission to examine the care and support of older people - Introduce a 'Carers Guarantee' that will provide a basket of services to carers across the country - Increase homecare - Introduce a Statutory Homecare Scheme - Extend eligibility for GP Visit Card to carers receiving Carer's Support Grant - Champion a whole-of-life approach to care - Cap parking charge at all public hospitals - Support Dialogue Forum with voluntary organisations to build a stronger working relationship between the State and voluntary healthcare sector	- Increase home support & PA hours - Reduce waiting times for assessment of need under the Disability Act 2005 - Introduce personalised budgets for people with disabilities - Further intensive transitional support packages for children/ young people with complex support needs - Expand adult day services for people with a physical, sensory or intellectual disability or autism - Increase residential and emergency residential places - End the inappropriate placement of young people to nursing homes - Integrate access to mental health supports as part of disability service - Reform the Mental Health Act 2001 - Extend the remit of the National Treatment Purchase Fund to secure timely assessment for both child and adult psychological services	Increase the Home Carer Tax Credit

Irish Local Development Network

IRISH LOCAL DEVELOPMENT NETWORK

REFLECTIONS ON BUDGET 2022

SUBMISSION ON BEHALF OF THE IRISH LOCAL DEVELOPMENT NETWORK.

The Irish Local Development Network:

The Irish Local Development Network CLG (ILDN) is the representative body for Ireland's Local Development Companies (LDCs). These 49 not-for-profit groups are building inclusive, vibrant communities and better life chances for people in every part of Ireland. They assist communities and disadvantaged persons/groups with personal development and well-being, social inclusion, employment training and placement, enterprise and social enterprise, community development, environment and climate action.

With 2,100 employees on the ground, supporting 15,000 community groups and 170,000 individuals through €300+ million of programmes each year, the ILDN membership is the largest Community Development/Anti-Poverty Network in the state. Programmes include LEADER, Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme (SICAP), Local Employment Service, Jobs Clubs, Back to Work Enterprise Allowance, Tús, Rural Social Scheme, social enterprise, Rural Recreation, Walks Scheme, health, mental health and social prescribing, environmental management and climate action.

The Consultation Process:

As part of its pre-budget scrutiny process, the Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community & Rural Development & the Islands, is inviting written submissions from Members of the Public, Stakeholders and interested parties.

The Joint Committee has agreed to undertake a detailed examination and review of the 2021 Estimates, once published, for both the Department of Social Protection and the Department of Community & Rural Development & the Islands and to hold hearings on same.

In particular, the Joint Committee will examine the overall fiscal position, public expenditure policy, exchequer receipts policy, and matters which have a significant impact on the budgetary position or fiscal policy of both Departments.

ILDN Budget Proposals:

- ILDN proposes a nationwide Local Employment Service delivered through Local Development Companies
- ILDN calls for increased investment in the Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme and the development of a Digital Inclusion Fund
- ILDN urges the Government to maximise the level of EU & Exchequer co-funding eligible for the purposes of LEADER
- ILDN seeks the continuation and expansion of the Ability Programme
- ILDN underlines the importance of deeper investment in Social Enterprise.
- ILDN recommend reforms of Tús, Community Employment & Rural Social Schemes in order to maximise eligibility and participation.
- ILDN suggests the introduction of a Core Costs Model to ensure the future sustainability of the Local Development Sector.

1. Employment Services in the Community

The Department of Social Protection contracts ILDN members for the provision of Local Employment Services (LES) in 23 locations. Providers deliver a case managed employment service for all, including those with disabilities, who avail of the services. Jobseekers work with a LES Mediator to develop a personal progression plan in order to access the full range of employment supports available. Providers also deliver a recruitment and job matching service for employers.

In these circumstances, there is a need to bring certainty, capacity and equity to the employment services required by jobseekers. Currently, jobseekers in 14 counties do not have access to an LES-type service whilst existing LES services face a fundamental disruption to their operations through a potential tender and reconfiguration. Whilst a tender process has also been proposed for some of the the 14 counties with no current service, this will result in two tender processes, with reconfigured service areas, realignment of operational areas, possible redundancies and disruption of service continuity at the worst possible time for jobseekers.

The current machinery is apt to provide the required employment services:

In areas with existing operations, the LES are providing an effective service and can be easily and rapidly upscaled in response to local needs. The 2019 independent Indecon Report records full-time employment placement in these services at 28.8% of hard-to- place *long-term* unemployed, as well as significant levels of part-time work placements. In addition, 89% of employer respondents indicated that their engagement with the Local Employment Services had helped them to find suitable candidates for available jobs.

In the remaining 14 counties, the country's Local Development Companies are currently closely engaged with jobseekers through the Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme (SICAP), Jobs Clubs, BTWEA and Tús, and they have been preparing to deliver LES type services in 2021 for many months now. Whilst they have not operated the LES programme, they do offer comprehensive rural employment services and have been preparing to add LES. They benefit from best practice sharing and networking to existing LES operators through the ILDN network.

Given the uncertainty in the labour market, the high numbers requiring activation over the next two years and the capacity available to the state through Local Development

Companies, now is not the time to embark on a realignment of existing LES operational areas and the introduction of a dual strand procurement process that will fundamentally disrupt activation services when they are needed most.

Instead, we need to release and mobilise the existing capacity. What ILDN proposes is:

- All Local Development Companies that do not have an existing LES would *pilot* an LES-type service, reflective of the Covid-19 context and changing Socio Economic profile.
- In this period, existing LDCs with LES contracts will continue to deliver the current LES service but provide enhanced services.

This proposal offers an agile response to the inevitable high demand for employment services –

- There is integration with existing rural employment and inclusion services.
- There is no requirement to develop infrastructure *ab initio.*
- There is no disruption to existing services from realignment of operational areas or loss of skilled staff.

2. Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme (SICAP)

Those who are already disadvantaged are likely to be more so in onsets of crises in health, economy, education and employment. This will be exacerbated by poorer access to information technology, digital/ online services. Whilst CSO have not yet mapped the incidence of Covid and Covid-related deaths onto the HP Deprivation Index, we know that Covid is not a leveler - there is a strong international correlation between the incidence of Covid-related deaths and areas of deprivation.

Currently, the Social Inclusion budgets stand at 50% of what it was in 2008 - (€43m currently, €84.7m in 2008) and Ireland ranks high internationally for social exclusion. Eurofound (2019) scores social exclusion here 28.9 out of 100, well behind Denmark (17.5), Germany (20.8), Latvia (22.2) and Estonia (25.2).

As we move into the recovery phase, digitization and the remote delivery of services will be become more normal across society, this causing further disadvantage to groups with poor access to and experience of digital channels.

To protect vulnerable groups, typically SICAP target groups, ILDN proposes a Digital Inclusion Fund (DIF) to be administered by Local Development Companies in conjunction with SICAP. This will have three principal elements –

- It will provide a Digital Enabler in each LDC whose will work internally but mostly externally with target groups (e.g., Local Community Groups, Social Enterprises) to provide Going Back to Work and Ongoing Supports to adapt and innovate in the new environment. As Local Community Groups and Social Enterprise use LDCs for ongoing advice on Health & Safety and other Compliance issues, the DIF will resource Health & Safety/Compliance Officers in LDCs who will also be deployed to ensure the Social Inclusion Target Groups (TGs) are supported to participate fully in civic society for the benefit of their own members.

- The digital challenge also requires support for TGs in the provision of hardware and software if they are not to be further distanced.

- New Programmes and Training for specific TGs such as Travellers, Roma, Migrants, NEETs etc.

The Digital Inclusion Fund is in line with the European Commission's Recommendation (Council Opinion on the 2020 Stability Programme for Ireland,

20.05.20 COM 2020 507 Final, page 8) that Ireland "address the risk of digital divide") so that digitization "does not increase educational and social inequalities." (page 6).

Whilst specific funding is required, the DIF will benefit from existing integrated services and facilities with LDCs. An adequate DIF provision for 1.5 staff, programming and grants to beneficiaries will cost circa €7.84 million at an average of €160,000 per LDC.

Further investment in SICAP is also important in the context of the implementation of the Government's White Paper on ending Direct Provision.

3. LEADER

LEADER is a rural development programme co-funded by the EU which operates a locally led, bottom-up, approach to meeting the needs of local communities and businesses. The programme supports private enterprises and community groups in rural areas. The next EU LEADER programme will not commence until 2023. To bridge the gap to the start of the next programme, in December 2020 a Transitional LEADER Programme which will come into effect from 1st. April 2021, with a Budget of €70 million to the end of 2022.

The LEADER Programme offers the ideal vehicle for the delivery of development funding to Rural Areas in the most effective manner.

It is important that Government allocates the maximum percentage possible of CAP Pillar II Funding and exchequer co-funding for the purposes of LEADER.

4. Community Employment Scheme (CE)

ILDN propose the following reforms to the Community Employment Scheme:

- Participants who leave the CE Scheme, or who do not take up another year within their current placement when their contract ends should be eligible for CE again after a 3-month period.
- Reinstate the CE scheme training budget to €500 per participant per annum in order to maximise training opportunities for participants beyond the current options.
- Develop a broader range of criteria for what is deemed acceptable in terms training options. This will allow for enhanced participation and improve post scheme career opportunities while also catering for participants with literacy & numeracy issues as well as other learning-based difficulties.

5. Tús

ILDN propose the following reforms to the Tús scheme:

- Reduce the period from which a Tús participant who has completed a placement can access another Tús placement from 3-years to 1-year. This approach allows the maximum number of jobseekers possible access to the scheme and its benefits from a productivity, educational and societal perspective.

- Extend employment contracts for participants identified as needing increased support to ensure their eventual progression. It is evident that the 12-month Tús contract for those coming from long-term unemployment is simply not sufficient to allow many participants to break the cycle of unemployment and fully re-integrate with the open labour market.

