



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Our Rural Future

Rural Development Policy 2021-2025





Our Rural Future provides a framework for the development of rural Ireland over the next five years. The policy is forward-looking and ambitious and addresses both the challenges facing rural areas and the opportunities which rural economies and communities can benefit from in the coming years.

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A Message from An Taoiseach



Our Rural Future provides a framework for the development of rural Ireland over the next five years. The policy is forward-looking and ambitious and addresses both the challenges facing rural areas and the opportunities which rural economies and communities can benefit from in the coming years.

Ireland is heading into an era of unprecedented change as we recover from the impact of COVID-19, as we adapt to new ways of working, as the impact of Brexit presents itself and as we transition to a climate-neutral society.

This unprecedented change presents an unprecedented opportunity for rural Ireland.

The Government's vision is for a rural Ireland that is thriving and is integral to our national economic, social, cultural and environmental wellbeing and development. That vision is built on the talent, skills and creativity of people in rural communities; on the importance of vibrant and lived-in rural places; and on the potential to create quality jobs in rural areas and sustain our shared environment. *Our Rural Future* will be a key enabler of that vision.

The policy will be implemented through 150 commitments which will be delivered by Government Departments, State Agencies and Local Authorities over the next five years.

Delivery of these commitments will benefit individuals, families, communities and businesses.

It will enhance the wellbeing and quality of life of people living in rural areas. It will build resilient and sustainable rural communities and economies through investment, supports and services. And it will ensure that rural communities are at the heart of designing and delivering responses that meet local needs.

With the resources and talent available in rural Ireland, and drawing on the interdependence of rural and urban areas which is highlighted in this policy, our rural communities and economies play a pivotal role in shaping Ireland's future.

Now is the time to be ambitious for what can be achieved through, and for, rural Ireland to deliver a more sustainable society, economy, environment and a brighter future for us all.

Micheál Martin T.D.

An Taoiseach

Minister's Foreword



Our Rural Future represents a new milestone in the approach to rural development in Ireland.

As we recover from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, an unparalleled opportunity now exists to realise the objectives of achieving balanced regional and rural development and maximising a recovery for all parts of our country.

The move to remote, or connected working, underpinned by the rollout of the National Broadband Plan, has the potential to transform rural Ireland. It will help to sustain and increase the population of rural areas, revitalise town centres, reduce commuting times, lower transport emissions and improve the quality of life of our people.

Supported by digitalisation and new technologies, the diversification of rural economies into new and emerging sectors will further strengthen the employment base in rural areas and improve career opportunities for young people.

We now have a unique opportunity to reimagine and re-value what rural Ireland means to our economy and to our society and to more fully embrace the interdependence between rural and urban areas in a way that maximises the benefits for both.

I recognise that every town, village and parish is different and there is no one-size-fits-all solution to meeting the needs of each area. Therefore, through this policy, the Government is advocating a holistic, place-based approach to rural development which encourages and supports rural communities to develop cohesive and integrated plans to meet the long-term needs of their own local area.

There is now more investment than ever available to support these objectives and to make a real and lasting impact on rural Ireland. The forthcoming review of the *National Development Plan* will further underpin the Government's commitment to rural communities and balanced regional development.

By delivering this policy over the next five years, I want to see more people living in rural Ireland and I want to see more people working in rural Ireland.

I want our rural towns to be vibrant hubs of commercial and social activity.

I want to see rural Ireland contributing to, and benefiting from, the opportunities in the green economy.

And I want rural communities, and especially our young people, to have an active role in shaping their future.

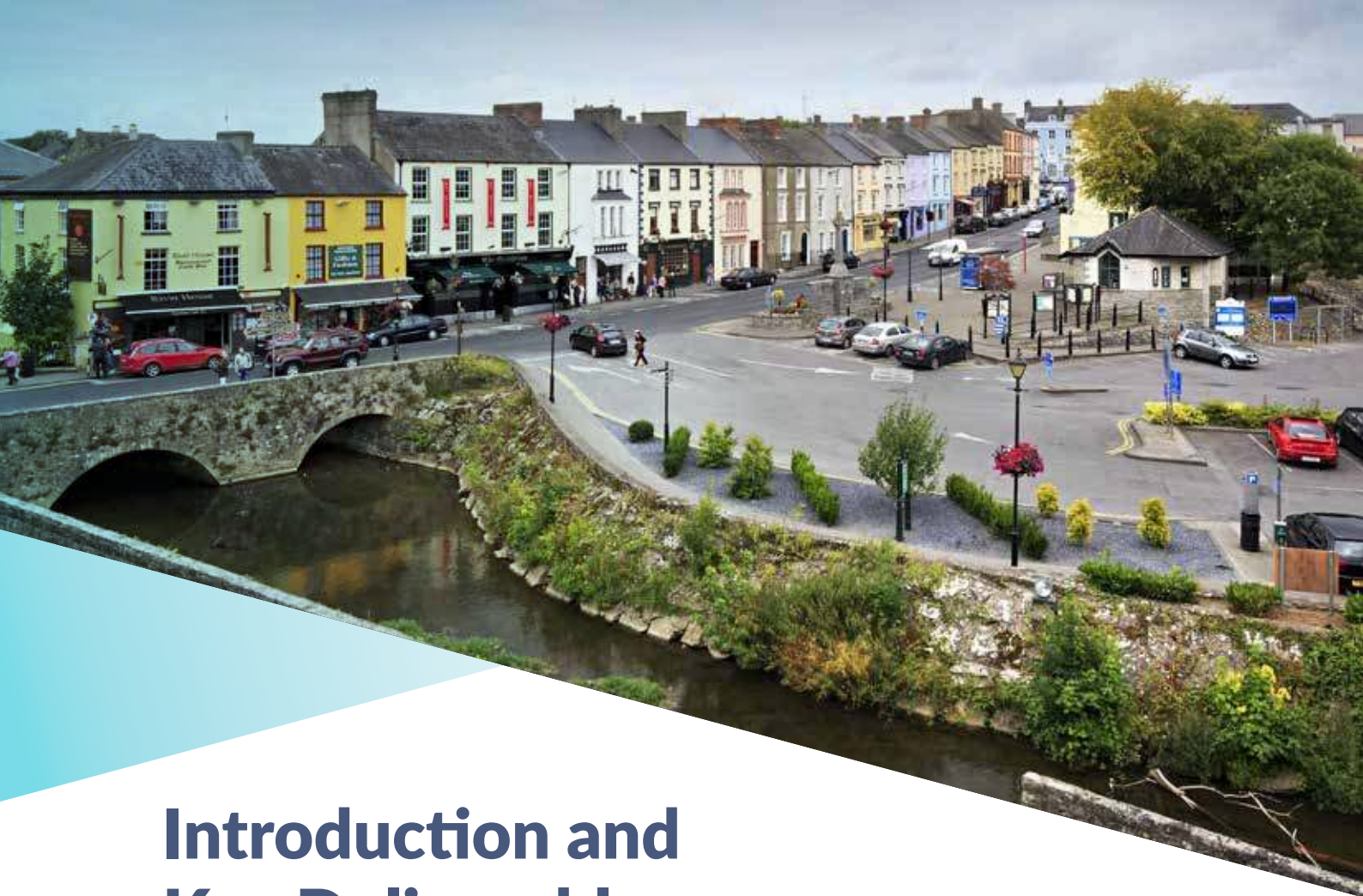
For decades we have seen global trends where young people leave their local communities to live and work in the cities. As we emerge from COVID-19 we will never have a better opportunity to reverse that long-standing trend. Many young people are now openly asking the question – *can I do the same job working from my own local community as I can in a city centre?*

Our Rural Future is the most ambitious and transformational policy for rural development in decades. It comes at a time of unique, generational change.

Through the implementation of this policy, the Government will seize this unprecedented opportunity for rural Ireland.

Heather Humphreys T.D.

Minister for Rural and Community Development



Introduction and Key Deliverables

“Our Vision is for a thriving rural Ireland which is integral to our national economic, social, cultural and environmental wellbeing and development, which is built on the interdependence of urban and rural areas, and which recognises the centrality of people, the importance of vibrant and lived-in rural places, and the potential to create quality jobs and sustain our shared environment.”

Why Rural Places Matter

The social and economic development of rural Ireland is integral to the wellbeing of our country as a whole and to our quality of life. Ireland's economy, heritage and culture is heavily dependent on the contribution of rural areas.

Rural-based businesses, from micro-enterprises and SMEs, to large multi-national companies, support hundreds of thousands of jobs and contribute significantly to our national economy. Agri-food and Tourism, which have traditionally been two of our strongest indigenous enterprise sectors, are built on the natural and human capital found in rural areas.

Well over a third of our population (1.7 million) live in settlements of less than 1,500 people and in the countryside, and this proportion increases to half of the population if smaller towns and villages are included¹.

Rural areas hold much of Ireland's natural resources, biodiversity and visitor attractions, and rural communities are important guardians of our heritage, culture and natural capital.

1 National Planning Framework, Page 68.

Investment in transport infrastructure and digital connectivity over the last two decades has improved access to and from rural areas. For businesses, improved connectivity to people and markets has enabled the growth of new enterprises in rural areas and has helped support the diversification of rural economies into new sectors such as Lifesciences, Agri-tech, and Renewable Energy.

This improved physical and digital connectivity has narrowed the gap between rural and urban areas. Moreover, it has highlighted the connectedness between urban and rural Ireland.

However, no two rural areas are the same. Some rural areas are close to large centres of population with relative ease of access to public services. Others, including the offshore islands, are remote or peripheral.

Some of the challenges which many rural areas contend with include an older demographic profile, a relatively narrow enterprise base, the implications of climate change for traditional industries such as farming, a high property vacancy rate in towns and villages, and a greater vulnerability to the effects of economic downturn.

Reimagining Rural Ireland

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed every aspect of our lives – how we socialise, how we work, how we study, and how we interact with others.

