



Investing to Save

Building an Equal Society After Covid-19

The Society of St Vincent de Paul
Pre-Budget Submission 2021



Society of St Vincent de Paul

The Society of St Vincent de Paul is involved in a diverse range of activities characterised by:

Support and friendship

Through person-to-person contact, we are committed to respecting the dignity of those we assist and fostering self-respect. We assure confidentiality at all times and endeavour to establish relationships based on trust and friendship.

Promoting self-sufficiency.

It is not enough to provide short-term material support. Those we assist are also helped to achieve self-sufficiency in the longer-term and the sense of self-worth this provides. When problems are beyond our competence, we enlist the support of specialised help.

Working for Social Justice

We are committed to identifying the root causes of poverty and social exclusion in Ireland and, in solidarity with people experiencing poverty and disadvantage, to advocate and work for the changes required to create a more just and caring society.

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Foreword by SVP National President

The implications of the Covid-19 pandemic are far-reaching and impact every corner of Irish society. As well as the tragic loss of life, this terrible situation has exposed a vulnerability in so many with hundreds of thousands having lost their jobs and worrying what the future will hold for them. The members of the Society of St Vincent de Paul (SVP) are seeing first-hand how the pandemic is worsening existing inequalities in our society and making life even more difficult for those trying to get by on an inadequate income.



We are now receiving calls from individuals and families who have lost their jobs and are worried about the rent and utility bills. They are without savings to keep them afloat and may not easily return to work. The concentration of job losses in low paid sectors means that the impact has disproportionately fallen on groups that are least able to endure a financial hit. Coping with the lockdown and the additional costs of being home all day is extremely stressful for those who don't have enough money to keep the fridge stocked and for families afraid to turn on the heating or lights due to cost.

The unprecedented housing crisis that is impacting children and families' well-being, forcing people into a constant state of insecurity, and driving poverty among those in the private rented sector has unfortunately not gone away. For those living in overcrowded, unsuitable, and poor-quality housing, this pandemic has shown far too many people do not have the luxury of suitable accommodation to self-isolate.

Our members are also worried there will be significant long-term consequences of school closures for disadvantaged students. Many children and young people have been unable to keep up with their schoolwork because they do not have space or have the right technology for online learning. We are particularly concerned for children living in homeless accommodation and direct provision where school is a respite from their cramped living conditions and for children with additional needs who have been missing out on vital supports.

There is a growing sense that after Covid-19, there is an opportunity to do things differently and reimagine a more socially just and equitable future. The past few months shows what is possible to achieve when all sectors work together, and the Government has rightly committed to offering security and stability for individuals and families. We are hopeful this sense of common purpose will continue to shape policy and Irish society after the crisis has ended.

A challenging task lies ahead for the new Government as the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic continue to unfold. But now is the time to get things right for the 700,000 people living in poverty and to put in place the necessary measures to prevent more people falling into a cycle of poverty as a result of the pandemic.

As our recent report on the *Hidden Costs of Poverty* shows, year after year, poverty imposes substantial costs on all of Irish society. While these costs fall heaviest on those living on the lowest incomes, there are substantial costs borne by all for not tackling the structural issues that cause poverty in the first place. Consequently, investing in measures to tackle poverty will not only improve the lives of the least well off but it will simultaneously free up government resources to focus on other public policy priorities.

In this year's pre-budget submission, *Investing to Save*, we outline the first steps needed to get us on the road to recovery and to ensure no one is left behind. We look forward to working with the new Government to bring about the positive changes needed to eliminate poverty once and for all.



Kieran Stafford,
SVP National President

Investing to Save

How Can We Build a Socially Just Society After Covid-19?

Ireland entered this crisis with almost 700,000 people across the country already living below the poverty line, including 225,000 children. Over 70 per cent of people living in poverty can't afford an unexpected expense, and 40 per cent are going without basics like adequate heating and food.¹ These households are being impacted by additional costs as a result of Covid-19 restrictions, with higher bills from more time at home.

In 2018, 40 per cent of those living below the poverty line were experiencing enforced deprivation, compared to 29 per cent in 2008.² Therefore, many low-income households will be more exposed to an economic shock now than they were at the outset of the last recession. Worryingly, the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) predicts that child poverty will increase sharply unless there is some economic recovery in 2020.³ For those still carrying the scars of the last recession, another downturn will harm them further unless safeguards are put in place.

We need to make sure that those already in poverty are not overlooked – or their situation made worse – as the economy recovers.

It is within this context that we outline SVP's key immediate priorities in response to the socioeconomic consequences of Covid-19, alongside our Budget 2021 priorities.