- Update the eligibility criteria to increase access to the Tús programme to more jobseekers. The current eligibility excludes those who may have engaged in pro-active job seeking activities in the previous year. Furthermore, there are a cohort who while jobless may not be on the live register and may welcome an opportunity to pursue a scheme such as Tús. Examples of how eligibility could be extended include:
    - Reducing the qualifying period for Tús to 6 months
    - Allowing all periods of training, work experience and short-term employment to count towards Tús eligibility
    - Extending eligibility to those not in receipt of a DSP payment but have training or those who are coming off a payment and are considering pursuing employment again
    - Extend employment contracts for Tús participants aged 62 or over. Job opportunities for the over 60's are limited for a range of reasons. In order to provide fulfilling opportunities for those over 62 who wish to remain on Tús scheme for an extended period consideration should

be given to allow this age cohort to remain on Tús until:

- Statutory Retirement
- They attain full-time employment.

6. Rural Social Scheme

The Rural Social Scheme (RSS) is aimed at low-income farmers and fishermen/women. To qualify for the RSS you must be getting a social welfare payment. In return, people participating in the RSS provide services that benefit rural communities.

The number of participants on the RSS faces decline in the coming years. ILDN urges the Government to review the programme ahead of Budget 2022 and bring forward reforms to protect participation in this important scheme.

7. Ability Programme

The Ability Programme provides funding to 27 local, regional, and national projects that focus on bringing young people with disabilities between the ages of 15 and 29 closer to the labour market.

The programme targets young people who are not currently work ready using a range of person-centred supports. This type of work assists young people to identify and follow progression routes based on both their potential and their needs. As a result, the programme promotes positive pathways into education, training, and employment for participants.

Ability has an overall budget of up to €16m from 2018 to 2021, is co-financed by the European Social Fund (ESF).

The objectives of Ability are to:

• assist young people with disabilities to develop the confidence and independence required to participate in education, training, and employment.
• support young people with disabilities who are not in education, employment, or training to access such supports, thus increasing inclusion for PWD’s in mainstream society at all levels.

• build the capacity of mainstream employment services, education, and training providers to support the progression of young people with disabilities

8. **build the capacity of employers to recruit and retain young people with disabilities within their workforce**

• .

The current Ability Programme is due to end on the 1st of July 2021. The 1,900+ young people who registered and engaged across the 27 projects all around the country require ongoing support to continue their journey through education and training towards employment if they are to realise their full potential. For this support to continue a solution needs approval to ensure these young people avoid early school leaving and unemployment.

ILDN notes recent commitments by Government to continue the Programme beyond July 2021.

9. SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

Social enterprise are businesses whose core objective is to achieve a social, societal or environmental impact. Like other businesses, they trade in goods or services on an ongoing basis. However, any surpluses they generate are re-invested into achieving a social impact.

Ireland is highly reliant on social enterprise and has the potential to create many more services and jobs in the sector. Forfás has estimated that Ireland's social enterprise sector supports over 25,000 jobs but has the potential to create at least a further 65,000.

Local Development Companies have a long and proud tradition of initiating and supporting social enterprises around the country that bring a multi layered set of benefits to disadvantaged communities in rural and urban Ireland. Currently, approximately 40 LDCs employ a dedicated staff member to work with and support social enterprises in every part of Ireland. In addition, LEADER and SICAP programme staff work with social enterprises.

Supports include:

- Local Development Companies exclusively operate the SICAP and LEADER Programmes which have social enterprise as component activities under EU Partnership Agreements.
- Developing and directly managing social enterprises.
- Strong experience in upskilling others to develop and manage social enterprises.
- Provision of Governance supports to companies including the Social Enterprise Regeneration Programme 2021.
- Using on-the-ground knowledge to ensure that services are relevant to local needs and making connections with local communities.
- Pre-Enterprise Training Supports including ‘Start your Social Enterprise’ programme which is complemented by mentoring and advice.
- Grant Assistance for Social Enterprise Start-up/Expansion: Grant assistance to social enterprises is allocated through a variety of programmes e.g. LEADER and SICAP.
- Provision of Placements: The opportunity to employ individuals through activation and other schemes bridges an important resource gap for the social enterprises at the start-up and scaling stages. Schemes such as Community Employment Schemes, Tús, RSS and Job Initiative are the most frequently used programmes.
- Meaningful training and employment opportunities for marginalised individuals who are in many instances excluded from mainstream employment opportunities (individuals with disabilities, ex-prisoners, ex-offenders, early school leavers etc).

Investment in Social Enterprises provides the State with the opportunity to meet a range of objectives in terms of job creation and the provision of services.

10. A Sustainable Local Development Sector

ILDN is seeking the introduction of a core cost funding model as a more sustainable and equitable approach to supporting the inclusion focused and anti-poverty work of Local Development Companies country-wide. This model is based on a full costs recovery system in line with Objective 4 of the Government's Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities strategy.

LDCs are responsible for implementing a range of programmes and initiatives, funded by the state and EU sources, to address poverty, disadvantage, exclusion and discrimination experienced by key target groups and marginalised communities. Based on over 25 years of successful delivery, a strong and robust trusted partner working relationship has been developed with many Government Departments and state agencies. LDCs are currently funded on a programme by programme budget scenario. Within this programme by programme funding milieu there is a degree of fragmentation and disjointed provision that act as impediments to maximising of the programmes remit and the resulting investment return opportunities. As such the current funding approach does not contribute to a sustainable operational framework.

The introduction of a fit for purpose core costs funding model to must be dynamic and premised on a full costs recovery system. The core costs funding model proposed will provide the necessary scope for LDCs to better achieve outcomes related to Government inclusion focused policy objectives and will help simplify matters in the recording, reporting and verification of integral management and administration functions involved in multiple programmes delivery. Properly resourced LDCs will continue to provide the state with transparent and credible systems for programmes delivery country-wide that meet best practice governance standards, high level quality performance and achievement and regulatory compliance.

Irish Natura and Hill Farmers Association

Rural Social Scheme
and
Farm Assist Submission

Joint Oireachtas Committee on the Social Protection, Rural & Community Development and the Islands

March 2021

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The Irish Natura & Hill Farmers Association (INHFA) as a farming representative body representing farmers in some of the most challenged areas of the country. As such we recognise the importance of both the "Farm Assist" and the "Rural Social Scheme" (RSS) and their value to farmers and fishermen who are in a position to avail of either of them.

In light of the fact that the Joint Committee intend to submit a pre-budget submission and have invited submissions from stakeholders, we would like to make the following recommendations in relation to the Farm Assist and the RSS:

Farm Assist

1. Currently 70% of income is assessed in the means test and we would recommend reducing this to 50%.

2 Currently the Agri/Environmental Scheme disregard is €2,540 with 50% of the balance also being disregarded. We would recommend increasing the initial disregard to €5,000 with 50% of the balance being disregarded. The logic behind this request is that society faces threats to bio-diversity and from climate change and it is imperative that as many farmers as possible especially in ecologically sensitive areas are encouraged to take part in the part EU funded schemes. The logic of changing this is that they allow direct costs to be offset against the income and we need to mention biodiversity, climate change and EU funding.

3. Irish Natura & Hill Farmers Association fundamentally disagree with Capital Assets (such as savings, investments and property being considered as income on an imputed basis. INHFA believe they should be assessed on income generated. However, we appreciate that a phased reform of the system is the best way to go and suggest the following as a realistic option in this year's budget:

   Currently the value of capital is assessed as follows:

   Disregard the first €20,000

   €20,000 to €30,000 is assessed at €1 for every €1,000 The next

   €10,000 is assessed at €2 per €1,000

   Anything more than €40,000 is assessed at €4 per €1,000

   The Irish Natura & Hill Farmers Association propose the Following:

   Disregard the first €30,000

   €30,000 to €40,000 is assessed at €1 for every €1,000

   Anything more than €40,000 is assessed at €2 per €1000

4. Farmer who were on Farm Assist pre 2006 who paid PRSI should get paid contributions "S" rate for any periods on Farm Assist.

   Farmer who didn't pay PRSI pre 2006 and were on Farm Assist should get credited PRSI contributions for any periods on Farm Assist.

Rural Social Scheme (RSS)

The RSS is a community service provision scheme where farmers provide vital services in their local community in return for a payment. It is not an activation or a training scheme.

The RSS is vital scheme for the farming population and for the communities that benefit from their skills. The fact that its flexible hours allows farmers to combine their farm duties with their off-farm tasks is very effective use of a valuable resource for both the community and the agriculture industry. It allows a farmer to contribute to their community and pay “A” rate PRSI contributions in areas where there is little chance of employment. We have seen during Covid the important work being done by Schemes such as the Rural Social Scheme work such as Meals on wheels, doing pharmacy runs for the elderly etc.

The INHFA proposes the following;

1. A farmer or fisherman who is eligible, subject to periodic means test, for the RSS should automatically be entitled to full personal rate, IQA and child dependent allowance irrespective of the means assessed under the means test. This is the way the scheme operated very successfully from 2003 up until 2012 when the rules were changed leaving very little incentive, particularly for those with a dependent adult or dependent children to go on the scheme as they only benefit from 19.5 hours work by a little over €1/hour.
2. The 6-year cap on a farmer’s duration on the scheme should be abolished (introduced in 2012). This would provide security into the future to participants on the scheme and continuity of a valuable resource to the Local Development Companies and Communities who depend on RSS staff.
3. Given the RSS has low numbers of participants and that the number of recipients of Farm Assist is also small, all those applicants who are eligible to go on the scheme should be accommodated on the scheme as far as possible by an increase in the number of participants on the scheme to 5,000 as a first step.

The Wheel

Submission to Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development, and the Islands

Introduction

The community and voluntary sector is an essential element of Irish society and our economy. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the extent to which we rely on its services, as well as the integral role that it plays in supporting our people and communities. It has an essential role to play in delivering the vision of inclusive recovery for Ireland.

Charities, community and voluntary organisations, and social enterprises provide essential services and support advocacy work in every constituency in Ireland. This includes health and disability, social care, education, housing, poverty relief, the arts, and sport, as well as international development.

The sector used innovative thinking and put effort into promoting and securing community engagement and ownership as well as empowerment of individuals and communities during COVID. It provided huge resources in energy, personnel, finance and commitment that could not be replicated by the State. It delivered flexible approaches and collaborative practices that supported, from micro to macro level, the ongoing battle against COVID-19.

