



COMMUNITY PLATFORM
CHALLENGING POVERTY & INEQUALITY

NOW YOU SEE US:
THE HUMAN STORIES
BEHIND POVERTY IN IRELAND

The Community Platform is a network of 30 national networks and organisations in the community and voluntary sector working to address poverty, social exclusion and inequality.

COMMUNITY PLATFORM MEMBERS

- ATD Fourth World Ireland
- Age Action Ireland
- Community Action Network
- Community Workers Co-operative
- Cairde
- Debt and Development Coalition
- European Anti Poverty Network (EAPN) Ireland
- Focus Ireland
- Gay & Lesbian Equality Network
- Immigrant Council of Ireland
- Irish Association of Older People
- Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed
- Irish Penal Reform Trust
- Irish Refugee Council
- Irish Rural Link
- Irish Traveller Movement
- Migrant Rights Centre Ireland
- National Adult Literacy Agency
- National Network of Women's Refuges and Support Services
- National Traveller Women's Forum
- National Women's Council of Ireland
- Older Women's Network
- OPEN
- Pavee Point
- Rape Crisis Network Ireland
- Simon Communities of Ireland
- Threshold
- Voluntary Drug Treatment Network
- Vincentian Partnership for Justice
- Women's Aid.

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INTRODUCTION

Ireland is now emerging from three years under the adjustment programme agreed with the EC/ECB/IMF 'Troika'. The combination of the recession and the political choices made over recent years have been devastating for people who are on low incomes, unemployed, marginalised or dependent on welfare.

The Community Platform, as a network of 30 national organisations working against poverty and inequality, has taken this opportunity to take stock of the impact of the recession and of the political choices on people and communities experiencing poverty, discrimination and exclusion and the implications for our work for a fairer Ireland.

This publication gives a snapshot of some of the human stories behind the statistics. The people quoted here have volunteered to tell their stories because they want the wider public to realise the impact that Government decisions are having on their lives and the lives of others like them.

The interviews were carried out by Jamie Gordan and Jacinta Fay, who asked the simple question: *"how is the recession, and Government policy, affecting your life?"*

The interviews confirm the experience of Community Platform members that the greatest impact of the crisis and austerity measures has been felt by people who are on the lowest incomes and most dependent on state supports and services. They now see these services and supports being cut and incomes greatly reduced. Many people are struggling to heat their homes or adequately feed themselves and their families and we have seen a growth of people queuing for food parcels in our cities and towns.

CUMULATIVE IMPACTS

The answers are different because of the different situations which people find themselves in, but some themes come through again and again.

Most people tell us that they have been hit not just by one policy but by the cumulative impact of unemployment or poorly paid employment, lack of opportunities and cuts to services and supports over successive years.

We are very aware of the rapid increase in the numbers of those who are unemployed and struggling to access limited training and even more limited work opportunities. Many of these people are struggling to pay off mortgage and other debts they took on when they were working.

The experience of Community Platform members, and the statistics, both show that many people have been affected in multiple ways by cuts and other policy changes. Many have experienced cuts to their income and to the services which they rely on.

It is often the cumulative impact of these changes over a number of years that drives people into poverty. This impact has been felt by people dependant on social welfare supports but also by people who are working on low incomes. People who are working on a low income have been brought into the tax net

through the Universal Social Charge which they start to pay from €10,036 onwards and in 2013 those earning over €18,000 are also paying an extra €5 per week on PRSI. Changes in rules on access to social welfare, often alongside greater flexibility in their work, makes it more difficult for them to access social welfare supports.

Basic social welfare payments for those between 26 and 64 years have been cut by €16 and in 2008 the Christmas bonus was also cut'. Unemployed people on Jobseekers Benefit have seen the duration of their payment cut and face bigger cuts in their supports if they secure part-time employment. Those under 26 have had a larger cut and older people have lost some of their Household Package and along with others have to pay a new prescription charge.

Those on Rent Supplement have had reductions in their supports and have to meet the gap in their rent if their landlord will not reduce their rent. Those with children have also had a series of cuts to their Child Benefit payments.

As a result of changes in the last number of budgets, lone parents have been especially hard hit. On top of being hit by the cuts outlined above there have been a number of changes to the One-Parents Family Payment which fail to recognise the extra costs of childcare and will impact on the ability of many lone parents to access training or employment.

On top of other changes in the funding of community childcare, the changes in supports to lone-parents has also resulted in the capacity of community childcare facilities to access sufficient staff with the knock on effect of limiting the access for people who need these facilities in order to take up training or jobs.

