



Irish Rural Link
Nasc Tuaithe na hÉireann

Irish Rural Link Submission to Pathways to Work Strategy

September 2019

Contact

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*An Roinn Forbartha
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Overview

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

IRL acknowledge the efforts being made to reduce unemployment across the country over the past number of years. However, there still remains disparity between NUT3 regions in terms of unemployment rate. The most recent figures in the Labour Force Survey for Q2 2019¹ shows unemployment rate for the state stands at 5.4%, a slight increase from the previous quarter (4.8%). The Midlands and South East region of the country continue to have the highest rate of unemployment with the South-East region having a rate of 8.1%. Results from Census 2016 showed that small towns had higher unemployment rates than larger towns. Of the larger towns across the country, Longford had the highest unemployment rate between 2011 and 2016 at 30%. The Pobal Deprivation Index published in September 2017 also highlighted more rural towns and villages have higher deprivation rates and while unemployment rates overall are decreasing, these areas are still experiencing high rates of unemployment². The impacts of high unemployment during the recession is still being felt in many rural areas and as the figures above show are not experiencing the same level of employment creation as urban or areas close to major urban centres. It is more difficult to resolve unemployment in rural areas which are over-reliant on primary industries such as agriculture, construction and low-level manufacturing and sectors that are historically low paid, such as accommodation and food, retail and caring sector.

We welcome that the *New Pathways to Work Strategy* will consider the needs of many of the vulnerable and marginalised groups of people and communities such as; Long-Term Unemployed, People with Disabilities, Migrants and Travellers, Lone Parents, Older Jobseekers, Unemployed adult dependents of claimants of welfare payments. Many of these people were left behind in the 'boom' and were pushed even further away from the labour market during the recession and must be prioritised in this strategy with adequate measures outlined and implemented to support and assist them into decent quality employment.

¹ CSO Labour Force Survey Q2 2019

https://pdf.cso.ie/www/pdf/20190827095440_Labour_Force_Survey_Quarter_2_2019_full.pdf

² Haase, T. & Pratscheke, J. (2017) 'The 2016 Pobal HP Deprivation Index for Small Areas (SA)'

<https://www.pobal.ie/app/uploads/2018/06/The-2016-Pobal-HP-Deprivation-Index-Introduction-07.pdf>

Inclusive Labour Market

The new '*Pathways to Work Strategy*' must ensure that every person of working age can participate in paid employment, especially vulnerable and marginalised groups of people and the strategy must promote an inclusive labour market. As mentioned previously, many disadvantaged and marginalised people did not benefit from any employment

People who are Long-term Unemployed

The recent labour Force survey showed that 32% of all those who are unemployed are so for one year or more. It is more difficult for a person who is long-term unemployed to get back into the workforce, mainly because they need to be upskilled or reskilled, and the longer someone is unemployed the greater this need is. For the new Strategy to be effective and meet the needs of these groups, better collaboration with Department of Education and Skills, Solas, ETB's and community education providers are a key resource in helping people get back into education or work.

Older Jobseekers and Young Jobseekers.

It is often more difficult for older jobseekers to find employment if made redundant from their job. Those who lost their jobs during the recession have found it difficult to get paid employment either because they are nearing retirement age or need to be upskilled or retrained. Older jobseekers must have the opportunity to remain in employment and return to employment and not be overlooked because of their age. The Pathways to Work Strategy must include measures that will help older jobseekers take up employment and at the same time encourage employers to employ older jobseekers.

Young Jobseekers: Youth unemployment remains high at 15.7% in a country where we are nearing "Full Employment". Again, the longer a young person is out of work, education or training the harder it is for them to get employment.

More young people are staying in school to leaving cert now than ever and we welcome this. We also commend the work of Youth Reach and other local youth programmes working to keep young people in education or training.

This strategy must work closely with the Department of Education and Skills in ensuring that young people remain in education or training and that the most appropriate training is available to meet their needs. It must also work with Solas on the new Apprenticeship programme to extend the availability of apprenticeships and identify sectors where they can be developed. Career guidance in school as well as parents must be better informed about the availability of apprenticeship programmes and that they are seen as a viable option to access work and career.

People with Disability

People with disability are often hindered by accessing employment. Employers and very often their premises are not always equipped to support workers with disabilities. More supports must be made available to people with disabilities to help them access

the workforce and retain employment. Supports to employers, especially for micro and SME's must be available so they can become more inclusive employers.

