

# Annual Review 2016

## Message from Billy Murphy, Chairman IRL

It is estimated that there are in the region of 237,753 SME's operating in Ireland employing almost a million people many of these enterprises are the economic backbone of their respective rural communities. This despite the obstacles placed in the way of rural businesses such as second rate broadband, poor transport infrastructure, fuel costs, and access to capital not to mention the looming shadow of Brexit.

However I do not wish to dwell on the negatives at this time but highlight the supports available to existing enterprises and start-up's in rural Ireland which will be showcased at Irish Rural Link's Annual Conference on Friday 5<sup>th</sup> May in Athlone.

In 2016, IRL became the lead organisation with the support from The Wheel, NUIG and Philip Farrelly & Co to run Ireland's National Rural Network. The NRN have responsibility for implementation of the Rural Development Programme (RDP) 2014-2020 and to ensure best outcomes for all stakeholders. Since the establishment of the NRN and through holding meetings with different stakeholders and seminars, IRL have expanded its knowledge base on the array of supports that are available to enterprises at all stages of development; including Back to Work Enterprise Allowance Scheme, supported by Department of Social Protection and the local Partnership Companies through to LEADER and the Local Enterprise Offices among others.

One of the missing links to the development of local rural enterprises is the access to locally led and committed capital. Some years ago Irish Rural Link embarked on an exploratory journey investigating what an alternative rural financial structure might look like. Early along this journey our paths crossed with members and promoters of the German Sparkassen Local Public Banking system who have remained our partners to this day through good times and bad and we have arrived at a place where this local banking model is now supported by all major political parties. I would like to encourage you all to come along to the Irish Rural Link annual conference to listen to Harald Felzen, Sparkassen, and lend your support for this important initiative that will contribute to the economic viability of rural Ireland and ensure it's social, environmental and cultural sustainability

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Chairperson



## Message from the Chief Executive Officer

In 2016, issues of *rural regeneration, being left behind, or not being taken seriously* by policy makers came to the fore. It was clear that in the aftermath of the general election, many politicians and commentators were surprised that rural communities felt that despite the recovery of Ireland they were left very far behind. Issues not new, included the continuous withdrawal of banking, post office, health and mainstream transport services. For young people there was a reduction of emigration, but an increase in migration, with many people having to move to the greater Dublin area; which in terms of employment opportunities seemed to be the only area in positive growth. Irish Rural Link in its many submissions made it clear that all policy formation needed to include the development of rural Ireland on a par with everywhere else.

The need to strengthen job creation policy, especially small businesses; who are the predominant employer in these areas. The old chestnuts of broadband and digital connectivity raised their heads again and despite Government adoption of actions to speed up coverage, so important for the sustainability of rural areas, there is still considerable disadvantages for the SMEs based in rural areas.

From an organizational point of view, I am glad to report considerable growth in terms of its work.

In partnership with The Wheel, NUIG, Philip Farrelly, we were successful in our bid to be selected as the National Rural Network, responsible for the dissemination of information emanating from the Rural Development programme as funded by the EU.

The importance of the RDP for rural communities cannot be overstated and from our prospective allows us to underline why rural areas benefit enormously from this funding. During the year we continued our research into the proposal to establish a local community banking system. In collaboration with Sparkasse of Germany, a foundation promotion local community banking as a means of improving regional development. We were glad to have succeeded in getting all political parties to agreement in terms of investigating the means in which it could be adapted for Irish conditions. Clearly the changes in the banking structure have meant that credit available to the smaller business is hampered. In regional areas, where the established banking system has embarked on headlong rush to the exit point, this proposal is the first in many years which shows that there is a need to establish a relationship model of banking where there is a re investment of monies back into the region and at the same time a system which gives confidence to the small businesses. We were awarded an Erasmus programme on the promotion of microbusiness in rural areas across six EU members states including Ireland. This programme scheduled to begin in 2017.

