



Irish Rural Link
Nasc Tuaithe na hÉireann

Irish Rural Link Election Manifesto

January 2020

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Irish Rural Link is core funded by the scheme to Support National Organisations (SSNO) funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development through Pobal



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Summary of Irish Rural Link's Priorities and Asks for the General Election 2020

1. Building Resilient, Sustainable and Inclusive Communities

- Retain the current Department of Rural and Community Development with its own senior Minister.
- Undertake an audit of rural areas identified by the Department of Justice and Equality to host refugees and asylum seekers on what services are needed in these areas to meet their needs and support them to fully integrate into the community.
- Engage with communities from the outset to help identify what services are available in the community, what gaps exist and can help with welcoming and integrating new groups of people.
- Engage communities in the restoration and conservation of peatlands and wetlands for carbon storage, improve air and water quality, help protect biodiversity and other ecosystems, giving people a place they will enjoy living in.
- Provide carbon credits to community groups, through the form of a scheme such as MoorFutures. Carbon credits should also be made available to landowners who conserve peatlands and wetlands and/or plant forestry.
- Provide financial support to communities for initial costs of construction for renewable energy projects as over the lifetime of energy sources the investment will be returned through selling the energy back into the grid.
- Ensure community groups are properly funded with multi-annual funding so they can budget properly to continue to provide these essential services.

2. Balanced Rural Development

- The Next Government must implement a collaborate approach to Regional Development to ensure more balanced growth across the country.
- Place more value on jobs created in indigenous sectors and support people to make sustainable careers that afford them an adequate standard of living.
- Provide more supports for micro and small enterprises to be able to expand their businesses, adapt to doing business after Brexit and adapt to Climate Change.
- Better supports and recognition of Social Enterprises by Enterprise Ireland and Local Enterprise Offices in their role of creating jobs and the contribution they make to local economies.
- Provide education and training for setting up rural social enterprises.
- Encourage more balance of IDA job creation across the country through a collective approach to regional development and ensure the necessary infrastructure is in place.

- Continue to support Remote Working to ensure people can work close to where they live but also to allow more marginalised groups access the labour market.
- Retain the Local Public Banking Stakeholder Forum which was established in 2019 and continue to engage through this on how a local Public Banking model be established.

3. Revitalising Rural Towns and Villages

- Prioritise the revitalisation of rural towns and villages and ensure the adequate infrastructure is available so people have the ability to live there.

4. Access to Infrastructure and services for all citizens

Broadband

- Ensure the full roll out of the NBP so every home and business will have access to high-speed, future proofed broadband.

Transport

- Make a rural transport a priority and make a real investment in making a suite of transport measures available and accessible to all.
- Explore an uber-style car service for rural areas so more marginalised groups can access other services. Such initiatives should be included under existing Free Travel Scheme.

Healthcare

- Prioritise the full implementation of Sláintecare and ensure people can access healthcare and age with dignity at home and in their community.
- Community Services, like Meals on Wheels must be properly funded with Multi-annual funding.
- Include Meals on Wheels and other such services on hospital discharge plans so people can access these services once they leave hospital. This can allow for earlier discharge from hospital and reduce the risk of readmission.

Education and Training

- Core funding must be made available to community education providers to allow them to budget for the delivery of programmes ensuring those furthest away from the education system can be reached.
- Upskilling and re-training must be a key focus of the next Government with new sectors emerging, the labour force must be equipped with the necessary skills to meet the skills demand.
- Commit to providing all citizens with the digital skills to meet their specific needs to enable them participate and engage fully in society.

Policing and Security

- Commit to increasing the number of Garda in community policing so communities can begin having more trust in the policing system.

- Work with communities and support them with Neighbourhood Watch and Community Text Alert Schemes.

5. Adequate Standard of Living for all Citizens

- Commit to providing a living wage in conjunction with provision of decent and reliable public services, especially in rural areas.
- Undertake a proper and meaningful review of Farm Assist and how it is calculated, taking into account present income and not means tested on previous year - due to conditions that are often out of the farmers' control.
- Implement a just transition approach to Climate Change, making no person worse off or pushing them further into fuel poverty when alternatives or not available or affordable to people, especially in rural areas.
- Commit to ring-fencing of revenues from carbon tax to support households make necessary changes to their homes and heating systems to improve energy rating and reduce carbon emissions.
- No further increase in carbon tax be made until the commitment of ring-fencing is made.

