



*Irish Rural Link*  
*Nasc Tuaithe na hÉireann*

# Pre-Budget Submission

## 2023

### Contact

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**Rialtas na hÉireann**  
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## Contents

Overview.....	3
Section 1: Immediate Measures to address the Cost of Living Crisis .....	4
Section 2: Long-term investment in Public Services for balanced Rural and Regional Development.....	5
Section 3: Address Income Inadequacy .....	8
Section 4: Supports for Just Transition and Climate Change .....	13
Section 5: Supports for Community Groups and Voluntary Sector .....	15
Section 6: Agriculture .....	17
Conclusion .....	20
Irish Rural Link the Organisation .....	21

## Overview

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

The current cost of living crisis has impacted many households, but most especially, those on fixed or low-income households, who were already struggling with household bills are now having to make extremely tough financial decisions on whether to heat their home or put food on the table for themselves and their families. The recent ESRI report *Energy Poverty and Deprivation in Ireland* highlighted that the level of inflation being experienced at present is “higher for lower-income, older and rural households as a result of their patterns of expenditure”. Through its membership, IRL are very aware of the hardship being experienced by rural households. With very little public transport available to people in rural areas, the increase is having a real impact on people on lower income who are dependent on their car to get to work, bringing children to school and activities, attending appointments, etc. and having to make chooses on what journeys they take. Rising fuel costs are also impacting the delivery of essential community services, such as Meals on Wheels, where providers are struggling with rising costs and no increase in funding and volunteers who use their own private car no longer able to afford to continue to volunteer to deliver meals.

We welcome that the *Summer Statement* acknowledges the cost of living crisis and that there will be a package to help alleviate some of the financial pressure households are experiencing. However, with inflation expected to continue to increase and still so much uncertainty on the war in Ukraine, we are concerned that measures will not be enough to support those most vulnerable and those being hit most by the current inflation crisis.

The current energy crisis comes as the country emerges from Covid-19, which is still very much with us. It is also as we try to reach our climate targets. It highlights the dependency Ireland has on fossil fuels and the need for a transition for cleaner, greener alternatives. Again, those on low and fixed income are the ones that are most impacted by this transition. However, we must begin supporting those who are furthest behind first.

The Government have committed a package in Budget 2023 for measures to help alleviate the cost of living for households. However, investment in long term measures to improve and extend public services and reduce their costs which also contribute to reducing costs of living for people such as; public and rural transport, broadband, childcare, healthcare, education and housing is also needed to reduce the cost of living for households living in rural areas, especially people on low and fixed income. Measures need to be targeted to ensure those people and households furthest behind are supported the first.

## Section 1: Immediate Measures to address the Cost of Living Crisis

Irish Rural Link are calling for a number of measures that must be put in place immediately following the announcement of Budget 2023 to alleviate the financial pressure that the current rise in energy and food prices are having on low-income households and those in receipt of a core social welfare payment. With little or no public transport options in rural areas for households, immediate measures to help reduce this cost for families must also be included.

### ***Transport and Energy:***

- A **50% increase in the fuel allowance** to help with the cost of home heating oil and solid fuel for low-income households who are unable to change to greener alternatives. Also the eligibility for fuel allowance must be widened to other low-income households.
- An immediate **removal of the 3.2km exemption to school transport provision**. This would help reduce the number of journeys that need to be taken by car for many low-income households.
- Establishment of a comprehensive **demand-led transport service** in rural areas, using electric vehicles.
- An allowance be given to those who hold a travel card but are unable to use it or get full use of it so it can go some way towards the cost of private transport.
- Setting a target to **retrofit at least 30,000 houses per year**. Those who are living in or are most at risk of energy poverty, living in energy inefficient homes, must be targeted first.

### ***Social welfare:***

- **At least 30% increase** in core social welfare payments so people are not just standing still coming into the winter months when energy and food prices are expected to increase further.

### ***Services:***

- The establishment of a body to examine the parameters of service delivery in rural areas.
- A comprehensive programme to assist older people and others in rural areas to access digital services. With more bank branches closing or moving to cashless banks, those who have no digital skills will be impacted the most and are at risk of being unable to access services online.

