Irish Rural Link
Nasc Tuaithe na hÉireann

IRISH RURAL LINK GENERAL ELECTION 2024 MANIFESTO

November 2024

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Summary of Irish Rural Link's Priorities and Asks for the General Election 2024 and the Next Government

1. Balanced Regional and Rural Development

- **Maintain** the current **Department of Rural and Community Development and senior Ministerial position** in the cabinet.
- Oversee the **full implementation of the remaining actions in *Our Rural Future*** must be completed, alongside the development of a successor strategy.
- Implement a **collaborative approach to regional development**, ensuring more balanced growth across every part of the country.
- **Rural proofing** of all new and existing government policies and strategies must be carried out.
- Continue to **support employers to facilitate remote working**. This will not only support rural communities, improves workers' quality of life but also reduce congestion in larger towns and cities and reduce carbon emissions.
- **Provide greater supports** for micro and SME enterprises from start-ups to helping existing businesses grow and expand. These supports are financial, but also in training and upskilling.
- **Enhance support and access to finance for social enterprises**: It is essential to provide stronger financial support and easier access to funding for social enterprises. Increased collaboration with **Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs)**, particularly in their role of job creation and economic development, would be a step forward in strengthening the contribution of social enterprises to local economies.
- **Offer targeted education and training for rural-based social enterprises**: There is a need for tailored education and training programs that support the establishment and growth of social enterprises in rural areas, equipping local entrepreneurs with the skills and knowledge required to succeed.
- **Integrate social enterprise into second- and third-level education**: Greater emphasis should be placed on including social enterprise subjects/modules at both second and third level education. This would raise awareness and encourage the next generation of social entrepreneurs.
- The next Government must place **more value on the jobs in indigenous sectors** such as agriculture and tourism and support people to make sustainable careers that afford them an adequate standard of living.
- **Expand the financial services** of Credit Unions and Post Offices to support micro, SME's and social enterprises.

2. Revitalising and Sustaining Rural Communities

- Support town and village living through **adequate and affordable housing**, making town and village living attractive with the **provision of services**, **adequate outdoor space and amenities and meeting places**.

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- **Housing must cater for all stages of life**; for young people wanting to rent or buy for the first time, older people looking to downsize, people with disabilities, or change in family circumstances.
- **Support community centres** to facilitate wide range of activities and classes for all age groups. Make them a meeting place where communities can come together.
- **Adequate transport and other local services**; post offices, shops, healthcare services as well as upgrading essential water and wastewater systems is needed to support people living in towns and villages and surrounding areas.
- **Engage with communities early** regarding immigration to prevent the spread of misinformation and provide a platform for concerns to be raised. Open communication will benefit both the community and newcomers, helping to identify the services needed to support population growth.
- **Shift away from privately owned and operated accommodation centres** to ensure that those providing support to newcomers are qualified and equipped to meet the unique needs of people coming from conflict and displacement. This will help ensure that people receive the best possible care and support during their transition.
- **Increase in funding** to the **C&V sector** to offset rising operational costs, including fuel and food. An allowance should also be introduced to help volunteers cover the cost of using their own vehicles, which is essential for services like community car schemes and Meals on Wheels.
- **Core multi-annual funding** for C&V organisations delivering essential services, including Meals on Wheels, health and social care services, community education, transport, childcare and domestic violence supports. This will ensure the sustainability of services and allow for better long-term planning.
- **Implement the Values and Principles** document to ensure the co-design, co-creation and co-implementation of policies and programmes in partnership with the C&V sector.
- Investment in community services to **create paid employment opportunities** in rural areas. This will not only provide job opportunities for CE and Tús participants but also ensure the long-term viability of services that are vital to the community.
- **Roll-out of the RSS 'Rural Dwellers' pilot**, a recommendation in the Report on the Review of Rural Social Scheme[1] which will allow those in rural areas access the scheme
- **Review of insurance costs** for the C&V sector, so that funds are spent on service delivery rather than excessive insurance premiums. This review should also consider support for wholly voluntary groups that receive no government funding but face high insurance costs when running events or services.

3. Substantial Investment in Infrastructure and Services in Rural Areas

- **Make rural transport a priority** and make a **real investment** in making a suite of transport measures available accessible to all.

[1] Government of Ireland (2024) 'Report on the Review of the Rural Social Scheme'. Dublin: Department of Social Protection https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/f69b1-report-on-the-review-of-the-rural-social-scheme-rss/?

- **Explore the implementation of an Uber-style car service for rural areas** to improve access for marginalised groups to essential services while also addressing the 'last mile' issue. This scheme should be integrated into the existing Free Travel Scheme.
- Ensure the **full roll out of the NBP** so every home and business will have access to high-speed, future proofed broadband.
- Prioritise the **full implementation of *Slaintecare*** and ensure people can access healthcare and age with dignity at home in their own community.
- **Meals on Wheels must be properly funded through multi-annual funding.** Additionally, there is a need for the service to be included in hospital discharge plans, ensuring that people can access it immediately upon leaving the hospital. This will facilitate earlier discharge and help reduce the risk of readmission.
- Provide **core funding to community education providers** to enable them to budget effectively for program delivery, ensuring that those who are furthest from the education system can be reached.
- **Upskilling, re-training and lifelong learning** must be a key focus of the next Government. With new sectors emerging the labour force must be equipped with the necessary skills to meet the skills demanded.
- **Commit to providing all citizens with the digital skills** they need, enabling full participation and engagement in society.
- Explore the **reintroduction of the 'Getting Citizens Online' program**, or a similar initiative, to help older adults and those without digital skills acquire and improve their skills.

4. End Poverty and Ensure an Adequate Living Standard for All

- **Eradicate Poverty** and set an ambitious target of 0% poverty in the next anti-poverty and social inclusion policy.
- **Work towards improving income adequacy for low-income households** to address persistent poverty and put measures in place that will give such people an affordable and socially acceptable standard of living.
- **Benchmark social welfare** rates against the MESL.
- **Address energy poverty** in its approach to ending overall poverty**.**
- **Ring-fence carbon tax** to support households at risk of being pushed further into fuel and energy poverty, and **direct retrofitting grants specifically to low-income households** not eligible for warmer home grants.
- **Develop direct supports for low-income households in rural areas** by creating a comprehensive suite of financial tools. This could include a **sliding scale of grants and low-cost, guaranteed loans designed based on the household's ability to pay**.