Overview

Rural development must be a key priority for the next Government. 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. There continues to be an imbalance in growth across the regions. People living in rural areas are still experiencing higher levels of poverty and have higher income inadequacies¹ 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. Thirty-seven percent of Ireland’s population live in rural areas (CSO, Census 2016). This is a large number of people who cannot be left behind by the new Government.

The lack of essential public services such as transport and broadband in rural areas, continue to exclude people, especially marginalised groups from fully participating in society and contributing to the economy. Investment in local transport and high speed and the roll out of the National Broadband Plan (NBP) must be key priorities for the next Government so that every person has the opportunity to participate in society.

Rural communities, villages and towns have a lot to offer the country and are a key contributor in how the Government want the country to be over the coming years but this will need political will and Government commitment, proper investment, and meaningful engagement and collaboration with rural people and communities. The Climate Crisis will pose many challenges for rural communities and how people must adapt to mitigation measures. However, rural communities also hold many of the solutions to overcoming these challenges for the whole of the country.

The launch of *Project 2040* in early 2018 sets out a roadmap for development in the country for the next number of years with the intention that this development will be balanced across the whole of the country. The next Government must commit to the delivery of this, that it is with the adequate funding and must ensure that every person in every part of the country reap the benefits of investment. The funds set up under *Project 2040* such as The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund and the Climate Action Fund must be adequately funded to ensure real change can be made and projects are sustainable after the funding is finished.

IRL welcome that a Department for Rural and Community Development was established with a senior Minister at cabinet. The next Government must retain this Department and a senior Ministerial position so balanced regional and rural developed are high on the Governments agenda.

¹ Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (2019) Minimum Essential Standard of Living Report 2019.

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>

All policies and strategies developed by the next Government must be rural proofed and ensure people living in rural areas, especially marginal groups are not adversely impacted.

Ireland was one of the lead countries in the signing of the *Sustainable Development Goals*, with 17 goals to achieve by 2030. With the first goal being 'No Poverty' by 2030, the other 16 goals must work to complement this goal and no person made worse off by trying to achieve the goals. The SDG's must form a pivotal part of the next Government.

Irish Rural Link's Priorities and Asks in the General Election 2020 and the Next Government

1. Building Resilient, Sustainable and Inclusive Communities

People and communities must be at the heart of the next Government Programme. Building resilient, sustainable and Inclusive communities across the island of Ireland must be a key priority for the next Government. People need a sense of place and belonging that is inclusive for all. By creating communities that are inclusive, have access to good public services and afford every person a decent and adequate standard of living, communities can become more resilient and sustainable.

Creating a space where people can work close to where they live is essential for communities to stay alive, as it gives people more opportunity to spend quality time with family, volunteer or become more involved in the community where they live as opposed to spending hours commuting long distances to work.

Welcoming new communities and citizens

Communities must be equipped with the necessary infrastructure and services to properly integrate and welcome refugees and asylum seekers. While rural communities have been criticised for being unwelcoming to new families, the lack of services in the area is the main concern of local residents. The lack of transport, health care, mental health services, school spaces in these small towns and villages means that the needs of new residents cannot be met.

The next Government must do an audit of an area to see what services are needed to ensure that refugees and asylum seekers can fully integrate into the community and have their needs met by the community.

Communities should be engaged from the outset to help identify what services are available in the community, what gaps exist and can help with welcoming and integrating new groups of people.

Climate Action

Addressing climate change and reducing carbon emissions will be a key issue for the next Government. Engaging with communities in a bottom-up approach to addressing climate change is vital in transitioning to a low-carbon society and in reaching our 2030 targets.

