



Budget Submission

2016/2017

Contact
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<p>Rural Energy Poverty</p> <p>Community led renewable Energy Projects</p>	<p>Ring-fence revenue from carbon tax to off-set fuel poverty and provide support for alternative fuels and heating systems. It should be noted that Ireland's carbon tax rates is one of the highest in Europe and is particularly punitive against businesses located in rural and regional areas.</p> <p>Encourage greater uptake of grant packages which will enable rural households to adapt their homes so that they will be warmer and will be compliant with all climate change policies.</p> <p>Develop plans that will cater for exceptional cold weather patterns.</p> <p>Address commuting patterns through regional and sub-regional employment stimuli and promote eco-driving.</p> <p>There is a need to offer financial support to community led projects for the initial structural costs.</p>
<p>Rural Enterprise & Employment</p> <p>Local Public Banking Policy</p> <p>Investment policy</p> <p>Rural Development Programme</p>	<p>Maintain the three-year tax relief for new start-ups</p> <p>Support entrepreneurialism and diversify employment in rural areas.</p> <p>Develop an employment based training programme, which links employers with the unemployed and which at the end of each individual training programme; the employer is expected to employ the person provided they get reasonable supports.</p> <p>The IRL proposal, included in the <i>Programme for a Partnership Government</i> 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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>Continue investment in broadband infrastructure. Review the delay of the completion of National Broadband Plan to 2022.</p>

Rain-water harvest	<p>Develop microfinance for small or rural enterprises.</p> <p>The design of environmental programmes, which will protect the environment and will also create jobs.</p> <p>The aim of this proposal is to put in place rainwater collection systems on every farm, using the existing farm shed as the main collector.</p> <p>Financial support to farmers would be designed under the new EU programme for rural development. Companies involved would do so to a minimum standard and could also avail of training programmes linked to people unemployed.</p>
Regional Development	<p>Follow through on commitments outlined in Programme for a Partnership Government to implement the recommendation in CEDRA Report and Rural Charter.</p> <p>Activate and continue Gateway Innovation Fund.</p> <p>Engage with communities on unfinished housing developments.</p>
Small Towns/Villages	<p>The launch of a targeted stimulus programme aimed at regenerating rural towns and villages.</p> <p>The mechanism for delivery of such a targeted stimulus programme should be similar to the RAPID programme and could be piloted in key areas most affected by the recession.</p>
Rural Transport & Isolation	<p>Maintain and extend current supports to Rural Transport Programme.</p> <p>Re-organise the method of finance allocation under the free transport programme. As it is currently constructed, it fails to be of benefit to the vast majority of people on social welfare in rural areas who are entitled to it.</p>
Phone Allowance	<p>IRL is calling on a reverse of the 2013 budget decision to remove the phone allowance for pensioners.</p>
Services	<p>Establish a study on the feasibility of essential services to rural areas. Using a cost benefit approach, the criteria used should include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The use of indicators that measure the benefit in social terms to people. - The long term consequences of not providing the service - The long term costs associated with cutting back. <p>Such a study would ensure that decisions made in the short term are based on strong principles of financial and social sustainability.</p>

Septic Tank Grants	Expand the grant system for improving the standard of septic tanks in Ireland. The level of the grants needs to be raised especially for low income families and to be staged as some families can just be over the limit for the full grant losing 30 per cent of the grant available. Education surrounding the correct maintenance of septic tanks is required to improve the standard while also reducing the inspection failure rate.
BenefIT 4 Basic Computer Training Programme	The decision to cut funding to the BenefIT 4 Basic Computer Training Programme should be reversed immediately as the programme provides essential training to those marginalised in the new digital age.

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. IRL have fully accepted the gravity of the crisis facing the Government but believe rural communities have borne a disproportionate weight of recent budgetary decisions including carbon taxes, community sector cutbacks and reduced regional investment.

We welcome the previous Government's success in maintaining the steady improvement of Ireland's finances and in particular their work in restructuring the huge national debt and we encourage that the new Government continue to build on this.

We urge the new Government to recognise the huge sacrifices made by people, during the period of austerity now and strongly recommend that this budget begins the process of stimulating the economy so that employment can begin to increase and lessen the hardship that many people and families continue to experience.

The new Government's ambition as set out in the *Programme for a Partnership Government* is to

“build a strong economy and to deliver a fair society, so that communities thrive, throughout both urban and rural Ireland”. (May 2016).

