



Irish Rural Link
Nasc Tuaithe na hÉireann

Pre-Budget Submission

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*An Roinn Forbartha
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Irish Rural Link Budget Submission 2019: Summary

Issue	Recommendations
Rural and Regional Development	<p>There continues to be an imbalance across the country in terms of growth and employment. The rate of growth in many rural areas is still lagging behind major urban centres. The lack of essential public services and infrastructure, such as transport and broadband, continue to exclude people, especially marginalised and disadvantaged groups from fully participating in society and contributing to the economy.</p> <p>The National Broadband Plan process must now be completed as a matter of urgency with no further delays. Services in rural areas continue to be cut which continue to impact on people's lives.</p> <p>The budget for the Department of Rural and Community Development must increase in Budget 2019 to ensure strategies, policies and schemes are properly resourced and can begin to make a real impact on the ground, especially for marginalised and disadvantaged communities. IRL continue to call for rural proofing of annual Budget and all Government policies and strategies.</p>
Rural Income Protection and Social Welfare	<p>The protection of marginalised and disadvantaged rural citizens and communities should be a key priority in Budget 2019.</p> <p>Large income inadequacies are still being felt by many households in rural areas who are dependent on social welfare or earning minimum wage. Budget 2019 must begin to close the gap of such income inadequacy to ensure people have an income which provides them with a sufficient standard of living.</p> <p>Other social welfare payments must be protected, such as living alone allowance and fuel allowance. IRL call for the restoration of the telephone allowance for older people in rural areas.</p> <p>The number of people in receipt of Farm Assist continues to decrease IRL continue to call for means testing of Farm Assist to prioritise current farm income instead of previous year's income.</p> <p>Employment schemes such as RSS and CE Scheme remain extremely valuable and beneficial to both participants and communities in rural areas, allowing in many cases for necessary services to be delivered.</p>

<p>Rural Enterprise and Employment</p>	<p>There are still disparities between regions in terms of unemployment, with some of the regions still seeing rates well above the state average. The quality of jobs in rural areas is below those available in the bigger urban areas. The continued migration of young skilled people to urban areas remains a major problem for rural areas.</p> <p>Micro Enterprises and SME's are the backbone of rural economies. However, lack of proper broadband and availability of credit, is impacting on the growth of SME's and microenterprises as well as new start up's.</p> <p>IRL welcome the recent publication of the Government report on Local Public Banking and there will be continued engagement with stakeholders. Action must be taken on this now and that it does not become a talking shop.</p>
<p>Transport</p>	<p>There now needs to be a comprehensive review of public transport policy and the delivery of a robust public transport system that will meet the transport needs of rural communities. A suite of public transport measures must be established so everyone has access to some form of public transport.</p> <p>The rural transport funding must be increased. While PSO services by Local Link companies are increasing there is still a need to provide door-to-door services and the RTP budget cannot be compromised by PSO budget.</p> <p>More support is needed to develop Local Link services and necessary infrastructure to make it more attractive for people to use. Policies must be put in place to support Local Link services and structures while a statutory framework for local transport planning must be created and adapted by Local Authorities in conjunction with public transport providers in that Local Authority area.</p>
<p>Climate Action and Rural Energy Poverty</p>	<p>Rural households are at greater risk of fuel and energy poverty due to the nature of rural housing, especially older stock. Many households have limited choice in fuel they can use; mainly dependent on fossil fuels and oil, and are not able to avail of bundle deals by energy providers. People on low or fixed income, spend a larger proportion of their income on fuel and energy.</p> <p>Any measures introduced in Budget 2019 to mitigate climate change must be poverty proofed and not discriminate against people in rural areas or those on low and fixed income.</p> <p>IRL continue to call for NO increase in tax on Diesel. As mentioned above, rural areas are not well served with a public transport system and households are dependent on a car. Again, any increase will impact most on people living on low or fixed income.</p>

<p>Health and Caring Services</p>	<p>With the number of people aged over 65 expected to double in the next thirty years, measures must now begin to be put in place to meet the future demand for health and caring services.</p> <p>With the publication of <i>Sláintecare</i> and its <i>Implementation Strategy</i>, Budget 2019 must ensure that proper investment begins to happen and that it is properly resourced so real change can be made and more equal healthcare system is developed.</p> <p>The move towards caring as an option of care for people as they age must now begin. Meals on Wheels is one service that can facilitate people remaining in their own home for as long as possible and give people a sense of independence. IRL call for Meals on Wheels services to be Core Funded so this valuable service can continue to be delivered and allow it to develop. A greater role from the HSE needs to be taken now so the service can be more streamlined across the country.</p> <p>Investment in Primary Care services in communities needs to now become a priority so future demand can be met and alleviate the pressure that is currently on our health system, the hospitals and A&E services.</p> <p>Mental health remains a stigma in rural areas. Investment in Mental Health services continues to be inadequate meaning services are substandard. IRL call for proper investment in Mental Health services across the country.</p>
<p>Agriculture</p>	<p>Schemes such as GLAS and TAM's must continue to be supported and adequate funding allocated to these schemes.</p> <p>Farm safety continues to be a real concern in rural areas. Measures must be now taken to ensure that the number of accidents and fatalities do not continue to escalate. IRL are calling for a bottom up approach to farm safety, where farmers could mentor other neighbouring farmers to be safety aware.</p> <p>With Review of CAP Post 2020 currently being undertaken, Pillar II of RDP and LEADER as part of this must continue to help those that live in poverty and/or excluded from fully participating in society. It must protect the small farmer also so that people can continue to live and work in close proximity.</p> <p>IRL are currently delivering two basic computer programmes; 'Getting Citizens on line' and 'IT Skills for Farmers'. Both programmes are funded by the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment. With a move towards making payments and farm returns to online, there is an onus on the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine to assist in some way in getting farmers online and support such a programme.</p>

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.

While the country approaches “full employment” and the economy is growing, the rate of growth in many rural areas is still lagging behind major urban centres. People living in rural areas are still experiencing higher levels of poverty and have higher income inadequacies’ than their urban counterparts¹. The Pobal Deprivation Index published in September 2017 also highlighted more rural towns and villages have higher deprivation rates and while unemployment rates overall are decreasing, these areas are still experiencing high rates of unemployment².

The lack of essential public services such as transport and infrastructure such as broadband, continue to exclude people, especially marginalised groups from fully participating in society and contributing to the economy. Investment in local transport and high speed broadband needs to be prioritised so that every person has the opportunity to participate in society.

