



*Irish Rural Link*  
*Nasc Tuaithe na hÉireann*

# **Irish Rural Link's Response to Programme For Government**

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**Rialtas na hÉireann**  
**Government of Ireland**

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## Introduction

A Programme for Government (PFG) has now been agreed by party leadership of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party and passed by all parties' members. Since the general election the country and global landscape has changed dramatically as a result of the COVID pandemic.

This document sets out a path to recovery with a lot of emphasis that this recovery will be a 'green recovery'. This is evident throughout the PFG with a heavy emphasis on the environment and addressing climate change throughout every sector and that every Government department must become more environmentally conscious in the delivery of their policies and strategies.

Irish Rural link welcome the commitments to rural communities and while the pandemic has caused devastation for many; the loss of loved ones, loss of jobs and livelihoods, it also highlighted a lot of positive aspects that we can learn from such as:

- The advantages of remote working, which would allow people to stay in their own communities and create the long awaited regional balance.
- The value of rural volunteering as demonstrated by Irish Rural Link and the Wheel where volunteers were mobilised to bring essential supplies to rural households who needed to isolate.
- The value of such services as meals on wheels, without which householders would have found it extremely difficult to abide by the necessary instructions designed to keep people healthy.

Meals on Wheels is not mentioned in the PFG. With the commitment by the new Government to implement Sláintecare and move towards primary and community which would allow for people to remain in their own home as they age, we believe Meals on Wheels have an important role to play in this and that a commitment must be made for better supports and change in funding structure for this service.

This document summarises and responds to the various measures as outlined in the PFG.

## **A Better Quality of Life for All (Pg.12-16)**

This section includes measures to improve the quality of life of all citizens, better air quality, remote working and a modal shift in transport and bringing life back into our town centres, smaller towns and our villages.

In an effort to measure wellbeing and progress to go beyond and complement economic measurement tools, the new Government will develop a set of indicators that will help measure how our environment and social progress is performing. It is intended that these will be used across government policymaking at local and national level. These will include;

- A set of wellbeing indices to create a well-rounded, holistic view of how our society is faring.
- A balanced scorecard for each area of public policy, focused on outcomes and the impact policies have on individuals and communities. Housing, education and health will be the first areas of policies such a scorecard will be applied to. More detail on this is needed and when other sectors would be included. Also, reassurance that this includes all individuals and communities across the country is needed.

### **Town Centres**

Measures to revitalise town centres and make them attractive for residential living again, the new Government will base this on the Scottish scheme:

- Prioritise a Town Centres First collaborative and strategic approach to regeneration of towns and villages. This will be done through a Collaborative Town Centre Health Check (CTCHC) framework to gather data and lead actions. IRL would like to see this within the first few months of Government being in place.
- Expansion of the Town and Village Renewal Scheme to bring vacant and derelict buildings back into use and promote residential occupancy. This is welcome, however it must be adequately funded to ensure other measures that already exist within the scheme are not jeopardised.
- Provide seed capital to local authorities to provide serviced sites at cost in towns and villages to allow individuals and families to build homes. This is welcome. IRL are aware of cases across the country where the lack of wastewater treatment and other services prevents people moving into a village or area.
- A Clean Air Strategy will be published with a regional approach to air and noise quality.
- The smoky coal ban will be extended to new towns and over the term of the Government – nationwide. We would call for supports be made available to those most at risk of fuel poverty.

### **Transport**

A move towards a reduction in the use of diesel and petrol cars is outlined the PFG with a push towards cycling and walking and more use of public transport.

### *Cycling and walking*

- There is a commitment to allocate 10% of the total transport capital budget for cycling projects and a further 10% for pedestrian infrastructure. €360 million of the 2020 capital budget will be allocated per year for the lifetime of the government.
- Every local authority will be mandated to adopt a high-quality cycling policy, carry out an assessment of their roads network and develop cycle network plans. A Cycling Officer will be appointed to help implement these measures and will have clear powers and roles. The NTA will provide assistance with the work to be carried out.
- Regional Cycle Design Offices will be established to support local authorities. They will be co-located in the seven Regional Design Offices for roads.
- The eligibility of the Bike to Work scheme will be extended with an increased proportionate allowance for e-bikes and cargo bikes.
- The new Government aim to dramatically increase in the number of children walking or cycling to school and will ramp up the Cycle Right programme so children are offered cycling training in primary school.
- A review of road traffic policy and legislation to ensure safety of walking and cycling.
- The Greenways initiative will continue and to connect all greenways for a national network.

### *Public Transport*

The Government will commit to a greater focus on the development and use of public transport. Over its lifetime, it will make a commitment of a 2:1 ratio of expenditure between new public transport infrastructure and new roads.

