



# **Submission to Department of Social Protection Statement of Strategy 2023-2026**

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**Rialtas na hÉireann**  
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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.

We welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the Department of Social Protection (DSP) Statement of Strategy for 2023-2026 and have our views and recommendations considered for inclusion in the Strategy.

This new Statement of Strategy must be developed in the current context of the continued cost of living crisis and commitments made to support those on low income and those most socially excluded from society. The current crisis has impacted many households, but most especially, those on fixed or low-income households, who were already struggling with household bills are now having to make extremely tough financial decisions on whether to heat their home or put food on the table for themselves and their families. An ESRI report *Energy Poverty and Deprivation in Ireland* highlighted that the level of inflation being experienced at present is “higher for lower-income, older and rural households as a result of their patterns of expenditure”. Through its membership, IRL are very aware of the hardship being experienced by rural households. With very little public transport available to people in rural areas, the increase is having a real impact on people on lower income who are dependent on their car to get to work, bringing children to school and activities, attending appointments, etc. and having to make choices on what journeys they take.

The current energy crisis comes as we try to reach our climate targets. It highlights the dependency Ireland has on fossil fuels and the need for a transition for cleaner, greener alternatives. The climate and indeed the digital transition will also be important elements in the design of the new Statement of Strategy. The DSP must ensure that a person centre approach is taken so the climate and digital transition of services is fair and just and those who are furthest behind, i.e. those on low income, marginalised groups in society, are supported first.

DSP has a role in ensuring other Government Departments deliver on their strategies and policies and that stronger collaboration and cross-departmental working takes place to ensure that people have access to essential services and that all Government policies and programmes are poverty proofed and inclusive of all.

## Addressing Poverty and Income Inadequacy

Prior to the current cost of living crisis, it was well documented that income inadequacy continues to be higher in rural areas, especially for those in receipt of core social welfare payments and those in low-paid or minimum wage employment when compared to urban counterparts. The *Programme for Government 2020* and the *Roadmap to Social Inclusion 2020-2025* both set out commitments to improving social inclusion and wellbeing for people. Income adequacy and access to services are key components to achieving these commitments regardless of where people live.

### Rural Poverty

The Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) looks at those essential goods included in the Consumer Price Index (CPI) basket of goods and services that are deemed necessary for a minimum standard of living. Such goods and services include; food, clothing, heating, healthcare, transport, education, etc.

Initial findings of the MESL for 2022 has shown that the cost of a MESL has increased for all household types by an average of 5%. For low income households in rural areas, this increase is higher at 14%<sup>1</sup>, confirming the results of the ESRI study *Energy Poverty and Deprivation in Ireland* where it found low income and rural households are most impacted by the current cost of living crisis.

The higher rate of change in rural areas is due to increases in household energy and transport related prices. The net increase in MESL home energy costs was an average of 50% for rural households due to dependency on home heating oil. Likewise, the dependency on the car by rural households has meant they have not benefited from reduced prices in public transport but have faced increases in the price of petrol and diesel.

The following tables highlights the income inadequacies for household types in receipt of a social welfare payment and 2 adults employed full-time in minimum wage jobs and living in social housing. It highlights the higher income inadequacies for rural households compared to their urban peers.

### Income Inadequacies by Household Type in Receipt of SW Payment

Household Type	Rural	Urban
2 Parents with 1 infant	-€131.70	-€21.64
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 pre-school, 1 primary)	-€114.21	-€2.80
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 primary, 1 secondary)	-€184.37	-€75.68
2 Parents with 3 Children	-€130.35	-€18.99

<sup>1</sup>VPSJ (2022) Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2022 Interim Report  
<https://www.budgeting.ie/publications/mesl-2022/>

(1 infant, 1 pre-school, 1 primary)		
2 Parents with 4 Children (2 primary, 2 Secondary)	-€256.87	-€146.00
One Parent with 1 child (Primary school)	-€143.91	-€18.82
One Parent with 2 Children (1 pre-school, 1 primary)	-€124.86	+€1.79
One Parent with 2 Children (1 primary, 1 secondary (Jobseeker transition))	-€194.88	-€70.94
Pensioner Living Alone (non-contributory)	-€83.54	+€1.83
Pensioner Living Alone (Contributory)	-€72.86	+€11.65

Source: VSPJ MESL 2022

The 2022 MESL showed households Income inadequacies are also felt by households who are working on minimum wage with these inadequacies larger for households in rural areas for most of the household types looked at.

