Another Waterford is possible

October 2021

During the pandemic we began to appreciate the role of workers in key essential areas. Not only in our health and care sectors, but all activities that supported communities: essential retail, waste collection, food processing, home delivery, catering and security, transport and so many more.

We began to learn the poor treatment that so many essential workers faced – whether low wages, poor working conditions, precarious contracts and lack of safety in work.

We also began to understand the deeply-rooted inter-dependencies of economic and social activities that make up communities' living standards and life quality.

It is against this background that SIPTU has made this submission to the Waterford Development Plan. It seeks to learn the lessons of the pandemic and apply them to the Plan in order to:

'Support the living standards and life quality of the people in Waterford through increased wages and incomes, enhanced public services, improved working conditions and life quality which are essential elements for a strong, sustainable resilient and successful economy.'

Democratising the Waterford Economy

To begin, we need to get an accurate economic and social description of the Waterford economy and living conditions. For instance, in many areas, a large proportion of working-age households do not have someone employed; or employed only on a part-time, low-paid basis.

% of Waterford households where Working Age Social Protection was majority of income: 2016 (Top 10 electoral divisions)			
Centre A	41.7	Morrisson's Road	33.3
Shortcourse	40.9	Larchville	32.9
Custom House B3	8.8	Newport's Square	32.3
Centre B	36	Ballybeg North	32.2
The Glen	33.6	Roanmore	31.5

(Latest figures available)

Social protection payments made up the majority of income in approximately 23% of working age households throughout Waterford City and 15% in the County.

The Plan should conduct a thorough economic and social audit of the Waterford economy. This will assist evidence-based policy-making. Examples of audits at electoral division level include:

- **Household Incomes:** in 2016, median household incomes in Waterford were 20% below the national average.

- **Social Exclusion:** Household with low-work intensity, poverty and deprivation.

- **Hourly wages and low-pay incidence:** average earnings in Waterford trail the national average.

- **Unemployment and Precarious work:** Economically inactive households (and the reasons for it such as family responsibilities, lack of social supports); and precarious contracts such as under-employment, temporary contracts, agency work, marginal part-time employment, etc.

A Decent Work Initiative

Decent work is not only the foundation of living standards and life quality; it is the foundation of a successful and resilient economy. Living standards and economic prosperity are two sides of the same coin.

The Plan should declare Waterford a *'Decent Work'* county. This could be embedded in a Charter. A Decent Work Charter would include (but not be confined to):

- Acknowledge and respect employees' right to bargain collectively
- Respect and participate in both the process and outcome of industrial relations institutions
- Commit to a decent pay strategy based on moving towards a Living Wage
- Promote regular employment contracts with secure hours and certainty of income
- Each workplace to ensure that the provisions of this Charter is applied to all its employees and employees under contract to the workplace

There could be other elements – employment of people with disabilities, Travellers, workers from new communities, along with environmentally sustainable practices in the workplace. The Charter would be promulgated through use of media, social media platforms and written material (leaflets, posters). This Decent Work Initiative would convey a clear signal to employees and employers of what the Plan expects as, initially, best practice and, eventually, universal practice.

Low-pay and precarious working conditions degrade business performance, public finances, and workers' living standards. The Development Plan should target the end of low-pay and precariousness in Waterford.

Decent Work Forum

To promote this initiative, a *Decent Work Forum* should be established. This forum would be made up of stakeholders – trade unions, civil society groups, business groups, etc. They should meet at least four times a year to discuss the issues and obstacles in promoting the Decent Work Initiative.

Public Procurement Contracts

In pursuit of the Decent Work Initiative, the Council should introduce social clauses into local public procurement contracts. These clauses would mirror the objectives in the Decent Work charter:

- Minimum rates of pay (e.g. Living Wage)
- Standardised contracts to combat precariousness
- Providing employees the right to bargain collectively
- A commitment to participate in industrial relations institutions (e.g. Labour Court, WRC), etc.