Our very successful programme designed to train people on the basic use of computers was significantly increased and extended for a further three years. So far we have trained over three thousand people, providing a very valuable outlet to people who are often isolated from the digital technology necessary to connect them to their friends.

In policy terms we launched a report on rural poverty, a publication which we plan to repeat on an annual basis. We presented policy documents to the Dáil Committee on Transport, banking and agriculture. We contributed over 20 submissions on rural issues and were members of short term government committees on the post office and

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broadband. We also presented a budget submission and attended the National Economic forum in Dublin Castle.

Over the year a number of specific forums were serviced through IRL.

The Wetlands forum continues to grow with meetings held on wetland sites around the country. There was a Wetlands Strategic plan which is to be launched in 2017. The main aim of the forum is to ensure that communities are the main decision makers on how wetlands in their own local area are managed.

The Meals on Wheels Network has been met by the HSE and representations were made to Government on the need to assist groups, particularly voluntary groups.

The Rural Transport Network, which comprises of the local transport providers asked IRL to act as their secretariat.

During the year IRL was again supported by the SSNO programme administered by the Department of Environment, which we are extremely grateful for.

I continue to be grateful for the support of the Board of IRL And its chairperson Billy Murphy for the help to myself and staff.

My thanks to the staff of IRL who continue to commit to ensuring that members receive the best service possible.

Seamus Boland  
CEO



## **IRL Executive Board & Staff**

Billy Murphy, Chairman, Wexford Local Development

Peter Brady, Secretary, Kilnaleck Community Council, Co. Cavan

Michael Kenny, NUI Maynooth

Chris Uys, Abbeyleix Bog Project

Marian Flannery, Women of the North West, Co. Mayo

Tom Lavin, Highwood CRC, Sligo

Ann Murtagh, Mullingar, Co. Westmeath (Retired May 2016)

Martin Smyth, Mullaghmeen Enterprises, Co. Westmeath (Retired May 2016)

Paddy Egan, Kenagh Co-op, Co. Longford (Retired May 2016)

Tara Farrell, Longford Women's Link

Miriam McKenna, Flexibus, Co. Meath

Pat Leogue, County Kildare Partnership

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Gerard Quain, Ballyhoura Development, Co. Limerick  
Maria O’Gorman, Treasurer, Duagh FRC, Co. Kerry  
Dr. Maura Farrell, NUIG  
Maureen Lally, Tochar Valley FRC,  
Mary Ryan, Teagasc, Athenry, Co. Galway– Elected May 2016  
Kieran McEntee, Kenagh Coop, Kenagh, Co. Longford – Elected May 2016  
Mary Keane – Co-opted 2016

## Meet the Team

Seamus Boland	Chief Executive Officer
Maria Pettit	Administration & Finance
Mary Keyes	Admin and ‘Getting Citizens online’ Co-ordinator February 2016
Louise Lennon	Policy & Communications Officer June 2016
Christine Casey	Departed February 2016
James Claffey	NRN Manager
Noel Kinahan	Community Rural Banking Project



## Irish Rural Link Priorities 2016

### Overall Aim

To secure the existence of substantial numbers of viable communities in all parts of rural Ireland where every person would have meaningful work, adequate income and social services, and where infrastructures needed for sustainable development would be in place.

### Strategic Priority 1

- Continue to develop as a visionary organisation in the field of rural community development  
Objective
- IRL is a key independent and influential rural community based organisation, influencing good practice and progressive and creative policy formation

### Strategic Priority 2

- Influence Policy Development and Implementation at Local National and European levels towards a sustainable vision  
Objective
- IRL in voicing rural policy has the skills and strategy to effectively influence sustainable policy development and sustainable policy implementation at national and EU levels

### Strategic Priority 3

- Facilitate and promote social and economic development initiatives in rural areas  
Objective

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- IRL is the key community based organisation promoting sectoral networks that cohesed rural communities of interest for the promotion of social and economic development.

#### Strategic Priority 4

- Strengthen and build the capacity of IRL members
- IRL is supported by a strategically developed active membership representing a profile of rural volunteers, community organisations and professionals working in rural community development.