Other measures relevant to rural areas:

- The Development and implementation of a Sustainable Rural Mobility Plan. A public consultation of this plan took place between Nov 2019 and 31<sup>st</sup> Jan 2020 prior to the General Election. This plan will introduce a public transport service connecting people to the national public transport system. Local Link will play a key role in this development.
- The new Government will recognise the importance of Local Link and its potential for public transport linkages between rural areas.
- A review of the operations and funding of Local Link will take place within the first 9 months of government taking up its position.
- The new Government aim to expand the service by three times as many passenger journeys.
- Prioritise public transport projects that enhance regional and rural connectivity for additional funding in the lifetime of a reviewed and extended *National Development Plan*.
- Ensure integrated timetabling, one tag-on ticketing system and coordination between bus and rail timetables of all operators.
- In terms of national bus services, protect and expand regional connectivity and connectivity between towns and villages in rural Ireland.

There are no details in this PFG of accessibility of the national bus fleet which for wheelchair users continues to cause grave difficulty. Also, supports for Local Link fleet owner companies to make their fleets wheelchair accessible is needed.

### *Decarbonisation of Road Transport*

Decarbonisation of all road transport will be a key priority for the new government in order to achieve its ambitious emission targets.

- A range of policy approaches will be used to incentivise use of Electric Vehicles (EV) and a shift away from petrol and diesel vehicles.
- Legislate to ban the registration of new fossil fuel cars and light vehicles from 2030 onwards and phase out diesel and petrol cars from cities from 2030. (SDG targets are 2030).
- A review of the current motor tax system will take place to capture the harm caused by nitrogen and sulphur oxide emissions. This will only apply to newly registered vehicles.
- Publish an EV strategy to ensure charging infrastructure stays ahead of demand and provide planning guidance to local authorities. This needs to be carried out early in the government taking up its position so that people can be confident to make the switch to EV's

### *Taxis*

- Support and provide financial assistance to taxi drivers switching to battery and plug-in hybrid EV's
- Review supports available for wheelchair-accessible taxi vehicles. Again we would call for this to be expanded to Local Link fleet owning companies.
- Rural Hackney initiative will be looked at. However, this is included as a measure in the section on *Building Stronger and Safer Communities* so which department will be responsible for this needs to be clarified.
- A pilot to examine the potential for ride-sharing apps will be run to improve rural connectivity.

## Reigniting and Renewing the Economy (Pg.18-29)

The new Government will have a big challenge to support the recovery of the economy post Covid and post the transition period of Brexit. According to the PFG, the recovery will be a 'green recovery' while being conscious of the importance of a just transition and the new digital age. SME's will be central to the recovery.

The approach to the recovery will be twofold:

- The first; a **'July Jobs Initiative'**: series of immediate actions for returning the economy to full capacity. These include setting out the future of the special COVID wage subsidies and unemployment benefits, as well as supports for SMEs and consideration for additional measures for the hospitality and retail sectors.
- Then a **National Economic Plan** is to be published in conjunction with Budget 2021 and set out longer-term, jobs-led recovery. This will be focused on employment, SME resilience, sustainability, regional and rural development, maintaining support for FDI and restoring consumer confidence. These aims will be achieved using five levers: education and training, investment, enterprise policy, business financing, and regulation & costs.
- The plan will prioritise protecting the workforce and the economy from future threats including Brexit, public health crises, digital transformation and climate change.
- A **Recovery Fund** available 2020-2022 will be the main tool of the July Job Initiative. It will fund current and capital projects to drive strategic change through SMEs. It is comprised of three elements: i) infrastructure development, ii) reskilling and retraining, and iii) supporting investment by helping Irish companies access credit and capital – this will include consideration for credit guarantees.
- Some of the other actions included in the July Jobs Initiative include;
  - Set out a pathway for the Future implementation of the Temporary Wage Subsidy and future distribution of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment.
  - Sectoral taskforces will be set up to focus on the specific needs of the sector.
  - A SME and State Bodies Group will be convened to coordinate the Government's ongoing response to COVID-19 for SME's.
  - Enact legislation for the introduction of a new €2 billion **Credit Guarantee Scheme, SURE Scheme and warehousing of tax Liabilities**. Also review the Business Restart Grant and other grant supports for SME's.
  - Scale up Microfinance Ireland so that it can support greater numbers of small businesses and start-ups to access finance.
  - Set out how commercial rates will be treated for the remainder of 2020 and create a code of conduct between landlords and tenants for commercial rents. A three-month waiver of rates was put place on March 27<sup>th</sup> and IRL would like to see this waiver continue for the remainder of 2020 as, as many businesses are re-opening up with zero income.

### National Economic Plan

A drive for public services reform will be needed for the delivery of the National Economic Plan. A cross-governmental approach will be taken in the implementation of

the plan. The key levers to implement it will include; Education, training and reskilling; investment and stimulus; enterprise policy, business finance and regulation and costs.

#### *Education, Training and Reskilling* (The National Economic Plan will –

- Publish an updated Apprenticeship Action Plan to look at new ways of structuring, funding and promoting apprenticeships. There will also be a focus and specific targets for the uptake of apprenticeships by women, people with disabilities and other marginalised groups.
- A Regional Technology and Clustering Programme will be set up to strengthen links between SME's, ETB's, multinational corporations and third-level institutions.
- More supports by Enterprise Ireland for smaller companies to invest in technology for clean processes, waste and energy efficiency.
- Promote a culture of lifelong learning within the workforce.

