



Irish Rural Link
Nasc Tuaithe na hÉireann

Submission to Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection Statement of Strategy 2017 - 2020

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Contact

Seamus Boland or Louise Lennon



government supporting communities

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An Roinn Tithíochta, Pleanála,
Pobail agus Rialtais Áitiúil
Department of Housing, Planning,
Community and Local Government

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.

There continues to be a gap in growth between urban and rural areas, with growth in urban areas far outweighing rural areas. Many people and communities, in rural areas, especially vulnerable and marginalised groups, are still feeling the impact of the recession and austerity budgets. These are very often the most difficult people to reach but now need to be prioritised and supported to be more included in society.

Although the rate of unemployment continues to fall, with the national unemployment rate now at 6.7% as of Q1 2017¹ 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.

With employment and getting people back to work now under the remit of the Department, it is essential that all staff are fully informed on the support services available to people and that they are able to link them to the correct service.

¹ CSO QNHS Q1 2017

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

Recommendations for Strategy Statement 2017-2020

Engagement with Stakeholders

There is good engagement by the DSP with some stakeholders. Two Bilateral meetings with the Community and Voluntary Pillar takes place each year and the Pre-Budget Forum is a strong engaging process which is well attended each year.

We would recommend that such engagement continues as part of new strategy. We would also recommend that attendance by officials from other Government Departments to the Pre-Budget Forum is encouraged, especially the workshops.

Transfer of Roles from Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation

The Department have new roles transferred from the old Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation. It is imperative that all staff members, especially those working on the front line are fully briefed on these new roles and that they have all the correct information to pass onto customers.

Information sharing among Departments

With the transfer of roles from DJEI to new Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection there is a greater responsibility on both Departments to engage with one another and work more closely so people are aware of what each Department does and staff can inform customers of what is available to them in terms of employment areas or if they wish to set up own business etc.

Poverty proofing of Budgets

While this function is carried out using the SWITCH model in collaboration with the ESRI, there is a greater need that this happens before the budget and not afterwards. By doing it beforehand, it will better inform Government departments of where spending needs to occur and identify the most vulnerable groups of people are going to be most likely impacted by the budget.

Rural Proofing of Department Policies/Strategies

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. There should be a commitment in every Government Department's Statement of Strategy 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.

Minimum Wage and Living Wage

Income inadequacies are felt by many households living in rural areas who are dependent on Social Welfare Payments and who are earning minimum wage. These income inadequacies are very often higher for households in rural areas than for counterparts in urban areas. The Minimum Essential Standard of Living is better reflection on the cost of living for those on low and fixed income and should be considered when making budgetary decisions and deriving policies and strategies.

With responsibility of the Minimum Wage now with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, there is now an opportunity for the Department to reduce the income inadequacies for some of the most vulnerable groups in society and help them move out of poverty by exploring the concept of a Living Wage.

Farm Incomes and Farm Assist

Despite a decrease in average farm income; a decrease from €26,000 in 2015 to €24,000 in 2016, there continues to be a decrease in the number of farmers/fishermen in receipt of Farm Assist. Irish Rural Link welcomes the increase by €5 in the payment in Budget 2017 as well as changes to income disregards in the means testing process. However, we are still concerned on the low numbers in receipt of the payment and that it is still based on previous year's income. IRL recommends that this be examined as well as more information made available to farmers/fishermen that this payment is available and how it can be accessed.

Employment Schemes

Employment schemes such as CE scheme, RSS and Tus are extremely valuable to many people and to communities. It allows those to use their skills while communities benefit from services and upkeep of their area which their Local Authority is unable to provide.

Changes were made to length of time a person can stay on these schemes. IRL have asked and continue to ask for these changes to be reversed. Many services in rural areas, such as Meals on Wheels, transport etc depend on people on these schemes to deliver these services which otherwise may not be provided. As many of the people who use these services are vulnerable older people there is a trust built up between customers and those who deliver their meal, if there is a constant change in staff it takes time for people to get to know new staff.

Travel Pass

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 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 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. Such a scheme/allowance should be explored as part of the Department's three year strategy.

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.'