However, 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.

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.

Overall Rural Strategies

Irish Rural Link welcomes the appointment of a Minister for Regional Development and Rural Affairs at cabinet level and will be charged with the implementation of CEDRA report and the Rural Charter.

The lack of any functioning overall strategy to inform Government policy on rural development has completely disadvantaged rural communities over the years. The demise of the white paper on rural development coupled with the

ending of the National Spatial Strategy has meant that there is no overarching strategy that can inform all departments on rural policy. National policies are then rolled out without any analysis of the unintended consequences for rural areas.

Examples include;

Government action	Outcomes
The closure of over 30 Garda stations in rural Ireland	Without an accompanying policy to assure communities that policing will be improved; rural families now believe they have an inferior police service.
School Closures	The closing of rural schools has the immediate consequence of increasing the costs of families in getting their children to school. Equally such closures are never analysed in terms of actual savings to the state.
Closure of outreach health related services	People living in isolated areas rely on accessing outreach health related services. Older people already limited in terms of transport have come to depend on these. Their closure increases their risk to ill health and increases their sense of isolation.
Carbon Tax	Because people living in rural areas can not choose alternative modes of transport, they are forced to pay this as an extra tax.
Broadband	The failure to roll out broadband, what is comparable with national standards disadvantages the rural towns, villages and communities in terms of employment creation and the encouragement of investment.

While this table is a limited representation of such examples it symbolises the huge gap between policy and action as it applies in rural Ireland.

We propose that a white paper outlining a ten year strategy to achieve regional based growth, both social and economic, is developed and launched and that measures set out in the Programme for Government are implemented.

Rural Poverty

The Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL)¹ for 2016 shows that there was a slight decrease in the cost of essential goods and services included in MESL² which fell by 0.7% from 2015 MESL costs but is still 4.6% higher than 2010. However, when housing and childcare are included there was a 3.0% increase in the year and a 7.7% increase from 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. Indeed, 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.

Income Inadequacies by Household Type in Receipt of SW Payment

Household Type	Rural	Urban
2 Parents with 1 infant	-€96.85	-€51.00
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 pre-school, 1 primary)	-€79.24	-€33.41
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 primary, 1 secondary)	-€154.03	-€110.00
2 Parents with 3 Children (1 infant, 1 pre-school, 1 primary)	-€99.92	-€54.95
2 Parents with 4 Children (2 primary, 2 Secondary)	-€244.27	-€192.99
One Parent with 1 child (Primary school)	-€107.61	-€43.83
One Parent with 2 Children (1 pre-school, 1 primary)	-€91.16	-€29.32
One Parent with 2 Children (1 primary, 1 secondary)	-€165.94	-€105.91
Single Adult living in Private Rented Accommodation	-€93.24	-€62.64
Pensioner Living Alone (non-contributory)	-€58.95	-€9.03

¹ Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (2016) 'Minimum Essential Standard of Living' http://budgeting.ie/images/stories/Publications/MESL_Update_Paper/VPSJ_2016_MESL_2016_Update_Report_Appendix.pdf

² 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.

Pensioner Living Alone (Contributory)	-€48.15	+€0.57
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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.

Rural Income Protection

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.

The protection of marginalised and disadvantaged rural citizens and communities should be a key priority in budget 2017.

- **Rural Social Scheme & Community Services Programme**

Irish Rural Link has welcomed the Government's commitment to the continuance of the Rural Social Scheme and Community Services Scheme. Together with the TUS scheme they provide a valuable service to people who are affected by unemployment or low income as is the case for farmers. Equally the contribution of these schemes to local communities.

IRL see these programmes 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. We strongly recommend that these schemes are restructured so that participants can make a real difference and ensure the best use is made of their skills, time and effort.

- **Community Employment (CE) Scheme**

This is a viable scheme 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 are on CE Scheme and is the only source of income for them. It is important that this scheme continues to be protected and adequate funding allocated. The weekly payment to people on this scheme must be increased in line with minimum wage to ensure people on the scheme do not experience poverty and to encourage more people who are long-term unemployed take up the scheme. It is also necessary to ensure valuable community services, such as Meals on Wheels can continue.

- **Farm Incomes and Farm Assist**

Farm Incomes have reduced considerably over the past number of years. A recent report from Teagasc on Farm Incomes shows that 34% of farms were economically vulnerable in 2015³. In recent times increasing numbers of farmers have relied on off-farm income, typically employed in the sectors most severely affected by the economic downturn such as construction and traditional manufacturing sectors⁴. However, this too has decreased over the past number of years. In 2007, 43% of farm households in the Border region had off-farm employment, in 2015, this decreased to 31%.

