Social Inclusion Division,

Room 1.1.15,

Department of Social Protection,

Goldsmith House,

Dublin 2,

D02 YY17.

30th June 2025

To whom it concerns,

Cork Chamber welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to inform the development of the successor to the Roadmap for Social Inclusion.

Cork Chamber represents 1,200 members together employing 130,000 people throughout the city, metropolitan area and county. Our vision is to lead a transforming and ambitious Cork City and County, and our purpose is to unite, represent and support our members and community. Our direction is guided by our formal pledge to uphold the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Cork Chamber has also been designated an SDG Champion by the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment for 2024 – 2025.

Cork Chamber's advocacy efforts are guided by the views and priorities of our partners, and are shaped by our continuous engagement with members, our board and key stakeholders in Cork City and County. Sustainability is embedded in all our activities and initiatives and Cork Chamber works to further integrate the SDGs across our work with businesses, charities and not-for-profits. We are committed to enhancing our sustainability offerings for our members and the broader community.

Sustainability, inclusivity, equality, diversity and belonging are at the core of Cork Chamber's values, and we work to promote social inclusion through a number of partnerships and initiatives across sectors.

Yours sincerely,

Cathal McSweeney

Director of Public and International Affairs

We are Cork.

Consultation Questions:

1. **What progress do you feel has been made in improving social inclusion and reducing poverty since publication of the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020–2025 in January 2020?**

   It is important to acknowledge the positive developments in employment rates in recent years, with Ireland now at near full employment. This is a crucial factor in addressing poverty and improving social inclusion. However, it is important to note that employment alone does not guarantee social inclusion. Persistent challenges remain around the quality of work, access to affordable housing, childcare, healthcare, and support services. Ensuring that employment is inclusive, accessible and offers fair pay and conditions must be central to future strategies.

2. **In your experience, what has worked well in reducing the number of people in Ireland experiencing poverty and social exclusion?**

   Targeted employment programmes and increased awareness of inclusive practices can play an important role in helping to reduce poverty risks. Collaborations between businesses and community organisations show the potential of locally led initiatives. National policy initiatives, like the successor to the Roadmap for Social Inclusion, should seek to support community-based initiatives and organisations where these are already in place, as well as supporting the development of new initiatives and collaborations.

   For example, Cork Chamber has partnered with SECAD on the WorkAbility Cork: Inclusive Pathways to Employment Programme. The programme aims to create opportunities for individuals with disabilities, providing them with the tools and supports needed to allow them to achieve their employment goals. As part of this programme, the Chamber collaborates with local employers to source opportunities for those participating in the programme and supports them in accessing these opportunities.[1] Such collaborations play an important role in promoting social cohesion in local areas, while also supporting individual employees to reach their full potential.

   More broadly, it is important to recognise the important role played by educational and research institutions in exploring potential solutions to mitigate social exclusion. Collaborations between researchers and relevant stakeholders should be supported in order to ensure effective and appropriate solutions are deployed on the ground.

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[1] Cork Chamber, WorkAbility Cork

3. **In your experience, what has not worked so well, or is challenging in reducing the number of people in Ireland experiencing poverty and social exclusion?**

Challenges persist in a number of areas when it comes to reducing poverty and social exclusion in Ireland, and the new strategy should seek to address some of these areas with more targeted measures, building on the progress already made in improving social inclusion:

- Access to early intervention and assessments, especially for children with additional needs: Delays create long-term educational and employment disadvantages. This also creates significant challenges for families, particularly those who may not have access to private options, which further entrenches social and economic divides.

- Housing availability: The availability and affordability of housing across the country remains a pressing issue for many in society, and can have an even greater impact on groups otherwise impacted by social exclusion or poverty. Sufficient funding and resources for initiatives like the Capital Assistance Scheme (CAS) are vital to ensure that groups experiencing exclusion and potentially facing long-term homelessness can access stable, community-based housing solutions. Transitional and supported housing options can provide an important pathway for those exiting emergency accommodation, for example, and the provision of such services should be prioritised to avoid longer-term homelessness and social exclusion.[2] Limiting funding and resourcing for such initiatives risks further entrenching disadvantage and social inclusion.

- Childcare provision: The affordability and accessibility of childcare can limit labour force participation, especially among women. In early 2024, Cork Chamber surveyed members on the provision of childcare services in Cork and the impact on employees.[3] 63% of those surveyed stated that childcare disproportionately impacted women in the workforce.

