



Submission to DRCD new Rural Development Policy 2020

October 2019

Contact
Seamus Boland or Louise Lennon

Irish Rural Link is core funded by the Scheme to Support National Organisations (SSNO) funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development through Pobal



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

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.

We welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the new Rural Development Policy 2020. We commend the work that has been done under the current rural policy – *‘Realising our Rural Potential: Action Plan for Rural Development’*, since its launch in 2017. However, there is still a lot more investment needed in rural areas to ensure that people have an affordable standard of living, can fully participate in society and their local community, have decent and quality employment to go to within a reasonable distance from where they live. Thirty-seven percent of the Ireland’s population live in rural areas (CSO, Census 2016). This is a large number of people who cannot be left behind as the economy continues to grow.

Rural communities, villages and towns have a lot to offer the country and are a key contributor in how the Government want the country to be over the coming years but this will need political will and Government commitment, proper investment, and meaningful engagement and collaboration with rural people and communities.

Since the launch of *‘Realising our Rural Potential: Action Plan for Rural Development’*, the landscape of the country has changed. Brexit is getting closer and there is more emphasis on Climate Change, the challenges this poses for communities and how people must adapt to mitigation measures. These challenges are more difficult for people living in rural areas to overcome, but rural areas can be the solution to overcoming many of these challenges for the whole of the country.

While the country approaches “full employment” and the economy is growing, the rate of growth in many rural areas is still lagging behind major urban centres. People living in rural areas are still experiencing higher levels of poverty and have higher income inadequacies’ than their urban counterparts¹. The Pobal Deprivation Index published in September 2017 also highlighted more rural towns and villages have higher deprivation rates and while unemployment rates overall are decreasing, these areas are still experiencing high rates of unemployment².

The lack of essential public services such as transport and broadband, continue to exclude people, especially marginalised groups from fully participating in society and

¹ Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (2019) Minimum Essential Standard of Living Report 2019.

² Haase, T. & Pratscheke, J. (2017) *‘The 2016 Pobal HP Deprivation Index for Small Areas (SA)’*
<https://www.pobal.ie/app/uploads/2018/06/The-2016-Pobal-HP-Deprivation-Index-Introduction-07.pdf>

contributing to the economy. Investment in local transport and high speed broadband needs to be prioritised so that every person has the opportunity to participate in society.

The launch of *Project 2040* in early 2018 sets out a roadmap for development in the country for the next number of years. This must now be backed with the adequate funding and must ensure that every person in every part of the country reap the benefits of investment. The funds set up under *Project 2040* such as The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund and the Climate Action Fund must be adequately funded to ensure real change can be made and projects are sustainable after the funding is finished.

The new Rural Development Policy 2020 must encompass all recent Government Policies and Strategies, such as *Project 2040*, *Climate Action Plan*, *Future Jobs Ireland*, *Slaintecare* and the forthcoming *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion* as well as the three Regional Assemblies *Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies*.

Ireland was one of the lead countries in the signing of the *Sustainable Development Goals*, with 17 goals to achieve by 2030. Getting a balance in achieving all goals equally will be a challenge. With the first goal being 'No Poverty' by 2030, the other 16 goals must work to complement this goal and no person be adversely impacted by trying to achieve the goals. These goals must also form a pivotal part of the new Policy.

Section 1: Rural and Regional Development

Rural and Regional Development is predicated on people and their desire and ability to continue to live, return or move to rural areas and regions outside the capital. The creation of jobs and quality of jobs that are being created is central to this as is the necessary infrastructure and services, such as roads, high speed broadband, water and sewerage treatment and public transport, to ensure people are connected to jobs and services in these areas. Ensuring that these essential services and infrastructure are in place are paramount to development in rural areas and must be invested in properly so areas can grow and people want to live in rural areas while at the same time have employment that affords them a decent standard of living.

There must also be a more collective approach to regional development such as Local Authorities in each region coming together to form Regional Development Groups. They can collectively look at macro barriers to setting up enterprises or preventing companies locating in their region such as planning, cost of rates, investment in broadband and mobile coverage, energy requirements, etc as well as ensuring the necessary services are in place for people to live in an area. By three or four Local Authorities coming together in a region, the cost of providing these services could be reduced.

