Irish Rural Link
Nasc Tuaithe na hÉireann

Pre-Budget Submission

2026

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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.

This is the first Budget of the new Government. It comes at a time of global uncertainty, with the potential for increased U.S. tariffs and growing political unrest. Ireland will not be immune to these challenges. Over the lifetime of this Government, there may be a decline in corporate tax revenues, possible reductions in public spending, and continued rises in the cost of essential goods and services—particularly food and fuel.

Many households across the country are still feeling the effects of the cost of living crisis, especially as the prices of everyday essentials continue to rise. Low-income households, in particular, were already struggling with bills even before the crisis began. Through its membership, IRL is acutely aware of the hardship being experienced by rural households. With limited access to public transport, people in rural areas often depend on private cars to get to work, bring children to school and activities, attend medical appointments, and manage daily life. Many are now forced to make difficult decisions about which journeys they can afford.

The persistently high cost of food and fuel is also affecting the delivery of vital community services, such as Meals on Wheels. Providers are struggling to manage rising costs without corresponding increases in funding. As a result, many have been forced to raise the price of meals to cover these expenses.

We recognise the urgent need to transition away from fossil fuels toward cleaner, greener alternatives. However, it is those on low or fixed incomes who are most impacted by this transition. IRL members report that the supports available often feel out of reach—due to lack of knowledge, limited access, or simply not having the upfront financial resources to bridge the gap between the cost of change and the grants available.

This is not only a new Government but also the beginning of a new medium-term budgetary framework. It presents a key opportunity to begin making sustained investments in how we support vulnerable and marginalised people—ensuring they can live with dignity and participate fully in society. While one-off measures in previous budgets were welcome and did help cushion some households from deeper poverty, they were temporary, short-term responses. What is now urgently needed is long-term investment aimed at ending consistent poverty and improving and expanding public services.

Budget 2026 must prioritise these long-term solutions. With a new Roadmap for Social Inclusion due by the end of 2025, the Budget must reflect its commitments—lifting people

out of poverty by ensuring adequate income and investing in inclusive infrastructure and public services.

In a rapidly changing world, where social values and the concept of an inclusive society are under threat, this Government, through Budget 2026, must act decisively to protect those values. It must invest in housing, infrastructure, and services, and provide real support to low-income and vulnerable households. Now is the time to build a more inclusive, resilient, and fair society.

Summary of Asks in Budget 2026

Issue	Asks
Regional & Rural Development	• **Rural Proofing and Regional Equity:** Budget 2026 must be rural-proofed and include a firm commitment to regional equity. Urban bias undermines not only the social and environmental pillars of sustainability but also limits the ability of regional economies to reach their full potential and adapt to emerging challenges. • **Investment in Rural Public Services:** Substantial investment in public services in rural areas is essential to help reduce the cost of living for low-income households. The current consultation on *Accelerating Infrastructure* should include the establishment of a dedicated body to examine and improve service delivery models in rural communities—an initiative that Irish Rural Link has long advocated for. • **Increased Funding for Rural Development:** Budget 2026 must include increases in both current and capital expenditure for rural development to ensure that the next phase of *Our Rural Future* is adequately resourced and can be effectively implemented. • **Continued Rollout of the National Broadband Plan:** Continued delivery of the National Broadband Plan is vital. Government must also improve communication with the public regarding progress updates and any anticipated delays to ensure transparency and accountability. • **Enhanced Rural Transport Provision:** Increased funding for the Rural Transport Programme (RTP) and improved delivery of public transport in rural areas is urgently needed. Greater transparency is also required in how RTP and Public Service Obligation (PSO) budgets are allocated, including a public breakdown of expenditures. • **Demand-Led Rural Transport Services:** A comprehensive, demand-led rural transport system should be established, making use of electric vehicles to support sustainability goals while improving mobility for rural residents and tackling the 'first-mile, last mile' challenges. • **Community Engagement on Immigration:** Early engagement with local communities regarding immigration is essential to prevent misinformation and allow for open discussion of concerns. This proactive approach will help both existing communities and newcomers identify and secure the services needed to support growing populations. • **Reform of Accommodation Centres:** The move away from privately owned and operated accommodation centres must continue. Staff working in these centres must be adequately qualified to provide appropriate support to individuals arriving from conflict zones.