SVP does not underestimate the serious economic challenges that lie ahead. As we face what may become the greatest and deepest economic recession in modern history, concern is growing among SVP members who have seen first-hand the impact the last economic crisis had on struggling households.⁴ We must not forget the enormous impact austerity policies had on individuals and families and the significant long-term social and economic costs it had for our society.

Our recent report on the *Hidden Cost of Poverty* clearly shows that poverty carries a huge cost, not just for those directly affected, but for everyone in society.⁵ The comprehensive analysis estimates that dealing with the consequences of poverty costs the State €4.5 billion every year – more than the respective annual Government budgets for housing, justice, transport, and agriculture. The report finds:

- The additional spending to deal with poor health outcomes associated with poverty is estimated to be over €1.2 billion.
- A significant proportion of state spending is allocated to support people in poverty unable to afford basics through social assistance (€592.7 million) and housing supports (€912.5 million).
- In education, €549.7 million is spent every year dealing with the legacy effects of early experiences of child poverty and on measures to prevent children now experiencing the longer-term impacts of educational disadvantage.
- €917.4 million of expenditure in the justice system is spent dealing with the association between social and economic disadvantage, exclusion, marginalisation, and crime.

¹ Survey of Income and Living Conditions 2018. EUROSTAT [ilc_mdcs04]

² CSO Statbank SIA26 by Poverty Status, Type of Deprivation and Year (2006-2018)

³ Regan and Maitre (2020) Child Poverty in Ireland and the Pandemic Recession

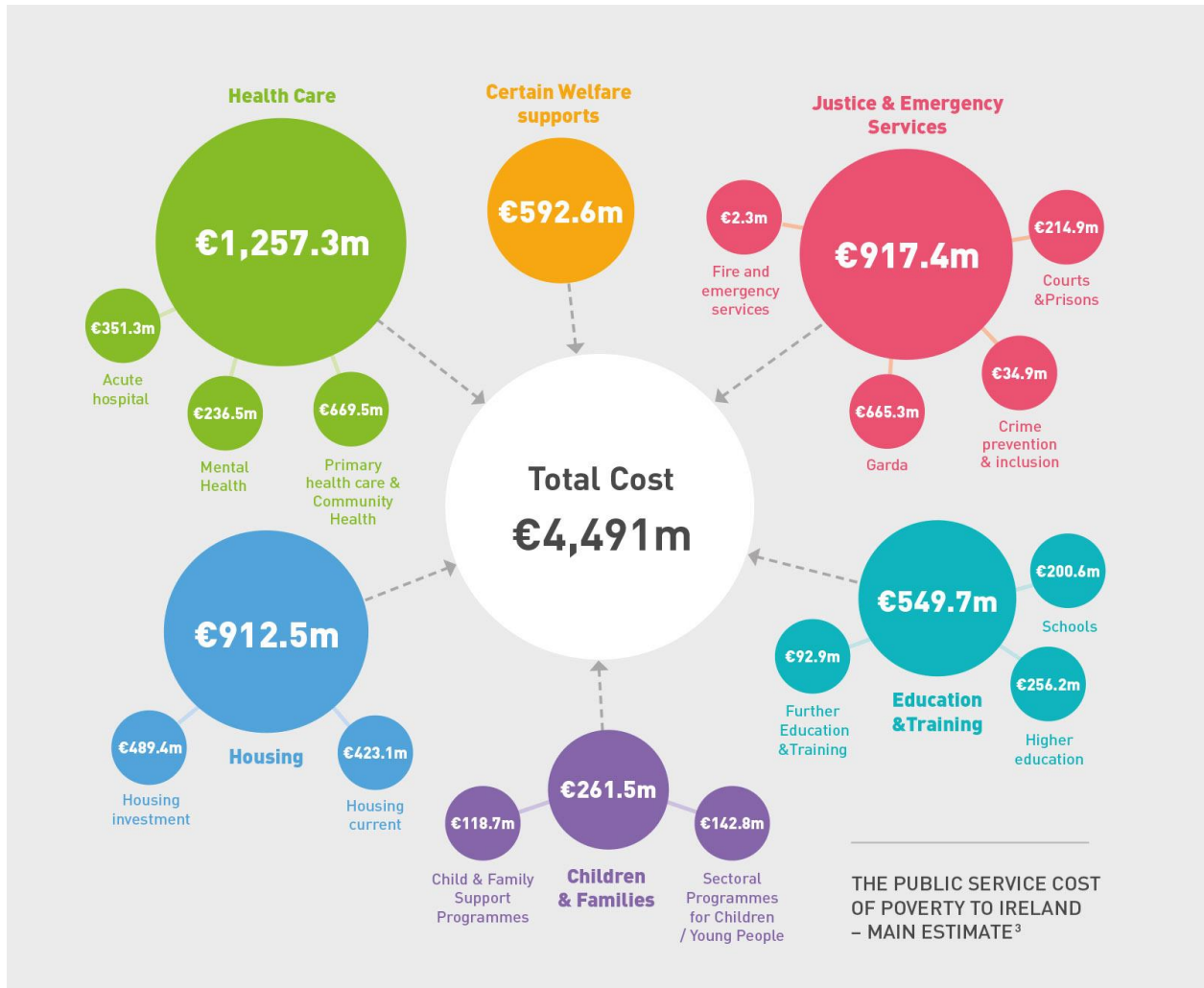
https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/BP202104_1.pdf

