



Irish Rural Link
Nasc Tuaithe na hÉireann

Irish Rural Link Submission to Northern and Western Assembly Draft Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy

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Overview

Irish Rural Link (IRL) is the national network of rural community groups, representing over 600 community groups and over 25,000 individuals committed to socially, environmentally and economically sustainable rural communities.

The Regional Assembly Spatial and Economic Strategy is an opportunity for the Assembly to drive growth in the region. The region is different to the other two regional assemblies; Eastern and Midlands and the Southern Assembly in terms of its demographics and the level of economic growth since the recession. While Census 2016 showed there was a 3.8% increase in the population across the country, the counties of Donegal and Mayo were the only two counties in the country to experience a fall in population; falling by 1.2% and 0.1% respectively. Nine other counties, mainly in the west, mid/south west and border regions only saw population growth of less than 2%¹. This decrease or small growth rates in population can be attributed to the high numbers of people who emigrated during the recession, who have not returned or who now are migrating to cities and larger urban centres to access employment. This is leaving these counties and the Northern and Western region with an ageing population. The Western Region has the highest percentage of over 65's, with 16.2% to 17.7% of the population in the region over the age of 65, this is followed by the border counties of Donegal, Cavan and Monaghan. With the number of people over the age of 65 projected to increase to approximately 1.4 million by 2046 (CSO, 2016). And the number of people over the age of 85 expected to double by 2031 and the number over the age of 80 years to dramatically increase to between 470,000 and 484,000 in 2046, the RSES must include measures that will help address the ageing population of the region to ensure the necessary healthcare services will be available to meet the growing demand.

The Northern and Western region has the majority of rural areas among the three regional assemblies. Rural areas are still not benefitting from the same level of growth and recovery as is happening in urban areas especially in the Dublin and Eastern part of the country. It has not benefitted in terms of level of job creation or the level of foreign investment. Essential services continue to close in rural areas and many homes and businesses still do not have access to high speed broadband. Micro enterprises and SME's are the backbone of rural economies. However, they remain very vulnerable, especially to Brexit. The draft RSES acknowledges that the Northern and Western region are more vulnerable to Brexit than any other region and every effort must be made to ensure that communities on the Border and businesses are protected.

Trying to keep people in the region and attracting new people to the region is a challenge for the assembly and for the implementation of the RSES. While the region has many valuable assets to the area, such as a slower pace of life, better quality of life,

¹ CSO (2017) Census 2016

<https://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/newsevents/documents/census2016summaryresultspart1/Census2016SummaryPart1.pdf>

in terms of cleaner air and outdoor space, promoting these to entice people, especially young people to move to the region will be an important factor in the Strategy.

A collaborate approach by all stakeholders is necessary for the measures set out in the Strategy to be realised and balanced and inclusive growth is essential. Quality jobs must be created across the Assembly region so people can work and live in close proximity and the jobs created must afford, at the very minimum, a basic standard of living for people. It is an opportunity also to bring those furthest from the labour market back into employment and sustainable employment so that people do not have to face long periods out of work.

1. 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 Q3 2018² showing unemployment rate now stands at 6%. However, there are still disparities in the rate of unemployment across NUTS3 regions, especially within the Eastern and Midlands region. Unemployment rates in the Midlands continue to remain above the state average at 7.1%, while the Mid-East and Dublin regions have unemployment rates of 5.8% and 5.3% respectively. Results from Census 2016 showed that small towns had higher unemployment rates than larger towns. A lot of work needs to be done within the Assembly region to ensure that there is more balance in job creation and that small and medium towns will see more job opportunities made available to them. Job creation must be inclusive for all with every person in society having the opportunity to take up employment. Long-term unemployment must also be addressed. Thirty-four percent of those who are unemployed are so for over a year or more. Getting people back to work and the provision of the necessary training or upskilling is now necessary. Training provided must match the skill needs for an area to ensure that they can gain employment close to where they live.

Quality of Jobs

The Western Development Commission report on '*Travel to Work and Labour Catchments in the Western Region*' found that the Wholesale, Retail and Trade and 'Education, Human Health and Social Activities' are both the largest employers in the region with 'Manufacturing Industries' being third most important sector³. This is in line with what Irish Rural Link has found over the years; however, the quality of jobs available in rural areas tends to be lower than in urban area, with a higher number of people employed in lower paid sectors. Many jobs in retail/wholesale, hotel and catering, tourism are zero

² CSO Labour Force Survey Q3 2018

<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/lfs/labourforcesurveyquarter32018/>

³ Western Development Commission (WDC) (2018) '*Travel to Work and Labour Catchments in the Western Region: A Profile of Seven Town Labour Catchments*'

contracts. In rural areas, these are the jobs many people work in as there is very little alternative unless they commute long distances to work, which is not always an option for people.