	• **Implementation of Sláintecare:** Budget 2026 must include adequate funding for the full implementation of *Sláintecare*. The Government must prioritise the delivery of its key actions to move Ireland closer to a fair and equitable healthcare system. • **Multi-Annual Funding for Community Education:** Community education providers need multi-annual funding to plan and deliver quality education programmes effectively. This funding should come through a dedicated, independent budget line, enabling providers to engage directly with SOLAS, rather than relying on distribution via Education and Training Boards (ETBs). • **Digital Inclusion for Older People and Rural Residents:** The re-establishment of the ***Getting Citizens Online*** computer training programme is needed to support older people and other vulnerable groups in rural areas to develop digital skills. As more services continue to go online, those without digital access or literacy are at serious risk of being excluded from essential services.
Address Poverty and Income Inadequacy	• In line with the MESL results for 2025, we call for an increase in core social welfare payments of a ***minimum* of €16 per week**. This is to help progress restoring the real value of the core social protection rate and go towards improving income adequacy. • Begin to **invest in Social Protection** and put measures in place to address consistent poverty, deprivation and 'at-risk' of poverty rates. **Benchmark rates against MESL** rather than CPI for Budgetary benchmarking. • A **50% increase in the fuel allowance** to help with the cost of fuel for low-income households who are unable to change to greener alternatives. Further widening of the eligibility for fuel allowance to other low-income households. • **Review the fuel allowance income thresholds** for over 70's so no person be made worse off if they are no longer eligible for fuel allowance. • With uncertainties in the global market, we call for **no further increase in excise duty** in Budget 2026. • An allowance be given to those who hold a travel card but are unable to use it or get full use of it so it can go some way towards the cost of private transport. • CE and Tus schemes must ensure the best use is made of participant's skills, time and effort while on these schemes and that meaningful employment is available when the scheme ends, which affords them an affordable living is gained. Increase in top-up for participants on schemes to ensure people are not made worse-off if take up a place on a scheme.
Supports for Just Transition and Climate Change	• **Ring-fence carbon tax revenue** to support households at risk of falling deeper into fuel and energy poverty, and expand retrofitting grants to low income households not currently eligible for Warmer Home Schemes.

	• **Develop targeted financial supports** for low-income rural households, including a comprehensive suite of sliding-scale grants and low-cost, government-backed loans based on ability to pay. • **Deploy Local Community Energy Advisors** in every local authority and support community-led outreach programmes to engage and inform hard-to-reach households most in need of energy efficiency upgrades. • **Advance the proposed Community Energy Outreach Programme** by IRL to ensure vulnerable households receive clear, accessible advice on retrofitting, alternative fuel sources, and addressing fuel poverty. • **Support workforce transition** by ensuring workers affected by the shift to a green economy are reskilled for employment in emerging sectors. • **Ensure early and meaningful community engagement** in renewable energy projects, allowing communities to influence decisions on the most suitable energy sources for their local needs. • **Reinstate the €5,000 (or higher) grant for electric vehicles** and retain the home charger grant at its current value for at least five more years. • **Introduce a 50% grant** to assist households in upgrading electrical systems to enable home EV charging.
Supports for Community & Voluntary Sector	• **Increase in funding to the Community &Voluntary sector** to help cover rising operational costs and make the sector more sustainable. Introduce allowances for volunteers using personal vehicles that area essential for services like community car schemes, meals on wheels etc. • **Allocate €10 million to support Meals on Wheels** services nationally**.** • **Introduce Core, Multi-annual funding for C&V organisations** delivering essential services in the community, such as Meals on Wheels and other health and social care services, community education, transport and childcare to safeguard the continuity and sustainability of these services. • **Invest in community services** to create paid employment in the local area. This not only supports CE and Tus participants to gain employment using the skills they have developed but also ensures the future sustainability of these valuable services. • **Conduct a review of insurance for the Community & Voluntary sector** to ensure more funding goes to the delivery of the service and not on high insurance costs. Provide targeted support for fully voluntary groups with no government funding but who face high insurance costs when organising community events.
Agriculture	• **Design agri-environmental schemes** to be practical and financially worthwhile for farmers. Direct engagement and collaboration with farmers on the ground is essential to drive meaningful change.