Restoration of Peatlands/Wetlands

Peat soils cover approximately 20% of Ireland's land area. Since the Habitat Directives (92/43/EEC), some of these areas have become Special Areas of Conservation (SAC's)

and many more areas have been declared SAC's since then. With the cessation of peat extraction and with peatlands having the ability to store twice as much carbon as forestry, there must be a greater drive to rewetting peatlands across the country. However, rewetted peatlands do not only act as carbon sinks but are also key contributors to a range of important Ecosystem Services (ESS) such as; nutrient retention, regional water and climate regulation as well as the protection of biodiversity.

Engaging communities in the restoration and conservation work can help to increase the value people place on the bog while providing valuable educational and recreational amenities in rural communities.

An example of where this is working is with the **Community Wetlands Forum (CWF)**, a network established under the umbrella of Irish Rural Link.

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 establishment, the Community Wetlands Forum has continued to grow its membership, with 21 community groups now part of the forum and new groups interested in joining all using the model of community engagement to develop similar projects in their areas. The forum is also attended by 15 Stakeholder members which includes representatives from Government Agencies, third level institutions, artists, photographers all interested in protection of peatlands and wetlands, biodiversity and 'Life on the Bog'. The Forum also has a rep on the LIFE Raised Bog Restoration Steering Group, NRN Biodiversity Sub-Committee and Irish RAMSAR.

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. The Community Wetlands forum launched its Strategic Plan 2017-2020 in May 2017³. The aim of the Strategic Plan is to guide the Community Wetlands Forum in its support of community wetland groups, improving outcomes in a mutually beneficial approach that is collaborative and inclusive.

Moor Futures

MoorFutures⁴ are a way to raise funds for the rewetting and restoration of peatlands and wetlands. Essentially, they are a type of carbon credit used as an instrument for financing peatland protection, ecosystem services and biodiversity, through private investment.

³ Community Wetlands Forum (2017) 'CWF Strategic Plan 2017-2020'

<https://www.communitywetlandsforum.ie/about-us/#>

⁴ <https://www.moorfutures.de/>

MoorFutures offer corporations an opportunity to offset their carbon emissions while investing in the biological diversity and the multiple benefits of peatlands and wetlands. MoorFutures create trust because projects are carried out in the local community and the buyer can visit the site easily; supplier and buyer are in direct personal contact. They started in Brandenburg state in Germany in 2012 with other states following suit. With the amount of peatland and wetland across Ireland, there is an opportunity now to explore such a scheme to help Ireland achieve its climate targets.

Engaging communities in the restoration and conservation of peatlands can not only help store carbon, making the air and water quality better in the area but also help protect biodiversity and other ecosystems, giving people a place they will enjoy living in.

Provide carbon credits to community groups, through the form of a scheme such as MoorFutures. Carbon credits should also be made available to landowners who conserve peatlands and wetlands and/or plant forestry.

Community Energy Projects

Communities are a valuable resource in the change to renewable and cleaner energy. Community-led renewable energy projects, brings communities together and gives them a sense of ownership over their energy source. a community coming together and being involved from the offset, the best source of renewable energy for a community can be decided on.

There needs to be meaningful engagement with communities is essential at the pre-planning stage of any community-led development.

- *Solar Panels*

Public buildings, schools, community centres, GAA centres have ample space on their roofs for solar panels. Again the sale of excess electricity produced from solar panels back to the grid should be made available to people and to communities. Farm buildings also give farmers the opportunity to produce their own energy or contribute in part to this. Supports must be in place and the ability to sell excess energy to the grid is necessary.

The next Government should provide financial support to communities for initial costs of construction of renewable energy projects as over the lifetime of energy sources the investment will be returned through selling the energy back into the grid.

Agricultural Sector

The agricultural sector can also be the solution in the production of greener energy and storing of carbon.

With some pilot **Anaerobic Digestion** projects happening in the use of waste to produce bio methane gas, there is scope to increase the number of these across the country and engage with farmers and local community groups so they can become involved in the production of their own energy. It is a way to help farmers reduce their carbon emissions 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 gas.

Community Services and Volunteering

Community services provide a lot of essential services to the most vulnerable and marginalised people in our society. Community services, such as healthcare, social care and childcare services are provided by community groups. These services have an important role to play in creating sustainable and inclusive communities and must be properly supported. Many of these services will never make a profit but funding should not be reduced or cut because of this.

