



EUROPEAN ANTI POVERTY NETWORK

IRELAND

# TOWARDS A SYSTEMIC APPROACH TO SOCIAL PROTECTION

POVERTY WATCH 2024







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# POVERTY WATCH IRELAND 2024

## 1. INTRODUCTION

**Poverty is a human rights violation and it is avoidable. Ending poverty is a political choice. The continued existence of poverty is a political decision.**

Despite some progress, poverty, social exclusion and inequality remain very real problems in Ireland. We can see from the ongoing experience of our members, and backed up by endless amounts of data, that the same groups and communities continue to experience the highest levels of poverty and social exclusion.

We need a real Government commitment to eradicating, not just alleviating, poverty. And this must be matched by high levels of political leadership, will and ambition.

Priority must be given to addressing the systemic and structural root causes of poverty, social exclusion and inequality. This can only be achieved in any effective way through the implementation of a genuinely integrated strategy across all Government policy.

Any effective anti-poverty strategy must address the multidimensional nature of poverty. A key part of this must be ensuring everyone has an adequate income to live with dignity and participate fully in society. We need to see real progress towards decent, liveable wages, and the benchmarking of social welfare supports at an adequate level to meet the cost of living.

Ensuring income adequacy for all must go hand in hand with investment in essential services. Without access to quality essential services, it is not possible to effectively reduce poverty. Tax revenue is essential for investing in quality public services and supports. This means we need to maintain and build a sustainable tax base – not hollow it out.

This year's Poverty Watch report addresses access to four essential services – health, housing, transport, and early childhood education and care. We also look at employment from the perspective of income adequacy, decent work, and essential services and supports.

Poverty Watch 2024 also contains a dedicated chapter on social protection, focused on the theme "Toward a Systemic and Structural Approach to Social Protection." Building on last year's focus on the impact of policy choices made in relation to the cost-of-living crisis, this year we look at the systemic and structural shortcomings of the Irish social protection system, and solutions to address them.

Eliminating poverty, social exclusion and inequality means ensuring no one is left behind. This requires strengthening the focus on the groups and communities most impacted, and giving an effective and meaningful voice to people experiencing poverty in how policies are developed and implemented.

It is clear the current system is not working, and we need a new approach. We do not need any more band-aids in the form of short-term or one-off measures. We need to see sustained, long-term measures that address the underlying root causes and multidimensional nature of poverty and social exclusion.

**Ending poverty must be put at the top of the political agenda.**

## 2. POVERTY IN IRELAND

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

The definition above has been in use in Ireland since the 1997 National Anti-Poverty Strategy.<sup>1</sup> This definition highlights that, while poverty is about income, it is also associated with inadequate access to services, resources and outcomes that denies people a decent standard of living. The second sentence highlights the direct link between poverty and social exclusion from the rest of society.

### 2.1 Government Targets to Reduce Poverty

The *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025* is Ireland's current anti-poverty strategy.<sup>2</sup> The current poverty reduction target is by 2025 'To reduce the national consistent poverty rate to 2% or less of the population', which repeats the commitment in the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion that ran from 2007 to 2019. There is also a second commitment 'To make Ireland one of the most socially inclusive States in the EU'.

### 2.2 Poverty Rates

The Central Statistics Office (CSO) the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) for 2023 showed that while the at risk of poverty rate and consistent poverty rate have decreased since 2022, the number of people living in enforced deprivation continued to increase.<sup>3</sup> This reflects that the income levels of large numbers of people, whether from work or social welfare or both, are not adequate to meet the cost of living. This Survey provides us with important information on income, poverty, and inequality in Ireland and some of the groups most impacted. It also helps us to see how Ireland is progressing towards its poverty target.

#### 2.2.1 At Risk of Poverty<sup>4</sup>

- People are at risk of poverty if they have an income that is less than 60% of the median disposable income. For 2023, this was €16,558 per annum or €317.32 per week. It is also known as being below the poverty line.
- Over 559,000 people or 10.6% of the population were at risk of poverty in 2023.
- When adjusted for inflation, 13.6% of people were at risk of poverty in 2023 compared with 12.5% in 2022.

#### 2.2.2 Enforced Deprivation<sup>5</sup>

- Enforced deprivation refers to those who cannot afford two or more of eleven necessities.
- More than 913,700 people or 17.3% of the population experienced enforced deprivation in 2023. This was up significantly from 16.6% in 2022 and 13.7% in 2021.
- The enforced deprivation rate for people at risk of poverty was 33.8% in 2023 compared with 38.9% in 2022, whereas the deprivation rate for those not at risk of poverty increased significantly to 15.4% in 2022, compared with 10.8% in 2021.

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<sup>1</sup> Government of Ireland (2020) [Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025: Ambition, Goals, Commitments](#)

<sup>2</sup> Government of Ireland (2020) [Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025: Ambition, Goals, Commitments](#)

<sup>3</sup> Central Statistics Office (2024) [Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2023](#)

<sup>4</sup> Central Statistics Office (2024) [Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2023](#)

<sup>5</sup> Central Statistics Office (2024) [Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2023](#)



### **2.2.3 Consistent Poverty**<sup>6</sup>

- Consistent poverty refers to those who are both at risk of poverty and who experience enforced deprivation.
- More than 190,000 people, or 3.6% of the population, were living in consistent poverty.

### **2.3 Difficulty Making Ends Meet & Experiencing Financial Burden**<sup>7</sup>

As part of the publication on enforced deprivation for 2023, the CSO published information on the difficulty people reported in making ends meet and experiencing a financial burden. It found that almost half of households (47.8%) had at least some difficulty making ends meet in 2023, while 6.4% had great difficulty, up from 5.5% in 2022. The figures for one parent families are particularly stark. Almost three quarters (72.1%) of one parent households had some difficulty making ends meet, while 17.9% had great difficulty. Around one in five were in arrears with rent or mortgage costs (18.2%), utility bills (21.5%) and hire purchase instalments or other repayments (19.6%). 14.4% of one parent households had arrears on mortgage or rental payments, while 16.2% had arrears on utility bills. More than half (51.7%) of one parent households regarded housing costs as a heavy burden.

### **2.4 Poverty Levels Among Different Groups in Society**

The CSO SILC 2023 showed that while the at risk of poverty rate and consistent poverty rate have decreased since 2022, the number of people living in enforced deprivation continued to increase.<sup>8</sup> This reflects that the income levels of large numbers of people, whether from work or social welfare or both, are not adequate to meet the cost of living. The enforced deprivation rate, which is based on the inability to afford at least two of eleven essentials, can be understood as a proxy for income inadequacy and therefore as a measure of policy failure in protecting households and as a way of identifying which groups are being failed.<sup>9</sup>

The SILC 2023 figures also show that despite decreases in the overall at risk of poverty and consistent poverty rates, the rates continue to remain disproportionately high across all measures for many of the most disadvantaged and marginalised groups, including people unable to work due to long-standing health problems, people who are unemployed, one parent families, and people living in rented accommodation.

- Those most **at risk of poverty** in 2023 were people unable to work due to long-standing health problems (27.3%), while over a quarter of people who were unemployed (25.5%) had incomes below the poverty line. Almost one in five (19.2%) lone-parent households were at risk of poverty. Children had the highest at risk of poverty levels of any age group, with 14.3% of children in Ireland living below the poverty line.
- Those most likely to experience **enforced deprivation** were people unable to work due to long-standing health problems (44.7%). Over two fifths of one parent households with children under 18 years of age (41.4%) experienced deprivation, as did almost two fifths of people who were unemployed (37.8%). One fifth of children experienced deprivation.
- The **consistent poverty** rate was highest among people unable to work due to long-standing health problems (16.5%). By household composition, it was highest for single adults aged less than 65 years (13%) and one parent households (7.1%). The consistent poverty rate was 9.4% for people who were unemployed, and 8.9% for persons in households where no one is at work. Almost three quarters (72.9%) of people in consistent poverty were renting or living rent free compared to 27.1% of homeowners.

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<sup>6</sup> Central Statistics Office (2024) [Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2023](#)

<sup>7</sup> Central Statistics Office (2024) [Survey on Income and Living Conditions \(SILC\): Enforced Deprivation 2023](#)

<sup>8</sup> Central Statistics Office (2024) [Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2023](#)

<sup>9</sup> McDonnell, T./NERI (2023) [Tax and Welfare: Building Better Systems in the Context of Looming Megatrends and Rising Challenges](#), Nevin Economic Research Institute (NERI)

While these official statistics highlight poverty levels for some groups in society, many groups disproportionately affected by poverty and social exclusion are not included in these statistics at all due to the size of the population used. This includes disabled people, Travellers, Roma, migrants and other ethnic minorities, people experiencing homelessness. These figures also cannot tell us about the impact of poverty on people or communities, including disadvantaged socio-economic communities. However, the Pobal *HP Deprivation Index* shows that between 2016 and 2022 many disadvantaged communities have not seen the same level of improvements as experienced more generally across the country in this period.<sup>10</sup> This further widened the gap between disadvantaged areas and the national average, with the number of people living in areas classed as very or extremely disadvantaged increasing from 143,506 to 195,992 people during that period.<sup>11</sup>

## 2.5 Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL)

Research by the Vincentian MESL Research Centre demonstrates the impact of increases in living costs on the minimum basket of goods and services needed to enable people to have a socially acceptable minimum essential standard of living (MESL).<sup>12</sup> The cost of the basket of goods needed to ensure a Minimum Essential Standard of Living has risen by 16.8% between March 2020 to March 2024.<sup>13</sup> Unlike the Consumer Price Index (CPI), the MESL findings more accurately measure the change in living costs for households on social welfare and low incomes, who are significantly more vulnerable to changes in food, energy, and transport costs in particular. The composition of the MESL basket is different from the average consumption basket used to measure inflation, with basics such as food and household energy making up a larger share of the minimum basket. The MESL represents a basic standard which allows individuals to live with dignity and below which nobody should have to live. The MESL provides for an income that represents the purchasing power required for the basic goods and services that meet a household's basic physical, social, and psychological needs.

Despite core rates of social welfare being at their highest nominal value in 2024, their real value has decreased since 2020. The MESL has found that there is a €48 gap between core social welfare rate for a single working age adult in an urban area and the cost of a MESL. The latest MESL data showed that for more than three quarters (76%) of households the income supports provided from social welfare were inadequate to meet minimum needs. Of these, 43% are experiencing deep income inadequacy, meaning social welfare supports provide for less than 90% of MESL expenditure needs. The MESL research has consistently found that households experiencing deep income inadequacy tend to be working-age single adult headed households and households with older children. Despite improvements since 2023, the level and severity of deep inadequacy remain high relative to 2020 levels. Social welfare supports only meet 62% of the MESL needs of older children 12 years of age and over, and 87% of younger children's MESL needs.