Organisations reorganised services to remotely deliver, responded to the need for socially distanced and safe services, cut costs, redirected resources to priority areas, and designed new service responses targeted at meeting emergent need.

The sector responded in this way in the face of the single greatest ever reduction in earned/fundraised income, in a context where demand for their services, supports, and advocacy increased very significantly.

The Wheel greatly values the work of government and the legislature, of the range of relevant Ministers, of officials in DRCD, and the early focus of this Committee on the key issues affecting our sector.

The Wheel's Recommendations

To fully support the community and voluntary sector, we propose the following seven budgetary priorities:

1. Focus on adequate and sustainable funding.
2. Streamline regulatory and funding-related compliance requirements with cost of compliance supports.
3. Dedicate resources to deliver the three new strategies for the community and voluntary sector, social enterprise and volunteering.
4. Increase investment in skills development for the sector.

5. Implement the recommendations of the Report of the Independent Review Group on the Role of Voluntary Providers in Publicly Funded Services (IRG Report).
6. Build on the collaborative working learnings during the COVID pandemic to develop better and more effective relationships between the sector and state agencies.
7. Continue government monitoring and oversight of insurance costs.

1. Focus on adequate and sustainable funding

The role of charities and community endeavour during the pandemic has proven its essential role as a component of Irish society and economy. Many services, however, remain impacted by funding uncertainty and reductions to service budgets initiated by statutory funders in 2008/2009.

We recommend:

- Multi-annual (three- to five-year) funding arrangements to facilitate and better enable long-term planning, assist effective staff recruitment and retention, and thereby deliver better and more sustainable services.
- Funding of services and supports on a full-cost-recovery basis, to fund core costs, provide adequate employee remuneration, train and develop staff, and make provision for pension contributions where appropriate.
- Make provision for sustainable terms and conditions to support staff retention and progression in HSE-funded Sect. 39 and Tusla-funded Sect. 56 organisations.
- Extend and provide greater funding to the Charities VAT Compensation scheme now concluding its initial three-year phase.

2. Streamline regulatory and funding-related compliance requirements with cost of compliance supports.

The state rightly invested heavily in recent years in regulation and compliance processes for the sector, including the Charities Regulator. There has been no equivalent investment in charities to support their capacity to comply. Indeed, many funding programmes specifically exclude use of allocated monies for necessary compliance work. Charities, community and voluntary organisations, and social enterprises are forced to divert fundraised income from vital services to pay for regulatory and compliance requirements. Duplication of reporting information across state bodies and agencies exacerbates the situation.

We recommend:

- Provision for necessary and legally required cost of compliance and good governance in all funding agreements.
- A comprehensive review of all existing compliance and regulatory requirements, to streamline procedures and reduce duplication, to benefit both the sector, government departments and official agencies.
- Improved information sharing and communication systems between state bodies, through the introduction of a charity-passport system or equivalent, to reduce duplication of information requests and increase efficiency.

3. Dedicate resources to deliver the three new strategies for the community and

voluntary sector, social enterprise and volunteering

The Wheel welcomes the development by the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) of a suite of policies for charities, community and voluntary organisations, social enterprises, and volunteers.

These comprise *Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities: A five-year strategy to support the community and voluntary sector in Ireland*, *The National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland,* and the *National Volunteering Strategy*.

We recommend:

- Dormant accounts funding should be expanded and accompanied bya dedicated budget line to support DRCD initiatives.
- Sufficient resources should be allocated directly to DRCD to enable full implementation of the commitments contained in the suite of policies for the charity, community and voluntary, and social enterprise sector.
- Continued funding supports should be applied through the National Training Fund to support crucial training and development needs.

4. Increase investment in skills development for the sector.

The report, *Investment Appraisal of Upskilling Employees in the Nonprofit Sector (2020)* by Indecon International Research Economists, indicates that investment in training in the nonprofit workforce in Ireland is low compared other sectors in the Irish workforce and with nonprofits in other countries. Specifically, it identifies barriers that impede the necessary investment, such as the cost of training and lack of time available to engage with training amongst workers, and points the way towards the solutions needed in this regard.

We recommend:

- Increasing the level of investment in skills-building of paid and unpaid workers in non-profits so that all of the labour market in the country has access to appropriate levels of skills-building resources.

That this and training be ‘culturally attuned’, sector-sensitive, and be put on as secure a footing as mainstream academic and business training.

5. Implement the recommendations of the Report of the Independent Review Group on the Role of Voluntary Providers in Publicly Funded Services (IRG Report).

We welcome recent resumption of the Dialogue Forum process following the COVID pandemic, working with voluntary organisations to build a stronger working relationship between the State and the voluntary healthcare sector, and implementing the recommendations of the report around:

- Creating a charter to underpin relationships;
- Agreeing a list of essential services;

- Reviewing and simplifying service agreements so they respect and support autonomy;
- Avoidance of duplication in reporting;
- Multi-annual budgeting;
- A system to manage deficits; and
- Provision of governance training and supports for smaller organisations.

We recommend:

- As the Forum progresses in its work, adequate enabling resources should be assigned to enable its outcomes to be actioned speedily and effectively.

6. Build on the collaborative working learnings during COVID to develop better, more effective relationships between the sector and state agencies

The necessary flexibilities and new approaches developed and successfully operated during the COVID pandemic show that we can all do things better and more effectively, while still responding flexibly and efficiently to the needs of individuals and communities.

Often commissioning-based approaches and Service-Level Agreements run contrary to the spirit of collaborative working. They can generate excessive bureaucracy and duplication of compliance and administration demands on charities and community and voluntary organisations, and an equal burden on funding agencies and bodies.

We recommend:

- A new formal framework for collaborative working between voluntary organisations and their statutory counterparts, drawings on the learnings from COVID.
- A mechanism to review effectiveness of collaboration initiatives.
- As part of this process, establish a dedicated budget of €2m to incentivise and cover costs of agreed mergers and collaborative work in the charity, community and voluntary sector, similar to the model used in trade-union mergers in the past. Mergers should not be linked to reductions in overall statutory funding.

7. Continued government monitoring and oversight of insurance costs

The unsustainable rise in insurance costs has had a very serious effect on many charities, community and voluntary organisations, and social enterprises.

The Wheel acknowledges the recent changes in insurance policy introduced by Government having worked as part of the Alliance for Insurance Reform (AIR) to ensure that community and voluntary organisations can continue to carry out their vital work.

We recommend:

- Continued close monitoring of the recently introduced regulations on insurance cost changes.
- Ensure that An Garda Síochána has the resources necessary to pursue insurance fraud.
- Seek continued clear commitments from insurers to deliver all the reforms listed in the Programme for Government.

Conclusion

The Wheel will make a more detailed and costed submission regarding the next Budget when outcomes from the pandemic become clearer as we progress through Q2 2021.

Finally, we recommend an overall increase in Budget Allocations for the Department of Rural and Community Development.

In addition to necessary funding for the above recommendations, a general baseline increase of 5% in Budget 2021 should be applied to allocations to the Department of Rural and Community Development to enable its continued effective working.

About The Wheel

The Wheel is Ireland's national association of community and voluntary organisations, charities and social enterprises. We are the representative body for this vibrant and diverse sector, and together with our members, we shape and promote conditions in which people and their communities thrive.

We passionately believe that community and voluntary action improves and enriches communities and society. Our simple but ambitious mission is to make Ireland a fair and just place for all by strengthening the capacity and capability of community and voluntary organisations, charities and social enterprises to play their part.

We do this by representing these organisations; supporting these organisations to do their work; and, promoting the importance of the voluntarism and community values that power these organisations.

- The Wheel has over 1,900 members and provides support services and representation on behalf of its members relating to matters that reflect their collective interests.

Roscommon Rapid Response

Proposal:

- To provide grant aid to community organisations and businesses to set up Community Emergency Response Systems that are capable of providing quality medical interventions within 3-5 minutes of Cardiac Arrest incidents in their communities. These Community Emergency Response systems should also encompass State/Government owned and promoted facilities e.g. Greenways, Forest Parks, Walking Trails, Parks. Cycleways, Tourist Attractions etc. where community members exercise and congregate. (Government has a Moral responsibility if not a legal responsibility to provide such an emergency service for users of facilities promoted and provided by the State).

- To support Defibrillator Owners (Depts/Local Authorities/Schools/Sports Clubs/Businesses/Community Groups) by providing certified external cabinets or grant aid towards purchase and insurance to allow 24/7 public access.

- Provide community groups/committees with certified external cabinets or grant aid to purchase them to replace existing non-compliant external AED cabinets.

Proposal Objectives:

1. To increase the survival rate of people experiencing an out of hospital cardiac arrest from the current 5% of 5,000 or 250 people to 12.5% of 5,000 or 625 people over a 3 year period. Medical research has shown that if cardiac arrest victims receive the appropriate quality community emergency medical treatment within 3- 5 minutes the survival rate could be increased by up to 7.5% which equates to an additional 475 lives saved per annum nationally. The National Ambulance target response time for cardiac arrest is 19 minutes 59 second

2 To increase the number of 24/7 accessibility Defibrillators within communities by providing certified IP 66 external AED cabinets and insurance to owners of AEDs that are currently located indoors.

3. To ensure that all Defibrillators are in working order and individual members of

Defibrillator Community Groups/Committees are not held personally liable if one of their Defibrillator does not work (April 2021 Court awarded 300,000 Euro when AED did not work and person died)

- having been stored in an external cabinet that does not comply with AED manufacturers physical conditions criteria (temperature between 0 - 37 degrees). AED Cabinets used outside - internal or own box with insulation foam/board
- because batteries or pads are not replaced when due or if not checked at least monthly by owners to ensure the AED is in good working order.