The draft RSES identifies tourism as a key sector for job creation and the development of natural landscape to promote the sector. As mentioned, many jobs in this sector are very often minimum wage jobs, precarious hours and seasonal. The Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL)⁴ for 2018 shows that income inadequacies are 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. This is mainly due to extra costs incurred by living in a rural area such as transport and energy costs.

The Health and Social Care Sector is already an important employer in the region. With the launch of Slaintecare and move towards regional based delivery of healthcare and care in the community so people can remain in their own home as they age and access healthcare closer to their home along with an ageing population the demand health and social care services as well as for homecare services will increase. The Draft RSES makes reference to SlainteCare and measures for quality healthcare services outlined in the RSES must be aligned to Slaintecare.

Childcare is an important subsector of Health and Social Care, which is a necessity for women wishing to go back to work. Twenty-four percent of those part-time employed are underemployed, with females making up a large portion of this group. This is mainly due to lack of affordable childcare.

The value placed on jobs in these sectors – tourism, homecare services and childcare to name but a few must be increased if these sectors are seen as key opportunity sectors and a move towards payment of the living wage of €11.90 must be encouraged. People cannot be made worse off by taking up employment. It must ensure them an adequate standard of living. Jobs in these sectors must also become more sustainable and that people can make career from them.

Foreign Direct Investment

Investment from foreign companies is a way of attracting high quality jobs to a region. While the number of IDA FDI jobs created in the west and Border region has increased by 5.1% and 3.6% respectively in 2017, there is still regional imbalance in the number of jobs available with Dublin and Eastern part of the country receiving the majority of IDA investment. Of the 210,443 jobs created by IDA companies in 2017, 101,355 were created in Dublin and Mid East compared to 23,286 and 11,469 in the Western and Border

⁴ Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (2018) 'Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2018'
https://www.budgeting.ie/download/pdf/mesl_2018_update_report.pdf

regions respectively⁵. The draft RSES includes the town of Athlone as a centre of growth for the region and it is an important centre to help drive growth in the Northern and Western region because part of the town is in the region. However, only 4,327 IDA FDI jobs were created in the Midlands Region (to include Athlone) and had the smallest rate of annual growth in IDA job creation at 1.2%. There is ample opportunity for the Midlands region to attract more FDI than is currently happening. With an Institute of Technology based in the Midlands region, there must be better collaboration between this, the IDA and Local Authorities in both regional assemblies to see what are the barriers preventing more foreign investment. With the onset on Brexit, there is an increased opportunity for more foreign investment in Ireland and this must be dispersed evenly across the country.

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. 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 an EU Funded Project MICRO IRL were lead partner, 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 employment⁶.

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.

The necessary infrastructure, such as broadband must be available to help these companies grow and make it easier for people to start-up companies. Enterprise Ireland, Local Enterprise Offices must work with third level institutes in the regions and other adult education providers, ETB's etc to ensure the skills and supports are in place to help SME's and Micro Enterprises. There are also opportunities for more collaboration between multinational companies and micro and SME's and spill-overs must be created.

⁵ IDA (2018) Annual Report 2017 https://www.idaireland.com/IDAireland/media/docs/About-IDA/IDA_Annual_Report_2017.pdf

⁶ MICRO (2017) "Rural Micro and Craft Entrepreneurs: Sustaining Rural Europe A MICRO Project Composite Report" <http://www.microsmetraining.eu/index.php>