Provision of Essential Infrastructure

Access to infrastructure such as roads, transport, broadband, quality water and waste water treatment are essential to allow people to live in rural areas. Without having basic infrastructures in place makes it more challenging for people to remain in rural areas or for people to move to a rural setting. This infrastructure forms a key part to growing sustainable communities.

Broadband

It is well highlighted that every home and business now needs access to high speed broadband. With the National Broadband Plan set to go ahead, timeframes must be put in place on the delivery of the Plan and no further delays. Ensuring the future proofing of the technology used in the rollout of broadband is imperative. It is essential for the creation of quality and sustainable jobs, to allow businesses to grow and expand their markets and reduce the need to travel/commute long distance for work, hence reducing carbon emissions. The success of the new Rural Development Policy 2020 will fundamentally be based on the rollout of Broadband.

Transport

The lack of a robust and reliable public transport system continues to be a challenge and obstacle for people living in rural areas in accessing employment, health services, hospital appointments, education and training and day to day business. The over reliance on cars for people living outside of Dublin is a result of the lack of a proper functional transport system. The Local Link service has gone some way to reducing

social exclusion for people and allow them access some services. The extension of the evening services is also welcome. However, there still remains a number of locations, mainly in the most remote areas, that are not being served by this bus service or the service is not regular enough for people to rely on it to get them to appointments, work, education or training.

With carbon tax expected to increase each year in the budget, it will be more expensive for many people to keep a diesel or petrol car. Also with electric vehicles out of the price range at present for a lot of people, there is a need for greater investment in public transport in rural areas and a suite of transport measures made available.

(See Section on Transport for further details)

Water and Waste Water Treatment

The current pressure on water and sewerage systems are set to continue with increase in the population. Upgrading these systems will be essential to ensure that people can live in rural areas. Irish Rural Link are aware of small villages and communities around the country where no more housing can be built in the village because of the current pressure on sewerage and water systems. This is preventing people moving into or returning to the community.

Policing and Security

Irish Rural Link do not see the need for all Garda Stations that were closed during the years of austerity to be reopened. However, we do see the need of more Garda presence on the ground and being visible in all communities. With the reduction of divisional headquarters, more community policing is needed and this new Policy must work with the Department of Justice and Equality to make sure there is an increase in presence of Gardaí and people have the confidence and trust to report incidents of crime.

Neighbourhood Watch and Community Text Alert Schemes. Where these are in place, they can work very well. Encouraging communities to explore these schemes is needed and providing the supports to committees and groups so it doesn't all rely on a small number of people is needed.

Section 2: Rural Transport

People living in rural areas still do not have the same level of public transport as is available in the cities. As a result, accessing employment, health services, hospital appointments, education and training and socialising can be more difficult for people. Census 2016 showed 91% of households in rural areas owned at least one car; highlighting the over reliance on cars for people living outside Dublin. Vulnerable groups of people; older people and people with disabilities as well as those who are unable to afford a car living in rural areas are most affected by this. They rely on the goodwill of family members and neighbours to meet appointments and to go to the nearest town to do their day-to-day business.

Meeting Transport Needs of Rural Communities

A whole rethink in how public transport in rural areas is delivered is needed. This new Rural Development Policy must have greater influence on the Department of Transport, its Minister and the National Transport Authority (NTA) to develop a proper and reliable transport system for rural areas.

We welcome that throughout 2018 and 2019 (to date) Local Link Services have continued to grow and that evening services in some areas continued beyond the pilot scheme. However, there are still a lot of people that do not have access to this service, or some services are limited in areas. IRL have become aware of changes to bus routes that means people have lost their Local Link service.

IRL have recommended for many years that an uber-style car service or public car scheme in rural areas needs to be part of the overall public transport policy, where people can call for a car, similar to the community car scheme some of the Local Link companies already provide, to bring them to appointments or for social outings. The rural hackney programme also needs to be revisited and how this could better serve people in rural areas, especially older people and people with a disability who may not be able to drive.

Statutory Framework for Local Transport Planning

Better integration between Local Link services, other Government Departments and Local Authorities is needed to identify routes and the most appropriate transport model and type are developed for the communities they serve. Better integration of all public transport services – Local Link, Irish Rail, Bus Eireann and other service providers are needed for better connectivity across the country so every person, regardless of where they live, has access to some form of a reliable and robust public transport service, be that a bus or car type service.

