

“Equality between all citizens is a core guiding principle of our Republic. Over recent years, we have taken major strides in addressing discrimination against minority and marginalised groups. However, the task of ensuring that every individual enjoys this fundamental right remains incomplete. This Government will continue to build on hard-won progress to give real meaning to our best values of equality and fairness.” Programme for Government, page 76

INOUE Submission to the Department of Social Protection’s Statement of Strategy 2023-2026



February 2023

Introduction

The Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed (INOU) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the preparation of the Department of Social Protection's Strategy Statement for the period 2023 to 2026.

"The INOU is a federation of unemployed people, unemployed centres, unemployed groups, community organisations and Trade Unions. The INOU represents and defends the rights and interests of those who want decent employment and cannot obtain it. We promote and campaign for policies to achieve full employment for all. We also campaign for an acceptable standard of living for unemployed people and their dependents. The INOU is an anti-sectarian, anti-racist, non-party political organisation which promotes equality of opportunity within society." (INOU Mission Statement)

The organisation has almost two hundred affiliated organisations and six hundred individual members. We work at the local and national level on issues affecting unemployed people through the provision of training and welfare rights information services; analysis of Government policies and related advocacy work; and working with a wide range of other organisations on issues of common concern.

Department of Social Protection

In the email seeking submissions to this process the Department noted that *"In the context of the preparation of the Department's **Strategy Statement for 2023 to 2026**, we would be pleased to receive your views on any strategic and cross-departmental issues that you consider should be addressed in the new Strategy Statement. The new Statement of Strategy will closely reflect the Government's priorities as set out in the Programme for Government and other overarching policy frameworks."*

In that email the Department also noted that their mission is to *"promote active participation and inclusion in society through the provision of income supports, employment services and other services"* and their overall objective is to *"put our clients at the centre of all our operations, **providing an integrated income support and activation focused service.**"* In the current Statement of Strategy this overall objective is slightly different as it states that the Department's overall objective is *"To continue putting our clients at the centre of all our operations, **providing an efficient and effective service and to continue developing our staff, structures and processes.**"*

In this submission we will use the overall objective from the Department's email, and reflect on what is required for more holistic and inclusive policy development and implementation.

Clients at the centre

In the *Programme for Government: Our Shared Future*¹, in the Chapter entitled *Mission: A New Social Contract*, the Government states: *"Ireland requires a new national social contract between citizens and the State"* and *"It will provide greater security for individuals and communities and will be founded on the principle of equality and ensuring that every citizen can achieve their full potential."* (p74)

¹ This publication is available at [fe93e24e-dfe0-40ff-9934-def2b44b7b52.pdf \(www.gov.ie\)](https://www.gov.ie/publications-and-resources/publication/fe93e24e-dfe0-40ff-9934-def2b44b7b52)

On page seventy-five the Government says that *“Any changes made in social welfare provisions will continue to be gender- and equality-proofed. We will do this by rigorous implementation of the new social inclusion strategy, A Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025.”* On page twenty-two of the Department of Social Protection’s current statement of Strategy they reiterate this commitment. **It will be important to ensure that the new Statement of Strategy commits to continuing with this practice and clearly demonstrates its impact in an informative manner.**

On page eight of the Department of Social Protection’s current statement of Strategy they say they will *“Ensure that the Department’s services and information are accessible to all service users and compliant with its Public Sector Human Rights and Equality Duty in all its activities.”* In their Annual Report 2021² they note under the heading Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty that *“The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) Act 2014 introduced a positive duty on public bodies to have due regard to human rights and equality issues. The department’s mission is to promote active participation and inclusion in society through the provision of income supports, employment services and other services. In particular, the department’s response to the public health crisis caused by COVID-19 was this public sector duty in action.”* (p84)

As part of the *New Social Contract* chapter of the *Programme for Government*, under the heading *Socio-economic Inequality* the Government state that they *“will examine the introduction of a new ground of discrimination, based on socio-economic disadvantaged status to the Employment Equality and Equal Status Acts.”* This work has been incorporated into the review of Ireland’s equality legislation, which is being led by another Department – Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. **However, it would be important for the Department of Social Protection to spell how they will support people who experience socio-economic disadvantage to realise their human rights and enjoy equality of outcomes in the DSP’s new Statement of Strategy.**

On page five of the *Roadmap for Social Inclusion*³ the Government notes *“this new Roadmap is framed in terms of the achievement of Social Inclusion which we define as follows:*

Social Inclusion is achieved when people have access to sufficient income, resources and services to enable them to play an active part in their communities and participate in activities that are considered the norm for people in society generally.”

