

Pre-Budget Submission

Pavee Point Travellers' Centre

October, 2004

Pavee Point is a non-government organisation which is committed to human rights for Travellers. The group comprises Travellers and members of the majority population working in partnership to address the needs of Travellers, who as a minority ethnic group experience exclusion and marginalisation.

Introduction

The budget has a crucial role to play in addressing issues of social and economic exclusion. Not only in the traditional areas of concern, welfare payments, but also in the provision of appropriate resources to realise social inclusion.

Given the multi-faceted nature of the exclusion facing Travellers it is vital that the issue of compartmentalisation of departments and the implementation of responses is addressed. It is pointless the State having social inclusion as an important policy objective without consistency across the range of state activity. This work should include the practice of proofing policies for their impact on the most marginalised: such an approach *should* inform the budget.

The Census 2002 highlighted the extent of Travellers economy and social exclusion:

- ▷ Unemployment runs at 73% for Traveller men against a national rate of 9%; while for Traveller women it is 64% against a national rate of 8%.
- ▷ 79% of Travellers have only primary level education in comparison to the national level of 22%; while only 19% of Travellers have some level of second level education in comparison to 52% of the overall population.
- ▷ Only 3% of the Traveller population is over 65 in comparison to a national rate of 11%; while 40% of Travellers are aged less than 15 in comparison to a national rate of 20%.

Adequate Income

With regard to social welfare payments per se, Pavee Point joins in the calls from a wide range of community and voluntary organisations for the state to meet its own targets. For example, in NAPS and re-iterated in 'Sustaining Progress' a target was set '*to achieve a rate of €150 per week in 2002 terms by 2007*'. To meet this target would require a significant increase in social welfare payments in the forth coming budget: an increase of at least €15 per week for the lowest social welfare payment.

There are particular issues for Traveller women which must be recognised and adequately addressed. For example, the development of education, training and employment programmes whose eligibility criteria are *not* based on the live register are important. Likewise, it is important that the limit that an adult dependent can earn before affecting the spouses social welfare is raised to that of a standard training allowance. Such an increase would ensure greater accessibility to training courses. Similarly, the limit that an adult dependent can earn is assessed on a daily rather than a weekly basis and this is impacting negatively on Traveller women's progression from training to employment.

Travellers' marginal socio-economic status is very evident in their poor health status. In this context the importance of the medical card cannot be overestimated. This is an enormous barrier to Travellers who wish to progress on from training and employment schemes to the mainstream labour market. Pavee Point is calling for affirmative action on this issue and proposes that Travellers should be able to

retain their medical cards for five years after taking up employment. This initiative should be reviewed after a five year period to ascertain its relevance in addressing Travellers exclusion from the labour market.

Developing more inclusive services

Inequality and discrimination are realities in Irish society: they have an impact and underpin Travellers social and economic exclusion. To address these issues requires a systematic approach. Legislation is the starting point, in effect the foundation of such an approach. To build on this demands:

- ›clear policies within state agencies on how equality and social inclusion objectives will be met in practice;
- ›training for front line staff on the issues facing, to use the language of NAPS, 'vulnerable groups' and the dynamics of exclusion;
- ›commitment from senior personnel within the agency / department;
- ›reviews of established policy and practice to ensure that they are in keeping with stated policies.

Such work requires on-going resources and Pavee Point would be concerned that there has been a roll back in this regard. However such work should be seen as a part of the long term investment in creating effective, efficient and *equitable* public services.

Developing opportunities

Many links have been made between educational status and access to the labour market. At present the Traveller Education Strategy is being developed. It would be important that adequate resources – both financial and human – are put in place to ensure that Travellers educational disadvantage is seriously addressed.

Progress on addressing Travellers accommodation issues has been slow. Pavee Point has been struck at the dramatic impact of tax incentives on the regeneration of local areas and the provision of a wider range of accommodation. The organisation is calling on the Government to explore such an approach to support, for example, Travellers who wish to provide their own accommodation or to underpin the development of public / private partnerships to speed up the implementation of local Traveller accommodation programmes. Such a development would be in addition to the range of policies that are in place – be part of the package to push forward on these issues which would benefit from the establishment of a National Traveller Accommodation Agency taking a lead role.

Active Labour Market Programmes have provided opportunities for Travellers to access second chance education and training and for many Travellers are the only access route to employment. It is therefore important that such schemes i.e. CE and JI are adequately resourced and Travellers employment in the community sector recognised and supported.

On a broader front much work needs to be done to support Travellers access to the other segments of the labour market – public and private. Such a development

requires strong leadership from the State as an *employer*, and recognition that positive action is required on the employers' side of the labour market if true inclusion is to be realised.

On the broader issue of the social economy, as distinct from the SEP, the D/SFA has an important role to play in the exploration of part work / part income support models – this was recommended in the 1995 Task Force Report. One mechanism to address this issue would be the re-development of the Back to Work Allowance and the introduction of a longer phasing out period with the reduction in welfare payment happening more gradually for example dropping by 20% per annum and spread over a six year period: this would ease the negative net income effect seen currently at the 50% stage. Such a development could have positive implications for Travellers access to employment and would make an important contribution to the exploration of self-employment options.

Supporting community development

Community development has played an important role in supporting Travellers active engagement in a range of initiatives from the local to the national. Such work is crucial if Travellers are to play an active role in the implementation of the NAP Incl and the NAPS. Adequate resources are required to develop these organisations and their capacity to deliver badly needed services *and* to develop the Traveller community's capacity to engage in social and economic development.

With regard to supporting Traveller organisations another potentially important development would be the introduction of a VAT exemption for organisations with charitable status. The application of a 21% VAT rate on, for example, building work and the purchase of equipment like computers can pose a considerable financial burden.

In conclusion

The Budget spells out how the State will raise its finances and what it regards as important to support. Given the status afforded social inclusion in the National Development Plan it would be logical to poverty and equality proof the Budget. Such an action should ensure that the stated objectives of a range of Government policies and programmes are not undermined by a lack of resources and the provision of supports to issues that are contrary to the development of an inclusive and equitable society.