⁴ SVP (2012) "The Human Face of Austerity" <https://www.svp.ie/getattachment/c9b25ec3-d643-4f36-b9a1-471655573da8/Human-Face-Of-Austerity-As-Seen-By-SVP.aspx>

⁵ Collins, M (2020) The Hidden Cost of Poverty: Estimating the Public Service Cost of Poverty in Ireland.

<https://www.svp.ie/news-media/publications/social-justice-publications/the-hidden-cost-of-poverty.aspx>

The Public Service Cost of Poverty



As well as the strong moral arguments for addressing poverty, we now have important evidence on the wider societal benefits of not allowing poverty to persist. Importantly, a return to austerity and an increase in poverty is not inevitable as most economists now agree that austerity is bad for growth and will hinder economic recovery.⁶

The fiscal stance in the coming budget must be to support economic and social recovery through investment in Ireland's social infrastructure. Increasing investment in infrastructural projects such as the retrofit of social housing, the development of a rural public transport network and a programme of building social housing would create employment, stimulate economic activity, assist in meeting climate change targets, and most importantly help tackle poverty and the housing crisis.⁷

⁶ IMF (2013) 'Growth Forecast Errors and Fiscal Multipliers' <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2013/wp1301.pdf>

⁷ McQuinn et al (2020) 'Quarterly Economic Commentary', <https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/QECSUM2020.pdf>

An Opportunity to do Things Differently

The pandemic has brought to the fore the vital role the State plays in providing basic services for its citizens and the importance of a strong welfare state for everyone in society. As well as investment in public childcare, housing, education, a just transition, and healthcare, we need to make sure the correct mechanisms are put in place shielding the most vulnerable for any adverse economic shocks by uprating social welfare payments, providing workers with a liveable income and tailored employment supports for those impacted by job losses.

Faced with economic uncertainty, we cannot repeat the mistakes of the past, and we need a legislative basis that creates a minimum social floor for all citizens that no one is expected to fall below.

To ensure the principles of equality, justice and fairness underpin all policy and budgetary choices as we emerge from the pandemic, SVP is asking that the new Government commit to introducing a Poverty Reduction Act within their first 100 days of office. This Act would:

- 1. Make the ambition of the Sustainable Development Goals of No Poverty by 2030 legally binding**
- 2. Set a new ambitious child poverty target for 2025**
- 3. Place poverty proofing and equality budgeting on a statutory footing to ensure all policies and programmes at design and implementation are assessed in relation to their likely impact on people living in poverty**
- 4. Establish a Special Oireachtas Committee on Poverty and Inequality to monitor the implementation of the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025**
- 5. Develop and adequately resource annual cross-governmental action plans to ensure Ireland reaches the target of reducing consistent poverty to 2 per cent or less by 2025 as set out in the Roadmap for Social Inclusion**
- 6. Publish a report by the Minister for Finance on budget day outlining how the proposed tax and expenditure changes will help address poverty and inequality.**

In the past number of years, we have seen a welcome decline in consistent poverty which shows with the right choices, Government can make a difference. However, much more work needs to be done to help move people out of poverty for good, and prevent more people falling into poverty as a result of the pandemic. Making the right investments now means we can reduce future expenditure spent dealing with the damage poverty causes.

In other words, we need to invest to save.

Housing and Homelessness

End the housing and homelessness crisis by increasing the output of social housing built by local authorities and Approved Housing Bodies and by introducing a National Affordable Cost Rental option for renters.

SVP members see the devastating impacts that homelessness and insecure housing has on individuals and families through their work in the community, and by providing support to people in emergency homeless accommodation who now have the added pressure of Covid-19.