The next Government must ensure funding for community groups are properly funded with multi-annual funding so they can budget properly to continue to provide these essential services

2. Balanced Regional Development

Project 2040, launched in January 2018, was a cross Government, cross party publication. Its aim was to ensure more balanced sustainable growth across the country. The development of Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies by each of the three Regional Assemblies were to support the implementation of *Project 2040* and support regional development. While we welcome the publication of these policies and strategies, there is still an imbalanced approach to development.

We welcome the establishment of a Government Department for Rural and Community Department and appointment of a senior Minister to cabinet. This Government Department and Ministerial position must be retained to ensure balanced regional and rural developed are high on the next Governments agenda.

Regional Assemblies facilitate a forum for collaboration and while representative of all counties, there is a general consensus that smaller and more rural local authorities are not being heard. IRL strongly believe that there is an opportunity for banding smaller groups of Local Authorities who have natural synergies and share borders to work collaboratively on a myriad of issues which are currently seen as barriers to people living, working and doing business in regions. Collaboration and uniformity around issues such as planning, waste management, climate action, commercial rates, development charges, access to broadband, energy infrastructure etc. are just some examples. Enterprise

Ireland, IDA, Institutes of Technologies, Universities and civil society groups must be included to help identify the needs of the region but also the opportunities available.

The next Government must retain the current Department of Rural and Community Development and senior Ministerial position in the cabinet.

We ask the next Government implement a collaborate approach to Regional Development to ensure more balanced growth to every part of the country.

Employment and Creation of Quality Jobs

A balanced approach to job creation is imperative to more balanced regional development. The jobs created also must be of decent quality and afford people an adequate standard of living. IRL acknowledge the efforts being made to reduce unemployment across the country over the past number of years. However, there still remains disparity between NUT3 regions in terms of unemployment rate. The most recent figures in the Labour Force Survey for Q3 2019⁵ shows unemployment rate for the state stands at 5.2%. The South East region of the country continues to have the highest rate of unemployment at 7.3%. The Border region saw an increase of unemployment to 5.4% during this quarter. 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 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 unemployment⁶.

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.

Job creation in rural areas is key in attracting people to remain or return to rural areas. These jobs must be of good quality and provide an adequate standard of living for households. Currently, the majority of jobs in rural areas are still in 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. (See Adequate Living Standard for All Citizens for details on in work poverty). However, these are still key indigenous sectors that make a significant contribution to the economy both nationally and at a local level. Both the agriculture and rural tourism sector has an important role to play in addressing climate change and holds many of the solutions to help meet climate change and carbon emission targets.

⁵ CSO Labour Force Survey Q3 2019

<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/lfs/labourforcesurveylfsquarter32019/>

⁶ 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>

With an ageing population, especially in rural areas, there will be an increasing demand for healthcare. IRL welcome the publication of *Sláintecare Implementation Strategy* and the *Action Plan 2019* and the vision for a shift towards primary care and care in the community.

The next Government must place more value on the jobs in indigenous sectors such as agriculture and tourism and support people to make sustainable careers that afford them an adequate standard of living.

The next Government must ensure the full implementation of *Sláintecare* so people can access healthcare close to where they live and age in their own home and community.

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. 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 employment⁷.

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. These businesses will also be more vulnerable to Brexit and to adaptations needed to tackle Climate Change and must be supported through this transition. There can also be opportunities for these businesses to explore new markets and new products but they must be supported to do so through training and financial measures.

The next Government must provide more supports for Micro and Small enterprises to be able to expand their businesses but also support to adapt to doing business after Brexit and Climate Change.

Social Enterprise

The publication of the '*Social Enterprise Strategy*' in 2019 was welcome and has highlighted the work and importance of social enterprises to the economy. Social enterprise has a key role to play in rural development and can be an intrinsic part in addressing climate change.

⁷ MICRO (2017) "*Rural Micro and Craft Entrepreneurs: Sustaining Rural Europe A MICRO Project Composite Report*" <http://www.microsmetraining.eu/index.php>

More recognition and support is needed from Enterprise Ireland and Local Enterprise Offices for social enterprises. And the need for education and training in setting up rural based social enterprises is needed.

