Irish Rural Link

**10th October 2017**

**Irish Rural Link reacts to Budget 2018**

Irish Rural Link – the national network representing the interest of rural communities broadly welcomes most of the measures set out in Budget 2018.

The increase funding to the Department of Rural and Community Development of €19m is disappointing as we feel it is not sufficient given how far behind rural development is. It will not be enough to achieve the economic development that is needed in rural areas and are concerned about the implementation of the Action Plan for Rural Development. Rural areas will continue to feel left behind.

We await the announcement by Minister Ross on the breakdown of his Department’s budget in particular the budget for the Rural Transport Programme. This programme remains underfunded and IRL continue to call for the budget to be at least the €18m it should have been by 2016. It needs proper investment and proper recognition by Government that it is a solution to many of the problems faced by people living in rural areas.

Irish Rural Link welcomes the increase by five euro per week in the State Pension, Jobseekers Benefit and Allowance and other Social Welfare payments. However, this increase does not cover the higher costs associated with living in rural areas. We await more details of the €2.50 per week for telephone allowance. We continue to call for the full restoration of the telephone allowance for people living alone and we hope that this is a first step to that restoration. There needs to be real investment in services for older people. Meals on Wheels is a vital service for older people to remain in their own home and needs to be adequately funded. We would like more details on the budget for this service and the home care package for 2018.

We welcome there was no increase in price of diesel and that there will be a review of the Carbon Tax. Carbon tax impacts most on people on low or fixed income and with no alternatives for heating a home, especially older houses, in rural areas. People continue to depend on their car in rural areas, which in many cases are diesel. The incentive for electric cars does not give any indication how this would work in rural areas. We know that electric cars are not advanced enough to be reliable for long journeys, so may not be any benefit for people in rural areas.

We welcome the Brexit Loan Scheme for SME’s. This will be crucial to ensure they can expand and diversify their markets.

Agriculture is still the main industry for rural areas. Budget for Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine by €64m. We await more details of the Farm Assist Program. One of IRL’s main concerns with the Farm Assist scheme is the way it is means tested on the previous year’s income and called for this to be changed to the current year’s income. We called for the increase in the number of places on the Rural Social Scheme by 500 and are disappointed that this was only increased by 250.

The hiring of 800 Gardai and we now call that there will be a sufficient number of these new Gardai allocated to rural areas.

-*Ends-*

**For further information, please contact (anytime):**

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**About Irish Rural Link:**

Irish Rural Link represents the interests of locally based rural groups in disadvantaged and marginalised rural areas by highlighting problems, advocating appropriate policies, sharing experiences and examples of good practice. It has a membership of nearly 600 rural community groups dedicated to sustainable rural development and represents rural communities at a national and international level.