We welcomed the introduction of emergency measures to protect tenants during the pandemic such as a ban on evictions and rent increases during the crisis, as well as providing more suitable accommodation for people experiencing homelessness. In the Dublin Region, the number of people becoming newly homeless dropped by 48 per cent in March/April compared to January/February – demonstrating the important role the eviction ban played in stemming the tide of homelessness.⁸

However, with those protective measures now recently curtailed and Covid-19 still causing serious disruption to all our lives, particularly low-income families living in the private rented sector, there is concern that homelessness will increase. The latest homeless figures show an increase in people experiencing homelessness from a total of 8699 in June 2020 to 8728 in July 2020.⁹ This is the first rise in homelessness in six months clearly showing the effectiveness of the previous legislation in preventing people becoming homeless. It is simply too early to lift the moratorium on all evictions and rent increases while people are severely impacted living through a pandemic and a housing and homeless crisis.

The current precarious situation many renters now find themselves in is due in part to the fact that two distinct but closely interrelated features have characterised social housing policy in Ireland over the past quarter of a century – a low level of provision of new social housing units relative to need, and an increasing reliance on the supplement of rents in the private rental sector as a way of responding to social housing need.

The overreliance on the private rented sector to meet social housing need not only forces people on low incomes into a constant state of insecurity, but it also offers poor value for money. Under current Rebuilding Ireland targets, the State will pay €1 billion to private landlords through housing subsidies, but it produces zero return on investment. In contrast, an equivalent investment in direct building by local authorities and housing associations would provide approximately 55,000 social housing units over a ten-year period and 165,000 units over a thirty-year period.¹⁰ It is therefore welcome that the new Programme for Government commits to reduce the reliance on the use of HAP for new social housing solutions, as the supply of social and public housing increases. This measure will be critical if we are to address the needs of people in housing and homeless distress.

Land in public ownership is a significant resource available to the State as 1,900 hectares of state-owned land has been identified as suited to housing - 1,700 hectares owned by Local Authorities and the Housing Agency and 200 hectares in the ownership of other state and semi-state bodies. This has the potential to provide at least 50,000 homes and is not all the state-owned land available.¹¹ This is also an opportunity to ensure we build sustainable and vibrant communities.

There is no 'one size fits all' solution to the housing and homeless crisis; however, part of the response should be developing a cost rental model, and it is welcome that this is a commitment in the Programme for

⁸ [https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/latest-figures-homelessness-ireland/?t=\\$2#Family](https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/latest-figures-homelessness-ireland/?t=$2#Family)

⁹ Department of Housing (2020) July 2020 Homeless Report

https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/homeless_report_-_july_2020.pdf

¹⁰ Hearne, R. (2018) No ordinary housing crisis *Part 1* Tasc Blog Post <https://www.tasc.ie/blog/2018/06/14/no-ordinary-housing-crisis/>

¹¹ National Economic and Social Council (2018) "Urban Development Land, Housing and Infrastructure: Fixing Ireland's Broken System". NESCC Reports No. 145. Available online at: http://files.nesc.ie/nesc_reports/en/145_Urban_Development_Land.pdf

Government. Linking cost-rents to affordability is critical to ensure tenants are only paying what they can afford. With a cost-rent model, tenants would have security of tenure and long-term sustainability.¹²

Homelessness and housing insecurity are everyone's issues and are not inevitable. Importantly, to allow for a better understanding of homelessness and how to prevent it occurring, the resourcing and implementation of improved practices in data collection and reporting concerning homelessness, including 'Hidden Homelessness' is needed.

The new Government and all departments need to contribute to ending the plight of homelessness and housing insecurity through much greater collaboration. A cross-Government strategy is needed with a shared vision for ending homelessness once and for all. We believe that all families and individuals should have access to a safe and secure home. This needs to be enshrined in our Constitution.

SVP Covid-19 Housing Priorities

- **Extend the eviction ban and rent freeze until 2021 or until the number of homeless people being housed is significantly greater than the number of people becoming newly homeless.**
- **Put in place an adequate financial, guidance and support package for tenants who are in rent arrears.**
- **Ensure families and individuals that were moved out of homeless accommodation during the pandemic are supported to remain living in the community.**

SVP Budget 2021 Housing Priorities

- **Increase the rent limits for Rent Supplement and the Housing Assistance Payment alongside enhanced rent certainty measures so that supports are adequate and in line with market rents.**
- **Designate sufficient funding for Homeless Prevention work as required under Section 10 of the Housing Act 1988.**
- **Provide appropriate resourcing and funding for an effective and efficient inspection system in local authority housing and the private rented sector.**
- **Increase investment in the development and provision of an affordable cost rental model to be delivered by Local Authorities and AHBs to address the needs of low to middle-income earners.**

¹² See SVP (2020) paper on Cost Rental <https://www.svp.ie/whatiscostrental>

Income and Employment

Benchmark social welfare rates against the cost of the Minimum Essential Standard of Living and introduce a Living Wage.