In the INOU’s submission⁴ to the mid-term review of the Roadmap for Social Inclusion we noted that *“Notwithstanding the Government’s desire to see this Roadmap as a policy for inclusion, the cold reality is that socio-economic exclusion and marginalisation has a cumulative impact on a person’s ability to participate as fully as possible in Irish society and its economy. It is critical not to underestimate the influence of a person’s start in life: the socio-economic status of the family and community they were born into, which in turn can impact on their educational attainment. There is a strong correlation between educational status and employment status, which in turn impacts on the type of employment the person can access, whether or not they experience long-term unemployment, or have the networks or contacts to secure decent employment.”*

² This report is available at [c27eefe5-789e-4864-b601-d50c85e1bd20.pdf \(www.gov.ie\)](https://www.gov.ie/c27eefe5-789e-4864-b601-d50c85e1bd20.pdf)

³ This publication is available at [bf7011904ede4562b925f98b15c4f1b5.pdf \(www.gov.ie\)](https://www.gov.ie/bf7011904ede4562b925f98b15c4f1b5.pdf)

⁴ This submission is available at [INOUE Submission to the Mid-term Review of the Roadmap for Social Inclusion](#)

To that end it is absolutely critical that supports are built around the unemployed person and others seeking supports from the Department of Social Protection, that the person really does feel that they and their concerns are at the heart of this work, and that they will be supported to make informed choices. These choices should include ensuring that people are on the right payment, that the system takes pro-active and supportive steps to ensure that people are, and that at all times the person feels and knows they can drop into their local Social Welfare / Intreo office to discuss any matter of concern.

On page seven of the current Statement of Strategy, the Department note that they value public service and *“are dedicated to serving the people of Ireland in an efficient and impartial manner.”* **To that end it is important that Ireland’s Public Employment Service, for which the Department is responsible, is available to everyone of working age regardless of whether or not they are on a social welfare payment or what type of social welfare payment they are on.**

Such an approach would be in keeping with the following policies:

- *Future Jobs Ireland 2019*⁵ where one of the deliverables was to *“Enhance the career advice service provided through the Public Employment Service to include offering support to those currently in employment who may need to identify new opportunities as a result of technological and other changes.”* (p57)
- *The Programme for Government: Our Shared Future* where it states *“we will build a stronger, fairer, and more sustainable economy prepared for the next phase of disruptive technologies and on a pathway to a low-carbon future.”* (p18)

Integrated Income Support

In February, 2021 the INOU ran a number of online events entitled *Building a Better Social Welfare System* and amongst the issues raised at these events were:

- The diversity of rules, the inconsistency of access and application across the system, a system that is often re-active rather than positively pro-active.
- The issue of inadequate, inconsistent information arises for both people accessing information and support and people working in local organisations.
- This issue arises with regard to the social welfare supports people may or may not be entitled to; what is or is not taxable; what supports are available for people who make the welfare to work journey; and what will be the difference in the income they obtain should they make this journey.

Amongst the recommendations in the Commission on Taxation and Welfare report is 10.7 which states *“The Commission recommends that cliff-edges in the taxation and welfare systems should be removed.”* The INOU welcomes this recommendation, but we are also conscious that it would need to be handled with great care. In particular to ensure that the cliff edges are addressed constructively, and people see a real improvement in their incomes.

In the *Programme for Government* Chapter entitled *Mission: A New Social Contract*, the Government states they will *Protect core weekly social welfare rates; Improve jobseeker supports for people aged under 24 over the lifetime of the Government.*

⁵ This report is available at <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/publications/publication-files/future-jobs-ireland-2019.pdf>

The issue of income adequacy is a key one for the INOU and along with other community and voluntary sector organisations has called on the Government to increase core social welfare rates so that they (i) lift people above the poverty line and (ii) support them to meet a minimum essential standard of living. In the *Roadmap for Social Inclusion*, Commitment twenty-five under Goal Three, seeks to “*Consider and prepare a report for Government on the potential application of the benchmarking approach to other welfare payments.*” **It would be vital that this work is undertaken as soon as possible in a constructive manner; that the poverty facing unemployed people and other social welfare recipients is properly addressed; and the age segregation visible in Jobseekers Allowance payments is finally ended.**

Activation Focused Service

In the Department’s current Statement of Strategy, under the heading “*As a Department, we value*” and the value of public service, it notes: “*We are dedicated to serving the people of Ireland in an efficient and impartial manner.*” This value is important and has a wider focus than the term ‘activation’ - which can limit the Department’s focus to people who become its customers or clients rather than people living and working in Ireland, and within that people who are on particular social welfare payments.