	• **Actively target and support smallholders** to participate in these schemes. While their land may be less productive agriculturally, it often holds high value for biodiversity and environmental conservation. • **Introduce support schemes** for farmers and rural communities to develop on-farm anaerobic digestion and bio-methane production. Funding for community-led projects must be accessible and free from excessive bureaucracy. • **Engage early and consistently** with farmers on the changes needed to meet climate targets, ensuring they are partners in every stage of the transition. • **Continue and expand grants** for solar panels, rainwater harvesting systems on farm buildings, and enable farmers to sell excess energy back to the grid. Launch engagement programmes to increase uptake. • **Increase the Farm Assist payment** and simplify the means-testing process to improve access for those most in need. • **Provide carbon credits** for the restoration of peatlands and wetlands that are unsuitable for productive farming, recognising their critical role in climate mitigation.

Section 1: Long-term investment in Public Services for balanced Rural and Regional Development

Robust public services must go hand-in-hand with adequate incomes to ensure that everyone, regardless of location, can enjoy a minimum standard of living and fully participate in society. Many households are still feeling the impact from the cost of living crisis, underlining the urgent need for increased investment in essential services, particularly public transport, to reduce reliance on private cars.

Rural Development and 'Our Rural Future'

Consultation on the next *Our Rural Future* is underway, aiming to build on the current framework for rural development, remote working, and sustainable communities. Access to transport, broadband, employment, healthcare, childcare, education, and other community services remains critical. For this policy to succeed, it must be backed by adequate investment and political will to ensure rural areas are attractive, viable places to live and work.

Census 2022[1] shows continued population growth in the east, particularly among younger age groups, while rural counties such as Mayo, Kerry, Roscommon, and Leitrim have the oldest populations. The concentration of jobs and services in Dublin and the Greater Dublin Area is no longer sustainable, with long commuting times, high living costs, and housing pressures increasing. While remote working has risen, it cannot replace the need for physical job presence in rural regions.

Transport

The lack of reliable public transport remains a significant barrier for rural residents in accessing employment, healthcare, education, and everyday services. An overreliance on private cars is largely due to inadequate infrastructure. While the expansion of Local Link and evening services is a positive step, many remote areas continue to be underserved. Vulnerable and low-income individuals without access to a car are especially impacted.

For asylum seekers and those seeking International Protection living in rural accommodation centres, the absence of public transport presents a serious challenge. IRL is aware of cases where young children are unable to access early years education due to transport issues. This lack of connectivity also leaves people isolated and unable to pursue education, training, or employment opportunities. In some cases, individuals must walk along unlit roads without footpaths to reach appointments or bus stops, putting their safety at risk.

[1]CSO 2023 Census of Population 2022
https://www.cso.ie/en/statistics/population/censusofpopulation2022/censusofpopulation2022-summaryresults/

The upcoming changes to school transport are a long-awaited and welcome development, especially for rural families. Similar to the success of the free school books initiative, this measure will ease financial pressure on households.

Broadband

The rollout of high-speed broadband remains vital for rural development. The National Broadband Plan must be accelerated, with improved public communication on progress and any delays.

Migration

IRL continues to call for earlier and better community engagement on the opening of refugee reception and accommodation centres. A lack of communication fuels disinformation and misinformation and resistance. Early dialogue allows concerns to be addressed and ensures communities are better prepared to welcome and support newcomers. Services such as transport can be better planned for.

Healthcare and Social Care

Access to healthcare in rural areas is becoming increasingly challenging as the number of rural GPs continues to decline. When a GP in a rural practice retires, there is often a significant delay in finding a replacement, or no replacement at all. A new graduate programme in rural and remote healthcare at the University of Galway is set to begin in September 2025. This is a welcome development and may help improve the availability of GPs in rural areas. However, until the first graduates enter the workforce, immediate measures are needed to attract GPs to rural and remote communities.

A fair, affordable, and universal healthcare system, promised under Sláintecare, must remain a top government priority. Community-based services, such as Meals on Wheels, play a vital role in supporting older people to live independently, preventing hospital admissions, and enabling timely discharges. Yet, underfunding remains a growing concern. These services must be fully integrated into the healthcare system and adequately resourced.