Better supports and recognition of Social Enterprises by Enterprise Ireland and Local Enterprise Offices in their role of creating jobs and the contribution they make to local economies is needed.

Provision of education and training in setting up rural based social enterprises

Foreign Direct Investment and Remote Working

IDA, the development authority in Ireland with responsibility to attract Foreign Direct Investment (IDA) into Ireland, continue to grow the number of FDI jobs in the country. In 2018, 229,057 IDA client jobs were created, an increase of 6.5% from 2017. However, the Dublin and Mid-East region continue to have almost half of the FDI jobs. This is in comparison to Midlands region who still only have just over 5,000 IDA client jobs⁸.

The *Town and Village Renewal Scheme* has helped communities develop digital hubs in rural areas and the *Rural Regeneration Fund* and the *Regional Enterprise Development Fund* have continued to encourage a collaborated approach to development of these hubs. 'Future Jobs Ireland' has identified remote working as one of the ambitions for the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation for the future of working in Ireland and Digital Hubs and co-working spaces are key to achieving this goal. Some of the new IDA funded companies look for staff that can work remotely so these hubs help in the creation of more FDI jobs outside of the Dublin region. It will also reduce commuting times for people, giving them more time to be involved in their communities, but also allow those, such as females, people with disabilities, who may not be able to commute due to a caring role or because of their disability. The positive impact on the environment with reduced carbon emissions from car usage is a major benefit to remote working.

The next Government must encourage more balance of IDA job creation across the country through a collective approach to regional development and ensure the necessary infrastructure is in place.

The next Government must continue to support Remote Working to ensure that people can work close to where they live but also will allow more marginalised groups access the labour market.

⁸ IDA (2019) Annual Report 2018 https://www.idaireland.com/getmedia/a4a188d7-e067-4c6d-8d00-ab771bd7122d/IDA_Annual_Report_2018.pdf.aspx

Local Public Banking Policy

Irish Rural Link continue to call for a local Public Banking Model be established to ensure SME's and Micro Enterprises are protected and sustain any future financial crises, but also to access credit to allow them grow and expand and such a model of banking would contribute greatly to regional development.

We welcome the establishment of the Local Public Banking Stakeholder Forum in 2019, IRL continue to participate in this forum and continue to engage with this.

The next Government retain the Local Public Banking Stakeholder Forum and engage through this on how a local Public Banking model be established.

3. Revitalising Rural Towns and Villages

Rural towns and villages were decimated by the recession and many are still feeling the impact. With the closure of many local services, such as local shops, post offices, Garda stations and primary schools, during this time, little if any, of these services have re-opened with more post-offices closing in recent years.

While the current Government have developed policies and strategies, *'Realising our Rural Potential: Action Plan for Rural Development'*, and the *'Town and Village Renewal Scheme'*, many towns and villages remain without essential services.

People are key to the revitalisation of rural towns and villages, in the use of local services and in creating a demand for new services. To enable people to live and work in rural towns and villages Government need to ensure that the necessary infrastructures are in place such as affordable housing, access to high speed broadband, good community facilities, proper water and sewerage services etc.

There is opportunity for the new Government to make a real impact in revitalising rural towns and villages by taking advantage of the increase in demand for Remote working (by both employees and employers) and Climate change with new sectors emerging as well as people's need to reduce carbon footprint.

The next Government must prioritise the revitalisation of rural towns and villages and ensure the adequate infrastructure is available so people have the desire and ability to live there.

4. Access to Adequate Infrastructure and Services for All Citizens

Access to infrastructure such as roads, transport, broadband, quality water and waste water treatment are essential to allow people to live in rural areas. Without having basic infrastructures in place makes it more challenging for people to remain in rural areas or for people to move to a rural setting. This infrastructure forms a key part to growing sustainable communities.