## 2.6 Inequality

Looking at the distribution of income, the poorest 20% of the population had 9.6% of the nation's equivalised disposable income, while the richest 20% had 37%.<sup>14</sup> This results in a quintile share ratio of 3.8 in 2023, slightly down from 3.9 in 2022. This means the wealthiest 20% have 3.8 times the income of the poorest 20%.

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<sup>10</sup> Pobal (2023) [Pobal HP Deprivation Index](#)

<sup>11</sup> Pobal (2023) [Pobal HP Deprivation Index](#)

<sup>12</sup> Vincentian MESL Research Centre (2024) [MESL 2024: Annual Update](#)

<sup>13</sup> Vincentian MESL Research Centre (2024) [MESL 2024: Annual Update](#)

<sup>14</sup> Central Statistics Office (2024) [Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2023](#)



The Gini coefficient measures income equality across the entire income distribution. A Gini coefficient value of 0% means perfect equality, indicating that income is distributed equally amongst all persons. A Gini Coefficient of 100% indicates perfect inequality where all the income is held by one person. In 2023 the Gini coefficient was 27.5%, almost unchanged from 27.4% in 2022.

Wealth inequality reflects the accumulation of resources by people in society over time, including over generations. The latest information from the Central Statistics Office shows that the bottom 10% of people in Ireland had an accumulated wealth of €600 while the top 10% had 1,314 times that with a wealth of €788,400.<sup>15</sup> In 2024, Oxfam reported that the two richest men in Ireland were richer than the poorest half of the population.<sup>16</sup>

In the most recent TASC (Think-tank for Action on Social Change) annual report on economic inequality in Ireland, it finds that while income inequality has fallen over the long-run, inequality increased recently by most measures.<sup>17</sup> It also found that inflation has impacted low-income households and renters the most, and proposes that increases in social investment can reduce market inequality and alleviate Ireland's high cost of living.

### 3. ACCESS TO ESSENTIAL PUBLIC SERVICES

Ensuring everyone, irrespective of their level of income, impairment, background or location, has access to the essential, quality public services they need, when they need them, is crucial for the eradication of poverty. However, in Ireland, due to historic under investment and a heavy dependence on the private market, we have a very mixed picture of service delivery. The Irish approach to essential services has generated inequality in access and outcomes based on someone's income, wealth and other factors that impact on different groups in society. This is apparent in different ways in our housing, care, health, and transport systems. We need to move towards public delivery of essential public services in order to ensure that everyone is guaranteed timely access to high quality services which not only meet their human rights, but support their positive well-being and full participation in society.

*"The provision of quality essential public services is crucial in supporting access to employment, and wider social inclusion. This includes childcare, the lack of access to it is a huge barrier for many... The provision of an effective level of public transport is also crucial."*<sup>18</sup>

#### 3.1 Housing

In Ireland, the housing, homelessness and accommodation crisis continues to have a devastating impact across the country. Both the European Commission's Country Reports and the recent UN CESCR Concluding Observations have expressed concern about the impact of the ongoing structural housing crisis in Ireland, the persistent gap between housing supply and demand and the disproportionate effect this has on the most marginalised and disadvantaged in society.<sup>19</sup> This crisis is being driven by a number of factors.<sup>20</sup> The issues of

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<sup>15</sup> Central Statistics Office (2022) [Household Finance and Consumption Survey 2020](#)

<sup>16</sup> Oxfam (2024) [Inequality, Inc.](#)

<sup>17</sup> Gilmore, O./TASC (2024) [The state we are in: inequality in Ireland 2024](#)

<sup>18</sup> Quote from participant in Community Work Ireland/EAPN Ireland (2024) [Preparatory Workshops: Key Proposals to the Social Inclusion Forum 2024](#)

<sup>19</sup> European Commission (2023) [Country Report – Ireland](#); UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (2024) [Concluding Observations on the fourth periodic review of Ireland](#)

<sup>20</sup> See e.g. Simon Communities of Ireland (2024) [Pre-Budget Submission 2025](#); Focus Ireland (2024) [Recommendations to Government for Budget 2025](#); ESRI (2024) [The National Development Plan in 2023: priorities and capacity](#)

low housing affordability and availability affect many people across society, but there is a particular and chronic shortage of social housing following years of undersupply. Ireland's housing strategy remains over-reliant on the private sector to build homes and to provide housing through the private rental sector. This approach to housing policy has led to a dysfunctional housing system that is a major driver of poverty and homelessness.

### 3.1.1 Homelessness

Homelessness has continued to grow at an alarming rate, with record levels of homelessness announced almost every month. The latest (August 2024) figures from the Department of Housing, Local Government, and Heritage show that 14,486 persons were in emergency accommodation, including 4,419 children and 224 older people (aged 65+).<sup>21</sup> Families and individuals are spending longer in emergency homeless accommodation, unable to exit through social or affordable housing. In total, 2,099 families are currently in emergency accommodation, and over half (58%) are one parent families. This is despite the fact that one parent families make up only 17% of all families.<sup>22</sup> Ireland has one of the highest rates of female homelessness in the EU 21.<sup>23</sup> These official homelessness figures relate only to people accessing State-funded emergency accommodation, and so do not include people sleeping rough or 'couch surfing', homeless people in hospitals or prisons, people in Direct Provision, and homeless households residing in domestic violence refuges. A recent report found that more than 24,000 households were experiencing some form of hidden homelessness.<sup>24</sup>

### 3.1.2 The Private Rental Sector

Instability in the private rental sector is one of the main drivers of homelessness in Ireland, with rents skyrocketing and supply remaining constrained over the last number of years.<sup>25</sup> Key issues of concern within the private rental market include lack of affordability, decreased availability of rental properties, insufficient protection for tenants and poor-quality accommodation.<sup>26</sup> The lifting of the no fault eviction ban in April 2023 led to an increase in people experiencing homelessness and living in precarious accommodation settings, affecting children and one-parent families in particular.<sup>27</sup> Housing and homeless organisations have noted a significant increase in evictions in the year since the ban was lifted.<sup>28</sup>

The high cost of renting in the private sector has a major impact on the likelihood of being at risk of or experiencing poverty and deprivation.<sup>29</sup> Renters were at greater risk of poverty (19.7%) than those who owned their own homes (6.5%). Renters have a deprivation rate of 36.5% compared to 8.8% of those who own their own homes. The consistent poverty rate was 8.5% for those living in rented or rent-free accommodation compared with 1.4% for those living in owner-occupied properties. While 30.7% of the population were renting or living rent free, they make up 72.9% of those living in consistent poverty. Two thirds (66%) of rented or rent-free households had at least some level of difficulty making ends meet and 14.2% had great difficulty. This compares with four in ten (39.4%) owner-occupied households who had some difficulty and 2.8% had great difficulty.

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<sup>21</sup> Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (2024) [Homeless Report – August 2024](#)

<sup>22</sup> Central Statistics Office (2023) [Census 2022](#)

<sup>23</sup> Bretheron, J. and Mayock, P. (2021) [Women's Homelessness \(European Evidence Review\)](#)

<sup>24</sup> Simon Communities of Ireland/Simon Community NI (2024) [Under the Radar: Unveiling Hidden Homelessness Across the Island of Ireland](#)

<sup>25</sup> Threshold (2023) [Threshold's Submission to the Review of the Private Residential Rental Sector](#)

<sup>26</sup> Threshold (2023) [Threshold's Submission to the Review of the Private Residential Rental Sector](#)

<sup>27</sup> European Commission (2024) [Country Report – Ireland](#)

<sup>28</sup> Focus Ireland (2024) [Recommendations to Government for Budget 2025](#)

<sup>29</sup> Central Statistics Office (2024) [Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2023](#)



In the past 12 months, we have continued to see increases in rent and house prices across Ireland. The most recent figures show rents rose by 2% in the second quarter of 2024, and by 7.3% on average across the country compared to a year previously in Q2 2023.<sup>30</sup> Rents in Dublin have increased 26% since the pandemic, while rents in the other cities are up an average of 52%.<sup>31</sup> The Residential Tenancies Board reported that the national year-on-year rate of change in standardised average rent in Q1 2023 for new tenancies was 8.1% and in existing tenancies was 5.9%.<sup>32</sup> The national Residential Property Price Index (RPPI) increased by 9.6% in the 12 months to July 2024, up from 8.9% in the year to June 2024. Prices in Dublin increased by 10.3% and prices outside Dublin were up by 9.1%.<sup>33</sup>

Due to the low levels of social housing the state is also heavily dependent on the private rental sector for provision of social housing. The Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) is the main state support provided to those in social housing in the private rental sector. Currently, HAP limits are insufficient to access private rented accommodation for many on low incomes. The increase to the discretionary rate which can be paid by the Local Authorities is an important measure to address this, but is still inadequate to enable many to afford their rents. Those tenants may end up having to pay the difference between the rent costs and the HAP levels from their own low incomes. The latest Simon Communities of Ireland quarterly *Locked Out of the Market* report found just 33 properties available to rent within HAP limits.<sup>34</sup> This represents just 3% of the total number of properties available to rent. Just three of these properties were available within standard HAP limits.

### 3.1.3 Housing & Structurally Vulnerable Groups

Homelessness is experienced in high levels among particular groups. Disabled people account for approximately 27% of people who are homeless.<sup>35</sup> In addition, more than 1,200 disabled people under 65 are still living in nursing homes.<sup>36</sup> Housing is a particular issue for disabled people, who are more likely to need social housing and wait longer on the social housing list due to a lack of sufficient fully wheelchair liveable and universally designed housing stock.<sup>37</sup>

*“For disabled people, housing is a huge issue. Before the housing crisis, there was already a huge issue in terms of a shortage of accessible accommodation. But now, with the general level of need, it’s an even bigger issue. Some of those more specific issues can get lost in the drive to increase supply, but you also need to increase the supply of accessible accommodation. And then for disabled people, it really interacts with the need for social care supports and the issues around lack of services there.”<sup>38</sup>*

Approximately 46% of Roma reported being homeless at some stage in their lives, while 39% of Travellers meet the European definition of homelessness compared to 6% of the general population.<sup>39</sup> Travellers and Roma face racism and discrimination in accessing housing in the public and private rental sector, and are at a greater risk of living in overcrowded and poor-quality living conditions.