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. It is currently based on a farmer's previous year's income, which is very disadvantageous and doesn't protect against current or future prices. Irish Rural Link calls for the Government to expedite their review of the Farm Assist Scheme and that the payment made under the scheme and eligibility for the scheme be increased in the forthcoming budget.

³ Hennessey, T & Moran, B (2016) *Teagasc National Farm Survey Results 2015*
<https://www.teagasc.ie/media/website/publications/2016/Income-Estimates-2015.pdf>

⁴ Teagasc (2008) "An examination of the contribution of off-farm income to the viability and sustainability of farm households and the productivity of farm businesses"
<http://www.agresearch.teagasc.ie/rerc/downloads/Final%20Report.pdf>

Rural Energy Poverty

Rural households are at greater risk of fuel poverty due to the nature of the rural housing stock, the types of fuels available, limited opportunities to switch to cheaper fuels such as gas or take advantage of bundle deals offered by gas and electricity suppliers.

The *Strategy to Combat Energy Poverty 2016-2019*, launched early 2016 sets out measures to help households to reduce their housing costs. It is important that these measures are implemented and followed through to ensure that every household has the opportunity to reduce their energy costs.

Government must honour its promise to compensate poorer people suffering the increase in fuel costs as a result of the carbon tax, and take action on the rising level of fuel poverty in the State. We welcome that, as part of the *Programme for a Partnership Government* that the new Government will work with Local Authorities to replace oil heating in social housing with other fuels such as natural gas or woodchip where possible. Grants should be made available to those who own their home in rural areas who are living in fuel poverty and to private rented sector landlords where tenants are experiencing fuel and energy poverty.

Retrofitting

Retrofitting of homes is widely acknowledged by all as a simple measure that can greatly reduce our energy usage. We welcome that this is now acknowledged by Government in the *Strategy to Combat Energy Poverty 2016-2019* and reiterated in *Programme for a Partnership Government*. It is 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.

The issue of energy poverty continues to be a concern for many people and organisations especially older people. People need to be made more aware of the grants that are available to them to upgrade the energy efficiency of their homes and application forms must be easy to fill out, which can be off-putting for older people and other vulnerable groups.

It is recognised that people living in private rented accommodation can be more at risk of fuel and energy poverty as there is no incentive for them to invest in their home. Incentives given to landlords of tenants in receipt of Housing Assistant Payment (HAP) to retrofit their properties must be extended to all landlords whose properties are of lower energy efficiency standards, and whose tenants are in receipt of another housing payment such as Rent Supplement or Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS) or on low income but not entitled to state assistance for housing.

- **Fuel Poverty Strategy**

Fuel allowance was increased to €22.50 per week in Budget 2016. This must be maintained at this level or a carbon tax exemption is essential for those on low incomes, and households where home heating costs have risen. Although, cost of oil heating has fallen over the past year, it will always be subject to price fluctuations and this needs to be factored into the fuel allowance.

- **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 the 20% 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 is calling on 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 in some through selling the energy back into the grid, construction jobs, maintenance jobs, environmental benefits, reduced energy costs etc.

Carbon Tax

A lack of a public transport options in rural areas necessitates car ownership in order to access employment, basic services and amenities. Carbon tax could cost 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 €275.⁵

- **Fuel Costs**

Increased fuel costs will increase the cost of living in rural areas, compounding the effects of a carbon tax with relatively little return to the exchequer and should not be introduced. Although, the cost of home heating oil has fallen over the past two years it is beginning to increase again since February 2016. Indeed, there was a 6.5% increase in the cost of home heating oil between April and May 2016⁶.

- **Eco-driving**

⁵ “STRIVE- Science and Sustainability- Research based knowledge for Environmental Protection”
EPA and ESRI 2010

⁶ CSO Consumer Price Index May 2016

<http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/cpi/consumerpriceindexmay2016/>

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.

- **Commuting Patterns**

Regional and Sub-regional employment stimuli represent one of the key ways in which commuting patterns, fuel consumption and carbon emissions can be addressed in a manner that supports local communities.