#### *Investment and Stimulus*

- Publication of a National Retrofitting Plan which will set out the new Government's commitment to; developing a one-stop shop approach to retrofitting; upgrading at least 500,000 homes to a B2 by 2030; grouping homes together to lower cost, starting in the Midlands area; leverage smart finance and develop easy-payback mechanisms such as through utility bills.
- Bring forward funding for the Project Ireland 2040 Climate Action Fund and the Disruptive Technologies and Innovation Fund.

#### *Enterprise Policy*

- Continue to commit to Foreign Direct Investment.
- Establish an SME Growth Taskforce to design a National SME Growth Plan to map out a long-term blueprint beyond Covid-19.
- Expand the role of the Local Enterprise Offices to support local job creation and provide direct grant support to businesses with more than 10 employees.
- Review the tax environment for SME's and entrepreneurs.
- Enable increased remote, flexible and hub-working arrangements. This will help improve better work/life balance and higher labour participation rate among females, people with disabilities, reduce commuting times and traffic congestion and help with regional development. We have seen how this is achievable during the pandemic and the benefits it brought for communities. Also, the flexibility of employers at this time highlighted that it is possible that it can become a permanent feature.
- A public consultation will take place and be completed within six months on the National Digital Strategy. This strategy will include a drive to digitalise public services. The *Getting Citizens Online* Programme, which IRL are currently delivering must be included in this strategy and enhanced so people, especially those over 65 can move on to the next level of learning and using technology.

#### *Business Financing*

We saw in the aftermath of the financial crisis, the impact the lack of lending by banks to SME's had on those businesses and in turn the local economies they were situated in. IRL has advocated since then for the establishment of a local public banking system.

As part of business financing measures, the new Government will enable credit unions to grow as a key provider of community banking in the country. IRL would like more clarity and detail of this measure. Credit unions will be supported to expand services to encourage community development.

Other measures for business financing include

- Enhancement of the mandate for the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland to get low cost finance to SME's. Irish SME's still pay higher interest rates than other EU countries so they must be brought closer in line with these interest rates.
- Support the role venture capital can play in driving growth in the indigenous economy.

#### *Other Measures to Reignite and Renew the Economy*

- European Green Deal – Direct any relevant funding under the European Green Deal towards decarbonising projects such as renewable energy, retrofits, ecosystem resilience and regeneration and reskilling needs to address unemployment from COVID-19 and decarbonisation.
- Public Finances and Taxation – focus on investment-led and people-focused economy, prioritising policy actions that protect the most vulnerable. A range of income tax measures, some already in place with no increase in the USC and an increase in the Home Carer Tax Credit to support stay-at-home parents. They are committed to keeping corporation tax at 12.5%, encourage the take up of the R&D tax credit for SME's.
- Carbon tax: As most of our members are aware, IRL believe carbon tax does not incentives a change to greener alternatives especially for those on lower incomes or living in rural areas where alternatives are not available. The new Government will increase carbon tax to €100 per tonne by 2030 with an annual increase of €7.50 per annum to 2029 and €6.50 in 2030. While there are supports and measures to reduce the impact of fuel and energy poverty, we would like more clarity on these measures. These include;
  - €3billion on targeted social welfare and other initiatives and other initiatives to prevent fuel poverty and ensure a just transition. An increase in the fuel allowance is a way to off-set the increase in fuel as a result of the carbon tax. However, not all households in receipt of a social welfare payment or those on low income are entitled to this payment and would still be unable to afford to make the changes to their home.
  - €5billion to part fund a socially progressive national retrofitting programme targeting all homes.
  - Allocate €1.5billion to a REPS-2 Programme to encourage and incentivise farmers to farm in a greener and more sustainable way. This will be in addition to the new CAP.

#### **Tourism**

Tourism will also be a key contributor to the reigniting and renewing the economy and a key sector in rural communities. This is the sector that has and will be the most affected by COVID-19. Some measures outlined in the PfG have already been put in place such as a **Tourism Recovery Taskforce**. Other measures will include;

- Introduce a new tourism-specific funding supports in collaboration with EU partners and allow maximum flexibility in state-aid.

- Make 2023 the Year of the Invitation.
- Sustain Investment in the two tourism agencies and develop and promote Ireland as a long-stay tourism destination and spread it more evenly across the country.
- Develop a Sustainable Tourism Policy.
- Expand and Develop greenways, blueways, walks and trails, and other outdoor activities and promote these for both tourism and to also benefit local communities.

## **A Green New Deal (Pg. 32-41)**

The PFG has set out a 'Green New Deal' with ambitious targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 7% on average per annum from 2021 to 2030 and to reach net zero emissions by 2050. It is intended that through a just transition approach, measures will be put in place to alleviate the impact of these targets on sectors that produce large volumes of GHG, on people and communities already living in or at risk of fuel poverty and those relying on a car to get to work.

The new Government will expect every Government Department and Sector of the economy and society to contribute to the Green New Deal – some of which are outlined in the various sections of the PFG.

Within the first 100 days of Government, a new Climate Action Bill will be introduced.