5. A Just Transition for Rural Communities and Agriculture

- **Deploy Local Community Energy Advisors** throughout every local authority as well as community organised support programmes, to engage and inform hard to reach energy users who would most benefit from energy efficiency upgrades.
- Further explore the proposed **Community Energy Outreach Programme** by IRL to ensure that vulnerable groups and households receive necessary assistance through the distribution of clear, concise, and accurate information and advice regarding retrofitting, alternative fuel sources, and fuel poverty.
- Ensure that **employees impacted by the green transition are reskilled** for employment opportunities in other sectors once their current roles are impacted.
- **Engage communities earlier in the process of renewable energy projects**, allowing them to participate in decision making to identify the most suitable renewable energy source for their specific needs.
- **Increase financial support** for the installation of solar panels on private homes, farm buildings, and public and community buildings, alongside **raising awareness of the Microgeneration Scheme.**
- Agri-environmental schemes must be designed to provide real incentives for farmers to participate. **Listening to farmers on the ground and collaborating with them** will be crucial in helping them implement the necessary changes.
- **Target smallholders and engage with them to participate in agri-environmental schemes**. While some of their land may be less productive in agricultural terms, it can be highly beneficial for environmental and biodiversity protection.
- **Engage early with farmers** regarding the changes required in the sector to meet climate targets, and work alongside them throughout the process.
- Continue providing **grants and support for the installation of solar panels, rainwater harvesting systems** on farm building roofs, and the ability to sell excess energy back to the national grid. Implement an engagement program to encourage more farmers to install these systems.
- **Increase the Farm Assist payment and streamline the means-testing process** to make it easier for eligible farmers to access support.
- **Provide carbon credits for the restoration** of peatlands and wetlands that are unsuitable for efficient farming.

Overview

Rural communities are the backbone of our society, yet they continue to face challenges that hinder their progress, such as limited access to essential services like transport, healthcare, education, and quality jobs. Despite these obstacles, rural areas hold vast potential for sustainable growth, innovation, and community resilience.

There remains a significant imbalance in growth and job creation across regions. People living in rural areas are still experiencing higher levels of poverty and have deeper income inadequacies than their urban counterparts[2]. The Pobal Deprivation Index 2022 published in November 2023 showed more isolated rural areas in the Northwest of the country, mainly in Donegal and Mayo as well as parts of Sligo, Cavan, Leitrim, Longford and Roscommon continued to have higher levels of deprivation compared to the Southeast[3].

The ongoing cost of living crisis is disproportionately affecting many rural and low-income households, as well as numerous community and voluntary organisations. Ireland was a leading signatory of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which include 17 targets to be achieved by 2030. The conclusion of the SDGs will coincide with the next government's full term, should it last that long. These goals must be central to the new government's priorities, with the eradication of poverty at the forefront of its agenda.

For the next government to demonstrate a genuine commitment to more balanced regional and rural development, the Department of Rural and Community Development must be preserved, along with a dedicated cabinet minister. All policies and strategies developed by the new government must undergo rural proofing to ensure that people living in rural areas—particularly marginalised groups—are not adversely impacted and that policies are not merely extensions of urban frameworks.

The next government must adopt a new approach to rural development—one that is people-centred and sustainable for future generations. It is crucial that rural communities are actively involved in decision-making and policy development to address their specific needs, especially those of the most vulnerable. Rural development must move beyond being a mere extension of urban policies and become a dynamic, locally-driven process focused on solutions that work for rural areas.

[2] Vincentian MESL Research Centre (2024) MESL 2024 Annual Update. https://www.budgeting.ie/publications/mesl-2024/

[3]Pratscheke, J. & Quigley, M. (2023) 'Pobal HP Deprivation Index 2022' https://www.pobal.ie/pobal-hp-deprivation-index/

Irish Rural Link's Priorities and Asks in the General Election 2024 and the Next Government

1. Balanced Regional and Rural Development

Although various government policies and strategies aimed at improving regional and rural development have been implemented by both the current and previous Governments, significant progress is still needed to achieve more balanced development across the country.

The 2022 Census highlights ongoing demographic trends, with a higher concentration of the population living in the eastern part of the country. While all counties saw population growth between 2017 and 2022, this growth was especially concentrated in the east, which also has the youngest population. In contrast, rural counties such as Mayo, Kerry, Roscommon, and Leitrim are seeing an ageing population.

The Dublin and Greater Dublin Area continue to attract the majority of high-quality jobs, with nearly half of all multinational corporations (MNCs) located in this region. However, the high cost of living and the ongoing housing crisis are placing increasing pressure on people trying to live and work in the east. Additionally, the long commuting times faced by workers traveling into Dublin further highlight the unsustainability of concentrating all development in the Greater Dublin Area.

While the number of people working from home has increased since the last census—and many individuals moved to rural areas during the Covid-19 pandemic—this shift should not be viewed as a comprehensive solution to regional imbalances. Remote working should be part of the solution, but it cannot be the only solution. It cannot replace the need for companies to establish a physical presence in regions outside of Dublin, which is essential for fostering sustainable regional development.

Regional and Rural Development Policies and Strategies

The **National Planning Framework (NPF),** developed under Project 2040, serves as the government's high-level strategic plan for shaping the future growth and development of Ireland up to 2040. A draft revision of the NPF was released for consultation in July 2024, reflecting changes and developments since its original publication in 2018. While the revised NPF sets out ambitious goals, it is crucial that the next government takes concrete action to implement these objectives, particularly with regard to ensuring balanced regional development.

Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025 outlines a framework for enhancing rural and regional development, promoting remote working, and building sustainable rural communities. As this policy nears its conclusion, consultations will soon begin for its

successor. For rural areas to thrive, it is essential that critical services and infrastructure—such as public transport, high-speed broadband, retail services, roads, employment opportunities, and access to community services, healthcare, training, and education—are prioritised.

These initiatives must be underpinned by significant investment and strong political will to ensure that rural communities can grow, provide a high quality of life, and offer employment opportunities that enable people to live and work in these areas with a decent standard of living.

The creation of a dedicated **Department for Rural and Community Development**, along with the appointment of a Cabinet Minister to oversee it, has been a positive step forward. It is vital that the next government maintains both the department and the ministerial role to ensure that rural communities continue to receive the attention and support they need. This will also be crucial for the ongoing implementation of *Our Rural Future* and the development of the next Rural Development Policy.

Role of Regional Assemblies

Regional Assemblies provide an important forum for collaboration, and it is essential that there is equal representation from all local authorities within each assembly. Effective collaboration between local authorities must be prioritised, particularly in towns or areas that span multiple counties or regions.

Greater coordination and consistency are needed across a range of critical issues, such as planning, waste management, climate action, transport (including Local Link services), commercial rates, development charges, broadband, and energy infrastructure. These are just a few examples where uniformity in approach can help drive more effective regional development.

To ensure that regional needs are properly addressed, and opportunities maximised, it is crucial to involve key stakeholders such as Enterprise Ireland, Local Enterprise Offices, the IDA, universities, technological universities, and civil society groups. Their input will be invaluable in identifying the specific needs of each region while also uncovering the opportunities that can drive future growth and prosperity.

Rural Proofing of Government Policy

All Government policies and strategies must be **rural-proofed**. This means that when developing new policies or reviewing existing ones, consideration must be given to the impact they will have on rural areas. Rural proofing ensures that rural communities are not disadvantaged by policies that may otherwise prioritise urban areas.

Currently, the **Department of Rural and Community Development** is piloting rural proofing. This initiative must be fully implemented by the next Government to ensure that rural considerations are embedded in all future policy-making.

The next Government must:

- Maintain the current **Department of Rural and Community Development and senior Ministerial position in the cabinet**.
- Oversee the **full implementation of the remaining actions in *Our Rural Future*** must be completed, alongside the development of a successor strategy.
- Implement a **collaborative approach to regional development**, ensuring more balanced growth across every part of the country.
- **Rural proofing** of all new and existing government policies and strategies must be carried out.
- Continue to **support employers to facilitate remote working**. This will not only support rural communities, improves workers' quality of life but also reduce congestion in larger towns and cities and reduce carbon emissions.