People on low income have been most affected by the 2% increase in VAT on most items in 2013. They have also had to face an increase in fuel and transport costs which impacts particularly on those in rural areas who have also seen many of their bus services disappear.

Poorer people in rural communities are acutely hit as services such as post offices are more centralised to larger towns and rural transport is cut. This also impacts on their chances of taking up training or work opportunities. The cuts to home care and personal assistant supports have had a very negative impact on the ability of many older people and people with disabilities to live independent lives and participate in society.

There is a strong message that people want to work, or to contribute to society in a useful way. The interviews are full of the frustrations not just at the lack of work but at the barriers which policy changes have put in their way, from lack of childcare to loss of essential benefits.

Many groups in society who already faced particular barriers to accessing services and employment during the boom years are now experiencing a disproportionate impact and even greater difficulties. This includes the long-term unemployed, lone-parents, Travellers, people with disabilities including children with special needs, people from ethnic minority groups, ex-offenders and women.

Problems accessing education and training emerge strongly from these studies. A number of people highlight the importance of the opportunities which they have availed of. They emphasise the importance

of appropriate and relevant courses. They also highlight the the damage caused by cuts to supports including childcare, return to education allowances, to changed eligibility for allowances and closure of education and training centres.

Another clear theme coming through is the effect of poverty and discrimination on health, including mental health, as well as insecurity and fear.

CREATIVE RESPONSES

The interviews also show the creative ways that people are working to try to solve their problems, from voluntary work to re-training and the anger that they are getting so little support in doing so.

Fundamentally, the pictures emerging here are of people who are reaching breaking point as they bear the brunt of a crisis which was not of their making.

The Programme for Government says that *“The Government for National Recovery will strive to ensure that every one of our citizens has an effective right, free from discrimination, to contribute to the economic, social and cultural life of the nation.”*¹ (p3)

It is hard to effectively contribute to Irish society or its economy if you are struggling to make ends meet and you are concerned that existing supports will be further undermined. It is even harder if you were marginalized already as are so many people who are now excluded from Ireland’s economic and social development. For example, over the past four years long-term unemployment has more than quadrupled. The supports that were there in so many communities to help people address their own issues have been cut: the supports that helped, for example, adults go back to education that in turn encouraged young people stay on in education.

In the Programme for Government they note that *“We will require all public bodies to take due note of equality and human rights in carrying out their functions.”* (p54) Such a development would be welcome and would support the development of a more coherent approach to seriously addressing marginalization and exclusion in Irish society. But where are the resources to undertake such work? Since the crisis hit the two bodies that are responsible for such work, the Equality Authority and the Human Rights Commission have seen their combined budgets cut by 43%.

It is crucial that the Government takes seriously the impact that policies have on people’s lives and that of their communities and changes course before it further dismantles the essential public services and supports which exist and drive people deeper into poverty while also creating a more unequal society.

The Government must carry out a poverty and equality impact assessments as an essential part of all policy making. This impact assessment must be done in a way which is transparent and in proper time so that all can see the evidence being used to make choices and discuss the impact of decisions.

Community Platform, December 2013

1. The Programme for Government is available at:
http://www.taoiseach.ie/eng/Publications/Publications_Archive/Publications_2011/Programme_for_Government_2011.pdf

GRAINNE, WEST CLARE

When he's not here it's just awful and I'm not the sort of woman that can't survive without a man, that's not me, I just love him and I worry about him.

The recession hit when we were both living in England but we had started to build our house here and felt we didn't have a choice, we just had to carry on with it. We thought at that point "OK, we've had recessions, we've been through recessions in the '80s, they don't last long, we'll get over this, it'll be fine."

We suspected maybe that my husband would have to stay in London for about six months and we would carry on here. I was pretty confident I could bring up our family without a father around for a while and it wouldn't be a problem. We were sending out CVs and making phone calls but slowly, slowly, slowly the realisation hit that this isn't going to happen within six months. Six years down the line, we're still waiting.

My husband works in construction on the sites. He will come back when he knows there's a job on and it's going to last. Twice he has gone back to England with no job prospects hoping for something and he was waiting seven to eight weeks. We're in a waiting period at the moment and it's kind of putting us under. We're just about alright for this month. I don't know what we'll do next month. It's massive stress, but that's our life.

I'm managing because you have to. I've nothing at all in my purse, nothing. John gets the free roll and the free milk at school and thank God he does. When people walk past our house, they may think 'they're managing'. There's nothing behind it though, you know. That makes you isolated - because you can't mix with people, you can't go anywhere. My husband is trying to pay rent and utility bills where he's living. I know he has no heating on at the moment. He goes without

so that we are a little bit more comfortable.