Phone Allowance

The decision to abolish the phone allowance for elderly people is seen to have had a devastating effect on the quality of life for rural residents. For many elderly rural residents the phone acts as their only connection with the outside world. The abolishment of the phone allowance has left people in increased isolation leading to mental health issues such as depression. This decision has also led to increased anxiety over security among older people. Phone lines are connected to house alarms and with the elimination of the phone allowance they are no longer able to afford to have a security system in place. This is an issue of increased importance given the 50 per cent rise in robberies and assaults on older people in rural areas over the past decade. The phone allowance must be reinstated in Budget 2017; especially in rural areas it can be the only reliable source of external communication for many where mobile phone coverage is poor.

Rural Enterprise & Employment

Although the rate of unemployment is falling, with the national unemployment rate at 8.4% as of Q1 2016⁷ the rate of unemployment in rural counties is above that in the urban areas. For the Midlands, West and South East regions, unemployment rate in Q1 2016 was 11.6%, 10.2% and 12.5% respectively, while in the Dublin region rate of unemployment was 6.9% and 5.9% in Mid-East. 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.

We welcome that 135,000 of the new 200,000 jobs that will be created as part of Programme for Government will be outside of Dublin. It is imperative that a proportion of these jobs are located in rural areas.

The following infrastructure and supports are required and need to be in place to attract jobs to rural areas and to also foster entrepreneurship and create sustainable employment opportunities among those living 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. 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).

⁷ CSO QNHS Q1 2016

<http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/qnhs/quarterlynationalhouseholdsurveyquarter12016/>

- **Broadband**

Investment in high-quality fibre broadband must continue. Significant investment from the commercial sector in regards to fibre broadband infrastructure has taken place so far. The introduction of Siro (Joint venture between ESB and Vodafone) into the market is seen as vital as it adds increased competition in the market. The announcement in June 2015 from Eir (formerly Eircom) outlining their plan to remove 300,000 premises from the State-subsidised National Broadband Plan is regarded as a hugely positive step towards delivering high speed fibre optic broadband to every premise in the country. This announcement means that there are now 460,000 premises under the National Broadband Plan. These premises will be serviced under the National Broadband Plan. However, the suggested delay to 2022 for National Broadband Plan is very disappointing and needs to be tackled urgently. Broadband taskforces to be established with local councils, once a contract is awarded, must ensure the rollout of Broadband reaches every home and business in the country, that it is fit for purpose to meet future demands and services the jobs and business that the new Government plan to create in rural areas.

- **Diversified Employment**

More information on a Regional Jobs Plan as outlined in *A Programme for a Partnership Government* must be made available and a date of when this will be developed set. It is imperative that sufficient funding is allocated to the development of regional jobs. 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. 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 receive an increased allocation if they are to successfully foster enterprise locally. Any new enterprise support structure must have sub-regional job creation targets. The three-year tax relief for start-ups must be maintained to encourage more entrepreneurs to set up.

- **Small to Medium Enterprises**

Small and Medium Enterprises need to be protected and supported. The Town and Village Renewal Scheme to revitalise the economies of small towns and villages in rural areas will need adequate funding allocated in Budget 2017. SME's are vital to our economy and their needs are often overlooked. Difficulty accessing credit and commercial rates continue to be grave challenges faced by SME's. 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. The necessary infrastructure needs to be in place to help grow and expand SME's. A recent study for IE Domain Registry found that a quarter of small businesses that do not have a website are being kept offline due to poor broadband, with a third not having the time to go online⁸. These issues need to be addressed also and supports in place for those companies who wish to have an online presence.

- **Inclusive Entrepreneurship**

Enterprise support in the budget must be built on the principles of Inclusive Entrepreneurship. Mainstream business support fails to reach many types of entrepreneurs, including women, rural entrepreneurs, the disabled and those from ethnic minorities.

Local Public Banking Policy

⁸ RTE News.ie 16/06/16 <http://www.rte.ie/news/2016/0616/795937-businesses-web-presence-iedr/>

Irish Rural Link welcomes that the Programme for a Partnership Government includes the proposal to thoroughly investigate the German Sparkassen model for the development of local public banks that operate within well-defined regions. IRL in cooperation with the Savings Bank Foundation for International Cooperation (SBFIC) look forward to participating with the Government on an ongoing basis to facilitate this investigation.

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 Agri sectors that allow commerce to thrive.

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. 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.

4. 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.

IRL Proposed Local Public Banks



Virtuous Cycle created in each region



Map of sub-regional Strategic Planning Areas

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 fall in unemployment, youth unemployment remains high at 16.9% nationally as of Q1 2016⁹.