Employment and Creation of Quality Jobs

A balanced approach to job creation is imperative to more balanced regional development and for rural development. The jobs created also must be of decent quality and afford people an adequate standard of living. While the country is in almost 'full employment' there are still cohorts of people who find it difficult to access employment. Currently, many of the jobs in rural areas are concentrated in primary industries such as agriculture, construction, and low-level manufacturing. Additionally, sectors historically associated with low wages, such as accommodation and food services, retail, and the caring sector, continue to dominate.

Despite these challenges, these sectors remain crucial to the local and national economy. Agriculture and rural tourism, in particular, are key indigenous industries that contribute significantly to economic activity. They also play a pivotal role in addressing climate change. These sectors hold many of the solutions necessary to meet climate goals and reduce carbon emissions, making them integral to a sustainable rural future.

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. SME's, employing less than 250 people employed, accounted for 99.8% of all enterprises in 2021, with 69.2% people employed in these

enterprises. Micro enterprises (10 employees or less) accounted for 92.6% of all enterprises and employed 27.6% of the workforce[4].

Micro Enterprises and SME's are always vulnerable to external shocks and continue to face many challenges in growing their businesses. The cost of living crisis is the most recent challenge they have faced, with rising cost of energy making it difficult for these companies to stay afloat. These enterprises are vital employers in rural areas, and supporting both new start-ups and helping existing businesses scale will be essential for the future prosperity of rural communities.

The Role of Social Enterprise in Rural Development

Social enterprises play a crucial role in rural development, contributing significantly to areas such as health and social care, childcare, community infrastructure, and can be an intrinsic part in addressing climate change. In fact, social enterprises are already integral to rural communities, providing essential services and fostering sustainable local economies. Currently, 3.7% of the total workforce is employed by social enterprises, with 69% of this workforce being women[5].

In July 2024, the Irish government launched the new National Social Enterprise Policy: *Trading for Impact*. This policy outlines five key objectives aimed at "*Helping to cultivate and sustain strong and impactful social enterprises in Ireland to enrich the social, environmental, and economic well-being of people living in our communities".*[6] However, despite the progress, access to finance remains one of the most significant challenges faced by social enterprises. While 88% of social enterprises are registered as charities, this status often limits their ability to access financing from mainstream banks and restricts their eligibility for some government funding and grant programs.

This is the second national Social Enterprise Policy, which provides greater recognition of the sector's importance. While these efforts are commendable, more still needs to be done to support the growth of existing social enterprises and encourage the creation of new ones.

Access to Finance

IRL continues to advocate for the establishment of a local public banking model to protect SMEs and micro-enterprises from future financial crises. Such a banking model would also be an avenue for social enterprises to access finance. This model would not only help sustain these businesses during times of economic uncertainty but also provide much-needed access

[4] CSO (2024) "Business in Ireland 2021" https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-biidr/businessinireland2021detailedresults/

[5] OECD (2023), "Boosting Social Entrepreneurship and Social Enterprise Development in Ireland: In-depth policy review", *OECD Local Economic and Employment Development (LEED) Papers*, No. 2023/20, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/3115bcb6-en.

[6] Government of Ireland (2024) "Trading for Impact National Social Enterprise Policy 2024-2027" Department of Rural and Community Development. Dublin. https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/7abc2-trading-for-impact-national-social-enterprise-policy-2024-2027/

to credit, enabling them to grow and expand. Such a banking model could make a significant contribution to regional development. **Post Offices** and **Credit Unions** are well-positioned to provide this type of banking service to SMEs, micro-enterprises, and social enterprises, supporting local economies and fostering sustainable growth.

The next Government must:

- **Provide greater supports** for micro and SME enterprises from start-ups to helping existing businesses grow and expand. These supports are financial, but also in training and upskilling.
- **Enhance support and access to finance for social enterprises**: It is essential to provide stronger financial support and easier access to funding for social enterprises. Increased collaboration with **Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs)**, particularly in their role of job creation and economic development, would be a step forward in strengthening the contribution of social enterprises to local economies.
- **Offer targeted education and training for rural-based social enterprises**: There is a need for tailored education and training programs that support the establishment and growth of social enterprises in rural areas, equipping local entrepreneurs with the skills and knowledge required to succeed.
- **Integrate social enterprise into second- and third-level education**: Greater emphasis should be placed on including social enterprise subjects/modules at both second and third level education. This would raise awareness and encourage the next generation of social entrepreneurs.
- The next Government must place **more value on the jobs in indigenous sectors** such as agriculture and tourism and support people to make sustainable careers that afford them an adequate standard of living.
- **Expand the financial services** of Credit Unions and Post Offices to support micro, SME's and social enterprises.

2. Revitalising and Sustaining Rural Communities

People and communities must be at the heart of the next Government Programme. Revitalising rural areas and building resilient, sustainable, and inclusive communities across the island of Ireland should be a key priority. Every person needs a sense of place and belonging, and communities must be inclusive, offering access to quality public services and ensuring a decent and adequate standard of living for all. By fostering such communities, we can help them become more resilient and sustainable.

Creating opportunities for people to work close to where they live is essential for the vitality of rural communities. It allows individuals to spend more quality time with family, volunteer, and become actively involved in the community. When people are more connected to their local area, they are more likely to invest in its long-term wellbeing.

Revitalising Towns and Villages

The **Town Centre First Policy** was launched in 2022. It aims to tackle vacancy, create town centres that function as viable, vibrant and attractive locations for people to live, work and visit, while also functioning as the service, social, cultural and recreational hub for the local community.

Over recent years, many rural towns and villages have fallen into decline, with the closure of shops, post offices, banks, and even garda stations. These areas have often had very little to offer, and without investment, revitalisation is difficult. To bring life back to these communities, we need targeted investment that allows people to live and work in or near their local village or town. Vacant and derelict properties, along with a shortage of housing**,** present a major challenge, but there is a clear disconnect between the availability of vacant buildings and the need for housing in these areas.

Housing in Rural Areas

A rethink of housing for rural areas and towns and villages is needed. While it is often seen as an urban problem, rural areas are not escaping the current housing crisis. While traditionally people would build in the countryside, which in some cases this is still necessary, it is becoming more difficult to do, in many local authorities. People must have housing options to live in their local town or village instead of having to move to larger towns and suburbs of cities. Also, with changing family dynamics, ageing population and younger people finding it more difficult to buy or rent accommodation, housing needs to cater for the different stages of a person's life and life circumstances.

In the Gaeltacht areas, it is getting harder to get planning to build housing. For the Irish language to survive, people need to be able to live in these areas and those who wish to return to live there must be able to do so.

Supporting Local Services and Businesses

Attracting people to rural towns and villages requires more than just housing – we need to ensure that these communities have the services and infrastructure to support their residents. Post offices, shops, cafes, and other local businesses are essential to keeping towns and villages alive. Equally important are outdoor spaces and meeting places where people can gather and connect with one another. Most towns and villages have a local community centre or hall. These facilities could be used more effectively to serve as meeting places and venues for a wide range of activities and classes for all age groups, while bringing local community together.