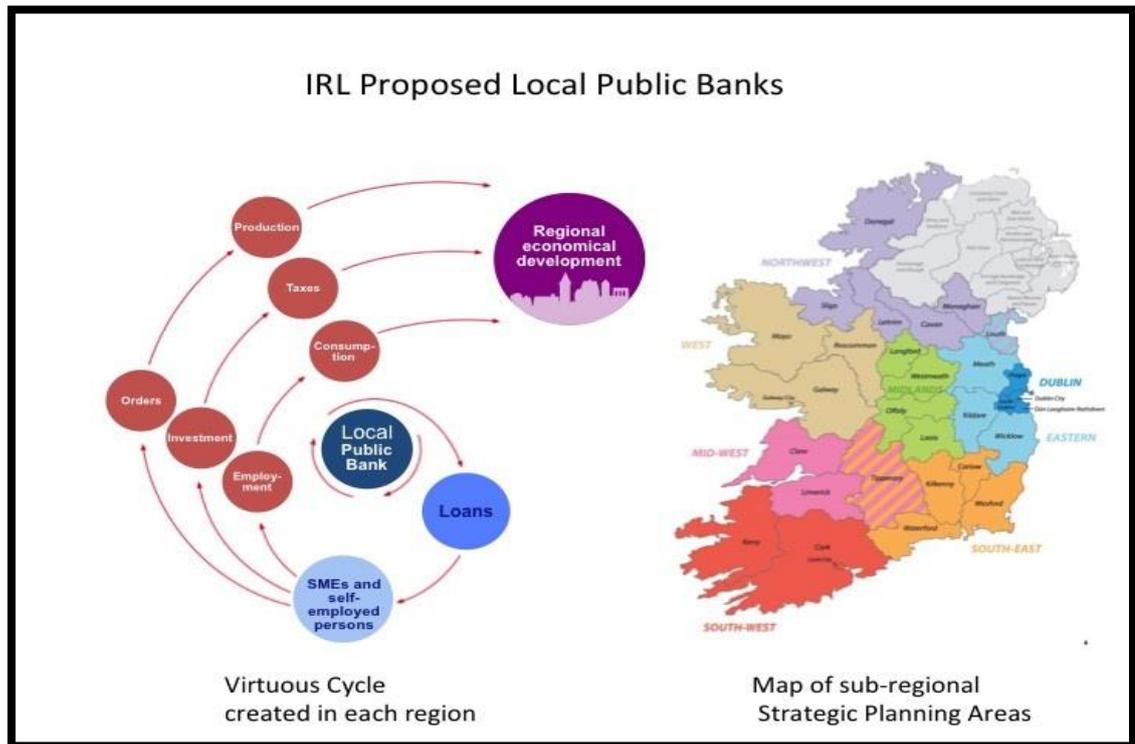
Local Public Banking

As mentioned above, small & medium enterprises and microenterprises remain a key employer in rural areas. SME's are still finding it difficult to access credit from the banking system and are therefore unable to reach their full potential. They are also more vulnerable to external financial shocks.

IRL have been at the forefront in campaigning for a Local Public Banking Model being introduced in Ireland as an alternative banking model for people than the pillar banks. We welcome that the Government published a report in July 2018 on Public Banking and investigation the German Sparkassen model and that a stakeholder forum will be established shortly on this.

This model of banking covers the 26 counties nationally and works on a regional basis following key principles of the "Framework for the Development of Regional Enterprise Strategies." The model is not based on a theory but on an existing regional working banking model bringing prosperity by creating a virtuous cycle of money circulating in the local economy. The concept proposal makes provision for inclusion of post offices and credit unions as part of invigorating local communities particularly in the area of SME's and the Agri sectors that allow commerce to thrive.

- 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.



Further Education and Training

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 being 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.

Community Education must be included in training and upskilling of people, especially women so they can increase their prospects of gaining employment or go on to further education. It must be incorporated into the RSES as a vital component in job creation. However, the following is needed for community education to be better supported -

- Develop concrete supports for community and adult education providers who are already providing formal and non-formal education to targeted disadvantaged groups and who have already identified the barriers to participation in lifelong learning (childcare, transport etc.)
- Support existing providers of education and training to lone parents to continue to deliver targeted supports to this group, taking into account the known barriers of childcare, transport and rural isolation to increase participation rates and support progression into further education and employment.
- Utilise SICAP funding (Goal 2) and access supports under LEADER (Theme 2: Social Inclusion) to support existing providers to develop programmes to enable access to 3rd level education on an outreach basis, taking into account the already identified barriers with specific reference to the low participation and attainment rates of females in third level education.
- Significant differences between third level institutions in terms of a) fees charged and b) attitude towards lifelong learning and willingness to engage.

2. Agriculture and Environment

As outlined in the draft RSES the Northern and Western region has the highest proportion of people employed in the agriculture, forestry and fishing industries compared to the rest of the State. The number of farmers in the region is also higher, however, the land is not of the best quality and there is a higher proportion of small farm holders, with the majority of the farms classed as vulnerable located in Border counties. Many farmers need to supplement their on-farm income with work off the farm.

The draft RSES recognises rural areas as being well placed to benefit from new opportunities emerging such as the food economy, the green economy and the bioeconomy. There is an opportunity also to help those farmers whose land may not be viable to diversify into some of these sectors. This would also help in meeting climate action targets as part of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals without having an impact on peoples' livelihoods.