#### IRL's Plans

- Develop a greater link between all advocates of community based development within Ireland and the EU.
- Ensure that groups affected by social inclusion or disadvantage have a continued voice
- Assist communities with innovative ideas that support rural communities.

#### Representation on External Bodies:

As well as being involved in Social partnership Irish Rural Link represents rural interests on a wide range of external bodies & boards.



#### IRL Collaboration & Representation

Erasmus+. LEADER.  
C&V Pillar. Seminars.  
Rural Services. Training.  
Wetlands Forum. MEMBERS.  
NESF. Rural Transport. Rural Banking.  
NESC. Micro Enterprises.  
DAFM. Public Consultation.  
MICRO. Cross Border Projects.  
Leargas. Getting Citizens Online.  
NDP Monitoring Committee.  
National Water Services Committee.  
Sustainable Rural Communities.  
Government Departments.  
National Rural Network.  
Farm Safety. BMW Regional Assembly.  
EUR Rural Parliament.  
Peatlands Council.  
Rural Broadband.  
Mealson Wheels. Social Inclusion.  
Sparkassen. Social Change.  
Pobal.  
Biodiversity. Climate Change.

## Activities in 2016

- IRL sits on 14 National Committees
- IRL is the current Chair of Pobal
- IRL is the current Chair of the Peatlands Council
- IRL is a member of the EU Social Economic Committee
- IRL completed our term as Secretariat to the C&V Pillar in June 2016
- IRL began our term as Secretariat to the National Rural Transport Network in June 2016.
- IRL was successful as the lead partner in a joint bid for the National Rural Network 2016 – 2020
- IRL was successful as the lead partner in a Joint bid for MICRO, under Erasmus+
- IRL was successful in a bid to continue to provide computer training under the ‘Getting Citizens Online’ programme.
- IRL hosts and facilitates meetings and consultations on behalf of Eirgrid.
- IRL continue to facilitate and support the National Meals on Wheels Network, Community Wetlands Forum, and Community Engagement sessions (Bord na Mona)
- IRL continues the Rural Banking project –in partnership with German bank Sparkassenstiftung including submissions made to various departments and Enterprise Ireland resulting in an inclusion in the Programme for Government.
- IRL held our Annual Conference in May 2016.
- IRL re launched our new website in 2016.
- The NRN held its Annual Conference in October 2016.



- The NRN launched its website in 2016.
  - Under the Benefit 4 (Getting Citizens online) IRL trained 1100 participants in 2016
  - IRL completed 1 research project in partnership with NUIG – ‘Wetlands Areas and their Oral Histories’
  - IRL made submissions to
    - Department of Transport, Sports & Tourism – Statement of Strategy 2017-2019
    - DSP – ‘Commissioning in Human, Social and Community Services’
- Oireachtas Committee on the Future of Healthcare.
- Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government Statement of Strategy 2016-2019
- Submission to Ireland’s Open Government Partnership Draft Action Plan 2016-2018
- IRL Pre-Budget Submission 2017, Pre-Budget Submission made on behalf of Meals on Wheels Network and Community Wetlands Forum.

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- Consultation with Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs to inform Action Plan for Rural Development.
- Blogs, published our Annual Review, 1 e-newsletter,
- Launched 2 new websites – Meals on Wheels & Community Wetlands
- As manager of the National Rural Network, issues 3 hard copy Newsletters, 4 E-newsletters, held 6 working group meetings, and attended seminars on LEADER, other national networks seminars in; London, Brussels, Amsterdam, Limerick. IRL/NRN co-hosted a Cross Border conference on Leader in Newry.
- A seminar jointly organised by Longford Women's Manifesto Group and Irish Rural Link took place in September 2016 on Citizen Engagement and Rural Communities.
- IRL published a report titled 'Poverty and Social Inclusion: The Case for Rural Ireland' with the support of the DSP for the UN International Day for the Eradication of Poverty.
- IRL were before the Oireachtas Committee on Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs in November 2016.
- IRL have issued 35 press releases and attended over 100 panel discussions on local and national media.