Social Enterprises

There are a number of Fleet Owning Companies that provide Local Link services in their locality. These groups give a full range of services including; PSO service, rural transport services, community Car, Accessible Community Car and Self Drive. These services are value for money and the employment this type of services creates is supportive of the

local community and gives employment and upskilling to people on the live register. The services they provide are flexible and have proved that service demand can be met in an economical way. However, these companies have faced increasing costs over the past few years; high insurance premiums for their vehicles, upgrading of buses and making buses wheelchair accessible, etc.

Support Climate Change

As already outlined, the need for a car in rural areas is as a result of the lack of a robust public transport system. If this was properly invested in, there would be less need for car use. There must be supports in place for those providing public transport or community/hackney car schemes to change to electric or greener fuel vehicles. At present this is very difficult for direct award Local Link providers as well as the TCU's. This must be fully explored as part of this new Policy.

Section 3: Employment and Creation of Quality Jobs

IRL acknowledge the efforts being made to reduce unemployment across the country over the past number of years. However, there still remains disparity between NUT3 regions in terms of unemployment rate. The most recent figures in the Labour Force Survey for Q2 2019³ shows unemployment rate for the state stands at 5.4%, a slight increase from the previous quarter (4.8%). The Midlands and South East region of the country continue to have the highest rate of unemployment with the South-East region having a rate of 8.1%. Results from Census 2016 showed that small towns had higher unemployment rates than larger towns. Of the larger towns across the country, Longford had the highest unemployment rate between 2011 and 2016 at 30%. The Pobal Deprivation Index published in September 2017 also highlighted more rural towns and villages have higher deprivation rates and while unemployment rates overall are decreasing, these areas are still experiencing high rates of unemployment⁴. The impacts of high unemployment during the recession is still being felt in many rural areas and as the figures above show are not experiencing the same level of employment creation as urban or areas close to major urban centres.

Job creation in rural areas is key in attracting people to remain or return to rural areas. These jobs must be of good quality and provide an adequate standard of living for households. Currently, the majority of jobs in rural areas are still in primary industries such as agriculture, construction and low-level manufacturing and sectors that are historically low paid, such as accommodation and food, retail and caring sector. These jobs are generally minimum-wage jobs with some having irregular working hours. Households living in rural areas have different and additional expenditure needs to meet to have the same minimum standard of living as households living in urban areas. The Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice Minimum Essential Standard of Living for 2019, showed core MESL continues to be higher for rural households. These higher costs are primarily related to higher transport and home energy costs⁵. While we welcome the increase in the minimum wage and new Employment laws on precarious and zero-hour work contracts, for many families' minimum wage does not afford them an adequate standard of living.

³ CSO Labour Force Survey Q2 2019

https://pdf.cso.ie/www/pdf/20190827095440_Labour_Force_Survey_Quarter_2_2019_full.pdf

⁴ Haase, T. & Pratscheke, J. (2017) 'The 2016 Pobal HP Deprivation Index for Small Areas (SA)'

<https://www.pobal.ie/app/uploads/2018/06/The-2016-Pobal-HP-Deprivation-Index-Introduction-07.pdf>

⁵ Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (2019) Minimum Essential Standard of Living Report 2019.

Income Inadequacies by Household Type with 2 Parents in Full Time Employment earning minimum wage

Household Type	Rural	Urban
2 Parents with 1 infant	-€1.06	+€36.26
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 pre-school, 1 primary)	-€49.52	+€33.18
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 primary, 1 secondary)	-€14.28	+€56.57
2 Parents with 3 Children (1 infant, 1 pre-school, 1 primary)	+€18.60	-€3.19
2 Parents with 4 Children (2 primary, 2 Secondary)	-€123.83	-€4.86

Source: VPSJ MESL 2019

Micro and Small & Medium Enterprises

IRL believe that Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises are the backbone to rural economies and are key to creating jobs in rural areas. While there continues to be a push for foreign multinationals to locate to Ireland, the reality is that they are attracted to the cities and larger towns. Micro enterprises accounted for 92.2% of all enterprises in 2015 (CSO, 2017) and this figure is reflected across the 28 EU countries. Research for MICRO project found that under 23 million SME's generated €3.9 trillion in value added and employed 90 million people across the EU in 2015. This accounted for 67% of EU28 employment⁶.