To make sure that we come through this crisis stronger and more ready to face future challenges we need to take a look at the incomes of those in poverty and make sure everyone is able to meet their cost of living.

The Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) has been set at €350 per week, an upfront recognition that the rate of Jobseekers Allowance (maximum personal rate of €203) and other primary benefits are currently insufficient. At SVP we already knew that payment levels this low leave people struggling to get by and have been calling on the Government to set welfare rates that allow people to afford a Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) as determined by research from the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice. In 2020, a single adult needs a minimum of €249 per week to live at an acceptable, dignified standard and participate in Irish society.¹³

The Programme for Government commitment to retain social welfare payments at current rates will, unfortunately, mean that hundreds of thousands of people will be left behind trying to cope on an inadequate income. Benchmarking social welfare against the costs of an MESL would allow people to make ends meet and bring thousands of individuals and families out of hardship.

We have also seen that many jobs that are poorly paid have been recognised as essential services, with employees turning up to work to keep our communities going and receiving the thanks and gratitude of us all. Everyone deserves at least a Living Wage for their hours at work – no one should come home from a shift and still struggle to pay their rent and worry about affording their weekly food shop.

As it becomes clear that the economy isn't going to immediately return to where it was pre-pandemic and that some industries will remain changed for a long time, we need to make sure that those in minimum wage and low paid jobs are protected from being pulled into poverty by adequate social welfare supports and well-designed income support when a return to work is possible.

The availability of good quality affordable childcare is key to ensuring that parents, in particular lone parents, can get back to work post Covid-19. It is now well established that the introduction of a universal, public childcare system in Ireland will enhance child and family well-being by mitigating the damaging impacts of poverty on children by promoting parental access to employment. However, the transition to a public system that includes free childcare for disadvantaged groups, as set out under the EU Child Guarantee, will take time. In the interim, policymakers should view access to quality childcare provision via the National Childcare Scheme as part of the holistic support required by low-income families, and every aspect of the scheme should be poverty proofed.

The individual costs of living on an inadequate income and long-term unemployment are wide-ranging, and the experience of ongoing disadvantage takes a physical, psychological, and social toll on the lives of too many children and adults and the effects can be long-lasting. Social protection is not an insignificant percentage of the Government's social spending. Still, it has a high return on investment, while the cost of non-investing has enormous long-term costs for society as the *Hidden Cost of Poverty* research clearly shows.

We know that to protect people from being trapped by poverty in the first place, everyone must be guaranteed an income that provides a decent standard of living, whether they are in or out of work. Both social security payments and hourly wages should be set at rates that meet the Minimum Essential Standard of Living as an income floor. This would reflect our values as a society and recognise that poverty has a cost that we can avoid.

¹³ MESL 2020 Update report <https://www.budgeting.ie/publications/mesl-2020/>

SVP Immediate Covid-19 Income and Employment Priorities

- **Implementation of changes to the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) and the new Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) must make full use of poverty proofing safeguards so that claimants and their families do not suffer undue hardship.**
- **Extend the EWSS and PUP for parents unable to return due to childcare obligations.**
- **Issue strong guidelines for employers to remain flexible around the care obligations of parents.**

SVP Budget 2021 Income and Employment Priorities

- **Begin to close the gap between social welfare rates and the real costs facing households. Increase the personal rate of social welfare by €8 per week and restore the full payment rate to under 25s to undo the hardship caused by unequal payment rates. Set a target of reaching an adequate level for all primary payments by 2025.¹⁴**
- **Tackle child poverty and prevent more children from experiencing poverty by increasing the qualified allowance for children over 12 by €10 and children under 12 by €3.¹⁵**
- **Provide all workers with a Living Wage, calculated according to the cost of living, through increases in the National Minimum Wage. As a first step, ensure all Public Sector Workers are paid at least the Living Wage in 2021.¹⁶**
- **Maximise the returns from work for low-income employees by introducing a refundable tax credit which returns unused portions of the PAYE tax credit to workers.¹⁷**
- **To ensure equality between different household types and to help one parent families get back on their feet post-COVID, reduce the Working Family Payment weekly hours threshold from 19 hours to 15 hours for lone parents.**
- **Bring the weekly allowance for children living in Direct Provision in line with the rate for a Qualified Child, including the higher rate for over 12s.¹⁸ Increase the adult rate of payment in line with the real costs faced by individuals living in Direct Provision. ¹⁹**
- **Provide top-up payments to make sure no parents are worse off when transferring from existing childcare subsidies to the National Childcare Scheme. Publish the Action Plan on Childminding while providing a dedicated and accessible budget line to support childminders in improving their facilities and practices to meet appropriate minimum regulatory and quality standards.**