The launch of *Project 2040* in early 2018 sets out a roadmap for development in the country for the next number of years. This must now be backed with the adequate funding and must ensure that every person in every part of the country reap the benefits of investment. We are concerned that the €1bn Rural Regeneration and Development Fund to invest in the revival of rural towns and villages for the next 10 years of the project is insufficient to meet the investment needed to allow rural areas develop at a fair rate.

The Budget for Rural and Community Development must increase in Budget 2019 to ensure that ‘*Realising our Rural Potential: Action Plan for Rural Development*’, the ‘*Town and Village Renewal Scheme*’ and other schemes and grants are properly resourced and can begin to make real impact on the ground especially for marginalised and disadvantaged communities. All other Departments have an important role to play when developing their policies and strategies to ensure that they are rural and poverty proofed and that they are inclusive of all members of society.

Ireland was one of the lead countries in the signing of the *Sustainable Development Goals*, with 17 goals to achieve by 2030. Getting a balance in achieving all goals equally will be a challenge. With the first goal being ‘No Poverty’ by 2030, the other 16 goals must work

¹ Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (2017) Minimum Essential Standard of Living Report 2017.

² Haase, T. & Pratscheke, J. (2017) ‘*The 2016 Pobal HP Deprivation Index for Small Areas (SA)*’
<https://www.pobal.ie/app/uploads/2018/06/The-2016-Pobal-HP-Deprivation-Index-Introduction-07.pdf>

to complement this goal and no person be adversely impacted by trying to achieve the goals.

Section 1: Rural and Regional Development

Rural and Regional Development is predicated on people and their desire and ability to continue to live, return or move to rural areas and regions outside the capital. The creation of jobs and quality of jobs that are being created is central to this as is the necessary infrastructure and services, such as roads, high speed broadband and public transport, to ensure people are connected to jobs and services in these areas. Ensuring that these essential services and infrastructure are in place are paramount to development in rural areas and must be invested in properly so areas can grow and people want to live in rural areas while at the same time have employment that affords them a decent standard of living.

Transport

The lack of a decent and reliable public transport system continues to be a challenge and obstacle for people living in rural areas in accessing employment, health services, hospital appointments, education and training and day to day business. The over reliance on cars for people living outside of Dublin is a result of the lack of a proper functional transport system.

Vulnerable groups and those who are unable to afford a car living in rural areas or indeed unable to drive are most affected by this and make it more difficult for them to gain employment or make medical appointments. They rely on the goodwill of family members and neighbours to meet appointments and to go to the nearest town to do their day-to-day business. (See Section 4: Transport)

Broadband

It is well highlighted that every home and business now needs access to high speed broadband. The lack of quality broadband has hindered the development of regions and especially rural areas for too long and if the Government are committed to having every home and business connected, there can be no further delays in the roll out of the National Broadband Plan. It is the key element to rural development allowing areas and regions to compete for jobs that might otherwise be located in urban areas. It would also allow for people, especially women, to work from home or start up their own business. With the move towards online banking, online billing, and other services moving to online, people in rural areas are unable to access these services as a result of the lack of reliable broadband. Also, the opportunity to stay in touch with family and friends who may have moved abroad is limited to telephone, which can be expensive.

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

Rural Policing

There are still many weaknesses in rural policing, which IRL have highlighted for many years. While we understand that not every Garda station that was closed during the recession will be re-opened. With crime figures, especially burglaries showing an increase; albeit with CSO statistics under reservation, there are other measures, some of which already exist, that need to be fully implemented and given more supports. 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.

In terms of policing, in particular rural policing, we are calling for the following in Budget 2019:

- **Increase in resources of An Garda Síochána:** By multiplying the number of patrol cars in rural areas especially. The enhanced number of patrol cars in an area can have a significant impact on preventing crime as well as providing people with a sense of security.
- **More supports for neighbourhood watch and community text alert schemes.** Where these are in place, they can work very well. Encouraging communities to explore these schemes is needed and providing the supports to committees and groups so it doesn't all rely on a small number of people is needed.
- **Establishment of a Rural Policing Forum:** In our submission in January 2018 to the Future of Policing, IRL called for the establishment of a rural policing forum in each divisional area. This would replace the Joint Policing Committee and give community groups more autonomy in coming up with ways of making their communities more secure. More meetings held by the forum would take place than does now, possibly six a year, one which would be open to the public.
- **Review of CCTV Scheme:** The delivery of the CCTV programme is stalled at the moment due to various concerns around data protection and responsibility of the maintenance of the cameras beyond the scheme. These issues need to be looked at and solutions explored. IRL believe there is a greater role for Local Authorities in this programme.
- **Review of Garda Pulse System:** It is without doubt that the Garda Pulse system and recording of crimes by Gardai needs to be reviewed and changes made to ensure crimes are recorded properly.

Education Costs and Access to Higher and Further Education

Accessing third level courses can be more difficult for students from rural areas and especially students from lower socio-economic backgrounds mainly due to cost. As most students in rural areas have to move away from home to access third level courses, the cost of third level impacts on the family's incomes more. For people in rural areas who are considering a third level course and are maybe returning to college as a mature student there are often barriers such as access to affordable transport. A study by Cullinan et al (2013) found that for every 10 kilometres of travel distance, the likelihood that individuals would participate in higher education decreased by 2.7%. Therefore, a

prospective student living 50 kilometres from a higher education institution is 13.5% less likely to participate in education at this level.

Barriers such as transport and childcare are very real for people, especially women in rural areas who are hoping to return to education and take up a course or training. For women who may have been out of the workforce for a while or never had the opportunity to take up a training course or third level education, community education providers place a lot of emphasis on those essential 1:1 and peer supports, literacy, creating the supportive environment etc. It can be daunting to move from that environment into the higher education arena so recognition of the need for those supports for many learners is essential.

Irish Rural Link are calling for;

- **The Government to re-examine the grant scheme and college fees of €3,000 per year.**
- **Core funding for community education** - if we are serious as a society about meeting the needs of our citizens.
- **Establishment of an education taskforce** - to carry out a critical analysis of our current educational system, a taskforce which is representative of all educational and skills providers and to include an analysis of the availability and accessibility of community education to ensure that issues of disadvantage and inequalities are adequately addressed across the board.

LEADER, CLÁR and other Funding Schemes

While LEADER funded projects are now commencing, there must be continued funding for these projects and future projects. Also funding made available through CLÁR and other similar schemes must be adequate so communities can deliver on projects that enhances their area. Match funding, whether it be 20% or 25%, can deter community groups from applying for funding for projects as well as other bureaucracy issues. IRL are aware of people taking out personal loans or signing personal guarantees for their community group in order to get a bridging loan while waiting for funding to be paid.

The bureaucracy and other difficulties that arise for groups applying for programmes and schemes must be examined and reduced so community groups are not deterred from applying for these programmes/schemes.