Broadband

It is well highlighted that every home and business now needs access to high speed broadband. It is as critical to Ireland's strategic infrastructure in 2020 as the electricity network was in the 1950s. The roll out of the National Broadband Plan to all of rural Ireland cannot be delayed any longer and we need definite timeframes for its delivery. Ensuring the future proofing of the technology used in the rollout of broadband is imperative. It is essential for the creation of quality and sustainable jobs, to allow businesses to grow and expand their markets and reduce the need to travel/commute long distance for work, hence reducing carbon emissions. The Digital Europe Vision 2025 aims to empower all European citizens through digital competency and knowledge. People have the right to participate in the digital society and to have access to digital services. We need to consider digital infrastructure and safe digital access is a basic right.

The next Government must ensure the full roll out of the NBP so every home and business will have access to high-speed, future proofed broadband.

Transport

The lack of a robust 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. The Local Link service has gone some way to reducing social exclusion for people and allow them access some services. The extension of the evening services is also welcome. However, there still remains a number of locations, mainly in the most remote areas, that are not being served by this bus service or the service is not regular enough for people to rely on it to get them to appointments, work, education or training.

IRL have recommended for many years that an uber-style car service or public car scheme in rural areas needs to be part of the 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, to bring them to appointments or for social outings. The rural hackney programme also needs to be revisited and how this could better serve

people in rural areas, especially older people and people with a disability who may not be able to drive. Provision should be made to support such schemes under the existing Free Travel Scheme to address the current inequality and imbalance that exists between urban and rural Ireland.

The next Government must make rural transport a priority and make a real investment in making a suite of transport measures available accessible to all.

The next Government must explore an uber-style car service for rural areas so more marginalised groups can access other services, including such initiatives under the existing Free Travel Scheme.

Healthcare

With an ageing population, especially in rural areas and a commitment by the current Government to care for people in their community, there will be greater demand placed on this sector in the future. With a sector that is already under a serious amount of pressure, there must be a shift in focus to primary and community care to allow people age with dignity in their communities. IRL welcome the publication of *Sláintecare Implementation Strategy* and the *Action Plan 2019* and the vision for this shift towards primary care and care in the community. But this care must be adequately resourced with personnel as well as capital and current funding.

There are a number of community care services that are already available that are playing a key role in the delivery of health care in the home. Meals on Wheels is one service that helps a person remain in their home as they age. However, the service is underfunded and it is becoming more difficult to source volunteers for the service. The service also relies heavily on employment schemes but due to restrictions under the current schemes, service providers are unable to, retain participants, even if there is no paid employment for them to go to. These scheme participants have received training and trust has been built up between the worker and the clients so it is imperative that in order to sustain vital services such as meals on wheels in our communities that they are properly resourced and supported by Government.

The new Government must prioritise the full implementation of *Sláintecare* and ensure people can access healthcare and age with dignity at home in their own community.

Community services, like Meals on Wheels must be properly funded with Multi-annual funding. There is also a need for the service to be included on hospital discharge plans so people can access the service once they leave hospital. It will also allow for earlier discharge from hospital and reduce the risk of readmission.

Education and Training

Accessing education and training for people living in rural areas can be difficult but even more difficult for marginalised groups – especially if they do not have access to transport. For Lone parents’ access to childcare and affordable childcare is also an issue. A study by Cullinane 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.

Community Education is a way of addressing socio-economic inequalities and barriers to social inclusion as it supports people, many of whom are often-early school leavers or are returning to education after a long time, to access education at a local level. It helps to address the educational needs of marginalised groups of people who would otherwise be excluded from fully participating in education system but also in society.

The next Government must provide core funding to community education providers so they can budget for the delivery of their programme ensuring those furthest away from the education system can be reached.

Upskilling and re-training must be a key focus of the next Government with new sectors emerging the labour force must be equipped with the necessary skills to meet the skills demand.

Digital skills

Fifty-two percent of the adult population in Ireland lack even basic digital skills, well above the EU average of 43% (European Commission)⁹. Even among people in employment, digital skills are low. With more services and indeed employment services going online, increasing the capacity of people’s computer skills is now necessity.

Irish Rural Link are currently involved in the delivery of the ‘*Getting Citizens Online*’ and ‘*IT Skills for Farmers*’ Programme funded through the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment. This is a free 10-hour basic computer course aimed at adults over 45 years who have never used a computer before. The course is also available for people who are unemployed, people with disabilities, travellers, migrants and other marginalised communities. We therefore have first-hand experience of the benefits to participants from digital upskilling and support Europe’s Vision of a Single Digital Market where “no citizen is left behind” and call on the incoming Government to expand on the supports available in the provision of community based education and training.