#### **Income Inadequacies by Household Type with 2 Parents in Full Time Employment earning minimum wage (living in social housing)**

Household Type	Rural	Urban
2 Parents with 1 infant	-€0.35	+€146.63
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 pre-school, 1 primary)	-€73.84	+€69.03
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 primary, 1 secondary)	-€126.91	+€70.73
2 Parents with 3 Children (1 infant, 1 pre-school, 1 primary)	-€114.55	-€0.42
2 Parents with 4 Children (2 primary, 2 Secondary)	-€260.80	-€86.15

Source: VSPJ MESL 2022

The DSP is the main Government Department in protecting people from falling into poverty and helping to get people out of poverty. Ensuring households, regardless of where they live in the country has an adequate income must be a key ambition of the new Statement of Strategy. However, IRL understand that it is more than just income that is needed to have an adequate standard of living and that access to public services is also needed. There is a role for wider Government to provide such services, such as transport, affordable housing, supports for retrofitting of housing etc. DSP has a role in ensuring that other Government Departments' policies/strategies and programmes are poverty and rural proofed and don't

negatively impact communities in rural areas. The DSP must therefore engage and work with other Departments when such policies and programmes are being developed. This is necessary if the targets within the *Roadmap for Social Inclusion* are to be achieved.

Indicators in addition to the *Roadmap for Social Inclusion* must be set out in the new Statement of Strategy on:

- How income supports will ensure people are lifted out of poverty;
- how the DSP will engage and collaborate with other Government Departments and agencies so that essential services such as public transport, affordable housing, retrofitting of homes, broadband, education and training and creation of quality jobs to ensure people have an adequate income to allow a decent standard of living.

### **Travel Pass**

As outlined in the MESL results the extra cost of living for households living in rural areas was the cost of energy/heating and transport. While those who are eligible for the travel pass living in rural areas may have one, they do not get the full benefit, if at all, of the Free Travel Card. With the lack of a decent public transport system in rural areas, older people and people with a disability are often reliant on a car, which as outlined above, is an added cost, or if don't have a car; the goodwill of family, neighbours and friends for lifts which leaves them very dependent on others and don't have the freedom to go places when they want. Taxis are the only other option for people which can be very expensive. Irish Rural Link calls for an allowance given to those who hold a travel card but are unable to use it or get full use of it so it can go some way towards the cost of private transport. Such a scheme/allowance should be explored as part of the Department's three-year strategy.

### **Benchmarking of Social Welfare Payments**

Irish Rural Link have called for the benchmarking of social welfare payments for a number of years. We continue to call for greater use of the MESL report and the goods and services used in this as a benchmark instead of the wider Consumer Price Index (CPI) as it captures the costs to the poorest households more effectively. The increase in core welfare payments in Budget 2023 while welcome, does not go far enough to lift people out of poverty and given higher cost of living, people will continue to struggle financially.

### **Budget Impact Assessment**

While we welcome that a Budget Impact is carried out, we continue to call for this to be done prior to the Budget to ensure no one is made worse off or at risk of being made worse off in the Budget. The current core welfare payments, even with the increase in Budget 2023, is not enough for people to meet increasing food, heating and energy costs. If this assessment was carried out prior to the budget a more adequate increase in payments could be made.

## Poverty and Rural Proofed Policies

Not only should the policies/strategies and programmes the DSP develop be poverty proofed, they must also be rural proofed and ensure that measures or actions within the policy/strategy does not negatively impact or make those living in rural areas worse off.

Also, the Department must work with other Government departments to ensure that policies/strategies they develop are poverty and rural proofed and ensure they are inclusive of everyone.