Rural Proofing of Policy

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

Section 2: Rural Income Protection and Social Welfare

As mentioned above, a gap still remains between urban and rural areas in terms of economic growth; rural areas are still not fully reaping the benefits of the economic recovery, especially those on low incomes or in receipt of a social welfare payment. Budget 2019 must ensure that marginalised and disadvantaged rural citizens and communities are prioritised and barriers such as childcare, transport, are removed to allow people, especially in rural areas to access employment, education and training. As mentioned, Ireland has signed up for the SDG's 2030, with the first one being 'No Poverty'. As the main Department with responsibility for reducing poverty, the DEASP must put the measures in place now to ensure poverty is eradicated.

Rural Poverty

The Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL)³ for 2018 showed a continued decrease in the cost of essential goods and services included in MESL⁴ falling by 1.2% from 2017 MESL. This is the fourth consecutive year there was a decrease in the MESL. However, this decrease is mainly due to reduction in the cost of health insurance, which many people Irish Rural Link represent do not have – those in receipt of social welfare payment or in minimum wage employment. For such households that do not have health insurance, the change in MESL from 2017 was just 0.2% lower. When the cost of housing and childcare are included, the MESL rate increased by an average of 1.5% in the last year. For households living in rural areas, the MESL continues to be higher than for households in urban areas. These higher costs are primarily related to higher transport and home energy costs. For example, meeting the transport needs of rural pensioner households requires a car – this can add an additional €59 per week (due to fuel, maintenance, insurance, etc) to the MESL budget for a lone pensioner in a rural area compared to no direct transport costs for a lone pensioner in an urban area. (VPSJ, 2018).

³ Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (2018) 'Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2018'
https://www.budgeting.ie/download/pdf/mesl_2018_update_report.pdf

⁴ The Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) looks at those essential goods included in CPI basket of goods that are deemed necessary for a minimum standard of living. Such goods include food, clothing, heating, etc.

Income Inadequacies by Household Type in Receipt of SW Payment

Household Type	Rural	Urban
2 Parents with 1 infant	-€75.83	-€25.78
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 pre-school,1 primary)	-€55.35	-€1.28
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 primary, 1 secondary)	-€126.50	-€74.30
2 Parents with 3 Children (1 infant, 1 pre-school, 1primary)	-€70.90	-€21.61
2 Parents with 4 Children (2 primary, 2 Secondary)	-€205.91	-€145.71
One Parent with 1 child (Primary school)	-€101.57	-€25.03
One Parent with 2 Children (1 pre-school, 1 primary)	-€81.94	-€7.17
One Parent with 2 Children (1 primary, 1 secondary)	-€153.08	-€80.19
Single Adult living in Private Rented Accommodation	-€84.83	-€47.38
Pensioner Living Alone (non- contributory)	-€55.71	+€8.59
Pensioner Living Alone (Contributory)	-€45.24	+€18.20

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

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

Irish Rural Link calls for the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection to now begin to strive for minimum wage and social welfare payments to reach the same rate as living wage of €11.90 per hour so people can have a basic standard of living. The Department must also work with other Government Departments to look at the cost of essential items and the impact it is having on people on fixed and low income.

Farm Incomes and Farm Assist

Preliminary findings from the 2017 Teagasc National Farm Survey reports an increase in the average family farm income by 32% to €31,374. However, this increase is largely due to Dairy Farms. Thirty-five percent of farms earned less than €10,000 and a further 22% reported a farm income of just over €20,000. Farm incomes in the Border and West regions had the lowest income at €17,547 and €17,895 respectively⁵.

Thirty percent of farms still remain economically vulnerable in 2017. The percentage of farms that were economically vulnerable was higher in the Border and West regions, with only a quarter of the farms in these regions economically viable. There was a 1% increase to 31% in the number of farm holders with an off-farm income, as well as an increase to 51% in the number of farm spouse who were employed off the farm. Forty percent of farmers in the West of the country were employed in off-farm employment, while Midlands and Border region had approximately 38% and 32% had an income from off-farm employment⁶.

Farm Assist

Farm Assist is a means tested payment and subject to eligibility criteria for people engaged in farming and/or forestry by Department of Social Protection whose income is below a certain level. Irish Rural Link welcome the increase in the payment by €5 in Budget 2018 as well as changes to income disregards in the means testing process, which came into effect from March 2017. However, IRL are still concerned that it is still based on a farmer's previous year's income, which is very disadvantageous and doesn't protect against current or future prices and can negatively impact on a person's eligibility for the scheme.

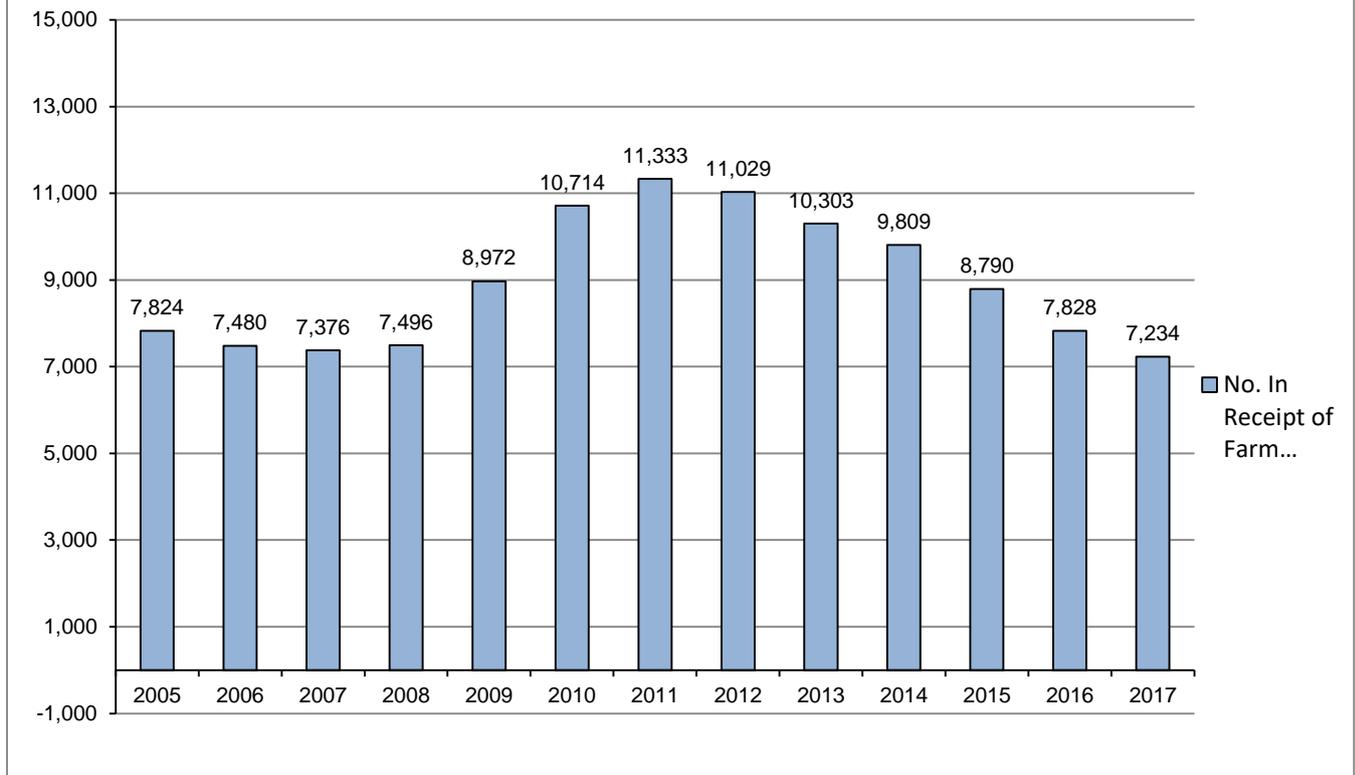
The number of people in receipt of Farm Assist continues to decrease since 2011 despite a decrease in farm incomes. The figure below shows the number of people in receipt of Farm Assist Payment from 2005 – March 2017⁷.