Progressive Enterprise Development

The Plan should target an expansion of local enterprise activity. Surveys should be conducted to assess business activity, including the proportion of businesses reliant on local, national and international demand; businesses that acknowledge collective bargaining; businesses reliant on public procurement contracts, etc. Depending on the results, the Plan would attempt to:

- Promote local businesses and start-ups to meet local demand with locally produced goods and services;
- Promote local businesses and start-ups to enter state and local government supply-chains

The Plan should give particular attention to the creation of new enterprises through local government market initiatives (e.g. local public enterprise and joint private-public local enterprise which can attract local capital) and the creation of new civil society enterprises such as community co-operatives and labour-managed enterprises.

An Experimental County

The Plan should engage in a number of pilot projects to assess more substantial policy interventions. The Council could seek financial support from central government and appropriate EU funding agencies. Here are just some of the trials the Council could launch

- **Jobs Guarantee:** to combat long-term unemployment the Council should pilot a guaranteed job scheme – employing long-term unemployment on socially useful activities sponsored by the Council and non-profit civil society organisations. These contracts could be combined with education/training programmes to assist people improve their work and personal skills.

- **Employee Driven Innovation:** to promote productivity, the Council should pilot employee-driven innovation within the local authority and local public agencies.This would involve employees proposing and carrying out innovation initiatives to improve public services.

- **Affordable Childcare:** to assist families and increase work participation, the Council should develop a pilot project in co-operation with the stakeholders in the childcare sector to provide quality childcare at greatly reduced fees combined with professional-level wages.

- **Reducing Working Hours:** there are growing demands for greater work/life balance. The Council should invite employee representatives to agree a pilot project that would involve reducing working hours for older employees and employees with young families.

Development issues

While most of SIPTU's submission is concerned with social and economic issues, there are a number of developmental policies that should be pursued.

> *While Irish local government is one of the weakest in Europe that doesn't mean we are helpless. We can innovate and use what limited powers we have to project another, better Waterford.*

Affordable Housing:
Waterford needs affordable housing. Rents have been rising faster in Waterford city than other major urban areas and with only 15 vacancies throughout the county, further upward rent pressures may persist.

Publicly-owned land must be used exclusively for social and affordable housing. The Ard Rí site of 45 acres is now available on the market. The Council or the Land Development Agency should purchase this rezoned land for social and affordable housing. The Council should investigate the establishment of a municipally-owned construction company with a view to reducing building costs and ensuring the highest quality employment and apprentice opportunities.

The North Quays is an essential part of the city's development. Full development could see up to 2,000 construction jobs and 500 long-term jobs created. The Michael Street development would have a similar impact, increasing retail outlets and employment opportunities. In particular, the Michael Street development should include 'over the shop' accommodation, thereby opening the city centre to a 'living' community. These developments need to proceed as quickly as possible. These are crucial steps in developing Waterford as a modern European City and a gateway to the South East.

Plunkett Station:
The Waterford Council of Trades Unions has campaigned to re-open the Waterford to Rosslare line as part of a green transport policy. The Council, in conjunction with Iarnród Éireann, should examine the potential of a freight distribution centre at Plunkett Station. This could reduce greenhouse emissions and remove large vehicles from the road network.

Waterford Greenway:
The current Greenway finishes at Grace Dieu, while the Waterford to New Ross Greenway is under construction from the Ferrybank direction. The two Greenways should be joined together by restoring the link to the 'Red Iron Bridge'.

Another Waterford is possible

Imagine a Waterford with rising living standards, sustainable economic growth, new enterprise opportunities and a participatory democracy at the workplace level. Poverty, low-pay and precariousness are not part of a natural process. They arise through policy and official neglect and can be reversed by policy and official engagement.

While Irish local government is one of the weakest in Europe that doesn't mean we are powerless. We can innovate and use what limited powers we have to project another, better Waterford.

This is the first step in making the possible a reality.