Irish Rural Link supports the youth guarantee and any initiatives that aim to reduce the high level of youth employment but has concerns over the

⁹ CSO QNHS Q1 2016
<http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/qnhs/quarterlynationalhouseholdsurveyquarter12016/>

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. An area where the accessibility could be improved is by providing greater funding to the Rural Transport Scheme which could deliver the participants to a training centre.

Irish Rural Link is calling on the government to monitor and evaluate the delivery of schemes such as JobBridge as some employers could be seen to exploit the scheme.

Rainwater harvesting

As part of our submission to the EU rural development programme, we proposed a rain-water collection system be installed in every farm. We continue to call for the installation of this.

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 ¹⁰

Fittings	€2,028
Precast Reinforced Concrete Tank	€1,500
Installation Costs	€ 800
Total	€4,328
Grant 12.5%	€ 516
Total cost to farm 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	€3,814

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.

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

¹⁰ 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.

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.

Renewed Commitment to Regional Development

Budget 2017 is an opportunity for the new Government to follow through on their commitments set out in the *Programme for a Partnership Government* for regional and rural development. The LEADER programme must be adequately funded in Budget 2017 and the implementation of recommendations of CEDRA and new Rural Charter. Rural Ireland bore the biggest brunt of the recession with many businesses having to close down and communities being lost as a result of emigration. The Government must now invest in redeveloping these rural regions to bring economic and social activity back to these communities.

- **Community Development**

The commitment by Government to continue to fund the completion of remaining unfinished housing developments is welcome. In rural areas, unfinished developments still exist, but the necessary services and jobs should be in place so that it is viable to bring them back to use and not left vacant once completed. Communities must have a role in this.

- **Public Service Efficiency**

The OECD has published a considered study of the Irish public sector *Towards an Integrated Public Service* and made detailed recommendations. These include the need for a strategic vision and increased performance review and accountability. These recommendations should be acted on immediately to ensure the public sector's efficiency, effectiveness and relevance.

- **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 Transport

The many benefits of the Rural Transport Programme include the important role it plays in combating rural isolation, particularly for older people. It also represents value for money, carrying approximately 1.5 million passengers annually, and functioning on less than 1.2% of the total annual investment in public transport. The role of community groups and non profit organisations in delivering this programme has been instrumental in affordability, capacity building and community involvement. Rural transport was acknowledged in the Programme for Government and we urge the Government to be cognisant of the impact of any changes to existing routes will have on people in remote rural areas.

Irish Rural Link makes the following recommendations:

- Funding for Rural Transport needs to be increased from its current level of €9m, far short of the 2016 target of €18m.
- Maintain and expand current supports to Rural Transport Programme
- Improve integration of rural transport services, including the Rural Transport Programme, Bus Éireann rural stage carriage services, health related and school transport services.
- IRL supports the development of the National Positive Ageing Strategy to deal with issues around incomes, isolation and poor access to services for older rural dwellers.

- Re-organise the method of finance allocation under the free transport programme. As it is currently constructed, it fails to be of benefit to the vast majority of people on social welfare in rural areas who are entitled to it.

The Community and Voluntary Sector

The Community and Voluntary Sector continue to play a valuable role at local, regional and national level and have a vital role to play in protecting marginalised members of society improving the rural citizen's quality of life.

By international standards a significant number of services are delivered by the sector in Ireland. This sector needs to be adequately funded and resourced if the new Government are to deliver on their commitments of a 'Social Economy' and a 'Just and Fair Society.' Funding Programmes available to the sector to provide valuable services must be protected. Some of these programmes include:

- The **Community Services Programme (CSP)**, 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 is now closed to new applicants. This needs to re-open and be a rolling programme as so many services such as Meals on Wheels could be availing of necessary funding.
- The **Social Innovation Fund** is managed by Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government and provides supports to social innovations in Ireland. It is welcome that the Government have committed to increasing the Social Innovation Fund from €5 million to €50 million in the *Programme for a Partnership Government* and this now must be honoured. Social Innovation now hopes to establish a health fund, which would be beneficial to services like Meals on Wheels. The network asks that money be allocated in Budget 2017 to

establish this fund and that application for the fund is simple and accessible for all to complete.

