



Irish Rural Link
Nasc Tuaithe na hÉireann

A VOICE FOR RURAL IRELAND

Submission to Ireland's Open Government Partnership Draft Action Plan 2016-2018

November 2016

Contact
Seamus Boland or Louise Lennon

Overview

Irish Rural Link (IRL) is the national network of rural community groups, representing over 600 groups and thousands of individuals committed to socially, environmentally and economically sustainable rural communities.

It welcomes the new National Action Plan on Open Government Partnership. Engaging with citizens in the development of Government policy, whether national or local, will give stronger policies and help those drafting the policies and strategies have a better understanding of what is happening on the ground and how a certain policy would impact on people's day to day lives.

The following are some recommendations on the Commitments for the Statement of Strategy 2016-2019:

Commitment 1: Promote Transparent Climate Policy Development

Including citizens in the development of climate change policy will increase their awareness of climate change and what they can do to influence it.

Carbon Tax Introducing a carbon tax on fuels with high CO₂ emissions, impacts most on people with low incomes and those in receipt of social welfare, increasing their risk of fuel poverty. Carbon tax could cost rural households ten times more than some urban households. Analysis in 2010 from the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) shows that the annual carbon tax likely to be paid by someone living in inner-city Dublin will be €25 but people living in the countryside could face bills of up to €275.¹ People in rural areas are further affected by a carbon tax as there is little or no alternative but to use fossil fuels and oil to heat homes. In Census 2011 report "*Roof over our heads*" 69% of houses in rural areas used home heating oil as main source of heating.

There needs to be a commitment from Government that no further increase in carbon tax until greener alternatives are available and affordable to all.

¹ "STRIVE- Science and Sustainability- Research based knowledge for Environmental Protection" EPA and ESRI 2010

Retrofitting of Houses Retrofitting of homes is widely acknowledged by all as a simple measure that can greatly reduce our energy usage. We welcome that this is now acknowledged by Government in the *Strategy to Combat Energy Poverty 2016-2019* and reiterated in *Programme for a Partnership Government*. It is in the Government's interest to provide capital funding to invest in retrofitting of homes and businesses to reach climate change targets with the long term benefits far outweighing initial investment.

The issue of energy poverty continues to be a concern for many people and organisations especially older people. People need to be made more aware of the grants that are available to them to upgrade the energy efficiency of their homes and application forms must be easy to fill out, which can be off-putting for older people and other vulnerable groups.

It is recognised that people living in private rented accommodation can be more at risk of fuel and energy poverty as there is no incentive for them to invest in their home. Incentives given to landlords of tenants in receipt of Housing Assistant Payment (HAP) to retrofit their properties must be extended to all landlords whose properties are of lower energy efficiency standards, and whose tenants are in receipt of another housing payment such as Rent Supplement or Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS) or on low income but not entitled to state assistance for housing.

By engaging with citizens on this, it will make them more aware of what schemes and grants are available to improve the energy efficiency.

Transport With the lack of public transport in rural areas, there is a higher dependency on cars. Irish Rural Link welcomes no increase in the price of Diesel for Budget 2017 as was proposed. Again, any increase in price of diesel would impact on those living in rural areas more; especially lower income households who have no choice but to have a car. The use of electric cars is still relatively low, especially in rural areas. This is due to a number of reasons including the shorter KM/charge compared to diesel or petrol and few charging stations in rural areas.

Eco-driving: Irish Rural Link believes that eco-driving training should be included as part of driver training and testing. Upon completing training, drivers tend to reduce their fuel consumption by 25% (Convery, 2008). Advancements in alternatives to fossil fuels for transport will also require commitment and educating people on the use of electric and other alternative fuelled vehicles is necessary and should be part of the engagement process on climate change.

Rural Transport Programme There is now an opportunity to further develop the Rural Transport Programme, currently being rebranded to 'Local Link'. More frequent services and new routes could provide an alternative to car use in rural areas and therefore reducing dependency on cars. Engagement with people in rural areas is needed to ascertain what people want and need in local areas.

Community Wetlands Forum The Community Wetlands Forum was established under the umbrella of Irish Rural Link in September 2013. The forum came together as a result of the work already undertaken by Irish Rural link on behalf of community groups affected by the Peatlands' directive and in the development of wetlands as an enhanced asset in the community. The main objective of the Community Wetlands Forum is to provide a representative platform for community-led conservation groups based on the principles of community development, namely; empowerment; participation; inclusion, equality of opportunity and anti-discrimination; self-determination and partnership.

The Community Wetlands Forum is a strong example of how community engagement into the preservation and conservation of one of Ireland's biggest natural resources can contribute to a more transparent Climate Change Policy. Raising awareness of the wise use of wetlands will reduce the exploitation of bogs and wetlands.

Community Energy Projects As a nation Ireland is rich of untapped renewable energy sources that cannot only help the environment but can also drive the national economy as well as provide cheaper energy to homes and businesses. One method of achieving the 20% renewable energy target set out by the European Union is by community owned energy projects. In particular the opportunities offered by Ireland's wind energy is unrivalled by many other countries. For centuries the west of Ireland has been considered a marginalised region but wind energy is one of the few sectors in which the west of Ireland in particular has a major competitive advantage over almost every other region in Europe.

In recent times there has been huge contestation to the construction of large energy projects such as windfarms and pylons. Some aspects that caused objection from the public were unfamiliarity with planning regulations and mistrust of the large energy companies. A method of addressing these issues is to incentivise community led renewable energy projects. These projects would give the communities control eliminating mistrust between communities and the energy companies.