Community Education

Community Education plays a key role in supporting personal development and helping people return to work or further education, particularly those furthest from the system. However, inconsistent and inadequate funding threatens its survival. Many providers receive no funding through ETBs and are excluded from national data collection, limiting visibility of their impact. Multi-annual, direct funding is essential to ensure long-term sustainability and effectiveness.

Lifelong Learning and Digital Inclusion

As society becomes increasingly digital, renewed investment in basic digital literacy is essential to prevent exclusion, to support older people and non-liners to feel confident and safe in using services, which many have moved online.

Budget 2026 Calls:

The following are IRL asks in relation to investment in Public Services to enhance regional and rural development

- **Rural Proofing and Regional Equity:** Budget 2026 must be rural-proofed and include a firm commitment to regional equity. Urban bias undermines not only the social and environmental pillars of sustainability but also limits the ability of regional economies to reach their full potential and adapt to emerging challenges.
- **Investment in Rural Public Services:** Substantial investment in public services in rural areas is essential to help reduce the cost of living for low-income households. The current consultation on *Accelerating Infrastructure* should include the establishment of a dedicated body to examine and improve service delivery models in rural communities—an initiative that Irish Rural Link has long advocated for.
- **Increased Funding for Rural Development:** Budget 2026 must include increases in both current and capital expenditure for rural development to ensure that the next phase of *Our Rural Future* is adequately resourced and can be effectively implemented.
- **Continued Rollout of the National Broadband Plan:** Continued delivery of the National Broadband Plan is vital. Government must also improve communication with the public regarding progress updates and any anticipated delays to ensure transparency and accountability.
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- **Implementation of Sláintecare:** Budget 2026 must include adequate funding for the full implementation of *Sláintecare*. The Government must prioritise the delivery of its key actions to move Ireland closer to a fair and equitable healthcare system.
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Section 2: Address Poverty and Income Inadequacy

Prior to the cost of living crisis, it was well documented that income inadequacy continued to be deeper in rural areas, particularly for those in receipt of social welfare payments and those in low-paid or minimum wage employment when compared to urban counterparts.

Consumer Price Index (CPI) continued to rise, albeit at a slower rate, with a 1.7% increase in the 12 months to May 2025. (CSO, 2025). In the year to May 2025, the cost food and non-alcoholic beverages rose by 4%. Key staple foods saw significant increases; the cost of bread, milk and butter all increased in the period by 2.6%, 12.4% and 18% respectively. Meat prices rose by 7.5% with beef alone increasing by over 19% during the same period[2]. Although the price of home heating oil, petrol and diesel have declined somewhat in the past year, low-income households—especially in rural areas—continue to struggle with these costs. These households are also disproportionately affected by annual carbon tax increases and remain vulnerable to external economic shocks.

The new *Roadmap to Social Inclusion* must commit to ending poverty in line with the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to which Ireland is a signatory.

The CSO SILC[3] figures for 2024 showed a rise in consistent poverty, increasing from 3.6% in 2023 to 5% in 2024. Without the implementation of cost of living measures, the consistent poverty rate would have reached 5.6%. In addition, 11.7% of the population were classified as 'at risk of poverty' in 2024, up from 10.6% in 2023. Without these support measures, that figure would have been 14.1%. The Northern and Western regions recorded the highest poverty risk, with 18.9% of individuals having equivalised disposable income below the at-risk threshold.[4].

In 2024, 15.7% of the population experienced enforced deprivation—defined as going without two or more of the eleven deprivation indicators. Among those at risk of poverty, the enforced deprivation rate jumped to 43.1%, up from 33.8% in 2023. For those not at risk of poverty, the rate stood at 12.1%. Alarmingly, 39.2% of those experiencing enforced deprivation went without heat at some point in the year, while 28.8% were unable to adequately heat their homes. Additionally, 5.6% of the population reported having great difficulty making ends meet in 2024[5].