⁵ Dillion, E et al (2018) *Teagasc National Farm Survey 2017 Preliminary Results*
<https://www.teagasc.ie/media/website/publications/2018/NFS-Publication-2017.pdf>

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Community & Voluntary Pillar Bilateral Meeting with Dept of Social Protection 08/05/17

Number of People in Receipt of Farm Assist 2005-2017



IRL welcome the increase of €5 to and some of the changes around income disregards to Farm Assist in Budget 2018 but are still concerned that it is based on the previous year's income. We understand that current income is now often taken into consideration in the means testing.

We also welcome that an advertising campaign was carried out by the Department in early 2018 to raise awareness of Farm Assist. We would like to see this campaign continued and reach out more to the farming community especially those who are most in need of Farm Assist.

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

Employment Schemes and Programmes

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

Rural Social Scheme

Irish Rural Link welcomes the increase of a further 500 places on the Rural Social Scheme (RSS) in Budget 2018. This is a valuable scheme to farmers and fishermen and women who are in receipt of Farm Assist as it allows them to use their skills and experience in the community while the community also benefits from this. However, Irish Rural Link is concerned about changes to the scheme which came into effect in late 2016 where new entrants are only allowed remain on the scheme for six years. People on this scheme are either farmers or fishermen and women and take part in this scheme on a seasonal basis when there is a reduction in farming or fishery work.

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

Community Employment (CE) Scheme/TUS/Gateway Programme

The CE and TUS schemes are viable schemes for unemployed people in rural areas in helping them get back into the work force. Many of the people who work with Meals on Wheels and other community services are on CE and TUS Schemes and is the only source of income for them. However, there is a vacuum for those on the Tús programme who do not gain employment after their time on the programme. These individuals need to be supported and their skills and competencies developed while on the Tús scheme. A Tús training budget is required in order for these individuals to not only gain work experience, but to also develop the skills and competencies needed to progress in the labour market. Those who are over 60 years on the Tús Scheme are a cohort that find it more difficult to gain employment after the scheme. IRL and its members would like to see the eligibility criteria to be broadened to allow people over 60 years to remain on the programme to retirement if no employment is available or unable to get employment.

The weekly payment to people on these schemes must be adequate enough to ensure people do not experience poverty and to encourage more people who are long-term unemployed take up the schemes. It is also necessary to ensure valuable community services, such as Meals on Wheels can continue.

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

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

Increase support through the Tus programme for targeted geographic based pilot programmes to target certain cohorts of hard to reach unemployed people to progress to employment.

Community Services Programme

The CSP programme, funded by the Department of Social Protection and managed by Pobal, provides funding to not-for-profit, social enterprises and community business that deliver services to communities where private and/or public services are lacking, due to geographical location or low demand for service. This programme is vital to the existence of organisations such as Meals on Wheels to deliver services that would not otherwise exist and to the provision of school lunches, especially in disadvantaged rural areas. However, this programme only remains open to new applicants for short periods, which is very disadvantageous to such services.

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

Other Social Welfare Allowance/Benefits

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

Phone Allowance/Broadband Allowance

IRL broadly welcomed the introduction of the Telephone Support Allowance in June 2018, announced as part of Budget 2018 package. However, we feel the €2.50 is too low and only those in receipt of living allowance *and* fuel allowance are eligible for it. The ceasing of the Phone allowance in 2014 left many older people more vulnerable and isolated. Many, especially those in remote areas, rely on the phone to stay in contact with family and friends. Without a phone, it can be very isolating for these people. The reduction in the take up of Security Alarm Scheme can be attributed to the cut to the phone allowance⁸. Although the alarm can now be linked to mobile phones, with poor coverage in areas, especially in remote rural areas, it is not always an option for people. Older people are left feeling vulnerable and isolated as a result of this.

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

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

⁸RTE.ie (Feb 2017) 'Telephone allowance cut blamed for fall in uptake of Seniors Alert System

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

Free Travel Card/Travel Allowance

People in rural areas do not get the full benefit, if at all, of the Free Travel Card. With the lack of a decent public transport system in rural areas, older people are often reliant on the goodwill of family, neighbours and friends for lifts which leaves them very dependent on others and don't have the freedom to go places when they want. Taxis are the only other option for people which can be very expensive.

Irish Rural Link calls for an allowance be given to those who hold a travel card but are unable to use it or get full use of it so it can go some way towards the cost of private transport.

Fuel Allowance

People living in rural areas are more at risk of fuel poverty due to the nature of one off housing, especially older stock. They are also more dependent on home heating oil and fossil fuel to heat their homes and unable to avail of bundle deals offered by energy companies. The cost of home heating oil and electricity prices has increased over the past year. In May 2018, the cost of home heating oil was 20.6% higher than the same month in 2017, while electricity prices increased by 6.8%⁹. People on fixed income are more vulnerable and more at risk of fuel poverty because of fluctuations in price of fuel. We welcome that the fuel allowance can be now made in two payments, which is beneficial to those dependent on oil to heat their home.

Given the continuous increase in cost of home heating oil Irish Rural Link calls for an increase in the fuel allowance of €22.50. There can be no increase in carbon tax and we ask the Dept of Employment Affairs and Social Protection to ensure no person is pushed further into fuel poverty as a result of carbon tax.