## **National Rural Network**

In 2016 a consortium led by Irish Rural Link, supported by the Wheel, NUIG and Philip Farrelly & Co. was appointed to run Ireland's National Rural Network (NRN). The new consortium is responsible for facilitating all stakeholders and interested groups in achieving better outcomes across the measures under the Rural development Programme 2104 – 2020 (RDP)

The NRN is part of the implementation architecture for RDP's across the EU, and its primary aims are to increase stakeholder involvement, improve quality of implementation, inform the public and potential beneficiaries, and foster innovation.

'The ambition of the consortium is to maximize the impact of the RDP by bringing it into the lives of as many people and communities as possible. We aim to transform levels of engagement with the programme, and by building participating in its implementation, and a sense of ownership of the programme amongst stakeholders, to maximize the positive impact in the lives of people and communities across rural Ireland'. Since its creation, the NRN has created a new dedicated Website, published several newsletters and e-newsletters, held its National Conference in October 2016.

The NRN has been working hard to increase its membership throughout the country. Membership is free and you can sign up on;

[www.nationalruralnetwork.ie](http://www.nationalruralnetwork.ie)



## 5. Innovative Farm Safety Mentoring Programme

The pilot project funded by the Health and Safety Authority was initially rolled out in the midland counties of Westmeath, Meath, Cavan and Longford and is based on the discussion group model, where farmers mentor their colleagues on farm safety.

## 6. MICRO

In November 2016 Irish Rural Link was in Brussels to launch the MICRO Project (Enhancing Competitiveness of Microenterprises in Rural Areas)

The project is co-funded by Erasmus+ Programme of the European Commission.

MICRO brings together experienced partners from 6 countries (Belgium, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Macedonia and Spain) coordinated by Irish Rural Link (IRL), with extensive experience in EU-funded projects: National University of Ireland Maynooth, IE; IDP European Consultants, IT; Internet Web Solutions, ES; IHF asbl, BE; CDI Community Development Institute, MK; Brainstorming, EL.



**Erasmus<sup>+</sup> and Irish Rural Link** are running a two year programme which will deliver innovative and supportive online education tools for entrepreneurs and craft leaders in rural areas. Micro and craft type enterprises, will benefit from this programme in terms of increased access to improved support services to empower them to cope better with the challenges of economic crises, explore new opportunities for growth and participate fully in the EU Single Market.

**The idea behind MICRO is to sustain the growth and competitiveness of rural micro-enterprises by developing practical online training resources and a dedicated Open Educational Resource**

IRL are now looking for small businesses that are interested in the following areas to join our programme:

- Learning new skills & making fresh contacts
- Gaining access to the wider European markets
- Learning how EU wide tools and resources can benefit their business
- Gaining market share globally through exporting
- Finding a pathway for their product in the Euro Zone –

For the first 200 businesses that sign up to participate in this programme, IRL will provide access to free face-to-face mentoring in the new modules developed as well as the potential to network with businesses taking part in the project across six European countries. In return we ask that they commit to completing the attached short survey, attend 1 national seminar, 1 locally held information seminar, and take the odd telephone call over the life of the programme (2 Years).

*Should you require any further information please do not hesitate to contact Irish Rural Link.*

## Rural Community Banking Initiative Review 2016

The Rural community banking initiative (Local Public Banking) has been consistent both in its support from political parties and other stakeholders. The SBFIC, IRL's partner in advocating this model, made a significant change in personnel and has brought on board to the project Harald Felzen. Harald has extensive experience in retail banking and sat on the Board of Management of the Sparkasse bank in Ludwigsburg. The project has benefited greatly from the work and support of TCD and DCU in the area of Economics and the legislative context. This support culminated and manifested itself in a seminar held in the RDS in Dublin. The seminar was well attended by possible future stakeholders such as ILCU, LEO's and political parties and council Representatives. The



speakers on the day included Sparkasse representatives Heinrich Haasis, Chairman of SBFIC and President of the World Savings Bank Institute and Dr Schackmann-Fallis, Member of the board of DSGV and member of the European Economic and Social Committee Brussels. Laying out the legal framework for the model being proposed was Dr Eoin O'Dell, Associate Professor TCD. The conference was a success and was our first opportunity to showcase our work to date on this project and engage with stakeholders.