To maintain vibrant communities, towns and villages must also be served by good transport links**.** Local Link services should connect rural areas with surrounding towns and not be bypassed in favour of larger towns. Reliable and frequent transport services are vital for people to access employment, education, and other essential services.

Infrastructure Challenges

To support more people to live in or close to towns and villages upgrades to current water and wastewater systems are essential to support the housing and services needed in these communities. Irish Rural Link is aware of numerous small villages and communities where delays in new housing projects are directly caused by insufficient capacity in local water and sewerage systems. These delays are preventing people from moving into or returning to these areas, further hindering efforts to revitalise rural communities.

The next Government must:

- Support town and village living through **adequate and affordable housing**, making town and village living attractive with the provision of services, **adequate outdoor space and amenities and meeting places**.
- **Housing must cater for all stages of life**; for young people wanting to rent or buy for the first time, older people looking to downsize, people with disabilities, or change in family circumstances.
- **Support community centres** to facilitate wide range of activities and classes for all age groups. Make them a meeting place where communities can come together.
- **Adequate transport and other local services**; post offices, shops, healthcare services as well as upgrading essential water and wastewater systems is needed to support people living in towns and villages and surrounding areas.

Integrating Refugees and Asylum Seekers into Rural Communities

Communities must be equipped with the necessary infrastructure and services to properly integrate and welcome refugees and asylum seekers. While rural communities have sometimes been criticised for being unwelcoming to new families and individuals, the main

concern among local residents is the lack of essential services. In many small towns and villages, limited access to transport, healthcare, mental health services, and school spaces means that the needs of new arrivals cannot be met effectively.

IRL has consistently called for better engagement with communities regarding the establishment of reception centres and temporary accommodation for refugees and those seeking International Protection. While the protection of people's identities is crucial, the lack of communication and community engagement surrounding the opening of these centres has often led to increased concern and fear among local residents. This, in turn, has fuelled the spread of misinformation and, in some cases, resulted in damage to reception centres.

In rural areas, where services are already scarce, the absence of clear communication can amplify anxiety and opposition. Early and open engagement with communities allows local residents to voice their concerns, ensures that accurate information is shared, and helps prevent the spread of misinformation. By fostering discussions and collaboration, communities can identify gaps in local services that need to be addressed to better support the integration of newcomers. Through proper engagement, both migrants and local residents can benefit, creating a more welcoming environment and facilitating smoother integration.

Role of Local Integration Teams

Since 2024, every Local Authority has established an Integration Team to support the integration of new arrivals into communities. These teams play an important role in connecting newcomers with local resources and services. There is also an opportunity for these teams to work more closely with communities to identify and address gaps in local services, ensuring that newcomers have the necessary support to integrate successfully.

Supporting Long-Term Integration

The Community Fund—which is available to help communities support the integration of new arrivals—is a positive step forward. However, the lack of housing in many rural towns and villages presents a significant challenge. Once refugees and asylum seekers receive the right to remain, they are often forced to leave their temporary accommodation and the community they have started to integrate into. Too often, they end up seeking homeless accommodation in Dublin, which disrupts their lives and undermines their sense of belonging.

To address this issue, there is a pressing need to support refugees and asylum seekers in remaining within the communities where they have integrated. This includes access to stable housing, employment, and training opportunities. Ensuring that newcomers can stay

in these areas and continue their integration process is crucial for both their well-being and for the sustainability of rural communities.

The next Government must:

- **Engage with communities early** regarding immigration to prevent the spread of misinformation and provide a platform for concerns to be raised. Open communication will benefit both the community and newcomers, helping to identify the services needed to support population growth.
- **Shift away from privately owned and operated accommodation centres** to ensure that those providing support to newcomers are qualified and equipped to meet the unique needs of people coming from conflict and displacement. This will help ensure that people receive the best possible care and support during their transition.

Community and Voluntary Sector

The Community & Voluntary (C&V) sector provide a lot of essential services to the most vulnerable and marginalised people in our society. Community services, such as healthcare, social care, transport, community education, childcare and domestic and gender based violence services are provided by community groups. These services have an important role to play in creating sustainable and inclusive communities and must be properly supported.

The C&V sector has been significantly impacted by the rising costs of energy and food, which have only added to the financial challenges many organisations were already facing. Coming out of the Covid-19 pandemic, many C&V groups saw a reduction in their funding due to their inability to fundraise during lockdowns. These challenges have persisted, particularly as many organisations have struggled to recover fully from the financial crash, with funding cuts that have yet to be restored.

The Government relies heavily on the C&V sector to deliver essential services at the community level, including in health and social care**,** education**,** childcare, and transport. For years, many of these services have been operating on minimal budgets, and staff shortages, particularly in HSE section 39 organisations, are now a significant concern. Low salaries in these sectors make it increasingly difficult to recruit and retain staff, putting the delivery and sustainability of services at risk.

The high cost of insurance remains a persistent challenge for many C&V organisations. For smaller, entirely voluntary groups, insurance premiums are a major barrier to service delivery and community development. This issue hinders the ability of many groups to function effectively and limits the growth of new community initiatives.

The current government has published the *Values and Principles for Collaboration and Partnership Working with the Community and Voluntary Sector*. This document, developed in

partnership between the C&V sector and the government, provides guidelines for fostering better interactions between the two. It emphasises the importance of public and C&V sectors working together to achieve the best outcomes for all communities. The document also highlights the role of the C&V sector in the design of policies and programs aimed at improving the lives of communities.

Employment Schemes and Programmes

The C&V sector relies heavily on Employment Schemes and Programmes—such as the Rural Social Scheme (RSS), Community Employment (CE), and Tús—to help deliver vital community services. These schemes are essential for developing rural community infrastructure and providing unemployed people with the necessary skills to seek employment or start their own businesses. In rural areas, services like Rural Transport, Meals on Wheels, tourism, and other essential community services rely on these schemes to operate effectively.

The Rural Social Scheme (RSS) is particularly valuable to farmers and fishermen (and their spouses) who are eligible for Farm Assist. The scheme allows participants to use their skills in their communities during periods when farm or fishery work is reduced. This scheme is a vital support, both for participants and the communities they serve.

The CE and Tús schemes are equally important for unemployed people in rural areas, helping them to re-enter the workforce. Many of the staff working in services like Meals on Wheels, community childcare, and community transport are on CE and Tús schemes, and for many, these programmes are their only source of income. However, in rural areas, once a participant completes a scheme, they often return to Jobseeker's Allowance, as there are few other employment opportunities locally. This leads to high staff turnover, which can disrupt services and deprive participants of the opportunity to build long-term careers with the skills they have gained.

The next Government must:

- **Increase in funding** to the **C&V sector** to offset rising operational costs, including fuel and food. An allowance should also be introduced to help volunteers cover the cost of using their own vehicles, which is essential for services like community car schemes and Meals on Wheels.
- **Core multi-annual funding** for C&V organisations delivering essential services, including Meals on Wheels, health and social care services, community education, transport, childcare and domestic violence supports. This will ensure the sustainability of services and allow for better long-term planning.
- **Implement the Values and Principles** document to ensure the co-design, co-creation and co-implementation of policies and programmes in partnership with the C&V sector.
- Investment in community services to **create paid employment opportunities** in rural areas. This will not only provide job opportunities for CE and Tús participants but also ensure the long-term viability of services that are vital to the community.