⁹ CSO Consumer Price Index (CPI) May 2018

<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/cpi/consumerpriceindexmay2018/>

Section 3: Employment and Job Creation

Irish Rural Link welcome that the overall unemployment rate in the state continues to fall, with most recent figures in the Labour Force Survey for Q1 2018¹⁰ showing unemployment rate now stands at 5.7%. However, there are still disparities in the rate of unemployment across NUTS3 regions, with unemployment rates in the Midlands and South East regions at 8% and in more rural regions still remains above the state average. 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 sectors that are historically low paid, such as accommodation and food, retail and caring sector. More often these jobs are minimum wage with precarious work hour contracts which are not sustainable. Many of the highly skilled and young workforce have emigrated over the past few years or continue to migrate to urban areas where jobs are more readily available.

Youth Unemployment and the Youth Guarantee

The aim of the EU-wide Guarantee is to provide young people under the age of 25 with a good quality offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship within a short time of becoming unemployed. Although, there is a continued fall in unemployment and youth unemployment has fallen also, it remains high at 12.5% nationally as of Q1 2018¹¹.

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

Irish Rural Link call for Government to revisit pilot carried out in Co. Wexford for youth guarantee in rural areas, and explore rolling this out to other rural areas.

¹⁰ CSO Labour Force Survey Q1 2018

<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/lfs/labourforcesurveyquarter12018/>

¹¹ CSO Labour Force Survey Q1 2018

<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/lfs/labourforcesurveyquarter12018/>

Micro and Small & Medium Enterprises

IRL believe that Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises are the backbone to rural economies and are key to creating jobs in rural areas. While there continues to be a push for foreign multinationals to locate to Ireland, the reality is that they are attracted to the cities and larger towns. In 2017, almost half of the IDA jobs created were located in the Dublin and Eastern region, with just over 4,000 jobs created in the Midlands region¹². More focus must be placed on micro and SME's and how they are and can contribute to rural development and be supported more to create employment in these areas.

Micro enterprises accounted for 92.2% of all enterprises in 2015 (CSO, 2017) and this figure is reflected across the 28 EU countries. Research for MICRO project found that under 23 million SME's generated €3.9 trillion in value added and employed 90 million people across the EU in 2015. This accounted for 67% of EU28 employment¹³.

Micro Enterprises and SME's are always vulnerable to external shocks and continue to face many challenges in growing their businesses; including access to credit and especially in rural areas; high speed broadband. We welcome the introduction of the Brexit loan for SME's in Budget 2018 and call for the extension of this until after Brexit and beyond until we know the full impact of Brexit on these firms

Irish Rural Link calls for the following in Budget 2019 to help improve job creation and sustainable employment in rural areas:

- **Quality Employment:** There must be an end to precarious work hour contracts so people have regular work hours. Jobs created must be of good quality that affords people a basic standard of living and reduces in work poverty.

DEASP and DBEI must work with Low-Pay Commission to look at moving towards a living wage.

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

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

- **Broadband** The roll out of the National Broadband Plan and connectivity for business in rural areas continues to be a major issue and is preventing growth and

¹² IDA (2018) Annual Report 2017 https://www.idaireland.com/IDAireland/media/docs/About-IDA/IDA_Annual_Report_2017.pdf

¹³ MICRO (2017) "Rural Micro and Craft Entrepreneurs: Sustaining Rural Europe A MICRO Project Composite Report" <http://www.microsmetraining.eu/index.php>

employment in rural areas and risks the implementation of Action Plan for Rural Development and Project 2040.

With only one company left in the tendering process for the roll out of the plan Irish Rural Link calls for no further delays in the rollout of the National Broadband Plan and that it is future proofed to ensure it will meet the demands and services jobs and businesses in rural areas.

- **Other Supports for SME's** While availability of credit and broadband are two of the main barriers to development and growth of SME's, there are a number of other issues that IRL are calling to be addressed as part of Budget 2019. These include;
 - **Continuation of the Brexit Loan Scheme in Budget 2019.**
 - **The three-year tax relief for start-up companies until end of 2018 is welcome. This must be extended in Budget 2019 to encourage business start-ups especially in rural areas.**
 - **Commercial rates for existing SME's must be reviewed and supports put in place for those who are being crippled by these rates. Other rates, such as water rates must also be looked at. The proposal to smaller organisations to pay higher charges must not be accepted. It is unfair and will have a negative impact on the survival of small businesses.**

Entrepreneurship

As mentioned, micro enterprises are key to employment in rural area and the western region of the country has the most self-employed people than the rest of the state, mainly because they are unable to find alternative unemployment. IRL welcome the introduction of social welfare entitlements for those who are self-employed similar to PAYE workers. While Local Enterprise Offices provide supports for entrepreneurs and people starting their own business, Local Development Companies could have a bigger role to play for those considering setting up a business but require supports/training to do so. 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.

Irish Rural Link calls for;

- **Supports made available to Local Development Companies to help pre-micro enterprises get established.**
- **Increased allocation of funding to Local Enterprise Offices.**
- **The three-year tax relief for start-ups must be maintained to encourage more entrepreneurs to set up.**
- **Supports for more inclusive entrepreneurship so those who are furthest from labour market can be encouraged to start up own business.**

Local Public Banking Policy

Irish Rural Link welcomes the publication of the Government's report on Local Public Banking. We welcome that the Government will continue to engage with stakeholders on this, including IRL and look forward to the continued dialogue. However, we feel action must be taken on this now and that it does not become a talking shop.

IRL believe that this type of banking model is necessary to ensure SME's and Micro Enterprises are protected and sustain any future financial crises, but also to access credit to allow them to grow and expand.

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

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

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

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

- The IRL proposal suggests a nationwide network of 8 to 10 Local Public Banks which are managed independently but with an identical business model working under identical management principles. Initially 2 or 4 pilot banks are envisaged with a rollout of the entire network developed over the next 5 years.
- In addition, a centralised service unit will provide internal services, including risk management and internal audit and will house a self-supervision unit for the new public banking system.
- The new Local Public Banks will follow a specific business model that is different from traditional commercial banking. The new public banks will have to be economically viable but they will not pursue profit maximisation. At the same time they will be enabled to fulfil a public mandate because they will not be under pressure to make dividend payments.
- Earnings will partly be retained to strengthen their capital base and partly distributed to social projects, also surpluses will be partly distributed to social funds to benefit the local community.

Section 4: Rural Transport

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

Meeting Transport Needs of Rural Communities

With closures to Bus Eireann routes and bus stops continuing and with the majority of these closures taking place in rural towns and villages, there now needs to be a comprehensive review of public transport policy and the delivery of a robust public transport system that will meet the needs of rural communities.