<sup>30</sup> Daft.ie (2024) [The Daft.ie Rental Price Report: An analysis of recent trends in the Irish residential rental market 2024 Q2](#)

<sup>31</sup> Daft.ie (2024) [The Daft.ie Rental Price Report: An analysis of recent trends in the Irish residential rental market 2024 Q2](#)

<sup>32</sup> Residential Tenancies Board (2024) [Rent Index Q1 2024](#)

<sup>33</sup> Central Statistics Office (2024) [Residential Property Price Index July 2024](#)

<sup>34</sup> Simon Communities of Ireland (2024) [Locked Out of the Market September 2024](#)

<sup>35</sup> ESRI (2018) [Discrimination and Inequality in Housing in Ireland](#)

<sup>36</sup> [Parliamentary Question response by Minister Anne Rabbitte to Violet-Anne Wynne TD](#), 20/03/2024

<sup>37</sup> Disability Federation of Ireland (2024) [Pre-Budget Submission 2025](#)

<sup>38</sup> Quote from participant in Community Work Ireland/EAPN Ireland (2024) [Preparatory Workshops: Key Proposals to the Social Inclusion Forum 2024](#)

<sup>39</sup> Pavee Point (2023) [List of Issues to UN CEDAW, September 2023](#)

The inadequate provision of culturally appropriate and quality accommodation for Travellers continues to be a major issue, with persistently long waiting lists for Traveller-specific accommodation.<sup>40</sup> Between 2008 and 2018, only two thirds of the allocated budget for Traveller accommodation was drawn down by Local Authorities.<sup>41</sup> While Local Authorities have drawn down the full Traveller accommodation budget in recent years, this funding has primarily been used for refurbishment and maintenance of existing Traveller accommodation and for COVID-19 mitigation measures.<sup>42</sup> Reports suggest that no new accommodation or units were delivered.<sup>43</sup>

*“There is under-provision not under-funding in the area of Traveller accommodation. So, there is a need to review if the current model of national allocation which can be drawn down by local authorities is fit for purpose, as it allows for local authorities who may want to exclude Travellers from the area to do so by not drawing down any budget and then not being held accountable.”<sup>44</sup>*

Recent research by the ESRI showed the effects of poor-quality housing is having on children’s social and emotional wellbeing. Low-income households, families with disabilities, some migrant origin families, those living in poor quality housing, and families who have experienced adverse life events are all disproportionately affected. The research findings have implications for the updated housing strategy including the importance of putting increased focus not just on supply, but on the quality of housing and the communities in which people live as being critical for families’ wellbeing.<sup>45</sup>

### 3.1.4 Housing for All

A number of legislative measures introduced by the Government seek to address the housing and homelessness crisis in Ireland, including the *Housing for All* strategy.<sup>46</sup> In 2023 the Government met its overall housing target set out in the *Housing for All* strategy, but failed to meet its social housing target. While 8,100 new build social homes were delivered in 2023, this outcome fell below the annual 9,100 target as set out in *Housing for All*. The current social housing targets set out under *Housing for All* are not adequate to meet the needs of our growing population, and the Government has consistently fallen short of meeting even these targets, particularly when it comes to new builds.<sup>47</sup> The recently published Report of the

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<sup>40</sup> Pavee Point (2024) [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Ireland: Joint Alternative Report by a Coalition of Traveller and Roma Organisations](#); Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (2024) [Ireland and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: Submission to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on Ireland's fourth periodic report](#)

<sup>41</sup> Pavee Point (2024) [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Ireland: Joint Alternative Report by a Coalition of Traveller and Roma Organisations](#); Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (2024) [Ireland and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: Submission to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on Ireland's fourth periodic report](#)

<sup>42</sup> Pavee Point (2024) [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Ireland: Joint Alternative Report by a Coalition of Traveller and Roma Organisations](#); Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (2024) [Ireland and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: Submission to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on Ireland's fourth periodic report](#)

<sup>43</sup> Pavee Point (2024) [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Ireland: Joint Alternative Report by a Coalition of Traveller and Roma Organisations](#); Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (2024) [Ireland and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: Submission to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on Ireland's fourth periodic report](#)

<sup>44</sup> Quote from participant in Community Work Ireland/EAPN Ireland (2024) [Preparatory Workshops: Key Proposals to the Social Inclusion Forum 2024](#)

<sup>45</sup> ESRI (May 2024) [Housing, Health and Happiness: How Inadequate Housing Shapes Child and Parental Wellbeing](#)

<sup>46</sup> Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (2021) [Housing for All – a New Housing Plan for Ireland](#)

<sup>47</sup> Simon Communities of Ireland (2024) [Pre-Budget Submission 2025](#); ESRI (2024) [The National Development Plan in 2023: priorities and capacity](#)



Housing Commission estimated that Ireland faces a housing deficit of up to a quarter of a million homes, between 212,500 and 256,000 homes.<sup>48</sup> The Government has acknowledged that current housing completion targets are inadequate to meet need, but has been slow to change or respond. A review of these targets is due to be published in Autumn 2024. Despite some progress, the housing provision targets set by the Government's *Housing for All* strategy have thus far failed to positively impact in any substantial way on the growing number of people experiencing homelessness, the increasing number of households within the private rented sector who are at risk of poverty, and the number of households for whom homeownership is unlikely to ever be a viable option. The Housing Commission has recommended increasing the stock of social and cost-rental housing to account for 20% of the national stock.<sup>49</sup>

### 3.1.5 Right to Housing

EAPN Ireland is a member of Home for Good, a broad coalition of organisations and individuals calling for the enshrinement of the right to housing in the Constitution. We support the calls of Home for Good, and believe that Constitutional change is an essential underpinning for any successful programme to tackle our housing and homelessness crisis. The Government must commit to holding a referendum to enshrine the right to housing in the Constitution. This fundamental reform is crucial to ensure that the State's planning and decision-making on housing legislation, policy and other measures are designed to move towards a guarantee of access to secure, affordable and suitable homes for all. We support the recommendations put forward by Home for Good, including that a constitutional amendment be a stand-alone right which includes both a recognition of a directly enforceable right to housing and a separate statement of the State's obligation to realise that right within available resources.<sup>50</sup>

### 3.2 Healthcare

Ireland continues to be an outlier in Europe due to its lack of universal healthcare provision. Health inequalities based on socio-economic status persist and are embedded in the Irish health system, and impact most negatively on already disadvantaged and marginalised groups and communities. The UN Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (UN CESCR) recently expressed its concerns about the large disparities between different socio-economic groups in access to healthcare services. Data and research from the CSO and ESRI demonstrate the negative impact on health outcomes, life expectancy and mortality rates experienced by disadvantaged and marginalised socio-economic groups and communities.<sup>51</sup> The EAPN Ireland report, *Giving Health Inequality a Voice*, shows how the social determinants of health, poverty and ill-health intersect to create health inequalities.<sup>52</sup> It finds that the Irish State is failing in its duty to provide adequate healthcare for many disadvantaged and marginalised individuals and groups, with the result that they experience worse health outcomes, including lower life expectancy.<sup>53</sup> The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission has stated that "State efforts to ensure accessible, available, affordable and quality health services are falling significantly short of human rights obligations."<sup>54</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (2024), [Report of the Housing Commission](#)

<sup>49</sup> Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (2024), [Report of the Housing Commission](#)

<sup>50</sup> Home for Good (2022) [Home for Good Submission to the Public Consultation on a Referendum on Housing](#)

<sup>51</sup> Central Statistics Office (2024) [Survey on Income and Living Conditions \(SILC\) Enforced Deprivation 2023](#); ESRI (2022) [Unequal Chances: Inequalities in mortality in Ireland](#)

<sup>52</sup> Deane, A./EAPN Ireland (2020) [Giving Health Inequality A Voice](#)

<sup>53</sup> Deane, A./EAPN Ireland (2020) [Giving Health Inequality A Voice](#)

<sup>54</sup> Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (2024) [Ireland and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: Submission to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on Ireland's fourth periodic report](#)

A significant proportion of Government expenditure goes to providing and financing health and social care services. In Budget 2024, €22.5 billion was allocated to the healthcare sector, representing 21% of total public expenditure.<sup>55</sup> However, despite such significant expenditure, there remain substantial barriers to accessing health and social care services in Ireland for many people. These include high costs, long wait times, and limited availability of some services. For examples, GP charges for people without a medical or GP-visit card are high and vary across the country.<sup>56</sup> Waiting times for publicly funded hospital-based services are high relative to other OECD countries.<sup>57</sup> Community-based health and social care services also remain inadequate.

The shortcomings in the health system have repeatedly been criticised by domestic and international bodies, in particular capacity constraints such as under resourcing, shortages of medical staff, as well as systemic obstacles preventing access to health services for the most marginalised healthcare infrastructure and services for those living in remote or rural areas. The European Commission Country Reports for Ireland continue to highlight the long-standing issues facing the health and long-term care systems as challenges not sufficiently covered within Ireland's Resilience and Recovery Plan.<sup>58</sup>

Particularly concerning is the slow implementation of Sláintecare, the plan for the introduction of a single universal health and social care system in Ireland. The full and prompt implementation of the Sláintecare reforms needs to be prioritised, resourced and delivered, in order to ensure a more equitable universal public healthcare system based on need rather than ability to pay. However, its implementation has experienced major delays and setbacks. Recent ESRI research examines the National Development Plan (NDP), and calls for greater investment in community healthcare without which the move away from heavy reliance on acute care in hospitals cannot happen.<sup>59</sup> The social, economic and environmental determinants of health – in particular socio-economic status and lack of resources – and inequalities of access to public health services impact on health status and outcome.<sup>60</sup> Addressing health inequalities must be a central plank in the reforms, in terms of access and outcomes, and addressing both physical and mental health and the social determinants of health.<sup>61</sup>

### 3.2.1 Disabled People & Healthcare

Disabled people face significant health inequalities, and there is a significant intersection between disability, poor health, and poverty.<sup>62</sup> There are ongoing high levels of unmet need for specialist disability services in Ireland, with long waiting lists, unequal and geographically dependent access, and underfunding being particularly acute and persistent problems.<sup>63</sup> Despite some progress on extending access, the entitlement to access a medical card for recipients of Disability Allowance may be at risk if they secure employment.<sup>64</sup> The accessibility of mainstream health services for disabled people is an ongoing issue, due to lack of integration between specialist disability services and mainstream health services, staff

<sup>55</sup> Department of Health (2023) [Ministers for Health announce budget for the delivery of health services in 2024](#)

<sup>56</sup> ESRI (2024) [The National Development Plan in 2023: priorities and capacity](#)

<sup>57</sup> OECD (2020), [Waiting Times for Health Services: Next in Line](#)

<sup>58</sup> European Commission (2023) [Country Report – Ireland](#)

<sup>59</sup> ESRI (2024) [The National Development Plan in 2023: priorities and capacity](#)

<sup>60</sup> Deane, A./EAPN Ireland (2020) [Giving Health Inequality A Voice](#)

<sup>61</sup> Deane, A./EAPN Ireland (2020) [Giving Health Inequality A Voice](#)

<sup>62</sup> Central Statistics Office (2024), [Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2023](#); Disability Federation of Ireland (2024) [Pre-Budget Submission 2025](#)

<sup>63</sup> Disability Federation of Ireland (2024) [Submission on Disability Issues to inform examination of Ireland's Fourth Report under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#); Disability Federation of Ireland (2024) [Pre-Budget Submission 2025](#)

<sup>64</sup> Disability Federation of Ireland (2024) [Submission on Disability Issues to inform examination of Ireland's Fourth Report under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#)



shortages, lack of disability awareness among healthcare staff, long waiting lists and lack of funding and resources.<sup>65</sup>

### 3.2.2 Travellers and Roma & Healthcare

Travellers and Roma continue to experience stark health inequalities and disproportionately poor health outcomes when compared to the general population.<sup>66</sup> Despite some positive developments in recent years, trends in Traveller health status show Travellers are falling further behind the health of the general population in Ireland.<sup>67</sup> In the most recent Census, 67% of Irish Travellers stated their health status was good or very good, compared with 83% of the total population, while 4% stated they had bad or very bad health, compared with 2% of the total population.<sup>68</sup> Travellers have a lower life expectancy on average, and continue to have higher mortality rates than the general population. Traveller men have a four times higher mortality rate, while Traveller women have a three times higher mortality rate compared to the general population. Suicide is six times the rate of general population. The infant mortality rate for Travellers is 3.5 times the rate of the general population. In order to address the unacceptable health inequalities experienced by the Traveller community, there is an urgent need to address the broader social determinants of Traveller Health, such as employment, education, accommodation and discrimination.