## **Section 2: Long-term investment in Public Services for balanced Rural and Regional Development**

The provision of robust public services must coincide with an adequate income to ensure people, regardless of where they live, have a minimum standard of living and can fully participate in society. The current cost of living crisis highlights the need for greater investment in public services, especially in transport so people can reduce their dependency on the private car.

*Our Rural Future: Rural Development 2021 -2025* sets out a framework to improving rural and regional development, supporting remote working and sustainable rural communities. Ensuring that essential services and infrastructure, such as public transport, high-speed broadband, shops, roads, employment opportunities and access to community services, healthcare, training and education are in place is paramount to development in rural areas and the success of the new rural development policy. It needs to be backed up with investment and the political will so rural areas can grow and people want to live in rural areas while at the same time have employment that affords them a decent standard of living.

We welcome some of the developments such as the creation of more digital hubs to facilitate remote and hybrid working for people living in rural areas. However, rural towns and villages continue to see the closure of shops, bank branches and post offices with no increase in public transport services to access these services elsewhere.

### **Transport**

The lack of a robust and reliable public transport system continues to be a challenge and obstacle for people living in rural areas in accessing employment, health services, hospital appointments, education and training and day to day business and continues to be one of the greatest concerns among IRL members. The over reliance on cars for people living outside of Dublin is a result of the lack of a proper functional transport system. The extension of the Local Link services to include evening services is welcome, however, there still remains a number of locations, mainly in the most remote areas, that are not being served. Vulnerable groups and those who are unable to afford a car living in rural areas or indeed unable to drive are most affected by this and make it more difficult for them to gain employment or make medical appointments. They rely on the goodwill of family members and neighbours to meet appointments and to go to the nearest town to do their day-to-day business.

### **Broadband**

The need for high-speed fibre broadband to every home has been well highlighted. The continued delay in the roll out of the National Broadband Plan as a result of Covid-19 is disappointing and now needs to be expedited to ensure that it is delivered within the timeframe. Better communications with the public is needed on updates and if any delays are anticipated.

### **Community Health and Social Care**

The commitment by this Government to deliver a fair and affordable universal healthcare system must continue to be a priority and *Slaintecare* must be adequately funded.

IRL sees a key role for community and voluntary health and social care services to the delivery of this commitment and these organisations continue to be at the forefront of caring for older and vulnerable people in the community. Demand for services such as Meals on Wheels, which IRL work closely with, have continued to increase significantly. With an ageing population, a statutory Home Care Scheme expected to be put in place and shift to delivery of healthcare in communities, there is a greater role for Meals on Wheels services in a suite of community care services that should be better integrated into the overall healthcare system. The role Meals on Wheels organisations play in supporting individuals to remain living in their own homes for as long as possible cannot be underestimated. With sufficient resources these organisations can enable people to be discharged from hospitals earlier, and even prevent admission to hospital in the first instance, saving the state significant amounts every year. However, there are many challenges that are hindering Meals on Wheels delivering the vital service it provides such as low levels of funding.

### **Community Education**

Community Education is a microcosm of the entire education system – it spans the whole process of the development of the person that enables learners to progress, either on a personal level or into employment or further education or a combination of all. It is about presenting equality of opportunity, a fact reflected in the *Programme for Government*, which outlines the latter as one of its key tasks and what this new Plan aims to do. It reaches those who are furthest away from the education system and the labour market. It is very often a second chance education for those who had a bad experience in school or have been gone from the education system a long time and want to return to the workplace. The community education model offered by providers delivers a meaningful route to personal development, giving participants the skills and confidence to continue progressing to the next level of education and on to economic independence.

Unfortunately, the current levels of investment in the Community Education sector is insufficient to deliver the quality services that are necessary to reach the most marginalised learners. Just 1.8% of the SOLAS annual budget was allocated to supporting community education provision in 2019<sup>[1]</sup>. Community Education providers are at a critical point in their existence due to the lack of core and consistent funding<sup>[2]</sup>. While the community education funding is channelled through SOLAS (via ETBs), IRL are aware that many providers do not receive any funding through these channels. As a result of this, they are also excluded from key data gathering exercises and initiatives such as the National FET Learner Forum thereby not providing an accurate reflection of what is happening in the sector.