How a Community Emergency Response System for Cardiac Arrest Victims will enable Community Members to provide the necessary medical assistance within 3/5 minutes by

The Community Response System has a number of distinct elements:

- EmCall App
- Defibrillators in certified external cabinets
- Internet communication and Data Storage
- Trained CPR Responders

Preparation:

Register existing Defibrillators - Location, Accessibility, CPR Responders etc.
(Existing Website & EmCall App)
Provide Grant Aid for New Defibrillators/External Cabinets to Communities who fulfill the required specified conditions - location, monitoring, annual services payment etc
Promote downloading of EmCall App free to Community Members

Community Emergency Response System:

Contact National Ambulance Service immediately	EmCall App
Provide incident location coordinates	EmCall App
Notify nearest 8 trained C.P.R. Responders	EmCall App
Provide C.P.R. (EmCall App gives guidance)	EmCall App
Identify and collect nearest accessible Defibrillator or	EmCall App
Trained CPR Responder with Defibrillator arrives at incident scene	
Defibrillator administers Shock	Defibrillator
IF Heart Attack e.g. STEMI Transfers ECG to National Ambulance Service/ Health Professional in real time	Defibrillator
Continue CPR	
Receive feedback on quality of CPR - Speed & Depth of Compressions	Defibrillator
Ensures quality of CPR even if delivered by a non trained person.	
All data stored and can be reviewed medical professionals	Defibrillator
Continue communication with NAS Call Taker	
Await Ambulance arrival.	

Conditions of grant aid for Community Response Systems

(Defibrillator, External Cabinet & EmCall App)

- Defibrillator & External Defibrillator Cabinet must comply with manufacturers specification
- Defibrillators must be accessible to community 24/7
- Defibrillator must not be located closer than specified - Rural 5km Urban 2.5 Km. Population Density, Sports/Walking/Schools facilities priority.
- Register Defibrillator on EmCall App
- Nominate a contact person
- Register 6 CPR trained Responders allocated to each Defibrillator
- Update and maintain own data on EmCall website
- Record & Maintain skills level of CPR Responders with ongoing training.

Defibrillator Specification (see attached Brochure)

Certified Semi or Automatic AED
Defibrillator will have SIM facility (we will provide SIM and Cloud Storage) and software to enable:

- Daily remote maintenance check with text/email notification
- Tracking with Notification when Defibrillator moved

Transfer of ECG to Medical Professional in real time - cardiac and heart attack e.g. (STEMI) to inform the appropriate emergency services response.

Real time monitoring and feedback on quality (depth & speed) of C.P.R. being delivered

A Switch - between Adult and Pediatric Pads.

External Defibrillator Cabinet Specification

Fiberglass, insulated external cabinet for Defibrillators/AEDs, certified to IP 66
maintain temperature (between 0 - 37 degrees), condensation, moisture and dust free.
No electrical connection required.

Awaiting official certification - our own testing complies.

EmCall App,

The EmCall App was developed with the support of Roscommon Leader Co. to address issues that arose as a result of our Defibrillator Survey.
Roscommon Rapid Response conducted a community survey prior to making a decision to develop the EmCall App which showed that:

- People were unaware where the nearest accessible Defibrillator is located
- Less than 50% urban located Defibrillators are accessible 24/7 (Boyle none)
- Shortage of Community Defibrillators. Large areas of county without or few AEDs

- Majority of State/Local Authority/Schools/Sports Organisation's Defibrillators not accessible 24/7
- No system in place to notify the nearest local CPR trained Responders of an incident.
- Ad hoc management and maintenance of Defibrillators depending on group
- External cabinets do not comply with AED manufacturers specifications - external heated cabinets require electrical connection and are expensive - 600 Euro +
- No monitoring of quality of CPR being delivered.
- No transmission of ECG to NAS or Health Professional.

EmCall App: Can be downloaded FREE from App Store or Google Play

how em call works draft 3 final.mp4

Roscommon Rapid Response has developed an **EmCall App** which allows user to

- Ring 999/112 and provide location coordinates to 112/999 Call Taker
- Notify the 8 nearest CPR trained Responders
- Locate nearest accessible Defibrillator

To develop the software for the EmCall App we have to:

Map where Defibrillators are located
Registered 6 trained CPR Responders per Defibrillator

Medical Research has confirmed that when a person suffers a cardiac arrest their outcome depends on the speed and quality of the CPR delivered and how quickly that a Defibrillator is used.

Community Group/Business to access grant aid for a Commmunty Response System must enter into an annual contract with Provider to:

Monitor Defibrillator's condition daily & send notification when required
Defibrillator movement tracking
Insure Defibrillator (Can only be provided for new Defibrillators eligible for grant aid)
Record dates & Replace Defibrillator Pads & Batteries on the specified dates
Record dates & Replace CPR Sensor unit Battery as specified
Maintain Software and upgrade as required
Provide remote support/training to upload data to website
Maintain Data on Website, Software Platform & App
Upgrade software as required.

Community Group/Business - Conditions of Grant for External Cabinet. EmCall App etc.

External Defibrillator Cabinet must be certified as complying with specification outlined
Defibrillator must be accessible to community 24/7
Register Defibrillator on EmCall App

Register 6 CPR trained Responders allocated to each Defibrillator
Maintain skills level of CPR Responders with ongoing training
Undertake to monitor that AED is in working order monthly
Undertake to replace Pads & Batteries as specified by manufacturer.

Suggested Program Implementation:
National Program:
Grant Aid Replace all external AED Cabinets that do not comply with manfacturers conditions.
Provide insurance cover through Irish Public Bodies for Defibrillator Groups/Committees who are registered with PPN to ensure individual community members can not be held liable.

County/Regional
Provide external AED Cabinets/Grant Aid & Insurance to enourage existing owners of internally located AEDs to locate them outside to allow 24/7 access.
Provide grants for Commnity Emergency Response Systems.

Grant Aid/Cost:

Defibrillator, External Cabinet & EmCall App:	**1,900 + VAT**
External Defibrillator Cabinet & EmCall App:	**275 + VAT**
Community Group Annual Contract: (Replacement PADs, Batteries AED and CPR unit Daily AED check and tracking SIM, transfer ECG - Data, Software upgrades, Online/Phone Support etc)	**250 + VAT per AED**

Charities Institute Ireland

Budget 2022 Submission

In May 2021, Benefacts produced a special report on Irish charities, informed by the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on Irish society. The report identified a number of emergent trends:

- Charities in sectors such as emergency relief, homelessness, mental health, local development and social services experienced an increased demand for their services.
- In some sectors (the arts, culture), charities without the capacity to move to digital ways of working have been unable to operate at all, or only to a very limited degree. They report staff cutbacks and other cost saving measures but have limited reserves and cannot avoid all fixed costs.
- Most sub-sectors have reported some positive effects, including heightened public awareness of the value of their work, better engagement across geographic divides, cost and time savings for example in travel, adopting more diversified fundraising solutions especially digital ones.
- With full lockdowns only expected to be lifted at the end of Q2 in 2021, a tougher year ahead is being predicted. Surveys of charities by their lead bodies and by Benefacts indicate that most of these charities anticipated losses in earnings between 15% and 65% and fewer charities entered 2020 with substantial financial reserves.

It is against this backdrop that Charities Institute Ireland (Cii) recommends the following measures be considered in the context of Budget 2022.

1. *VAT Compensation Scheme - renew the scheme and increase the fund available to €20m to meet demand;*
2. *Sustainable Funding - Accelerate multi funding arrangements;*
3. *Reducing the Burden of Compliance - Expediate development of centralised database;*
4. *Ensure Sustainable Funding for HSE Section 39 - Parity of employment conditions for Section 39 employees to support staff retention;*
5. *Digitalisation grants - Support scheme for upskilling charity staff to enable digital transformation;*
6. *Benefacts - Continued funding of Benefacts to support independent research for the sector*

VAT Compensation Scheme

The VAT Compensation Scheme for charities was introduced in Budget 2018 to reduce the tax burden on charities and to partially compensate them for the VAT paid in delivering on their charitable purposes. Under the scheme charities may claim a refund of a proportion of their VAT costs based on their level of non-public funding.

Cii would like to acknowledge and thank the Minister and the Department of Finance for their support in creating the Scheme. A review of the Scheme is currently being finalised by the Department of Finance and the Revenue Commissioners and will be published by the Tax Strategy Group in due course. Cii was pleased to engage with both organisations and contribute to the review.

The scheme has now operated for two years with payments having issued in 2019 and 2020. In those two years, claims received exceeded the capped amount available. In 2018, 1,100 claims, valued at approximately €40m were made while 900 claims valued at €49m were submitted in 2019. These payments were calculated and issued on a pro-rata basis, as a result charity received 13% and 10% of the original claim submitted.

These numbers confirm the that the demand for the scheme justifies the continuation of the scheme.

In April 2021 we conducted a survey for the review to ascertain the value of the VAT Compensation Scheme to the sector and to assess how the scheme worked operationally. Almost 90% of respondents reported that the VAT Compensation Scheme claim process was straightforward and easy to follow and that for the charities that did need to engage with Revenue, that experience was overwhelmingly positive.

The survey also highlighted the value and importance of the scheme in empowering charities to deliver their mission. Some examples of direct feedback from the survey and consultation with charities include:

- *"The VAT compensation scheme has enabled us to dedicate even more funds to our vital cancer services. This was particularly true given the challenges and increases in demand for our services due to Covid-19. The €68k we received from the VAT compensation scheme in 2020 is the equivalent of funding nearly 200 nights of palliative care for cancer patients through our Night Nursing programme."*

- *"ISPCC – the refund from the Scheme is equivalent to running Childline for two days."*

- *"Grant funding covers about 50% of our annual running costs and we depend on fundraising income to cover the remainder. Any income, including the VAT compensation scheme, enables us to provide the range of housing and support services we offer."*

The main finding from the survey was the huge value of any additional income in supporting charities to deliver their missions.

For this reason and based on the operational success of the Scheme, Cii recommends that the funding of the Scheme increase from €5m to €20m. We believe that such an increase is aligned with the original paper produced by the Working Group on VAT;

"The charities' view is that the VAT burden significantly diminishes the capacity of charities…. to deliver services; that it promotes over-reliance by charities on state grants and the taxpayer; and is at odds with Government efforts to regulate the sector in that it penalises good governance in organisations that use professional financial, legal and training services."