Irish Rural Link are the lead partner with the National Rural Network and through this work, raising awareness of the schemes and initiatives available to farmers to adapt to climate change is one of the key aims of the network. Measures that are available and some that need to be introduced include:

1. EIP Initiative

EIP - European Innovation Partnerships are a new and fresh approach to research and innovation for better and more sustainable agriculture productivity. EIPs allows for the pooling of expertise and resources by bringing together public and private sectors at EU, national and regional levels, combining supply and demand side measures.

2. Rainwater Harvesting

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.

3. 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.

Establishing biodigester cooperatives would allow farmers from the same area come together and establish these cooperatives, reducing the cost for them at an individual level while also reducing their carbon emissions.

4. Farm Based Energy Cooperatives

A lead on from the Biodigester Cooperatives would be the establishments of farm based energy cooperatives. These would create energy through the use of biodigestors – converting farm waste, slurry etc. into energy which can then be used on the farms and the wider community.

Conversations now need to happen on how excess energy supply from such cooperatives can be sold back to the grid with moneys invested back into the community so everyone can benefit.

Conservation of Peatlands/Wetlands

Wetlands and peatlands are a key contributor to mitigating climate change. Wetlands and peatlands can hold two to three times more carbon than forestry and wise use of wetlands/peatlands can contribute to a range of important Ecosystem Services (ESS) such as; nutrient retention, regional water and climate regulation as well as the protection of biodiversity. Wetlands and peatlands are a tangible way to help Ireland deliver the commitments that it has made on Climate Action, such as Paris Agreement and Sustainable Development Goals 2030. With extraction of peat being stopped, there will be many bogs, especially in the Midlands region that will be left idle and conserving these can contribute to mitigating climate change, but community led approach is needed for

this. The Community Wetlands Forum (CWF) was established under the umbrella of Irish Rural Link in September 2013. See Text box 2.1 for information on CWF.

Carbon Sinks

Peatlands and Wetlands as well as forestry absorb carbon. Allowing farmers and landowners to offset their carbon emissions against planting of forestry and/or no longer cutting turf on bogland and rewetting this land. The introduction of carbon sinks for both of these activities could encourage farmers, especially small farm holders, whose land is not viable to explore these options, while also giving them extra income. For community groups such as CWF members who are conserving peatlands, Moor Futures are a way that community groups can raise funds to help maintain the work they are doing.

Moor Futures

MoorFutures 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. 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 Brandesburg 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.

Text Box: 2.1 Community Wetlands Forum

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 14 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 representatives from Government Agencies and third level institutions. 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. In support of the main objective, CWF also has the following objectives.

1. To promote wetlands, including peatlands, as important places of biodiversity and conservation, which support community integration, well-being and other services.
2. To facilitate the sharing of knowledge, ideas, experience and organisational methods between members.
3. To grow the network by encouraging new community groups who are in the process of developing community wetlands or who wish to establish such initiatives to join CWF.
4. To facilitate regular Community Wetlands Forum meetings where all stakeholders in wetland conservation can participate as equal partners.
5. To share the latest research and best practice in wetland conservation and management, and facilitate access to national and international expertise, similar networks, and funding opportunities.
6. To maximise linkages with other relevant plans, programmes, and strategies.

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

In May 2017, the Community Wetlands forum launched its Strategic Plan 2017-2020. 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. CWF now have a part-time Development Officer to implement its strategic Plan.

3. Connectivity

The Northern and Western region still has poor public transport connection to the rest of the country. With no rail service to the border counties, they can often feel cut off from other areas. The importance of the provision of robust and reliable public transport is key to connecting people to employment, education and training, health services, while at the same time reducing isolation and mitigating climate change.

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.

The NWRA RSES must set out measures to meet the transport needs of every person. Connecting all the components of public transport currently available is needed but also building on the services and introducing new services to reduce the reliance on cars would be beneficial to all and to the environment.

Local Link Services

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. In the NWRA region, there are six Local Link companies; Cavan -Monaghan, Donegal; Leitrim-Sligo-Roscommon; Mayo and Galway, delivering services to people in rural areas. The pilot scheme for evening services has now been extended until March 2019. IRL would like to see this pilot becoming a permanent service among Local Links. See Text Box 3.1 for more information on services they provide

However, the services Local Link companies provide are still not accessible to everyone and the uber style service proposed in the last number of weeks should be explored further as it could be a solution to a raft of challenges facing people and businesses in rural areas.

Statutory Framework for Local Transport Planning

Local Link is still not recognised or known by many Government Departments and Local Authorities have not engaged as much as they should with their Local Link Companies. It can be 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.