- **Roll-out of the RSS 'Rural Dwellers' pilot**, a recommendation in the Report on the Review of Rural Social Scheme[7] which will allow those in rural areas access the scheme
- **Review of insurance costs** for the C&V sector, so that funds are spent on service delivery rather than excessive insurance premiums. This review should also consider support for wholly voluntary groups that receive no government funding but face high insurance costs when running events or services.

[7] Government of Ireland (2024) 'Report on the Review of the Rural Social Scheme'. Dublin: Department of Social Protection https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/f69b1-report-on-the-review-of-the-rural-social-scheme-rss/?

3. Substantial Investment in Infrastructure and Services in Rural Communities

Access to infrastructure such as roads, transport, broadband, quality water and waste water treatment, affordable housing, childcare, 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.

Transport

A car is an essential commodity in order to live in rural Ireland at present, with most households needing two cars. In order for people to remain in rural Ireland and to reduce our carbon footprint, a reliable public or community transport system is required. The lack of such a transport system continues to be one of the main challenges and obstacles for people living in rural areas in accessing employment, health services, hospital appointments, education and training and day to day business.

We welcome increased services on Local Links across the country and the number of people using the service also increasing; 3.2 million passengers travelled on a Local Link service in 2023, with 4.7 million passenger journeys recorded on Connecting Ireland rural bus routes. This is a 70% increase from 2022[8]. However, more investment is needed as there still remains a number of locations 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 or only stays for one or two hours in the nearest town.

Bus stops on main routes should be located in rural areas, not just in villages or towns. Rural residents need more bus stops along key routes, or alternatively, a community bus service to connect them to these main routes.

For many years, IRL has recommended incorporating an Uber-style car service or a public car scheme into the overall public transport policy for rural areas. This service would allow people to call for a lift, similar to the community car schemes provided by some Local Link companies, to attend appointments or social outings. Additionally, the rural hackney program should be revisited to better serve rural residents, especially older people and those with disabilities who may not be able to drive. Provision should be made to support such schemes under the existing Free Travel Scheme to address the current inequality and imbalance between urban and rural Ireland.

The next Government must:

- **Make rural transport a priority** and make a **real investment** in making a suite of transport measures available accessible to all.

[8] National Transport Authority (2023) "Connecting Ireland Insights" Issue 5 Q4 2023. National Transport Authority, Dublin https://www.nationaltransport.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Connecting-Ireland-Bulletin-Q4-2023-Final.pdf

- **Explore the implementation of an Uber-style car service for rural areas** to improve access for marginalised groups to essential services while also addressing the 'last mile' issue. This scheme should be integrated into the existing Free Travel Scheme.

Broadband

The continuation of the National Broadband Plan must continue to be a central part of the next Government. While more rural homes and businesses now have access to fibre broadband, there are still areas that are not connected and connection remains slow. The full rollout of the NBP is due to be completed in the first three years of this Government. Making sure that this is done is vital for the sustainability of rural communities and businesses.

The next Government must:

- Ensure the **full roll out of the NBP** so every home and business will have access to high-speed, future proofed broadband.

Healthcare

With an ageing population, especially in rural areas, and the current Government's commitment to caring for people within their communities, there will be greater demand on the health and social care sector in the future. Given the sector is already under significant pressure, there must be a shift in focus towards primary and community care to ensure that people can age with dignity in their communities. The Government's commitment to delivering a fair and affordable universal healthcare system must remain a top priority, with adequate funding for *Sláintecare* being essential for its success. Consultations for a successor or extension of the *Sláintecare* framework should begin early in the next Government's term.

While many developments within *Sláintecare* are still in progress, it is important to continue monitoring the impact of changes such as the Regional Health Areas and population-based planning. These initiatives will need to be closely observed for their effectiveness.

Staff shortages, both in hospitals and in community and primary care settings, remain a significant challenge. Access to GPs is becoming increasingly difficult as the population grows, and in rural areas, replacing retiring GPs is a struggle. This forces people to travel longer distances to access care, and long waiting times for GP appointments are exacerbating the issue. As a result, many are turning to A&E for care that could be provided in the community.

Irish Rural Link recognises the critical role that community and voluntary health and social care services play in delivering healthcare in local communities. These organisations continue to be at the forefront of caring for older and vulnerable individuals. The demand for services like **Meals on Wheels** has risen significantly. With an ageing population and the ongoing shift toward community-based healthcare, the role of Meals on Wheels is more vital than ever.

These services must be better integrated into the broader healthcare system to provide comprehensive care.

The contribution of Meals on Wheels organisations in helping individuals remain in their own homes for as long as possible cannot be overstated. With adequate resources, these organisations can facilitate earlier hospital discharges and, in many cases, prevent hospital admissions altogether, ultimately saving the state significant amounts each year. However, insufficient funding remains a major barrier to the sustainability and expansion of these essential services.

Section 3.1 outlines the priorities for the next Government by the National Meals on Wheels Network in relation to the Meals on Wheels service.

The new Government must:

- Prioritise the **full implementation of *Slaintecare*** and ensure people can access healthcare and age with dignity at home in their own community.
- **Meals on Wheels must be properly funded through multi-annual funding.** Additionally, there is a need for the service to be included in hospital discharge plans, ensuring that people can access it immediately upon leaving the hospital. This will facilitate earlier discharge and help reduce the risk of readmission.

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 also an issue.
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.

The next Government must:

- Provide **core funding to community education providers** to enable them to budget effectively for program delivery, ensuring that those who are furthest from the education system can be reached.
- **Upskilling, re-training and lifelong learning** must be a key focus of the next Government. With new sectors emerging the labour force must be equipped with the necessary skills to meet the skills demanded.

Digital Skills

Over a quarter of the adult population in Ireland still lack basic digital skills, and even among those in employment, digital skills remain limited. As more services, including employment services, move online, improving people's computer skills has become a necessity.

Irish Rural Link delivered the ***'Getting Citizens Online'*** and ***'IT Skills for Farmers'*** Programme funded through the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment. These programs helped individuals with no prior computer experience get online. We witnessed first-hand the importance of these classes for participants. Supports must be put in place to ensure that the 25% of the population without digital skills can acquire them.

The next Government must:

- **Commit to providing all citizens with the digital skills** they need, enabling full participation and engagement in society.
- Explore the **reintroduction of the 'Getting Citizens Online' program**, or a similar initiative, to help older adults and those without digital skills acquire and improve their skills.

Policing and Security

Increasing the presence of Gardaí in rural areas is essential, particularly in light of the recent spate of burglaries. A greater Garda presence on the ground, with officers being more visible in communities, can help reduce fear and boost public confidence. It is crucial that more community policing initiatives are implemented to ensure a consistent and reassuring presence of Gardaí, allowing people to feel confident in reporting crimes and incidents.