## Stakeholder engagement

Irish Rural Link would like to acknowledge the engagement by the DSP with some stakeholders. Two Bilateral meetings with the Community and Voluntary Pillar takes place each year and the Pre-Budget Forum is a strong engaging process which is well attended each year. We welcome that additional engagement has taken place prior to Budget 2023 as a result of the cost of living crisis. We would recommend that;

- such engagement continues as part of the new strategy and,
- attendance by officials from other Government Departments to the Pre-Budget Forum, Social Inclusion Forum is encouraged, especially the workshops.

## Digitalisation of Services

With the move of more Government services and applications for different payments to online, there is a risk that there will be people left behind or excluded.

The new Statement of Strategy must be cognisant of the level of digital skills among older people and other people who have not had the opportunity to develop these skills so they can access DSP services online. In July 2022, funding ended for the 'Getting Citizens Online' basic computer training programme. IRL had delivered basic computer training skills through this programme to over 6,000 older people, migrants, farmers, long-term unemployed, people with disabilities who had never used a computer before. This programme, funded by the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications, supported these people in using Government websites and online services as well as other basic skills. With this programme now ended, it will be harder to reach those with low digital skills. For people living in rural areas who do not have access to their own transport or who may be unable to travel to their nearest Social Welfare or Intreo Office, online is an alternative to this.

Engagement with the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications is also needed to ensure that programmes like 'Getting Citizens Online' can be supported so everyone has the basic skills and can be confident in accessing services online.

## Communications

Communication should be a key part of this Statement of Strategy, whether this is between the DSP and people using the service, between DSP staff on the ground and those in head office or between DSP and other Government departments, agencies and other stakeholders.

The people who use DSP services are some of the most vulnerable in our society. People's disabilities, literature and digital skills and other issues they may have must all be considered when communication is being issued to people. Literature must be available in simple English, in other languages and in Braille.

For many people having the human contact with someone in the department is still important and moving services online can be difficult for people with low digital skills. While moving services online can be beneficial, it is not suitable for everyone.

Communication between staff within the DSP at all levels is also needed, especially between those in head office and those working in local offices, who are dealing with people face-to-face on a daily basis. This is important so people are aware of changes to their payments or what payments they are eligible for.

## **Employment Services**

With a proposed new pay-related jobseekers benefit currently out for consultation, it is important public employment services are easily accessible and supports are in place to help those who have lost their job move quickly to new employment or can access the necessary training and education to upskill or reskill.

With climate change, digitalisation and new technologies as well as nature of work changing, supports need to be available to those most at risk of losing their jobs while at the same time working closely with those who are long-term employed or find it difficult to stay in employment for long periods.

### **Employment Schemes**

Employment schemes such as CE scheme, RSS and Tus are extremely valuable to many people, community and voluntary organisation and to communities. It allows those to use their skills while communities benefit from services and upkeep of their area which their Local Authority is unable to provide. IRL continue to call for some of these schemes such as Tus to have more flexibility, especially if those on the scheme are close to pension age and unlikely to secure employment. Many services in rural areas, such as Meals on Wheels, transport etc. depend on people on these schemes to deliver these services which otherwise may not be provided. As many of the people who use these services are vulnerable older people there is a trust built up between customers and those who deliver their meal, if there is a constant change in staff it takes time for people to get to know new staff.

## **Conclusion**

The Department of Social Protection Statement of Strategy 2023-2026 must set out goals and objectives that will support people who are now being impacted by the current cost of living crisis. Those who are on low income and working families in minimum wage employment must be able to access adequate financial supports so they are not pushed further into poverty. The DSP must help to lift people out of poverty and not put more people at risk. The creation of quality jobs and ensuring a living wage is introduced is needed to ensure those at

work have an adequate income. The Department must collaborate more with other Government Departments so essential services are in place in rural areas and allow people to have an adequate standard of living. The goals and objectives of the strategy must prioritise lifting people out of poverty and creating an inclusive society for all.



## **Irish Rural Link the Organisation**

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

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

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

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

Irish Rural Link's aims are:

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

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