While cost of living supports helped to reduce the number of people entering the 'at-risk of poverty' category, they had a limited impact in preventing individuals from falling into

[2] CSO (2025) Consumer Price Index May 2025 https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpi/consumerpriceindexmay2025/
[3] Survey on Income and Living Conditions
[4] CSO (2025) SILC Report 2024 https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2024/poverty/
[5] CSO (2025) SILC Enforced Deprivation Report 2025 https://www.cso.ie/en/statistics/socialconditions/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilcenforceddeprivation/

consistent poverty. With this being the first Budget of the new government and the first under the Medium-Term Budgetary Framework, there is a critical opportunity to begin meaningful investment in the social welfare system to ensure adequate incomes and decent living standards for all.

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.

In the year to March 2025 MESL costs have increased by an average of 1.8%. Since 2020 there has been an increase in 18.8%. Further increases in energy and food prices are anticipated over the course of 2025 and are expected to continue rising in 2026. This has the potential to result in a further 3.4% in minimum living costs, as measured by the MESL baskets[6].

Deep income inadequacy continues for older single adult households living in rural areas. This is primarily due to the additional cost of transport, keeping a car on the road. The non-contributory state pension and secondary supports meets 81.2% of MESL costs. This compares to an older adult in an urban area with 97% of their MESL costs met by the non-contributory state pension and secondary supports.

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 2025 MESL figures[7]. It highlights the deeper income inadequacies for rural households compared to their urban peers.

[6] Vincentian MESL Research Centre (2025) MESL2025.

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

Income Inadequacies by Household Type in Receipt of SW Payment

Household Type	Rural	Urban
2 Parents with 1 infant	-€108	-€4
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 pre-school,1 primary)	-€121	-€22
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 primary, 1 secondary)	-€181	-€92
2 Parents with 3 Children (1 infant, 1 pre-school, 1primary)	-€122	-€23
2 Parents with 4 Children (2 primary, 2 Secondary)	-€275	-€182
One Parent with 1 child (Primary school)	-€147	-€37
One Parent with 2 Children (1 pre-school, 1 primary)	-€143	-€32
One Parent with 2 Children (1 primary, 1 secondary)	-€203	-€102
Pensioner Living Alone (non-contributory)	-€76	-€9
Pensioner Living Alone (Contributory)	-€65	+€1

Source: Vincentian MESL Research Centre MESL 2025

The 2025 MESL showed some improvements in income adequacies among some household types who are working on minimum wage, however some income inadequacies still existed among some household types.

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

Household Type	Rural	Urban
2 Parents with 1 infant	+€138	+€296
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 pre-school,1 primary)	+€27	+€173
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 primary, 1 secondary)	+€10	+€176
2 Parents with 3 Children (1 infant, 1 pre-school, 1primary)	-€54	+€64
2 Parents with 4 Children (2 primary, 2 Secondary)	-€173	-€18

Source: Vincentian MESL Research Centre MESL 2025

Restoring the purchasing power for low income households must be a priority for the Government in Budget 2026 and begin investing in Social welfare so people can begin to live with dignity.

Fuel Allowance

IRL welcome the extension of the Fuel Allowance to single people and couples over the age of 70. However, we are aware of the difficulty some over 70's still faces in accessing fuel allowance. Due to the income thresholds in place, a couple may qualify for fuel allowance as their joint income is below the income threshold for a couple but if a spouse or partner passes away, the person left may become ineligible for the allowance if their income is above the single income threshold. The energy costs for the single person remains the same but are now more at risk of energy poverty as they have a reduced income and have lost the financial support. IRL would recommend that these income thresholds are reviewed and that no person should be made worse off if they are no longer eligible for fuel allowance.

Employment Activation Schemes and Rural Social Schemes

Employment Activation programmes such as CE and Tús Schemes must equip participants with the necessary skills to take up paid employment and that they are matched with the scheme that best works for them. Participants must not be made financially worse-off if they take up a place. The cost of fuel in rural areas can make a participant worse off getting to the place of work.

Many community and voluntary organisations providing essential services such as Meals on Wheels, childcare and other services rely on participants from various employment activation schemes, such as the Community Employment (CE) Scheme, the Tús Scheme, and in rural areas, the Rural Social Scheme (RSS), to help deliver their services. However, with near full employment, it is becoming increasingly difficult to recruit new participants to replace those who complete their time on the schemes. This is placing additional pressure on service providers. In many rural areas, individuals finishing these schemes often have no paid employment opportunities available to them.