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SOLAS Annual Report, 2019

<sup>[2]</sup> AONTAS research in 2017 identified 12 unique funding streams, representing 8 government departments, only one of which was Department of Education (FinALE, 2017).

### **Lifelong Learning and Digital Divide**

IRL have been delivering the 'Getting Citizens Online' and 'IT Skills for Farmers' for a number of years and have trained over 6,000 people and farmers in basic skills of using a computer; email, internet, banking online, paying bills online, skype and for farmers, register stock, make returns etc. The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of these courses. However, funding for these classes will cease during 2022. As we continue to move to a more digital society, funding must continue for these courses and better collaborate with other training and development skills.

### **Budget 2023 Calls:**

The following are IRL asks in relation to investment in Public Services to enhance regional and rural development

- Budget 2023 must be rural proofed and contain a commitment to regional equity and the prevention of urban bias, which compromises not just the social and environmental pillars of sustainability, but also the capacity of regional economies to utilise their potential and adapt to current and future challenges.
- Robust investment in public services in rural areas to help alleviate the increasing cost of living for many low-income households in rural areas.
- Increase in both current and capital expenditure for rural development to ensure actions and measures outlined in *Our Rural Future* are adequately resourced.
- Address delays in the roll out of the National Broadband Plan and the roll-out be expedited. Better communications with the general public on updates on the status of the Plan as well as any future delays is also needed.
- Increase in the Budget for the Rural Transport Programme and delivery of public transport in rural areas is needed. Also, greater transparency is needed on how RTP and PSO budgets are divided and a breakdown of each made available.
- Implementation of the Rural Hackney initiative outlined in the *Programme for Government* with adequate funding behind it. This must be a locally driven initiative and service the local area while at the same time be able to connect to Local Link and national bus and rail services.
- Adequate funding for the full implementation of *Sláintecare*. Commitment to implement actions set out for 2023 must now be prioritised to ensure we move a step closer to a more equitable healthcare system.
- Multi-Annual Funding for Community Education is needed so providers are able to budget the delivery of courses in advance to ensure the best outcome for students. This needs to be an independent budget line where independent community providers can engage directly with Solas (and not distributed via ETBs).
- Continue to fund 'Getting Citizens Online' and 'IT Skills for Farmers' basic computer courses and develop a follow on course for those who completed this. Extend the course also to those in low skilled employment.

### **Section 3: Address Income Inadequacy**

Prior to the current cost of living crisis, it was well documented that income inadequacy continues to be higher in rural areas, especially for those in receipt of social welfare payments and those in low-paid or minimum wage employment when compared to urban counterparts. With consumer prices increasing by 9.1% in the year to June 2022<sup>1</sup> and prices of essential goods; food, fuel and energy prices, expected to continue to increase over the next number of months, IRL are concerned that the income inadequacy for these households will become a lot worse if suitable measures are not taken.

The *Programme for Government 2020* and the *Roadmap to Social Inclusion 2020-2025* both set out commitments to improving social inclusion and wellbeing for people. Income adequacy and access to services are key components to achieving these commitments regardless of where people live.

Budget 2023 must work towards improving income adequacy for those low-income households, not just those to cover current rise in cost of living but put measures in place that will give such people an affordable and socially acceptable standard of living.

#### **Rural Poverty**

The Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) looks at those essential goods included in the Consumer Price Index (CPI) basket of goods and services that are deemed necessary for a minimum standard of living. Such goods and services include; food, clothing, heating, healthcare, transport, education, etc.

Initial findings of the MESL for 2022 has shown that the cost of a MESL has increased for all household types by an average of 5%. For low income households in rural areas, this increase is higher at 14%<sup>2</sup>, confirming the results of the ESRI study *Energy Poverty and Deprivation in Ireland* where it found low income and rural households are most impacted by the current cost of living crisis.

