



Irish Rural Link
Nasc Tuaithe na hÉireann

Budget Submission

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Contact

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Irish Rural Link Budget Submission 2018: Summary

Issue	Recommendations
Rural and Regional Development	<p>Many rural areas are not experiencing the same level of growth as urban areas, especially Dublin, with many families still experiencing a raft of financial hardships since the recession.</p> <p>Full implementation of “<i>Realising our Rural Potential: Action Plan for Rural Development</i>” and (when finalised and published) the new National Planning Framework is needed. Proper investment must now be made in essential infrastructure in rural areas, such as public transport and broadband so growth can begin to happen.</p> <p>IRL continue to call for rural proofing of annual Budget and all Government policies and strategies.</p>
Rural Income Protection and Social Welfare	<p>The protection of marginalised and disadvantaged rural citizens and communities should be a key priority in Budget 2018.</p> <p>Large income inadequacies are still being felt by many households in rural areas who are dependent on social welfare or earning minimum wage. Budget 2018 must begin to close the gap of such income inadequacy to ensure people have an income which provides them with a sufficient standard of living.</p> <p>Other social welfare payments must be protected, such as living alone allowance and fuel allowance. IRL call for the restoration of the telephone allowance for older people in rural areas.</p> <p>The number of people in receipt of Farm Assist continues to decrease despite a fall in the average farm income, which now stands at approx. €24,000. IRL continue to call for means testing of Farm Assist to prioritise current farm income instead of previous year’s income.</p> <p>Employment schemes such as RSS and CE Scheme are remain extremely valuable and beneficial to both participants and communities in rural areas, allowing in many cases for necessary services to be delivered. Recently the length of time participants can stay on these schemes has been reduced. IRL call for the reversal of this decision.</p>
Rural Transport	<p>People living in rural areas do not have the same level (of), if any, access to a proper public transport system.</p> <p>The Rural Transport Programme (Local Link) is a lifeline to many people in rural areas. However, funding for this programme still remains below the €18 million it was supposed to be by 2016. IRL call for the RTP Budget to be increased in Budget 2018 to ensure that the service can continue to grow.</p> <p>More investment is also needed in the promotion of the RTP and Local Link to broaden the demographics of passengers and for the better integration with the wider public transport system.</p>

Climate Action and Rural Energy Poverty	<p>Rural households are at greater risk of fuel and energy poverty due to the nature of rural housing, especially older stock. Many households have limited choice in fuel they can use; mainly dependent on fossil fuels and oil, and are not able to avail of bundle deals by energy providers.</p> <p>People on low or fixed income, spend a larger proportion of their income on fuel and energy and will be most impacted by increase in electricity from October 2017. This price increase is as a result of the use of more sustainable sources of energy to provide electricity. IRL call for poverty proofing of actions taken to mitigate climate change.</p> <p>IRL continue to call for NO increase in tax on Diesel. As mentioned above, rural areas are not well served with a public transport system and households are dependent on a car. Again, any increase will impact most on people living on low or fixed income.</p>
Rural Enterprise and Employment	<p>Unemployment in rural areas still remains above the state average. The quality of jobs in rural areas is below those available in the bigger urban areas. The continued migration of young skilled people to urban areas remains a major problem for rural areas.</p> <p>SME's are the backbone of rural economies. However, lack of proper broadband and availability of credit, is impacting on the growth of SME's and microenterprises as well as new start up's.</p> <p>IRL welcome the public consultation on Local Public Banking in early 2017 and continue to call for serious consideration to be given to this alternative banking system to ensure rural areas can reach their full potential.</p>
Health and Caring Services	<p>With the number of people aged over 65 expected to double in the next thirty years, measures must now begin to be put in place to meet the future demand for health and caring services.</p> <p>Caring at home is the preferred option of care for many people as they age as well as their families and indeed Government. Meals on Wheels is one service that can facilitate people remaining in their own home for as long as possible and give people a sense of independence. IRL call for increased HSE Section 39 funding to ensure this valuable service can continue to be delivered and allow it to develop. A greater role from the HSE needs to be taken now so the service can be more streamlined across the country.</p> <p>Investment in Primary Care services in communities needs to now become a priority so future demand can be met and alleviate the pressure that is currently on our health system, the hospitals and A&E services.</p> <p>Mental health remains a stigma in rural areas. Investment in Mental Health services continues to be inadequate meaning services are substandard. IRL call for proper investment in Mental Health services across the country.</p>
Agriculture	<p>Schemes such as GLAS and TAM's must continue to be supported and adequate funding allocated to these schemes.</p> <p>Farm safety continues to be a real concern in rural areas. With 14 farm fatalities already in 2017, measures must be now taken to ensure that this</p>

number does not continue to escalate. IRL are calling for a bottom up approach to farm safety, where farmers could mentor other neighbouring farmers to be safety aware.

IRL are currently delivering two basic computer programmes; 'Getting Citizens on line' and 'IT Skills for Farmers'. Both programmes are funded by the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment. With the movement of payments and farm returns to online from January 2018, there is an onus on the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine to assist in some way in getting farmers online and support such a programme.

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. The impact of the recession is still being felt in many rural areas and have not seen the same level of economic growth or employment as more urban areas have over the past couple of years. People in rural areas continue to subsidise urban dwellers by paying for public services such as buses that they cannot access. They cannot access a widespread rural transport service or take advantage of free travel entitlements. Much the same can be said about amenities such as libraries, public swimming pools etc. The potential for school amalgamations with no consideration of the impacts this has on a community or on families in terms of the cost of transport and the closures of Garda stations in the absence of proper community policing continue to be great concerns for rural communities.

We welcome the steady improvement of Ireland's finances and the progress in growth made to date. We now urge the Government to recognise the huge sacrifices made by people, during the period of austerity and strongly recommend that this budget is inclusive of every citizen in every part of the country and that everyone can begin to reap the benefits of growth and lessen the hardship that many people and families continue to experience.

Section 1: Rural and Regional Development

Over the past few years families in rural areas have been experiencing a raft of financial hardships in terms of:

- Care based services, rising fuel costs and cuts to school transport, Garda stations and post offices.
- The down turn has also affected families' access to reasonable financial services. This is highlighted by the gradual disappearance of bank branches and the increased tightening of regulations governing credit unions.
- This latter experience is forcing many families who are in extreme poverty to depend on money lenders, whose charges are punitive.
- Increased hardship on families who have children in third level education as a result of increased fee charges and accommodation costs.

Irish Rural Link welcome the publication of *'Realising our Rural Potential: Action Plan for Rural Development'* in January 2017, the *'Town and Village Renewal Scheme'* and the consultation on new *'National Planning Framework – Ireland 2040: Our Plan'* and look forward to the publication of this framework later in the year. These publications are a positive first step to rural and regional development but they must ensure they are inclusive of everyone and be adequately funded and resourced. The many services that need to be provided in rural areas and the wider regions need proper investment to ensure that these strategies and frameworks can be realised and fully implemented.