My job in the resource centre is my lifeline. My mental health I think is so much better than what it could be, you know, if I was sitting at home. If I didn't have a job I couldn't cope. I get out, I mix with friends, I earn a few bob. It's everything. I think it's given me so much more than the wage. My work is bringing older people who live in isolated areas together once a week. And it's really down to as basic as having a cup of tea, having a chat and giving them information.

Otherwise I don't socialize, I can't. It's your petrol to get there, it's something to bring with you if you're staying in someone's house, you know it's everything. So you just stay on your own, you stay indoors, you just keep your head down and hope that things get better.

After about six months back here, I got sick. I think it was stress. I ended up having two operations but I had a really good doctor and she got me a medical card. Since then, my health has just got worse. I've got diverticulitis, I've got a hyperactive thyroid, I've got diabetes. You're just waiting for the heart attack next you know 'cos that's how it feels.

When my husband is here we're as skint as when he's not here but we're together and it feels better. You feel richer in yourself, in your body, in your mind, in your soul. When he's not here it's just awful and I'm not the sort of woman that can survive without a man, that's not me, I just love him and I worry about him. It's awful being apart. James misses him dreadfully.

I keep thinking to myself maybe Ireland will find its' community spirit. That is what is lacking now - the community spirit, the family bonds - all of those things have gone. The only way the country is going to build itself up is by keeping families and communities strong because it doesn't work when they are all disjointed - you have to pull together.

I don't think about too far down the line, I can't, I really just have to carry on, day by day. I've had it said to me a few times; "what's he doing in England, why is he there, why doesn't he just come back and sign on?" That's not his style, it's just not his style. It would be the very, very last resort. Sometimes I wish he would just come back and sign on, I really do but I know eventually we'd lose everything, I know we would, so he's trying everything.

He has a new plan, a couple of new plans. One is to give up the place that he's living in and live in a container on site. The other plan is to go to Norway, he says there's construction work there. It's nearer than Australia. But we have to do something. Life is not all about the bank, it's not all about the mortgage, they're bricks and mortar. It'll be here when we're dead and gone.

So you just stay on your own, you stay indoors, you just keep your head down and hope that things get better.

“WE’RE JUST ABOUT ALRIGHT FOR THIS MONTH. I DON’T KNOW WHAT WE’LL DO NEXT MONTH. IT’S MASSIVE STRESS, BUT THAT’S OUR LIFE.”

NIAMH, HOMELESS, DUBLIN

“I would like to have a good job and to work and be independent. To be independent to support myself and whatever I need, like paying the rent and not to depend on social welfare or anything like that”.

Niamh was homeless for six months before qualifying for rent allowance. She is only temporarily off the streets through the kindness of friends and is struggling to find somewhere to live.

“The landlords want the money straight away. They can’t wait a few weeks for the rent and the deposit to come through, they want the money upfront. But I don’t have €800 to give them straight away”, she says.

Three years ago, Niamh completed a FAS metalwork course and went looking for work with little success. She found that there were few opportunities in the welding/metal work field and employers were looking for people with advanced skills and more qualifications. She underwent further training acquiring computer and communication skills but still couldn’t find a job.

Niamh struggled to overcome feelings of depression and, with the support of Focus Ireland, she has returned to college to study fitness. She is also brushing up on job applications and her interview skills in the hope of better things to come.

The problem of finding somewhere to live, however, still haunts her.

“I was living in different hostels with about four people in the room and you can’t really sleep. If somebody wakes up and makes noise or they come home late and they wake you up, then you can’t say anything to them because you might get thrown out of the hostel. I live with my friends now but I have to move out soon because I don’t

want to destroy the relationship between me and my friend”.

Niamh lives on €144 a week and the recent cuts in rent allowance and social welfare just makes everything that little bit harder.

“The way you live every day you have to sacrifice; your clothing, your food money and the rent. I’m still trying to move on and do my best”, she says. “I’m trying to save money to put in my account to have some money in case something happens but I can’t save up the €800 or €900 for a rent deposit so I am just hoping to find a landlord who can wait a few weeks until the rent comes through. Many of them don’t accept rent allowance so that is another problem”.

If the rules of rent allowance were changed to allow people pay the deposit up front to the landlord or if the landlord could wait a few weeks for the money to come through, Niamh says it would really help.