This Bill will:

- Bring into law the 2050 target of net zero emissions.
- Adoption of five-year carbon budgets, setting maximum emissions by sector a legal requirement.
- Establish an Independent Climate Action Council.
- Ban the sale of new and importation of second hand petrol and diesel from 2030.

The new Government will also;

- Propose the establishment of a standing Joint Oireachtas Committee on Climate Action with similar powers to the Public Accounts Committee.
- Update the *Climate Action Plan* annually with quarterly progress reports.

The other key measures include:

- Delivery of a National Aggregated Model of Retrofitting reaching over 500,000 homes by 2030. Given the number of older one-off housing in rural areas and the number of older housing stocks in our towns and villages as well as in larger towns and cities we would see this figure to be more.
- Scaling up of district heating projects following pilots.
- Measures in transport as set out in the 'Better Life' Section.
- Expanding and incentivising micro generation, including roof-top solar energy.
- Measures for the agriculture and forestry sector include; development of a new strategy on afforestation; transform the scale of organic farming with a fair price for farmers at the core of this; build on the carbon efficiency in food production; reduce the use of inorganic nitrogen fertiliser to 2030.
- Evaluate the potential role of sustainable bioenergy.
- Complete and Implement a Waste and Circular Economy Action Plan. Under the plan a Circular Economy Unit will be created within Government, an examination of a municipal compost system for biodegradable packaging will be undertaken and the introduction of a deposit and return scheme for plastic bottles and aluminium cans.

### **Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy**

- National Energy Efficiency Action Plan will be implemented.
- Produce a whole of government plan setting out how to deliver at least 70% renewable electricity by 2030 and identify and develop the skills, supply chain, legislation and infrastructure to enable this.
- Finalise and publish the Wind Energy Guidelines.

- Develop a Social Energy Strategy for rooftop and ground.
- All mechanical electricity meters will be replaced by 2024.
- A longer term plan will be produced looking at the potential of off-shore energy in the Atlantic.

### **A Just Transition and Community Engagement**

The new Government state that they are committed to bringing Communities with them and a just transition as part of the Green New Deal. Some of the measures outlined in the PFG to achieve this include;

- Increasing the target for the number of Sustainable Energy Communities.
- Prioritise the development of microgeneration and letting people sell excess power back to the grid by June 2021.
- Ensure community energy can play a role in reaching the overall target of 70% renewable energy and that they are an integral part of installing new renewable energy projects.

#### *Just Transition*

Just transition extends to the impact of greater digitalisation, automation and robotics as well as decarbonisation. Where jobs and even sectors will become obsolete, the just transition must ensure that alternative job opportunities are made available to people and that vulnerable groups are protected from financial hardship.

- A Just Transition Plan will be published and will set out the work of a permanent Commission for Just Transition. It will also identify and prepare for challenges in the various sectors and regions that will be affected by this.
- The Just Transition Commissioner will become a statutory office.
- Ensure that financing is available and continue to grow the Just Transition Fund.

#### *Engagement Model*

A new engagement model will be developed with citizens, sectors and regions and will be an early priority for the new Government. No exact timeframe is given when this will be developed. The model will include; a structured approach to dialogue with a specific youth strand and citizens, sectoral and regional involvement in delivering actions will be promoted.

It is well publicised that Bord Na Mona will be ceasing peat extraction in the Midlands. The new Government will support the work of the Just Transition Commissioner and publish and implement a detailed plan of the recommendations from the Commissioner's first report. A feasibility study will be undertaken into the establishment of a Green Energy/Renewable Energy Hub in the Midlands.

### **Funding**

- *Climate Action Fund*, set up as part of Project 2040, will be brought into law in the first 100 days of Government. There will also be a second call of this fund.
- *Local Environmental Innovation Fund* – will launch this fund to enhance community participation. More details needed on this fund and if it will be community led projects or state agencies led.
- *Environment Fund* – this will be expanded and money ring-fenced for investment in biodiversity and climate initiatives, including a parks fund to support development of new parks and wildlife areas. We would call that community led

peatland and wetland projects like those Community Wetland Forum members are involved in are included in this fund.

### **Natural Heritage and Biodiversity**

The new Government have set out measures they will take to protect biodiversity and natural heritage. Some of the relevant measures that are mentioned include;

- Progress the establishment of a Citizen's Assembly on Biodiversity.
- Review the remit, status and funding of the National Parks and Wildlife Services (NPWS) and ensure local authorities have a sufficient number of biodiversity and heritage officers among their staff.
- Support biodiversity data collection.
- Coordinate the actions in the *Programme for Government* regarding peatlands to maximise the benefits for biodiversity.
- Review the protection of natural heritage including hedgerows, native woodland and wetlands.
- Develop a new National Invasive Species Management Plan.
- Continue to implement the third *National Biodiversity Action Plan 2017-2021*.
- Promote biodiversity initiatives across all education sectors and appoint Education Liaison Officers in each of the National Parks.
- Continue to raise awareness of biodiversity through schemes like the Annual Biodiversity Awards Scheme.

### **Water**

The new Government will continue to fund Irish Water's Investment Plan on a multi-annual basis and deliver the €8.5 billion funding package committed to in *Project Ireland 2040*.