Transport

The lack of a decent and reliable public transport system continues to be a challenge and obstacle for people living in rural areas in accessing employment, health services, hospital appointments, education and training and day to day business. The over reliance on cars for people living outside of Dublin is a result of the lack of a proper functional transport system. Vulnerable groups and those who are unable to afford a car living in rural areas or indeed unable to drive are most affected by this and make it more difficult for them to gain employment or make medical appointments. They rely on the goodwill of family members and neighbours to meet appointments and to go to the nearest town to do their day-to-day business. (See Section 3: Transport)

Broadband

The lack of quality broadband has hindered the development of regions and especially rural areas. A proper broadband infrastructure would promote rural development allowing areas

and regions to compete for jobs that might otherwise be located in urban areas. It would also allow for people, especially women, to work from home or start up their own business. With the move towards online banking, online billing, and other services moving to online, people in rural areas are unable to access these services as a result of the lack of reliable broadband. Also, the opportunity to stay in touch with family and friends who may have moved abroad is limited to telephone, which can be expensive.

Irish Rural Link calls for proper investment in rural broadband and the roll out of National Broadband Plan and the tendering process be expedited. Provisions need to be made within the Broadband Plan to upgrade speeds when necessary so businesses and homes have proper connectivity.

Rural Policing

Although crime figures have reduced in the last number of months, Irish Rural Link are still aware of many burglaries in rural areas that go unreported. The closure of a large number of rural Garda stations, with 100 Garda stations closed in 2013 alone, is one aspect of reduced reporting of crimes. IRL acknowledges that the number of unreported crime is not solely because of the closure of Garda stations and shortage of personnel but expresses it is a factor and we ask that the recruitment of new members to the Garda force continues to be built on. IRL continues to campaign for a modern rural policing system that protects rural communities especially the most isolated of its residents. There needs to be a sense of security and reassurance given to rural communities by the Department of Justice and An Garda Síochána to eliminate any fear factor.

Irish Rural Link calls for increase in resources of An Garda Síochána by multiplying the number of patrol cars in rural areas especially. The enhanced number of patrol cars in an area can have a significant impact on preventing crime as well as providing people with a sense of security. We also call for more supports for neighbourhood watch and community text alert schemes.

Education Costs

Students and their families from rural areas continue to struggle financially due to increased costs associated in attending college namely; increased college fees, accommodation, travel, utilities etc. Evidence of the increasing costs in attending third level education can be seen in the Irish League of Credit Unions' survey 2015¹ which shows that 72% of parents who participated in the survey struggle with the cost of their child's third level education; this

¹ Irish League of Credit Unions "2015 Third Level Education Study"
<http://www.creditunion.ie/communications/pressreleases/2015/title.9335.en.php>

is an increase from 64% in 2014; with 59% of parents getting into debt up to €5,030 per child to cover college costs. Students living away from home are spending on average €1,033 per month on rent, transport, living and college related expenses. Students living at home are spending on average €474. As most students from rural areas have to move away from home to attend third level, they are impacted more by these higher costs.

College fees and the rising cost of living are causing some young people to rethink attending third level education because they simply cannot afford it. The proposal of providing SUSI liaison personnel in each region in the Programme for Government is welcome. This needs to be given serious consideration and be flexible to meet with students. There is now a need to examine the income limits of the parents of third-level students so no person is prevented from attending third level due to cost.

Irish Rural Link is calling on the government to re-examine the grant scheme and college fees of €3,000 per year.

LEADER

The LEADER programme must be adequately funded in Budget 2018 and the implementation of recommendations of CEDRA and '*Realising our Rural Potential*' must be followed through on. IRL are aware and concerned of the bureaucracy associated with LEADER. This must be examined to ensure it does not jeopardise the programme.

Local Government

The cost saving recommendations around cross cutting and shared services contained in the Local Government efficiency review must be implemented instead of further cuts to the Local Government Fund. Cuts to the Local Government Fund lead to Local Authorities cutting services and refusing to reduce rates and charges which drastically increase the cost of doing business. Local Authorities must be adequately resourced to provide services at a local level.

Rural Proofing of Policy

With the appointment of a Rural and Community Affairs Minister and Department policies developed must encompass all aspects of rural life and work with other Government Departments to rural proof any policy being developed that can impact on people living in rural Ireland. As the primary national economic policy tool, the annual budget should contain a commitment to regional equity and the prevention of urban bias, which compromises not just the social and environmental pillars of sustainability, but also the capacity of regional economies to utilise their potential and adapt to current and future challenges.

Section 2: Rural Income Protection and Social Welfare

As mentioned above, a gap still remains between urban and rural areas in terms of economic growth; rural areas are still not fully reaping the benefits of the economic recovery, especially those on low incomes or in receipt of a social welfare payment. The protection of marginalised and disadvantaged rural citizens and communities should be a key priority in budget 2018.

Rural Poverty

The Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL)² for 2017 showed there was a decrease in the cost of essential goods and services included in MESL³ which fell by 2.5% from 2016 MESL. This is the third consecutive year there was a decrease in the MESL, however it is still 2.1% higher than in 2010. When the cost of housing and childcare are included, the MESL rate increased by an average of 1.25% in the last year and by 9% since 2010. Although, there was some reduction in MESL costs for certain household types in both urban and rural areas, core MESL costs (excluding housing and childcare) remain higher for the majority of rural household types. Income inadequacies were higher for each of the household types dependent on social welfare living in a rural area than their urban area counterparts, with the largest gaps between income inadequacies between rural and urban felt by pensioners living alone and one-parent families, which may be a result of the high increase in home-heating oil in the year.

² Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (2016) *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2017*
<https://www.budgeting.ie/publications/mesl-2017-update-report/>

³ The Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) looks at those essential goods included in CPI basket of goods that are deemed necessary for a minimum standard of living. Such goods include food, clothing, heating, etc.

Income Inadequacies by Household Type in Receipt of SW Payment

Household Type	Rural	Urban
2 Parents with 1 infant	-€88.62	-€33.73
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 pre-school, 1 primary)	-€70.18	-€15.87
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 primary, 1 secondary)	-€143.26	-€90.78
2 Parents with 3 Children (1 infant, 1 pre-school, 1 primary)	-€88.91	-€35.25
2 Parents with 4 Children (2 primary, 2 Secondary)	-€229.38	-€169.58
One Parent with 1 child (Primary school)	-€106.15	-€33.56
One Parent with 2 Children (1 pre-school, 1 primary)	-€88.63	-€18.26
One Parent with 2 Children (1 primary, 1 secondary)	-€161.71	-€93.18
Single Adult living in Private Rented Accommodation	-€90.81	-€53.69
Pensioner Living Alone (non-contributory)	-€57.65	+€0.27
Pensioner Living Alone (Contributory)	-€46.85	+€9.87

Income inadequacies were also felt by households who were working on minimum wage with these inadequacies larger for households in rural areas for most of the household types looked at.