A recent review of the Rural Social Scheme recommended the introduction of a pilot 'Rural Dwellers RSS'. This would allow individuals who are long-term unemployed or who have completed the CE or Tús schemes—without prospects of paid employment—to transition onto the RSS. Such a measure would help ensure the sustainability of essential services like Meals on Wheels, while also offering greater security to those participating in the scheme.

Budget 2026 Calls to address income inadequacy:

The following are IRL asks to improve income adequacy:

- In line with the MESL results for 2025, we call for an increase in core social welfare payments of a ***minimum* of €16 per week**. This is to help progress restoring the real value of the core social protection rate and go towards improving income adequacy.

- Begin to **invest in Social Protection** and put measures in place to address consistent poverty, deprivation and 'at-risk' of poverty rates. **Benchmark rates against MESL** rather than CPI for Budgetary benchmarking.
- A **50% increase in the fuel allowance** to help with the cost of fuel for low-income households who are unable to change to greener alternatives. Further widening of the eligibility for fuel allowance to other low-income households.
- **Review the fuel allowance income thresholds** for over 70's so no person be made worse off if they are no longer eligible for fuel allowance.
- With uncertainties in the global market, we call for **no further increase in excise duty** in Budget 2026.
- An allowance be given to those who hold a travel card but are unable to use it or get full use of it so it can go some way towards the cost of private transport.
- CE and Tus schemes must ensure the best use is made of participant's skills, time and effort while on these schemes and that meaningful employment is available when the scheme ends, which affords them an affordable living is gained. Increase in top-up for participants on schemes to ensure people are not made worse-off if take up a place on a scheme.

Section 3: Supports for Just Transition and Climate Change

The energy crisis highlighted the urgent need to move away from fossil fuels as energy sources to heat our homes and power our electricity. Census 2022 results showed that over 21,000 households lack central heating, while nearly 68,000 still rely on peat, including turf, as their primary heating source – down from 90,000 in 2016. Peat use is highest among households headed by someone over 65, with 28,351 relying on it. Notably, 6,941 households in this age group also lack central heating[8]. As previously outlined, the number of people unable to adequately heat their home or who had to go without heat continues to remain high.

IRL welcomes SEAI grants and the extension of the fuel allowance to those over 70, making them eligible for the 100% Warmer Home grant. However, the eligibility criteria remain too narrow, excluding many low-income households and social welfare recipients, particularly renters, who are dependent on landlords or local authorities to carry out improvements. Other available grants often remain out of reach for those on low incomes, especially in rural areas.

While low-interest loans for retrofitting are a positive step, access must be improved for low-income households through sliding interest rates and flexible repayment options. Credit Unions should play a key role in delivering these loans.

In 2022, IRL proposed a Community Energy Outreach Programme to the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications to assist vulnerable groups with clear information on retrofitting, fuel alternatives, and energy poverty. This would support the implementation of the National Retrofit Plan.

While the Just Transition Fund and related measures are welcome, they are not sufficient and are progressing too slowly for those most affected. Budget 2026 must prioritise targeted supports to ensure the most vulnerable are helped first.

Community Energy Projects

Communities must be at the centre of just transition with meaningful engagement from the outset of any renewable energy projects. Community owned energy projects empower communities to understand and appreciate the benefits of greener energy sources and help them choose the solutions that best meet their needs. It also helps to build trust between communities and the energy companies, while creating local community employment opportunities.

[8] CSO (2023) Census of Population 2022 Profile 2 – Housing in Ireland https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpp2/censusofpopulation2022profile2-housinginireland/occupieddwellings/

Electric Vehicles

The high cost of electric vehicles remains the main barrier for people to switch, along with the lack of public charging infrastructure in the country. For older homes, existing electrical systems do not often support the installation of EV chargers without costly upgrades, creating an additional disincentive. The reduction of grants for electric vehicles and phasing out of grants for home chargers, further discourage rural households to switch to electric cars. These supports should be maintained and a new 50% grant to help households upgrade their electrical systems to support home charging.