### 3.3 Transport

The availability, affordability, accessibility, and quality of public transport services are essential to ensure people can fully participate in society. Government measures to lower public transport fares and cap school transport fees are beneficial but assume equal access to public transport. However, levels of access to reliable, quality public transport vary across Ireland, particularly between urban and rural areas.<sup>69</sup> People in rural and other underserved areas often lack effective access to public transport.<sup>70</sup> The National Household Travel Survey 2022 found 69% of trips nationwide are made by car, with rural areas more heavily reliant on cars (80%) than urban areas (53% in Dublin City and Suburbs). Public transport usage is higher in urban areas, with higher rates in Dublin City and Suburbs for bus/coach usage (9%) and cycling (5%).<sup>71</sup>

*“In urban areas where there may be more transport options available, affordability remains an issue for many people. If the Government is to seriously support the use of public transport, more needs to be done to ensure its accessibility, availability, affordability and acceptability.”<sup>72</sup>*

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<sup>65</sup> Disability Federation of Ireland (2024) [Submission on Disability Issues to inform examination of Ireland's Fourth Report under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#)

<sup>66</sup> Pavee Point (2024) [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Ireland: Joint Alternative Report by a Coalition of Traveller and Roma Organisations](#); Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (2024) [Ireland and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: Submission to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on Ireland's fourth periodic report](#)

<sup>67</sup> Pavee Point (2024) [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Ireland: Joint Alternative Report by a Coalition of Traveller and Roma Organisations](#); Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (2024) [Ireland and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: Submission to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on Ireland's fourth periodic report](#)

<sup>68</sup> Central Statistics Office (2022) [Census 2022 Profile 5 - Diversity, Migration, Ethnicity, Irish Travellers & Religion](#)

<sup>69</sup> Gilmore, O./TASC (2024) [The State We Are In: Inequality in Ireland 2024](#)

<sup>70</sup> Government of Ireland (2021) [Climate Action Plan 2021](#); Gilmore, O./TASC (2024) [The State We Are In: Inequality in Ireland 2024](#)

<sup>71</sup> National Transport Authority. (2024) [National Household Travel Survey 2022](#)

<sup>72</sup> Quote from participant in Community Work Ireland/EAPN Ireland (2024) [Preparatory Workshops: Key Proposals to the Social Inclusion Forum 2024](#)

These disparities can exacerbate socioeconomic inequality.<sup>73</sup> Inaccessible, unaffordable and unavailable public transport – what is termed ‘transport poverty’ – contributes to and exacerbates social exclusion.<sup>74</sup> This is particularly the case in remote and rural areas which are underserved by public transport, with rural households often facing higher transport related costs than urban households.<sup>75</sup> The Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) research shows that additional transport costs contribute significantly to the higher cost for rural households to meet the same socially acceptable minimum standard of living as those in urban areas. The free travel pass removes the need for private transport related costs for urban based older adult households in the MESL expenditure budgets. Meeting the transport needs of rural older adult households requires a car. Consequently, car related costs (fuel, maintenance, insurance, etc.) add an additional €80 per week to the MESL budget for older people living in a rural area.

*“From a rural perspective, without a robust public transport system in place for people in rural areas, it adds to the cost of living and puts people at risk of poverty.”<sup>76</sup>*

Limited access to public transport can also limit access to essential services such as healthcare; to employment and work opportunities; to education and training; and to general day to day business.<sup>77</sup> The lack of accessible public transport is particularly an issue for disabled people. The lack of public transport or difficulty affording public transport is a major challenge for people living in international protection accommodation.<sup>78</sup>

*“A one size fits all approach is not necessarily going to be suitable. Transport that is flexible for the needs of people in the community is what is needed including addressing the access needs of older people and disabled people.”<sup>79</sup>*

*“The delivery of services by public transport providers must ensure a focus on accessibility as a requirement - this includes in terms of location, quantity and quality of public transport options suitable training for all employees, effective complaints mechanisms and remedies.”<sup>80</sup>*

### 3.4 Early Childhood Education and Care

Research has shown that adequately investing in high-quality, affordable, accessible and inclusive early childhood education and care (ECEC) has beneficial effects for children’s developmental outcomes.<sup>81</sup> Affordable childcare also serves a vitally important role in facilitating parental employment, which in turn can reduce child poverty. However, the level of

<sup>73</sup> Gilmore, O./TASC (2024) [The State We Are In: Inequality in Ireland 2024](#)

<sup>74</sup> P. Carroll, R. Benevenuto, B. Caulfield (2021) [Identifying hotspots of transport disadvantage and car dependency in rural Ireland](#), Transport Policy, Volume 101

<sup>75</sup> Vincentian MESL Research Centre (2024) [MESL 2024: Annual Update](#)

<sup>76</sup> Quote from participant in Community Work Ireland/EAPN Ireland (2024) [Preparatory Workshops: Key Proposals to the Social Inclusion Forum 2024](#)

<sup>77</sup> Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (2024) [Ireland and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: Submission to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on Ireland’s fourth periodic report](#); R. Greaney and K. Harrahill, [Fair Clare: Securing Socio-Economic Rights and a Just Transition in County Clare](#)

<sup>78</sup> Irish Refugee Council (2023) [Living in International Protection Accommodation: Exploring the Experiences of Families and Children in Direct Provision](#).

<sup>79</sup> Quote from participant in Community Work Ireland/EAPN Ireland (2024) [Preparatory Workshops: Key Proposals to the Social Inclusion Forum 2024](#)

<sup>80</sup> Quote from participant in Community Work Ireland/EAPN Ireland (2024) [Preparatory Workshops: Key Proposals to the Social Inclusion Forum 2024](#)

<sup>81</sup> ESRI (2023) [Early childhood education and care in Ireland and Northern Ireland](#)

public expenditure on ECEC per child in Ireland, while growing, is still lower than the EU average and significantly below the highest spending countries.<sup>82</sup>

Affordability, accessibility and flexibility are major barriers for families who require ECEC, especially for low-income households. Currently, ECEC costs in Ireland are among the highest in both the EU and the OECD, representing a significant financial burden, and leaving many low-income families struggling to cover other basic necessities and with a lack of options.<sup>83</sup> While investments made in recent Budgets in the childcare sector are welcome, childcare costs remain unaffordable for many families.<sup>84</sup>

Due to the gender-imbalance of care duties, women are disproportionately impacted.<sup>85</sup> Lack of quality, accessible, inclusive and affordable Early Childhood Education and Care is the single biggest barrier to women's equal participation in society, including their ability to access opportunities and participate in training, education and decent employment.<sup>86</sup> The lack of affordability has a particularly negative impact on one parent families, which are primarily female headed households. Many are simply unable to afford childcare services, with a 2019 report suggesting that almost 60% of one parent families were unable to access childcare services due to financial reasons.<sup>87</sup>

Ireland has the highest level of private provision of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) of any OECD country.<sup>88</sup> In contrast to many other OECD countries, almost all preschool provision in Ireland is either in the private for-profit sector or the community and voluntary sector, but funded by the State. Despite Government financial supports for families, the reliance on private provision means that the cost of ECEC remains high.

Many families are unable to access ECEC, due to lack of flexibility and the limited number of spaces available – particularly for children aged under two years old. Rural and disadvantaged urban areas are also underserved by private providers where there are less incentives to operate. Increasing costs and lack of places and provision, particularly in certain areas and among marginalised groups, is making access to ECEC increasingly difficult for many families.

Low pay and poor conditions in the sector are driving ongoing challenges in terms of staff recruitment and retention which, in turn, poses a significant challenge to quality service provision.<sup>89</sup>

EAPN Ireland is a member of Together for Public, the recently formed alliance for a public system of early childhood education and care. The alliance outlines the key components of a public system as:<sup>90</sup>

- Guaranteeing a place for every child through legislation, starting from whenever parents need it and including school aged childcare;
- Not for profit, with all investment directly benefiting children's education and care;
- Accessible and available to all children, including children with additional needs, children living in rural areas, and children in disadvantaged areas;

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<sup>82</sup> ESRI (2023) [Early childhood education and care in Ireland and Northern Ireland](#); OECD (2024) [Education at a Glance 2024: OECD Indicators](#)

<sup>83</sup> OECD (2024) [Education at a Glance 2024: OECD Indicators](#)

<sup>84</sup> National Women's Council (2024) [A Feminist Analysis of Budget 2025](#)

<sup>85</sup> National Women's Council (2024) [Pre-Budget Submission 2025](#)

<sup>86</sup> National Women's Council (2024) [Pre-Budget Submission 2025](#)

<sup>87</sup> One Family (2024) [Pre-Budget Submission 2025](#); Society of St Vincent de Paul (2019) [Working, Parenting and Struggling? An analysis of the employment and living conditions of one parent families in Ireland](#)

<sup>88</sup> Pobal (2022) [Annual early years sector profile report 2020/2021](#)

<sup>89</sup> SIPTU (2024) [Early Years Professionals Survey 2024](#)

<sup>90</sup> National Women's Council (2024) [Alliance of 30 organisations calls for public system of early childhood education and care](#)



- Ensuring decent pay and working conditions for early years educators;
- Providing flexibility and choice for parents and allowing in particular women and all parents to participate fully in society; and
- Combining public childcare provision with better paid and longer family leave, giving parents real choices in terms of caring for their children and work life balance.

## 4. EMPLOYMENT

Poverty is deeply connected to (un)employment status. Those most at risk of poverty in 2023 were people unable to work due to long-standing health problems (27.3%), while over a quarter of people who were unemployed (25.5%) had incomes below the poverty line.<sup>91</sup> Almost two fifths of people who were unemployed (37.8%) were living in deprivation.<sup>92</sup> The consistent poverty rate was 8.9% for persons in households where no one is at work.<sup>93</sup>

### 4.1 Unemployment

The most recent information for Quarter 2 of 2024, shows 131,200 people were unemployed, an increase of 9,100 people over the year.<sup>94</sup> The unemployment rate was 4.6%, up from 4.4% in Q2 2023. There were 26,900 people in long-term unemployment (unemployed for 12 months or longer), 5,400 fewer people than Q2 of 2023. The long-term unemployment rate was 0.9%, down from 1.2% a year earlier. Over a fifth (21.3%) of unemployed persons were in long-term unemployment, which is down from 27.6% a year earlier. The unemployment rate for women was 4.5%, up from 4.2% a year earlier. The unemployment rate for men was 4.6%. The Youth Unemployment Rate (15-24 years) was 12%, down from 12.2% in Q2 2023.