Micro Enterprises and SME's are always vulnerable to external shocks and continue to face many challenges in growing their businesses; including access to credit and especially in rural areas; high speed broadband. These businesses will also be more vulnerable to Brexit and to adaptations needed to tackle Climate Change, however there can also be opportunities for these businesses to explore new markets and new products but they must be supported to do so.

Foreign Direct Investment and Remote Working

IDA, the development authority in Ireland with responsibility to attract Foreign Direct Investment (IDA) into Ireland, continue to grow the number of FDI jobs in the country. In 2018, 229,057 IDA client jobs were created, an increase of 6.5% from 2017. However, the Dublin and Mid-East region continue to have almost half of the FDI jobs. This is in comparison to Midlands region who still only have just over 5,000 IDA client jobs⁷.

⁶ MICRO (2017) "Rural Micro and Craft Entrepreneurs: Sustaining Rural Europe A MICRO Project Composite Report" <http://www.microsmetraining.eu/index.php>

⁷ IDA (2019) Annual Report 2018 https://www.idaireland.com/getmedia/a4a188d7-e067-4c6d-8d00-ab771bd7122d/IDA_Annual_Report_2018.pdf.aspx

There must be more balance of these job creations across the country and this is where a collective approach to regional development must happen as outlined in Section one of this submission to ensure that the necessary infrastructure – such as high speed broadband to every premises in the country, the skills needed can be quickly identified and that better collaboration can happen with not just third level institutions in the regions but ETB's and other training providers.

The *Town and Village Renewal Scheme* has helped communities develop digital hubs in rural areas and the *Rural Regeneration Fund* and the *Regional Enterprise Development Fund* have continued to encourage a collaborated approach to development of these hubs. 'Future Jobs Ireland' has identified remote working as one of the ambitions for the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation for the future of working in Ireland and Digital Hubs and co-working spaces are key to achieving this goal. It must also be a key priority in this new Rural Development Policy. Some of the new IDA funded companies look for staff that can work remotely so these hubs help in the creation of more FDI jobs outside of the Dublin region. It will also reduce commuting times for people, giving them more time to be involved in their communities, but also allow those, such as females, people with disabilities, who may not be able to commute due to a caring role or because of their disability. The positive impact on the environment with reduced carbon emissions from car usage is a major benefit to remote working.

Social Enterprise

Irish Rural Link welcome the publication of the '*Social Enterprise Strategy*'. There is ample opportunity for social enterprise to contribute to development of rural communities, by creating jobs but also providing much needed services so people can be fully inclusive. Irish Rural Link have raised our concerns about essential services community and voluntary groups provide in rural areas to the most vulnerable and marginalised people in our society, such as healthcare, social care and childcare services. Many of these groups are providing such services because the state has failed to provide them in these areas. They will never make a profit let alone break even and need to be supported and funded differently to social enterprises. They should never have to compete for the same funding as Social Enterprises and not be granted the funding because they are unable to prove they can become self-sufficient.

Local Public Banking Policy

Irish Rural Link continue to engage with Government on the Local Public Banking model we first proposed over three years ago. However, we feel action must be taken on this now and that it does not become a talking shop.

IRL believe that this type of banking model is necessary to ensure SME's and Micro Enterprises are protected and sustain any future financial crises, but also to access credit to allow them grow and expand.

IRL has developed a working relationship with the SBFIC to explore how this model could be introduced in Ireland and the SBFIC. The wider Sparkassen Group has expressed support for such a model to be established in Ireland to bring added value for regional development.