The Rural Transport Programme (RTP) now known as “Local Link” is delivered by 17 Local Link Companies across the country reaching people in remote areas. Some are now providing connecting services to Bus Eireann, where stops have closed and to Irish Rail. IRL welcome the pilot scheme introduced for the extension to Local Link services to evenings and weekends. This must be rolled out to other parts of the country. However, there are still some people that do not have access to this service, or some services are limited in areas. Because of this, there is now also a need to look at a public car scheme as part of overall public transport policy, where people can call for a car, similar to the community car scheme some of the Local Link companies already provide and also revisit the rural hackney programme and how this could better serve people in rural areas, especially older people and people with a disability. We would also call that the travel pass would be accepted by the hackney providers.

Rural Transport Funding

Rural Transport Budget remains below what is was supposed to be by 2016. While Local Link companies are extending their PSO services, there is still a need for a door-to-door service and this still needs to be adequately funded.

With PSO services now being delivered, there is concern that some of the RTP budget could be allocated to PSO services, therefore reducing the funding and delivery of the rural transport programme or door-to-door services.

The Rural Transport Programme started in 2002 and provided services in rural areas where there was no access to public transport, these services are still as important today and must continue. There are still areas and people who require the service. The free-travel pass is accepted on all Local Link services. There must be adequate cover for free-travel pass holders to Local Link companies

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

Statutory Framework for Local Transport Planning

Local Link plays a vital role in delivering services in local areas and in some of the most remote areas of the country, it needs to be recognized by all Government Departments and Local Authorities as a key solution to many of the difficulties that have occurred in public transport system over the past few years and be part of the overall transport system for the country.

A statutory framework for local transport planning must be created and adapted by each Local Authority. Local Authorities must work with their Local Link company to identify routes and the most appropriate transport model for the communities they serve.

Better integration of Local Link with other transport services is essential for better connectivity across the country and that every person, regardless of where they live, has access to a reliable and robust public transport service.

Development of Local Link Services

Policies to support Local Link Services and structures must be developed to support the growth and development of Local Link services. There is ample opportunity for Local Link services to contribute to an overall public transport system and meeting the transport needs of people, both young and old living in rural areas.

The necessary infrastructure to support Local Link services, such as bus stops and bus shelters as well as connections to other transport services will make the services as attractive as possible to people in rural Ireland who to this point may not have had any previous opportunity to avail of a comprehensive public transport system in their area.

Supports now must put in place to support the development of Local Link Services

Support Social Enterprises

There are seven Fleet Owning Companies that provide Local Link services in their locality. These groups give a full range of services including; PSO service, rural transport services, community Car, Accessible Community Car and Self Drive. These services are value for money and the employment this type of services creates is supportive of the local community and gives employment and upskilling to people on the live register.

The services they provide are flexible and have proved that service demand can be met in an economical way. However, these companies have faced increasing costs over the past few years; high insurance premiums for their vehicles, upgrading of buses and making buses wheelchair accessible, etc.

These fleet owning companies are essentially social enterprises, providing a service in their local community that would either wise not exist. More support for social enterprises is needed and establishment of a social enterprise group. Also, an allowance for Fleet Owning Companies is now needed so they can update their fleet so it is accessible for all. This could either be done through depreciation or a capital allocation or by some other means.

Section 5: Climate Action and Rural Energy Poverty

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

Fuel Poverty

Rural households are at greater risk of fuel poverty due to the nature of the rural housing stock, the types of fuels available, limited opportunities to switch to cheaper fuels such as gas or take advantage of bundle deals offered by gas and electricity suppliers. The SILC¹⁴ report 2016¹⁵ showed almost a quarter (24.7%) of individuals at risk of poverty went without heat at some stage during 2016 while 15% were unable to keep their home adequately warm. For those living in consistent poverty, these figures were much higher with just under half of individuals (48.1%) going without heat at some stage during the year and 29.1% unable to keep their home adequately warm.

Carbon tax costs rural households ten times more than some urban households. Analysis in 2010 from the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) shows that the annual carbon tax likely to be paid by someone living in inner-city Dublin would be €25 but people living in the countryside could face bills of up to €275.50.¹⁶

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

Retrofitting

Retrofitting of homes is widely acknowledged by all as a simple measure that can greatly reduce our energy usage and in the long term reduce the cost of energy. It remains in the Government's interest to provide capital funding to invest in retrofitting of homes and businesses to reach climate change targets with the long term benefits far outweighing initial investment. IRL were successful in working with SEAI in hosting information evenings on the deep retrofit programme and are aware that the roll out of a similar engagement process will take place in the coming months with Local Authorities and private landlords.

With rents in the private rental market continuing to increase, DCCAE and SEAI must also engage with Department of Housing and Planning on this to ensure that landlords do not increase rents far beyond what is affordable for people, especially those on fixed or low

¹⁴ SILC – Survey on Income and Living Conditions

¹⁵ CSO (2018) – Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2016

https://pdf.cso.ie/www/pdf/20180316124231_Survey_on_Income_and_Living_Conditions_2016_full.pdf

¹⁶ “STRIVE- Science and Sustainability- Research based knowledge for Environmental Protection” EPA and ESRI 2010

income living in private rented accommodation as a result of the lack of supply of social housing.

Irish Rural Link calls for more engagement with people around the benefits of retrofitting grants and warmer homes initiatives, through public information evenings, but also support in the completion of application forms especially for vulnerable and marginalised groups of people. Also engaging with vulnerable and marginalised groups of people on ways to reduce their energy bills and usage.

Community Energy Projects

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

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

Diesel Tax

A lack of a public transport options in rural areas necessitates car ownership in order to access employment, basic services and amenities. Census 2016 showed that 91% of rural households had at least one car, highlighting the high dependency rate people in rural areas have on a car. Many people in rural areas have Diesel cars because it is more economical. We welcome that there was no increase in Diesel tax in Budget 2018. Electric vehicles are still not reliable enough for long-distance driving and until this is the case we will continue to argue that Diesel must remain affordable for people, especially for those on low or fixed income. Also the cost to buy an electric car, either new or second hand is still too expensive for many of the people IRL represent.

Irish Rural Link calls for no increase in tax on Diesel until there are more affordable alternative fuel sources in place. Any increase in diesel tax and carbon tax will continue to discriminate against people living in rural areas.