IRL and the SBFIC made a submission to the Action Plan for Rural Development. This was prompted following the Government's commitment in the Programme for Partnership Government to "thoroughly investigate the German Sparkassen model for the development of local public banks that operate within well-defined regions". The Action Plan for Rural Development was published in early 2017.



## Getting Citizens Online in 2016

### Benefit 4 Basic Computer Training

**Irish Rural Link** offered a free computer course that took place at a range of venues around the country. The main objective of Benefit 4 Programme is to get more people online. It is aimed at people who have never used the computer before, with the objective of being able to use computer programs such as Ms Word, navigate the World Wide Web, searching for information and sending emails. Training is provided by fully qualified Computer Tutors. The course takes place over a 5 week period with one 2 hour classes per week.

We focus on key target groups like older people, jobseekers, people in the rural community, small business owners, persons with disabilities and farm families.

#### **Irish Rural Link runs Basic Computer Classes for**

Age profile 45+

People in the farming community

Small business owners (<10)

Unemployed person

Persons with disabilities

Disadvantaged groups

To date, Irish Rural Link has delivered this type Internet training to over 4,500 participants around the country for all different age groups. Its aim is to deliver this type training to the most isolated areas including the islands”.



### Venues in 2016



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### **"Digital Skills for Citizens"**

In December Irish Rural Link was awarded funding from the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment to run the new Getting Citizen's Online Programme which will replace the Benefit 4 Programme commencing in January 2017. The overarching objective of the scheme is 'to provide citizens who are unable to use the internet with confidence, motivation and skills to reap the benefits of participating in today's digital world'. Funding is being provided to deliver basic digital skills training to those

with little or limited computer skills. The programme also includes classes for farmers which will focus on delivering Digital Skills Training to farmers. The classes are being rolled out nationwide in 2017.

### **The new IT Skills for Farmers Course will include the following:**

Department of Agriculture  
Farmer Registration Calf & Herd Register  
Computer Literacy  
Internet Search  
Setting up Email  
Online Banking

**Contact [Mary@irishrurallink.ie](mailto:Mary@irishrurallink.ie) for more information**



May 2017



Roinn Cumarsáide,  
Fuinnimh & Acmhainní Nádurtha  
Department of Communications,  
Energy & Natural Resources



## FREE IT SKILLS COURSE FOR FARMERS



**IRL** are holding **FREE** classes in a venue near you

**Topics Include :**

**Department of Agriculture**

**Farmer Registration Calf & Herd Register**

**Computer Literacy**

**Internet Search**

**Setting up Email**

**Online Banking**

**BOOKING IS ESSENTIAL**

**For more information on this free course, please contact:**

**Mary at 090 6482744**

[maryk@irishrurallink.ie](mailto:maryk@irishrurallink.ie)  
[www.irishrurallink.ie](http://www.irishrurallink.ie)

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**Membership:**

At end of December 2016 IRL Group Membership stood at 622  
List available on request

**Metrics**

**Media in 2016 -**

Press Releases	100+
Media Appearances	50+
Newsletters	2
Blogs	3
Website Launch	4
Number of Submission made in 2016 -	7
Number of National Committees -	13
Number of Research Projects -	2
Participants Trained under B4 -	1100
No. Of New Established Member networks -	1 (NRN)

*Irish Rural Link was referenced in the International Best Seller "The Living Death" by Graham Masterton.*



Trainer Panel 2016

Irish Rural Link acknowledges, the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government and the Programme, the Scheme to Support National Organisations 2016-2019”

Irish Rural Lin acknowledge the support of the Scheme to Support National Organisations and the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government)



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

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