We are likely to see on-going periodic disruption to the way we go about our daily lives for some time to come. However, we have also seen, from our response to the COVID-19 outbreak, how resilient our communities are and how our businesses can adapt to deliver services in innovative ways, or develop new products to meet the needs of a changed market.

Notwithstanding the challenges that lie ahead, lessons from the COVID-19 experience bring to the fore very real opportunities to reimagine the way we live and work. As we work through the COVID-19 crisis and look to the future, we have an opportunity to reshape our economy and our society in a way which focuses on inclusive, balanced and sustainable economic, social and environmental development.

We have an opportunity to re-value the importance of rural Ireland to our national development and to reimagine what rural Ireland means to our economy and our society.

Through this policy, *Our Rural Future*, the Government will deliver innovative solutions to address key policy challenges affecting rural areas, including in relation to investment, job creation, sustainable population growth, balanced regional

development, access to services, broadband connectivity, social cohesion and inclusion, Brexit, and adapting to the challenges of climate change.

The implementation of this policy will have a transformative effect on rural areas and make rural Ireland integral to our national recovery and future development.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic arose, there were exciting opportunities emerging for rural Ireland in a range of areas. Those opportunities are still there to be availed of. This policy and its associated programme of measures seeks to capture those opportunities.

In addition to delivering responses to the COVID pandemic in the near-term, the policy also looks to the equally important longer-term development of our rural areas in order to create sustainable rural economies, communities and an environment which offer a brighter future for all.

A new approach to rural development

Our Rural Future represents a new milestone in the approach to rural development policy for Ireland. It builds on, but goes beyond, the *Action Plan for Rural Development 2017-2019* by adopting a more strategic, ambitious and holistic approach to investing in and maximising opportunities for rural areas.

There is an increased understanding nationally and internationally that rural development is integrally linked to policies across a wide range of areas including spatial planning, enterprise growth, job creation, social cohesion, community development, public services, communications infrastructure, agriculture, the marine, climate adaptation, tourism, heritage, health and leisure.

To achieve a co-ordinated, multi-sectoral approach to rural development, *Our Rural Future* is a comprehensive policy, underpinned by a programme of commitments across Government Departments and agencies, which will support the economic and social progress of rural Ireland over the next five years and build a better quality of life for people who live in rural areas.

The policy advocates a holistic, place-based approach to rural development, which encourages and supports rural communities to develop cohesive and integrated plans to meet the long-term needs of their own particular area. This approach recognises that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to meet the developmental needs of every area.

The policy will help rural economies and rural communities to recover from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and to maximise the opportunities afforded by improved digital

connectivity, town centre regeneration, the resilience and leadership of local communities, and the transition to a climate neutral society.

Our Rural Future is forward-looking and ambitious and is underpinned by the Government's objective of achieving balanced regional development and strengthened rural economies and communities. The investment afforded by the *National Development Plan*, together with the rollout of the National Broadband Plan, provides an unprecedented opportunity to make a lasting impact on rural Ireland, and to underscore the interdependence of rural and urban areas in jointly creating Ireland's future.

Vision and Objectives

The Government's vision is for a thriving rural Ireland which is integral to our national economic, social, cultural and environmental wellbeing and development, which is built on the interdependence of urban and rural areas, and which recognises the centrality of people, the importance of vibrant and lived-in rural places, and the potential to create quality jobs and sustain our shared environment.

Our Rural Future is a key milestone towards achieving this vision. It responds to the issues which will affect rural Ireland over the coming years, including those identified through an extensive consultation process with the people who live in and care about rural Ireland. It complements other Government policies and initiatives such as *Project Ireland 2040*, the *National Economic Recovery Plan*, the *Climate Action Plan*, and the National Broadband Plan. It places a particular emphasis on the relevance of those initiatives to rural areas. The policy also reflects the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, the increased prevalence of remote working, and the development of our offshore islands.

This policy will have a real and transformative effect on rural areas. It will benefit individuals, families, communities and businesses. It will enhance the wellbeing and quality of life of people living in rural areas, and build resilient and sustainable rural communities and economies through integrated investment, supports and services.

Our Rural Future focuses on the following thematic objectives:

- Optimising the opportunities for rural communities from high speed broadband.
- Supporting improved quality employment and career opportunities in rural areas.
- Assisting the regeneration, repopulation and development of rural towns and villages.
- Enhancing the participation, leadership and resilience of rural communities.

- Enhancing public services in rural areas
- Supporting a Just Transition to a climate neutral economy.
- Supporting the sustainability of Agriculture, the Marine and Forestry.
- Supporting the sustainability of our island and coastal communities.
- Nurturing our culture and heritage.

The policy will be delivered through a joined-up, whole-of-Government approach to service delivery and investment, underpinned by regular consultation with rural stakeholders and the flexibility to be able to respond to changes in the external environment.

To deliver on the objectives set out in this policy we will:

- Invest significantly in remote working infrastructure to provide an opportunity for people to continue to live in rural communities while following their career ambitions.
- Invest in rural towns and villages as hubs of economic and social activity.
- Transform the opportunity for the diversification of rural economies, including through the delivery of high speed broadband to every part of the country.
- Adopt a place-based approach to rural development to meet the needs of different areas in a holistic way and maximise the impact of investment in those areas.
- Invest in and empower rural communities to design and deliver responses that meet their local needs.
- Actively involve young people in rural areas in decisions that affect them and their future.

Implementation and Oversight

The commitments to be delivered in this policy will be implemented progressively over the lifetime of the policy. Each will be led by a named Government Department, State agency or other body, as set out in Appendix 1.

Progress on the implementation of the policy will be overseen by the Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Investment which is chaired by the Taoiseach.

Progress updates on the implementation of the policy will be published every six months. At the end of each year, an annual report and work programme for the following year will form part of the progress updates. This annual work programme will enable new actions to be added over the lifetime of the policy.

Our Rural Future: Key Deliverables

Remote Working

- Rollout the National Broadband Plan and explore how the project can be accelerated to deliver connectivity as soon as possible to rural areas.
- Invest significantly in remote working infrastructure to enable more people to live and work in rural communities, with good career prospects, regardless of where their employer is headquartered.
- Provide financial support to Local Authorities to bring vacant properties in Town Centres back into use as Remote Working Hubs.
- Develop an integrated network of over 400 remote working facilities throughout the country, with shared back-office services and a single booking platform for users.
- Utilise remote working facilities to support the retention of skilled people in rural communities and attract mobile talent to rural areas.
- Introduce legislation in 2021 to provide employees with the right to request remote work.
- Review the current tax arrangements for remote working for both employers and employees.
- Pilot co-working and hot-desking hubs for civil servants in a number of regional towns.
- Move to 20% home or remote working in the public sector in 2021, with further annual increases over the lifetime of this policy.
- Through IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland and Údarás na Gaeltachta promote and enable the uptake of remote working across their client base to support regional job creation.
- Examine the potential to introduce specific incentives to encourage remote workers to relocate to rural towns.
- Provide funding to Local Authorities to run innovative marketing campaigns targeted at attracting remote workers and mobile talent to their county.

Revitalising Rural Towns and Villages

- Put the future development and regeneration of rural towns at the heart of decision-making through the Town Centre First approach.
- Invest significantly in the revitalisation of rural town centres through the €1 billion Rural Regeneration and Development Fund.
- Expand the Town and Village Renewal Scheme as a key enabler to bring vacant and derelict buildings and sites back into use as multi-purpose spaces and for residential occupancy.
- As part of Budget 2022, examine the scope to introduce new financial supports to encourage increased residential occupancy in rural towns.
- Review and extend the regulations which exempt certain vacant commercial premises, such as “over the shop” type spaces, from requiring planning permission for change of use for residential purposes.
- Provide seed capital to Local Authorities to provide serviced sites at cost in towns and villages to allow individuals to build homes and encourage town living.
- Identify potential State owned properties in rural towns and villages which can be used for community purposes.
- Provide and resource dedicated Local Authority staff to support town centre renewal.
- Enhance the powers of Local Authorities to offer commercial rates-based incentives targeting vacant commercial units.
- Encourage Local Authorities to use their powers under CPO, where appropriate, to tackle vacant and derelict properties in Town Centres, to bring vacant properties back into use.
- Examine the feasibility of introducing ‘meanwhile use’ legislation so that empty buildings and shopfronts on main streets can be brought back into use on a short-term, temporary basis as pop up shops, street markets, exhibitions spaces and other purposes.
- Provide funding to support the upgrade and enhancement of shopfronts and street facades in towns and villages and for the adaptation of town centres for outdoor socialising.
- Fund Local Authorities to adapt and improve outdoor public spaces for cultural events and activities all-year round.
- Invest significantly in the development of parks, green spaces and recreational amenities in town centres to make them vibrant hubs for community enjoyment, and to increase footfall for local businesses.
- Provide grants to retail businesses in rural towns and villages to establish an online presence to complement traditional footfall trade.
- Develop Gaeltacht Service Towns situated in or adjacent to Gaeltacht Language Planning Areas which will play a significant role in providing public services, recreational, social and commercial facilities for those areas.
- Invest in water and wastewater infrastructure to support the development of rural towns and villages.
- Prioritise the siting of new State agencies, Departments and enterprises outside of Dublin, where possible.



Jobs for Rural Ireland

- Through the updated *National Development Plan* invest in key infrastructure projects to support and enable balanced regional development.
- Target half of all new IDA investments for regional locations, supported by the construction of Advanced Technology Buildings and landing space in 19 strategic regional locations.
- Deliver ambitious regional job creation and enterprise development targets for the indigenous sector in the strategies of Enterprise Ireland, Údarás na Gaeltachta and the Local Enterprise Offices.
- Support rural enterprises to diversify into new sectors and markets by taking advantage of high speed broadband and new technologies.
- Invest in and deliver more Technological Universities to help support regional growth and to act as an anchor for regional economic development, research and investment.
- Publish a new Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025 to ensure that we have a modern and responsive apprenticeship programme with a strong regional footprint which meets the needs of a changing economy.
- Develop an overarching Clustering Policy and Framework Programme to advance strong and effective clustering and links between SMEs, multinational corporations and the third-level sector to drive competitiveness and innovation in the regions.
- Deliver a suite of new measures to support the development of Social Enterprises in rural areas to increase their social, economic and environmental impact and contribute to job creation locally.
- Examine, and take forward as appropriate, the recommendations of the SME Growth Plan to map out an ambitious long-term strategic blueprint for all SMEs, including rurally based businesses.