In the INOU’s report *Building a Quality Public Employment Service*⁶ we note that “*A Public Employment Service is one that is open to and available to everyone of working age who wishes to avail of the service including:*

- *Unemployed people in receipt of a Jobseeker’s payment*
- *Unemployed people not in receipt of a Jobseeker’s payment*
- *People working part-time*
- *People who are underemployed*
- *People out of work and in receipt of other Social Welfare payments*
- *People working in low-paid jobs*
- *People looking for a change of career*
- *People who are very significantly distanced from the Labour Market” (p2)*

The world of work is changing. Ireland’s employment, education and training supports and services must work together to ensure that people who are unemployed; in employment that may disappear as Ireland seeks to decarbonise our economy; require new skills as increasing digitalisation changes how we work, and how engage with the world around us, including public services. As the *Programme for Government* notes on page thirty-eight “*The next decade will see two major transitions: to a low-carbon future and to greater digitalisation, automation, and robotics.*

Both transitions will unleash huge changes in society, and while presenting significant challenges, will also bring a range of opportunities. The impacts of these changes will be unevenly spread and will manifest themselves in different ways.

In some cases, these transitions will impact entire industries and regions. In others, particular trades or professions may become obsolete. It is vital that a Just Transition pathway be found, which delivers alternative job opportunities to sectors and regions most affected and ensures

⁶ This publication is available at https://www.inou.ie/assets/files/pdf/building_a_qpes.pdf

that vulnerable groups are helped, as transformative policies are implemented. This will require the anticipation of challenges and planning for responses to them.”

The Department of Social Protection employment services must play their role in supporting job seekers, job changers, job returners to ensure that change / transition that are underway are just, and do not further exacerbate the inequalities in Ireland’s labour market.

Under the Chapter heading *Mission: Balanced Regional Development* on page sixty of the Programme for Government they note *“Economic growth is not an end in itself but a means to provide a decent life for all our citizens.”* The United Nations eight Sustainable Development Goal seeks to *“Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all”*. According to the International Labour Organisation definition: *“Decent work involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men”*.

In 2020 the INOU ran a project on Decent Work⁷ and within one of the workshops for this project *“An example was given of a young person trying to manage on their Jobseekers payment, with the expectations of their engagement in activation. Yet the lack of an accessible and regular bus service made this extremely difficult. Concerns were raised that some people had lost their Jobseekers Allowance because they could not get into their local Intreo Office. (p13)* It is important that when people are expected to engage with activation supports and services that providers are mindful of the challenges that face people with few resources.

Other concerns included: *“A lack of quality guidance by Intreo was raised and that the approach needs to be holistic, compassionate and personal: the specifics of each person’s situation are key. Within this discussion better direction by activation services including career guidance was sought for unemployed young people.” (p20)* At present the Department of Education are leading a consultation on the development of a *National Framework for Guidance*.

In the consultation document for this framework the Department of Education provides a potential vision for lifelong guidance as *“A more unified guidance system which will allow all young people and adults to have access to high quality and appropriate lifelong guidance*

- *Lifelong guidance aims to provide career development support for individuals of all ages, at all career stages.*
- *It includes careers information, advice, guidance counselling, assessment of skills and mentoring.*
- *Quality guidance services should be available to all individuals, regardless of their employment situation, socioeconomic status, ethnicity or gender. (p10)*

⁷ It was funded under IHREC Grants Scheme and the report is available at https://www.inou.ie/assets/files/pdf/inou_decent_work_report_web.pdf

Such a vision is to be welcomed and it would be important that the Department of Social Protection plays an active role in delivering on it.

On page six of the *National Framework for Guidance* consultation document it notes that *“The **Department of Social Protection (DSP)** provide the Public Employment Services through Intreo. The Pathways to Work 2021-2025⁸ is the government’s national employment services strategy, the government’s overall framework for activation and employment support policy.”*

In *Pathways to Work* it states *“Therefore, the State needs to make sure that the full toolset of options is available and used to best effect. For this reason, the capacity of, and processes used by, the Public Employment Service and the knowledge and skills of its case workers are critical to ensure, as far as reasonably possible, that correct guidance is given to each individual jobseeker.”* (p31)

In the design and delivery of active labour market and related programmes, the Department must create greater flexibility on eligibility criteria for employment, education, and training programmes. Such a development is essential to ensure such supports are more person centred and holistic and lead to more equitable and inclusive outcomes. To that end participation on activation programmes must be by choice, self-referrals should be facilitated, and people must be supported when they demonstrate their own initiative. This would be very much in keeping with the Department of Social Protection’s mission to *“promote active participation and inclusion in society through the provision of income supports, employment services and other services”*.

Thank you for your time and consideration

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⁸ Pathways to Work is available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/1feaf-pathways-to-work-2021/>