The higher rate of change in rural areas is due to increases in household energy and transport related prices. The net increase in MESL home energy costs was an average of 50% for rural households due to dependency on home heating oil, which has now increased by 115.4% in the year to June 2022<sup>3</sup>. Likewise, the dependency on the car by rural households has meant they have not benefited from reduced prices in public transport but have faced increases in the price of petrol and diesel. Petrol has increased by 43.8% and Diesel by 50.7% in the year

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<sup>1</sup> CSO (2022) Consumer Price Index June 2022

<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/cpi/consumerpriceindexjune2022/>

<sup>2</sup>VPSJ (2022) Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2022 Interim Report

<https://www.budgeting.ie/publications/mesl-2022/>

<sup>3</sup> CSO Ibid

to June 2022<sup>4</sup>. Also the increase in price of second hand cars impacts low-income rural households more.

The increase in food prices, especially staple foods such as bread, cereals, milk, meat and chicken have all increased significantly in the year to June 2022 and will impact more on low-income families.

The following tables highlights the income inadequacies for household types in receipt of a social welfare payment and 2 adults employed full-time in minimum wage jobs and living in social housing. It highlights the higher income inadequacies for rural households compared to their urban peers.

#### Income Inadequacies by Household Type in Receipt of SW Payment

Household Type	Rural	Urban
2 Parents with 1 infant	-€131.70	-€21.64
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 pre-school, 1 primary)	-€114.21	-€2.80
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 primary, 1 secondary)	-€184.37	-€75.68
2 Parents with 3 Children (1 infant, 1 pre-school, 1 primary)	-€130.35	-€18.99
2 Parents with 4 Children (2 primary, 2 Secondary)	-€256.87	-€146.00
One Parent with 1 child (Primary school)	-€143.91	-€18.82
One Parent with 2 Children (1 pre-school, 1 primary)	-€124.86	+€1.79
One Parent with 2 Children (1 primary, 1 secondary (Jobseeker transition))	-€194.88	-€70.94
Pensioner Living Alone (non-contributory)	-€83.54	+€1.83
Pensioner Living Alone (Contributory)	-€72.86	+€11.65

Source: VSPJ MESL 2022 (Interim Results)

The 2022 MESL showed households Income inadequacies are also felt by households who are working on minimum wage with these inadequacies larger for households in rural areas for most of the household types looked at.

<sup>4</sup> CSO Ibid

**Income Inadequacies by Household Type with 2 Parents in Full Time Employment earning minimum wage (living in social housing)**

<b>Household Type</b>	<b>Rural</b>	<b>Urban</b>
2 Parents with 1 infant	-€0.35	+€146.63
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 pre-school,1 primary)	-€73.84	+€69.03
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 primary, 1 secondary)	-€126.91	+€70.73
2 Parents with 3 Children (1 infant, 1 pre-school, 1primary)	-€114.55	-€0.42
2 Parents with 4 Children (2 primary, 2 Secondary)	-€260.80	-€86.15

*Source: VSPJ MESL 2022 (Interim Results)*

**Case Studies**

The following are the lived experiences of two lone parents who use the services of one of our members and how they are trying to cope with the current financial pressures they currently find themselves in.

**Case Study 1:**

One lone parent who is originally from Galway had to move to Longford with her two young daughters to get accommodation as Galway rents are so high and accommodation is hard got. Her rent is just a little over 1000-euro month, 500 of the payment is covered by HAP Galway CC the remainder she pays herself. She is trying to get transferred to HAP with Longford county council, this will support her chances getting a local authority house.

In her locality there are houses awaiting to be renovated by the local authority. She is hoping she will get one eventually however it annoys her the money she pays on rent, if it were possible could pay a small mortgage for one of these houses resulting in her gaining autonomy and security for herself and her family. But she feels all odds are against her ever achieving this.

She has lobbied her local Councillor and stays connected with the local family resource centre and she said they are both very supportive and helpful, she feels their hands too are tied as much as hers and it is at this stage a waiting game.

This lady is on a CE scheme earning €310 per week. After she puts money aside for rent her shopping, her bills she has very small bit left to put by for emergencies. This winter approaching worries her as she feels with the rise in cost of living it will leave her with nothing to put aside for emergencies and she will be to the pin of her collar.