These study findings clearly show that rural households are far more vulnerable to cuts in social welfare payments and experience higher costs of essential goods and services to necessitate an adequate standard of living. Essentially, rural households will be the first to be pushed below the poverty line, or further below the poverty line as the case may be. IRL welcome the €5 increase in basic social welfare payments across the board. However, as outlined above, the income inadequacy for households in receipt of a social welfare payment is a lot greater than €5.

Irish Rural Link calls for the Department of Social Protection to now begin to strive for social welfare payments to reach the same rate as living wage of €11.70 per hour so people can have a basic standard of living.

Farm Incomes and Farm Assist

Preliminary findings from the 2016 Teagasc National Farm Survey reports a reduction in family farm incomes. Of the 83,377 farms represented by the Survey, there was a 9%

decline from 2015 in farm income to €24,060⁴; well below the average industrial salary of €37,000.

Thirty-four percent of farms still remain economically vulnerable in 2016. There was a 1% increase to 30% in the number of farm holders with an off-farm income, while a 1% decrease to 49% number of farm spouse who were employed off the farm. Forty-two percent of farmers in the West of the country were employed in off-farm employment, while Midlands and Border region had approximately 35% and 32% had an income from off-farm employment⁵.

Farm Assist

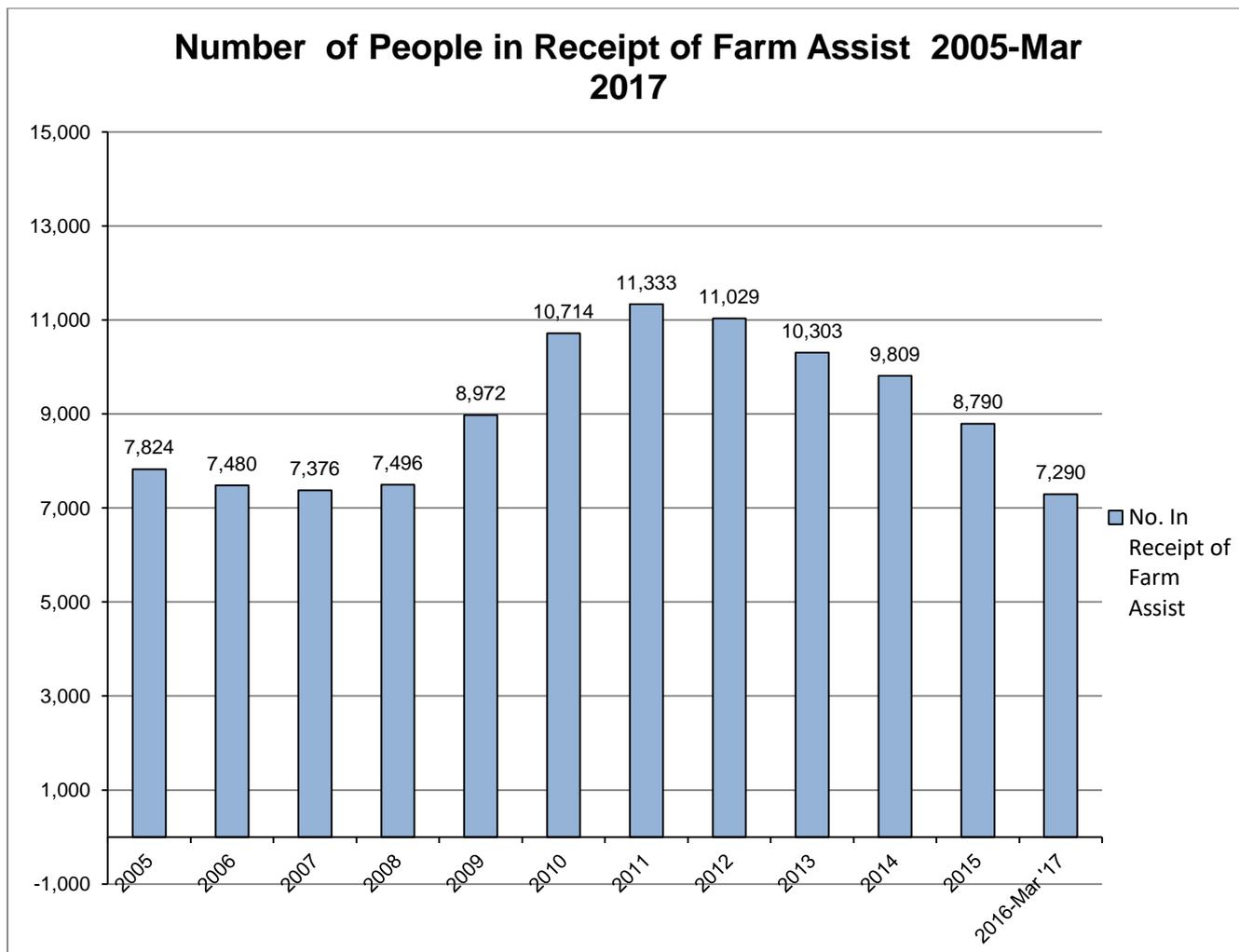
Farm Assist is a means tested payment and subject to eligibility criteria for people engaged in farming and/or forestry by Department of Social Protection whose income is below a certain level. Irish Rural Link welcome the increase in the payment by €5 in Budget 2017 as well as changes to income disregards in the means testing process, which came into effect from March 2017. However, IRL are still concerned that it is still based on based on a farmer's previous year's income, which is very disadvantageous and doesn't protect against current or future prices and can negatively impact on a person's eligibility for the scheme.

The number of people in receipt of Farm Assist continues to decrease since 2011 despite a decrease in farm incomes. The figure below shows the number of people in receipt of Farm Assist Payment from 2005 – March 2017⁶.

⁴ Dillion, E, Moran, B & Donnellan T (2017) *Teagasc National Farm Survey 2016 Estimates*
https://www.teagasc.ie/media/website/publications/2017/NFS_Prelim_Estimates_2016.pdf

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Community & Voluntary Pillar Bilateral Meeting with Dept of Social Protection 08/05/17



IRL welcome the increase of €5 to and some of the changes around income disregards to Farm Assist in Budget 2017 but are still concerned that it is based on the previous year's income. We understand that current income is now often taken into consideration in the means testing.

Irish Rural Link calls for priority be given to current income over previous year's income when means testing is being carried out.

