



# *A Fixed Star*

NEWSLETTER OF THE SVP SOCIAL JUSTICE AND POLICY COMMITTEE  
Summer 2007



## ***NEW TIMES FOR A NEW COMMITTEE***

Several important developments affecting social justice and policy have occurred since the last Fixed Star. The election of a new government represents a fresh opportunity to tackle problems which the Society has consistently brought to public attention, most recently with the 'election card' sent to all conferences. These issues will not disappear and must be addressed by whatever administration comes to power. The Society continues to play its part within the Social Partnership process to advance its goals, and is now represented on bodies concerned with health, rent, housing as well as the steering group which oversees implementation of *Towards 2016*. The recent publication of the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion also offers potential avenues for tackling these problems.

With the election of the new Committee chair, it is opportune to take stock and consider the membership and role of the Committee going forward. In particular, regional representatives are important for ensuring a national perspective on social policy, and we hope to recruit a number of new members in the coming months to deepen our expertise and capacity.

The Committee is delighted to welcome back from a recent absence our colleague John-Mark, who energetically heads up the Social Justice and Policy team. The Committee also congratulates Mairéad Bushnell on her election as President of the Society and looks forward to working with her. Finally, the Committee intends holding a social justice conference in mid-September for all members. *Details to follow.*

## **NATIONAL ACTION PLAN FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION**

The overall goal of the new Plan is to reduce the number of people experiencing consistent poverty to between 2% and 4% by 2012, with the long-term aim of eliminating consistent poverty by 2016. The Plan includes goals for people at various stages in their life, i.e. Children; People of Working Age and Older People. It also has a number of goals regarding people with Disabilities and Communities

The Government believes that much of their work has been done regarding levels of social welfare, and that the big challenges in tackling poverty include the delivery of housing, health and education services, the improvement of services at local level, and stronger joint working across Government agencies. As members working with people in need, do you feel that this is the correct approach for the Government to take? **Please tell us what you think!**

## ***TOWARDS 2016*** **SOCIAL PARTNERSHIP NEWS**

### **SVP Selected for Social Partnership Steering Group**

The Society was one of four organisations selected out of the Community and Voluntary (C&V) nominees to represent the C&V Pillar at quarterly meetings with the Taoiseach's Dept. and other Government Departments. John-Mark McCafferty, Head of Social Justice, is the SVP's representative. The purpose of the Steering group is to monitor and input to Government progress in implementing the new agreement, *Towards 2016*, that are relevant to the needs of the people we assist, such as policies for children and access to public services.

### **SVP Member on Rent Supplement Group**

Eileen Walsh, Dundrum SVP, South Dublin, is representing the Society on a Government Working Group dealing with various poverty traps in the welfare system. Chaired by the Department of Social and Family Affairs, the issues being discussed include SWA Rent Supplement, Fuel Poverty, and Back to School costs. The group have worked well over the last few months and as a result there are now changes to way Rent Supplement is administered. (see below)

### **C&V Pillar – linkage groups**

The SVP is also actively consulted by the Dept. of Health, alongside other community and voluntary groups. Audry Deane, Social Justice and Policy Officer, represents the Society on this 'linkage group'. The Society also works within the Community and Voluntary Pillar of Social Partnership in relation to Housing and Homelessness.

## ***Social Welfare News***

### ***Rent Supplement Changes***

The Dept. of Social and Family Affairs (DSFA) have approved some important changes in relation to rent supplement and the rental Accommodation Scheme. The changes, scheduled to begin on the 5<sup>th</sup> June, will enable recipients of Rent Supplement, who have been placed on a Local Authority list for accommodation under the Rental Accommodation Scheme, to take up full time employment and remain eligible for rent supplement, subject to satisfying the other conditions for entitlement. The SVP participated in the advisory group for the changes and welcomes the development.

### ***Rates of Payment Booklet***

*Every year the Dept. updates its information about the rates of social welfare in a handy booklet known as SW19. The Society has sent copies of the Booklet to all the regions but further copies can be easily obtained from the Department by ringing their information services at lo-call 1890 662244.*

## POLICY ANALYSIS GROUP NEWS

### 3<sup>RD</sup> LEVEL GRANTS – ARE THEY ENOUGH?

Our recent factsheet on 3<sup>rd</sup> Level grants prompted members to tell us of the level of assistance they are providing to students in universities, institutes and colleges. The main findings of the group were:

- The SVP is frequently called on by students and families to assist with either the direct costs of 3<sup>rd</sup> level education (books, materials) or the indirect costs (travel, maintenance, childcare).
- We are increasingly being asked by foreign nationals resident in Ireland (both asylum-seekers and parents of Irish children) to assist with their course fees.
- Rural conferences have reported that many 'new' families are approaching the SVP for help as the non-adjacent rates are inadequate.
- Some SVP regions have negotiated special agreements between the SVP and local colleges. While this is welcome it should not disguise the hardship faced by students we assist.
- There is no grant assistance available for part-time students. These degrees are often the only option for people on social welfare/low incomes.
- Conferences are also stepping into the gap for first year students whose applications have been delayed, or whose grants have not been paid.

**If you have any further information call Brendan Hennessy on 021-4943540**

### ANNUAL REPORTS

Every year volunteer treasurers have kindly filed their annual returns with their regional office. These figures give us very important information on the Society's fight against poverty.

The annual reports also ask particular questions about how we *work for social justice* by asking you to report how many people you help per week and what are the main priorities in your area.

The *Policy Analysis Group* will shortly begin looking at reports from four regions. We hope to be able to look at all regions in due course. In the meantime, thanks for taking the time by providing this important information.



*From the Ground-Up*

### Preparing for the last 6 months of "Our Plan"

The *From the Ground-Up* team have begun the process not only of thinking of the next six months but the next three years! While we will continue to make our local calls over the summer months, we are also looking at new ways of gathering information from you in as easy as away as possible! We are also hoping to provide our volunteers with an informative winter seminar with a special guest speaker. Watch this space!

### Best wishes for Plan Co-ordinator Annmarie

Like all of our sister project teams the *From the Ground-Up* project benefited enormously from the enthusiasm and dedication of Annmarie O'Connor, outgoing regional co-ordinator. We wish her the very, very best at this exciting juncture in her life.

### Poverty in Rural Ireland – What do we mean?

**With the increasing urbanisation of Irish Society what is left for rural communities? SVP members and staff at a recent conference organised by *Irish Rural Link* heard that there are many questions on the future of rural Ireland.**

**Post Offices:** An Post has announced that 500 of the 1300 sub-post offices are to close, however Ireland has had the highest no. of post offices per head in the EU.

**Transport:** Since its inception in 2001 the State's Rural Transport Initiative has provided 2.26 million journeys. 70% of users don't have access to a car. This scheme is now being 'mainstreamed'.

**Access to Health:** SVP volunteers know and experience the challenges of accessing quality medical care in rural Ireland, often funding, or simply providing, transport themselves.

**Social Isolation:** The unspoken and unheard need for human interaction. It seems that commuting is the new emigration leaving it impossible for adult children and neighbours to spend time with older or disadvantaged members of the community.

Quote of the Conference:

*The Challenge is an Enduring Challenge*