As well as home heating oil she has an open fire in the sitting room. She has had no heat on since April as it is far too costly, and she is saving it for the winter when the weather is much colder. The house has no emersion and her only way of accessing hot water is from the electric shower which adds also to the cost.

She is trying to focus on gaining qualification on CE and to progress to part time employment. She says that the CE scheme is great opportunity it covers her childcare and training costs and as she has no family round her it also provides her a social outlet.

She feels having no family living close to her, the low pay within the childcare sector and now the extra pressure of the increase in the cost of living, points her in the direction of part time employment, but she feels safer staying within the boundaries of the system. However, she is aware the security of staying within the system on the other hand prevents her from ever affording her own car, home and becoming self-dependant and leaves her motionless.

### **Case Study 2:**

I am the sole carer for my 2 children and only have the support of my elderly grandmother, who is on a limited income herself. Even though money was always really tight, I used to be able to save a few euro with the credit union every week but now it is not possible. This would provide a cushion for an unexpected expense. The fact that I do not have that cushion anymore causes worry and anxiety. Over the summer, I am preparing for the children going back to school and trying to pick up a few things every week while also trying to get ahead for the winter by getting some drums of oil when I can. Also, one of my children is for communion next year, so I know that I have to plan very carefully for this. Transport will be a problem for me in the near future, currently I rely on my grandmother to bring my children and myself to school and work but she will not be in a position to do this due to ill health. So I will have to either learn to drive and put her car on the road myself (an expense I cannot afford), or give up my part-time work where I have the possibility of a career.

Money is just not stretching as far as it used to.

The VPSJ study findings and the Case Studies clearly show that rural households will continue to be impacted by the current cost of living crisis and the need to increase core welfare payments as well as targeted measures such as increase in fuel allowance, living alone allowance, working family income supports etc. Employment Activation programmes must equip participants with the necessary skills to take up paid employment and that they are matched with the scheme that best works for them.

### **Budget 2023 Calls to address income inadequacy:**

The following are IRL asks to improve income adequacy:

- An increase in core social welfare payments is needed and call for at *least* a 30% increase in these payments so people are protected from the further price increases that are expected over the coming months.
- Begin to invest in Social Protection and put measures in place to address consistent poverty, deprivation and 'at-risk' of poverty rates. Benchmark rates against MESL rather than CPI for Budgetary benchmarking.

- Increase in Fuel allowance as part of just transition as well as expansion of eligibility criteria to those currently not eligible but are on fixed or low incomes and will be at risk of fuel poverty due to higher energy prices.
- CE and Tus schemes must ensure the best use is made of participant's skills, time and effort while on these schemes and that meaningful employment is available when the scheme ends, which affords them an affordable living is gained.
- An allowance be given to those who hold a travel card but are unable to use it or get full use of it so it can go some way towards the cost of private transport.

## Section 4: Supports for Just Transition and Climate Change

The current price increases in energy and fossil fuels highlights the need to move away from these type of energy sources to heating our homes and powering our electricity. The rising price in home heating oil is putting greater financial strain on households in rural areas, especially those on low income or a social welfare payment. There are still a significant number of households in rural areas who continue to rely on turf, briquettes and coal to heat their homes and for some turf is the only form of heat source.

The SILC<sup>5</sup> report 2021<sup>6</sup> showed that 17% of those at-risk-of poverty went without heating at some stage throughout the 2021 and 8.7% were unable to adequately heat their home. Among households living in consistent poverty; 43.3% went without heating at some stage throughout the year, while 24.2% were unable to adequately heat their home. While these were a reduction on the 2019 figures, we would expect these figures to increase for 2022 and into 2023 also.

While we welcome the SEAI grants, the eligibility for the 100% Warmer Home grant is very narrow and excludes many households on low income and some social welfare payments. Many who are in receipt of the eligible payments do not own the home they are living in so therefore automatically do not qualify. They are dependent on the owner of the property to make the changes, whether this is a local authority or a private landlord. To carry out works with the grants is still beyond the financial capacity of many households in rural areas and especially those on low income or in receipt of state pension. IRL have proposed a Community Energy Outreach Programme to the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications to ensure that vulnerable groups and households receive necessary assistance through the distribution of clear, concise, and accurate information and advice in relation to retrofitting, alternative fuel sources and fuel poverty. The programme will also incorporate the Government's National Retrofit Plan. We believe now is the time to begin lifting people out of fuel and energy poverty and ensure no more households are put at risk of energy poverty in the future.