“We are in the middle and we are the ones who are suffering. We want to get a place as soon as we can to go to work or to go to college, to do things, to move on”, she says. “It affects us and you get depressed. Right now, since I don’t have a place to live, I feel like I am just standing still. I can’t move on”.

While there are supports to help people return to education and training which are useful, says Niamh, it is really all about jobs and job opportunities. That is really what she, like many others, are looking for.

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MAEBH, CE WORKER, DUBLIN

I never wanted to be a single parent. I never set out to be a single parent.

I've reared my child on my own and it's been hard. His father's not around. It's a constant struggle. Last year ten euro was taken out of the child benefit and the year before the same thing. I depend on that and even more now than ever. They're cutting money while everything else is going up: bills, food, everything. I'm working part time but you're just living to pay bills and make ends meet - you're not able to really live or have a life.

When my marriage broke up, my confidence was at an all time low. I was lucky though because I got on a Community Employment Scheme which suited me when my child was very young. Only for it I would have been absolutely lost. I never got maintenance but I was able to work, have a few bob and also get my training, rear my child and not be totally struggling.

After the CE scheme finished I got a job working the morning shift in a canteen and did that for five years until the place shut down. I was back looking for work but found it very hard to get morning hours to work around my child.

I decided to return to education because I left school when I was very young. I did a horticulture course FETAC Level 5 with OPEN and it was the best thing I ever did. I've been studying community development and social analysis ever since. I can only do that now because my son is older. Now I'm working with kids doing a big garden project [in] the flats.

I consider myself one of the lucky ones. Back when my child was very young, there were structures in place to help but now there's really nothing there for lone parents. The changes to the CE schemes

have had a devastating effect as well as funding cuts to community crèches. The Government used to provide support for people to return to education and work - now that's all gone out the window.

Any lone parent I know wants to get out and work but they can't, they honestly can't. What are they going to do with their child? The big obstacle for lone parents is childcare, proper childcare facilities. Putting a child in a crèche costs like a hundred quid a week. How can anyone go out to work for that? Give your child to a stranger to work for nothing? There is just no incentive.

If I lost my job tomorrow how am I going to support my son? I try to stay positive and think it is not going to happen but what if? I work in community and youth work where funding is always tight. Tomorrow the place could be shut down. Then I am back to 220 quid on my book. How would I live on that? The Family Income Support is a help but it only looks at people when they're working - they're not looking at the people that can't work.

I want the best for my son because I didn't have an education. I'm panicking now about college fees. What if he gets his points in his Leaving and he can't do the course because I don't have the money? I really want this for him.

An awful lot of people just think lone parents are scum. I wish there was more awareness of the fact that genuine lone parents do want to go out to work but genuinely can't. It's so, so hard - his father wasn't around so I never had a weekend off. I never wanted to be a single parent. I never set out to be a single parent. Why can't they think

about what it is like to be on your own raising a child, what it's like to have no-one there to give a hand or take a bit of the load? Why don't they look at the bigger picture and say how can we help lone parents get out to work?

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“I GOT ON A COMMUNITY EMPLOYMENT SCHEME WHICH SUITED ME WHEN MY CHILD WAS VERY YOUNG. ONLY FOR IT I WOULD HAVE BEEN ABSOLUTELY LOST.”

MARGARET, PRIMARY HEALTHCARE WORKER, DUBLIN

Lots of Travellers would love to go out and work but there's nothing there for them.

Margaret has been working to improve the health of Travellers for the past 9 years. The austerity measures have bitten deep in a community that already experience high unemployment, discrimination and poverty. As a Traveller herself, Margaret knows the struggles faced by other Travellers on a daily basis.

“Travellers dependent on social welfare are really hurting. What they're getting in one hand, they're giving back in another on bills”, she says. “Cuts to the child benefit will have a huge impact on poor families because it's money you're dependent on coming in. A member of my own family is living in town and his rent allowance has been cut along with his social welfare payment which is now €100. This has to cover electricity, heating, food and clothes. How can anybody in this day and age live on this?”

She maintains that Travellers are one of the groups who did not benefit from the boom times. Many still live in very poor accommodation with no bin collection, no electricity supply, one portaloo and tap between ten or twelve families. Alongside accommodation problems are the pressing concerns about cuts to education and high unemployment.

“The resource teachers for Travellers have been cut and this is going to have a huge impact on the kids at a time when they are actually staying in school not to mention the cost of getting four or five kids to school when the back to school grant has been cut”, says Margaret.