Rural Living

- Update the Rural Housing Guidelines for planning authorities, to address rural housing in a broader rural development and settlement context.
- Work with An Post to identify the scope to channel additional services through the post office network.
- Develop a pilot scheme to support the use of rural pubs as community spaces and hubs for local services.
- Increase the capacity for remote and blended learning to enable young people, in particular, in rural areas to access further and higher education courses through online learning while living in their local communities.
- Implement a €70 million Transitional LEADER Programme for community-led rural development for the period 2021-2022, and develop and deliver a new LEADER programme to commence in 2023, in line with the next EU funding framework.
- Provide investment for multi-purpose spaces in the community (e.g. community centres, libraries, and sports clubs) for a variety of activities, including leisure, community, cultural and services provision.
- Provide improved rural public transport services and pilot new transport initiatives to enhance the quality of life for people in rural areas.
- Deliver expanded Local Link services through the NTA's Connecting Ireland, Rural Mobility Plan.
- Ensure that public transport services in rural and regional areas are accessible to persons with disabilities and reduced mobility.
- Develop a subsidised Local Area Hackney Scheme in designated areas of rural Ireland which are too small or remote to support a full-time taxi or hackney service.
- Through the Healthy Ireland programme, support improved health and wellbeing of rural communities in collaboration with Local Authorities and local stakeholders and partners.
- Invest in high-quality walking and cycling infrastructure specifically targeted at towns and villages across the country.
- Invest in the local and regional road network to maintain roads to a proper standard and improve regional accessibility.
- Increase investment in the repair of non-public roads through the Local Improvement Scheme.
- Review and enhance the effectiveness and availability of community alert and property-marking schemes in partnership with rural stakeholders to combat rural crime.
- Increase the number of places on the Rural Social Scheme, TÚS and Community Employment Schemes to support rural communities.
- Develop an effective rural proofing model to ensure the needs of rural communities are considered in the development of Government policies.

Rural Ireland's Unique Tourism, Culture & Heritage

- Publish Ireland's first ever National Outdoor Recreation Strategy, backed up by increased investment in trails, greenways, cycleways, blueways and other amenities, capitalising on the increased demand for outdoor pursuits post COVID-19.
- Through the implementation of the National Outdoor Recreation Strategy, develop Ireland's outdoor activity sector in a strategic and coordinated manner to maximise tourism benefits and create employment opportunities in rural communities.
- Develop a new Dark Skies Strategy, with a focus on the opportunities this unique blend of tourism and science can create for rural communities.
- Develop the Wild Atlantic Way, Ireland's Hidden Heartlands and Ireland's Ancient East to increase visitor numbers, support local economies in towns and villages, and bring further sustainable benefits to rural communities.
- Support the development of new flagship cross-border tourism projects, such as the Ulster Canal.
- Implement Culture and Creative Strategies in each Local Authority area, including "Culture Days", to showcase local cultural heritage.
- Strengthen the identity and branding of the Gaeltacht regions and develop a Tourism Strategy for the Gaeltacht areas.
- Approve and implement an Irish language plan for each of the 26 Gaeltacht districts to strengthen Irish language usage by individuals, community, and businesses in these areas.
- Implement a new National Heritage Plan, *Heritage Ireland 2030*, to identify priority actions in the heritage area.

Supporting Communities to create their own future

- Develop an integrated, place-based approach to rural development to maximise investment and meet the long-term needs of individual parishes, villages and towns by supporting rural communities to develop long-term cohesive Master Plans for their areas.
- Develop a single portal to provide a funding roadmap on the range of programmes and schemes available across Government for rural and community development.
- Establish a Rural Youth Assembly to allow young people living in rural Ireland to make an on-going contribution to issues that impact on them and their future.
- Hold a regular series of Rural Ideas Fora to enable Government to respond to the emerging needs and issues of rural stakeholders.
- Develop and implement Local Digital Strategies in each Local Authority area to maximise the potential of improved rural digital connectivity for businesses and communities.
- Develop and implement a new Adult Digital Literacy Strategy so that everybody, regardless of age, can capitalise on the connectivity and opportunities presented by the National Broadband Plan.
- Build capacity for community development through provision of mentoring/training for community development leaders, with a particular focus on young people between the ages of 18 and 25.
- Further enhance the Public Participation Network and Local Community Development Committee structures to ensure that local communities are fully involved in, and contribute to, decisions affecting their local areas.
- Work in consultation with local community and voluntary groups and with local decision-making structures to help welcome and integrate newcomers to rural towns and villages and to support cohesion more broadly.



Agriculture, the Marine and Forestry

- Develop and Implement a new Agri-Food Strategy to 2030, to ensure the economic, environmental and social sustainability of the agri-food sector in the decade ahead.
- Implement *Ag Climatise*, a roadmap towards climate neutrality for the agri-food sector.
- Support research and development in areas such as agri-food, biobased systems, smart agriculture and precision agriculture to promote and encourage innovation and diversification.
- Develop Ireland's Common Agricultural Policy Strategic Plan for the period 2023-2027, which addresses existing and emerging challenges including climate action, environmental protection, generational renewal, viable farm incomes, and to sustain vibrant rural areas.
- Support generational renewal, including young farmers and women in agriculture, through measures including the CAP, taxation measures and access to finance initiatives.
- Encourage and support Local Authorities to expand the number of farmers' markets, farm shops and community-owned markets in all towns, to showcase produce from local farmers, growers, and food producers.
- Develop a new integrated marine sustainable development plan, as a successor to *Harnessing Our Ocean Wealth*, focusing on all aspects of the marine sector.
- Deliver an ambitious afforestation plan to achieve an afforestation target of 8,000 ha/year.
- Enact legislation implementing revised Nursing Home Support Scheme (Fair Deal Scheme) provisions in respect of assets which are family-owned and operated farms and businesses.

Island and Coastal Communities

- Publish and implement a new 10 year cross-Departmental Policy for Island Development and associated action plans to ensure delivery.
- Establish gTeic enterprise hubs on the islands under the remit of Údarás na Gaeltachta to support employment opportunities and explore the potential for community-based enterprise hubs on islands not under the remit of Údarás.
- Maximise the potential to utilise the islands as test-beds for innovative technologies (e.g. eHealth, micro-generation of renewable energy).
- Progress vital infrastructure development for our Island communities.
- Bring investment and job opportunities to coastal communities by developing the offshore renewable energy sector.
- Explore the potential for Coastal Partnership Groups to bring together the local coastal communities to share best practice and resources, and facilitate communication between stakeholders.

Transitioning to a climate neutral economy

- Develop and invest in a Just Transition to a climate neutral society, ensuring that no member of our society is left behind.
- Through the Just Transition Fund, deliver flagship projects of scale, such as the €108 million Bord na Móna Peatlands Restoration Project, to assist communities in the transition to a carbon neutral economy.
- Maximise our resources and strengths in the Green Economy to support employment opportunities for rural communities in areas such as renewable energy, sustainable tourism, energy retrofitting, the Bioeconomy and the Circular Economy.
- Enable community energy to play a role in reaching the target of generating at least 70% of electricity through renewables by 2030, through supports such as a Community Benefit fund and a community category within the Renewable Electricity Support Scheme.
- Prioritise the development of microgeneration of renewable electricity, allowing people sell excess power back to the grid, through the establishment of a Microgeneration Support Scheme.
- Expand the Sustainable Energy Communities Network from 500 to 1,500 by 2030, to involve more local communities directly in how energy is used for the benefit of their community.
- Consider the needs of rural areas in the development of a new Electric Vehicle Infrastructure Strategy which will seek to ensure that charging infrastructure stays ahead of demand.
- Invest in rehabilitating our peatlands to contribute to reduced carbon emissions, carbon sequestration and enhanced biodiversity.
- Support and encourage increased use of allotments and community gardens through rural development programmes and the Tidy Towns competition.

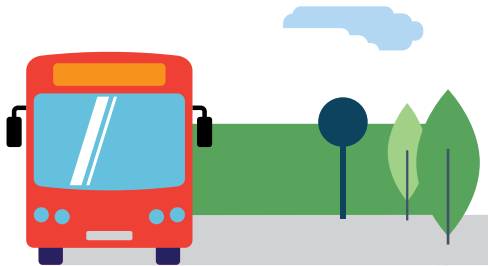
High Level Outcomes



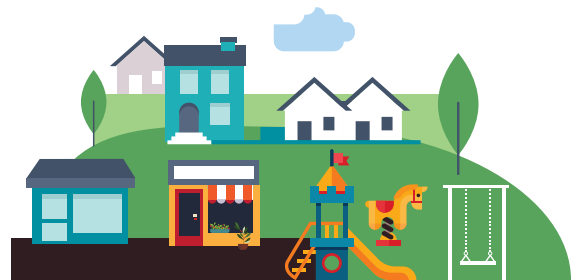
Increase in no. of people living in rural areas
(settlements of <10,000)



Increase in no. of people in rural areas in employment/self-employed



Increase in rural transport services/increase in passenger numbers



Number of town regeneration projects funded



Number of hubs in the national remote working hub network



Reduction in regional income disparity



Increase in broadband coverage in rural areas

1

Chapter 1 Vision and Policy Context

Our Vision for Rural Ireland

“Our Vision is for a thriving rural Ireland which is integral to our national economic, social, cultural and environmental wellbeing and development, which is built on the interdependence of urban and rural areas, and which recognises the centrality of people, the importance of vibrant and lived-in rural places, and the potential to create quality jobs and sustain our shared environment.”