¹⁴ Increasing the personal rate from €203 to €211 would be the first annual step in reaching income adequacy during the lifetime of this Government based on the Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL). MESL calculates the income required for 90% of households in Ireland to meet a basic but acceptable standard of living, according to social consensus and informed by expert knowledge. See www.budgeting.ie for more details. The estimated cost of this increase based on pre-pandemic recipient numbers is €312 million. To restore the under 25 rate based on the number of pre-pandemic recipients = estimated €86 million.

¹⁵ Increasing the two QCI rates reflects the requirements for reaching family income adequacy. The estimated cost of these increases based on pre-pandemic recipient numbers would be €105 million.

¹⁶ In 2019, the Living Wage, calculated based on the cost of the Minimum Essential Standard of Living, was set at €12.30 per hour. See www.livingwage.ie for more details. The estimated costs of providing all civil servants and public sector worker with a living wage would be €55 million.

¹⁷ This measure would cost an estimated €140 million.

¹⁸ This measure would cost an estimated €2 million.

¹⁹ SVP welcomes the commitment in the Programme for Government to move towards a not-for-profit model of International Protection and look forward to working with Government in advancing this goal.

Education

Ensure everyone can access and participate in education on an equal basis by providing genuinely free primary and secondary education and enhancing supports for further and higher education.

As a result of Covid-19, education shifted from the classroom to the home. For some children and young people, they adapted to their new learning environment, and for some, it amplified their learning disadvantage’.

Some households lack the physical resources necessary to support their child’s learning, this has become even more evident during school closures. For example, SVP members support families living in homeless accommodation and direct provision centres and families experiencing ‘hidden homelessness’, often living in overcrowded and unsuitable conditions to promote learning. It is very challenging in those circumstances to study when there is no separate space away from the rest of the family. Children and young people from the Traveller community also experience similar difficulties.

A further issue which has arisen for members is the number of households who do not have access to a laptop and internet. For many households struggling with the high cost of rent and utilities, having a laptop and broadband is a luxury, not a necessity. These are issues that have not been fully addressed in the event of schools closing again. Also, a recent ESRI report* has shown that students from disadvantaged backgrounds have been disproportionately impacted by school closures. This requires an all of Government approach if we are to successfully tackle educational disadvantage.²⁰

SVP members see the anxiety and stress of parents trying to juggle their low incomes to meet school costs. The substantial amounts incurred at the start of each school year for schoolbooks, uniforms and footwear, digital devices, school transport and ‘voluntary’ contributions are adding additional financial pressure to families who were already struggling before Covid-19.

We see access to education as the key enabler out of poverty, yet education costs were one of the main reasons people request help from SVP. Last year, SVP spent €4.5 million on education, supporting children and young people at pre-school, primary, second and third level as well as supporting further education and training, second-chance education, and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for the people we assist.

Lone parents are one of the groups most at risk of poverty and Covid-19 has disproportionately impacted these families through job loss, social isolation, and the additional financial pressures of parenting alone. As we emerge from the crisis, there is an opportunity to create pathways to sustainable employment and a route out of poverty by promoting access to education. Many lone parents who seek support from SVP have expressed their interest in attending higher education on a part-time basis, but the fact they cannot receive the SUSI grant is a major barrier. Very often part-time study is the only viable option for someone with work and family responsibilities, however, a disincentive exists in that they are subject to tuition fees.

Efforts to support disadvantaged students to learn during the pandemic are welcome. However, much more work needs to be done to ensure that inequalities in education do not become more pronounced during the current public health crisis. It is also an opportunity to level the playing field; for the new Government to learn some lessons about how education could be designed more equitably. It is imperative that long term measures are taken now to ensure that the current and future cohorts of students can participate in education on an equal footing and secure equal educational outcomes regardless of their parents’ economic status.

²⁰ Darmody, Smyth and Russel (2020) The Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic for Policy in Relation to Children and Youth People: A Research Review: https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/SUSTAT94_3.pdf

SVP Immediate Covid-19 Education Priorities

- Establish a properly resourced taskforce to identify and implement measures that will support children and young people in DEIS and non-DEIS schools to prevent further educational disadvantage as a result of Covid-19.
- Expand on existing governmental measures to address digital poverty, ensuring all low-income households have access to online teaching and pre-printed resources, if required during the academic year as a result of Covid-19 safety measures.
- Develop a strategy for re-engagement of learners unable to participate in further and higher education during the pandemic.