Other measures include:

- Support the take up of *Irish Water's Small Towns and Villages Growth Programme 2020-2024* which will provide water and wastewater growth capacity in smaller settlements.
- Ensure the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund supports the development of such projects.
- Launch a new revised River Basin Management Plan in 2022, using a collaborate approach.
- Development of Irish Drinking Water Plans
- Continue to support the *Local Authority Waters Programme* and expand the Community Water Development Fund.
- Conduct a feasibility study examining how further assistance can be given to low-income households for the installation of water efficient appliances.

### *Group Water Schemes*

- The new Government will support the National Federation of Group Water Schemes, to ensure that issues of quality and security of supply are addressed.
- Continue to invest multi-annual capital funding programme to improve the quality of drinking water in group water schemes.

## **Universal Health Care (Pg.44-52)**

The impact of COVID-19 put extra pressure on an already strained healthcare sector. However, it also showed that a universal healthcare system is possible. Ireland remains the only EU country without a universal healthcare system and the new Government will “seek to expand universal access to health care in a manner that is fair and affordable” (Pg.44). However, a greater commitment to this is needed and with access to healthcare based on the patient’s need rather than ability to pay.

The *Sláintecare* framework was published in 2018 and outlined a restructure and reform of the healthcare system in Ireland with a shift away from hospital centric delivery of healthcare to primary and community care and the development of six new regional health areas to deliver local services for patients. Most of the measures outlined for the healthcare system and improved health and wellbeing of people are actions from *Sláintecare* and other recently published policies and strategies published by the Department of Health.

### **Fair and Affordable Health Care System** (The new Government will -

- Increase homecare hours and introduce a Statutory Homecare Scheme. This featured in the last *Programme for Government* (2016) with a public consultation on this taking place in 2017. A pilot of such a scheme was due to take place early 2020.
- Extension of free GP care to more children, carers in receipt of the Carer’s Support Grant and increase the income threshold on medical cards for people over 70.
- Extend discretionary medical cards to those with a terminal illness.
- Reduce prescription charges and the Drug Payment Scheme threshold.
- Abolish in-patient hospital charges for children and extend free dental care to more children.
- Introduce a cap on maximum daily charge for car parking for patients and visitors in all public hospitals.

### **Care in the Community**

The delivery of this is central to *Sláintecare* and many of the measures outlined in the PFG are included in *Sláintecare*

- Develop Community Healthcare Networks to support the expansion of services, based on the need and size of the local population. This task is already being undertaking.
- Seek to increase the opening times of unscheduled care, radiology and diagnostic services in the community.
- Strengthen GP services such as implementing the contract with GP’s, out of hours and rural services.
- Establish a ‘DEIS’ programme for health similar to that of DEIS schools – providing GP practices, community pharmacies and public health staff with dedicated additional resources to communities, focused on improved health outcomes and driven by strong data.
- Roll out chronic disease management programme.
- Continue and increase telemedicine and virtual clinics
- Support the Dialogue Forum working with voluntary organisations to build a stronger working relationship between the state and voluntary healthcare

sector. With the omission of Meals on Wheels it is important that organisations providing this service are included in this dialogue.

Further to this Increasing Home and Community care support measures include;

- Expansion of community-based care, bringing it closer to home in line with *Sláintecare*.
- Introduce a statutory scheme to support people to live in their own homes,
- Increase home-care hours
- Expand Community Intervention Teams to prevent hospital admissions and to support the timely discharge of patients to their homes. Community supports such as Meals on Wheels and Befriending services must be included in these and Meals on Wheels must be included on hospital discharge plans so the service is available when they arrive home. IRL are aware that discharges can be delayed if a person has no one to look after them or if there is concern they will not have a proper meal when they get home.
- Assignment of a care manager for older people with chronic conditions to assist them with accessing the care they need.
- Develop the role of advanced nurse practitioners in older person services and chronic disease management.
- Deliver a 'Carers Guarantee' proposal that will provide a core basket of services to carers across the country, regardless of where they live. IRL suggest a mapping exercise is needed to see what services are available and where there are gaps in services.
- Increase in access to talk therapies to help address mental health and accessing care and support to those in need.
- Loneliness and isolation is a major problem for many older people especially in rural areas. The new Government will develop a plan to address this as outlined in the *Roadmap for Social Inclusion*.

### **Mental Health**

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on people's mental health will be felt for some time to come.

*Sharing the Vision – A Mental Health Policy for Everyone* was launched two weeks ago as well as an implementation plan and roadmap. Some of the measures include:

- A national implementation and monitoring committee will be established immediately. This committee will have representation from the community and voluntary sector.
- Expand Jigsaw youth mental health and support services.
- Integrate mental health services provided by non-governmental organisations.
- Publish a Traveller and Roma Mental Health Action Plan.

## **Housing for All (Pg.54-58)**

Affordability will be “at the heart of the housing system” for both purchase or rental. Priority will be given to increasing the supply of public, social and affordable homes, with the social housing stock to increase by more than 50,000 with a greater emphasis on new builds.

Local Authorities will be central to delivering housing.