Unemployment among Travellers has always been a problem and it has only worsened since initiatives around the recycling of metals, scrap

cars and clothes have been introduced. This is an area of the economy Travellers have traditionally been involved in. It has worsened since the downturn in the economy and also with the introduction of very rigid legislation in the areas of recycling scrap, car-parts, clothes etc which has squeezed Travellers out of income generating activities they were traditionally engaged in.

“I know lots of Travellers who have applied for jobs online and when they go in for interview, straight away employers know who they are because of their accent and probably wouldn't give it to them”, says Margaret. “I found it difficult to get work experience for my daughter because of who we are. I couldn't get it for her and she couldn't go in herself and get it even though you're living in the area all your life”.

The funding cuts to Community Employment Schemes, FAS programmes, Traveller groups and organizations means that the strain is being felt across the community. In her own area of work, Margaret says that vulnerable Travellers depend on the health support and care she, and others like her, offer. Given the discrimination that Travellers face among more mainstream service providers, who will be there to help them if the primary healthcare projects are cut further?

“We need to get together as a whole community and go out and protest and let the government know how we feel”, says Margaret.

“The Government should be providing more support to vulnerable people and communities, not less. Lots of Travellers would love to go out and work but there's nothing there for them. I would love to see young Travellers getting better

education and better job opportunities. I think we have to look to the future generation that's getting a good education, Junior, Leaving Cert, third level if possible and then get a good job after that out of it".

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MARY, CARER

I'm being told that I may not be entitled to a contributory pension even though I've been working all my life.

The Celtic Tiger never happened for us. We have been in farming all our lives and nothing much changes - the outlay is still high and the income is still relatively low.

I'm in the process of applying for the old age pension and I'm being told that I may not be entitled to any contributory pension even though I've been working all my life. I started out working in a chemist shop back in 1963 and later worked as a telephonist for twelve years. I never knew anything about stamps or pensions - all I knew is that money was being taken off us but apparently it wasn't being put into a pension scheme.

I didn't know either that there was such a thing as signing on when you were looking after children or working in the home. I went back to paid employment working for a caring agency in 2001 but I didn't qualify for a stamp then either because the income was reckoned to be too high from the farm. Eventually by applying year after year I did qualify and I got my stamps paid.

To calculate my pension, they are starting back from '62 right to the present moment and taking an average because of the stamps I have put up in between. But there is a whole life time of work that isn't recognized. I did all the work as my husband was away a lot of the time. But there's nothing on paper to say that, you see. I'm sure I'm not the only one in this situation because an awful lot of women my age didn't work outside the home.

Farm work is hard and its physically draining so there will come a stage where we won't be able to do it. But I suppose you can only just hope

that we'll be able to keep going. We have to keep working the farm because we don't have any other income other than his contributory pension and that wouldn't keep two people living. God forbid if we have to go into a nursing home or anything like that I don't know what would happen. We can't afford a private pension on the income from the farm. Any income made over the years barely kept us living and kept the farm going. Money had to be put back in to keep buildings right and stock replaced. I mean we don't go out or we don't go on holidays. We don't do anything like that. You couldn't afford it.

I see other people in the community working very late into their lives where they're probably not fit to be working or shouldn't be working but they still have to. If you have to keep a car on the road and keep the bills paid you won't live on the pension. People now don't use the car as often, they might just take it out twice a week. If they were in senior citizen's clubs or whatever, they're just not going or not going as much. They're getting more cut off and they're just staying at home. It's very isolating altogether.

Contributory pensions should be a basic entitlement for everybody. Healthcare should be available for anyone that wants it - not because you have millions or insurance or whatever but because you are sick. There should be a health service for everyone.

I would like to see the government taking less in their own salaries, I don't know for the life of me how anyone can spend two or three thousand a week which some of them are on and expenses as well. I would say to the government stop their own

salaries, wages, expenses and bring them back down to the ordinary workers rate. I don't think they're doing anything more, maybe a lot less than the ordinary worker on the street and why should they be getting anything more? Then there might be a little more to go around.

We have to keep working the farm because we don't have any other income other than his contributory pension and that wouldn't keep two people living.

“I MEAN WE DON'T GO OUT OR WE DON'T GO ON HOLIDAYS. WE DON'T DO ANYTHING LIKE THAT. YOU COULDN'T AFFORD IT”.

TARIQ, CHEF, DUBLIN

I'm crying last night because of what is happening with me. I'm an honest person. I'm suffering all the time. Every day I wake up I have in mind that it's the start of a bad day.