The next Government must commit to providing all citizens with the digital skills to meet their specific needs to enable them participate and engage fully in society.

⁹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/file_import/2019-european-semester-country-report-ireland_en.pdf

Water and Waste Water Treatment

The current pressure on water and sewerage systems are set to continue with increase in the population. Upgrading these systems will be essential to ensure that people can live in rural areas. Irish Rural Link are aware of small villages and communities around the country where no more housing can be built in the village because of the current pressure on sewerage and water systems. This is preventing people moving into or returning to the community.

Policing and Security

Irish Rural Link recognises the rationale behind the closure of some of the Garda Stations during the years of austerity, however, we do see the need for more Garda presence on the ground and being visible in all communities. With the reduction of divisional headquarters, more community policing is needed and this new Policy must work with the Department of Justice and Equality to make sure there is an increase in presence of Gardaí and people have the confidence and trust to report incidents of crime.

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 to enable them expand their schemes and engage more participants in its delivery.

The next Government must commit to increasing the numbers in community policing so communities can begin having more trust in the policing system.

The next Government must work with communities and support them with Neighbourhood Watch and Community Text Alert Schemes.

5. Adequate Living Standard for all Citizens

The new Government must ensure all citizens have an adequate standard of living that affords them to fully participate in society. An adequate standard of living not only means having adequate income and financial resources but also having access to a wide range of robust and reliable public services and goods.

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. With the first SDG being 'No Poverty', the new Government must ensure that marginalised and disadvantaged 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.

The Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL)¹⁰ for 2019 showed little or no change (-0.06%) in the cost of essential goods and services included in MESL¹¹ from 2018. While there was a decrease in the costs of some of the basic essentials such as food, clothing, household goods and communications, household energy costs and health increased by 4.6% and 0.8% respectively. When housing (private rented) and childcare were included there was an increase of 3.9% in overall cost of an MESL from 2018. There has been a cumulative increase over the last five years in MESL need by 13.3% compared to a cumulative change in CPI inflation of 1.1%. The report also found that 63 of the cases examined showed deep income inadequacies, where social welfare meets less than 90% of household MESL expenditure need.

Rural Poverty

The Minimum Essential Standard of Living Index (MESL) shows that households living in rural areas have different and additional expenditure needs to meet to have the same minimum standard of living as households living in urban areas. In 2019, core MESL continued to be higher for rural households. 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, 2019). Also, the reliance of home heating oil as no other affordable alternative is available, higher waste charges and higher food costs due to less proximity to large supermarkets contribute to higher MESL among rural households.

¹⁰ Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (2019) 'Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2019' https://www.budgeting.ie/download/pdf/mesl_2019_update_report.pdf

¹¹ 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 | -€67.13 | -€13.47 |
| 2 Parents with 2 Children (1 pre-school,1 primary) | -€44.47 | +€11.64 |
| 2 Parents with 2 Children (1 primary, 1 secondary) | -€112.42 | -€60.82 |
| 2 Parents with 3 Children (1 infant, 1 pre-school, 1primary) | -€57.64 | -€1.98 |
| 2 Parents with 4 Children (2 primary, 2 Secondary) | -€184.19 | -€124.55 |
| One Parent with 1 child (Primary school) | -€95.32 | -€19.75 |
| One Parent with 2 Children (1 pre-school, 1 primary) | -€73.58 | +€2.86 |
| One Parent with 2 Children (1 primary, 1 secondary) | -€141.53 | -€69.60 |
| Single Adult living in Private Rented Accommodation | -€81.07 | -€42.39 |
| Pensioner Living Alone (non- contributory) | -€51.39 | +€10.64 |
| Pensioner Living Alone (Contributory) | -€40.92 | +€20.25 |

Source: VPSJ MESL 2019

In Work Poverty

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

For households living in rural areas where there are 2 people in full time employment earning minimum wage there is still an income inadequacy. Again the cost of transport getting to and from work can be attributed to this as most households would need two cars.