In the event of the fund increasing, we believe that a claim ceiling of €1m should apply. It is important to remember that the scheme was developed to support charities that have less dependence on the state as they rely primarily on fundraised income which lessens the dependence on the state for financial support. There is a risk that smaller charities might be displaced by larger charities and may not submit claims due to the level of work involved in order to receive a small payment.

We believe that while the best means of ensuring a higher proportion of compensation is to increase the overall pot of money available, a maximum claim amount does need to be introduced to ensure no single claim disproportionately draws on the Scheme in favour of any one charity. This would allow continued substantial payment to charities while protecting the total funding available for the maximum benefit of all charities.

Request – renew the scheme and increase the fund available to €20m to meet demand

Sustainable Funding

In order to plan adequately, charities need clarity on future government funding. We are calling on Government to accelerate the implementation of the Department of Rural and Community Development's Five-Year Strategy for the Sector - ***Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities***

The implementation of the DRCD strategy is ambitious given the scale of the challenge. While the Department has established the Independent Review Group (IRG) to progress this strategy and Cii is very supportive of the initiative, there is a concern among Cii's members that progress remains slow.

We are calling on the Government to introduce multi-annual funding arrangements to enable long term planning for both service provision and staff recruitment and retention.

Where government is funding the work of charities through a grant or service-agreement, funding should be allocated on a multi-annual basis so that charities can plan their work efficiently. Strategic planning is almost impossible when funding is renewed annually and all too often funding is confirmed when budgets and plans have been put place which results in additional administrative burden on valuable resources.

Request – Accelerate multi funding arrangements

Reducing the Burden of Compliance

Many charities are subject to regulation or oversight by a number of state agencies - The Charities Regulator, the Revenue Commissioners and State funders such as the HSE. Although charities recognise the importance and benefits of increased compliance, and feel better protected by its introduction, the overhead this requires is significant for many charities and growing year on year.

There is currently no additional funding provided to match the work required to meet the significant number of standards.

Many charities have faced over a decade of cuts to their core statutory funding and during this time the number of standards and codes to comply with grew. These charities are fully committed to best practice, however, the overhead of complying with, and evidencing, compliance with all of these standards and codes is causing huge strain on resources particularly given the increased demand for support and services.

While no comprehensive research has been produced on the impact of COVID-19 on people working in the sector – a recent survey conducted in the UK, indicated that nine in 10 charity workers have felt stress, overwhelm or burnout over the past year. The survey shows that while the pandemic was the primary cause of this stress, others leading factors included funding concerns and job insecurity, Cii welcomed the commitment to exploring "the establishment of a centralised database for information about those in receipt of State funding for the delivery of community services" in DRCD's latest strategy statement. This initiative builds on the recommendations from Indecon's report in late 2019 into the potential for a 'Charity Passport' for charities in Ireland, Cii would like to see the implementation a number of recommendations from the study. This system, when developed, could provide a streamlined compliance and regulation system which would allow charities to enter their data once which could then be accessed by multiple departments, funders and the public as required. This would reduce the administrative costs to government departments in repeat processing of information and reports.

Professionalism comes at a cost and the Government should fund charities adequately to enable them to secure the entire cost of delivering vital supports and services, such costs include administration, compliance and salary overheads.

Request – Expediate development of centralised database to reduce burden of compliance on charities

Ensure sustainable funding for HSE Section 39

Section 39 organisations deliver vital services across health, family support, social care and disability services. Unsustainable pay and conditions for the staff of such organisations is a major issue that threatens the ability of many organisations to retain staff and provide services. It is resulting in the continued loss of experienced staff from these agencies and organisations with people leaving to pursue more secure, stable, therefore, more attractive career opportunities.

Due to the nature of much of the work the sector delivers, it is critically important to have a motivated and supported workforce to deliver much needed services.

Sustainable pay and terms and conditions for staff would greatly assist in retaining these fully qualified staff.

We need a commitment from government to address these issues by creating a more equitable and fair system for section 39 employees. This is needed if the sector is to continue to support and as often is the case, replace the role of government in the provision of essential services to Irish society.

Request – Parity of employment conditions for Section 39 employees to support staff retention

Digitalisation grants

The Government has announced a range of initiatives for the private sector focused on increased digitalisation of services and related training. However, no such schemes exist for the charity sector.

With so many organisations within the sector undertaking their work and providing their services online there is an increased need for digital innovation supports. For many organisations they have had to invest in technology and upskilling of staff to allow them to continue their work which has placed a further additional burden on their organisation.

We are asking the Government to introduce a support scheme for charities to support the digitalisation of services and the necessary training for staff. Such a scheme could be based on the COVID-19 Online Retail Scheme administered by Enterprise Ireland.

Request – Support scheme for upskilling charity staff to enable digital transformation

Benefacts

Cii, together with our members, values the work of Benefacts in delivering independent research on the non-profit sector. We particularly welcomed the recent report, referenced in our introduction, which was dedicated to the charity sector and the immediate impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the sector.

Professional, independent and insightful research is an essential tool in supporting a vibrant charity sector while ensuring that stakeholders, like Policymakers, regulators and donors have access to data to support their decision making. We would encourage the Government to continue to fund this valuable resource.

Request – Continued funding of Benefacts to support independent research for the sector

Social Justice Ireland

SOCIAL JUSTICE IRELAND
working to build a just society

Priorities for Budget 2022

Submission to the Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development

Introduction

Social Justice Ireland welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development on our priorities for Budget 2022 in relation to social protection, community and rural development. We are available to elaborate further on any part of this submission if required.

Budget Priorities

How we plan our finances, and what we choose to prioritise, post-Covid-19, will have profound implications for the future of our economy and society. Covid-19 has exposed and exacerbated weaknesses that already existed in Irish society: a totally inadequate supply of social housing; a two-tier healthcare system; climate change; growing inequality; homelessness; environmental goals not being met, to name but a few. But this past year has shown us that change is possible. To this end it is vital that Government takes the opportunity in Budget 2022 to focus on those who are most vulnerable, those people and communities who were in a very difficult position pre-pandemic and who may find themselves left behind in any recovery without appropriate policies and resourcing.

1. Social Welfare and Poverty Reduction

The Covid-19 crisis has highlighted a number of aspects of the welfare state and the importance of properly provided and funded public services in countries across the world. Among the many lessons in this country, the crisis has highlighted the importance of the social safety net that is our social welfare system. For many, the experience has also illustrated the substantial challenges of life on a low income; even when that income is considerably higher than the value of core social welfare payments that many unemployed people, pensioners and people with long-standing illness and disabilities struggle with persistently.

Poverty data from the CSO, released in October 2020, demonstrated how adequate social welfare payments are required to prevent and address poverty. Without the social welfare system 41.4 per cent of the Irish population would have been living in poverty in 2019. Such an underlying poverty rate suggests a deeply unequal distribution of direct income. In 2019 social welfare payments reduced the poverty rate by almost 29 percentage points to 12.8 per cent.

Yet, even after the provision of social welfare payments, in 2019 there were almost 630,000 people in Ireland living below the poverty line. Of these almost 190,000 were aged under 18.

Core Social Welfare rates should be benchmarked

A lesson from past experiences of economic recovery and growth is that the weakest in our society get left behind unless welfare increases keep track with increases elsewhere in the economy. Benchmarking minimum rates of social welfare payments to movements in average earnings is therefore an important policy priority.

Over a decade ago Budget 2007 benchmarked the minimum social welfare rate at 30 per cent of Gross Average Industrial Earnings (GAIE). Today that figure is equivalent to 27.5 per cent of the average weekly earnings data being collected by the CSO. Applying this benchmark using CSO data for 2020 and projections for wage growth in 2021 allows us to compare this benchmark with current welfare rates[1].

[1] For further details see https://www.socialjustice.ie/sites/default/files/attach/publication/5752/2019-03-26- indexationandsocialwelfarerateswithcover.pdf?cs=true

In 2021 the updated value of 27.5 per cent of average weekly earnings equals €222 implying a shortfall of €19 between current minimum social welfare rates (€203) and this threshold.

Given the importance of this benchmark to the living standards of many in Irish society, and its relevance to anti-poverty commitments, the current deficit highlights a need for Budget 2022 to further increase minimum social welfare rates and commit to converging on a benchmark equivalent to 27.5 per cent of average weekly earnings. Government should commit to reaching this benchmark over two years. As a start **Budget 2022 should increase minimum social welfare rates by €10 per week.**

Supporting a Universal Basic Income (UBI) Pilot

Social Justice Ireland has a long history of advocating for a system of Universal Basic Income to be implemented in Ireland. We therefore welcomed the inclusion in the Programme for Government of a commitment to examine Basic Income and run a pilot in Ireland during the lifetime of the current Government.

In May 2021 we hosted a seminar, and published a document, outlining a proposal for a UBI pilot to be applied to artists and arts workers. The proposal builds on a recommendation of the Arts and Culture Recovery Task Force Report and detailed a four year pilot paid at the current rate of jobseekers benefit. The proposal also outlined a timeline for the development, introduction and evaluation of the pilot. The document, and presentations from the launch event, are available on our website.

While there are limited cost implications associated with the pilot we have proposed, **Budget 2022 should commit to introducing this universal basic income pilot** and funding the evaluation process to accompany it. Ultimately, there are important lesson to learn from this UBI pilot which can inform longer term developments in this area.

Young jobseekers

Continue the process started in Budget 2020 and **equalise Jobseekers rates for all those under 26** at the increased rate of €210 per week.

Cost of Disability

To support people with disabilities to live fulfilling lives within their communities, Government should **introduce a cost of disability payment** of €20 per week in Budget 2022.

Universal State Pension

Social Justice Ireland proposes **a single-rate universal state social welfare pension from January 2022 at a rate of €258.30 per week**. The significant additional expenditure required could be funded through reform of Ireland's system of pension-related tax reliefs, and through a moderate increase in Employer PRSI, as detailed in our report on the Universal Pension from March 2018. This would involve standard-rating the tax break on all private pension contributions. The objective of a pension system is to provide citizens and residents with an income that removes them from the risk of poverty in old age, yet the Irish pension system is characterised by incomplete coverage and a generous system of tax reliefs that disproportionately benefit the better-off in society.