Our Rural Future represents the Irish Government’s blueprint for the post-COVID recovery and development of rural Ireland over the next five years. It provides the framework to achieve the vision of transforming the quality of life and opportunity for people living in rural areas.

The policy builds on the progress achieved through the *Action Plan for Rural Development 2017-2019*. It is forward-looking and is underpinned by the *Project Ireland 2040* objective of achieving Strengthened Rural Economies and Communities.

This policy is built around the centrality of **People** who make up the communities that support and maintain the fabric of rural Ireland. We want to enhance their resilience and ensure their meaningful participation on issues that impact on their lives.

It is built around the **Places** where our rural communities live, where businesses start up and grow, and which are gateways to our heritage, culture and natural environment. We want our towns and villages to be vibrant and lived-in places which capitalise on their local strengths and assets.

And it is built around the **Possibilities** for rural economies as we invest in connectivity, new technologies, infrastructure and skills to open up new job opportunities, and as we respond to new ways of working and to climate change.

The measures contained in this policy focus on both the social and economic development of rural areas in Ireland, recognising that both strong communities and strong local economies are vital in maintaining vibrancy and enabling the future development of our society.

We recognise that rural Ireland is not a homogenous unit; there are many variations of rural areas around the country. These range from rural areas adjacent to large urban centres, to significantly peripheral areas and many areas between these extremities. The policy recognises that the needs of these different types of rural areas varies, and seeks to adopt a more tailored, place-based approach to their development in order to ensure appropriate and effective responses to different requirements at local level.

The economic and social advancement of rural areas requires a whole-of-Government approach. This policy is strategic in nature and will operate in an integrated manner alongside other relevant Government initiatives, including *Project Ireland 2040*, the *National Economic Recovery Plan*, the *Climate Action Plan*, the *Agri-food Strategy to 2030*, and Ireland's alignment with the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Regional and local Government structures also have a key role to play in the delivery of measures at local level, including through the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies, County Development Plans, Local Economic and Community Plans, and Local Authority Climate Action Plans.

Programme for Government

Recognising the fundamental importance of rural towns, enterprises, and people to our national prosperity and wellbeing, the Programme for Government, *Our Shared Future*, places a strong emphasis on rural development.

The Government's objective is to achieve the sustainable development of rural areas by encouraging local economic growth, arresting decline, and ensuring that rural Ireland continues to be a vibrant and lived-in place, meeting the needs of all communities.

Commitments throughout the Programme for Government which will benefit rural Ireland include the development of town centres, better transport services to connect rural communities, support for outdoor tourism initiatives, the development of the Circular Economy, a Just Transition to a climate neutral society, broadband rollout, maximising the potential of the marine sector, and supports for farming and farm families.

This policy will enable a co-ordinated approach across Government to the delivery of these commitments for rural Ireland.

Project Ireland 2040

Our Rural Future also supports the objectives of *Project Ireland 2040* which comprises:

- (a) the *National Planning Framework* (NPF) which sets out a spatial strategy for Ireland to accommodate in a sustainable and balanced way an anticipated growth of one million in our population by 2040, with an additional 600,000 people at work; and
- (b) the *National Development Plan* (NDP), which will provide infrastructural investment to support the NPF.

One of the ten Strategic Outcomes which *Project Ireland 2040* aims to achieve is Strengthened Rural Economies and Communities.

Other Strategic Outcomes, such as Enhanced Regional Accessibility, A Strong Economy supported by Enterprise, Innovation and Skills, Transition to a Climate Resilient and Climate Neutral Economy, and Enhanced Amenity and Heritage, will also support rural economies and communities.

The Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies of the three Regional Assemblies (Northern and Western Region, Southern Region, and Eastern and Midlands Region) reflect and underpin the NPF objectives at regional level.

Local Authority County and City Development Plans and Local Economic and Community Plans will align with their respective Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies, along with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment's Regional Enterprise Plans, in ensuring that a shared vision is carried through from national and regional level to local level.



NDP Review

The 2021 review of the NDP will enable greater alignment of investment with the post COVID-19 economic recovery and with strategic areas of importance outlined in the Programme for Government. It will set out 10-year investment priorities to deliver on the national strategic objectives of the State to 2030.

Improving the regional spread of infrastructure, addressing long identified priority gaps such as housing, flood defences, and water infrastructure, and measures to address climate action such as sustainable transport, are likely to remain important areas of focus for the updated NDP.

These issues are particularly relevant for rural areas, and the alignment of the objectives of the revised NDP and *Our Rural Future* will bring real benefits to rural areas.

Investment in Rural Ireland

Rural Ireland has benefited from unprecedented investment in recent years. This investment has included funding for town and village regeneration, investment in depopulated areas, improvements in regional and local road infrastructure, expanded rural transport services, funding for tourism, culture and heritage projects, and flood relief measures, amongst other thematic areas.

The investment has supported job creation, community participation, and has contributed to an improved quality of life for those living in rural areas.

The NDP established a Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF)^{2,3} with a commitment to providing an additional €1 billion over the period 2019 to 2027 to support rural development.

The Fund supports co-ordinated, collaborative and integrated projects involving Government Departments, State agencies, Local Authorities, other public bodies, communities and, where appropriate, philanthropic funders and/or the private sector, to bring about the transformative regeneration of towns and villages with a population of less than 10,000, and outlying areas.

Rural areas will also benefit from other NDP expenditure, including investment in broadband connectivity, agriculture, transport infrastructure, tourism, employment, the Gaeltacht and the islands.

Alignment with International developments

This policy is aligned with current international thinking in relation to rural development at EU and OECD level.

2 Rural Regeneration and Development Fund - <https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/c77144-rural-regeneration-and-development-fund/>

3 The RRDF is part of DRCD's Rural Investment Programme, which also includes the Town and Village Renewal Scheme, CLÁR, the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme, the Local Improvement Scheme, LEADER, and the Walks Scheme.

The OECD's *Rural Policy 3.0* framework⁴ recognises the diverse nature of rural areas, the linkages between urban and rural areas, and the significant contribution rural regions make to national prosperity and wellbeing. It highlights the potential of rural regions as places of opportunity. It also emphasises the importance of rural regions being central to harnessing major global opportunities and meeting the challenges of the 21st century.

Rural 3.0 recognises that there is a spectrum of rural regions which each have different policy opportunities and challenges. It emphasises the need for integrated delivery of supports to address the needs and circumstances of different rural regions. The OECD framework also highlights the need for deploying a range of policy instruments and taking a multi-stakeholder approach to delivery in order to achieve improved wellbeing for rural dwellers across economic, social and environmental dimensions.

At EU level, *Our Rural Future* supports the realisation of the European Green Deal and the European Pillar on Social Rights.

The European Commission acknowledges the need to reform the operation of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) to make it more responsive to current and future challenges such as climate change or generational renewal, while continuing to support European farmers for a sustainable and competitive agricultural sector. The new CAP, to commence in 2023, will ensure that the needs of rural areas are specifically catered for in national strategic plans.

The LEADER programme, which is funded through the CAP, is based on a locally-led 'bottom-up' approach and recognises the diversity of rural areas and the importance of tailoring projects to meet local needs. The new CAP and LEADER programmes for Ireland will be developed and commenced in the early years of *Our Rural Future* and will make a significant contribution to the delivery of this policy.

Links with UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Ireland has adopted a whole-of-Government approach to the SDGs, and adopted its first SDG National Implementation Plan in March 2018. The SDG National Implementation Plan includes an ambitious 2030 Vision for Ireland to fully achieve the SDGs at home and to support their implementation around the world.

While governments hold primary responsibility for achieving the SDGs, responsibility does not lie with governments alone. The SDGs belong to everyone, in every community, in every country across the world. The Government strongly believes that partnerships between governments, civil society organisations, businesses and communities will be essential to achieving the SDGs.

A key commitment under the SDG National Implementation Plan involves mainstreaming the SDGs across national policies, so that when relevant sectoral policies are developed or reviewed, Ireland's commitments under the SDGs will be taken into account. The policy commitments in *Our Rural Future* are linked directly to the SDGs (see Appendix 1).



4 *Rural Policy 3.0* (OECD)-<https://www.oecd.org/cfe/regional-policy/Rural-3.0-Policy-Note.pdf>

Principles Underpinning this Policy

The delivery of this policy will be guided by the following principles. It will be:

- **People-centred:** Recognising the centrality of people, to enable them to increase their capability and confidence to achieve progress together, based on their rights and aspirations.

- **Sustainable:** Promoting and developing sustainable rural communities, economies, and environment and linked to the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

- **Participative and Inclusive:** Building active participation, fostering social cohesion amongst all communities and prioritising the needs of those experiencing social or economic exclusion, including rural isolation.

- **Integrated:** Ensuring consistency with strategies across national and local government to achieve complementarity of objectives and actions and to ensure coordinated delivery.

- **Progressive:** Building on significant positive progress as well as retaining the flexibility necessary to capitalise on emerging opportunities.

- **Rural-Urban Interdependence:** Recognising the functional interdependence between urban and rural areas, and the economic and social interactions between the two. With this in mind, the policy seeks to reframe the narrative around rural Ireland to reflect the integral role which rural areas play and their economic and social importance to our national development.

These principles are consistent with the State's commitments to progressing human rights and equality in Ireland.

The policy aligns in design and implementation with the *Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty*.

2

Chapter 2 Rural Ireland Today

Recognising the Diversity of Rural Ireland

While the term “rural Ireland” is widely used, there are many different perceptions of what “rural Ireland” means. The fact is that rural areas are not identical and every town, village and parish differs considerably in terms of its individual strengths, needs and possibilities.

The CEDRA report⁵, published in 2014, noted that there are many variations in the characteristics, challenges and opportunities for rural areas around the country, from areas adjacent to large urban centres, to significantly peripheral areas, including the offshore islands. Gaeltacht areas have additional characteristics, challenges and opportunities given their unique socio-linguistic context.