Engagement with communities by Government, Local Authorities and organisations involved in the construction of wind farms and other renewable energy sources at every stage of planning and delivery. This can make communities feel they are part of the decision making process.

Agricultural Sector: The agricultural sector still plays a larger role in the Irish economy than in other European countries. The contribution agriculture has to climate change and CO2 emissions are also higher in Ireland than other EU countries. Measures have been set out by the National Rural Network as part of the current Rural Development Programme (2014-2020) to reduce the level of greenhouse gases produced in the agricultural sector including; GLAS scheme and Beef Genomics. Conferences will be run throughout the six years of the programme informing those involved in the agriculture sector of the different schemes available to reduce CO2 emissions on farm land.

Commitment 2: Support Public Participation Networks

Irish Rural Link partnered with Longford Women's Link and Women's Manifesto in September 2016 to hold a seminar on Public Participation Networks and looking at how these are working in a rural context.

Some of the challenges facing rural communities such as; rural isolation, the increasing older population, the decline in towns and villages, poor transport and broadband infrastructure can impact on the level of participation citizens in rural areas have in their local PPN's.

PPN's are still very much in the building phase and still require a large amount of support. Training has started to take place in some PPN's and is continuing to be rolled out across the country. Training needs to be provided on a continuous basis and for new volunteers that come on board. There is still confusion about the new structures, the language used and the meanings for the different acronyms. This can be off putting for people. Support is needed for members of the Community & Voluntary sector who are on their local PPN or LCDC and without this support there is a risk that they won't continue to develop.

Some PPN's are working well around the country and more consultation and information sharing of what is or is not working is needed among Local Authorities and central Government.

Commitment 3: Improve Access to Justice

Equal access to justice needs to be available for every citizen. The ambitions for improving access to justice set out in the draft report are achievable but need the full commitment from Department of Justice and other Government Departments.

For people in rural areas, access to justice can often be more difficult because of location and a lot of planning is needed if people do not have access to a car or public transport. The extra travel costs and time incurred can also impact on a person's decision to access the justice system.

The reduction of Garda presence in rural areas as a result of the closure of Garda Stations has reduced people's confidence in the system. There needs to be an increase in Garda patrolling in rural areas. Community and text alert schemes need to be properly supported and funded and access to the local Gardai is necessary with regular contact with such groups.

Commitment 4: Enhance Citizen Engagement in Policy Making

Citizen engagement into policy making at both a local and a national level is key for an open and transparent Government. The consultation portal is a good means of allowing citizens to engage, but more awareness of this is needed to ensure it is fully utilised. Consultation meetings are also a good method of getting citizens engaged. However, such consultations need to be spread across the country evenly and not always in the same places or concentrated in one region.

The necessary broadband infrastructure needs to be made available for the online portals to work effectively so that every person in every part of the country has equal access to the portals and have an input into policy making.

Commitment 6: Improve Access to Government Services through Technology

Moving Government services online will help citizens have better access to Government services, especially those who may be excluded from these services due to geographical location and lack of transport. It also allows for engagement in Government policy and decision making.

However, the proper infrastructure must be in place to allow equal access for all to these online services. It is widely acknowledged that broadband infrastructure in rural areas still remains quite poor and this may exclude a large number of people from accessing such services.

The Government must be cognisant to the fact that not every person uses or has ever used technology. This is particularly true for the older population. Computer training programmes such as Benefit 4, which Irish Rural Link delivers, is aimed at people who have never used computers before. It teaches the basics of computers; from turning on a computer, using the keypad/mouse, to using the internet, banking and paying bills online and using Government services online such as paying car tax. This programme will be a vital resource for people who will have to use Government services online and must therefore be acknowledged as such and adequately funded.

Commitment 13: Develop a Code of Practice for the Governance of Charities

Irish Rural Link are fully supportive of the development of a Code of Practice for the Governance of Charities. The controversies surrounding some charities over the past few years have resulted in a lack of trust in the sector and a fall in donations by citizens. By putting a Code of Practice in place, charities will need to be more transparent and publish their accounts and have them available to people if they request them. This will work to the advantage of charities by regaining the trust of donors again.

The work charities do and the services they provide needs to also be acknowledged by Government. Many are provided services that should be provided by Government departments and are doing so with limited resources and limited funding.

Irish Rural Link the Organisation

Irish Rural Link (IRL), formed in 1991, is a national network of organisations and individuals campaigning for sustainable rural development in Ireland and Europe. IRL, a non-profit organisation, has grown significantly since its inception and now directly represents over 300 community groups with a combined membership of 25,000.

The network provides a structure through which rural groups and individuals, representing disadvantaged rural communities, can articulate their common needs and priorities, share their experiences and present their case to policy-makers at local, national and European Level.

Irish Rural Link is the only group represented at the national social partnership talks solely representing rural communities' interests.

'Our vision is of vibrant, inclusive and sustainable rural communities that contribute to an equitable and just society'

Irish Rural Link's aims are:

- To articulate and facilitate the voices of rural communities in local, regional, national and European policy arenas, especially those experiencing poverty, social exclusion and the challenge of change in the 21st century.
- To promote local and community development in rural communities in order to strengthen and build the capacity of rural community groups to act as primary movers through practical assistance and advice.
- To research, critique and disseminate policies relating to rural communities including issues such as sustainability, social exclusion, equality and poverty
- To facilitate cross-border networking between rural communities

'Our mission is to influence and inform local, regional, national and European development policies and programmes in favour of rural communities especially those who are marginalised as a result of poverty and social exclusion in rural areas.'