Employment Schemes and Programmes

IRL see Employment Schemes and Programmes available in rural areas as essential to the development of community infrastructure as well as providing unemployed people with the necessary skills to remain motivated to seek out employment or establish their own business. Many of the services in rural areas, such as the Rural Transport Programme, Meals on Wheels, tourism and other sectors rely on these schemes to provide employment.

Rural Social Scheme

Irish Rural Link welcomes the increase of 500 places on the Rural Social Scheme (RSS) in Budget 2017. This is a valuable scheme to farmers and fishermen and women who are in receipt of Farm Assist as it allows them to use their skills and experience in the community while the community also benefits from this. However, Irish Rural Link is concerned about changes to the scheme which came into effect in late 2016 where new entrants are only allowed remain on the scheme for six years. People on this scheme are either farmers or fishermen and women and take part in this scheme on a seasonal basis when there is a reduction in farming or fishery work.

Irish Rural Link proposes that the number of places on the RSS is increased by 500 and that changes to the length of time a person can stay on the scheme is reversed.

Community Employment (CE) Scheme/TUS/Gateway Programme

The CE and TUS schemes are viable schemes for unemployed people in rural areas in helping them get back into the work force. Many of the people who work with Meals on Wheels and other community services are on CE and TUS Schemes and is the only source of income for them. The weekly payment to people on these schemes are adequate enough to ensure people do not experience poverty and to encourage more people who are long-term unemployed take up the schemes. It is also necessary to ensure valuable community services, such as Meals on Wheels can continue.

The Gateway Programme is another viable programme which can bridge the gap for people who are unemployed to get back into employment. It also helps Local Authorities continue and maintain projects they no longer have the resources for, such as village enhancement schemes, landscaping, libraries etc. Local Authorities should be encouraged to continue with this programme.

Irish Rural Link calls for payments to people participating on these schemes/programmes are increased in line with minimum wage in the short term with long term vision of them being in line with living wage. They must ensure the best use is made of participant's skills, time and effort and that meaningful employment which affords them a living wage is gained.

Community Services Programme

The CSP programme, funded by the Department of Social Protection and managed by Pobal, provides funding to not-for-profit, social enterprises and community business that deliver services to communities where private and/or public services are lacking, due to geographical location or low demand for service. This programme is vital to the existence of organisations such as Meals on Wheels to deliver services that would not otherwise exist

and to the provision of school lunches, especially in disadvantaged rural areas. However, this programme is now closed to new applicants, which is very disadvantageous to such services.

Irish Rural Link calls for an increase in funding in this programme to meet the increasing costs associated with providing services. It also proposes that this programme remain open for applications for longer periods.

Other Social Welfare Allowance/Benefits

Other social welfare allowances and benefits, such as household package, living alone allowance, fuel allowance are essential to ensure some groups of people are not pushed further into poverty or a vulnerable state. These need to be protected and some that are discontinued be now re-introduced.

Phone Allowance/Broadband Allowance

The ceasing of the Phone allowance in 2014 has left many older people more vulnerable and isolated. Many, especially those in remote areas, rely on the phone to stay in contact with family and friends. Without a phone, it can be very isolating for these people. The reduction in the take up of Security Alarm Scheme can be attributed to the cut to the phone allowance⁷. Although the alarm can now be linked to mobile phones, with poor coverage in areas, especially in remote rural areas, it is not always an option for people. Older people are left feeling vulnerable and isolated as a result of this.

With the move by banks to get more people banking online and getting bills paid online and with closure of branches and reduced services in rural areas, more people will have to go online. With most broadband providers requiring customers to have a phone line to get connected, it can be expensive for older people to sustain these monthly payments.

Irish Rural Link calls for the re-introduction of the phone allowance for older people living alone. It will also reduce the cost of broadband for people also if with the same provider.

Free Travel Card/Travel Allowance

People in rural areas do not get the full benefit, if at all, of the Free Travel Card. With the lack of a decent public transport system in rural areas, older people are often reliant on the goodwill of family, neighbours and friends for lifts which leaves them very dependent on

⁷RTE.ie (Feb 2017) 'Telephone allowance cut blamed for fall in uptake of Seniors Alert System

<https://www.rte.ie/news/2017/0228/855979-hogan-telephone-allowance/>

others and don't have the freedom to go places when they want. Taxis are the only other option for people which can be very expensive.

Irish Rural Link calls for 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.

Fuel Allowance

People living in rural areas are more at risk of fuel poverty due to the nature of one off housing, especially older stock. They are also more dependent on home heating oil and fossil fuel to heat their homes and unable to avail of bundle deals offered by energy companies. The cost of home heating oil has increased over the past year. In May 2017, it was 10% higher than the same month in 2016⁸. In March there was a 25% increase in the price from one year previous⁹. People on fixed income are more vulnerable and more at risk of fuel poverty because of fluctuations in price of fuel. We welcome the recent announcement by the Minister in that people will now have the option to have two payments of €290 in the year.

Irish Rural Link calls for the fuel allowance of €22.60 be maintained and no increases in carbon tax be introduced. Also a carbon tax exemption is essential for those on low incomes, and households where home heating costs have risen.

⁸ CSO Consumer Price Index (CPI) May 2017

<http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/cpi/consumerpriceindexmay2017/>

⁹ CSO CPI March 2017 <http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/cpi/consumerpriceindexmarch2017/>

Section 3: Rural Transport

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

Rural Transport Programme and Local Link

The Rural Transport Programme (RTP) is being re-branded under the name “Local Link” and is delivered by 17 Local Link Companies across the country reaching people in remote areas. However, the programme continues to be underfunded. We welcome that the budget for RTP was increased by €2million for 2017 to €14 million; however, it still remains below the €18million it was supposed to be by 2016.

The budget for the Rural Transport Programme must be increased in Budget 2018 to ensure that Local Link can continue to provide and grow its service and more people can avail of the service.

Public Service Obligation (PSO) and Transparency of overall budget to Local Links

The number of PSO services Local Link companies provide has increased over the last year. Local Link companies are in a good position to provide PSO services in their local areas where Bus Eireann routes have been cut or connect into other bus/rail services. However, there is concern how PSO services affect the RTP budget and if the RTP budget is allocated to PSO services.

The Rural Transport Programme started in 2002 and provided services in rural areas where there was no access to public transport, these services are still as important today and must continue. There are still areas and people who require the service.

Greater transparency is needed on how RTP and PSO budgets are divided and a breakdown of each made available.

Department of Social Protection Free Travel Pass Budget

Local Link is the only accessible public transport available to many people outside of cities. There must be adequate cover for older people, people with disabilities and other groups of people who hold a DSP Free Travel Pass. Under the Sectoral Plan, each Department must work under, there has to be adequate provision for the disability sector.