### 4.2 Full Employment?

The unemployment rate has consistently been below 5% since early 2022, which has led some commentators to describe the labour market as operating at 'full employment'. Despite high employment levels, many of the most marginalised and disadvantaged groups continue to be disproportionately affected by unemployment and underemployment.<sup>95</sup> Despite the existence of a number of targeted strategies such as the *Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities* and the *National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy*, and commitments in broader strategies such as *Pathways to Work* and the *Roadmap for Social Inclusion*, the employment levels of these and other groups experiencing socio-economic exclusion in society has not significantly improved.

The employment rate for disabled people is 32.6%, almost 20% below the EU average of 51.3%.<sup>96</sup> The disability employment gap was 38.6% in 2023, among the highest in the EU where the average was 24.4%.<sup>97</sup> Irish one parent households have one of the lowest employment rates in the EU at 67.9%.<sup>98</sup> The employment rate for Travellers was 18% and the unemployment rate was 61%. The employment rate for Roma was 61%, while their unemployment rate was 17%. This is compared to a 4.5% unemployment rate for the

<sup>91</sup> Central Statistics Office (2024) [Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2023](#)

<sup>92</sup> Central Statistics Office (2024) [Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2023](#)

<sup>93</sup> Central Statistics Office (2024) [Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2023](#)

<sup>94</sup> Central Statistics Office (2024) [Labour Force Survey Quarter 2 2024](#)

<sup>95</sup> UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (2024) [Concluding Observations on the fourth periodic review of Ireland](#)

<sup>96</sup> European Disability Forum (2023) [European Human Rights Report Issue 7 – The Rights to Work: The employment situation of persons with disabilities in Europe](#)

<sup>97</sup> European Disability Forum (2023) [European Human Rights Report Issue 7 – The Rights to Work: The employment situation of persons with disabilities in Europe](#)

<sup>98</sup> European Commission (2023) [Country Report – Ireland](#)

population overall.<sup>99</sup> Census 2022 data indicates that 61% of Travellers and 16.5% of Roma 'in the labour force' were 'unemployed'.<sup>100</sup> Of the 9,038 Travellers in the labour force, 5,520 were looking for their first job or had lost or given up their previous job. Of the 8,687 Roma in the labour force, 1,433 were looking for their first job or had lost or given up their previous job.

### 4.3 Barriers

The UN CESCER expressed concern about “the structural and institutional barriers” which are hindering marginalised and disadvantaged groups from accessing the labour market. More needs to be done by the Government, including via targeted supports, to address the multiple barriers to employment, including discrimination and bias, experienced by under-represented and marginalised groups in society, particularly women, people with low skills, single parents, disabled people, and Roma and Travellers.<sup>101</sup>

The INOU (Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed) has highlighted a wide range of issues that disadvantage people who are long-term unemployed or distant from the labour market, including inflexible rules in the welfare system, a need for more practical supports including for confidence and mental health, and disadvantaged localities such as rural areas.<sup>102</sup> The INOU has called for a more both the social welfare system and employment services to be more supportive, better resourced, and person-centred.<sup>103</sup> It has also called on the Government to “deliver wrap around employment and support services that really meet the needs of people who are unemployed, regardless of whether or not they are a social welfare payment, and to support them to access decent work while appropriately addressing any barriers they experience.”<sup>104</sup>

*“Review the public employment system and linked programmes so that they work from a person-centred culture that provides a holistic approach and tailored supports that people need and treats everyone with respect and as adults.”<sup>105</sup>*

*“Adequately train and resource support services to ensure the provision of services considers the needs of people who are furthest behind.”<sup>106</sup>*

### 4.4 Living Wage

The Government is moving to introduce a national ‘living wage’ to replace the national minimum wage from 2026. The living wage will be set at 60% of the median wage which will support the implementation of the EU Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages, but will not be based on ensuring workers have a wage that meets the cost of living. This national ‘living wage’ is different from the ‘Living Wage’ calculated by the Living Wage Technical Group (comprised of civil society organisations, trade unions and academics), based on the cost of living as calculated by the Minimum Essential Standard of Living reference budget methodology.<sup>107</sup> A minimum living wage of €14.75 per hour is recommended for the period 2024-2025, by the Living Wage Technical Group. This updated figure has been calculated as the amount needed to make a minimum acceptable standard of living possible for someone

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<sup>99</sup> European Commission (2024) [Country Report – Ireland](#)

<sup>100</sup> Central Statistics Office (2023) [Census 2022 Profile 7 – Employment, Occupations and Commuting](#).

<sup>101</sup> European Commission (2023) [Country Report – Ireland](#)

<sup>102</sup> INOU (2024) [Pre-Budget 2025 Submission](#)

<sup>103</sup> INOU (2024) [Pre-Budget 2025 Submission](#)

<sup>104</sup> INOU (2024) [Pre-Budget 2025 Submission](#)

<sup>105</sup> Quote from participant in Community Work Ireland/EAPN Ireland (2024) [Preparatory Workshops: Key Proposals to the Social Inclusion Forum 2024](#)

<sup>106</sup> Quote from participant in Community Work Ireland/EAPN Ireland (2024) [Preparatory Workshops: Key Proposals to the Social Inclusion Forum 2024](#)

<sup>107</sup> Living Wage Technical Group (2024) [Living Wage Update 2024/25](#)

working full-time. In Budget 2025, the National Minimum Wage was increased by €0.80 per hour to €13.50. While this is a welcome step, it is significantly off the amount needed to meet a minimum acceptable standard of living recommended by the Living Wage Technical Group.

## 4.5 Decent Work

In addition to a living wage, the availability of ‘decent work’ must be addressed in the context of preventing and addressing poverty. Decent work includes appropriate and safe working conditions, where the rights of employees are respected and enacted, regular and consistent hours, as well as access to a wage that meets the cost of living. Decent work at adequate wages is crucial to reduce poverty. But solely or primarily focusing on work is not enough: in-work poverty continues to be a reality. More than one third (33.3%) of those who experienced enforced deprivation in 2023 were in work.<sup>108</sup> One in five (20.2%) people in consistent poverty were in work.<sup>109</sup> We need to ensure that everyone, in or out of the labour market, has sufficient resources to live a life in dignity.

## 5. SOCIAL PROTECTION: TOWARD A SYSTEMIC APPROACH

### 5.1 Introduction

Comprehensive, adequate and accessible social protection for all is a human right. It is also a prerequisite for combatting poverty and social exclusion, and plays a critical role in providing support to households with inadequate incomes. Thus, it is also crucial to the fulfilment of Ireland’s anti-poverty commitments, including under the *Programme for Government: Our Shared Future*,<sup>110</sup> the *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025*,<sup>111</sup> the European Pillar of Social Rights,<sup>112</sup> and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).<sup>113</sup>

While the most recent Central Statistics Office *Survey on Income and Living Conditions* (CSO SILC 2023) shows progress towards these targets, the Government’s anti-poverty commitments cannot be achieved without a sustained and systemic approach that tackles the root causes of poverty and social exclusion. A systemic approach to social protection would be predicated on adequate income for all, accessibility, and a comprehensive, human rights-based, person-centred active inclusion approach. As such, it should help to guarantee a minimum standard of living and a dignified and decent life for all, and enable people to fully participate in society. Social protection should be recognised as a human right and a social good, and reflected as such in social policy.

### 5.2 Ireland’s Social Protection System

The Irish social protection system is primarily a system of income supports, which consists of three main types of payments. These are: social insurance, which is based on Pay-Related Social Insurance contributions (PRSI); social assistance, which is means-tested and based on household assets and income; and universal payments, which are paid regardless of means or contribution history. While Ireland’s social welfare system is generally classified as a ‘liberal’ welfare regime, it is less easily categorised – rather than being ‘a pure type’ welfare regime, it is a relatively hybrid system, which incorporates influences common to other European systems.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Central Statistics Office (2024) [Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2023](#)

<sup>109</sup> Central Statistics Office (2024) [Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2023](#)

<sup>110</sup> Government of Ireland (2020) [Programme for Government: Our Shared Future](#)

<sup>111</sup> Government of Ireland (2020). [Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020 – 2025: Ambitions, Goals, Commitments](#).

<sup>112</sup> European Commission (2017) [European Pillar of Social Rights](#).

<sup>113</sup> UN General Assembly (2015) [Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#).

<sup>114</sup> NESF (2020) [The Future of the Irish Social Welfare System: Participation and Protection](#); Murphy, M.P. (2021) [A New Welfare Imaginary for the Island of Ireland](#). *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 32(2), 532-557



### 5.3 Adequacy Of Social Protection

In its *Programme for Government*, the Coalition Government committed to protect core weekly social welfare rates.<sup>115</sup> However, while the nominal value of core social welfare rates has increased, there has been a reduction in their real value since 2020. Ireland's social welfare support is not based on the cost of living and what is adequate to lift people out of poverty. Both the CSO Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) and the Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) research have consistently shown that many people on social welfare are not in receipt of an income that allows them to achieve a decent standard of living and are living in poverty. If the Government is serious about protecting core weekly social welfare rates, our social protection system must ensure that everyone, at whatever stage in life and whether working or not, has an income that allows them to live with dignity and take a full part in society. To do so, it must effectively address inadequacy in the social welfare system, so that core rates meet the cost of living and ensure income adequacy.

Ensuring income adequacy is crucial for the fulfilment of Ireland's anti-poverty commitments, and is fundamental to addressing and preventing poverty and social exclusion. The right to an adequate income which allows people to participate fully in society and to live with dignity is enshrined in international human rights law and standards, and the European Pillar of Social Rights. This right does not differentiate regarding the source of income, whether through employment or social welfare. In this regard, Ireland's social protection system must ensure that everyone has access to an adequate income.

The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, in its recent Concluding Observations on the Fourth Periodic Report of Ireland, highlighted the urgency of ensuring everyone has an adequate income for a decent life, recommending that both wages and social welfare supports be linked to the cost of living.<sup>116</sup> The adequacy of income supports is also one of the five principles adopted by the Commission on Taxation and Welfare to inform the recommendations in its report published in 2022.<sup>117</sup> This reinforces the findings of the Commission on Social Welfare in 1986, which in its report included adequacy as one of five guiding principles to inform the review of the welfare system, stating that 'payment level should be adequate in relation to prevailing living standards'.<sup>118</sup>

*"A crucial issue is income adequacy and ensuring people are provided with an adequate income to live on. This includes ensuring that people who may never be able to work are still able to live a decent life, and that payments match that aim."*<sup>119</sup>

In order to ensure that social protection is adequate in the medium to long-term, structural social welfare increases must be part of a broader systemic approach to benchmark our system to an adequate level and allow people to live with dignity. The Government must benchmark all core social welfare rates in Ireland against a level which is adequate to lift people above the poverty line and provide them with a Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL).<sup>120</sup> The levels would also need to be updated annually to ensure they continue to meet that standard.