I've been living here for over twelve years with my wife and two daughters. Everybody's good to me and my family. It's just working life that's very difficult. I'm a professional chef for the last twenty seven years. I'm a very good chef. When I came to Ireland, I had many awards in this field. Before the recession, I was working in the one restaurant for over five years. I had a visa at that time but the owner did not renew my work permit. I feel he used me. I don't have a status now. I'm working, no stamps, no work permit. It's a very bad situation.

The past six years have been very hard for me. Sometimes I am working, sometimes I have no job. I'm illegally working but what can I do? If you don't have a work permit there are no continuous or permanent jobs, only jobs for one month or two months. Sometimes I'm working in places but they know I don't have a work permit so I'm given one or two weeks of work and after that told go away. Sometimes somebody gives me a job and they use me. They know about my situation and they misuse me by not paying properly and sometimes they'll decide the wages but they won't be proper wages. I feel everybody has used me, used but misused.

I'm not getting one cent off the social welfare. I'm not a burden on this country, on the government. Sometimes my friends help me, they give me money. I get a lot of money from a lot of friends. I'm not getting social welfare but I survive, sometimes eating sometimes not eating. I give the food to the children. Sometimes my daughter says 'Baba get something'. But if you don't have money what do you do? I'm trying all the time, the best for the children. One day I work in another place

then another place so the children can eat.

Before 2007, I didn't have any health problems. Now, I'm taking nine to ten tablets every day. I have depression, I have diabetes, blood pressure, cholesterol, back pain, problems with my bones, everything. I have tension all the time and headaches. There's a lot of pressure on me. The tablets are working but still in the mind I am very sick. My wife is sick; she has depression, thyroid problems and breathing problems, she is sick all the time. I'm going to hospital to get medicine. I don't have medical card or anything like that, nothing. Over the last three weeks my children are sick, my wife is sick. I have to get medicine. It's very hard for me because the medicine is expensive.

I'm not sleeping. My wife is not sleeping. All the time sitting in the sitting room and thinking, what do I do? Where am I going? I don't have money. I'm patient, my wife is patient, my daughters too who were born in this country. My family are scared all the time. I'm scared all the time. I don't have other family in this country. I have family left behind. My mother is dying now. But I'm not going to my country, I don't have a visa.

I'm crying last night because of what is happening with me. I'm an honest person. I'm suffering all the time. Every day I wake up I have in mind that it's the start of a bad day.

Sometimes I'm working in places but they know I don't have a work permit so I'm given one or two weeks of work and after that told go away.

JOHN, YOUTH WORKER, BALLYFERMOT

The message we have for young people here is that change can happen, you can make change, it's up to you.

John is a Ballyfermot native and has seen the place grow and change from the previous recession in the 80's through the boom times and back to recession again. As a youth worker, he sees young people coming into the service at the age of 21 who don't know what it's like to work. There are opportunities - but in illegal activity.

"They'd be making money other ways; being drivers in cars where people are getting shot", he says. "Carrying guns or drugs down their jocks and earning €600 a week. Things are after changing big time and this has become normalized behaviour in Ballyfermot. There have been three shootings here in the last two weeks".

It is easy to look around for someone to blame, John argues, but he believes the Government have abandoned the young people of Ballyfermot. The young lads have few options - the schools have let them down, families have let them down and now the youth service is letting them down. Funding cuts have led to a reduction in their opening times and there are just not enough hours in the day to meet with everyone.

"We have young people walking in the door and saying 'listen, you wouldn't believe what's after happening, I'm after fucking up everything. Help me, will ye?' And that's what we're here for", says John. "But our hours are reduced due to funding cuts and it's heart breaking when you know there's only so much you can do and then there's nothing else coming after you do that. You can only try and support them but support them how far and where do you direct them to? To FAS?"

Over the last twenty years Ballyfermot has been fighting its way back from poverty and deprivation and had started to thrive. The money that had been invested in local communities and services was paying off but now the rug has been pulled and John believes that politicians see pen strokes on a paper - not real people with real problems and real needs.

"The Government needs to think about what kind of society it wants to create - one where everyone can function and live together or one where crutches are snatched away and people are left to fall to the floor", he says. "Because this is what is happening in Ballyfermot. But it is not only the responsibility of the Government to make change. It is up to each individual. People need to find their voice and start mobilizing. You have got power. Use it".

The message for young people in the area is that change can happen, you can make change, it's up to you.

"When they come in and say 'this is bollox, me ma's children's allowance is after getting cut and we're not going to afford a turkey at Christmas', we ask them why is that, why is society like this where do you fit in, and how can you change that going forward? My responsibility is to support these young people to become aware that we do have power and we can make a change here. How we go about it they might not know, but they just need to know that they can."