Additionally, Neighbourhood Watch and Community Text Alert schemes have proven to be effective when implemented. Where these schemes are already in place, they have shown positive results in enhancing community safety. Encouraging more communities to adopt these initiatives is vital, and it is equally important to provide the necessary support to committees and local groups to help expand these schemes and engage more participants in their delivery.

With advancements in technology, there is greater potential to use these tools for detecting speeding on rural roads, where speed vans may not always be feasible.

The next Government must:

- **Commit to increasing the numbers in community policing** so communities can begin having more trust in the policing system.
- Work with communities and **support** them with **Neighbourhood Watch and Community Text Alert Schemes.**

3.1 National Meals on Wheels Network's Priorities for the next Government

The National Meals on Wheels Network was established in 2015 under the umbrella of Irish Rural Link and work closely with Meals on Wheels providers across the country. These services are deeply impacted by rising fuel and food costs, which are essential for providing nutritious meals to older people. However, funding remains on an annual basis and needs multi-annual funding to allow these organisations to plan more effectively.

The network is calling for the next Government to commit to the following asks for the sector:

Challenges	Requirements

Funding	• The introduction of multi-annual core Meals on Wheels funding to allow providers to budget robustly for their service.
	• Increased multi-annual funding to include application for
	  ○ Staffing Costs.
	  ○ Meal delivery cost contributions (to cover transport costs).
	  ○ Meal on wheels' specific insurance costs.
	  ○ An increase in the Meals on Wheels Budget to **€10 million ring-fenced.**
	• Consistency in meals on wheels funding allocation across all RHA's.

Procurement	• Access to the HSE Procurement process for all Section 39 funded providers in line with the government's Green Public Procurement Strategy and Action Plan 2024 – 2027.
Cost of Living Crisis and Inflation	• A continuation of the Inflationary Fund into 2025 to Section 39 funded providers in line with current and future rates of inflation. • An allowance for inflation to be included in all Section 39 funding arrangements.
Volunteers and Staffing	• Increase employment scheme protections and payments to align with minimum wage to attract and retain participants. • Boost funding to retain staff and ensure the service's sustainability. • Disburse payments to providers in accordance with the WRC agreement. • Funding for training or working with ETBs to provide training for staff and volunteers. • A funding contribution for volunteers to recognise their input into the delivery of the meals on wheels' service.
Environmental and Green Choices	• Support providers to apply for funding towards the purchase of electric delivery vehicles. • Section 39 Funding and other funding streams to address the costs of environmentally friendly packaging. • The HSE will support the government's Green Public Procurement Strategy and Action Plan 2024 – 2027 by engaging in discussion on pilot packaging programmes.

Gaps in the Service	• All HSE Section 39 funded providers to become members of this Network. • Increase Network involvement at local Older Persons Services level to address the gaps in the service. • Include the meals on wheels' service on the hospital discharge sheet nationwide.

The National Meals on Wheels Network's strategy aims to ensure sustainable funding, collaboration and innovation to meet growing needs. Increased funding is required for the Network to develop National Meals on Wheels Standards, design specific software, and implement both to ensure national accessibility.

4. End Poverty and Ensure an Adequate Living Standard for All

Working to end poverty must be a key priority of the next Government. While an adequate standard of living is not just about an adequate income but includes access to affordable public services, rural households are more at risk of experiencing lower living standards as a result. However, an adequate income is still a key component in lifting people out of poverty and preventing people being pushed into it.

The **Roadmap to Social Inclusion 2020-2025** commits to reducing the level of consistent poverty to 2% and this has been reiterated in the Midterm review. A new Poverty/Social Inclusion strategy will be developed in the first year of the new Government.

Also, the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will end in 2030. The first SDG is 'No Poverty'. Marginalised and disadvantaged people and communities must be prioritised and barriers such as childcare, transport, removed to allow people, especially in rural areas to access employment, education and training.

Ireland continues to face major challenges as a result of the cost of living crisis. However, prior to the cost of living crisis, there were many households living in poverty, having inadequate income and excluded from fully participating in society and the economy. The crisis exacerbated this for these households and pushed more households into poverty. The ESRI report *Energy Poverty and Deprivation in Ireland* highlighted that the level of inflation being experienced at the beginning of the crisis was *"higher for lower-income, older and rural households as a result of their patterns of expenditure".* Through its membership, IRL are very aware of the hardship being experienced by rural households. With very little public transport available to people in rural areas, the increase in the cost of living has had a real impact on people on lower income who are dependent on their car to get to work, bring children to school and activities, attending appointments, etc. and having to make choices on what journeys they take.

Income inadequacy among rural households can be further impacted by the lack of affordable public services; public transport, childcare, etc. which adds to their weekly expenditure. The annual MESL highlights this.

The CSO SILC[9] figures for 2023 showed that 3.6% of the population was living in consistent poverty, while this was a decrease from 2022, if social welfare one-off payments were not in place, this rate would be 4.4%. Over 10% of the population were 'at-risk of poverty' in 2023. Again this would be much higher at 13.6% if one-off payments were not in place. Those unable to work due to illness and those long-term unemployed are households most 'at-risk of poverty' at 27.3% and 25% respectively[10].

[9] Survey on Income and Living Conditions
[10] CSO (2024) SILC Report 2023 https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2023/poverty/

Households living in the Northern and Western region of the country were more 'at-risk of poverty' at 14.3% than households in the Eastern and Midland region at 9.5%. This was also the case for the number of households living in consistent poverty at 4.2% in the Northern and Western Region and 3.1% in the Eastern and Midland Region[11].

Over 6% of households had great difficulty in making ends meet in 2023, compared to 5.5% in 2022. 92% of households experiencing enforced deprivation had at least some difficulty in making ends meet, with 28.6% having great difficulty. Even for households not experiencing enforced deprivation, 38.6% had at least some difficulty in making ends meet[12].

Rural households have lower disposable incomes and have deeper income inadequacies than their urban peer households. Disposable incomes in many rural counties are below the state average. Donegal had the lowest level of disposable income per person in 2021 at €19,253. This compares to Dublin's disposable income per person stood at €27,958, 15% higher than the state average, having risen a further 3.8% from 2020. The border and midland regions are consistently below the state average for disposable income. Income for the Midlands region was 10.9% below the state average per person. This is followed by the border region[13i].

Rural Poverty

The Vincentian MESL Research Centre annual Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) looks at the change in the cost of the minimum basket of goods and services needed to enable people to live with dignity. Such goods and services include; food, clothing, heating, healthcare, transport, education, etc. IRL are aware that having a minimum standard of living in rural areas is more than just income, it is also about access to services, such as transport, childcare, healthcare.

The MESL 2024 shows a lower number of households in *deep* income inadequacy but higher number of households in income inadequacy. In order to purchase the same goods in March 2024 as in 2020, the core social welfare rate would have needed to be €237. Adjusting for forecast inflation gives a requirement of weekly core social welfare rates of €247 by the end of 2025[14]. This does not account for what an adult requires to ensure an adequate income nor does it account for the extra costs of disability or caring. The extra cost of running a car for rural households and energy costs have meant that rural households have always had a deeper income inadequacy when compared to their urban peers. The table below shows the cost comparisons from 2020 and 2024 for an older person living alone in a rural area.