Community Wetlands Forum and Conservation of Peatlands/Wetlands

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

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

Section 6: Health and Caring Services

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

Meals on Wheels

Meals on Wheels service is a critical component of the continuum of care services and one service available that enables older people to remain living in the community or to return to their own homes after hospitalisation. For those using the service it is seen as more than just a meal. It links people into other services, such as the Public Health Nurse, befriending services and other healthcare services and it can reduce rural isolation. For many, especially men living alone, the person delivering a meal may be the only person they might see in the day or week. According to McGivern (2007)¹⁷, the aim of Meals on Wheels in Ireland is twofold: firstly, to improve the diet and nutritional status of meal clients; and secondly to increase the level of social contact afforded to clients, which also enables the early detection of need for other care services.

Under the umbrella of Irish Rural Link, the Meals on Wheels Network was established in 2015 with the overall aim to provide a local, community led professional facility to assist people who require services to maintain optimum health, independence with strong life extending possibilities¹⁸.

There are many challenges that are hindering Meals on Wheels delivery the vital service it provides such as low levels of funding and recognition by Department of Health and other Government Departments. However, there are also great opportunities to develop this service and include it in an overall home care package. The role Meals on Wheels organisations play in supporting individuals to remain living in their own homes for as long as possible cannot be underestimated. With sufficient resources these organisations can enable people to be discharged from hospitals earlier, and even prevent admission to hospital in the first instance, saving the state significant amounts every year.

Irish Rural Link calls for Meals on Wheels services to be Core Funded so they can better plan and budget for the service they provide. We also call for a more

¹⁷ McGivern, Y., 2007. The 2006 Healthy Ageing Conference: Nutrition and Older People in Residential and Community Care Settings. Conference Proceedings. Dublin: NCAOP

¹⁸ Meals on Wheels Network <http://www.mealsonwheelsnetwork.ie/>

structured and standardised service on Meals on Wheels (*see National Meals on Wheels Pre Budget Submission for more details on this*)

Primary Care

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

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

Community Development Officers

Investment in Community Development Officers in each HSE region would assist in developing a community approach to healthcare which can help to promote better health and wellbeing in a community and ensure that health inequalities are removed and access to healthcare is based on need¹⁹. Part of the Community Development Officer's role would be to fully engage with all stakeholders in an area to ensure everyone, especially older and other vulnerable groups and those on low incomes have equal access to healthcare and are aware of the health services they are entitled to.

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

Specialist Health Care and Local Hospitals

Irish Rural Link welcomes Centre of Excellences for the delivery of specialist healthcare. However, the speed of access to specialist healthcare continues to be an issue and leads to inequalities in terms of income. The two-tier system that occurs for specialist healthcare must be removed. Access must be based on a person's need and not on their ability to pay or if they have private health insurance. People with private health insurance can be fast-tracked to specialist care. With the cost of private health insurance increasing, many people, especially in rural areas can no longer afford to pay this.

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

¹⁹ HSE 'Community Development Resource Pack'

https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/yourhealthservice/SUI/Library/Guides/Community_Development_Resource_Pack.pdf

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

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

Mental Health Services

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

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

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

Domestic Violence Services

Currently, there are 20 domestic violence refuges in Ireland located across 17 counties. These provide a range of supports however nine counties do not have a dedicated women's refuge. Women who are victims of domestic abuse and live in rural areas face many of the same challenges as women who are victims of domestic abuse living in urban areas but these challenges can be further exacerbated as a result of living in rural areas where the same level of services and auxiliary services are not available.

Since its establishment in 1995 Longford Women's Link (LWL) has diversified and expanded to become a substantial organisation that advocates effectively on the issues that impact women and their families, providing practical supports such as affordable childcare and transport where possible and also providing the essential services of domestic violence support, counselling, women's community training and education and support in employment and self-employment options for women and their families. LWL provides supports to over 300 women every year and these figures are increasing year on year. During the first six months of 2018, LWLDVS has already supported 241 women - 70.5% of our 2017 figures have already been supported in 2018 to date.

The impact of closures to services such as Garda stations, post offices, lack of a robust public transport service in rural areas, lack of social housing and issues surrounding Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) as well as stigma surrounding domestic abuse and other social issues in rural areas are highlighted in more detail in Appendix 1: LWL input

into IRL Pre-Budget Submission – The Impact of Domestic Violence on Rural Women and Children.

More investment is needed in community services to help domestic violence victims have the supports they require to be able to leave their home if needed. Proper investment in rural areas in housing, transport, Gardai and other public services that support those experiencing domestic violence is now necessary.

Section 7: Agriculture

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

Rainwater Harvesting

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

The objectives of such a scheme are:

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

Cost per farm unit ²⁰

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

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

Support for On Farm Bio methane

With increasing pressure on the agriculture sector to reduce their carbon emissions, every avenue must be explored to help farmers do this without compromising their output and their livelihood. Anaerobic Digestion is one way in which Irish agriculture can continue to grow its output while at the same time reduce its carbon emission through the production of bio methane.

²⁰ 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.

Irish Rural Link are call for a support scheme in Budget 2019 to encourage the development and deployment of on farm Anaerobic Digestion for production of bio methane.

Septic Tank Grants

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

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

Farm Safety

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

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

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

Computer Training for Farmers

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

Irish Rural Link calls for the funding of this programme continue to be made available in Budget 2019

CAP Post 2020

IRL are aware of calls by many environmental groups that more funding of Pillar II of the CAP/Rural Development Programme should be allocated to tackling climate change and protection of the environment in the next round of funding. Pillar II and LEADER must continue to help those that continue to live in poverty and/or are excluded from fully participating in society. There needs to be more allocation of funding to help small farmers or those not directly involved in agriculture so they can make a living in the place where or close to where they live. Pillar II and LEADER go hand in hand with the development of rural Ireland and must be adequately funded and resourced to do that and ensure it inclusive in its delivery.

Conclusion

Budget 2019 must protect the most vulnerable in our society. Adequate funding and resources must be put in place to ensure that everyone now has a basic standard of living and people are not further pushed into poverty. The necessary investment and Government will is now needed to ensure rural and regional development and the strategies and frameworks are fully realised and that every person is given the opportunity to access employment, education or training close to where they live. Budget 2019 must be both rural and poverty proofed so that every person regardless of where they live in the country can begin to benefit from economic growth.

Irish Rural Link the Organisation

Irish Rural Link (IRL), formed in 1991, is a national network of organisations and individuals campaigning for sustainable rural development in Ireland and Europe. IRL, a non-profit organisation, has grown significantly since its inception and now directly represents over 600 community groups with a combined membership of 25,000.

The network provides a structure through which rural groups and individuals, representing disadvantaged rural communities, can articulate their common needs and priorities, share their experiences and present their case to policy-makers at local, national and European Level.

Irish Rural Link is the only group represented at the national social partnership talks solely representing rural communities' interests.