The population density in rural areas varies considerably. According to Census 2016, based on Electoral Division data the average population density in rural areas (in this context, settlements of less than 1,500 people) in 2016 was 27 persons per km². However, some rural areas have more than 74 persons per km² while others have fewer than 13 persons per km². The average density for urban areas, by comparison, was 2,008 persons per km².

Notwithstanding the variations between different rural areas, what is clear is that a significant proportion of Ireland’s national population, workforce and economic activity is located in rural parts of Ireland.

5 Report of the Commission on the Economic Development of Rural Areas (CEDRA) - https://www.teagasc.ie/media/website/rural-economy/CEDRA_Report.pdf

The Central Statistics Office (CSO) defines “rural” as areas with a population of less than 1,500 people, including small settlements and individual dwellings in the countryside. Collectively these areas were home to approximately 37% (1.7 million people) of the national population in 2016⁶.

However, there are many towns and villages with populations of more than 1,500 people that are intrinsic to sustaining viable rural communities and have an interdependence with their rural hinterlands. Recognising this, and for the purposes of investment and planning for future growth and development, *Project Ireland 2040* regards rural areas as settlements with a population of less than 10,000 people outside the metropolitan catchment of a city.

In addition, many towns with a population over 10,000 play an important role as key economic hubs for people in rural areas. They provide employment to people from surrounding areas and support local businesses and producers.

In order to realise the full potential of rural Ireland, a flexible approach is required to address the needs of different rural areas in a meaningful way. As part of that response, this policy seeks to adopt a more holistic and place-based approach to rural development than heretofore, in order to ensure tailored responses to different requirements at local level.

Demographics

Ireland’s population grew by 173,613 people between 2011 and 2016, an increase of 3.8% over the period in question. 80% of this population growth took place in urban areas⁷.

The population of rural areas (in this case, areas with a population of less than 1,500) grew by 34,714 between 2011 and 2016, to 1,776,084 people. This represented an increase of 2%. However, the population in the 25 and under age groups fell by 1.2% in rural areas in the same period, compared to an increase of 1.5% nationally for this age cohort.

Ireland has an ageing population and the number of people over 65 years of age increased in both urban and rural areas between 2011 and 2016.

While this age cohort constituted 12% of the population in urban areas in 2016, it accounted for 15% of the population in rural areas.

Highly remote rural areas had the highest average age profile at 41.2 years, compared to an average age of 37.3 years nationally.

Overall, the 2016 Census shows a trend towards a rural population that has a slower growth rate and a higher age profile than the national average. However, more detailed Census data also shows that there was wide geographic variation in population change, with some rural areas experiencing population growth while others experienced population decline. Electoral Divisions which recorded population growth were close to larger towns and cities, while those distant from, or inaccessible to, these centres generally witnessed population decline.

Characteristics of Rural Areas

In December 2019, the CSO published a report, *Urban and Rural Life in Ireland 2019*, which gives a useful insight into the social and economic characteristics of different types of urban and rural areas. In this report, the CSO defined three categories of rural area (settlements/areas of less than 1,500 people), based on their dependence on urban areas. The three rural categories are:

- Rural areas with high urban influence
- Rural areas with moderate urban influence
- Highly Rural/Remote areas.

Highly Rural/Remote areas, while spread throughout the country, are predominantly found along the Atlantic seaboard and in the Border region (see Figure 1).

Some of the key findings of the CSO report show the vulnerability of Highly Rural/Remote areas. For example:

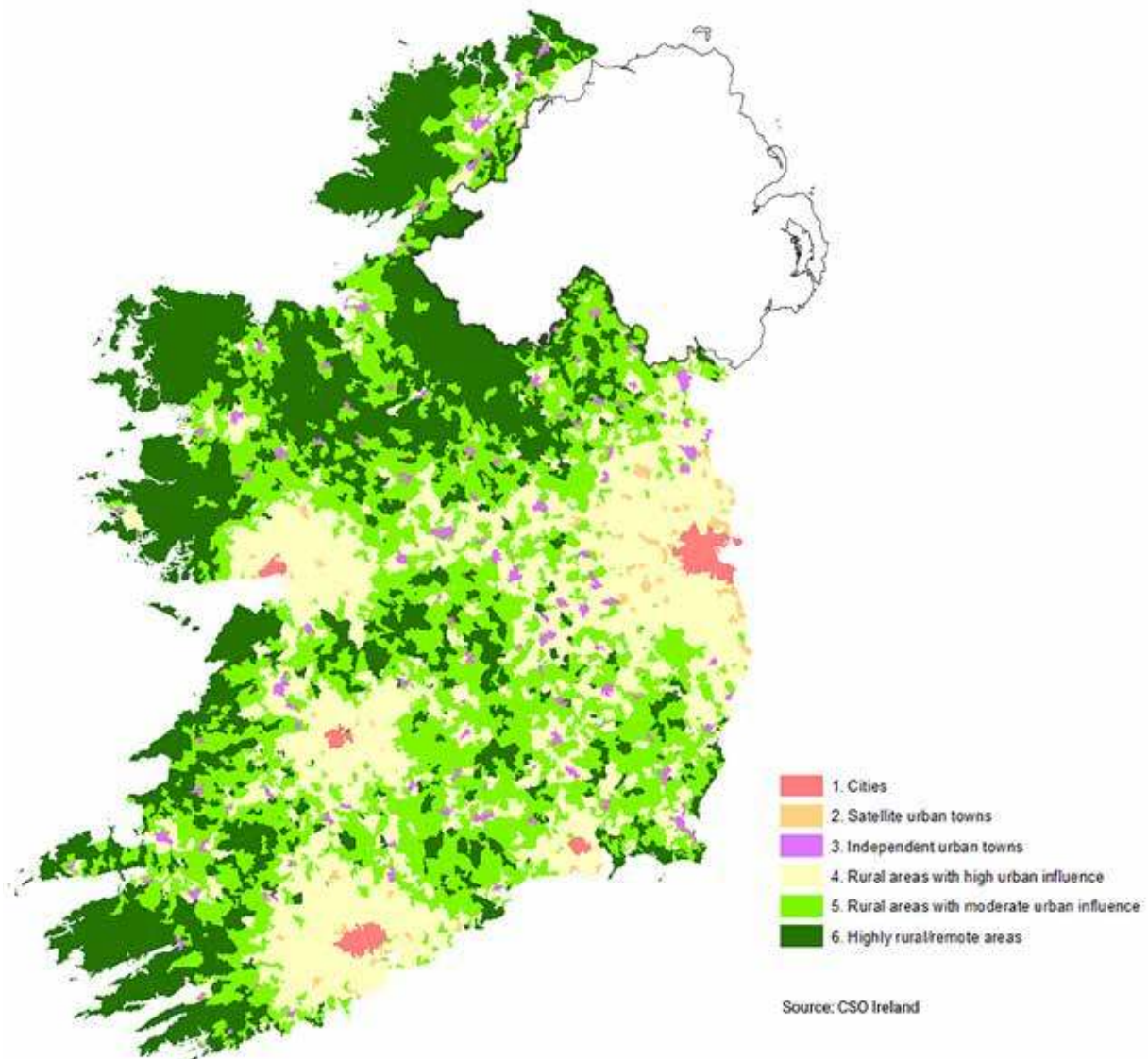
- The population of Highly Rural/Remote areas fell marginally (by 0.6% or 2,400 people) between 2011 and 2016, whereas the population in all other urban and rural categories increased in the same period.

6 The aggregate population of settlements with less than 1,500 people was 1,776,084 in 2016. Census of Population 2016 (CSO) - <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp2tc/cp2pdm/>

7 Census of Population 2016 (CSO) - <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp2tc/cp2pdm/pd/>

- The average age of the population in Highly Rural/Remote areas, at 41.2 years, was higher than any other area. The age dependency was also highest in these areas.
- Household income in Highly Rural/Remote areas was 34% lower than in cities.
- The “at risk of poverty” rate was also highest in these areas.
- The labour force participation rate was lowest in Highly Rural/Remote areas, at 54.9%, some 10 percentage points below cities or Rural Areas with high urban influence.
- The distance required to travel to everyday services such as supermarkets, banks, post offices and garda stations is considerably higher in most cases for all rural areas than for urban areas, with Highly Rural/Remote areas having the furthest distance to travel.
- 30% of households in Highly Rural/Remote areas had no internet access in 2016.
- People living in Highly Rural/Remote areas in 2016 had the lowest proportion holding a Third Level degree or higher (although this may reflect the possibility that those originally from such areas with Third Level qualifications had migrated elsewhere within Ireland or abroad).

Figure 1: Urban and Rural Areas in Ireland, 2016



The ongoing challenge of young people moving to Ireland's cities and overseas means a loss of talent and potential for rural communities



Other findings of note in the report, from a rural policy perspective, were that one in four farmers in rural areas had an income stream from another industry sector; median residential property prices are nearly three times lower in Highly Rural/Remote areas than in cities; contrary to common perception, rural areas did not have the highest unemployment rate – this rate was highest in Independent Urban Towns; and one in ten workers in Highly Rural/Remote areas worked mainly from home.

Characteristics of rural areas which are not empirically measured in the CSO report, but which emerged strongly from consultation with rural stakeholders, include the perception of a better quality of life and a strong sense of community belonging amongst rural dwellers.

Young People in Rural Ireland

In 2016, more than one-third of all persons aged under 25 years in Ireland lived in a rural area.

The consultations which underpin this policy (see Appendix 2) suggest that some of the issues which impact on people living in rural areas generally are more pronounced for young people. For example, access to comprehensive and reliable public transport services is particularly important for young people in rural areas whose independence is restricted if they have to rely on family or friends for transport.

Services such as mental health and addiction supports can be harder to access for young people in rural areas, as these services are often located in the cities or other large urban centres.

Facilities for young people in rural communities tend to be generic in terms of age provision (covering 5-18 years of age), and sufficient consideration is not given to different categories of age-appropriate facilities, i.e. separate tailored amenities for the younger age group, young teenagers, and the older teenage group. Stakeholder consultations have highlighted that there is also often a gap in the diversity of activities available in rural areas for young people, outside of sports.