### **Serviced Sites**

The Serviced Sites Fund will be extended and seed capital will be provided to local authorities to provide serviced sites at cost in towns and villages to allow individuals and families build homes.

### **Rental**

- Develop a cost rental model for the delivery of housing that creates affordability for tenants and a sustainable model for the construction and management of homes. Look at international experience such as the ‘Vienna Model’ to inform this.
- Improve the security of tenure for tenants, through legislating for tenancies of indefinite duration, increasing RTB inspections and enforcement and examining incentives for long-term leasing.
- Extend the current moratorium on the termination of tenancies, in line with public health advice and emergency powers legislation.

## **Balanced Regional Development (Pg.60-72)**

The new Government intends on investing in key infrastructure that will facilitate new working opportunities and foster enterprises in rural Ireland. It will commit to ensuring equal opportunities for all citizens regardless of where they live. Agriculture will play a key role in rural development and will be supported to make the transition to a sustainable future. A new Office of the Planning Regulator will be established with involvement of communities at early stages of planning and instil the concept of community gain.

### **Rural Development**

The publication of a new Rural Policy, support for the LEADER Rural Development Programme, high-speed broadband and remote working, balanced regional development, improving connectivity and transport in rural Ireland, An Post services and young people will all play a key role in developing sustainable rural communities, towns and villages.

### **Rural Policy**

- A new Rural Policy will be published and implemented to promote rural recovery and development post COVID-19. Consultation for this policy took place last year and was due to be published in January 2020. IRL have further engaged with the Department of Rural and Community Development who are updating the policy to include the impact of Covid.
- Begin a series of Rural Ideas Fora to inform rural policy development and innovation. More details what these would look like would be welcome.
- Support community groups, arts and cultural bodies, sports clubs, voluntary organisations and charities to recover in the aftermath of COVID-19.
- Parks and other outdoor spaces will be expanded with a focus on biodiversity enhancement.

### **LEADER Rural Development Programme**

- Prioritise a state-led Rural Development Programme to bridge the gap between the wind-up of the current LEADER programme to the next one.
- We welcome that the bureaucracy surrounding LEADER will be reduced and simplified. IRL are aware that many community groups were put off applying for LEADER because of the level of bureaucracy.
- Apply to EU for an exemption from State Aid rules so LEADER can help communities and small businesses.
- Review capital funding restrictions under LEADER for broadband.
- Increase the Rate of Aid available to private enterprises from 50 to 75% for capital projects.

### **High Speed Broadband and Remote Working**

- The new Government will seek to accelerate the roll-out of the National Broadband Plan. This must be done as a matter of priority. COVID-19 has highlighted the lack of high-speed broadband has for people who were trying to work from home and for students and places these households at a real disadvantage.
- The mobile and broadband task force will continue.

- Expand the provision of free-to-use wireless internet in rural areas.
- The development of digital hubs and shared working spaces will be important for those who can work remotely. Many of these hubs have been developed over the last few years.
- A National Remote Working Policy will be developed to facilitate people working from home or shared working spaces in rural areas. The Government will also explore the feasibility and merits of changing tax arrangements to encourage more people to work remotely.

We have seen the many benefits of working from home can have for families, communities, environment and peoples' overall wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic and how when forced to do so, employers were flexible for people to work from home. The roll out of the National Broadband Plan must be delivered sooner.

### **Balanced Regional Development**

- A subsidised Local Area Hackney Scheme will be developed in areas that are too small or remote to support a full-time taxi or hackney services. We would welcome more details on this, if it will be under the remit of Department of Transport and NTA as part of the wider transport and mobility system.
- A Rural Youth Assembly will be established to allow young people identify and influence policy issues that impact on them and their future.
- Establish a national network of Teen Sheds similar to Men's sheds. How will these be different to youth services that are already in existence.
- The new Government believe An Post have the potential to make a greater contribution to businesses and communities and that they can become a central hub for community focused services. There are no details in the PFG on how what these services could be or how or when this will be done.

### **Agriculture Sector**

The new Government see the importance of family farms and food businesses to rural areas and they endeavour to improve farm incomes and protect family farms. The way people farm will be different in line with the Green New Deal. Also with the current CAP programme finishing at the end of this year, they will continue to negotiate to maintain the CAP budget. However, there is very little mention of how Brexit will impact the agricultural sector and other rural businesses especially in border counties and on the CAP budget and that they will no doubt be working with a lower budget.

The PFG outlines some measures to support young farmers such as; investing in young farmers under the new CAP; more focused being placed on sustainability, climate action and biodiversity in agricultural colleges and supports for the 'Forgotten Farmers'. There is no mention or measures outlined to support women in agriculture either for herd number holders or for those who work on family farms but don't get recognition and can be limited to the types of employment activation or education and training courses they can do.

In relation to *CAP* they will;

- Fund a CAP transition period to ensure investment is maintained in rural areas and safeguard direct payments.
- Support farmers to embrace more environmentally friendly farming practices; seek reforms within CAP to reward farmers for sequestering carbon, restoring

biodiversity, improving water and air quality etc. and recognise that farmers should not be unfairly penalised for maintaining land that contributes to biodiversity principles. Consultations on the new CAP have been taking place and also with EU Green Deal no doubt some of these measures will be included.