The implementation of the Just Transition fund and other measures to alleviate the impact of the transition to a greener society are welcome but are not enough and are not happening quick enough for many people and communities most impacted by this. IRL are aware that the funding available for the Just Transition fund is not sufficient to ensure a smooth transition and that employees and more disadvantaged groups are being negatively impacted.

Budget 2023 must now set out measures on a just transition that are targeted to ensure those who are the furthest behind are supported the first.

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<sup>5</sup> SILC – Survey on Income and Living Conditions

<sup>6</sup> CSO (2022) – Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2021

<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2021/povertyanddeprivation/>

### **Community Energy Projects**

Communities must be at the centre of just transition and engagement from the beginning for any renewable energy projects is essential. Community owned energy projects allow communities to appreciate the benefits of greener energy sources and help them decide what sources of renewable energy works best for their needs. It also helps to eliminate mistrust between communities and the energy companies as well as creating new employment opportunities for people in the community.

### **Budget 2023 Calls for Just Transition and Climate Change:**

- Ring-fencing of carbon tax to support households at risk of being further pushed into fuel and energy poverty and targeting retrofitting grants for low income households not eligible for warmer home grants.
- Develop direct supports for households in low-income and fixed income households in rural areas, a comprehensive suite of financial tools must now be developed. This would take the form of sliding scale of grants and low cost guaranteed loans designed on ability to pay.
- Deploy Local Community Energy Advisors throughout every local authority as well as community organised support programmes to engage and inform hard to reach energy users who would most benefit from energy efficiency upgrades.
- Explore further the proposed Community Energy Outreach Programme by IRL to ensure that vulnerable groups and households receive necessary assistance through the distribution of clear, concise, and accurate information and advice in relation to retrofitting, alternative fuel sources and fuel poverty.
- Ensure that employees impacted by closure of peat factories and cessation of peat production are reskilled to take up employment in other sectors once their job ends.
- Earlier engagement with communities on renewable energy projects but also allowing communities to be part of the decision making of the correct source of renewable energy that works best for their needs.

## **Section 5: Supports for Community Groups and Voluntary Sector**

The Community and Voluntary sector have not escaped the impact of the current rise in energy and food prices. Indeed, many were struggling prior to the current crisis and coming out of Covid-19, had seen a fall in their funding due to their inability to fundraise during the pandemic.

The Government rely heavily on the C&V sector to deliver the many services in health and social care, education, childcare and transport, to name but a few, at community level. Many have been doing this on a shoestring for many years having not had their funding, that was cut following the financial crash, reinstated.

IRL have a network of Meals on Wheels providers from across the country. These have been particularly impacted by the current rise in prices due to increasing costs of keeping vans on the road and increasing food costs, all essential in the making of a nutritious meal for their clients. The rising costs is also now impacting on volunteers who use their own car to deliver meals and having to make choices if they can continue to volunteer and make the journeys.

The cost of insurance continues to be an issue for community and voluntary groups across the country and hinders the development of some community groups and indeed communities. For smaller, wholly voluntary groups, it is a greater concern.

### **Employment Schemes and Programmes**

The C&V sector rely heavily on Employment Schemes and Programmes, such as *Rural Social Scheme*, *Community Employment (CE)* and *Tús*, to help in the delivery of their services. They are considered essential to the development of community infrastructure in rural areas as well as providing unemployed people with the necessary skills to remain motivated to seek out employment or establish their own business. Many of the services in rural areas, such as the Rural Transport Programme, Meals on Wheels, tourism and other sectors rely on these schemes to provide employment.

The *Rural Social Scheme* is a valuable scheme to farmers and fishermen and women who are in receipt of Farm Assist as it allows them to use their skills and experience in the community while the community also benefits from this. People on this scheme are either farmers or fishermen or a spouse and take part in this scheme on a seasonal basis when there is a reduction in farming or fishery work.