The ongoing challenge of young people moving from rural areas and not returning to live there means a loss of talent and potential entrepreneurs in rural communities. It deprives rural areas of a cohort who could act as key contributors to society, to their communities and to the local economy.

One of the best ways to retain young people in rural areas and to attract graduates back to rural Ireland, is to create quality jobs throughout the regions, with career opportunities and progression pathways.

The increase in remote working facilities, accelerated by the impact of COVID-19, has demonstrated the possibility for many young people to pursue a career while continuing to live within their local area, regardless of where their employer is headquartered.

This policy places a particular focus on supporting young people in rural communities to encourage their active participation in issues that affect their daily lives, to build their leadership capabilities and to provide on-going input to the development of future initiatives and policies for rural Ireland.

The policy also acknowledges the needs of older people and the value of intergenerational initiatives within rural communities to support the transfer of knowledge, skills and heritage between different age groups, including the opportunity for young people to support older age groups to adapt to digital technologies.

Employment

Rural areas support a mix of businesses of varying sizes, operating in a wide range of sectors from traditional activities such as agriculture, forestry, retail and tourism, to more modern industries such as financial services and Creative Industries.

2016 Census data show the importance of the public services, education and health sectors for employment for those living in rural areas. These combined sectors accounted for over 33% of earned income in Highly Rural/Remote areas.

Employment in the three rural area types classified by the CSO increased by between 2.4% and 5% between Q1 2018 and Q1 2019⁸.

However, the disruption to economic activity caused by COVID-19 saw a reduction in employment across the national labour force from the start of 2020, with sectors such as Tourism, Hospitality, Arts and Culture, which are important for many rural economies, particularly affected.

Future Challenges and Opportunities

The challenges likely to face rural Ireland over the coming years are consistent with patterns affecting rural areas globally. The OECD's Rural 3.0 policy recognises that change in rural areas is being driven by trends such as the impacts of ageing populations, urbanisation, the rise of emerging economies, climate change and environmental pressures, increased globalisation and technological breakthroughs.

Ensuring that rural economies and rural communities continue to develop and realise their potential requires building their resilience to deal with domestic and international challenges that will arise over the coming years. Foremost of these will be the response to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is dealt with throughout this policy.

Other factors which will impact on rural Ireland in the coming years are likely to include:

- continuing demographic trends, with remote rural areas in particular experiencing aging populations and high dependency ratios; this will have implications for the provision of local services for older people and succession issues for farm families;
- the implications of climate change as Ireland seeks to implement a range of measures to transition to a climate neutral economy and society;
- the changing nature of work for businesses and employees - including as a result of new technologies, automation and remote working;
- the fall-out from Brexit, given that many businesses in rural areas are engaged in sectors most vulnerable to the disruption resulting from the UK leaving the EU.

8 Urban and Rural Life in Ireland, 2019 (CSO) - <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-urli/urbanandrallifeinireland2019/>



Other important challenges which were identified by rural stakeholders during the development of this policy include access to public services and transport, infrastructural development, broadband connectivity, the availability of appropriate and adequate community facilities for all age groups, and the future of farming (see Appendix 2).

These factors reflect challenges, but they also present opportunities for rural areas if appropriate measures are put in place to prepare rural businesses and communities for them.

Some of the opportunities which were identified in the stakeholder engagement process include the potential for a more cohesive approach from Government to rural development, supporting capacity building for communities, the expansion of employment opportunities in rural areas, the revitalisation of rural towns and villages, and the optimisation of digital connectivity and emerging technologies.

This policy seeks to address the challenges and help rural communities realise their opportunities through a series of policy measures which will be progressively delivered over the next five years

Impact of COVID-19 on Rural Areas

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted significantly on global and national economies. Rural economies are particularly vulnerable to economic downturns due a less diversified economic base than large urban areas, generally lower income levels and a reliance on micro and small enterprises which are a critical part of rural economies.

Work carried out by Ireland's three Regional Assemblies in 2020 on the impact of COVID-19 concluded that coastal and rural counties are more likely to be exposed to the economic disruption caused by COVID-19 due their higher reliance on enterprises that require human interaction or which cannot operate remotely⁹.

Sectors such as Accommodation and Food Services (essentially the Tourism and Hospitality sectors), Arts & Entertainment and Personal Services, on which many rural towns, villages and communities depend, experienced the greatest disruption from COVID-19 and are likely to be slowest to recover. Some of these sectors are also amongst those most exposed to the impact of Brexit.

9 COVID-19 Regional Economic Analysis (Regional Assemblies) - <https://www.southernassembly.ie/uploads/general-files/CV19-Regional-Economic-Analysis.pdf>

Societal impacts

Apart from the effect on businesses and employment, the societal impact of COVID-19, social distancing, and reduced personal interaction has been unprecedented. It has left many people feeling isolated and uncertain.

The dispersed settlement patterns and the demographic profile of rural Ireland, which has a higher age profile than urban areas, creates a social vulnerability for many people living in rural areas. However, the crisis has demonstrated the value of having robust community structures in place, particularly in rural areas where the support needs of vulnerable people are particularly pronounced due to the dispersed nature of the population.

A report by the National Economic and Social Council on the Community Call initiative¹⁰ found that organisations working together across boundaries were able to effectively identify vulnerable people and their needs and deliver a range of services to them. The community and voluntary sector played a key role in the work of identifying and supporting the vulnerable.

Looking to the future

The OECD report *Policy implications of Coronavirus Crisis for Rural Development*¹¹ highlights the potential opportunities, as a result of COVID-19, to rethink existing approaches to issues that impact on rural areas and to develop strategies to overcome future economic shocks.

The report notes that the COVID-19 experience has embedded remote and mobile working in the labour force, and increased the attractiveness of rural areas for people and firms across the OECD. All of this can result in new opportunities for sustainable growth in rural regions. The use of distributed remote networks can also help increase the linkages between rural and urban areas.

In Ireland, the response to COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of digital connectivity for maintaining economic, social and leisure activity and has demonstrated the benefits of remote and flexible working for many employers and employees. The move towards remote working has also contributed to reducing transport emissions, it has provided a boost for small local businesses across the country, and it has provided possibilities for young people to build a career while continuing to live in their communities.

In Ireland, the COVID-19 crisis has also highlighted the centrality of people and rural places which can play an important role in the post-COVID recovery. Many of the positive aspects of rural living have been highlighted, including the availability of high quality local produce and access to a wealth of outdoor amenities which contribute to health and wellbeing.

Brexit

Brexit presents a particular challenge for businesses and communities in rural Ireland. A number of studies show that the potential negative impacts of Brexit on Ireland will be most pronounced outside the major urban centres.

Rural areas are more dependent on sectors and enterprises that are vulnerable to the impact of Brexit, especially the Agri-food and Fisheries sectors, and small Irish-owned enterprises which represent a significant proportion of Ireland's rural enterprise base.

The impact of Brexit on coastal fishing communities is particularly significant. The cost of the final quota transfer by Ireland will amount to a 15% loss of the overall value by 2026, with 60% of this reduction applying in 2021 alone.

The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine has set up a Task Force involving seafood industry representatives and other stakeholders to provide recommendations on the appropriate measures that will best support the fishing sector and coastal communities.

While Brexit poses challenges for rural areas and for particular sectors of the economy, opportunities may also arise for Ireland as a result of the UK's exit from the EU. These include the potential to attract additional foreign direct investment to Ireland in the medium-term, import substitution, and diversification into new markets by Irish businesses which have traditionally relied on access to the UK. Improved digital connectivity through the National Broadband Plan will support these opportunities for rural-based enterprises.

The Government has introduced a range of measures and supports to strengthen the resilience of the Irish economy in the context of the UK's exit from the EU.

10 Community Call: Learning for the Future, see http://files.nesc.ie/nesc_secretariat_papers/No_22_CommunityCall.pdf

11 *Policy Implications of Coronavirus Crisis for Rural Development* (OECD) - <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/policy-implications-of-coronavirus-crisis-for-rural-development-6b9d189a/>

3

Chapter 3 Optimising Digital Connectivity

Our Ambition

Our ambition is to transform digital connectivity for rural communities and enterprises through the delivery of high speed broadband to every part of the country, ensuring equality of access to digital services and supporting the diversification of rural economies and jobs through digital technologies.

Our aim is to bridge the gap in urban-rural connectivity and enable rural businesses, particularly small and micro enterprises, to trade online and broaden their customer base.

We will invest significantly in remote working infrastructure to provide an opportunity for more people to live in rural communities while following their career ambitions.

We will promote remote working in the public and private sectors and improve digital skills to ensure that all people can avail of the social and economic benefits afforded by digital technologies.

Context

High quality digital connectivity offers an unprecedented opportunity to transform rural Ireland. It will support the sustainability of rural communities by enabling more people to continue to live and work in rural locations and encouraging others to relocate to rural areas.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of digital connectivity in supporting many aspects of our daily lives. Throughout the crisis, digital connectivity helped many people to avoid becoming socially isolated; it enabled students to continue their education through on-line learning; and it demonstrated its potential to support economic activity through remote working and the delivery of services on-line.

Digital connectivity is as much an equality issue as it is about business and technology. Over the lifetime of this policy, improved connectivity and digital innovation will help communities to have greater outreach. It will support older people to live independently in their communities, but with access to more supports and services through connected technologies. It will mean a better quality of life for rural dwellers, enabling people to access online information and resources including the provision of online services such as education and personalised health care.

We have learned from the response to the COVID-19 pandemic that remote working offers a viable choice to many employers and employees which is productive and beneficial for both parties.

The greater prevalence of home and remote working arising out of COVID-19 has provided a boost in trade for local businesses and highlights an opportunity for rural towns and villages to benefit from this new way of working, including through the provision of facilities for remote working and ancillary services.