SVP Budget 2021 Education Priorities

- Equalise the income thresholds for the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance (BSCFA) for one and two-parent households.²¹ Introduce ‘tapering’ for the BSCFA to provide greater access to support with school costs for working poor households and to reduce poverty traps.
- Make child benefit payable to families with children over the age of 18 enrolled in secondary school in recognition of the higher cost of education in the senior cycle and as a measure to prevent early school leaving.²²
- Extend the free school-books pilot scheme to all non-fee paying primary and secondary schools.²³
- End the ‘voluntary’ contribution system in non-fee paying primary and secondary schools. Begin by restoring capitation rates to 2010 levels.²⁴
- Increase investment in digital access for non-fee-paying schools where digital technologies are a feature of teaching, learning and assessment to reduce the financial burden on parents.
- Review the income thresholds and means test to qualify for the SUSI grant and increase the value of the maintenance grant levels to 2011 rates in recognition of the increase in the cost of living and loss of part-time work for students due to Covid-19.²⁵ Increase the Student Assistance Fund allocation by 20% to address the needs of students affected by Covid-19 income loss.²⁶
- Expand eligibility for the SUSI grant to part-time students studying in publicly funded further and higher education and training institutions to provide financial support to non-traditional, mature, and part-time learners. Enact the legislation required to do so in the first 100 days of the new Government.
- Support students in further education and training by reversing the decision to means test income from part-time work for those in receipt of the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) and extend the Cost of Education Allowance to all recipients of the BTEA.

²¹ Currently, a couple with one child can earn up to €603.70 per week and qualify for the BSCFA but a one parent family with one child will not qualify if they earn more than €438.30 per week.²¹

²² Estimated cost extending child benefit to 18-year olds still in secondary school: €56 million.

²³ The estimated cost of providing free schoolbooks to all secondary and primary school students is €40 million.

²⁴ This equates to €30 per pupil at primary level and €49 per student at post-primary level = €35.6 million annually.

²⁵ Estimated cost of restoring maintenance rate 2011 levels = €40 million.

²⁶ The total allocation for the SAF is €9.1 million annually – a 20% increase would equate to an additional €1.8 million.

Energy and Climate Justice

End energy poverty and help address the climate emergency through investment in energy efficiency schemes and by improving rural public transport links.

Preventing climate breakdown – and adapting to changes that may now be inevitable – requires many areas of our lives to change. As an economy, we must decarbonise production and the world of work. As individuals and communities, we will also see changes in our consumption habits, the way we travel, and the way we heat our homes. As well as the direct consequences of the changing climate, people in poverty could end up suffering as a result of the changes we make to avoid the crisis. This is something we can and must avoid. The UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty has said that it will be the poorest who suffer most from climate breakdown, despite contributing the least to the situation we are now in.²⁷

SVP are committed to making sure that the changes we make to avert the climate crisis, including reducing our use of fuel, lead to better lives for those on low incomes and people in poverty. This societal transition must be just and equitable. People in energy poverty must benefit from improved energy efficiency in their homes so that they can afford to stay warm and stay well, and also that they are able to benefit from the job opportunities that go along with improving homes.

It is estimated that energy poverty (measured as spending 10 per cent or more of a household's disposable income on energy) affects one in six households in Ireland, with the rate for lone parents reaching 31 per cent.²⁸ SVP are concerned that as we emerge from Covid-19, a significant proportion of households will be in energy debt. Energy usage during the restrictions has increased as people are at home more, and many households will experience bill shocks at a time when they are on a reduced income.

The commitment to retrofit 500,000 homes to B2 BER rating by 2030 in the Programme for Government, including the commitment that €5 billion raised from carbon taxation will go towards retrofitting in the Midlands and on social and low-income tenancies, is welcome. It is also positive that there will be increased delivery targets for energy suppliers under the Energy Efficiency Obligation Scheme, including for households in energy poverty.

We would like to see reducing energy poverty as a key pillar and explicit objective within the National Retrofitting Plan to ensure that the most vulnerable are not left behind. Strategies and mechanisms to increase uptake must be explicitly designed for the requirements and circumstances of low-income people including those in the private rented sector and those who cannot access credit and should include 100% grant funding for those who need it.