Local Link companies find that the allocation they receive from Dept of Social Protection for the free travel pass does not stretch to the end of the year.

In the short term there must be an increase in the free travel pass allocation in Budget 2018, with a radical overhaul of the system in the medium to long term must be agreed and full recompense for FTP for each journey travelled.

New Routes and Integration with other Transport Services

There is now an opportunity for Local Link companies to grow and expand their routes with the necessary funding and supports by Department of Transport, Sport and Tourism and the NTA. Local Link companies are in a position to identify new routes and services that would meet local need.

Local Link plays a vital role in delivering services in local areas and in some of the most remote areas of the country, it needs to be recognized by all Government Departments and Local Authorities as a key solution to many of the difficulties that have occurred in public transport system over the past few months and be part of the overall transport system for the country. **Better integration of Local Link with other transport services is essential for better connectivity across the country and that every person, regardless of where they live, has access to a reliable and robust public transport service.**

Investment in Infrastructure

As part of the potential of developing both the Local Link brand and services, the opportunity should now be recognised in relation to establishing the necessary infrastructure i.e, bus stops and shelters which will provide the ancillary support to make the establishment of these services as attractive as possible to people in rural Ireland who to this point may not have had any previous opportunity to avail of a comprehensive public transport system in their area.

Investment should now be made in relation to the required supports.

Fleet Owning Companies

There are seven Fleet Owning Companies that provide Local Link services in their locality. These groups give a full range of services including; PSO service, rural transport services,

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

An allowance for Fleet Owning Companies is now needed so they can update their fleet so it is accessible for all. This could either be done through depreciation or a capital allocation or by some other means.

Section 4: Climate Action and Rural Energy Poverty

Ireland will have to meet its Climate Action targets as part of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. However, these targets must be poverty proofed and no person can be pushed into or further below the poverty line.

Fuel 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 SILC¹⁰ report 2015¹¹ showed that 13.6% of the population went without heat at some stage during 2015 and 9% were unable to afford to keep the home adequately warm. For individuals at risk of poverty; 27.9% went without heating at some stage during 2015, while 19.6% were unable to afford to keep home adequately warm. For those living in consistent poverty 53.3% went without heating at some stage in the year. Carbon tax costs rural households ten times more than some urban households. Analysis in 2010 from the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) shows that the annual carbon tax likely to be paid by someone living in inner-city Dublin will be €25 but people living in the countryside could face bills of up to €275.50.¹²

Irish Rural Link calls for no further increase in carbon tax on home heating oil and fossil fuels as this will impact most on those already experiencing fuel poverty, especially those in rural areas where there is no alternative fuel source available.

Retrofitting

Retrofitting of homes is widely acknowledged by all as a simple measure that can greatly reduce our energy usage. It remains in the Government's interest to provide capital funding to invest in retrofitting of homes and businesses to reach climate change targets with the long term benefits far outweighing initial investment. We welcome initiatives and grants that are available to people and communities for retrofitting their homes/community buildings. However, we are aware that there is still a low uptake of such grants and initiatives, especially among people who need them most; older people, those on low income and those living in rented accommodation. This is often as a result of the initial cost of the retrofitting

¹⁰ SILC – Survey on Income and Living Conditions

¹¹ CSO (2017) – Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2015

<http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditions2015/>

¹² “STRIVE- Science and Sustainability- Research based knowledge for Environmental Protection” EPA and ESRI 2010

and that it can be still expensive for many people, the application process and for those living in rented accommodation, landlords may not be willing to retrofit the property.

Irish Rural Link calls for more awareness around the benefits of retrofitting and assistance for people who may need it for applying for grants. Incentives for landlords to upgrade energy efficiency of their property are also needed.

Community Energy Projects

As a nation Ireland is rich of untapped renewable energy sources that cannot only help the environment but can also drive the national economy as well as provide cheaper energy to homes and businesses. One method of achieving our renewable energy target set out by the European Union is by community owned energy projects. In particular the opportunities offered by Ireland's wind energy is unrivalled by many other countries. For centuries the west of Ireland has been considered a marginalised region but wind energy is one of the few sectors in which the west of Ireland in particular has a major competitive advantage over almost every other region in Europe. In recent times there has been huge contestation to the construction of large energy projects such as windfarms and pylons. Some aspects that caused objection from the public were unfamiliarity with planning regulations and mistrust of the large energy companies. A method of addressing these issues is to incentivise community led renewable energy projects. These projects would give the communities control eliminating mistrust between communities and the energy companies.

Irish Rural Link calls for the government to offer financial support to communities for initial costs of construction as over the lifetime of energy sources the investment will be returned through selling the energy back into the grid, construction jobs, maintenance jobs, environmental benefits, reduced energy costs etc. Consultations with communities must continue prior to the construction of energy sources.

Diesel Tax

A lack of a public transport options in rural areas necessitates car ownership in order to access employment, basic services and amenities. Census 2016 showed that 91% of rural households had at least one car, highlighting the high dependency rate people in rural areas have on a car. Many people in rural areas have Diesel cars because it is more economical. We welcome that there was no increase in Diesel tax in Budget 2017. Electric vehicles are still not reliable enough for long-distance driving and until this is the case we will continue to argue that Diesel must remain affordable for people, especially for those on low or fixed income.

Irish Rural Link calls for no increase in tax on Diesel until there are alternative fuel sources in place.

Eco-driving

In the short term, until there are alternatives, car transport will continue to dominate. Irish Rural Link believes that eco-driving training should be included as part of driver training and testing. Upon completing training, drivers tend to reduce their fuel consumption by 25% (Convery, 2008). Advancements in alternatives to fossil fuels for transport will also require commitment.

Community Wetlands Forum and Conservation of Peatlands/Wetlands

Wetlands and peatlands can hold two to three times more carbon than forestry and wise use of wetlands/peatlands can contribute to cleaner water and regulation of flooding.

The Community Wetlands Forum (CWF) was established under the umbrella of Irish Rural Link in September 2013. The initiative came from community groups involved in wetland conservation who were developing the idea of wetlands as assets for their communities, as well as work undertaken by Irish Rural Link on behalf of communities affected by the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC). Since its inception, the CWF has held a number of meetings and visits to member sites, and in April 2016, the Forum agreed a constitution. Membership of CWF is open to community groups involved in wetland conservation, as well as other organisations and individual stakeholders who support the aims and objectives of CWF. The main aim of the CWF is to provide a representative platform for community-led wetland conservation groups based on the principles of community development namely empowerment; participation; inclusion; self-determination; and partnership. (see *Community Wetland Forum Budget Submission*).