- Small farm holders
- Introduce a new cap on basic payments, in line with the outcome of CAP negotiations. They must keep in mind the impact of Brexit on the new CAP budget.
- Invest in enhanced farm safety and wellbeing measures under the next CAP. IRL a whole new approach of how farm safety is dealt with is needed. With 24 farm fatalities so far this year we continue to call for peer to peer approach to farm safety.

### *Farm Incomes*

Farm incomes continue to be well below the average industrial income and with one-third of farms unviable more supports for these are needed. We welcome that a review of the means test disregards for Farm Assist will be conducted with a view to better rewarding farmers who avail of the scheme for the enterprise. IRL have called for a review of this for many years and should be based on current years' income. Also, the Rural Social Scheme must expand the eligibility for spouses to take up a wider range of activation and education and training courses.

### *Climate, Environment and Biodiversity*

The new Government see farmers as playing a vital role in addressing the climate and biodiversity crisis. A number of measures are outlined that it will work with farmers to support implementing. Meaningful engagement and incentives must be carried out with farmers on these measures and continued effort to raise awareness of how making changes can benefit the farmer as well as the environment. Some of the measures include;

- Carry out a baseline biodiversity survey on every farm to inform future policy development.
- A new National Pollinator Plan will be published and a national hedgerow survey will be completed.
- Incentivise the rewetting of carbon-rich soils. IRL would like to see what these incentives would be like and we called for carbon credits to be made available for this in our Election Manifesto and previous submissions.
- Explore and develop potential opportunities for farmers from anaerobic digestion.
- Develop climate action '**signpost farms**' to provide on the farm experience of the sustainable farming.
- '**Energy Efficient Farming**': This will be a new scheme established to include a farm efficiency rating, educational support and grant subsidies for onsite renewable energy options and the promotion of energy-efficient technology for farm use. This is welcome and we would like to see the facilitation of excess energy use being sold back to the grid or credits given.
- '**Flagship Environmental Scheme**': A new flagship environmental scheme will be designed under the new CAP and will be complemented by an ECO-scheme under Pillar 1 of CAP. It will reward farmers who deliver enhanced environmental performance.

- A pilot of the agri-environmental scheme will take place during the CAP transition period. It will seek to include farmers that are not currently in GLAS, those who participated in AEOS and those exiting GLAS.

### **Land Review**

The new Government will undertake a national land use review to include; agricultural, forests and peatlands so that '*optimal land use options inform relevant government decisions.*' The review will aim to balance the environment, social and economic use of the land. All stakeholders will be consulted. IRL believe community groups, such as those like our CWF members, be involved in this consultation as they can provide best practice examples of the wise use of peatlands and the benefits for the local community.

## **A New Social Contract (Pg.74-80)**

The new Government will strive for a more equal society for all its citizens, and provide greater security for individuals and communities. New and minority communities will be fully recognised and integrated into Irish life. Policy decisions throughout the term of the new Government will seek to improve living standards for the most vulnerable in society with particular attention to refugees and asylum seekers, the homeless and people living on low incomes.

- Core weekly social welfare payments will be protected and greater recognition given to the importance of ancillary benefits and eligibility criteria to vulnerable groups.
- Progress to a living wage over the lifetime of the Government. IRL argue that this needs to be complemented with availability of public services in rural areas also.
- Improve jobseeker supports for people under 24 years.
- Increase the availability of activation schemes. People must be match with the correct scheme for them and lead to meaningful employment.

Any changes made in social welfare provisions will continue to be gender and equality proofed as was outlined in *A Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025* and ensure to improve the outcomes of those on low income, those with caring responsibilities and raising families alone as well or those with a disability.

**Anti-poverty and Social Inclusion** (measures to tackle poverty and make our society more inclusive include:

- They will act to reform child maintenance system and prioritise and protect supports for lone parents.
- Address food poverty in children and ensure no child goes hungry.
- Ensure those in low-paid employment are valued, with the Low Pay Commission being the key player in doing this. The Low Pay Commission will also examine a Universal Basic Income.
- Support women returning to work who have taken time out for caring responsibilities by introducing returnships in partnership with employers.
- Review and update the *National Carers' Strategy* and develop a pension solution for family carers that recognises their work.
- Extend free GP care to carers in receipt of the Carer's Support Grant and develop a Carers Guarantee proposal to provide a core basket of services to cares across the country.

## **Immigration and Integration**

The new Government are committed to ending Direct Provision and will provide accommodation for asylum seekers that has the protection and promotion of human rights at its core. IRL welcome the ending of the current Direct Provision system and a more engaging process will be put in place with communities. Other measures set out include:

- Publish a new national Action Plan against Racism.
- Develop and implement a new Migrant Integration Strategy.
- Create new pathways for long-term undocumented.