This significant spend by Government should be used to build the long-term assets and prosperity of communities. The Government should learn from national and international best practice to retain the benefits of investment locally through progressive procurement policies that prioritise local firms that pay a Living Wage and invest in their workforce.

Carbon taxation revenue should be used for the short and long term alleviation of energy poverty through direct financial assistance to offset the immediate increase in outgoings, and long term energy efficiency improvements that lift people out of energy poverty and create savings for Government further down the line. The principle that the poorest should be protected within the transition to sustainability must be upheld.

²⁷ Climate change and poverty 'Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights', <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/41/39>

²⁸ SVP (2019) Growing up in the Cold: A Policy Briefing of the Nature and Impact of Energy Poverty in Households with Children. <https://www.svp.ie/getattachment/2cb10388-e3ca-41ef-9911-a17f252ce09c/Growing-up-in-the-Cold.aspx>

SVP Immediate Covid-19 Energy and Climate Justice Priorities

- **Ensure adequate resources are available through the Exceptional Needs Scheme so that low-income households with significant Covid-19 related energy debt are not pushed into energy poverty or additional hardship.**
- **Suppliers, Government, the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities establish a debt relief mechanism for households in significant energy debt because of Covid-19.**

SVP Budget 2021 Energy and Climate Justice Priorities

- **Increase the Fuel Allowance to €25.30 and restore the payment season to 32 weeks so that the value of the payment is restored to 2010 levels and is in line with current energy costs.²⁹ Expand eligibility to the Fuel Allowance to households in receipt of the Working Family Payment and remove the waiting period for those in receipt of Jobseekers Allowance.**
- **Establish a service of local community energy advisors working in partnership with the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland to engage and inform hard to reach energy users who would most benefit from energy efficiency upgrades across all tenure types.**
- **Invest in the Rural Transport Programme, increasing the range of public transport options, promoting social inclusion for those in rural areas, and incentivising greater public transport usage.³⁰**
- **The National Retrofitting Plan must explicitly recognise reducing energy poverty as an objective and target the deep retrofitting of social tenancies and improvements in the Private Rented Sector to at least BER grade B2 by 2030. Minimum standards in the PRS should be implemented alongside an awareness-raising campaign, incentives for landlords that are conditional on enhanced security of tenure and increased funding for inspections and enforcement.**
- **Use the significant investment in retrofitting to create regionally dispersed employment and high-quality opportunities that are paid a Living Wage.**
- **Ensure that low income and energy-poor households are protected from energy price increases associated with a switch to renewable energy, including the carbon tax and the public service levy. This can be done by strengthening the regulatory role of the State on price setting and monitoring, and by introducing Government subsidised social tariffs.**

²⁹ This is based on the Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) calculations and would give an annual value of the €810 needed by households. To restore the purchasing power of the Fuel Allowance to 2010 levels the payment needs to return 32 weeks of payment and the payment amount should rise to €25.30, reflecting the cumulative energy price increases over the last decade. See www.budgeting.ie for more details. The estimated cost of increasing the fuel allowance to restore purchasing power to 2010 levels would be €41.5 million.

³⁰ We are recommending an additional annual investment of €50 million in the Rural Transport Programme.

Healthcare

End the two-tier health system and base the provision of health on need rather than ability to pay through the implementation of Sláintecare.

Ireland's response to Covid-19 has shown the pressing need to deliver a single-tier health system and our capacity to create a universal health service. We need to build a health system that can tackle inequalities where access to care is based on need and not ability to pay.

SVP members continue to raise concerns about the cost of travelling to health-related appointments. For people on low incomes living a long distance from hospitals and clinics, the cost of travel, coupled with the cost of food and accommodation which is sometimes necessary, can reach hundreds of euro and is unaffordable for many. Prescription charges and expenditure on over the counter healthcare can also cause anxiety when these costs are not budgeted for in a particular week.

The Sláintecare report was agreed by an all-party committee in May 2017, for the development of a national public health service, available to everyone. The Government must resource and implement Sláintecare and finally be in a position to provide equitable access to quality healthcare for people in Ireland.

SVP Budget 2021 Healthcare Priorities

- **Establish a ringfenced budget line for the Sláintecare delivery programme and factor in implementation into budget planning. In the initial stages of implementation, priority should be given to investment in mental health and community health care.**
- **As we transition to a system of universal health care, ensure everyone on a low income can access care by increasing the medical card income thresholds to the equivalent of the highest means-tested welfare payment.**
- **Reduce health-related costs for low-income households by abolishing prescription charges for all medical card holders.**
- **Increase the annual allocation to the hospital discretionary funds, to support low-income individuals and families under financial pressure due to health and hospital-related charges.**

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