Lone Parents and Women

Access to affordable childcare continues to be an issue for many parents, especially for lone parents. Women continue to be the main carers and more women stay at home in a caring capacity (whether to care for children or elderly or sick family member) and have a higher rate of underemployment.

'Pathways to Work Strategy' must ensure that opportunities are available to lone parents, majority of which are women, and women in general to help them access employment, education and training. Access to transport is a further barrier for many women in rural area. The Strategy should include Remote working, and how this can reduce many of the barriers for women and lone parents to accessing employment.

Migrants and Travellers

We welcome that people living in Direct Provision can now apply for work permits after 9 months of being here. Accessing employment, training and education is a way of helping migrants integrate into communities and participate fully in Irish society. Travellers also must have same access to employment, education and training as every other person. The 'Pathways to Work Strategy' must ensure real actions are taken and implemented to ensure both migrants and travellers have the same access to employment, training and society and there is better engagement with both jobseekers and employers to take on people from these communities.

People Living in Rural Areas

People living in rural areas are still experiencing higher levels of poverty and have higher income inadequacies' than their urban counterparts³. Households living in rural areas have different and additional expenditure needs to meet to have the same minimum standard of living as households living in urban areas. In 2019, core MESL continues to be higher for rural households. These higher costs are primarily related to higher transport and home energy costs.

For people living in rural areas in employment, it is more often in minimum wage jobs which does not afford many household types an acceptable social standard of living.

Income Inadequacies by Household Type with 2 Parents in Full Time Employment earning minimum wage

Household Type	Rural	Urban
2 Parents with 1 infant	-€1.06	+€36.26
2 Parents with 2 Children	-€49.52	+€33.18

³ Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (2019) Minimum Essential Standard of Living Report 2019.

(1 pre-school, 1 primary)		
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 primary, 1 secondary)	-€14.28	+€56.57
2 Parents with 3 Children (1 infant, 1 pre-school, 1 primary)	+€18.60	-€3.19
2 Parents with 4 Children (2 primary, 2 Secondary)	-€123.83	-€4.86

Source: VPSJ MESL 2019

A whole of Government approach is needed to ensure that services are available to people in rural areas to help reduce their cost of living, and the *'Pathways to Work'* must ensure that people can improve their earnings and decent jobs are created in all parts of the country.

Addressing Literacy, Numerical and Digital Skills

There are approximately 445,800 people aged between 25-64 years who have less than a QQI Level 4 qualification, with over 50% of these in employment. One in six adults in Ireland find reading and understanding everyday texts difficult: for example, reading a leaflet, bus timetable or medicine instructions (CSO, PIAAC 2012). One in four Irish adults has difficulties in real world maths, from basic addition and subtraction to calculating averages. Currently adults can receive between 2 and 6 hours adult literacy tuition per week. There are a small number of longer programmes delivered under Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education (ITABE) and some through the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) in the Education and Training Boards (ETBs). However, there is no financial support or tax relief for people accessing this tuition or other supports such as childcare, elder care provision or transport. These people are some of the furthest away from the labour market in gaining employment or if in employment, advancing in the workplace.

These people must be prioritised in the *'Pathways to Work Strategy'* and collaboration with ITABE, ETB's community education providers is needed with clear actions set out to enhance the literacy and numerical skills of people, whether in or out of employment.

Digital skills

Fifty-two percent of the adult population lack even basic digital skills, well above the EU average of 43% (European Commission)⁴. Even among people in employment, digital skills are low. With more services and indeed employment services going online, increasing the capacity of people's computer skills must be a necessity as part of the *'Pathways to Work Strategy'* and actions taken must be future proofed.

Irish Rural Link are currently involved in the delivery of the *'Getting Citizens Online'* Programme funded through the Department of Communications, Climate Action and

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/file_import/2019-european-semester-country-report-ireland_en.pdf

Environment. This is a free 10-hour basic computer course aimed at adults over 45 years who have never used a computer before. The course is also available for people who are unemployed, people with disabilities, travellers, migrants and other marginalised communities. There is a need for this course to be open to people in employment who have low digital skills or have never used a computer so they can access payslips, P45 and other paperwork which has all been moved online. While the Department of Communications is allowing this cohort to be trained under the programme, more collaboration between the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection and Department of Communications must happen to extend this programme further. This action must be included in the new '*Pathways to Work Strategy*' and implemented as a matter of urgency.