'Our vision is of vibrant, inclusive and sustainable rural communities that contribute to an equitable and just society'

Irish Rural Link's aims are:

- To articulate and facilitate the voices of rural communities in local, regional, national and European policy arenas, especially those experiencing poverty, social exclusion and the challenge of change in the 21st century.
- To promote local and community development in rural communities in order to strengthen and build the capacity of rural community groups to act as primary movers through practical assistance and advice.
- To research, critique and disseminate policies relating to rural communities including issues such as sustainability, social exclusion, equality and poverty
- To facilitate cross-border networking between rural communities

'Our mission is to influence and inform local, regional, national and European development policies and programmes in favour of rural communities especially those who are marginalised as a result of poverty and social exclusion in rural areas.'

Appendix 1: Longford Women's Link Input to IRL Pre-Budget Submission

LWL input to IRL Pre-Budget Submission The impact of Domestic Violence on Rural Women and Children

Introduction

Longford Women's Link is a dynamic social enterprise which was founded in 1995 initially, to provide back to education and training opportunities for women who had left school early or who had to leave work when they got married. Over the past 23 years LWL has diversified and expanded to become a substantial organisation that advocates effectively on the issues that impact women and their families, providing practical supports such as affordable childcare and transport where possible and also providing the essential services of domestic violence support, counselling, women's community training and education and support in employment and self-employment options for women and their families. LWL has always been guided by a fundamental purpose of providing a space for women to 'develop their voice' in order to address the myriad issues that they and their families face. Despite major changes within the organisation and also locally, regionally and nationally over these years, LWL remains committed to this guiding purpose.

LWL Domestic Violence Service

LWL's Domestic Violence Service (LWLDVS) provides supports to over 300 women every year and these figures are increasing year on year. During the first six months of 2018, LWLDVS has already supported 241 women - 70.5% of our 2017 figures have already been supported in 2018 to date.

There are a range of issues faced by rural women and their children which exacerbate their situation – these issues are presented below. As we know, Ireland is currently experiencing the highest rates of homelessness since records began and as we also know, while the root causes of homelessness are complex, there are generally underpinned by structural inequalities and poverty. Therefore, women who are on lower incomes face greater risks including inequality, difficulty in managing caring responsibilities and the risk of domestic violence. Indeed, a recent survey conducted by Focus Ireland on the pathways of families into homelessness found that 15% of respondents reported domestic violence as their main cause of homelessness, with an additional 7% reporting that domestic violence had had a negative impact on their housing situation in the past (*Focus Ireland, 2016*). Currently, there are 20 domestic violence refuges in Ireland located across 17 counties. These provide a range of supports; however, nine counties do not have a dedicated women's refuge.

Key issues for LWLDVS

LWLDVS provide a wide range of supports for women and children including 1:1 Support, Group support, Court accompaniment and advocacy. In 2018, the key areas of concern for this rural service are as follows:

Rural Transport

- In 2017, LWLDVS assisted 35 women with transport to crisis supports which amounted to 162 journeys to and from appointments including court, solicitors and viewing properties. This is a critical element of LWLDVS support, given the lack of accessible rural transport options in the region, and needs consistent resourcing.
- As with many rural service providers, 75% of our service users live outside Longford Town. Only three main locations are served by some form of daily public transport, however these services do not coincide with crèche/school times, nor do they support women wishing to access employment/supports in Longford.

Housing

- 50% of our service users would identify leaving the abusive home environment as being the best safety plan for themselves and their families. However only 15% of our service users actually secured private rented accommodation. All of these women (with the exception of one) secured this accommodation through friends or via support from their communities. It is worth noting that the only person who sourced accommodation via commercial means (estate agent) was in employment and therefore could provide references and did not require HAP.
- LWLDVS clients are reporting issues of racism/discrimination regarding access to accommodation in the county – despite our offer to assist these women in reporting these issues they do not want to make formal complaints.
- The housing crisis is preventing women leaving for their safety. In addition, the HAP system is causing financial difficulties for some families where their rent is substantially higher than the supplement from the council. As a result, women are remaining in volatile situations at great risk to themselves and their children.

Stigma in Rural Communities

- The issue of women living in their abusive partner's family area remains a significant issue for our clients. Barring orders are very difficult to implement and are often not sought by women in situations where their abuser works in close proximity to the house, on the family farm or other businesses.
- For those women who do access Gardaí or DV court orders, many report feeling isolated and shunned by their communities.
- Members of the communities are often reluctant to support DV survivors at the risk of being targeted themselves.

Diminishing Resources Impact

- The impact of the closure of rural Garda stations has a significant impact on rural victims of domestic violence. Victims face lengthy waits for call outs and on several

occasions women have been told that the only Garda car on patrol is the other side of the county or is responding to another incident. On several occasions, LWLDVS staff have called the Longford Garda station and got no response (on one specific occasion staff called five different extension numbers over 19 times in 2 hours and did not get to speak to anyone in the station). This not a criticism of AGS – LWLDVS understands that resources within the force are limited and diminishing year on year however the failure to address this by the government means that there is a significant knock on effect on women and children who are experiencing domestic violence in rural Ireland.

- The closure of rural post offices has also had a detrimental impact of women experiencing domestic violence in rural Ireland. Post offices had traditionally been a means of having a hidden account that would be used to build up an escape plan or a way to conduct business without being supervised by abuser. Recent commitments from An Post that that communities of over *500 people* will have a *post office is naturally welcomed but many rural communities such as those in Longford, do not have a population of 500.*
- Cutbacks in the health service also have an impact e.g. access to GP services. The GP numbers are reducing and in a crisis situation, many clients must rely on their abuser to access MIDOC services, thereby maintaining their control over the victim.
- As in other rural areas, key services are locating their headquarters in larger population centres e.g. in the case of Longford, many of the main offices are now in Mullingar/Athlone. The CPS service is now only accessible through a call centre in Westmeath and calls often go unanswered.
- While areas such as Longford have a smaller population, the deprivation levels are significantly higher and resources are not being invested to reflect this. For example, despite the higher than average proportion of non-Irish nationals, there are no interpreting services in the area and we often have to engage in considerable efforts to access interpreters via other NGOs in Dublin. In addition, LWLDVS clients say they still have challenges accessing the many English classes available due to lack of childcare and transport.
- Finally, there is a dearth of information on services available for women in rural communities. LWLDVS regularly encounters women who are still financially dependent on an abuser when they are entitled to welfare payments in their own right but were not aware of this.

LWLDVS asserts that the issues presented above would be quite typical for most rural service providers. There is an urgent need for greater investment not only in domestic violence services but also in key areas of supports for women and families in rural Ireland e.g. health, AGS and transport.