2. Community

The cuts to funding for the Community and Voluntary sector made during the last recession have yet to be restored. Covid-19 has again highlighted the importance of communities. This support must now be formally recognised with investment in programmes that support community engagement; deal with deficit demand; tackle social exclusion; and sustain communities.

The sector is set to lose an estimated €500m in fundraising, as donations plummet. In addition, increased administrative and regulatory duties imposed upon this sector mean that resources that would otherwise be dedicated to frontline and core services are diverted to administration. This must be streamlined with recognition given to the size and capacity of the range of organisations within the sector. Budget 2022 should start addressing the current funding gap as the sector faces a likely rise in demand for services.

Community and Voluntary Sector

Whilst Social Justice Ireland welcomes the Covid-19 related funding received by the Community and Voluntary sector, the funding challenges faced by the sector since 2008 have never been resolved and will be further exacerbated by the current crisis. The Covid-19 pandemic saw extra demands laced upon the sector coupled with a loss of fundraising. It is essential that Government resource this sector into the future and that it remains committed to the principle of providing multi-annual statutory funding.

Social Justice Ireland proposes an **increase of €30m to the Community and Voluntary sector** to ensure the continuation of the provision of key supports and services in our communities*.*

Public Participation Networks (PPNs)

The PPNs are the primary mechanism for Local Authority engagement with communities. While this is an important step in fostering a more democratic local government structure, there is some way to go to build real participation and partnership in local government decision-making.

Investment in community engagement is needed to support capacity building and the establishment of local dialogue forums to support participation in the development of the Local Economic and Community Plans, and the Local Authority budgets. To this end, **an additional allocation of €2 million** should be made in Budget 2022 to support capacity building and meaningful participation at local level.

Social Enterprise and Deficit Demand

There is a diverse range of organisations within the social enterprise arena, ranging from those responding to 'deficit demand', particularly in under-represented and disadvantaged areas, to social entrepreneurs whose business model is most closely aligned to the commercial sector.

Budget 2022 should **allocate €1.5m towards resourcing the National Social Enterprise Strategy**, aimed in particular at those social enterprises meeting deficit demand and providing vital community services.

Community Development Programmes

The importance of community has been highlighted in the aftermath of the Covid-19 crisis. This importance must now be formally recognised through an increase in funding to support community development, especially in rural areas and areas of high disadvantage.

Government must increase funding allocations to LEADER (the funding programme to support the social and economic development of areas) and SICAP (the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme) to support the development of local communities with **an additional allocation of €2m** in Budget 2022.

3. Rural Development

Investment in the regions is vital to a balanced and fair post-Covid recovery. Rural Ireland faces many challenges, including an older population, higher rates of part-time employment, lower median incomes, distance from everyday services and higher poverty rates than the national average. In addition new challenges have emerged, the impact of Brexit, digitisation and a potentially prolonged period of unemployment on areas that were already struggling.

Regional Development and Transition

Social Justice Ireland proposes the establishment of a regional development and transition programme. This programme would have the task of aligning 'Our Rural Future', Regional employment plans, Future Jobs Ireland, the Climate Action Plan and the Economic Recovery Plan with the principles of just transition and developing sustainable local economies and livelihoods for our communities.

€100m should be allocated to Regional Development and Transition in Budget 2022. This funding should be used to invest in (i) Smart Villages to support remote working; (ii) education for the current and future generation of farmers to move to more sustainable agricultural methods; (iii) developing local cooperatives and regional 'Farm to Fork' strategies, and (iv) improving and expanding public services to promote and support rural living.

In addition, an additional **€25m to Enterprise Ireland** to develop and support indigenous enterprises and job creation across the regions, particularly those areas most impacted by Covid-19 and those who will be most impacted by Brexit. We also propose an additional **€25m for Fáilte Ireland** to promote local and regional tourism initiatives.

Rural Transport

Increased funding is required for rural public transport and the nationwide expansion of cycling infrastructure and greenways. *Social Justice Ireland* calls on Government to invest an **additional €50m to the Rural Transport Programme**, increasing the range of public transport options and ensuring the rural public transport options and fleet are in line with our climate commitments, safe-guarding communities from isolation, and incentivising greater public transport usage. In addition we propose an investment of **€10m in our cycling and walking infrastructure**.

Broadband

Strategies and plans to promote rural and regional economies are heavily reliant on the provision of reliable, quality, high-speed broadband. *Social Justice Ireland* proposes **a €200m investment** to rollout the network of 400 Remote Working Hubs, supporting infrastructure and shared services, upgrade existing remote working hubs and meeting our Digital Agenda for Europe targets.

Conclusion

Social Justice Ireland believes that fundamental changes are required if Ireland is to ensure that our post-pandemic recovery is fair and works for all and leaves no person or community behind. Investment in our social welfare system, in the community and voluntary sector and the regions is essential to achieve this goal.

Society of St Vincent de Paul

Pre-Budget Scrutiny 2022

To: Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and The Islands

Date: 30th April 2021

Society of St Vincent de Paul
National Office

91/92 Sean McDermott St.
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Contents

Introduction.

The Society of St Vincent de Paul (SVP) welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development, and the Islands as part of its pre-budget 2022 scrutiny.

SVP is the largest charity of social concern in Ireland and its primary aim is to provide direct assistance to low-income households. Although home visitations have been curtailed because of Covid restrictions, support is still being provided remotely by SVP. Every household in Ireland is affected by this crisis but in our experience the impacts have been most acute for those experiencing poverty and marginalisation.

In 2020, we received over 160,000 requests for help and in the first three months of this year we received more than 45,000 calls from individuals and families struggling to make ends meet on a reduced or inadequate income. Some of the main reasons people have reached out for help this year include:

- Lone parents who are socially isolated and struggling with food and energy poverty.
- Single adults living alone, with health conditions and in receipt of disability payment, worried about isolation and being able to pay the bills.
- People whose jobs or businesses have closed and they have no money left after they pay their rent or mortgage
- Older people living alone who can't afford to keep their homes warm.
- People who had to give up work to care for vulnerable family members.
- Mothers and lone parents in particular who had to leave their jobs due to lack of childcare.
- Low-income households during winter lockdown worried about paying high utility bills, and many families are unable to afford to keep the fridge stocked as food bills increased with the children home all day.
- Individuals and families moving out of homeless accommodation and into new homes but without access to bedding or cooking equipment as they cannot shop online.
- Families in emergency accommodation and direct provision struggling with isolation, home-schooling and food poverty.

Informed by the experiences of our members and the people we assist we work towards addressing the root causes of poverty and inequality through our policy and advocacy work. It is from this perspective that we make this submission to the Committee.

Context for Budget 2022.

SVP do not underestimate the challenges facing the economy and society from the ongoing Covid-19 crisis and the uneven socioeconomic impact it is having on Irish society. It is critical that all policy and budgetary decisions focus on delivering a fair, equal and inclusive recovery. We must invest now to save in the long term, rather than making short term decisions that build in the future cost of poverty.

The pandemic has brought to the fore the vital role the State plays in providing essential services for its citizens and the importance of a strong welfare state for everyone in society. As well as investment in public childcare, housing, education, and a just transition, we need to make sure that income adequacy is recognised as the foundation of poverty prevention. The correct mechanisms must be put in place to support incomes by benchmarking social welfare payments against the cost of Minimum Essential Standard of Living, and providing all workers, many of whom worked on the frontline of the pandemic, with a liveable income. For those who lost their job as a result of the pandemic they must receive tailored employment supports that create a pathway to sustainable employment. The next budget should prioritise:

- Supporting incomes and addressing poverty and inequality through adequate social welfare, including core social welfare rates.
- Building inclusive labour markets and supporting parental employment
- Investing in quality public services that support the well-being of people, society and the economy.
- Prioritising a just transition to a low carbon economy ensuring no one is left behind.
- Embedding poverty proofing in economic and social policy including budgetary decisions.

In this submission we outline the context for Budget 2022 from the perspective of SVP and highlight our key recommendations for the Minister for Social Protection that are needed to tackle and address poverty. Our full list of recommendations for Budget 2022, including costings where feasible, will be published in summer 2021.[1]

Poverty and deprivation prior to Covid-19.

Ireland entered this crisis with over 600,000 people across the country living below the poverty line, including almost 200,000 children. Over 70% of people living in poverty couldn't afford an unexpected expense, and 40% are going without basics like adequate heating and food.[2]

Growing up in poverty can negatively affect the entire life course of a child, limiting opportunities and making it more difficult for them to realise their full emotional, educational social and economic potential. While there was some progress between 2016 and 2017 with 25,000 children being lifted out of consistent poverty, the latest figures see a reversal of the positive trend. In 2019, the rate of consistent poverty among children stood at 8.1%, up from 7.7% in 2018. This equates to approximately 97,000 children. This compares to a rate of 5.1% for adults aged 18-64 and 2.3% for those over the age of 65.[3] The rate increases to 17% among one-parent families, highlighting how if we are to be successful in tackling child poverty, we must support lone parents. Now more than ever with the pandemic disproportionately impacting low-income families, it is essential that child poverty is held as a political priority across Government departments and throughout the political system.

In 2019, 43 per cent of those living below the poverty line were experiencing enforced deprivation, compared to 29 per cent in 2008.[4] This shows that many low- income households were more exposed to an economic shock now than they were at the outset of the last recession. For those still carrying the scars of the last recession, another downturn will harm them further unless safeguards are put in place.

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[1] Recommendations may also be adjusted to take account of changes based on the Minimum Essential Standard of Living data, which is updated annually and published in quarter 2 each year. [2] Survey of Income and Living Conditions 2018. EUROSTAT[ilc_mdes04]

[3] CSO Survey of Income and Living Conditions

[4] CSO Statbank SIA26 by Poverty Status, Type of Deprivation and Year *(2006-2018)*

The Irish Government Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025 contains the ambition 'To reduce the national consistent poverty rate to 2% or less of the population' and, 'To make Ireland one of the most socially inclusive States in the EU'. Previous to this the commitment in the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion was to reduce consistent poverty to 2% or less by 2020. This target is unlikely to be met when data is published later this year, and the unequal impact of the pandemic makes reaching this target more challenging.