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<sup>115</sup> Government of Ireland (2020) [Programme for Government: Our Shared Future](#)

<sup>116</sup> UN Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (2024) [Concluding Observations on the Fourth Periodic Report of Ireland](#)

<sup>117</sup> Government of Ireland (2022) [Foundations for the Future: Report of the Commission on Taxation and Welfare](#).

<sup>118</sup> Department of Social Welfare (1986), [Report of the Commission on Social Welfare](#)

<sup>119</sup> Quote from participant in Community Work Ireland/EAPN Ireland (2024) [Preparatory Workshops: Key Proposals to the Social Inclusion Forum 2024](#)

<sup>120</sup> Vincentian MESL Research Centre, [www.budgeting.ie](http://www.budgeting.ie)

As noted above, poverty rates remain consistently and disproportionately high for many disadvantaged and marginalised groups. As such, additional payments and adjustments beyond changes to core welfare rates will be required to ensure these groups are not trapped in poverty and social exclusion. The additional costs faced by disabled people must be addressed through the introduction of a weekly Cost of Disability payment.<sup>121</sup> To tackle in-work poverty, it is crucial that the relativities between thresholds and earnings disregards for in-work income supports are maintained in line with changes to the National Minimum Wage.<sup>122</sup> The State Pension is often the main, and in many cases only, source of income for the majority of older people. It must be benchmarked, along with adequate adjustments to additional income supports, in order to deliver income adequacy for its recipients.<sup>123</sup>

## 5.4 Accessing Social Protection

Members have shared with us challenges and procedural barriers faced by individuals accessing social protection, both during initial application processes and in the appeals system. Some of the key issues raised include procedural barriers, inconsistencies in decision making, inconsistencies in levels of support or reasonable accommodation, high refusal rates which are often overturned on appeal, perception of bias, dehumanising treatment, and lack of transparency.<sup>124</sup> People who are long-term unemployed or distant from the labour market face a number of barriers in accessing the welfare system, including inflexible rules, the lack of provision of practical supports such as to address confidence and mental health, and help with travel costs.<sup>125</sup> The system has been criticised for failing to adequately address the needs of structurally vulnerable or disadvantaged groups such as disabled people, migrants and other ethnic minorities, children and young people, and people with language, literacy or digital skills challenges.<sup>126</sup> Research demonstrates the challenges people face accessing their rights within Ireland's social protection system, which is described as "invasive, time consuming, confusing and in many cases strict and unempathetic."<sup>127</sup>

### 5.4.1 Cliff-Edges

Cliff-edges in the social protection system can result in individuals losing eligibility for certain social welfare supports and being left financially worse off due to entering employment, increasing their working hours, seeking a promotion, or taking a pay rise.<sup>128</sup> This has implications for in-work poverty. For example, where means-tests, thresholds and earnings disregards for in-work income supports have not been increased in line with changes to the National Minimum Wage, this can affect eligibility for social protection supports.<sup>129</sup>

### 5.4.2 Conditionalities

Certain conditions attached to social welfare, including the Habitual Residence Condition and Housing Circular 41/2012/419, effectively deny or at least impede access to some social

<sup>121</sup> Department of Social Protection/Indecon (2021) [The Cost of Disability in Ireland – Research Report](#).

<sup>122</sup> Vincentian MESL Research Centre (2024) [MESL Annual Update 2024](#)

<sup>123</sup> Age Action (2023) [Spotlight on Income in Older Age: The State of Ageing in Ireland 2023](#).

<sup>124</sup> Community Work Ireland & EAPN Ireland (2024) [Key Proposals to the Social Inclusion Forum \(SIF\) 2024](#); ATD Ireland (2023) [Breaking Barriers: A participatory approach to defining socio-economic discrimination](#); Community Law & Mediation (2023) [Submission to the public Consultation on Changes to the Social Welfare Appeals Regulations](#). Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (2024) [Ireland and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: Submission to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on Ireland's fourth periodic review](#)

<sup>125</sup> INOU (2024) [Pre-Budget 2025 Submission](#)

<sup>126</sup> Community Law & Mediation (2023) [Submission to the public Consultation on Changes to the Social Welfare Appeals Regulations](#)

<sup>127</sup> ATD Ireland (2023) [Breaking Barriers: A participatory approach to defining socio-economic discrimination](#)

<sup>128</sup> Government of Ireland (2022) [Foundations for the Future: Report of the Commission on Taxation and Welfare](#).

<sup>129</sup> Vincentian MESL Research Centre (2024) [MESL Annual Update 2024](#)

protection services for certain disadvantaged or structurally vulnerable groups, including Child Benefit, Disability Allowance and housing supports. These conditionalities have a disproportionately discriminatory effect on disabled people, Travellers, Roma, migrants and international protection applicants, domestic violence survivors, and people experiencing homelessness.<sup>130</sup> These conditionalities have been repeatedly criticised by UN Treaty Monitoring Bodies, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC), the Ombudsman for Children,<sup>131</sup> and civil society organisations. Despite this, it is notable that the Irish State has not addressed the discriminatory impact these conditions have on specific communities, and has instead cited their universal application.

*“Address flaws and shift the culture, approach and priorities in the social protection system that currently does not adequately protect people and avoid a culture that makes people avoid availing of opportunities for fear of losing secondary benefits and/or fear that if the opportunity does not work out, it will be impossible to get back in the door.”<sup>132</sup>*

*“Increase focus on addressing barriers, such as bias and stigma and more effectively tackle all forms of discrimination in the employment system. These are key reasons that people cannot access supports, employment or education. Currently, however, it appears to be the case that the focus is on the individual as “unwilling” and treating people with suspicion, rather than on systemic issues and barriers.”<sup>133</sup>*

## 5.5 Ireland’s Social Protection System – Systemic Shortcomings

Historical and political dynamics have shaped the evolution of Ireland’s social protection system, and inform how it has been designed and operates.<sup>134</sup> Ireland’s social protection system was relatively underdeveloped for much of its existence, in comparison to other similar European countries. The reliance on, at various times, the Catholic Church, the private sector and/or NGOs to provide core services demonstrates “a reticence by design within the executive to take on a centralised role in welfare provision.”<sup>135</sup> In contrast to many other European countries, Ireland’s social welfare system heavily relies on cash income supports rather than service provision in meeting basic needs.<sup>136</sup>

### 5.5.1 The State’s Approach to Social Protection

While adequate and accessible social protection is a human right, the Irish State has tended to view and frame these entitlements, as well as broader economic, social and cultural rights

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<sup>130</sup> Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (2024) [Ireland and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: Submission to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on Ireland’s fourth periodic review](#), 7 February; UN Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (2024) [Concluding Observations on the Fourth Periodic Report of Ireland](#); Ombudsman for Children (2024) [Ombudsman for Children’s Office report to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#)

<sup>131</sup> Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (2024) [Ireland and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: Submission to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on Ireland’s fourth periodic review](#), 7 February; UN Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (2024) [Concluding Observations on the Fourth Periodic Report of Ireland](#); Ombudsman for Children (2024) [Ombudsman for Children’s Office report to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#).

<sup>132</sup> Quote from participant in Community Work Ireland/EAPN Ireland (2024) [Preparatory Workshops: Key Proposals to the Social Inclusion Forum 2024](#)

<sup>133</sup> Quote from participant in Community Work Ireland/EAPN Ireland (2024) [Preparatory Workshops: Key Proposals to the Social Inclusion Forum 2024](#)

<sup>134</sup> Dukelow F, Whelan J, Bolton R. (2022) [Introduction: Interrogating Welfare Stigma](#). *Social Policy and Society*. 21(4):627-631

<sup>135</sup> Fitzpatrick, C., & O’Sullivan, C. (2021) [Comparing Social Security Provision in the North & South of Ireland: Past Developments and Future Challenges](#) *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, 32(2), 283-313

<sup>136</sup> NESC (2020) [The Future of the Irish Social Welfare System: Participation and Protection](#)



as charity.<sup>137</sup> This is directly linked to the Irish Government's resistance to give justiciable economic, social and cultural rights a constitutional footing. Shortcomings in the social protection system are linked to and reflective of broader shortcomings in effectively addressing the root causes of poverty, social exclusion and inequality. IHREC has criticised the State's "continuing failure to address the root causes of the enduring crises in health, housing, poverty and the cost of living with forward looking, innovative and sustainable solutions, resorting instead to short-term, emergency and temporary measures."<sup>138</sup> While acknowledging the efforts made to tackle poverty and social exclusion, The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has recommended that Ireland adopt "a multidimensional national action plan to eradicate poverty and to address...the root causes of poverty...ensuring the inclusion of clear and measurable targets, the allocation of adequate resources for its implementation and effective mechanisms for coordination among national and local governments."<sup>139</sup> The Irish social protection and taxation systems significantly mitigate Ireland's high levels of market inequality.<sup>140</sup> However, the State has consistently failed to address the underlying problem and causes of these high levels of market inequality. As a result, while the at-risk-of-poverty rate has declined, the deprivation rate has increased and many people continue to experience inadequate living standards and high levels of precarity.<sup>141</sup>

## 5.5.2 The State's Approach to Setting Social Protection Payments and Levels

Ireland has an ad-hoc system for setting social protection payments and levels, whereby reforms and changes are announced – usually via flat-rate increases – in the annual Budget. This approach does not necessarily address the needs of recipients, and does not systematically account for changes in the cost of living or inflation in any consistent way.<sup>142</sup> This discretionary system also means that such decisions are dependent upon political will and this can be particularly evident in the nature of decisions made during election cycles. This approach is also echoed in the Irish State's emergency, reactive response to crises, which has tended to be through the introduction of once-off relief measures, rather than addressing the root causes through sustainable planning and financing.<sup>143</sup> While they may be necessary at the time, such short-term and reactive responses have tended to impede or preclude long-term policy goals.<sup>144</sup>

## 5.5.3 The 'Gendered' Dimension of Ireland's Social Protection System

There is also a distinctly 'gendered' dimension to how Ireland's social protection system operates. Ireland's social protection system is rooted in a 'male breadwinner' approach which continues to inform a number of schemes.<sup>145</sup> The welfare state in Ireland developed mainly over the course of the twentieth century, at a time when fertility rates were high, and care and

<sup>137</sup> Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (2024) [Ireland and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: Submission to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on Ireland's fourth periodic review](#)

<sup>138</sup> Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (2024) [Ireland and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: Submission to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on Ireland's fourth periodic review](#)

