



Society of St. Vincent de Paul

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# STATEMENT OF STRATEGY 2017-2020

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Submission to the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection

SEPTEMBER, 2017  
SOCIAL JUSTICE AND POLICY TEAM  
Society of St Vincent de Paul

## 1. Introduction

The Society of St Vincent de Paul welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the forthcoming Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection Statement of Strategy 2017-2020. Established in 1844, we are the largest, voluntary, charitable organisation in Ireland. We make this submission based on the experience of 11,000 members who provide practical support to thousands of low income households across the country.

## 2. Priority areas for forthcoming Statement of Strategy

- Reducing the consistent poverty rate and improvement in other social inclusion indicators should be a high-level goal and objective of the forthcoming strategy. A clear Departmental strategic objective in relation to an **ambitious poverty target** is critical for the implementation of the forthcoming new National Anti-Poverty Strategy.
- Integration of government policy and **cross departmental working** (e.g. BOBF, Rebuilding Ireland, Action Plan on Jobs) will be pivotal to the success of the Strategy. The role of the Department in the implementation of Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures should be included in the next Statement of Strategy, including the lead role of the Department in relation to Outcome 4: Economic Security and Opportunity. The lead role of the Department in this area is enhanced by the transfer of employment functions from the DJEI to the DSP. In addition, achieving the National Social Target for Poverty reduction and the child poverty target will require cross-departmental working on issues such as childcare and after-school care; education; health; housing and jobs. In particular, ongoing dialogue with the DCYA on the roll out of the Affordable Childcare Scheme and the DHPLG on the implementation of Rebuilding Ireland is required.
- Social transfers have played a vital role in alleviating poverty and it is critical that our social protection system continues to work towards providing an adequate income for those outside the labour market as well as low work intensity households. The transfer of the Low Pay Commission, Employment Rights Policy and Legislation, including legislation in relation to the minimum wage provide the Department with the necessary functions to address the level of market inequality which is one of these highest in the EU and OECD.<sup>1</sup> **Access to quality employment** and the need to tackle low paid and precarious work should be included in the forthcoming Strategy.
- It is welcome that the current strategy highlights the importance of educational supports alongside activation and employment measures. In collaboration with the Department of Education and Skills, the new Strategy should prioritise an **'education/training first approach'**, to tackle labour market disadvantage and address the barriers to decent work for long term unemployed and people who are parenting alone.

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<sup>1</sup> Before social transfer Ireland has the highest GINI coefficient among EU 28 countries. Source: Eurostat [EU-SILC indicator: ilc\_di12c]. Among OECD countries Ireland has the third highest proportion of low paid workers after the United States and Columbia. The incidence of low pay refers to the share of workers earning less than two-thirds of median earnings (full time only). Source: OECD (2017), Wage levels (indicator). doi: 10.1787/0a1c27bc-en (Accessed on 05 September 2017)

- The new Strategy should also encompass the need to support people in **reconciling paid work and family life** recognising the additional practical and financial challenges for those parenting alone.
- The requirement to fully analyse the impact on poverty, rights and equality of different policy and budget measures as outlined in the Programme of Government should be included as a high-level objective in the forthcoming strategy. **Poverty impact and social impact assessment** must be overtly used to direct individual policy decisions and overall budget strategy.
- Improving **communications with clients** by using multiple channels to contact would be welcome. This could involve using text messages and email as well as postal communications, particularly when a customer is at risk of having a payment reduced or suspended to try and ensure that the customer can be successfully contacted and the issues addressed before the payment is suspended or reduced, as these sanctions have a very serious negative impact on a household.
- A **client centred approach** should continue in the forthcoming strategy. This objective should not be at odds with other departmental objectives. The need to implement control and compliance measures is acknowledged by the SVP but the chosen mechanism should be cognisant on the potential negative impact it may have on the wider cohort of beneficiaries, particularly more vulnerable individuals and households, and the take up of in-work income supports such as FIS.

### 3. Key challenges and opportunities in our Operating Environment

- The economic and employment improvements are welcomed but growth needs to be balanced and inclusive. The Department should play a key role in ensuring economic improvements and labour market expansion are inclusive and that those who are most vulnerable are protected. A clear strategic objective in relation to promoting inclusive growth through its various functions will help guide the Department's priorities over the coming years.
- Ireland is faced with an increasingly uncertain external environment as the implications of Brexit remain unclear. Consideration needs to be given to the social as well as economic implications of Brexit. These include, among others, threats to employment, and potential increased pressure on public services and the housing market. The forthcoming Strategy should outline the potential threats and opportunities Brexit will present to the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection.
- SVP acknowledges that demographic changes have implications for the overall allocation of resources. Prioritisation of resources should be directed towards those with the greatest and most urgent levels of need, including households and individuals with the highest risks of poverty.

### 4. Enablers in achieving the Strategy Objectives.

- The Department holds a large amount of administrative data. The analysis of administrative data should be used to support the achievement of the objectives set out in the Statement of Strategy 2016-2019.
- A research strand in the work of the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection can support the achievement of the Department's objectives for the coming years.

- The Department engages with stakeholders via customer focus groups, the Pre-Budget Forum and various meetings with civil society organisations. This engagement is important in the achievement of the Department's objectives and should be referenced in the new Statement of Strategy.