Budget 2026 Calls for Just Transition and Climate Change:

- **Ring-fence carbon tax revenue** to support households at risk of falling deeper into fuel and energy poverty, and expand retrofitting grants to low income households not currently eligible for Warmer Home Schemes.
- **Develop targeted financial supports** for low-income rural households, including a comprehensive suite of sliding-scale grants and low-cost, government-backed loans based on ability to pay.
- **Deploy Local Community Energy Advisors** in every local authority and support community-led outreach programmes to engage and inform hard-to-reach households most in need of energy efficiency upgrades.
- **Advance the proposed Community Energy Outreach Programme** by IRL to ensure vulnerable households receive clear, accessible advice on retrofitting, alternative fuel sources, and addressing fuel poverty.
- **Support workforce transition** by ensuring workers affected by the shift to a green economy are reskilled for employment in emerging sectors.
- **Ensure early and meaningful community engagement** in renewable energy projects, allowing communities to influence decisions on the most suitable energy sources for their local needs.
- **Reinstate the €5,000 (or higher) grant for electric vehicles** and retain the home charger grant at its current value for at least five more years.
- **Introduce a 50% grant** to assist households in upgrading electrical systems to enable home EV charging.

Section 4: Supports for Community Groups and Voluntary Sector

The Community and Voluntary (C&V) sector are still feeling the impact of the cost of living crisis. Many organisations were already struggling before this, having seen reduced funding post-Covid due to limited fundraising opportunities during the pandemic.

Despite this, the Government relies heavily on the sector to deliver vital services in health, social care, education, childcare, and transport. Many of these services have operated on limited budgets for years, with funding cuts from the financial crash never fully restored. HSE Section 39 organisations, in particular, face serious staffing challenges due to low wages, making it increasingly difficult to recruit and retain staff. This threatens the sustainability of essential community services.

National Meals on Wheels Network

IRL's National Network of Meals on Wheels providers continues to face increased costs—from rising food prices to the expense of running delivery vehicles. The funding increase in Budget 2025 was not sufficient and the Network are now calling for an allocation of €10m in Budget 2026 for the Meals on Wheels service. IRL also calls for multi-annual funding to support long-term planning and prevent cost burdens being passed on to older service users.

Insurance Barriers

High insurance costs remain a major obstacle for C&V groups, particularly smaller, volunteer-led organisations. These costs can limit growth and community engagement, especially in rural areas.

Employment Schemes and Rural Services

The C&V sector heavily depends on employment schemes such as the Rural Social Scheme, Community Employment (CE), and Tús. These programmes not only help deliver vital services like rural transport, Meals on Wheels, and community childcare, but also provide skills development and employment opportunities for participants.

The Rural Social Scheme is especially valuable for farmers and fishers on Farm Assist, allowing them to contribute their skills to the community during off-peak seasons. CE and Tús schemes offer a crucial lifeline for unemployed individuals in rural areas. However, many participants return to jobseeker's payments after completing the schemes, as few local jobs are available. This also results in the loss of trained staff from community services, despite the strong relationships they've built with service users.

Budget 2026 calls for the Community and Voluntary Sector:

- **Increase in funding to the Community &Voluntary sector** to help cover rising operational costs and make the sector more sustainable. Introduce allowances for volunteers using personal vehicles that area essential for services like community car schemes, meals on wheels etc.

- **Allocate €10 million to support Meals on Wheels** services nationally**.**
- **Introduce Core, Multi-annual funding for C&V organisations** delivering essential services in the community, such as Meals on Wheels and other health and social care services, community education, transport and childcare to safeguard the continuity and sustainability of these services.
- **Invest in community services** to create paid employment in the local area. This not only supports CE and Tus participants to gain employment using the skills they have developed but also ensures the future sustainability of these valuable services.
- **Conduct a review of insurance for the Community & Voluntary sector** to ensure more funding goes to the delivery of the service and not on high insurance costs. Provide targeted support for fully voluntary groups with no government funding but who face high insurance costs when organising community events.

Section 5: Agriculture

Agriculture remains a cornerstone of rural life. However, the sector is evolving, and targeted supports are needed to help it grow and diversify in response to climate action and environmental goals—while minimising the impact on livelihoods. The bio and circular economies are emerging opportunities where farmers can play a leading role, particularly in protecting biodiversity. With the right incentives, smallholders and less viable land could be used for these purposes. Greater value must be placed on non-productive areas of farmland. IRL believes smallholders, especially those farming marginal land with little return, are well-positioned to benefit from this transition, turning low-value land into a source of environmental and economic benefit.