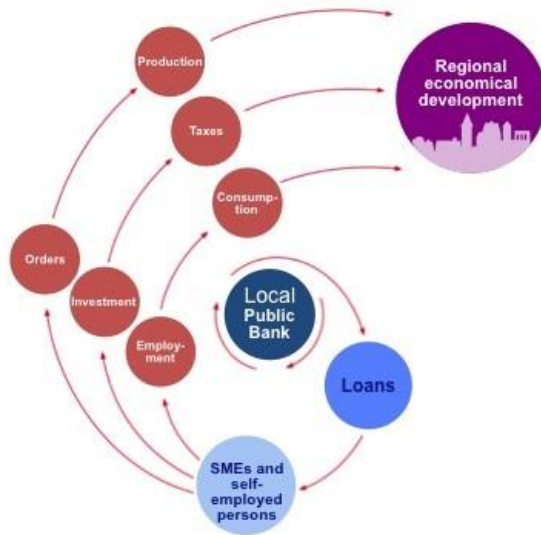
This model of banking covers the 26 counties nationally and works on a regional basis and follows key principles of the "Framework for the Development of Regional Enterprise Strategies"

The model is not based on a theory but on an existing regional working banking model bringing prosperity by creating a virtuous cycle of money circulating in the local economy.

The concept proposal makes provision for inclusion of post offices and credit unions as part of invigorating local communities particularly in the area of SME's and the Agriculture sectors that allow commerce to thrive.

- The IRL proposal suggests a nationwide network of 8 to 10 Local Public Banks which are managed independently but with an identical business model working under identical management principles. Initially 2 or 4 pilot banks are envisaged with a rollout of the entire network developed over the next 5 years.
- In addition, a centralised service unit will provide internal services, including risk management and internal audit and will house a self-supervision unit for the new public banking system.
- The new Local Public Banks will follow a specific business model that is different from traditional commercial banking. The new public banks will have to be economically viable but they will not pursue profit maximisation. At the same time they will be enabled to fulfil a public mandate because they will not be under pressure to make dividend payments.
- Earnings will partly be retained to strengthen their capital base and partly distributed to social projects, also surpluses will be partly distributed to social funds to benefit the local community.

IRL Proposed Local Public Banks



Virtuous Cycle
created in each region



Map of sub-regional
Strategic Planning Areas

Section 4: Existing and Emerging Sectors in Rural areas

Rural areas already have many key sectors that make a significant contribution to the Irish Economy. As outlined above, many of these sectors, such as agriculture, tourism and community health and social care are lower paid and irregular working hours but they are going to continue to play a key role, if not more important role for growth and development in rural areas and beyond. If the Government want these sectors to grow, more value must be placed on jobs and employees in these sectors.

There are also new sectors that will emerge as a result of Brexit, Climate Change and as a result of how technology advances and artificial intelligence will see some jobs no longer in existence. Rural communities can be leaders in these sectors, especially in adapting to climate change with opportunities for job creation but supports must be provided and barriers removed.

Agricultural Sector

Agriculture still remains one of the biggest sectors in rural areas. It needs to be supported to grow and diversify to incorporate changes around Climate Action and Environment, with as little as possible impact on people's livelihoods. While the agriculture sector is often named as the main culprit of carbon emissions and greenhouse gases, it can also hold many of the solutions to helping reduce these emissions and in the production of renewable energy solutions. Farmers and the sector as a whole must be supported to make changes.

The food sector in Ireland is greatly dependent on the agricultural sector for the production of high quality traceable food. It is one of the main sectors at risk from Brexit and must be supported to explore new markets. Promotion and raising awareness of the benefits to a person's health and the environment of locally sourced food is required.

The agricultural sector can also be the solution in the production of greener energy and storing of carbon.

With some pilot **Anaerobic Digestion** projects happening in the use of waste to produce bio methane gas, there is scope to increase the number of these across the country and engage with farmers and local community groups so they can become involved in the production of their own energy. It is a way to help farmers reduce their carbon emissions without compromising their output and their livelihood. Anaerobic Digestion is one way in which Irish agriculture can continue to grow its output while at the same time reduce its carbon emission through the production of bio methane gas.

Irish Rural Link continues to call for the installation of a **rain-water collection system**. Water is an increasing cost to farmers and obligations under the Water Framework Directive reinforce the need for farms to make the most efficient use of water possible. Farming's intensive use of water has implications for the water reserves of the wider community. Farms have large areas of roofed sheds and concrete yards and there is significant scope to harvest, collect and recycle the water from these, enabling it to be

used in farm activities or - if suitably treated - as high quality drinking water. In light of this Irish Rural Link propose a supports scheme.