A survey by the National University of Ireland Galway (NUIG) and the Western Development Commission (WDC) in 2020¹² found that, from over 5,600 respondents, 94% expressed an interest in working remotely on an on-going basis some or all the time following the COVID-19 crisis.

The rollout of high speed broadband through the National Broadband Plan (NBP) will be a key enabler of remote working in rural Ireland, with added benefits through reduced commuting time, lower transport emissions, a better work-life balance and improved quality of life.

The NBP rollout will also have a transformative effect for rural business, farms, schools and communities as more and more elements of our interactions are delivered through digital technologies. Improved access to digital connectivity will also support social cohesion and equality.

National Broadband Plan Rollout

The NBP will deliver high speed broadband services to all premises in Ireland through a combination of commercial investment and State intervention in areas where commercial operators acting alone are unlikely to invest. These intervention areas are primarily in rural locations.

Up to €2.7 billion of Exchequer funding will be invested in the intervention areas to provide a future-proofed high speed broadband network to nearly 600,000 premises, including new builds. The NBP is the largest infrastructural project in rural Ireland since rural electrification, spanning 96% of Ireland's land mass. It will bring high speed broadband to 23% of Ireland's population and 69% of the national total of farms.

The availability of high speed broadband services in rural communities will have a transformative effect, even in the most remote parts of the country. It will ensure equality of access to on-line services for people in rural areas. It will create potential for improved social cohesion and economic growth and will allow people to pursue their careers without the need to relocate, as well as offering the potential to attract new people and businesses to rural locations.

NBP connectivity will allow businesses, particularly small and micro enterprises, to trade in wider markets, potentially expanding their customer base internationally.

Over 90% of premises in the State will have access to high speed broadband over the lifetime of *Our Rural Future*, but the Government will explore how the rollout can be accelerated to deliver connectivity as soon as is feasible across rural Ireland.

12 Remote working during COVID-19: Ireland's National Survey Phase II Report (Whitaker Institute) - <http://whitakerinstitute.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Remote-Working-National-Survey-Phase-II-Report-Oct-2020-Final.pdf>

Initial access to broadband for many of our most remote rural communities will be provided through the rollout of approximately 300 community-based Broadband Connection Points (BCPs). These publicly-accessible sites provide free WiFi internet connectivity to remote rural locations, including many of our offshore islands, pending the full rollout of the NBP to those areas. In the longer-term, it is envisaged that many of the BCPs will act as a central point for the provision of digital services in the community.

In addition to the broadband connectivity provided by the NBP, continued investment will be required to ensure mobile phone infrastructure keeps pace with technology trends and maximises opportunities around emerging technologies.

The Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce will continue to identify solutions to broadband and mobile phone coverage deficits and to investigate how better services can be provided to consumers.

Investing in Remote Working

Remote working has the potential to be transformative for rural Ireland.

Supported by appropriate infrastructure and facilities, remote working can encourage more people to live in rural areas while working in good quality jobs, no matter where their employer is based. Developing remote working hubs in rural town centres will have the added benefit of helping revitalise those towns.

The shift from the fixed workplace model will be supported by a national network of remote/co-working spaces and enterprise hubs which have the potential to become a significant resource to support our national economic development.

They will enable many people to work locally and offer new or expanding companies the opportunity to locate in rural areas, either as primary locations or advance second sites.

The Government will implement the *National Remote Work Strategy*¹³ which aims to make remote working a lasting feature of Ireland's workforce in a way that can maximise the benefits economically, socially and environmentally.

The Strategy will, inter alia, provide employers and employees with ongoing up-to-date guidance on remote work and raise awareness of existing remote work hub infrastructure in Ireland.

The Programme for Government mandates public sector employers, colleges and other public bodies to move to 20% home and remote working from 2021. The potential use of co-working spaces by civil servants, including through shared hot-desking in Government office spaces, will be explored in this context on a pilot basis.

The Tax Strategy Group will review the current tax arrangements for remote working in respect of employees and employers, and assess the merits of further enhancements for consideration in the context of Budget 2022.

The Government has invested significantly in remote working hubs and enterprise spaces over the last number of years, including through the Department of Rural and Community Development, Enterprise Ireland and Údarás na Gaeltachta, and it is committed to continue to do so.

IDA Ireland, in its FDI Strategy 2021-2024, recognises the potential of remote working as part of its value proposition to attract investment to Ireland. Remote working can present opportunities to create jobs in regional locations that might previously have been more likely to be based in large urban centres. The agency will engage with clients and identify opportunities to promote the uptake of remote working across their client base with a view to supporting regional job creation.

While there are many public, private and community owned hubs being established across the country, the benefits of remote and co-working spaces will be best realised if the hubs - existing or planned - are developed in a cohesive way that ensures that the right facilities are located in the right places to meet demand and maximise utilisation.

In this context, the Government will invest strategically in remote working hubs in rural areas and create a cohesive national network of available working facilities.

13 Making Remote Work: *National Remote Work Strategy* (Government of Ireland) - <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/Publications/Making-Remote-Work.html>

The Department of Rural and Community Development, as Chair of the National Hub Network Oversight Group, and the Western Development Commission will complete work in 2021 on developing and mapping a comprehensive picture of remote working hubs across the country, classifying the various facilities available. This will help to inform further investment decisions.

The initiative will also lead to the establishment of a national integrated network of 400 remote working hubs, supported by shared back-office services and the development of an app to allow remote and mobile workers to book space in any of the hubs in the network through a centralised booking system. Many of the hubs will also be made available for community-based activities.

Local Authority Digital Initiatives

As the NBP is rolled out, Local Authorities will be at the forefront of the process. The development of Local Digital Strategies in every county will ensure that Local Authorities are well positioned to maximise the use of high speed broadband for the people and businesses that are located in their administrative areas.

Local Digital Strategies in each Local Authority area will enable improved use of digital technologies for businesses and communities.

Through the European Commission's WiFi4EU programme, co-funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development, Ireland's Local Authorities are also establishing free public WiFi services in centres of public life, such as town squares, public parks and libraries. Local Authorities are also trialling new technologies and innovative uses of existing technologies to deliver more effective public services through the Government's Digital Innovation Programme¹⁴. Projects across the country, from water safety to oral histories, tourism initiatives and precision farming, have shown the potential for Local Authority-led digital innovation to work for the public benefit.

Digital Education in Schools

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of connectivity in facilitating remote learning. The availability of high speed broadband services will allow rural schools to benefit through facilitating live streaming of classes where required and using innovative educational tools, granting access to specialist teaching resources and enabling equal engagement through distance learning.



14 Digital Innovation Programme - <https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/d916d7-digital-initiatives-schemes/#digital-innovation-programme>

This will be underpinned by the delivery of high speed residential broadband under the National Broadband Plan, enabling engagement in the home.

Under the Department of Education's Schools Broadband Programme, 98% of primary schools are provided with some level of broadband connectivity, with all post-primary schools and a number of special schools provided with high speed symmetrical connectivity of 100 Mbp/s or more.

Where existing and planned commercial infrastructure does not provide for high speed broadband, the services to be rolled out under the NBP will help address connectivity issues and bring many benefits to rural primary schools. These include facilitating improved collaboration and engagement across the school sector, opening up capacity for teachers to embed digital technologies in teaching and learning in their schools, facilitating collaboration with other schools, including on the islands, and improving networking across schools.

The Department of Education will continue to deliver guidance on the use of digital technologies in schools, including through national frameworks such as the Digital Learning Framework, and provide Continuous Professional Development programmes for teachers and school leaders.

There have also been considerable developments in Further and Higher Education training to improve capacity in digital inclusion and blended learning to make education and training as accessible as possible to everyone, including those in rural communities.

Further work remains to be done in this area, with a particular focus on the scale, effectiveness and co-ordination of efforts. Consideration of how best to ensure that people have the digital literacy skills to participate in a digital society will be undertaken in the context of the Government's 10-year adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy strategy to be developed by SOLAS.

Developing digital capability within the enterprise sector, especially amongst SMEs and microenterprises, is critical for competitiveness and business sustainability. The enterprise agencies and Local Enterprise Offices will continue to have a focus in this regard through initiatives such as the Trading Online Voucher Scheme, Online Retail Scheme and range of related training programmes for eligible businesses.

Digital Skills for All

Acquiring digital skills is as important as physical access to broadband infrastructure to enable individuals and communities to maximise the benefits of high speed broadband connectivity.

The internet and digital technologies are transforming the way people live and work, but figures from the Central Statistics Office¹⁵ show that use of these technologies decreases in older age categories.

The Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications' *Digital Skills for Citizens* Scheme provided basic digital skills classes to over 57,000 people in the period 2017 to 2020 through community, voluntary and not-for-profit organisations.

15 Ireland's UN SDGs 2019 - Report on Indicators for Goal 4: Quality Education (CSO) - <https://www.cso.ie/en/statistics/unsustainabledevelopmentgoals/unsdgsgoal4-qualityeducation/>

Actions to Achieve Our Ambition

To optimise digital connectivity in rural areas, the Government will deliver the following policy measures:

Policy Measure	
1	Invest up to €2.7 billion in the rollout of the National Broadband Plan and explore how the initiative can be accelerated to deliver connectivity as soon as possible in rural areas.
2	Implement the <i>National Remote Work Strategy</i> to facilitate employees in working from home, or from co-working spaces, which will support the retention of skilled people in rural areas.
3	Introduce legislation in 2021 to provide employees with the right to request remote work.
4	Map and publish a comprehensive picture of remote working facilities across the country, and the various facilities available in each, to ensure that future hubs are developed in a strategic way that meets demand and maximises utilisation in key locations.
5	Establish a comprehensive and integrated national network of 400 Remote Working Hubs throughout the country, with shared back-office services and a central booking platform for users.
6	Invest significantly in remote working facilities to support the retention of skilled people in rural communities and attract mobile talent to rural areas.
7	Provide financial support to Local Authorities to bring vacant properties in town centres back into use as Remote Working Hubs.
8	Develop national data on the incidence and frequency of remote work, to provide an evidence base for future policy.
9	Establish a centralised cross-departmental knowledge base on the costs and benefits associated with the increased adoption of remote working to understand impacts on areas such as employment, transport, carbon emissions, broadband, and equality.
10	Mandate public sector employers, colleges, and other public bodies to move to 20% home and remote working in 2021, with further annual increases over the lifetime of this policy.
11	Pilot co-working or hot-desking for civil servants in a small number of towns initially, to support the objective of a move to 20% home or remote working.
12	Through IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland and Údarás na Gaeltachta promote and enable the uptake of remote working across their client base to support regional job creation.
13	Through the Tax Strategy Group, review the current tax arrangements for remote working in respect of (i) employees and (ii) employers, and assess the merits of further enhancements for consideration in the context of Budget 2022.
14	Provide grants to retail businesses in rural towns and villages to establish an online presence to complement traditional footfall trade.