The *CE* and *TUS* schemes are viable schemes for unemployed people in rural areas in helping them get back into the work force. Many of the people who work with Meals on Wheels, community childcare, community transport and other community services are on CE and TUS Schemes and is the only source of income for the participant and only source of employees for the services. However, in many rural areas, once a person has completed a scheme, they often return to a jobseeker's payment as there is no further employment opportunities for them in the local area. Also the service loses staff that have gained valuable skills on the job and built a rapport with service users.

### **Budget 2023 calls for the Community and Voluntary Sector:**

- Increase in funding to Community service providers to offset the increase in costs of running the services they are currently experiencing. Also an allowance for volunteers to help cover the cost of using own car which is vital for many services such as community car schemes, meals on wheels etc. to continue.
- Core funding of C&V organisations who deliver essential services in the community, such as Meals on Wheels and other health and social care services, community education, transport and childcare to safeguard the continuity and sustainability of these services.
- Investment in community services is needed so that they can create paid employment in the local area. This not only supports CE and Tus participants to gain employment using the skills they have developed but also ensures the future sustainability of these valuable services.
- Review of insurance for the Community & Voluntary sector is needed so funding can go to the delivery of the service and not on high insurance costs. Also supports to wholly voluntary groups who receive no government funding but face high insurance costs when running events.

## Section 6: Agriculture

Agriculture still remains one of the biggest sectors in rural areas and needs to be supported to grow and diversify to incorporate changes around Climate Action and Environment, with as little as possible impact on people's livelihoods.

The Bio and circular economy are emerging sectors which the farming community will play a key role. They also have a key role in protecting local biodiversity. With the right supports and incentives, smaller farmers and land that is not viable could be used for these purposes. Value must be put on the non-productive areas of the farm. Peatlands or wetland store carbon emissions. There is ample peatland in this country to store carbon emissions, and landowners should be given carbon credits that they can offset against costs they may face due to changes in regulations as a result of climate change.

The 2020 Teagasc National Farm Survey reported the average family farm income was €25,663. The border region had the lowest level of farm income at €14,297 this compares to an average farm income of €38,034 in the South-East<sup>7</sup>.

Thirty-three percent of farms still remain economically vulnerable in 2020; meaning they have no alternative or off-farm income. Again the Border and West regions had the highest percentage of vulnerable farms. The percentage of farms that were economically vulnerable was higher in the Northern and Western region at 37%. Only 19% of farms were viable in this region compared to 43% in the South.

The type of farming also determined how viable the farm was. Eighty percent of all Dairy farms were viable and 67% of tillage farms. This compared with just 11% of cattle-rearing farms that were viable<sup>8</sup>.

Farm Assist remains an important payment for many farming households across the country, helping in some part to reduce poverty. IRL welcome the recent announcement for the income disregard for those who wish to participate in agricultural environmental schemes such as Glas, REAP etc. and that they will not lose out on their pension or other social welfare payments such as Farm Assist. This will help encourage smaller farmers to join these schemes which will benefit the environment.

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<sup>7</sup> Dillon, E. et al (2021) *Teagasc National Farm Survey 2020 Preliminary Results*  
<https://www.teagasc.ie/media/website/publications/2021/National-Farm-Survey-2020-Preliminary-Results.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

## **FarmPEAT**

Irish Rural Link are partners on a project FarmPEAT - **Farm Payments for Ecological and Agricultural Transitions**. This project is developing a locally-led, innovative, results-based farm scheme for farmers who manage lands that surround some of Ireland's finest remaining raised bogs. The project identified study sites across the counties of Roscommon, Offaly, Kildare and Westmeath and work with local farmers, rewarding them for improved management of habitats on peat soils as well as other important landscape features such as eskers, field boundaries and watercourses. The programme is results-based in that farmers will get paid depending on the scores they achieved. The second scoring season is taking place over the summer months. It is envisioned that this programme will form a basis for future agri-environmental schemes in these areas.