<sup>139</sup> UN Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (2024) [Concluding Observations on the Fourth Periodic Report of Ireland](#)

<sup>140</sup> Gilmore, O./TASC (2024) [The State We Are In: TASC Inequality Report 2024](#)

<sup>141</sup> Gilmore, O./TASC (2024) [The State We Are In: TASC Inequality Report 2024](#)

<sup>142</sup> Select Committee for Budgetary Oversight (2022) [Report on Indexation of the Taxation and Social Protection System](#)

<sup>143</sup> Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (2024) [Ireland and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: Submission to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on Ireland's fourth periodic review](#)

<sup>144</sup> NES (2020) [The Future of the Irish Social Welfare System: Participation and Protection](#)

<sup>145</sup> NES (2021) [Ireland's Social Welfare System: Gender, Family and Class](#)

household management was typically carried out by a full-time female carer.<sup>146</sup> Ireland is characterised by a weak care infrastructure, with a high reliance on private or familial care rather than a public system of care.<sup>147</sup> This has led to primarily female lone parents being disproportionately at risk of poverty.<sup>148</sup> Although EU membership required reforms to this system, significant male breadwinner legacies remain in the Irish tax and welfare system.<sup>149</sup> One such example is the 'qualified adult' system, whereby payments to two-parent families comprise a payment for the main claimant and a Qualified Adult (QA) payment to additional adults in the household. A recent study found that 90% of 'qualified adults' are women.<sup>150</sup> The National Women's Council has called for an individualised approach, arguing that the present system creates "a relationship of dependency".<sup>151</sup> Because 'qualified adults' do not receive an income in their own right, they are excluded from many active labour market programmes that require a core social protection payment.

### 5.5.4 Discrimination, Stigma and Bias in the Social Protection System

The austerity period following the global financial crisis of 2008 had a major impact on the Irish social protection system.<sup>152</sup> Welfare conditionality, means testing and employment activation became key features of unemployment benefit and within the Irish social protection system after the financial crash.<sup>153</sup> Ireland moved toward utilising the social welfare system to "activate" and "responsibilise" the unemployed, albeit in a less severe manner than the UK.<sup>154</sup> Ireland's social welfare system shifted to a more conditional 'work first' form of activation policy.<sup>155</sup> This was coupled with an emphasis on fraud prevention and an increasing narrative of benefit deviance that sought to problematise the behaviour of social welfare claimants.<sup>156</sup> Researchers have suggested that these shifts "altered the nature of focus on social welfare provision and the relationship between state and claimant."<sup>157</sup> The influence of austerity policies has not gone away – the framing used during this period still informs much of the approach to social protection we see today.

### 5.5.5 Retrogressive Policies, Stigmatising Discourse and Narratives

In the years since the 2008 global financial crash, retrogressive policies have significantly impacted Ireland's social protection system, eroding the rights of people who are unemployed,

<sup>146</sup> NESC (2021) [Ireland's Social Welfare System: Gender, Family and Class](#); Murphy, M.P. (2021) [A New Welfare Imaginary for the Island of Ireland](#). *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 32(2), 532-557; National Women's Council (2024) [National Women's Council Pre-Budget Submission 2025](#)

<sup>147</sup> NESC (2021) [Ireland's Social Welfare System: Gender, Family and Class](#); Murphy, M.P. (2021) [A New Welfare Imaginary for the Island of Ireland](#). *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 32(2), 532-557; National Women's Council (2024) [National Women's Council Pre-Budget Submission 2025](#)

<sup>148</sup> Murphy, M.P. (2021). [A New Welfare Imaginary for the Island of Ireland](#). *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 32(2), 532-557

<sup>149</sup> Murphy, M.P. (2021). [A New Welfare Imaginary for the Island of Ireland](#). *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 32(2), 532-557

<sup>150</sup> NESC (2021) [Ireland's Social Welfare System: Gender, Family and Class](#)

<sup>151</sup> National Women's Council (2024) [National Women's Council Pre-Budget Submission 2025](#)

<sup>152</sup> Dukelow, Fiona and Considine, Mairead (2014) ["Between Retrenchment and Recalibration: The Impact of Austerity on the Irish Social Protection System."](#) *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 41: Iss. 2, Art. 5.

<sup>153</sup> Grubb, D., Singh, S. and Tergeist, P. (2009), ["Activation Policies in Ireland"](#), *OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers*, No. 75, OECD Publishing, Paris; Whelan, J. (2021) [Work and thrive or claim and skive: Experiencing the 'toxic symbiosis' of worklessness and welfare reciprocity in Ireland](#) *Irish Journal of Sociology*, 29(1), 3-31

<sup>154</sup> Fitzpatrick, C. and O'Sullivan, C. ["Comparing Social Security Provision North and South of Ireland: Past Developments and Future Challenges."](#) *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, vol. 32 no. 2, 2021, p. 283-313.

<sup>155</sup> Murphy, M.P. (2021). [A New Welfare Imaginary for the Island of Ireland](#). *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 32(2), 532-557

<sup>156</sup> Fitzpatrick, C. and O'Sullivan, C. ["Comparing Social Security Provision North and South of Ireland: Past Developments and Future Challenges."](#) *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, vol. 32 no. 2, 2021, p. 283-313

<sup>157</sup> Fitzpatrick, C. and O'Sullivan, C. ["Comparing Social Security Provision North and South of Ireland: Past Developments and Future Challenges."](#) *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, vol. 32 no. 2, 2021, p. 283-313

migrants, disabled people and women.<sup>158</sup> Concerns have been raised by national and international human rights bodies, as well as civil society groups about stigmatising discourses and narratives around social welfare, including by Irish politicians, public officials, and the media.<sup>159</sup> For example, one parent families in Ireland have been historically marginalised, and continue to face stigmatisation. A 2022 survey looking at perceived attitudes to lone parents revealed that 80% of lone parents have experienced stigma or judgemental attitudes due to their family type.<sup>160</sup> Of the respondents who had experienced negative attitudes, 39.89% experienced them in their engagement with Social Protection Services. In 2020, the Irish Examiner reported on intimidation and harassment in the Irish social welfare system.<sup>161</sup> The investigation showed that the system of social welfare inspection can leave mothers in receipt of single-parent payments vulnerable to abuse of power, with unannounced visits and searches of personal possessions, stigmatisation, privacy rights violations, intimidation, harassment, humiliation and shaming.

### 5.5.6 Socio-Economic Discrimination

A major barrier to accessibility is the institutional socio-economic discrimination people face from the State and in its laws and policies.<sup>162</sup> Research has found that the social protection system is an area of public life in which people often face barriers due to socio-economic discrimination.<sup>163</sup> Welfare stigma is particularly associated with the liberal welfare regime characteristics which are a feature of the Irish social protection system, and has been heightened in the aftermath of the global financial crisis and the subsequent period of austerity.<sup>164</sup> The Add the 10<sup>th</sup> Alliance (of which EAPN Ireland is a member) states: “Current labour market practices, social welfare conditionality and neoliberal work-centric attitudes have gradually engendered barriers for those in, or approaching poverty, to rights and social inclusion”.<sup>165</sup>

The frequency with which discrimination is experienced by social welfare recipients has led some to question whether this is a feature rather than a flaw of the system. Members tell us that bias, stigma and discrimination in the social protection system and employment services are barriers that prevent people accessing supports, reporting an overt focus on the individual as “unwilling” and treating people with suspicion, rather than on the systemic issues and barriers they face.<sup>166</sup> Socio-economic discrimination is caused by a combination of lack of understanding around the experiences of people living in or facing poverty and exclusion, deep societal inequalities, and government policy.<sup>167</sup>

The lack of understanding of the reality and barriers faced by people experiencing poverty can lead to negative stereotypes and a tendency to “blame” and stigmatise people for their situation. Welfare fraud rhetoric and debates about whether or not the welfare state structure provides ‘incentives’ for people to withdraw from the labour force create a false dichotomy between welfare recipients as ‘deserving’ or ‘undeserving’, which can also weaken support for

<sup>158</sup> Fitzpatrick, C., & O’Sullivan, C. (2021). [Comparing Social Security Provision North and South of Ireland: Past Developments and Future Challenges](#). *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 32(2), 283-313.

<sup>159</sup> Power MJ, Devereux E, Ryan M. (2020) [Framing and Shaming: The 2017 Welfare Cheats, Cheat Us All Campaign](#). *Social Policy and Society*. 21(4):646-65

<sup>160</sup> One Family (2022) [Survey marking 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of One Family reveals negative attitudes continue towards one-parent families](#)

<sup>161</sup> Moore, A (2020) [Single mothers on welfare feel ‘bullied’ by inspectors](#), Irish Examiner, 19 October; Moore, A. (2020) [Overreach of power: Intimidation and harassment in the social welfare system](#), Irish Examiner, 19 October

<sup>162</sup> ATD Ireland (2023) [Breaking Barriers: A participatory approach to defining socio-economic discrimination](#).

<sup>163</sup> ATD Ireland (2019) [Does it only happen to me? Living in the shadows of socio-economic discrimination](#).

<sup>164</sup> Bolton, R., Whelan, J. and Dukelow, F. (2022) [‘What Can Welfare Stigma Do?’](#), *Social Policy and Society*, 21(4), pp. 632–645

<sup>165</sup> ATD Ireland (2021) [ATD Ireland’s work on socio-economic discrimination](#)

<sup>166</sup> Community Work Ireland & EAPN Ireland (2024) [Key Proposals to the Social Inclusion Forum \(SIF\) 2024](#).

<sup>167</sup> ATD Ireland (2023) [Breaking Barriers: A participatory approach to defining socio-economic discrimination](#)



redistribution through the welfare state.<sup>168</sup> Research has found that welfare fraud rhetoric has become deeply rooted in the organisational culture of the social protection system in Ireland, which can manifest in a lack of empathy in delivering services and, in severe cases, to humiliation and institutional maltreatment, including excessive control, surveillance and suspicion of welfare recipients as potential fraudsters.<sup>169</sup> All of this can impact on a person's ability to access social welfare. At the wider societal level, some studies point to an increase in levels of individualism, which correspond with a decrease in solidarity with others.<sup>170</sup> These patterns can reduce support for the redistributive elements of the welfare state, as well as for the costs associated with the welfare system.<sup>171</sup>

## 6. Engagement and Consultation

A major systemic issue hampering attempts to improve not just Ireland's social protection system, but the broader policy approach to tackling poverty and social exclusion, is a flawed approach to engagement and consultation with people affected and the organisations that represent them. In 2023, the OECD published its report, *Strengthening Policy Development in the Public Sector in Ireland*, which found that "direct input into policy design by or on behalf of vulnerable communities is uneven at present."<sup>172</sup> The report recommended "collaborating and/or co-creating with other departments or people likely to be affected by policy decisions."<sup>173</sup> Feedback from civil servants consulted for the report echoed the views and experiences of members, citing deficits in consultation including uneven rural/urban divide, being invited to engage after decisions are made, greater focus on established and bigger organisations and "limited co-creation".<sup>174</sup>

The Community Platform has developed a discussion paper, *Towards a Progressive Model of Collaborative Governance*, which proposes a new approach for how the Irish State can engage with the community sector and affected communities. The paper identifies a number of systemic problems with current models of engagement between the State and civil society for addressing key public policy issues, including poverty and social inequality.<sup>175</sup> These core concerns include: a lack of joined up, multidimensional and complementary approaches to solving issues; limited collaborative leadership capacity; the engagement of civil society in mechanisms that demand time and energy, but which struggle to generate effective outcomes; and a need and willingness from all participants in collaborative processes to learn from each other.<sup>176</sup> The paper raises additional concerns at the lack of clarity about accountability and implementation, and processes to support the participation of affected communities in public policy development, and finds that many structures and models of engagement are outdated and require new ways of thinking and critical reflection.<sup>177</sup>

<sup>168</sup> NESC (2020) [Challenges Facing the Welfare State: Background Paper](#)

<sup>169</sup> Power MJ, Devereux E, Ryan M. (2020) [Framing and Shaming: The 2017 Welfare Cheats, Cheat Us All Campaign](#). *Social Policy and Society*. 21(4):646-656.