The objectives of such a scheme are:

- To conserve water.
- To make farms more self-sufficient in terms of water usage.
- To create employment in rural areas.

Tourism Sector

The tourism sector is one of the most important sector to the Irish Economy and is one of the largest indigenous industries in the country. The sector has grown rapidly over the last number of years, with overseas visitor numbers in 2018 reaching over 10 million (10,616,000). This was an increase of 6.8% on the numbers visiting Ireland in 2017. Tourism is a particularly important sector to the rural economy and is a key employer in rural areas. The marketing by Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland of the 'Wild Atlantic Way' has increased the number of visitors to these areas. Other campaigns 'Ireland's Ancient East' and the new 'Ireland's Hidden Heartlands' is an attempt to spread tourism to all parts of the country. Our regional airports have a key role in having a more balanced tourism sector, in developing more flights in and out to the regions.

The success of the tourism sector can no longer be measured on the number of visitors or the income it generates alone and a more sustainable approach to the sector is now needed. It must consider the value and benefits it has on local communities, that people living in an area are not displaced or damage caused to the natural environment. It must also place more value on the jobs in the sector, the people working in these jobs and ensure that people have regular hours of work that afford them a socially acceptable standard of living and that people can create careers in the sector.

Healthcare Sectors

With an ageing population, especially in rural areas and the commitment by Government to care for people in their community, there will be greater demand placed on this sector in the future. With a sector that is already under a serious amount of pressure, there must be a shift in focus to primary and community care to allow people age in their communities. IRL welcome the publication of *Sláintecare Implementation Strategy* and the *Action Plan 2019* and the vision for this shift towards primary care and care in the community. But this care must be adequately resourced with personnel as well as capital and current funding.

There are a number of community care services that are already available that are playing a key role in the delivery of health care in the home. Meals on Wheels is one service that helps a person remain in their home as they age. However, the service is underfunded and it is becoming more difficult to source volunteers for the service. The service also relies heavily on employment schemes but are unable to keep them on once they are finished, even if there is no paid employment for them to go to. They have received training and trust has been built up between the worker and the customers. More value

must be placed on the work that is been done and there is opportunity for jobs to be created in this section of the healthcare sector if Government is serious about the full implementation of Slaintecare and indeed this new Policy.

Meals on Wheels

Meals on Wheels service is a critical component of the continuum of care services and one service available that enables older people to remain living in the community or to return to their own homes after hospitalisation. It can play a key role and compliment the implementation of Slaintecare. For those using the service it is seen as more than just a meal. It links people into other services, such as the Public Health Nurse, befriending services and other healthcare services and it can reduce rural isolation. For many, especially men living alone, the person delivering a meal may be the only person they might see in the day or week. According to McGivern (2007)⁸, the aim of Meals on Wheels in Ireland is twofold: firstly, to improve the diet and nutritional status of meal clients; and secondly to increase the level of social contact afforded to clients, which also enables the early detection of need for other care services.

Under the umbrella of Irish Rural Link, the Meals on Wheels Network was established in 2015 with the overall aim to provide a local, community led professional facility to assist people who require services to maintain optimum health, independence with strong life extending possibilities⁹.

There are many challenges that are hindering Meals on Wheels delivery the vital service it provides such as low levels of funding and recognition by Department of Health and other Government Departments. However, there are also great opportunities to develop this service and include it in an overall home care package. The role Meals on Wheels organisations play in supporting individuals to remain living in their own homes for as long as possible cannot be underestimated. With sufficient resources these organisations can enable people to be discharged from hospitals earlier, and even prevent admission to hospital in the first instance, saving the state significant amounts every year.

Construction Sector

With the move away from home heating oil and fossil fuels as main source of heating our homes, many homes in rural areas will need to be retrofitted and new energy systems put in place. While new homes will be built to an A rated BER, existing houses will need to be retrofitted. This will bring with it new construction jobs to make the improvements in these houses. Training and upskilling will be needed to ensure that the Government can meet its targets for retrofitting.