Section 5: Rural Enterprise & Employment

Although the rate of unemployment continues to fall, with the national unemployment rate now at 6.7% as of Q1 2017¹³ the rate of unemployment in more rural regions still remains above the state average. Unemployment rates in the Border and Midlands regions are 7.5% and 7.8% respectively with the South East region at 9.3% while Dublin and Mid East regions now have unemployment rates of 6.3% and 5% respectively. Results from Census 2016 showed that small towns had higher unemployment rates than larger towns. Of the larger towns across the country, Longford had the highest unemployment rate between 2011 and 2016 at 30%. The impacts of high unemployment during the recession is still being felt in many rural areas and as the figures above show are not experiencing the same level of employment creation as urban or areas close to major urban centres. It is more difficult to resolve unemployment in rural areas which are over-reliant on primary industries such as agriculture, construction and low-level manufacturing and where many of the highly skilled and young workforce have emigrated over the past few years or who are now migrating to urban areas where jobs are becoming available.

Irish Rural Link calls for the full implementation of Action Plan on Jobs.

Youth Unemployment and the Youth Guarantee

The aim of the EU-wide Guarantee is to provide young people under the age of 25 with a good quality offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship within a short time of becoming unemployed. Although, there is a continued fall in unemployment and youth unemployment has fallen also, it remains high at 13.2% nationally as of Q1 2017¹⁴.

Irish Rural Link supports the youth guarantee and any initiatives that aim to reduce the high level of youth unemployment but has concerns over the implementation in rural areas where youth unemployment is significantly higher. An aspect of the youth guarantee that needs to be considered is that a large proportion of the youth population in rural areas do not have access to transport to travel to the urban centres for employment or training. With such a large population of youth unemployment occurring in rural regions there is a case for the training centres to be more accessible to young people in rural areas.

¹³ CSO QNHS Q1 2017

<http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/qnhs/quarterlynationalhouseholdsurveyquarter12017/>

¹⁴ CSO QNHS Q1 2017

<http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/qnhs/quarterlynationalhouseholdsurveyquarter12017/>

SME's

SME's and Micro Enterprises are the backbone of rural economy and are a key to employment in rural areas. However, they continue to face many challenges such as availability of credit and reliable broadband. Along with these factors the onset of Brexit, there is an increase in the number of SME's that the business environment is declining. Small Firms Association (SFA), in November 2016, found 17% of their members felt the current business environment had weakened compared to just 3% in six months previous¹⁵. Although there are slight improvements in lending by pillar banks to SME's, lending market remains highly concentrated with the combined market share of the three main lenders currently at 93%¹⁶. With these limited options of credit available to SME's, they are extremely vulnerable to any shocks, either within these three main lenders or external factors, such as a financial crisis. The continued closure of bank branches, limited services and opening times of existing branches and more services moving to phone or online banking, it is becoming more and more difficult for SME's, particularly in rural areas, to access banking services.

Irish Rural Link calls for the following in Budget 2018 to help improve employment in rural areas:

- **Credit Availability** Cash flow and credit availability for viable businesses must be addressed. In order for rural communities to become economically sustainable, the lack of available credit at reasonable rates is currently a barrier to new and existing enterprises in all sectors.

Irish Rural Link call for An alternative credit/banking system based on the principles of microfinance incorporating microcredit is required for business start-ups and community based enterprises in particular. A rural loan guarantee scheme for rural start-ups and businesses with less than ten employees should also be implemented. (See Section Below on Local Public Banking)

- **Broadband** Irish Rural Link welcomes the report of the Broadband and Mobile Phone Taskforce at the end of 2016. However, the roll out of the National Broadband Plan and connectivity for business in rural areas continues to be a major issue and is

¹⁵ SFA (2017) Presentation at Irish Rural Link Annual Conference 'Next Generation Business – A Vision of for Small Firms in Ireland'

¹⁶ Central Bank (2017) SME Market Report 2016 H2

<http://www.centralbank.ie/stability/Documents/SME%20Market%20Report%202016H2.pdf>

preventing growth and employment in rural areas and risks the implementation of Action Plan for Rural Development and new National Planning Framework.

The Digital Health Index for Q1 2017 reported almost a quarter of SME's have no online presence with 13% citing lack of reliable broadband as reason for staying offline. Twenty percent say they do not have the time to set it up. SME's with a website earn an additional €24,000 and receive 22 extra jobs or web-based sales on average¹⁷.

Irish Rural Link calls for the tendering process for the rollout of the National Broadband Plan to be expedited and that it is future proofed to ensure it will meet the demands and services jobs and businesses in rural areas.

- **Other Supports for SME's** While availability of credit and broadband are two of the main barriers to development and growth of SME's, there are a number of other issues that IRL are calling to be addressed as part of Budget 2018. These include;
 - **The three-year tax relief for start up companies until end of 2018 is welcome and must be maintained with continuation for new start-ups following a review of the scheme.**
 - **Commercial rates for existing SME's must be reviewed and supports put in place for those who are being crippled by these rates.**

Diversified Employment

The Action Plan on Jobs must be fully implemented in every region of the country. The level of education in rural areas is now higher than ever before and there is now an opportunity for the Government to take advantage of this and develop more diversified jobs so young people have the option to remain in their locality and community.

Irish Rural Link calls for sufficient funding must be allocated to the development of regional jobs and a graduate workplace initiative which allows graduates to access opportunities in their local area outside of hubs and gateways should be put in place.

Entrepreneurship

County Enterprise Boards must have the necessary resources in place so they are in a position to successfully foster enterprise locally. Any new enterprise support structure must have sub-regional job creation targets. Enterprise support in the budget must be built on the principles of Inclusive Entrepreneurship Mainstream business support fails to reach many

¹⁷ IEDR.ie (2017) 'Digital Health Index Q1 2017' <https://www.iedr.ie/uploads/dot-ie-Digital-Health-Index-Q1-2017.pdf>

types of entrepreneurs, including women, rural entrepreneurs, the disabled and those from ethnic minorities.

Irish Rural Link calls for;

- **Increased allocation of funding to County Enterprise Boards.**
- **The three-year tax relief for start-ups must be maintained to encourage more entrepreneurs to set up.**
- **Supports for more inclusive entrepreneurship so those who are furthest from labour market can be encouraged to start up own business.**

Local Public Banking Policy

Irish Rural Link welcomes that a consultation process took place in early 2017 on Local Public Banking as was outlined in the *Programme for a Partnership Government (2016)*

“We will thoroughly investigate the German Sparkassen model for the development of local public banks that operate within well-defined regions”

We await a report on this consultation which is due in mid-2017.