Text Box 3.1 About Local Link

The Rural Transport Programme (RTP) has been re-branded under the name “Local Link” and is delivered by 17 Transport Co-ordinated Unit’s (TCU’s) across the country reaching people in some of the remotest parts of the country. The TCU’s in NWRA region include Cavan/Monaghan Local Link; Leitrim/Sligo/Roscommon Local Link; Donegal Local Link, Mayo Local Link and Galway Local Link.

In 2012 responsibility of the programme was transferred to the National Transport Authority (NTA) and Local Link offices now operate 1,000 public bus services in local and rural Ireland. In 2016⁷ Local Link delivered over 250,000 rural transport service trips nationally. Over €1.7m passengers accessed Local Link Bus rural transport services in 2016.

The service models provided by Local Link include;

- Scheduled Fixed Transport – These are high frequency services with a regular route, stopping places and timetables.
- Scheduled Flexible Transport – these operate to timetabled departures but can deviate from route to pick up/set down passengers closer to their destination.
- Demand Responsive – This is a door to door service responding to requests for services and operates by making specific trips to pick up and drop off passengers at their own door.

Local Link plays a vital role in delivering services in local areas, particularly in some of the most remote rural areas, providing a lifeline for many in terms of social inclusion and connectivity and are a key contributor to rural economic and social wellbeing. However, there appears to be little recognition or awareness at Government, Department and Local Authority level to the services Local Link provides and the service it could provide if there was more joint-up thinking between Government Departments, Statutory Agencies, Local Authorities and Community and Voluntary Organisations.

Broadband and Mobile Phone Coverage

The rollout of the National Broadband Plan needs to happen without any further delays. The Broadband Officers in Local Authorities must continue to work with getting the fibre broadband to every home and business in the country and ensure that the technology is future proofed. It is essential for businesses, for attracting investment but also for helping people, especially older people stay in touch with family and friends.

⁷2016 are the most recent figures available

With many services, including farm payments and farm returns moving online, broadband is now a necessity.

4. Quality of Life

The RSES is a real opportunity to improve the quality of life for people living in the region. This will involve a wide range of measures including those outlined from in previous section such as; creating quality jobs, provision of public services – transport, high speed broadband and having local amenities for people to enjoy and have healthier lifestyles.

Healthcare

Improved quality of life needs to be across the lifecycle. This would involve access to healthcare close to where people live and people can remain in their own home as they age. With the Northern and Western Region having the oldest population in the country, measures need to be put in place for older people living in the regions, especially in rural areas and to meet the future demand of health care that comes with an ageing population. With the development of SlainteCare and the Action Plan to be launched in the coming weeks, the focus of healthcare must be on the delivery of health care at community level and primary care. This must be included in the RSES.

Community services play a vital role in helping keeping older people in their homes and allowing for early discharge from hospital. Services such as meals on wheels, befriending services, home help all now must be properly funded and become a greater part of home care packages. As outlined in previous sections, this sector will be a growing sector in the coming years and more value must be placed on jobs in this sector.

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. However, there are many challenges that are hindering Meals on Wheels delivery the vital service it provides and need to be addressed to ensure older people can remain in their own homes and live independently.

Social Inclusion

Growth and development in this RSES must be balanced and inclusive of everyone in society. People in rural areas continue to be more at risk of poverty and social exclusion. This can be further exacerbated for marginalised and vulnerable groups of people; older people, young people, people with disabilities, migrant and ethnic

minority. The lack of services such as public transport and broadband are two of the main causes of this.

The Vincentian Partnership MESL continues to show households living in rural areas, the MESL is 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).

Income Inadequacies by Household Type in Receipt of Social Welfare 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

And as mentioned, households in rural areas in receipt of minimum wage still have higher income inadequacies than their urban counterparts.

IRL would like to see MESL used as a benchmark for social welfare payments and minimum wage scales. While this is one means of improving standard of living for low income households, it must be accompanied with provision of adequate services to

Conclusion

As a driver for the new Project Ireland 2040, the Northern and Western Regional Assembly must work closely with the other three Assemblies to ensure that there is balanced growth and development across the countries. This needs to be outlined in its Spatial and Economic Strategy and ensure that it is inclusive of everyone. There must be more collaboration between all stakeholders, Local Authorities, Employment agencies and Third Level Institutes to attract FDI to all regions and for the provision of quality jobs, with continued support available to indigenous companies and start-ups in the region.

This must now be a strategy to ensure that those people who have been left behind since the recession and even before the recession have opportunities to access education, training and quality employment.

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.'