Our hours are reduced due to funding cuts and it's heart breaking when you know there's only so much you can do.

KEVIN, DUBLIN

There needs to be a better strategy of what you're training people for and why.

I'm finding being unemployed really demoralising. I'm constantly applying for jobs and getting refused because maybe 200 people have applied. When you're in work every day there's a social element with a regular pattern where you're engaging with other people. When you're unemployed you don't have that so you can very easily slip into a pattern of sitting at home all the time, watching TV and not engaging with anyone.

At the moment I get up and go out. I do loads of little bits and pieces like voluntary work with a disability organisation and some stuff with other groups. It can be difficult because public transport costs money. So sometimes I end up just sitting at home because I just don't have the cash. Being unemployed really does affect your mental health and at the end of the day a lot of my time is spent applying for jobs. I put a tailored CV in for every job so sometimes that can take a day to prepare.

Attitudes to unemployed people are really negative. It's kinda like, 'oh you don't really want a job, you're just sitting around doing nothing'. That really drives me mad. There's a media vilification of people on social welfare but how do they expect people to survive if it is cut? Our cost of living is expensive. I'm struggling to be able to survive myself. I think if I had a family and people who were depending on me, it would be much worse.

I applied to work on a CE scheme, which would have given me €20 extra a week, but when I calculated it, transport costs would have been more than the extra money. That's a serious problem. I think the Government should consider

allowing organisations that participate in training schemes to give travel expenses to workers. I did 'Job Bridge' but even though they have statistics to say it's the most successful in Europe, it didn't work for me.²

Training opportunities can be pointless and stupid. There needs to be a better strategy of what you're training people for and why. There is no sense that the person is valued as an individual. It's just "shove them on to something so we can get them off the live register". If it's just about shoving somebody into something they're not interested in, is that really any use in the long term? I just find FAS incredibly unhelpful.

There are a lot of mantras out there, that we can't increase taxes on higher earners or corporations. Those need to be challenged. Why can't we bring in a third rate of tax for the extremely wealthy?

Twenty years ago in a Welfare Office staff were instructed to focus on finding everything someone is entitled to and give them the maximum support possible. Now it's the opposite - find ways of cutting back and take things off people. The reality is that the Government is forcing people into impoverishment. We have situations where some parents are not feeding themselves in order to feed their children. Younger people are paying the price for the excesses of older generations.

Attitudes to unemployed people are really negative. It's kinda like, 'oh you don't really want a job, you're just sitting around doing nothing'. That really drives me mad.

2. JobBridge is a National Internship Scheme that provides work experience placements for interns for a 6 or 9 month period.

PATRICK, COMMUNITY WORKER, FATIMA MANSIONS, DUBLIN

We'll never let Fatima go back to what it was but it is becoming more and more of a challenge.

Five years ago, Patrick would have said that jobs and investment and hard work by the local community had turned the tide in Fatima Mansions. But this stability is now under threat because of income poverty, no jobs and no future.

"I look out the window now and I see gangs of young lads whose brothers we had working a few years back. We had broken the cycle of people entering into criminality", he says. "But the biggest impact of the austerity of the last four years has been anti-social gang culture. Young people who may have been in a position to get a job a few years back are now drifting into the drugs scene. What that translates to is you end up in the criminal justice system or you end up with a bullet. It's really that serious".

Patrick is a Community Worker in Fatima Mansions and believes that employment, an income and a sense of well being goes a long way towards helping people to feel like they belong to society. But the pursuit of the Government's austerity measures has resulted in people feeling like there is no real pathway - there is no escape.

"The cuts are all cumulative. Within our organisation, we've got health, childcare and education services and supports", he says. "All the things that are important to meeting the needs of a community. But all those strands of work have been cut and butchered where only 'frontline' services are seen as a priority. But what does that mean? At the end of the day, areas like this need an integrated service response, not just a simple one".

The cutbacks have reduced the organizations capacity to get people in the locality involved in the running of the services. Not only are the funding cuts impacting on the services provided, but eligibility criteria for schemes and programmes have tightened and opportunities are limited. The youth services have been cut significantly and the community drugs team have seen a 35% cut in their services. Patrick says that there is a significant level of violence, intimidation and fear in the flat complexes and they are struggling to respond to that.

"We'll never let Fatima go back to what it was but it is becoming more and more of a challenge", says Patrick. "The message from Fatima is quite simple: you can't keep cutting. You have to give us, and communities like us, support to come up with new ideas that will meet the needs of people in the community. People are resilient. But we need to continue to come up with programmes that ignite the spirit within people and within a community."