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

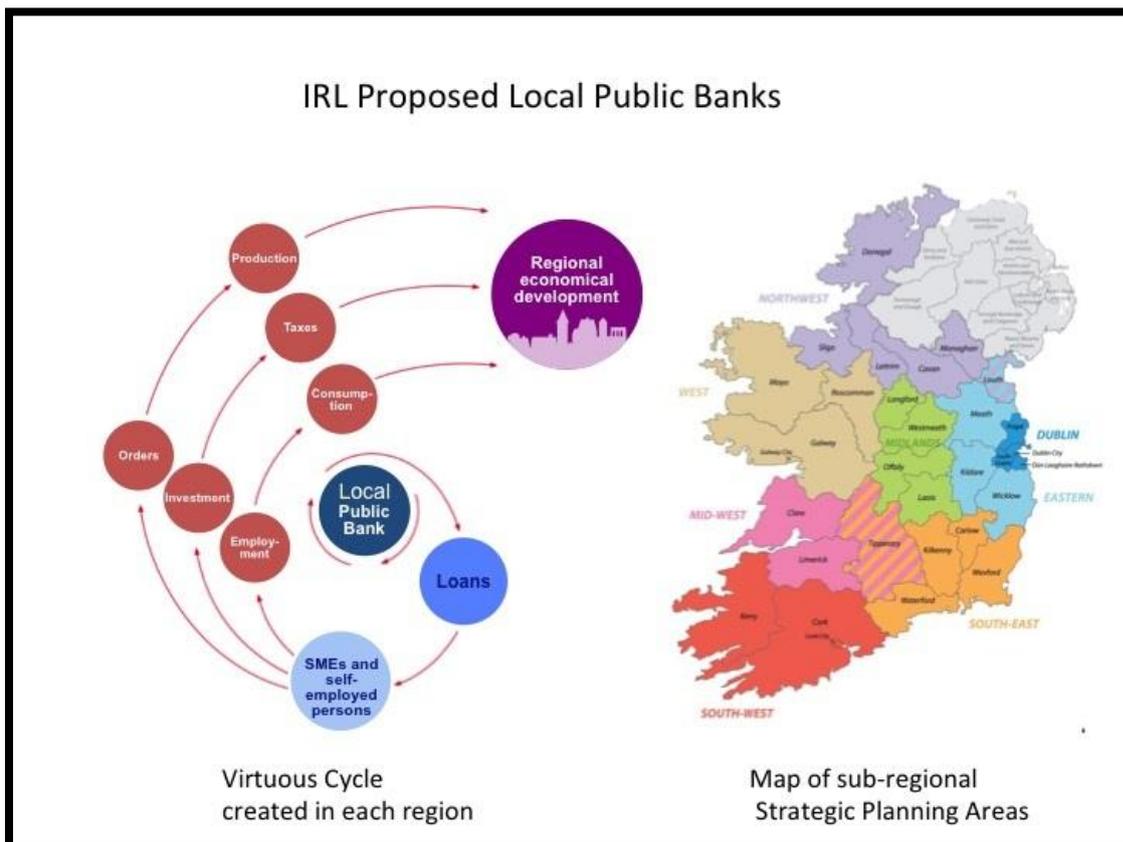
This model of banking covers the 26 counties nationally and works on a regional basis and follows key principles of the "Framework for the Development of Regional Enterprise Strategies"

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

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

- The IRL proposal suggests a nationwide network of 8 to 10 Local Public Banks which are managed independently but with an identical business model working under identical management principles. Initially 2 or 4 pilot banks are envisaged with a rollout of the entire network developed over the next 5 years.
- In addition a centralised service unit will provide internal services, including risk management and internal audit and will house a self-supervision unit for the new public banking system.

- The new Local Public Banks will follow a specific business model that is different from traditional commercial banking. The new public banks will have to be economically viable but they will not pursue profit maximisation. At the same time they will be enabled to fulfil a public mandate because they will not be under pressure to make dividend payments.
- Earnings will partly be retained to strengthen their capital base and partly distributed to social projects, also surpluses will be partly distributed to social funds to benefit the local community.



Section 6: Health and Caring Services

It is clear Ireland's ageing population is a growing area of concern not only for this Government but also for future policy makers. It is expected that in thirty years the number of people over the age of 65 will double. The ageing population will not only increase financial strain on the countries' finances but also on health and caring services themselves. Investment in these services needs to be developed and improved upon now to meet future demand for healthcare and meet the healthcare needs of an ageing population. Research indicates that home based caring is the preferred option for many families as well as Government as it is the most cost effective method and IRL welcome that consultation on a new Home Care Scheme is now open.

Meals on Wheels

Meals on Wheels service is a critical component of the continuum of care services and one service available that enables older people to remain living in the community or to return to their own homes after hospitalisation. For those using the service it is seen as more than just a meal. It links people into other services, such as the Public Health Nurse, befriending services and other healthcare services and it can reduce rural isolation. For many, especially men living alone, the person delivering a meal may be the only person they might see in the day or week. According to McGivern (2007)¹⁸, the aim of Meals on Wheels in Ireland is twofold: firstly, to improve the diet and nutritional status of meal clients; and secondly to increase the level of social contact afforded to clients, which also enables the early detection of need for other care services.

Under the umbrella of Irish Rural Link, the Meals on Wheels Network was established in 2015 with the overall aim to provide a local, community led professional facility to assist people who require services to maintain optimum health, independence with strong life extending possibilities¹⁹.

There are many challenges that are hindering Meals on Wheels delivery the vital service it provides such as low levels of funding and recognition by Department of Health and other Government Departments. However, there are also great opportunities to develop this service and include it in an overall home care package. The role Meals on Wheels organisations play in supporting individuals to remain living in their own homes for as long as possible cannot be underestimated. With sufficient resources these organisations can

¹⁸ McGivern, Y., 2007. The 2006 Healthy Ageing Conference: Nutrition and Older People in Residential and Community Care Settings. Conference Proceedings. Dublin: NCAOP

¹⁹ Meals on Wheels Network <http://www.mealsonwheelsnetwork.ie/>

enable people to be discharged from hospitals earlier, and even prevent admission to hospital in the first instance, saving the state significant amounts every year.

Irish Rural Link calls for increase in HSE funding to the providers of Meals on Wheels to meet increasing costs they are facing. We also call for a more structured and standardised service on Meals on Wheels (see *National Meals on Wheels Pre Budget Submission for more details on this*)

Primary Care

With life expectancy increasing there is also an increase in the number of older people with a chronic disease. This is also increasing pressure on hospitals with chronic disease accounting for 40% of hospital admissions and 75% of bed stays. With preference by both people and Government for people to remain in their own homes and communities for as long as possible, there is now a need for better investment in primary and community care services, so that current and future demands can be met. That step-down care from hospital can be provided for in the home and community.

Irish Rural Link calls for increase in investment and continued roll out of Primary Care Services in communities.