Income Inadequacies by Household Type with 2 Parents in Full Time Employment earning minimum wage

| Household Type | Rural | Urban |
|---|----------|---------|
| 2 Parents with 1 infant | -€1.06 | +€36.26 |
| 2 Parents with 2 Children (1 pre-school,1 primary) | -€49.52 | +€33.18 |
| 2 Parents with 2 Children (1 primary, 1 secondary) | -€14.28 | +€56.57 |
| 2 Parents with 3 Children (1 infant, 1 pre-school, 1primary) | +€18.60 | -€3.19 |
| 2 Parents with 4 Children (2 primary, 2 Secondary) | -€123.83 | -€4.86 |

The new Government must commit to providing a living wage in conjunction with provision of decent and reliable public services, especially in rural areas.

Farm Incomes and Farm Assist

Findings from the 2018¹² Teagasc National Farm Survey reported a decrease in the average family farm income from €31,374 in 2017 to €23,333. There was a decrease across all farming systems apart from tillage farming which saw an increase in income of 13%. Farm incomes in the Border and West regions had the lowest income at €13,292 and below €14,000 respectively¹³. Only a third of farms in the country were viable (32%) with 34% of farms economically vulnerable. Sustainable farms accounted for 34% 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.

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 2019 as well as changes to income disregards in the means testing process, which came into effect from March 2017 and that a person can receive the higher Qualified Child rate for children over 12 years (and under 18 years) introduced in Budget 2019. However, IRL are still concerned that it is still based on a farmer's previous year's income,

¹² The 2018 National Farm Survey is not yet published. We would expect the average farm income to be lower in 2018 due to the adverse weather conditions that occurred at this time.

¹³ Dillion, E et al (2018) 'Teagasc National Farm Survey 2018

https://www.teagasc.ie/media/website/publications/2019/NFS-2018_final_web.pdf

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 – December 2018¹⁴.

The way Farm Assist is calculated must be changed, need to look at present income and not means tested on previous years, due to weather and other conditions outside the control of the farmer.

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 SILC¹⁵ report 2017¹⁶ showed 22.5% of individuals 'at risk of poverty' went without heat at some stage during 2017 while 13.1% were unable to keep their home adequately warm. For those living in consistent poverty, these figures were much higher with over a half of individuals (51%) going without heat at some stage during the year and 30.2% unable to keep their home adequately warm.

Any increase in carbon tax will push these individuals and households further into energy poverty. While there have been proposals of redistributing the tax to poorer households, either through social welfare payments or tax credits, it does not address the issue of reducing carbon emissions – the purpose of the tax – if homes are not properly insulated and alternative heating systems or greener fuels available and affordable to people. People need to have choice and affordable choices available to them before any increase in carbon tax.

In addressing fuel poverty and the need for a just transition from a reliance on fossil fuels to a low-carbon alternative, Government needs to review the supports currently available to home owners under Sustainable Energy Agency Ireland (SEAI). Energy efficiency measures are available to homeowners under a number of schemes, but presently schemes such as Better Energy Homes and Warmer Homes are totally over-subscribed and under-funded. If Government are committed to reaching its ambitious targets for retrofitting homes before 2030 and to ensuring a just and fair transition for those at risk of fuel poverty, serious investment is required both in the schemes themselves but also

¹⁴ Community & Voluntary Pillar Bilateral Meeting with Dept of Social Protection 08/05/17

¹⁵ SILC – Survey on Income and Living Conditions

¹⁶ CSO (2019) – Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2017

<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2017/povertyanddeprivation/>

in new local authority schemes which would see all local authority owned homes being brought up to high BER ratings.

IRL have called for a Climate Change Summit to be held with stakeholders for across all sectors; farming, transport, energy, industry, environmental, social and community and voluntary sector.

The next Government must implement a just transition approach to Climate Change, making no person worse off or pushing them further into fuel poverty when alternatives or not available or affordable to people, especially in rural areas.

Commit to ring-fencing of revenues from carbon tax to support households make necessary changes to their homes and heating systems to improve energy rating and reduce carbon emissions.

No further increase in carbon tax be made until the commitment of ring-fencing is made.

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.'