The uneven impact of the pandemic.

The concentration of job losses in the tourism, hospitality, food, and retail sectors means that the impact has disproportionately fallen on groups that are least able to endure a financial hit, as a higher proportion of minimum wage and low paidworkers are located in these sectors.[5] Those in the mostly severely affected sectors of the economy are more likely to be in private rented accommodation, have more debt and less savings. The longer it takes for these sectors to recover and unless safeguards are put in place, the more likely people will be pushed further into hardship. [6]

According to RED C research commissioned by SVP 'Cutting back and falling behind?', published in March 2021, a significant proportion of Irish society are facing a multitude of financial pressures due to the pandemic.[7] This includes loss of income, increased household expenditure on basics, erosion of savings to meet ordinary living expenses, falling behind on bills and being forced to cut back on essentials like food, heating and electricity.

[5] Redmond and McGuinness (2020) Who can work from home in Ireland? https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/SUSTAT87.pdf

[6] Coates, Corcoran, Corin and Broscú (2020) The Initial Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Ireland's Labour Market

[7] SVP and RED C (2021) Cutting Back and Falling Behind: An Analysis of the Financial Impact of Covid-19 https://www.svp.ie/news-media/submissions/poverty-in-ireland/cutting-back-and-falling-behind-red-c-report-march.aspx

Data from a representative sample of 1026 adults shows that 43% of the population reported experiencing at least one form of financial strain due to the Covid-19 pandemic with:

- 24% cutting back on food, heating or electricity due to cost.
- 22% using savings to meet ordinary living expenses.
- 14% falling behind on bills such as rent, mortgages, utilities or other regular payments.
- 7% going into debt (personal loan, credit cards) to meet ordinary living expenses.

It finds that those who are experiencing the most adverse financial impacts are many of the groups that were vulnerable to poverty prior to the pandemic including low- income families with children, lone parents, renters, and people with disabilities.

During Covid-19, over a third of one parent families had to cut back on heating or had fallen behind on bills, and 25% had cut back on food due to cost. Increased expenditure on basics is hitting low-income families with children harder as they coped with the additional financial pressures associated with school closures. For people unable to work due to illness or disability, 42% reported going without heating due to cost due to Covid-19, compared to 18% of people at work.

The data also shows warning signs of financial distress among tenants, with almost one-in-ten renters reporting that they have fallen behind on their rent and a quarter stating they were in arrears on other regular payments. It is SVP's view that the current protections for tenants with Covid-19 related rent arrears are too narrowly defined, difficult to access and can be particularly challenging for vulnerable tenants to navigate.

The research shows that the financial impact of the pandemic is not felt evenly across the population. Of those who were finding it difficult to manage financially prior to the pandemic, 85% reported experiencing some form of financial strain due to Covid-19, compared to 21% of those who stated they were living comfortably prior to the pandemic. This group were also more likely to report a drop in income (51%

compared to 25% of those living comfortably prior to the pandemic). Furthermore, of those who were finding it quite difficult or very difficult to manage prior to Covid-19, 49% were spending more on essentials compared to 35% of those who were living comfortably.

The pandemic has heightened and exposed long-term issues for people living on low incomes and in financial precarity. We now have an an opportunity to build back better. We must bolster the financial resilience of households in Ireland by investing in our safety net and our social infrastructure.

The cost of poverty.

As well as the moral imperative to address poverty, we now have important evidence on the wider societal and economic benefits of addressing and preventing poverty.
Our recent report on the Hidden Cost of Poverty, carried out by Dr. Michéal Collins in University College Dublin, clearly shows that poverty carries a huge cost, not just for those directly affected, but for everyone in society. [8]The comprehensive analysis estimates that dealing with the consequences of poverty costs the State €4.5 billion every year through public services – more than the respective annual Government budgets for housing, justice, transport, and agriculture. The report finds:

- The additional spending to deal with poor health outcomes associated with poverty is estimated to be over €1.2 billion.
- A significant proportion of state spending is allocated to support people in poverty unable to afford basics through social assistance (€592.7 million) and housing supports (€912.5 million).
- In education, €549.7 million is spent every year dealing with the legacy effects of early experiences of child poverty and on measures to prevent children now experiencing the longer-term impacts of educational disadvantage.
- €917.4 million of expenditure in the justice system is spent dealing with the association between social and economic disadvantage, exclusion marginalisation, and crime.

[8] Collins, M. (2020) The Hidden Cost of Poverty: Estimating the Public Service Cost of Poverty in Ireland https://www.svp.ie/news-media/publications/social-justice-publications/the-hidden-cost-of-poverty.aspx

This is spending that could be avoided if poverty was prevented in the first place through sufficient investment in protecting the incomes of the least well off.

Prioritising a long-term investment in tackling poverty will not only improve the lives of the least well off but it will lead to a freeing up government resources to focus on other public policy priorities. Investing in income adequacy and robust services is the only route to long term social and economic sustainability.

Social Protection Priorities for Budget 2022.

The levels of poverty in Ireland prior to the pandemic and the uneven impact it has had on Irish society underlines the need for Government to pursue right kind of recovery following the pandemic. This recovery must learn the lessons of the last decade and focus on investment not austerity. Budget 2022 will be decisive and must allocate sufficient resources to address poverty and social exclusion. Ireland's recovery must tackle the inequalities that are preventing people from reaching their potential and which are storing up human, economic and social costs for the future. Making the right investments now means we can reduce future expenditure spent dealing with the damage poverty causes.

Ensuring adequacy and alleviating poverty.

SVP strongly believe that people who receive social welfare should have the means to remain integrated and participate in society. Where social welfare payments address only very basic needs, they can contribute to locking people in a cycle of dependency without adequate means to access opportunities or to fully participate in society. Adequate social welfare helps people reconnect to the world of work and allows people to live in dignity. A just recovery must begin with investing in those who are furthest behind. Everyone should be guaranteed an adequate income to participate fully in society, whether they are in work or not.

The pandemic has caused a significant increase in unemployment and a large portion of this may turn into long-term unemployment. As well as tailored employment supports, affordable childcare and accessible education and training, Government must guarantee those outside of the labour market have adequate social welfare supports. This will protect individuals and families from poverty.

The Pandemic Unemployment Payment has been set at €350 per week, an upfront recognition that the rate of Jobseekers Allowance (maximum personal rate of €203) is currently insufficient. At SVP we already knew that payment levels this low leave people struggling to get by and have been calling on the government to set welfare rates that allow people to afford a Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL).[9] Benchmarking social welfare against the costs of an MESL would allow people to make ends meet and bring thousands of individuals and families out of hardship. It is an investment in our future and the only way to reach poverty targets.

The European Pillar of Social Rights, of which Ireland is a signatory, states that "Everyone lacking sufficient resources has the right to adequate minimum income benefits ensuring a life in dignity at all stages of life, and effective access to enabling goods and services. For those who can work, minimum income benefits should be combined with incentives to (re)integrate into the labour market". [10]

Importantly, we also now have evidence of strong public support for adequate welfare payments as 96.7% of the Citizen's Assembly voting in favour of the following recommendation "*Set social protection payments and/or supports at a level that lifts people above the poverty line, prevents deprivation and supports an adequate standard of living".* [11] This is in addition to the National Economic and Social Council's recent recommendation that an independent indexation group be established to advise Government on appropriate welfare payment rates to ensure social welfare payments are adequate to prevent poverty. [12]

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[9] www.budgeting.ie

[10] European Pillar of Social Rights https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/deeper-and-fairer- economic-andmonetary-union/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en

[11] http://www.citizensassembly.ie/en/what-we-do/meetings/voting-results-citizens-assembly-on- gender-equality/full-list-of-recommendations.pdf

[12] http://files.nesc.ie/nesc_reports/en/151_Future_Social_Welfare.pdf

Qualitative research shows that in households experiencing income inadequacy, parents give priority to the needs of their children over their own and often worry and feel guilty that they are letting their children down. Living below an Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) has an impact on the well-being of parents and children, with implications for mental and physical health, educational attainment, loss of confidence and erosion of resources such as savings.[13]

A Minimum Essential Standard of Living is one which meets the minimum needed to live and participate in Irish society and is a standard of living which no one should be expected to live below.[14] The MESL analysis finds that one parent household compositions and single adults continue to demonstrate the greatest rates and depth of income inadequacy.[15] In 2021, the gap between the social welfare income of a one parent household with a primary school and secondary school aged children is
€80 every week. For a single adult living in an urban area the gap is €46 per week.[16]

While MESL data has shown that recent budget increases to the QCI have led to improvements in adequacy for some household types, the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice conclude that 'child poverty and income inadequacy can only be fully addressed when the minimum needs of the entire household are considered.'[17] We therefore recommend Budget 2022 prioritises achieving income adequacy for households reliant on the social welfare safety net.

13 Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (2018) Stories of Struggle https://www.svp.ie/storiesofstruggle

14 See www.budgeting.ie

15 Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (2020) Budget 2021 Impact Briefing https://www.budgeting.ie/download/pdf/budget_2021_-_mesl_impact_briefing.pdf
16 Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (2020) Budget 2021 Impact Briefing https://www.budgeting.ie/download/pdf/budget_2021_-_mesl_impact_briefing.pdf
17 Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (2020) Budget 2021 Impact Briefing https://www.budgeting.ie/download/pdf/budget_2021_-_mesl_impact_briefing.pdf

Recommendations

- Social welfare rates should be set at a sufficient level which evidence shows will lift people out of poverty and provide them with a Minimum Essential Standard of Living. Budget 2022 must begin to close the gap between social welfare rates and the real costs facing households by investing in core rates that protect the overall household income. Increase the personal rate of social welfare by €8 per week with proportionate increases for children aged over and under 12. Set a target of reaching an adequate level for all primary payments by 2025 including for those aged under 25.

- Link earning disregards, means-tests and income tests for supports such as the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance and Medical Card and in-work income supports to increases in the National Minimum Wage and core social welfare payments, maintaining the value of and access to these supports year on year.