Community Development Officers

Investment in Community Development Officers in each HSE region would assist in developing a community approach to healthcare which can help to promote better health and wellbeing in a community and ensure that health inequalities are removed and access to healthcare is based on need²⁰. Part of the Community Development Officer's role would be to fully engage with all stakeholders in an area to ensure everyone, especially older and other vulnerable groups and those on low incomes have equal access to healthcare and are aware of the health services they are entitled to.

Irish Rural Link calls for the allocation of more funding for the Community Development Officers

Specialist Health Care and Local Hospitals

Irish Rural Link welcomes Centre of Excellences for the delivery of specialist healthcare. However, the speed of access to specialist healthcare continues to be an issue and leads to inequalities in terms of income. The two-tier system that occurs for specialist healthcare

²⁰ HSE 'Community Development Resource Pack'
https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/yourhealthservice/SUI/Library/Guides/Community_Development_Resource_Pack.pdf

must be removed. Access must be based on a person's need and not on their ability to pay or if they have private health insurance. People with private health insurance can be fast-tracked to specialist care. With the cost of private health insurance increasing, many people, especially in rural areas can no longer afford to pay this.

People living in rural areas are faced with extra costs when accessing specialist healthcare. People will have to travel to access the specialist healthcare and in some cases may need to accommodation if receiving treatment. These costs are incurred by the patient. There is also the cost of caring, with another person having to travel with the patient.

Better working relations and linkages between local hospitals and Centres of Excellence within hospital groups need to be developed. With advancements in healthcare and treatments, a review of what treatments could be provided in local hospitals or primary care centres, could be examined to reduce costs for patients. Any scans, bloods etc could be carried out in local hospitals or primary care centre with results communicated to specialists in Centres of Excellence by the local hospital.

Irish Rural Link calls for a universal health system and the removal of two-tier health system that is in place, especially for specialist services.

Mental Health Services

Rural Isolation can have a negative impact on a person's mental health. Rural isolation is a particular issue among men, and especially older men, who are living alone and this group can be more susceptible to mental health problems. With the closure of services, such as Post Offices, rural schools, Garda Stations, local pubs over the past few years, many people, mainly older people who live alone, the issue of isolation has increased.

The stigma surrounding mental health and suicide is still very prevalent especially in rural areas and in particular among men. The stigma around asking for help or talking about their problems has not changed in rural areas.

Irish Rural Link calls for continued funding of €35 million to Mental Health Services. Every effort must be remained to fill posts for services and retain staff in these posts.

Section 7: Agriculture

Agriculture still remains one of the biggest sectors in rural areas. It needs to be supported to grow and diversify to incorporate changes around Climate Action and Environment

Rainwater Harvesting

Irish Rural Link continues to call for the installation of a rain-water collection system.

Water is an increasing cost to farmers and obligations under the Water Framework Directive reinforce the need for farms to make the most efficient use of water possible. Farming's intensive use of water has implications for the water reserves of the wider community. Farms have large areas of roofed sheds and concrete yards and there is significant scope to harvest, collect and recycle the water from these, enabling it to be used in farm activities or - if suitably treated - as high quality drinking water. In light of this Irish Rural Link propose a supports scheme.

The objectives of such a scheme are:

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

Cost per farm unit ²¹

Fittings	€2,028
Precast Reinforced Concrete Tank	€1,500
Installation Costs	€ 800
Total	€4,328
Grant 12.5%	€ 516
Total cost to farm	€3,814
At an average saving in water charges of 1,000 per year the farmer could expect to pay the capital cost in just over three years	

Based on an estimate that there are 135,000 farms in Ireland and that such a proposal would be targeted at 100,000 farms; the overall cost to the EU rural development programme would be 50 million.

²¹ This study and report were undertaken under the auspices of the National Rural Water Monitoring Committee by a project team from the School of Civil and Structural Engineering at Dublin Institute of Technology.

Septic Tank Grants

Inspection of septic tanks now takes place around the country by the local authorities for many rural residents this sparks fear. Many septic tanks have been left in decline since their construction due to a lack of education on maintenance. Many people are living in fear of inspections due to the cost of bringing their tank up to standard. From the initial round of inspections up to 75% of septic tanks failed in some counties. The majority of these were down to minor problems such as sludging or lack of maintenance. The tanks with larger structural damage will cost a great deal more to fix for which there is a maximum grant of 4000 euro available.

Irish Rural Link is calling for an increase in the level of the grant available aimed at low income families and elderly people. The staging of the grants is also an issue that needs to be addressed. There is currently an 80% grant to a maximum of 4,000 euro for incomes under 50,000 while there is 50% available to a maximum of 2,500 euro for incomes between 50,001 and 75,000. IRL is calling for the grants available to be increasingly staged as families earning just over 50,000 euro could lose up to 30% of the grant available for being relevantly over the limit.

Farm Safety

With fourteen farm fatalities so far this year, it is without doubt that this number is too high. One death is one too many. Action needs to be taken now to ensure that this number does not continue for the second part of the year. The reasons why so many farm deaths and accidents are occurring in the first instance also need to be explored; whether this is work stress, mental health or just a change in mindset.

Irish Rural Link piloted a Farm Safety Mentoring Programme “Farmers inspiring Farmers to be Safety Aware”, funded by the HSA in 2012 in four counties; Westmeath, Longford, Cavan and Meath and carried out for 12 months. The programme was a bottom up approach to farm safety where mentors, who were farmers themselves and concerned about farm safety, carried out safety checks on neighbours or friends’ farms in a less formal manner. The main objective of the programme was to empower a group of farmers or individuals with a close association with the farming community to assist with a change in the perception and habits regarding farm safety. It was found that farmers were more responsive to other farmers than to someone from the Department of Agriculture or Health and Safety Authority.

Irish Rural Link calls for a similar Farm Safety Programme be rolled out and sufficient allocation of funding available to support this. It is imperative that the number of agricultural deaths be reduced to zero.

Computer Training for Farmers

With Farm Payments and registration of herd number moving online from January 2018, farmers need to be upskilled in computer training. Irish Rural Link launched a basic computer programme for farmers in May 2017 'IT Skills for Farmers' which provides farmers with the computer skills to go online and register stock, make returns and learn how to use the internet. To date over 40 farmers have been trained in this programme and many more have expressed interest in doing the course.

Irish Rural Link calls for the funding of this programme continue to be made available in Budget 2018

Conclusion

Budget 2018 must protect the most vulnerable in our society. Adequate funding and resources must be put in place to ensure that everyone now has a basic standard of living and people are not further pushed into poverty. The necessary investment and Government will is now needed to ensure rural and regional development and the strategies and frameworks are fully realised. Budget 2018 must be both rural and poverty proofed so that every person regardless of where they live in the country can begin to benefit from economic growth.

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.'