⁸ McGivern, Y., 2007. The 2006 Healthy Ageing Conference: Nutrition and Older People in Residential and Community Care Settings. Conference Proceedings. Dublin: NCAOP

⁹ Meals on Wheels Network <http://www.mealsonwheelsnetwork.ie/>

Energy Sector

The provision of greener energy is an opportunity for job creation in rural areas. With over 500 redundancies expected in Bord na Mona when it ceases peat cutting, employees must be retrained and upskilled to take up employment in the green and bio economy. With the move to alternative and greener energy sources, engaging with local communities where these sources will be constructed is essential.

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 our 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.

IRL would recommend financial support be provided to communities for initial costs of construction as over the lifetime of energy sources the investment will be returned through selling the energy back into the grid, construction jobs, maintenance jobs, environmental benefits, reduced energy costs etc. Consultations with communities must continue prior to the construction of energy sources.

Solar Panels

Public buildings, schools, community centres, GAA centres have ample space on their roofs for solar panels. Again the sale of excess electricity produced from solar panels back to the grid should be made available to people and to communities. Farm buildings also give farmers the opportunity to produce their own energy or contribute in part to this. Supports must be in place and the ability to sell excess energy to the grid is necessary.

Section 5: Natural Environment

Peat soils cover approximately 20% of Ireland's land area. Since the Habitat Directives (92/43/EEC), some of these areas have become Special Areas of Conservation (SAC's) and many more areas have been declared SAC's since then. With the closure of peat extraction and with peatlands having the ability to store twice as much carbon as forestry, there must be a greater drive to rewetting peatlands across the country. However, rewetted peatlands do not only act as carbon sinks but are also key contributors to a range of important Ecosystem Services (ESS) such as; nutrient retention, regional water and climate regulation as well as the protection of biodiversity.

Communities must be educated on peatlands and the role they can play in mitigating climate change. Engaging communities in the restoration and conservation work can help to increase the value people place on the bog.

An example of where this has worked is with the **Community Wetlands Forum (CWF)**, a network established under the umbrella of Irish Rural Link.

The Community Wetlands Forum (CWF) was established under the umbrella of Irish Rural Link in September 2013. The initiative came from community groups involved in wetland conservation who were developing the idea of wetlands as assets for their communities, as well as work undertaken by Irish Rural Link on behalf of communities affected by the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC). Since its establishment, the Community Wetlands Forum has continued to grow its membership, with 21 community groups now part of the forum and new groups interested in joining all using the model of community engagement to develop similar projects in their areas. The forum is also attended by 15 Stakeholder members which includes representatives from Government Agencies, third level institutions, artists, photographers all interested in protection of peatlands and wetlands, biodiversity and 'Life on the Bog'. The Forum also has a rep on the LIFE Raised Bog Restoration Steering Group, NRN Biodiversity Sub-Committee and Irish RAMSAR.

The main aim of the CWF is to provide a representative platform for community-led wetland conservation groups based on the principles of community development namely empowerment; participation; inclusion; self-determination; and partnership. The Community Wetlands forum launched its Strategic Plan 2017-2020 in May 2017¹⁰. The aim of the Strategic Plan is to guide the Community Wetlands Forum in its support of community wetland groups, improving outcomes in a mutually beneficial approach that is collaborative and inclusive.

¹⁰ Community Wetlands Forum (2017) 'CWF Strategic Plan 2017-2020'
<https://www.communitywetlandsforum.ie/about-us/#>

Carbon Credits for Peatlands and Forestry

Value must be put on the non-productive areas of the farm. There is ample peatland in this country to store carbon emissions, and landowners should be given carbon credits that they can offset against costs they may face due to changes in regulations as a result of climate change.

The same is true for forestry. Again this is another big carbon store and a cleaner fuel alternative. Farmers and landowners must be given incentives to plant forestry and giving carbon credits is one way this can be done.

Moor Futures

MoorFutures¹¹ are a way to raise funds for the rewetting and restoration of peatlands and wetlands. Essentially, they are a type of carbon credit used as an instrument for financing peatland protection, ecosystem services and biodiversity, through private investment. MoorFutures offer corporations an opportunity to offset their carbon emissions while investing in the biological diversity and the multiple benefits of peatlands and wetlands. MoorFutures create trust because projects are carried out in the local community and the buyer can visit the site easily; supplier and buyer are in direct personal contact. They started in Brandesburg state in Germany in 2012 with other states following suit. With the amount of peatland and wetland across Ireland, there is an opportunity now to explore such a scheme to help Ireland achieve its climate targets.