Addressing problem debt arising from Covid-19

The Red C survey results 'Cutting back and falling behind?' on the financial impactof Covid-19 show a divergence in experience during lockdown, with those most vulnerable to financial strain and poverty feeling the brunt of the negative economic consequence of the pandemic. While we commend the Government policy response for mitigating significant income losses through the Pandemic Unemployment Payment and wage subsidy schemes, this data shows that additional interventions for those most at risk of financial distress are now needed to ensure the public health crisis is not followed by a deeper debt, homelessness and poverty crisis. Any cliff edge in supports that does not take account of continued economic context will lead to hardship for low-income households.

Recommendations

- Implementation of changes to the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) and the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) must make full use of poverty proofing safeguards so that claimants and their families do not suffer undue hardship. Taper supports towards those most at risk of financial hardships including low-income families with children and renters.
- Ensure adequate resources are available through the Exceptional Needs Scheme so that low-income households with significant Covid-19 related energy debt are not pushed into energy poverty or additional hardship.
- Suppliers, Government, the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities establish a debt relief mechanism for households in significant energy debt because of Covid-19.
- Establish a joint budget line between the Department of Social Protection and the Department of Housing to help those with significant rent arrears.

Supporting lone parents and reducing child poverty

One parent families continue to be the group most at risk of poverty in Ireland today. Research from the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) shows that lone parents and their children experienced persistent levels of poverty during boom, recession and the early stages of economic recovery.[18] In 2019, 17% of one parent families lived in consistent poverty, 45% were experiencing enforced deprivation and almost 80% were unable to afford an unexpected expense.[19]

Lone parents are also more likely to be in be in low paying insecure jobs and experience in-work poverty than parents in two parent households.[20] Research shows that high housing and childcare costs combined with low levels of income mean that it is challenging for many families with children to make ends meet. These

[18] ESRI (2018) Poverty dynamics of social risk groups in the EU: an analysis of the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions, 2005 to 2014. https://www.esri.ie/system/files/media/file-uploads/2018-01/BKMNEXT345.pdf

[19] CSO (2020) Survey of Income and Living Conditions https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2018/ [20] Ibid

factors significantly reduce the standard of living of working lone parents who face additional challenges as both the primary earner and primary caregiver for their families. It also creates additional barriers to employment for those who want to take up work or increase their working hours. These factors combine and contribute to the relative low living standards of lone parents in Ireland compared to one parent families Europe as they have the second highest rates of income poverty, persistent poverty and severe deprivation among 15 EU peer countries.[21]

One parent families are now being disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. It has added huge additional pressures to one parent families as they navigate the practicalities of self-isolation, increased food and energy bills from being at home more, childcare closures, familial conflict due to access issues and home schooling. During Covid-19, over a third of one parent families had to cut back on heating or had fallen behind on bills, and 25% had cut back on food due to costs with increased expenditure on basics is hitting low-income families with children harder as they coped with the additional financial pressures associated with school closures.[22]

In recognition of the higher rates of poverty among one parent families and the negative impact of the reforms and cut to the One Parent Family Payment, there have been some welcome measures for lone parents and their families in recent Budgets. Firstly, there have been incremental improvements in the earnings disregard for the OFP and JST recipients to €165 per week that will help lone parents take up and increase their working hours. Additionally, the increase in social welfare, the full restoration of the Christmas bonus, improvements in the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance and the new higher rate of payment for children over 12 will help reduce the poverty risk among one parent families.

[21] SVP (2019) Working Parenting and Struggling:

https://issuu.com/svp15/docs/working_parenting_and_struggling-_/1?e=25010855/71456122

[22] SVP (2021) Cutting Back and Falling Behind: https://www.svp.ie/getattachment/a116ab93-1ba9-4f04-b5a2-bbad59dab050/Cutting-Back-and-Falling-Behind-Red-C-Report-March.aspx

However, lone parents working part-time will still see a reduction in their income when their child reaches the age of seven, as they are no longer eligible for the WFP in conjunction with the OFP. There are also a number of issues when their child reaches the age of 14 as parents' caring obligations effectively become invisible to the system as they are now just viewed as "Jobseekers". Additionally, those working part-time and moving the from Jobseekers Transition Payment to the Working Family Payment will also see a drop in their income. This is at a time when a family's expenditure on food, clothing and education increases as the cost of raising a child over the age of 12 is significantly higher[24] but access to in-work income support becomes more difficult.

Recommendations

- Extend the cut off for the Jobseekers Transition Payment until the youngest child reaches the age of 18, so that lone parents can access better in-work income supports and training opportunities.
- To ensure equality between different household types and to help one parent families get back on their feet post-COVID, reduce the Working Family Payment weekly hours threshold from 19 hours to 15 hours for lone parents.
- Equalise the income thresholds for the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance (BSCFA) for one and two-parent households. Introduce 'tapering' for the BSCFA to provide greater access to support with school costs for working poor households and to reduce poverty traps.
- Make child benefit payable to families with children over the age of 18 enrolled in secondary school in recognition of the higher cost of education in the senior cycle and as a measure to prevent early school leaving.

Tackling energy poverty and ensuring a just transition

SVP are committed to making sure that the changes we make to avert the climate crisis, including reducing our use of fuel, lead to better lives for those on low incomes and people in poverty. This societal transition must be just and equitable.

It is estimated that energy poverty (measured as spending 10 per cent or more of a household's disposable income on energy) affects one in six households in Ireland.[23] In 2019 (the last year for which we have data), 4.9 % of the population were unable to keep their homes adequately warm[24] – rising to 12.1% of single parent families. Of the people in poverty in Ireland, 15.2% could not keep their homes warm enough, an increase of almost 4 percentage points from the previous year. In addition, 8.9% of households were in arrears on their utility bills[25] – for single parent families 22.1 per cent were behind on utility bills. These figures show what we regularly see at SVP, that there are many households who are forced to live on incomes that do not meet the cost of living and that is reflected in people going without the basics they need.

This year we know that many households will be facing higher energy bills due to the impact of staying at home during Covid-19 lockdown. For households on a low income (including those managing with a drastically reduced income due to job loss or hours reduction) the additional pressure of these energy costs will lead to worry and hardship.

Within the new economic context of Covid-19, it is more important than ever that customers in energy poverty are protected from rising costs, whether that is in the unit price of energy, in standing charges, or in taxes and levies. As the poorest customers spend the highest proportion of their income on energy, any increase in charges will have a disproportionately negative impact on them.

Energy poverty is caused by a combination of fuel costs, income adequacy, and housing efficiency. All three aspects must be tackled to sustainably address and reduce energy poverty. This complexity necessitates cross-departmental work and a strategy that addresses immediate need as well as long term investments. Research from the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice VPSJ finds that improvements in

[23] https://www.svp.ie/getattachment/2cb10388-e3ca-41ef-9911-a17f252ce09c/Growing-up-in-the-Cold.aspx

[24] EUROSTATilc_mdes01

[25] EUROSTATilc_mdes07

energy efficiency alone will not enable vulnerable households afford their minimum energy needs. Even at the highest efficiency level examined, social welfare dependent households tended to remain in energy poverty due to income inadequacy.[26] Therefore, a key recommendation for the Minister for Social Protection is to continue to increase the level of the Fuel Allowance and make sure it is adequate in meeting minimum energy needs and reaches those who need it.

In addition to addressing energy poverty, as part of the just transition we need to ensure that low-income households can access a well connected and affordable system of public transport, particularly those living in rural areas. Rural households have to rely on private cars in order to avail of public services, employment opportunities, healthcare and recreational activities is a key challenge for policy makers. For rural households' private transport is a minimum need, as identified in the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice's Budget Standards Research. Their research finds that car related costs (fuel, maintenance, insurance, etc.) add an additional €59, per week.[27] The development of Rural Transport Scheme (Local Link) and the commitments to improve rural transport programme in the new rural development plan, Our Rural Future, is welcome, however sustained and increased investment is required to provide a truly accessible and affordable service to those who would benefit most from it.

Recommendations

- Ensure that people in energy poverty are protected from rising fuel costs. Currently the Fuel Allowance is highly means tested and misses many households in energy poverty such as those on WFP and those receiving Jobseekers payments for less than a year. The Fuel Allowance should be extended to these groups.

- Extend the Fuel Allowance from 28 to 32 weeks and increase in line with energy prices increases as well as increase in environmental taxation (carbon tax and Public Service Obligation (PSO) levy).

[26] https://www.svp.ie/getattachment/716d46e2-e390-4fce-8e4e-cc3fb2297f62/minimum-household-energy-need-

[27] www.budgeting.ie

- Invest in the Rural Transport Programme and develop a budget line to implement the rural transport commitments set out in Our Rural Future, thereby increasing the range of public transport options, promoting social inclusion for those in rural areas, and incentivising greater public transport usage.

Embedding Poverty Proofing in the Budgetary Process

Poverty proofing or Poverty Impact Assessment is the process by which government departments, local authorities and State agencies assess policies and programmes at design, implementation and review stages in relation to the likely impact that they will have, or have had, on poverty. Under the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025 there is a commitment to retain this process as important part of the regulatory impact assessment process. Importantly, the assessment of impacts of policies on poverty should form an integral part of the policy making process, rather than an exercise which takes place after a policy has been adopted.

Since its introduction over 20 years ago, poverty proofing has been weak and poorly implemented. The Social Impact Assessment produced by the Department of Social Protection pre- and post-budget is important. However, it is still very difficult to assess the impact that increased Government spending on public services and broader economic policy has on different groups. All Government Departments need to produce an assessment of measures which relate to their own areas so that we can see the impact of all policy and budgetary decisions.

Economic policies affect existing distributive relational and institutional structures and as such have poverty and social outcomes. Fiscal policies, taxation, inflation and labour market policies effect people in poverty in different ways and policies will not be sustainable if they are not equitable. Without mainstreaming of poverty reduction into economic and public expenditure policy, our best efforts are likely to be blunted.

Recommendations

- Place poverty proofing and equality budgeting on a statutory footing to ensure all policies and programmes at design and implementation are assessed in relation to their likely impact on people living in poverty.