Patrick believes it is his job and the job of others like him to put pressure on the State to respond and do something. The reality is that everyone is competing for resources, he says. "But if the people of Fatima are left at the bottom of the ladder then we are facing another wasted generation".

"You end up in the criminal justice system or you end up with a bullet. It's really that serious"

SIOBHAN, LONE PARENT

The government and the IMF don't hear about the poverty they are bringing to people - they don't live my life.

I've been on lone parent allowance now for fourteen years. Basically you just have enough to feed yourself and your kids. There's no extra for anything else. I get €220 a week. My rent is paid out of that, by the time I pay my gas, ESB, my bins, I only have like 120 euro left on a Thursday. By Friday it's gone and I just have the bare essentials there's no treats or nothing nice for the kids just basic food as in cereals, dinner and probably a bit of pasta for supper, that's it, that's as far as it goes.

Come every Wednesday, I'm on emergency electricity and I'm on emergency gas after putting thirty euro in on both the week before. I'm running around turning lights off, pulling out plugs, turning the heating off just to save that little bit extra.

It's depressing as well to sit at home and just have what you need that day. Wednesday is the worst day, when there's literally hardly anything left in the presses. It's only been like this for the last couple of years but it's getting really bad so I'm actually dreading what it's going to be like next year.

Amy's doing her junior cert at the moment and that has been tough since she's started back in September because she needs extra. I'm trying to juggle the money, like leaving out something in the shopping this week to buy exam papers. I'm trying to get the ones that she really needs and put the other ones on hold. She just has to go to a few classes without them.

Childcare has always been a problem - my daughter is 14 now and my son is two. I left school at fourteen so I haven't got a lot of education. I'd

love to go back and do psychology for two or three years but there's no funding for childcare. There are a few crèches around the area but its ninety five euro a week. That's half of my pay gone just to educate myself. That's a lot for any lone parent. If I can, childcare providing, I'll train and hopefully be able to provide for the kids myself instead of relying on social welfare because you've no life, you've no sanity on these sorts of payments and with the cuts it's just even worse.

I did a few things over the years like CE schemes and other courses like computer courses things like that but childcare has always been a problem. I'm only 31 years of age, just sitting at home day in day out. I found out about An Cosan³, signed up for a couple of courses but because of the childcare issue I can't do everything I want to do, so I'm here two days a week. It's a great support.

I started off doing personal development because I went so into myself over the years, no confidence, no self esteem. I'm here now meeting new people. It's only for two and a half hours each day but it's a great help. An Cosan are definitely keeping me sane.

They ask you for a fiver for each class. Some weeks I haven't even got that. I didn't go to my class last Monday because I hadn't got the fiver, I was too embarrassed. I didn't have the money the week before either but I came in anyway and I was the only one that hadn't got the money. I couldn't do the same the next week - I just could not do it, it was my pride as well. I think all I have left is my little bit of pride.

3. An Cosan is a community education centre in Jobstown, West Tallaght that concentrates on learning, leadership and enterprise.

I've no real support, my family don't live close and I haven't got the bus fare to go and see my ma and da so I'm basically here on my own. I think if you're on any sort of welfare, there's nothing there for you, you've no options, you're left at home and that's it. I can't see any hope because I know it's going to be a hard budget so I don't know what the New Year is going to bring for me or the kids.

I am so stressed all the time and it is affecting my health. I'm on anxiety tablets because I'm thinking too much. I'm panicking and having panic attacks so I'm on medication for that. I'm only thirty-one years of age and I'm on medication for six months now. It's really hard but the kids keep me going, the kids are my strength, only for them I don't know I'd probably be on a lot more medication than what I am just for sanity basically.

The government and the IMF don't hear about the poverty they are bringing to people - they don't live my life. They don't realise how hard it is for us, they don't. And with everything going up now the gas and the ESB and the whole lot they need to give us a break. We can't take any more cuts. It's going to actually cost them more money for mental health in a few years down the line. They need to just give us a break and stop cutting our money especially the lone parents and children's allowance; that's for the kid's clothes, that keeps them warm.

I don't think we can take any more cuts; for people's sanity please don't.

To provide for the kids myself instead of relying on social welfare because you've no life, you've no sanity on these sorts of payments and with the cuts it's just even worse.

“I THINK THAT ALL I HAVE LEFT IS MY LITTLE BIT OF PRIDE”.

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