Education, Further Education and Training

Life-long learning must become a real option for people looking to get back into the workforce but also for people in employment so they have more opportunities available to them so they can advance in the work place.

Accessing education and training for people living in rural areas can be difficult but even more difficult for marginalised groups – especially if they do not have access to transport. For Lone parents' access to childcare and affordable childcare is an issue. A study by Cullinan et al (2013) found that for every 10 kilometres of travel distance, the likelihood that individuals would participate in higher education decreased by 2.7%. Therefore, a prospective student living 50 kilometres from a higher education institution is 13.5% less likely to participate in education at this level.

Community Education is a way of addressing socio-economic inequalities and barriers to social inclusion as it supports people, many of whom are often-early school leavers or are returning to education after a long time, to access education at a local level. It helps to address the educational needs of marginalised groups of people who would otherwise be excluded from fully participating in education system but also in society. It helps reduce barriers such as transport and childcare that are very real for people, especially women in rural areas who are hoping to return to education and take up a course or training. It also helps alleviate some of the anxiety and stress people may feel returning to education or training after a long time, especially if they did not have a good experience first time around. Community Education providers place a lot of emphasis on those essential 1:1 and peer supports, literacy, creating the supportive environment etc. It can be daunting to move from that environment into the higher education arena so recognition of the need for those supports for many learners is essential.

The important role community education plays in helping people into education and training and in turn employment must be highlighted in the new '*Pathways to Work*

Strategy’ and measures outlined to increase supports for providers in collaboration with the Department of Education and Skills and Solas.

Future Jobs

IRL welcome the publication of ‘*Future Jobs Ireland*’ by the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation in early 2019. It is important that new emerging sectors and the development of existing sectors are recognised and supported.

Climate Change

The new *Pathways to Work Strategy* must complement some of the measures outlined in ‘*Future Jobs Ireland*’ to ensure that workers are protected from job losses in sectors that will cease to exist in the future due to climate change and artificial intelligence.

With almost 500 redundancies expected in the Midland region as Bord na Mona move to stop the cutting of peat, there must be opportunities for these employees to reskill and retrain in the low carbon and green economy. Engaging with these employees now to ensure they can smoothly transition into other sectors is essential. There should be an engagement piece written into the strategy.

Brexit

With the nearing of Brexit, many micro, small and medium size companies will be at risk of losing business increasing the possibility of job losses. This will be especially true for rural areas where many of the micro and small businesses export to the UK market. These enterprises are the backbone of rural economies creating jobs in local areas. Businesses and their employees must be safeguarded as much as possible from the impact of Brexit on businesses and in turn jobs. The *Pathways to Work Strategy* must ensure there are extra measures in place to deal with the fallout of Brexit and that employees can move quickly into other employment.

Tourism and Healthcare Sectors

With a push towards enhancing the tourism sector in rural areas, extending the tourist season and eco-tourism and adventure tourism becoming more popular, new skills will be needed. The tourism sector is one of the main employers in rural areas, especially in western counties but more value must be placed on employees in the sector, having proper contracts and pay and opportunities to make a career in the sector.

The same is true for the healthcare sector and healthcare in the community. With an ageing population, especially in rural areas and the commitment by Government to care for people in their community, more value must be placed on the work done by community services providers – again having proper employment contracts for employees and a wage that affords them a social acceptable standard of living.

The new Pathways to Work Strategy must set out measures that give opportunities for people working in these sectors to have secure and quality jobs and careers and earn a decent pay.

Conclusion

The new '*Pathways to Work Strategy*' must be a more inclusive strategy so that every person, especially vulnerable and marginalised groups of people have access to decent and secure employment that affords them a socially acceptable standard of living. Education, training and further education must be in place so people have the opportunities to return to work, upskill or retrain for those employed in sectors that will not exist in the near future. The Strategy must be rural and poverty proofed and the impact of Brexit on employment, especially in rural areas must be given due consideration.

Reaching those people who are at present furthest away from the labour market must be prioritised and the barriers, such as childcare, elder care, transport, literacy, numerical and digital skills, that prevent them from taking up employment, education or training must be addressed.

Irish Rural Link the Organisation

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

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

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

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

Irish Rural Link's aims are:

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

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