## **Farm Safety**

In April 2022, IRL launched a new EIP-Agri project “Farmers4Safety – Managing Risk Together”. This project in partnership with the BRIDE (Biodiversity Regeneration in a Dairying Environment) project, the Duncannon Blue Flag Farming & Communities Scheme, the New Futures Farming Group, and the Health and Safety Authority are carrying out this pilot in the catchment areas of Cork, Tipperary and Wexford.

The project adopts a ‘peer-to-peer’ mentoring and champion approach to engage farmers in an attitudinal and behavioral change towards farm safety by tackling and improving the social norms around farm safety and emotional wellbeing. It will investigate farmers, and farm families behaviours and attitudes towards farm safety, health and wellbeing and change the norm around farm safety and emotional wellbeing so it becomes a normal and sustained part of farming culture in Ireland while making the sector safer for those who live, work and visit farms. By utilising a peer-to-peer mentoring approach it will effectively engage farmers on the ground and be the catalyst to change the social norms surrounding farm safety, health, and wellbeing. To date 182 farmers have been directly engaged with.

Farm Safety must be a key component of the new CAP and measures put in place to reduce the number of accidents and fatalities that happen on the farm. A recent survey as part of the Farmers4Safety project showed that 31% of respondents said they work over 60 hours per week on the farm. 46% of respondents had said that they had been injured or experienced near hits while working on the farm in the last three years.

Farms need to be a safe environment for farmers and their families to work and live on and supports, such as the peer-to-peer mentoring must be put in place to ensure that farmers are safe in their workplace and look after their mental health and wellbeing.

## **Budget 2023 Calls for the agriculture sector:**

- Increase in supports for farmers involved in the protection of biodiversity and diversifying their land to protect environment.

- Support schemes for farmers and communities to encourage the development and deployment of on farm Anaerobic Digestion for production of bio methane. Funding for community projects in this area must be easily accessible and not be laborious and bureaucratic.
- Continuation of Grants and supports for installation of solar panels, rainwater harvesters on roofs of farm buildings and ability to sell excess energy back to the national grid. Engagement programme to get more farmers involved in the installation of these.
- Provision of carbon credits for the restoration of peatland and wetland that cannot be used efficiently for farming.
- Farm Safety must become a priority in the new CAP. The current pilot project Farmers4Safety must be rolled out to the rest of the country and the learnings from the pilot built on to make it an ongoing part of farming to make it a safe occupation for farmers and their families.

## Conclusion

Budget 2023 must address the current cost of living crisis, especially for those on low income and in receipt of social welfare payments who are feeling the impact of rising prices the most. However, many of these households, especially in rural areas were experiencing income inadequacy long before the recent rise in inflation. Transport and home energy costs were the main expenses low income rural households faced and with significant increases in the price of home heating oil (over 100% price increase) and in petrol and diesel (approx. 50%) they are having to make tough choices on journeys they take and whether to turn on heat in their home. Targeted measures to ensure that households who are worst impacted must be made.

However, there now needs to be real investment in public services in rural areas; such as public transport, childcare, healthcare and broadband. The reduction in cost of public transport, while welcome, has very little or no benefit for many low-income rural households who have no access to regular public transport services. Investment in services is as important as increasing income adequacy to lift rural households out of poverty and prevent pushing more households into poverty.

As we continue to address climate change and transition to a more digital society measures must be targeted to ensure those who are the furthest behind are supported the first. Retrofitted grants must be on a sliding scale and low cost guaranteed loans designed on ability to pay. The introduction of a Community Outreach Programme must be explored to ensure that those households who depend most on fossil fuels to heat their homes are engaged with and supported to make the necessary changes.

Budget 2023 must put in place financial support for low income households and those dependent on social welfare payments that not just supports them to stand still in the current cost of living crisis but affords them not to have to make the hard choices of either eating a meal or heating their home. It must also now start to look at long term measures to lift people out of poverty and not push more people into it. This will involve not only financial supports but real investment in public services, especially in rural areas where, if a proper public transport system was in place, would reduce dependency on the private car and reduce the cost of living for many low-income rural households.

## **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 21<sup>st</sup> 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.'***