[11] Ibid
[12] CSO(2024) SILC Report Enforced Deprivation 2023 https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silced/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilcenforceddeprivation2023/deprivationitems/
[13] CSO (2024) "County Incomes and Regional GDP 2021" https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cirgdp/countyincomesandregionalgdp2021/disposableincomebycounty/
[14] Vincentian MESL Research Centre, 2024. *MESL 2024: Annual Update*. https://www.budgeting.ie/publications/mesl-2024/

	2020	2024	% change
Home heating oil (per week)	14.10	25.35	↑80%
Telephone and broadband	40.60	47.00	↑17%
Sunday newspaper	3.54	4.00	↑13%
Petrol for the car (per week)	24.70	30.00	↑22%
Tea bags, milk and sugar	6.50	8.04	↑24%
Warm winter coat	49.00	45.00	↓8%
Exercise class in local hall	5.20	8.00	↑54%

Source: Vincentian MESL Research Centre

The tables below show the income inadequacies for household types in receipt of a social welfare payment and 2 adults employed full-time in minimum wage jobs and living in social housing based on 2024 MESL figures[15]. It highlights the deeper income inadequacies for rural households compared to their urban peers.

Income Inadequacies by Household Type in Receipt of SW Payment

Household Type	Rural	Urban
2 Parents with 1 infant	-€131.14	-€34.15
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 pre-school,1 primary)	-€114.44	-€14.07
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 primary, 1 secondary)	-€195.96	-€96.04
2 Parents with 3 Children (1 infant, 1 pre-school, 1primary)	-€139.38	-€38.11
2 Parents with 4 Children (2 primary, 2 Secondary)	-€297.50	-€182.10
One Parent with 1 child (Primary school)	-€135.87	-€28.29
One Parent with 2 Children (1 pre-school, 1 primary)	-€119.83	-€9.16
One Parent with 2 Children (1 primary, 1 secondary (Jobseeker transition)	-€200.83	-€90.82
Pensioner Living Alone (non-contributory)	-€74.41	-€4.67
Pensioner Living Alone (Contributory)	-€63.48	+€5.36

[15] Vincentian MESL Research Centre (2024) MESL 2024 https://www.budgeting.ie/download/pdf/mesl_2024_-_appendix_tables.pdf.

The 2024 MESL showed income inadequacies among some household types who are working on minimum wage with these inadequacies deeper for households in rural areas.

Income Inadequacies by Household Type with 2 Parents in Full Time Employment earning minimum wage (living in social housing)

Household Type	Rural	Urban
2 Parents with 1 infant	+€83.82	+€223.28
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 pre-school,1 primary)	-€4.88	+€126.47
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 primary, 1 secondary)	-€50.91	+€122.01
2 Parents with 3 Children (1 infant, 1 pre-school, 1primary)	-€98.99	-€4.62
2 Parents with 4 Children (2 primary, 2 Secondary)	-€271.44	-€96.85

Source: Vincentian MESL Research Centre MESL 2024

The next Government must:

- **Eradicate Poverty** and set an ambitious target of 0% poverty in the next anti-poverty and social inclusion policy.
- **Work towards improving income adequacy for low-income households** to address persistent poverty and put measures in place that will give such people an affordable and socially acceptable standard of living.
- **Benchmark social welfare** rates against the MESL.

Energy Poverty

Rural households are at greater risk of fuel poverty due to the nature of the rural housing stock, the types of fuels available, limited opportunities to switch to cheaper fuels such as gas or take advantage of bundle deals offered by gas and electricity suppliers. The SILC report 2023 showed 10.8% of households went without heat at some stage during 2023, with 7.2% of households unable to keep their home adequately warm. Twenty-seven percent of lone parent households went without heat during the year, for unemployed households this figure was 25.7%. These households had the highest rate of unable to keep their homes adequately warm at 21.1% and 18.5% respectively[16].

[16] CSO(2024) SILC Report Enforced Deprivation 2023 https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silced/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilcenforceddeprivation2023/deprivationitems/

To address fuel poverty and facilitate a just transition from fossil fuel dependence to low-carbon alternatives, more decisive action is needed to expand support for retrofitting homes, prioritizing those who are furthest behind.

IRL welcomes the SEAI grants aimed at making energy improvements to people's homes and acknowledges the extension of the fuel allowance to those over 70, which makes these households eligible for the 100% Warmer Homes grant. However, we believe that the eligibility criteria for the grant remain too narrow, excluding many low-income households and recipients of certain social welfare payments.

Additionally, many individuals who receive the eligible payments do not own the homes they live in, and thus automatically do not qualify for the grant. These individuals are dependent on the property owner—whether a local authority, an Approved Housing Body (AHB), or a private landlord—to make necessary changes. For many households, especially those in rural areas or those living on low incomes or state pensions, carrying out retrofitting work using other available grants remains financially out of reach.

While we welcome the introduction of low-interest loans for retrofitting homes, we believe more can be done to ensure that low-income households can access these loans. Specifically, we recommend implementing a sliding interest rate based on income and an ability-to-pay model. We also advocate for Credit Unions to become key providers of these loans, as they are well-positioned to support their local communities.

The next Government must:

- **Address energy poverty** in its approach to ending overall poverty**.**
- **Ring-fence carbon tax** to support households at risk of being pushed further into fuel and energy poverty, and **direct retrofitting grants specifically to low-income households** not eligible for warmer home grants.
- **Develop direct supports for low-income households in rural areas** by creating a comprehensive suite of financial tools. This could include a **sliding scale of grants and low-cost, guaranteed loans designed based on the household's ability to pay**.

5. A Just Transition for Rural Communities and Agriculture

The energy crisis highlighted the greater need to move away from fossil fuels as energy sources to heat our homes and power our electricity. Census 2022 results on housing showed that over 21,000 households had no central heating in their homes. Almost 68,000 households (67,891) still use peat including turf as their main source of heating. Although the number has been steadily decreasing in recent years, down from over 90,000 in 2016. The use of peat including turf as a source of heating is higher among households where the head of the household is aged over 65 years of age at 28,351. This figure reduces as the age of the head of the household reduces. Over 6,941 households over the age of 65 has no central heating[ii]. As outlined in the previous section, the number of people unable to adequately heat their home or had to go without heat at some stage over the last 12 months has increased significantly.

Retrofitting Homes

See asks in Section 4 on Energy poverty.

Community Outreach Programme

In 2022, IRL proposed a Community Energy Outreach Programme to the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications. This programme aims to ensure that vulnerable groups and households receive the necessary support, including clear, concise, and accurate information on retrofitting, alternative fuel sources, and combating fuel and energy poverty.

The programme would also align with the Government's National Retrofit Plan. We believe that now is the time to begin lifting people out of fuel and energy poverty and ensure that no more households are at risk of energy poverty in the future.
More details on IRL recommendations for retrofitting of rural houses are available in our submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection, Rural and Community Development and the Islands here.

The implementation of the Just Transition fund and other measures to alleviate the impact of the transition to a greener society are welcome but are not enough and are not happening quick enough for many people and communities most impacted by this.

