

Ministers Speeches



Speech by Séamus Brennan T.D.,

Minister for Social and Family Affairs,

at the launch of the first Annual Report of the

Office for Social Inclusion.

Friday 17 December 2004, Government Press Centre

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Introduction and Background

Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to welcome you here this morning to mark the launch of the first Annual Report of the Office for Social Inclusion.

The Office, which is located in my Department, was set up in 2002 and has overall responsibility for developing, co-ordinating and driving the National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion. Ireland joined other EU Member States at Lisbon in 2000, in making a commitment "to make a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty" by 2010. These Action Plans are the way Member States plan to make that "decisive impact" and show to their own people, especially those experiencing poverty, and to other Member States the progress being made.

The current plan was submitted to the EU in July 2003 and covers the period up to 2005. It sets out the commitments made by Ireland over that period in meeting the Lisbon pledge. The plan incorporates the strategic approach to tackling poverty which was set out in the earlier National Anti-Poverty Strategy. It reflects the social inclusion commitments agreed in the National Partnership agreement, Sustaining Progress.

The causes of poverty are many. Working to eradicate it requires action across a range of different policy areas. The Plan includes actions in relation to employment, social welfare, education, health, housing, equality and so on. But the strategic approach reflected in the plan means that these actions are being coordinated in an integrated, "joined up" way, with a view to achieving more effective outcomes in relation both to the people supported and for the considerable resources devoted to providing this support. In the case of my own Department alone this will amount to over 12 billion euro next year.

The need to develop this strategic approach was also the primary motivation behind the establishment by this Government of the Office for Social Inclusion. The Office has an important role in developing the planned, integrated approach to tackling poverty and in supporting Government Departments in meeting the commitments

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contained in the National Action Plan. As part of this process special Social Inclusion Units have been created in key Departments, staffed by social inclusion liaison officers, several of whom are here this morning. I would like to acknowledge the key role played by these liaison officers in ensuring implementation of the targets contained in the action plan. I would also like to particularly acknowledge the role played by the Management Group of Assistant Secretaries, who oversee the work of the Office, and the Social Inclusion Consultative Group, representing the Social Partners, in finalising the report.

The Annual Report

This first annual report of the Office details the progress made on implementation of the National Action Plan since August 2003. It details actions taken under the targets contained in the Plan, as well as other initiatives designed to combat poverty and social exclusion.

I am happy to say that good progress has been recorded against many of the targets that we have set in the National Action Plan. Commitments made by this Government, for example, in relation to income support mean that we are well on the way to meeting the 2007 target of a rate of 150 euro per week for the lowest social welfare payments in 2002 terms. We are also moving steadily towards the target of 200 euro per week for social welfare pension rates.

Despite these substantial improvements, which extend also to other policy areas, it has not been possible to ensure that incomes of those dependent on social welfare keep pace with the major increases overall, which Irish people have enjoyed during the recent period of economic growth.

The key to keeping pace with such increases in incomes for those of working age is employment, especially for families with children. We must work more to help people better reconcile work and family life. In this way they can improve their standard of living for themselves and their children, while at the same time being able to ensure that their children receive the care and the parental time they need. This will be a key issue to be dealt with in the forthcoming strategy for families in a changing society. Our children are our future and we must support their families in ensuring they get a good start in life.

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An ongoing priority will be improving the position of older people, especially those who are more elderly, or living alone. They have already earned a comfortable old age and we must ensure that they obtain that comfort and support.

The report also identifies some important policy developments that will benefit people who are socially excluded. Some examples here include:

The launch in September 2004 of the National Disability Strategy;

The extension nation-wide of the FÁS High Support Process for jobseekers suffering personal barriers to employment;

Additional funding for childcare under the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme; and

The establishment of the first National Council for Special Education.

Next Steps

As for the next stage in the process, the staff in the Office for Social Inclusion will soon undertake, in conjunction with the relevant Government Departments, a detailed analysis of the Annual Report with a view to identifying areas where progress has been slow, or perhaps uneven. The advice of the Social Inclusion Consultative Group, on which the social partners and the Community and Voluntary sector are represented, will also be sought. The report will also be a major subject for discussion and analysis at next month's Social Inclusion Forum.

When these areas are identified they will be highlighted for stronger action in the period ahead. As part of the analysis of the report the Office will also seek to highlight areas where insufficient data is available to allow the measurement of progress against particular objectives and targets. In this regard a priority objective of the Office for the year ahead is the development of a comprehensive Data Strategy, one of the aims of which will be to ensure that data gaps are identified and filled.

As I indicated, this is only the first annual report of the Office for Social Inclusion. In its preparation, aspects of the reporting process have been identified which can be revised or improved for the next report. I would also like to invite the Departments and other groups represented here today to provide the Office with any comments

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you have which may improve the reporting process.

Communicating the Message - New Website for the Office for Social Inclusion

A key challenge is to ensure that there is widespread knowledge and related information available about the policies and mechanisms that are in place to combat poverty and social exclusion. The Office will aim to achieve this objective through the development and implementation of a strong communications strategy.

The OSI Annual Report and the information leaflet entitled 'What is being Done About Poverty and Social Exclusion' will assist greatly in this regard. Another important element of the OSI Communications Strategy which I am also very happy to officially launch today is the new website for the Office for Social Inclusion. The site – **www.socialinclusion.ie** - is designed to provide an understanding of the work of the Office, to show updates on progress under the National Action Plan, and to provide links to other Government Departments and bodies involved in tackling poverty and social exclusion. I hope that you find it informative and easy to use. The annual report being launched today can be found on the site.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to thank you once again for your attendance here this morning. I hope that this first report of the Office for Social Inclusion will assist in all our efforts to promote an inclusive society. My aim is to ensure that we will build on what has been achieved so far, as outlined in the report, and that we will be determined to make up for where we fall short in ensuring a decent standard of living for all in this country. Finally, I would like to record my thanks to the Director and staff of the Office for Social Inclusion, for their commitment and dedication in producing this report and for their work in driving forward the Government's priorities in this area. Thank you.

ENDS.