Small Towns and Villages

It is welcome that the new Minister for Regional Development and Rural Affairs will develop a Town and Village Renewal Scheme. The decline of rural towns and villages over the past few years is demonstrated by the high closure rate of small businesses, often moving out to the outskirts of the area. While it is clear that the recession has contributed to this, it is also an outcome of high rental charges and local authority rates. Equally the cost of doing business in towns is added to by the imposition of parking charges or restrictions on parking in any circumstance. Towns that are mainly supported by small business types are therefore more vulnerable to any increased charges.

The closure of services, such as Garda stations, Post offices and banking services, particularly in the smaller towns has reduced their sustainability and increased overall poverty.

The new scheme must be designed to bring economic activity back to the main streets of small towns and villages to restore these as a platform of creating a vibrant rural hinterland, with adequate funding and resources available to do so.

Rural Proofing of Policy

We hope that with the development of a Regional Development and Rural Affairs Minister and Department, that policies developed will encompass all aspects of rural life and will 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.

Rural Policing

In the past decade rural Ireland has seen a stark rise in its crime rate especially the number of assaults and robberies on elderly people. An aspect of this is the closure of a large number of rural Garda stations with 100 Garda stations closed in 2013 alone. IRL acknowledges that the number of attacks and burglaries 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 in 2014 and 2015 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 welcomes that as part of the review by the Policing Authority a Pilot scheme to reopen 6 Garda Stations in both rural and urban areas will be launched, as set out in Programme for Government. A date for the commencement of this scheme needs to be agreed and should happen as a matter of urgency. A review of this pilot must be carried out, within 6 months of the scheme commencing and be open to more stations entering the scheme with a long term view of re-opening stations permanently. We continue to call on the government to increase the 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.

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 2015¹¹ which shows that 72% of parents who participated in the survey struggle with the cost of their child's third level education; this 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.

As a result of new rules from the Central Bank regulators, many ordinary families are suffering as they are finding it difficult to access loans from their local Credit Union leading to students being forced to drop out of college because their parents are unable to get a credit union loan.

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

College Accommodation

College accommodation has become a major issue for students. More students now have to live at home with some facing long commutes to college as they are unable to access accommodation. Rising cost of rent and shortage of supply in the Private rented sector has now spread to all major urban centres across the country. The lack of campus accommodation needs

¹¹ Irish League of Credit Unions “2015 Third Level Education Study”
<http://www.creditunion.ie/communications/pressreleases/2015/title.9335.en.php>

to be addressed to ensure there will be a sustainable supply of student accommodation for the growing number of students that will be attending third level in the future. We welcome that this was acknowledged in the *Report of the Oireachtas Committee on Housing and Homelessness* which will create a Government Student Housing Strategy in the next 12 months and urge the Government to consider the recommendations set out in the report in relation to student accommodation¹².

In the immediate term Irish Rural Link is calling on the government to introduce allowances for rural students who are paying thousands of euros every year for accommodation as well as their increasing student contribution. A policy that could address the problem is the introduction of a tax relief for registered tax compliant landlords who are willing to rent their accommodation to students.

Benefit 4- Basic Computer Training Programme

Irish Rural Link's basic computer training course is aimed at people who have never used a computer before with the objective of being able to send an email and Skype with friends and family around the world. Irish Rural Link's basic computer training course is aimed at people who have never used a computer before with the objective of being able to Surf the web, send and receive email, Skype, pay bills online, using government websites, etc after eight hours.

IRL have delivered the computer training all over country for all different age groups. This computer training course provides a social outlet and freedom for people especially the elderly who have restricted transport opportunities and are geographically isolated.

Since its commencement, 4,500 people have participated in this programme with 1,500 taking part from January to June 2016. Funding to the Benefit 4 Basic Computer Training Programme should be protected as the programme

¹² Report of Oireachtas Committee on Housing and Homelessness (2016)
<http://www.oireachtas.ie/parliament/media/committees/32housingandhomelessness/Final-Report-.pdf>

provides essential training to those marginalised in the new digital age. There is a clear contradiction within policy as policy makers are encouraging people older people in particular to move to online banking while on the other hand they have reduced the funding available for training. There remain a large proportion of citizens who are offline and are reluctant to bank online due to security fears and lack of training.

Community Wetlands Forum

The forum was established under the umbrella of Irish Rural Link in September 2013. The forum came together as a result of the work already undertaken by Irish Rural link on behalf of community groups affected by the Peatlands directive and in the development of wetlands as an enhanced asset in the community.