Community-Centred Just Transition and Renewable Energy Projects

Communities must be at the heart of a just transition, and their engagement from the outset of any renewable energy projects is crucial. Community-owned energy projects empower local communities to experience the benefits of greener energy sources while giving them the opportunity to choose the renewable energy solutions that best meet their needs. This approach not only fosters trust between communities and energy companies but also creates new employment opportunities within the community.

Solar Panels

Public buildings, schools, community centres, and GAA clubs all have ample roof space for solar panels. Similarly, farm buildings provide farmers with an opportunity to generate their own energy or contribute to the grid. To make this feasible, greater support is needed to install solar panels on private homes, as well as public and community buildings, along with easier access to the microgeneration scheme. Additionally, more awareness and knowledge about these initiatives are crucial.

The next Government must:

- **Deploy Local Community Energy Advisors** throughout every local authority as well as community organised support programmes, to engage and inform hard to reach energy users who would most benefit from energy efficiency upgrades.
- Further explore the proposed **Community Energy Outreach Programme** by IRL to ensure that vulnerable groups and households receive necessary assistance through the distribution of clear, concise, and accurate information and advice regarding retrofitting, alternative fuel sources, and fuel poverty.
- Ensure that **employees impacted by the green transition are reskilled** for employment opportunities in other sectors once their current roles are impacted.
    - **Engage communities earlier in the process of renewable energy projects**, allowing them to participate in decision making to identify the most suitable renewable energy source for their specific needs.
    - **Increase financial support** for the installation of solar panels on private homes, farm buildings, and public and community buildings, alongside **raising awareness of the Microgeneration Scheme.**

Agriculture

Agriculture still remains one of the biggest sectors in rural areas. Although the numbers employed in agriculture is falling, farming was one of the largest industry groups where males are employed together with IT sector in Census 2022, with 59,000 working in the sector[17].

Supporting the Transition in Agriculture for Climate Action and Environmental Protection

The agricultural sector is undergoing significant change, and to ensure its growth and diversification in line with Climate Action and Environmental goals, it is essential to provide the right supports. These changes should aim to minimise the impact on people's livelihoods as much as possible.

The bio economy and circular economy are emerging sectors in which the farming community will play a key role. Farmers also have a crucial responsibility in protecting local

[17] https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpp7/censusofpopulation2022profile7-employmentoccupationsandcommuting/atwork/

biodiversity. With the right incentives and supports, smaller farmers and underutilised land could contribute to these sectors. It is vital that non-productive areas of farms are valued and put to good use. IRL believes that smallholders are well-positioned to benefit from this transition. Many smallholders currently farm on poor-quality land with little or no return, and this shift could provide an opportunity to optimise land use while generating additional income.

This approach is also applicable to peatlands and marginal land near peatlands and wetlands. Ireland has abundant peatland areas that can store carbon emissions, and landowners should be compensated with carbon credits that could offset costs incurred from regulatory changes driven by climate action. However, farmers and landowners must be involved from the beginning in the planning process for any changes within the agricultural sector. IRL knows that farmers respond positively to necessary environmental changes when they are fully engaged throughout the process.

Farm Income

The 2023 Teagasc National Farm Survey reported significant decreases in the average family farm income and viability of family farms. The average farm income for 2023 was just €19,925, this was a 57% decrease on 2022 figure. The West had the lowest level of farm income at €14,905 compared to an average farm income of €80,524 in the South-East[18].

Thirty-one percent of farms in 2023 were classed as been economically vulnerable; meaning they have no alternative or off-farm income. 41% of farms are being sustained by an off-farm income. The North and West regions had the highest percentage of vulnerable farms at 36%, followed by the East and Midlands at 35% with 26% of farms deemed vulnerable in the south. Just 13% of farms in North and West regions were economical viable compared to 38% in the south of the country[19].

Farm Assist remains an important payment for many farming households across the country, helping in some part to reduce poverty and also to participate in the Rural Social Scheme. Similar to core social welfare rates, the rate remains below The current rate of €232 must be increased in line with other core social welfare payments to restore real purchasing power of their income. The means testing process is still off-putting for many farmers to apply for the payment even though they may be eligible. This means they lose out in being eligible to participate on RSS.

Agri-environment Schemes

IRL are involved in the delivery of projects and programmes that support and engage farmers in schemes that protect the environment and local biodiversity. Below are two EIP projects

[18] Dillon, E. et al (2023) *'Teagasc National Farm Survey 2023* *https://www.teagasc.ie/publications/2024/teagasc-national-farm-survey-2023.php*
[19] Ibid

IRL are lead and partner on, where farmers have made changes and work alongside ecologists to protect the environment and local biodiversity.

Breeding Waders

IRL are currently involved in the delivery of two EIP projects. Lead partner in the Breeding Waders EIP, the aim is to secure existing Breeding Wader[20] populations and support population recovery through landscape management and policy development. The project will engage farmers in the protection of these bird species that are near extinctions. This project was launched on 22nd May and work has commenced on protecting the nests of these birds for the remainder of this breeding season. Work will then commence with farmers on work needed to protect the nests on their land for future breeding season.

FarmPEAT

FarmPEAT is an EIP (European Innovation Partnership) project working with farmers in the Midlands to raise the water table and reduce carbon emissions from drained agricultural peat soils. Farmers receive results-based payments and can also volunteer to complete supporting actions to improve their results-based payments in future years. These actions are part or fully funded by FarmPEAT. For example, drain blocking is a fully funded action where farmers can install dams to raise the water level in the drain, slow the flow of water, and reduce carbon emissions while allowing the field to continue being farmed.

Engaging with and listening to farmers on the ground gives the project an insight into their needs and what they would like to see in terms of agri-environmental schemes. What lessons can be learnt from these projects and where improvements can be made. During a workshop with our project farmers and steering group, FarmPEAT found that future agri-environmental schemes can boost the uptake of drain-blocking actions with:

- payment stability/continuity/certainty
- tailored, site-specific schemes
- options that don't negatively impact net income
- a mixture of annual flat rate, results-based, and supporting action payments
- flexible deadlines to complete actions that take into account the impact of climate change on seasonality
- easily accessible hydrological expertise to avoid unwanted impacts on neighbouring land.
- coherence between different schemes

[20] Breeding Wader species includes; Curlew, Lapwing, Redshank, Snipe, Oystercatcher, Dunlin, Golden Plover, Ringed Plover, Common Sandpiper, Red-Necked Phalarope

The next Government must:

- Agri-environmental schemes must be designed to provide real incentives for farmers to participate. **Listening to farmers on the ground and collaborating with them** will be crucial in helping them implement the necessary changes.
- **Target smallholders and engage with them to participate in agri-environmental schemes**. While some of their land may be less productive in agricultural terms, it can be highly beneficial for environmental and biodiversity protection.
- **Engage early with farmers** regarding the changes required in the sector to meet climate targets, and work alongside them throughout the process.
- Continue providing **grants and support for the installation of solar panels, rainwater harvesting systems** on farm building roofs, and the ability to sell excess energy back to the national grid. Implement an engagement program to encourage more farmers to install these systems.
- **Increase the Farm Assist payment and streamline the means-testing process** to make it easier for eligible farmers to access support.
- **Provide carbon credits for the restoration** of peatlands and wetlands that are unsuitable for efficient farming.

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.'