This also applies to peatlands and adjacent poor-quality land. Ireland has significant peatland capable of storing carbon, and landowners should be able to earn carbon credits to offset potential costs from regulatory changes. However, meaningful engagement with farmers and landowners is essential. Through the delivery of various projects delivered by IRL, the experience shows that when farmers are involved in planning and decision-making, they are more open and responsive to environmental reforms in agriculture.

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. The current rate of €244 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.

Non-contributory state pension can make farm families more at risk of poverty. Women, especially are at risk, as they are financially dependent on the farm holder, even though they have worked on the farm. They are assessed on their spouse's income from the farm and elsewhere. This puts this cohort in a financially vulnerable position. We know some work has been done on this and call for further work to be done to protect farm families into the future.

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. The FarmPEAT EIP project finished in December 2024. The project was farmer-led and showed that farmers are willing to make changes once they are involved from the beginning and shown what changes are needed.

IRL are lead and partner on the Breeding Waders EIP, where again farmers are engaged with and are making changes, working 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[9] populations and support population recovery through landscape management and policy development. The project is one year into its work and are mapping and engaging farmers during the current breeding season to protect these bird species that are near extinctions.

Budget 2026 Calls for the agriculture sector:

- **Design agri-environmental schemes** to be practical and financially worthwhile for farmers. Direct engagement and collaboration with farmers on the ground is essential to drive meaningful change.
- **Actively target and support smallholders** to participate in these schemes. While their land may be less productive agriculturally, it often holds high value for biodiversity and environmental conservation.
- **Introduce support schemes** for farmers and rural communities to develop on-farm anaerobic digestion and bio-methane production. Funding for community-led projects must be accessible and free from excessive bureaucracy.
- **Engage early and consistently** with farmers on the changes needed to meet climate targets, ensuring they are partners in every stage of the transition.
- **Continue and expand grants** for solar panels, rainwater harvesting systems on farm buildings, and enable farmers to sell excess energy back to the grid. Launch engagement programmes to increase uptake.
- **Increase the Farm Assist payment** and simplify the means-testing process to improve access for those most in need.
- **Provide carbon credits** for the restoration of peatlands and wetlands that are unsuitable for productive farming, recognising their critical role in climate mitigation.

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

Conclusion

Budget 2026 marks the first budget of the new Government and the first under the new medium-term budgetary process. It presents a crucial opportunity to begin seriously addressing poverty and income inadequacy among low-income households and individuals reliant on social welfare payments.

While one-off payments have provided short-term relief, they are not sustainable and fall short of tackling the root causes of poverty. Addressing poverty is not only about income supports—it also requires meaningful access to essential public services such as public transport, childcare, healthcare, and broadband. Real investment in public services must go hand-in-hand with efforts to improve income adequacy, particularly in rural communities, to both alleviate and prevent poverty.

The new *Roadmap for Social Inclusion* and *Our Rural Future* that will be published at the end of 2025/early 2026, there must be real and targeted investment in the measures to ensure everyone, regardless of where they live or their background, can fully participate in society.

As Ireland continues its transition to a low-carbon, digital economy, it is essential that those furthest behind are supported first. Climate and digital measures must be inclusive and equitable. Retrofitting grants should operate on a sliding scale, and low-cost, guaranteed loans should be based on ability to pay. A Community Outreach Programme should also be explored to engage households most dependent on fossil fuels, ensuring they are supported through the transition.

Budget 2026 must provide more than subsistence-level support for those on low incomes and social welfare, it must enable them to achieve a dignified and adequate standard of living. Crucially, the Budget must look beyond short-term fixes and implement long-term strategies to lift people out of poverty rather than risk pushing more into it.

This will require not just financial support, but genuine investment in public infrastructure—particularly in rural areas where the absence of reliable public transport increases dependence on private cars and drives up the cost of living.

As global social values face growing threats, Ireland must remain committed to ensuring that its most vulnerable and marginalised communities are not left behind. Supporting people to live with dignity must be a key part of Budget 2026.

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.'