The difficulties associated with implementing the Peatlands directive, particularly regarding the adverse experience of turf cutters, have shown that there is a disconnection between communities and the objectives of conservation as they would apply to wetlands. Because of this, many wetland areas are left in perilous states, with essential management needed for their protection. Equally where wetland community groups have taken action, the results, both for the wetlands and the communities are spectacular. There is as you will know a small number of communities who have established development plans in their areas. From our work on this we are coming across many who would wish to start the process, but feel they will need support, given the controversial publicity around the implementation of the Peatlands directive.

The rationale supporting a Wetlands Community Forum is based on the development of wetlands using the tools of community development as a means of ensuring that all actions taken have the full support of the community. It means that the community become engaged in acquiring a greater knowledge of the value of wetlands and can use this to their own benefit. It also means that the community become involved as early as possible and that the necessary local stakeholders are included.

In establishing a network of wetland groups it is proposed that the aim is to: Facilitate the sharing of knowledge, ideas and organisational methods. It will also introduce groups to the latest research, national and international experts, similar networks and funding possibilities.

It will also provide skills in the use of community development principles as a means of bringing all parts of the community with them.

Clearly the group currently in its infancy will need support, particularly some funding. As of now there is a group of 11 local networks with interest in more joining. These include Abbeyleix, Corlea, Cabragh, Laois Offaly wild life trust, Cloughjordan, Kenagh, Boora, Clara, Kerry, Westmeath and Kildare.

While Irish Rural Link is currently providing some administrative support, it will not be able to supply expert related assistance in the form of research and technical wetlands expertise. Examples of such support include;

- The identification of potential wetland sites in communities and communities who wish to evaluate their own areas.
- The co-ordination of targeted event, seminars on community involvement.
- The provision of direct assistance to groups who wish to explore new projects.

As a beginning we would like to hire the services of a graduate or someone whose qualifications or experience could be put to use with this group. As a means of funding this Irish Rural Link would propose that government consider means in which the EPA, perhaps in partnership with the relevant department would make available funding in the region of €10,000 to begin the process.

Please see the Wetlands Community Forum's budget submission for more details.

National Meals on Wheels Network- delivering Community Services

The National Meals on Wheels Network was established under the umbrella of Irish Rural Link in the spring of 2015 and consists of Meals on Wheels organisation from Clare, Donegal, Galway, Kerry, Mayo and Roscommon which plans to develop the network nationally over the next year.

Meals-on-wheels service is a critical component of the continuum of care services that enables older people to remain living in the community or to return to their own homes after hospitalisation. It has, therefore, previously recommended on a number of occasions that the service is designated as a core service underpinned by legislation and funding. Currently there is no legal entitlement to receive or obligation on the State to provide meals-on-wheels to older people. As a result, there is no clear direction regarding who should be responsible for the support and development of the sector.

With the existence of the meals on wheels there is:

- lower mortality
- shorter hospital stays
- fostered independent living
- reduced need for nursing home care following discharge
- increased likelihood of discharge from nursing home and reduced need for non-elective hospital readmission
- reduced incidence of falls
- daily contact
- expression of community inclusion
- Decline in loneliness
- Decrease isolation

Aim:

To provide a local, community led professional facility to assist people who require services to maintain optimum health and independence.

Objectives:

- to advocate for a national standardised meals on wheels service which provide a system all organisations can adhere to.
- to ensure members have adequate resources to deliver a professionally produced nutritious meal to their clients.
- To advise and advocate the government and other agencies which influence the delivery of Meals on Wheels and ancillary services.
- to meet the future demands of network members by assisting in the development of their services .
- To develop the organisation in a manner which is inclusive and participatory to all meals on wheels organisations.
- To develop a voluntary professional Meals on Wheels service to a standard and to create a template that will be recognised and given a quality national rating.

Clearly the network currently in its infancy will need support, particularly some funding. While Irish Rural Link is currently providing some administrative support, it will not be able to supply expert related assistance in the form of research and technical meals on wheels expertise. Examples of such support include;

- The identification of potential meals on wheels organisations around the country.
- The co-ordination of targeted seminar which would help informs organisations about new regulations and guidelines.
- The provision of direct assistance to groups who wish to explore new projects as there are many communities who could establish meals on wheels services with the appropriate assistance.
- Promotion of product and service through marketing to potential clients, their families, carers, PHN, Hospital discharge service, home help, doctors and others.

Please see the National Meals on Wheels Network's budget submission for more details.

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 300 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.'