- Publish a white paper by the end of 2020 which will set out how the new **International Protection Accommodation** system will be structured and steps to achieving it.
- In the short term act to improve conditions for those living in the system such as right to work, vulnerability assessments, ability to apply for a driver licences and bank accounts, mental health and training of managers of Direct Provision Centres. IRL would see that all staff should receive the necessary training.
- Develop new models of community engagement to ensure that the establishment of new accommodation is done in an inclusive and welcoming fashion. IRL would call on the Government also to engage communities to help identify gaps in services that would be needed in the area to support asylum seekers and other vulnerable migrants to integrate and settle in communities, such as transport, healthcare and mental healthcare, schools, adult education etc.

A number of measures are outlined for other marginalised communities including LGBTI, Travellers and Roma, People with Disability and commitment to gender equality. Also an examination to introduce a new ground of discrimination, based on socio-economic disadvantaged status to the Employment Equality and Equal Status Acts.

### Pensions

There are a number of measures included under Pensions and the new pension auto-enrolment system. Some of these include;

- Maintaining the state pensions as the bedrock of the Irish pension system.
- Maintain the State Pension age at 66years with the increase to 67years being deferred. The Government will take action on this following the report by the Commission (which will be established) due to be published in June 2021.
- 65year olds who are required to or chose to retire early can receive an 'Early Retirement Allowance or Pension' at the same rate as jobseekers benefit without the requirement to sign on.
- A Total Contribution approach will be introduced. It will include provision for credited contributions, ensuring that people who take time off to care for children, sick or elderly relatives are not disadvantaged.
- Maintain the entitlement for the Free Travel Scheme for all individuals aged 66 and over and work with private bus operators and the NTA so that the Free Travel Scheme is available on all publicly licensed bus routes.

## **Building Stronger and Safer Communities (Pg.84-92)**

The strength of communities came to the fore during COVID-19 and the lockdown restrictions. The importance of volunteers and community and voluntary organisations in the delivery of essential services to vulnerable people was highlighted and were relied on more than ever at this time.

The PfG outlines measures to strengthen communities and maintain and build on the work that has been done during COVID-19. However, the approach is very much a top-down approach with little involvement from the people on the ground.

- Development of a new Anti-poverty, Social Inclusion and Community Development Action Plan. This will be framed around the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.
- A review of Public Participatory Networks (PPNs) and Local Economic and Community Plans to ensure they are fit for purpose for climate action and community development. There must be better representation from on the ground organisations involved in PPNs and be representative of everyone in communities.
- County Integration Strategy will be developed by each local authority/Local Community Development Committees (LCDC). These will be intended to promote the inclusion of minorities. While this will be done through a participative process, it is difficult to see if all marginalised groups will be represented.
- A strategy to support volunteering will be published. Consultation was carried out on this by the previous Government and the *Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities Strategy* published in 2019 will be fully implemented.
- Funding programmes currently in place for community and voluntary organisations will be refined and built upon such as CLÁR, SICAP and CSP and CEP programmes and the Dormant Accounts Fund will be updated to expand eligibility to projects to include biodiversity, environmental awareness and climate change. The interests of the most vulnerable in communities must be central to these projects and they help improve their living standards and wellbeing.
- A small capital grants programme will be delivered through local authorities for the maintenance, improvement and upkeep of community centres.
- Senior Alert Scheme will adapt to changes in demographics and changes in technology.

### **Community Call**

This was introduced when COVID19 lockdown restrictions were announced and it is envisaged that the positive qualities from this maintained to link the services and supports available at local level. However, this needs a more on the ground approach to ensure those who need supports are linked to the correct service and that gaps can be identified. This was at the heart of the Community Outreach Programme delivered by IRL and The Wheel during lockdown with the Champions providing those necessary links.

## **Policing**

Community safety will be at the heart of the ongoing transformation of An Garda Síochána and a key part of the new Government's social contract with citizens. Some of the measures outlined in the PfG to achieve this include;

- Prioritising visible policing in both rural and urban communities.
- Free up Gardai from admin, technical and other non-core duties to focus on policing duties.
- A new Policing and Community Safety Bill will be introduced to redefine the functions of An Garda Síochána. Community policing and increased visibility of Gardai must be central to this Bill.
- An external review on the legal and organisational framework of community CCTV will be undertaken. Neighbourhood Watch and Text Alert Scheme are not mentioned in the PFG. These must be included as part of the policing reform and be fully supported.

## **Better Opportunities through Education and Research (Pg.99-101)**

The PFG outlines measures for education at all levels. In relation to Further Education and Community Education Sectors they will see a key role for further education and training and encourage a culture of lifelong learning with the workforce.

- They have set a target to increase the rate of lifelong learning from 9% to 18% by 2025.
- Recognise the role of community education and its vital role in communities by supporting its schemes and initiatives post COVID-19. Funding for community education providers must be multi-annual.
- Enhance the back-to-work schemes and initiatives to assist in upskilling those who are seeking new employment opportunities following the crisis.
- Develop and implement a standardised system of accreditation of prior learning taking account of previous education, skills, work experience and engagement in society.
- Review Back-to-Education Allowance to ensure that it can help those unemployed as a result of COVID-19 access education and training.
- Work with Further and Higher Education Institutions to develop new fast track mid-career educational models to meet the needs of a changing economy.