Balance between Economic and Conservation Value

It is widely acknowledged that Ireland's natural landscape is the biggest attraction for tourists and wetlands are a significant part of this landscape as well as other natural landscapes and heritage sites. As these sites increase in terms of their economic value, a balance between economic and conservation value must be achieved. It is critical that agencies and communities work together to achieve the appropriate balance. Creating awareness among communities on the value of their local natural landscape and heritage sites is needed and ways to protect these.

¹¹ <https://www.moorfutures.de/>

Section 6: Education, Further Education and Training

Accessing education and training for people living in rural areas can be difficult but even more difficult for marginalised groups – especially if they do not have access to transport. For Lone parents' access to childcare and affordable childcare is an issue. A study by Cullinan et al (2013) found that for every 10 kilometres of travel distance, the likelihood that individuals would participate in higher education decreased by 2.7%. Therefore, a prospective student living 50 kilometres from a higher education institution is 13.5% less likely to participate in education at this level.

Community Education is a way of addressing socio-economic inequalities and barriers to social inclusion as it supports people, many of whom are often-early school leavers or are returning to education after a long time, to access education at a local level. It helps to address the educational needs of marginalised groups of people who would otherwise be excluded from fully participating in education system but also in society. It helps reduce barriers such as transport and childcare that are very real for people, especially women in rural areas who are hoping to return to education and take up a course or training. It also helps alleviate some of the anxiety and stress people may feel returning to education or training after a long time, especially if they did not have a good experience first time around. Community Education providers place a lot of emphasis on those essential 1:1 and peer supports, literacy, creating the supportive environment etc. It can be daunting to move from that environment into the higher education arena so recognition of the need for those supports for many learners is essential. **Longford Women's Link** is a provider of community education and is an example of where it helps women living in rural areas.

Longford Women's Link is a dynamic social enterprise which was founded in 1995 initially, to provide back to education and training opportunities for women who had left school early or who had to leave work when they got married. Over the past 23 years LWL has diversified and expanded to become a substantial organisation that advocates effectively on the issues that impact women and their families, providing practical supports such as affordable childcare and transport where possible and also providing the essential services of domestic violence support, counselling, women's community training and education and support in employment and self-employment options for women and their families. LWL has always been guided by a fundamental purpose of providing a space for women to 'develop their voice' in order to address the myriad issues that they and their families face. Despite major changes within the organisation and also locally, regionally and nationally over these years, LWL remains committed to this guiding purpose.

Community Education must be an integral part in the new Rural Development Policy 2020 to ensure that the most marginalised in rural areas can access education, training

and in turn employment. It ensures that every citizen can fully participate in society and their local community.

Digital skills

Fifty-two percent of the adult population in Ireland lack even basic digital skills, well above the EU average of 43% (European Commission)¹². Even among people in employment, digital skills are low. With more services and indeed employment services going online, increasing the capacity of people's computer skills is now necessity.

Irish Rural Link are currently involved in the delivery of the '**Getting Citizens Online**' Programme funded through the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment. This is a free 10-hour basic computer course aimed at adults over 45 years who have never used a computer before. The course is also available for people who are unemployed, people with disabilities, travellers, migrants and other marginalised communities. There is a need for this course to be open to people in employment who have low digital skills or have never used a computer so they can access payslips, P45 and other paperwork which has all been moved online.

Conclusion: Implementation and Funding

The new Rural Development Policy 2020 must have the full support of every political party and every Government Department so that it will continue beyond the current Government. Measures and actions set out in the new Policy must be followed through on and timeframes attached.

Adequate funding and resources must be provided to ensure that measures and actions can be fully implemented. IRL would call for new funding for the implementation of actions be made available. For example, the Rural Regeneration Fund is part of project 2040 and should not be transferred to this policy and announced as new money. Also, the social inclusion pillar of LEADER funding must be adequately funded post 2020, so that the most vulnerable and marginalised are not left behind or excluded even further.

Irish Rural Link would support an implementation and monitoring group to oversee the full implementation of the actions and would be happy to work with the Department in its delivery of the Policy.

¹² https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/file_import/2019-european-semester-country-report-ireland_en.pdf

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 600 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.’