- Disability services: Services for those with disabilities and overall accessibility in areas such as infrastructure, healthcare, education and employment remains a challenge for many, and it is vital that there is continued investment in accessibility improvements, particularly in public spaces and public realm developments. The resourcing of support services is also important, and community-based organisation which often provide valuable services should be supported.

- Services for migrants: Barriers to service access for migrants and asylum seekers, including language, documentation and a lack of tailored supports,

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[2] University College Cork, Pathways Towards Stable Housing for Parents & Children Exiting Residential Services
[3] Cork Chamber, Economic Trends Quarter 1 2024

particularly in some rural areas, persist. Sufficient funding and supports for integration measures, English language classes and other supports should be provided to reduce the risk of social exclusion.

4. **Does consistent poverty remain the most appropriate primary target for the new social inclusion strategy?**

   Other: While consistent poverty remains a crucial metric, a more comprehensive approach would be beneficial. Incorporating measures of deprivation, access to services (e.g., childcare, housing, health), quality of employment, and social participation could offer a more holistic perspective on inclusion.

5. **What is the most appropriate timeframe for the new social inclusion strategy?**

   5 years

6. **Which groups in society should the new social inclusion strategy put a particular focus on?**

   Unemployed people/People with Disabilities/Migrants

7. **Are there any actions you would recommend to improve social inclusion among these specific groups?**

   Unemployed people:
   To improve social inclusion among unemployed people, support for community-based organisations and initiatives is vital to ensure to promote social inclusion and community participation among as many individuals as possible. Collaborations with business representative associations should also be considered in this regard, to help bridge the gap between individuals who may be seeking employment, potentially on a part-time or flexible basis, and potential employers.

   Additional opportunities for collaboration with regional and national further education and training providers could also be explored to support long-term workforce participation and active participation in society. Expanded access to upskilling and reskilling grants, as well as the provision of courses in a flexible manner, with tailored modes of delivery to suit different learning styles and types of employment, could play an important role in sustaining active participation.

   Cork Chamber is a partner of the Cork Access Network and became the first formal partner from the business community to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with

Cork City's Education and Lifelong Learning Partners in 2024. Cork Chamber's participation in the initiative serves to highlight the essential role of businesses in fostering a culture of continuous education. All project partners work together to mitigate against educational disadvantage in Cork City where possible, with project partners working across four broad pillars of access, namely further and higher education, community, the workplace, and schools.[4]

The value of these initiatives, both for the business community and the wider community in Cork, is clear and Cork Chamber is committed to building on the success of these initiatives to promote active participation and inclusion in the workforce and in society.

<u>People with Disabilities:</u>
Growing inequalities in terms of accessing essential supports and services for people with disabilities, particularly children, is a pressing issue which negatively impacts social inclusion and workforce participation. Waiting times for assessments and interventions should be reduced where possible to facilitate the provision of appropriate, tailored supports. Educational supports and collaboration with schools and other educational institutions is particularly important in this regard.

Improving the accessibility of infrastructure, public services and public realm spaces for those with disabilities is crucially important to promote independence and participation in society. Programmes that actively promote inclusive employment opportunities should be prioritised, ensuring reasonable accommodations are available when needed. Collaborative initiatives between different actors are essential for advancing inclusion and equal opportunity, while also strengthening social cohesion at a local level.

<u>Migrants:</u>
In recent decades, Cork has evolved into a thriving, multicultural city region. Promoting social cohesion and integration through actions such as long-term funding for English language classes, upskilling and reskilling programmes for migrants, and community initiatives is vital to support integration into the future.

8. **Any additional indicators (data sources) we should be aware of?**

   N/A

9. **What are the current issues impacting people experiencing poverty and social exclusion?**

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[4] Cork Learning City

People experiencing poverty and social exclusion are impacted by a range of issues at present. These include many of the challenges currently impacting the wider population, such as a lack of housing availability. However, many of those experiencing social exclusion may be further marginalised when it comes to accessing safe, affordable accommodation and are often at an increased risk of homelessness. Without sufficient supports for those experiencing poverty and social exclusion, ongoing poverty and unstable living conditions are much more likely to persist among vulnerable populations. Accessibility of accommodation, as well as public spaces and infrastructure, for those with disabilities is also important.

Access to quality education and upskilling opportunities can be more challenging for people facing poverty and social exclusion, which becomes a barrier when trying to find quality jobs and earn a living wage. Providing accessible and affordable options for upskilling is critical, ensuring that there are flexible options for accessing learning and resources, and that links with industry are prioritised in order to bridge the gap between education and entering the workforce.