<sup>170</sup> NESC (2020) [The Future of the Irish Social Welfare System: Participation and Protection](#)

<sup>171</sup> NESC (2020) [Challenges Facing the Welfare State: Background Paper](#)

<sup>172</sup> OECD (2023), [Strengthening Policy Development in the Public Sector in Ireland](#), OECD Public Governance Reviews, OECD Publishing, Paris.

<sup>173</sup> OECD (2023), [Strengthening Policy Development in the Public Sector in Ireland](#), OECD Public Governance Reviews, OECD Publishing, Paris

<sup>174</sup> OECD (2023), [Strengthening Policy Development in the Public Sector in Ireland](#), OECD Public Governance Reviews, OECD Publishing, Paris

<sup>175</sup> Community Platform (2022) [Towards a progressive model of collaborative governance: A Community Platform Discussion Paper](#).

<sup>176</sup> Community Platform (2022) [Towards a progressive model of collaborative governance: A Community Platform Discussion Paper](#)

<sup>177</sup> Community Platform (2022) [Towards a progressive model of collaborative governance: A Community Platform Discussion Paper](#)

## **7. RECOMMENDATIONS:**

### **7.1 Recommendations on Systemic Change**

- Ensure that the eradication of poverty is mainstreamed as a priority across all Government Departments, and made a central issue at the heart of all relevant policy development, implementation and monitoring, as well as in the annual Budget process;
- Develop and implement a successor to the Roadmap for Social Inclusion in the form of a whole-of-government anti-poverty strategy based on the objective of eliminating consistent poverty by 2030 with a range of policy and administrative measures adequate to ensure this target is achieved. This strategy should:
  - Be based on and address the multidimensional nature of poverty;
  - Be comprehensive, human rights-based, person-centred, and integrated;
  - Address poverty, social exclusion and inequality for all and through the life course;
  - Include mechanisms for coordination and accountability, clear and measurable targets, and the allocation of adequate resources for its implementation.
- Enshrine economic, social and cultural rights in the Irish Constitution as justiciable rights. Adopt all legislative, policy, administrative and other measures to give full effect to and incorporate the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights into Irish law, and ratify the Optional Protocol to the Covenant;
- Develop and implement a process to effectively poverty, gender, and equality proof all relevant policies (including social, economic, fiscal, equality, and environmental policies) to ensure the rights of people experiencing poverty are protected and that they contribute toward Ireland meeting its anti-poverty commitments;
- Specifically recognise and instrumentalise social protection as a human right and a social good, through giving this approach effect in policy, legislation and other measures, including recognising welfare recipients as rights bearers, with a corresponding positive duty on the State to ensure they are able to access their rights;
- Take steps to address policy silos and insufficient inter-departmental and inter-agency coordination and cooperation.

### **7.2 Recommendations on Essential Services:**

#### **7.2.1 Housing:**

- Implement the recommendation of the Housing Commission to increase the size of the social and cost-rental housing sectors to 20% of total national housing stock;
- Prioritise and adequately resource comprehensive prevention and early intervention measures to prevent homelessness from occurring and reoccurring;
- Ensure robust standards are in place so all housing meets adequate standards of habitability, accessibility including universal design, cultural appropriateness, energy efficiency, location and availability of services, facilities and infrastructure;
- Introduce legislative and other measures to improve protection for tenants and ensure security of tenure, including regulations on rent levels and other housing-related costs in the private sector, increasing Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) and Rent Supplement rates, and the delivery of sufficient cost-rental housing;
- Urgently address barriers to the adequate provision of Traveller-specific accommodation.
- Hold a referendum to enshrine the right to housing in the Constitution, including a stand-alone amendment with a recognition of a directly enforceable right to housing and a separate statement of the State's obligation to realise that right.

### **7.2.2 Health:**

- Expedite the implementation of Sláintecare, with adequate investment and resources, as part of ensuring a single-tiered universal and comprehensive health care system to facilitate affordable, quality, and efficient access to health services, so everyone can access the care they need, when they need it, in their own communities;
- Step up efforts to ensure sufficient resources to increase capacity, recruit and train additional healthcare personnel, reduce waiting times, and reduce obstacles that prevent access to health care for marginalised communities;
- Prioritise addressing and reducing health inequalities in terms of both access and outcomes, including to address physical and mental health, as well as the social determinants of health, particularly for marginalised and disadvantaged groups;
- Ensure the medical card is available to any disabled person who needs it, regardless of employment status, as part of a State package to address the extra Cost of Disability;
- Ensure a whole-of-government response to effectively and fully implement the National Traveller Health Action Plan, including adequate resourcing and oversight.

### **7.2.3 Transport:**

- Prioritise and increase investment in the expansion of public transport and active travel infrastructure, with emphasis on rural, remote, and underserved areas, reducing costs, and making transport safer, more accessible and low carbon.

### **7.2.4 Early Childhood Education and Care:**

- Deliver a universal, public system of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), including through increased investment to 1% of national income by 2030;
- In the interim:
  - Increase investment in affordability measures to further reduce childcare costs, alongside targeted measures to ensure affordability for all families;
  - Pilot the rollout of publicly-run, affordable ECEC services, prioritising areas and communities that are currently underserved or marginalised;
  - Guarantee decent pay and working conditions for childcare workers and childhood educators, including through the introduction of professional salary scales, support and investment in continuous professional development.

## **7.3 Recommendations on Employment:**

- Progress the introduction of a living wage based on the cost of living, as calculated by the Living Wage Technical Group;
- Take measures to ensure that the minimum/living wage applies to all workers, all sectors and all forms of employment, including by repealing the following sections of the Employment Equality Act: 34 (6), which provides for age-related remuneration, and 35 (1), on different rates of remuneration for disabled people;
- Review employment policies to address the root causes of unemployment for under-represented and marginalised groups and people distant from the labour market, including through an action plan with time-bound goals, and measures to support these groups and overcome structural and institutional barriers hindering participation, inclusion and access to the labour market;
- Review the social protection and public employment systems to address flaws and shift the culture, including reevaluating welfare conditionality practices, and moving away from approaches to welfare that are sanction-based, punitive and work-focused towards being supportive, enabling, holistic, inclusive and person-centred;



- Adequately resource and fund effective public employment services and supports to ensure a respectful culture and the provision of enabling services which takes a holistic approach to identifying the specific needs of individuals and developing person-centred pathways;
- Strengthen standards on decent work, including by guaranteeing fair, safe and healthy working conditions for all workers in all sectors;
- Develop and implement a comprehensive Traveller and Roma Training, Employment and Enterprise Plan, in consultation with Traveller and Roma groups.

## **7.4 Recommendations on Social Protection:**

### **7.4.1 Accessibility & Affordability**

- Benchmark all social welfare rates against a level that is adequate to lift people above the poverty line and provide them with a Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL);
- Ensure that social welfare payments and supports are accessible to all who need them, without any unnecessary restrictions or conditions;
- Increase core working-age social welfare rates, in order to restore their real value and make progress toward providing people with income adequacy based on MESL data;
- Move toward individualisation of benefits within the social protection system;
- Remove cliff edges in the social welfare system and taper supports in response to a change in circumstance;
- Ensure the value of earnings disregards are maintained in line with changes to the national minimum wage;
- Introduce a permanent Cost of Disability payment that adequately reflects the additional costs incurred by disabled people.

### **7.4.2 Discrimination and Stigma**

- Expedite the review process of the Equality Acts, and add Socio-Economic Status as a ground of discrimination under Ireland's Equality Legislation;
- Introduce compulsory training for all public servants, essential services providers, and staff engaged in the administration of social welfare, to address issues including but not limited to: their obligations and duties under the Public Sector Duty; anti-racism and cultural competency; disability equality; poverty training on the day-to-day realities and challenges faced by people experiencing poverty and the barriers to accessing rights and services; trauma-informed responses;
- Take all available measures to address social cohesion in tandem with social inclusion, and to combat stigma, stereotyping, misinformation and disinformation about, and the scapegoating of, minorities and marginalised groups and communities, including social welfare recipients.

## **7.5 Recommendations on Collaborative Governance**

- Implement the proposals made in the Community Platform Discussion Paper, *Towards a Progressive Model for Collaborative Governance*, to strengthen collaborative governance, particularly to establish a Collaborative Governance Advisory Body, led by the Department of the Taoiseach, to oversee the implementation of a consistent and effective process of collaborative governance across Government.
- Ensure all strategies, policies and programmes related to disadvantaged and marginalised individuals and groups are developed in partnership with those individuals and groups and receive sufficient financial, human and technical resources, including through the effective application of the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty, and that their implementation is regularly monitored and evaluated through effective oversight.

- Significantly increase investment in and resourcing of local autonomous community development including scaling up and mainstreaming the Community Development Programme, and expedite the establishment of a network of autonomous community development projects in and with marginalised communities.
- Evaluate how the Community and Voluntary sector could be better resourced and introduce more multi-year funding to allow organisations to effectively plan long term.

## 7.6 Recommendations on Sustainable Funding for Social Investment:

To ensure the requisite capacity and resources are available to sustainably fund social investment in a manner that tackles income and wealth inequality and does not negatively impact people experiencing poverty or on lower incomes:

- Broaden the tax base in a progressive and sustainable manner which is fair and redistributes income, wealth and resources.
- Continue to increase the Pay Related Social Insurance (PRSI) contribution rates, in a fair and progressive manner, in order to replenish the Social Insurance Fund.
- Tackle wealth inequality by introducing reforms to our taxation system in order to better tax wealth, including a progressive wealth tax on Irish millionaires and billionaires.
- Ensure tax changes, including proposals to reduce tax revenue, are poverty and equality proofed.

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