15	Develop Local Digital Strategies in each Local Authority area, to maximise the potential of improved rural digital connectivity for businesses and communities.
16	Expand the provision of free-to-use wireless internet connectivity in rural areas through the rollout of Broadband Connection Points and other initiatives such as the WiFi4EU public wifi networks and the Digital Innovation Programme.
17	Under the Schools Broadband Programme, review on an ongoing basis the availability of broadband services and upgrade schools broadband connectivity, including within the State intervention area where possible.
18	Increase the capacity for remote and blended learning to enable young people, in particular, in rural areas to access further and higher education courses through online learning while living in their local communities.
19	Develop and implement a new 10-year Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy strategy so that everybody, regardless of age, can capitalise on the connectivity and opportunities presented by the rollout of high speed broadband.
20	Upgrade and reskill workers in sectors undergoing transformational technological change to adapt to new roles and new ways of working.

4

Chapter 4 Supporting Employment and Careers in Rural Areas

Our Ambition

Our ambition is to have more people working in rural Ireland, with access to quality employment opportunities and improved career prospects.

Our aim is to grow regional employment by creating an environment that supports entrepreneurship and enterprise growth in rural areas.

We will achieve this by supporting rural businesses to diversify and grow. We will invest in enhancing skills, and developing, retaining and attracting talent to support continued economic development in rural areas.

Context

Rural areas support a range of enterprises, from micro-enterprises to large multi-national companies. These enterprises employ hundreds of thousands of people in rural Ireland and contribute significantly to our national economy.

Agri-food and Tourism, two of our strongest indigenous enterprise sectors, depend heavily on the natural capital and human resources in rural areas. Apart from more traditional sectors, rural-based enterprises support employment in a diverse range of sectors such as Financial Services, Medtech, Agri-tech and the Creative Industries. They serve a wide range of markets, from local to international level.

Locally-based enterprises also help to maintain the fabric of rural communities through support for community events and community-based organisations, as well as through the provision of jobs. Small and Medium Sized Enterprises are a critical part of rural economies, providing employment, contributing to the local economy and adding to the vibrancy of rural towns. At the same time, rural economies are particularly vulnerable to economic downturns due to a less diversified economic base, a strong reliance on micro and small enterprises, and generally lower income levels.

Many rural businesses have been particularly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic due its impact on the sectors in which they operate.

The Tourism and Hospitality sectors have been amongst those worst hit by the impact of the virus. Notwithstanding developments in relation to vaccinations, the restrictions required to suppress the virus and a fall in overseas visitors are likely to continue to impact on these sectors for some time. A sectoral report on the Tourism and Hospitality sectors¹⁶, highlights the potential impacts of COVID-19 on these sectors and the changed environment in which these businesses will operate post-COVID.

A key challenge for rural businesses in all sectors will be to recover from the impact of COVID-19, with Government supports where appropriate, and adapt their products and services to reflect new consumer behaviours and capitalise on emerging opportunities.

The Government will also continue to support those who are unemployed, with a particular focus on investing in people and their potential, to enable them to secure sustainable and quality employment.

Growing Regional Employment

Strong regions provide the basis for improving the economic and jobs potential of rural areas. These opportunities are underpinned by the objectives of the *National Planning Framework* to achieve stronger regional growth and a more balanced distribution of jobs and population growth.

Over the last five years, Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland have focused on supporting enterprise growth and job creation throughout the regions. 65% of new jobs created by Enterprise Ireland client companies in 2020 were outside the Dublin region, while 56% of employment in IDA Ireland's client companies is located in the regions.

As our economy recovers from the impact of COVID-19, IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland will continue to embed jobs growth within the regions by building on recent successes and setting ambitious targets for the coming years.

In its strategy, *Driving Recovery and Sustainable Growth 2021-2024*¹⁷ the IDA is aiming to win 400 investments (half of its total national target) for regions outside of Dublin over the period 2021-2024 and has set specific targets for each region. The multiplier effect of these FDI investments will spread beyond the towns in which the investment is located and will offer employment and supply chain opportunities for people and businesses in neighbouring towns and rural areas. IDA Ireland will also deliver 19 Advanced Building Solutions in strategic regional locations, in line with the National Planning Framework, over the course of its four-year strategy.

Enterprise Ireland recognises that having strong, innovative, regionally based exporting companies is vital to balanced economic development and sustaining and creating high value jobs into the future. Enterprise Ireland is placing a focus on a number of strategic priorities including strengthening regional enterprise development and enterprise infrastructure, supported by regional enterprise schemes such as the Regional Enterprise Development Fund and the Border Enterprise Development Fund.

The 31 Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs), located in each Local Authority area, will continue to provide advice, information, and, where appropriate, financial supports, to help entrepreneurs to start up or businesses to grow.

16 Focus on Tourism & Hospitality, August 2020 (Government of Ireland) <https://dbe.i.gov.ie/en/Publications/Publication-files/Focus-on-Tourism-and-Hospitality-2020.pdf>

17 *Driving Recovery and Sustainable Growth 2021-2024* (IDA Ireland) - <https://www.idaireland.com/about-ida/driving-recovery-and-sustainable-growth-2021-2024>

In Gaeltacht areas, Údarás na Gaeltachta carries out the work of the LEOs, IDA, and Enterprise Ireland and provides supports for enterprise development across a range of sectors, including Life Sciences, ICT, Tourism, Fish processing and aquaculture, Renewable Energy, Food, Manufacturing, and the Creative Industries. 427 new full-time jobs were created in Údarás client companies in 2020, resulting in 7,363 full-time and 437 part-time jobs in companies supported by Údarás at the end of 2020.

The Western Development Commission supports micro-enterprises and SMEs in the Western region¹⁸ through the Western Investment Fund and sectoral initiatives. The WDC is also central to the development of the national remote working hub network, building on the model which the organisation established along the Atlantic Economic Corridor, from Kerry to Donegal.

The Government's focus on regional enterprise and employment growth is supported by nine Regional Enterprise Plans aimed at driving sustainable and quality job creation in the regions and facilitating each region to achieve its economic potential through 'bottom-up' collaborative initiatives. These Plans complement national level policies and programmes and the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies of the Local Authorities. The Regional Enterprise Plans will be refreshed and updated in 2021.

The Regional Enterprise Plans are underpinned by funding such as the Regional Enterprise Development Fund¹⁹ and the Regional Technology Clustering Fund²⁰. The suite of supports under the Department of Rural and Community Development's programmes also have a key role to play in supporting job creation in rural areas.

A new Clustering Policy and Framework will be established to strengthen the links between SMEs, multinational corporations and the third-level sector in the regions.

Diversifying Our Rural Economies

Rural economies need to diversify to build resilience and to support sustained population growth. External factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit have highlighted the need for businesses to be adaptable and innovative.

The focus of the Government's enterprise and job creation policy is on supporting quality jobs that will be resilient into the future.

Supporting the creation of more and better jobs throughout the regions will allow people to have a choice of employment and improved career prospects. It will enable them to continue to live and work in their local area and encourage more people to relocate to, or return to, rural areas, supporting the regional growth strategy of the National Planning Framework.

Agriculture will remain a key contributor to rural economies and will be a significant source of income and of direct and indirect employment in rural areas. However, the sector will need to innovate and diversify in response to the transition to a climate neutral economy.

In addition, Agri-tourism provides an opportunity for rural areas to showcase their landscape, history and culture, and for rural businesses, farmers, producers and artisans to develop their products and services, and to connect further with the community and visitors.

As digital connectivity and opportunities for remote working continue to grow, there is potential for increased employment in rural areas in sectors such as Agri-tech, ICT, Financial Services, multi-media and the Creative Industries. As Ireland transitions to a climate neutral economy, rural areas are also well placed to see employment growth in areas such as renewable energy, the Bioeconomy and the Circular Economy.

Impact of Digital Connectivity

Improved digital connectivity through the rollout of the National Broadband Plan will open up unprecedented opportunities for the diversification of rural economies and enable businesses in rural areas to offer new services and reach new markets over the coming years. It will also open opportunities for new career paths for workers and can help retain high-skilled workers in rural communities, as well as attracting others to relocate to rural areas.

Remote working, whether from home or co-working facilities, also provides an opportunity for greater labour market participation by those who may not be in a position to attend fixed workplace locations.

18 The WDC has a statutory remit to support economic and social development in counties Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Roscommon, Mayo, Galway and Clare.

19 Regional Enterprise Development Fund 2017-2020 - <https://www.enterprise-ireland.com/en/funding-supports/REDF/>

20 Regional Technology Cluster Fund - <https://www.enterprise-ireland.com/en/funding-supports/Regional-Technology-Cluster-Fund/RTCF/>

An increasing number of digital and enterprise hubs which are being established in rural locations throughout the country will support remote working and co-working. It is estimated that up to 400 remote working hubs will form part of an integrated national network throughout the country, in both rural and urban areas.

The hub network will not just support remote working, but will create an entrepreneurial ecosystem to encourage business start-ups and foster engagement and collaboration with other entrepreneurs.

The transition to remote working in properly purposed facilities can benefit employers regardless of where they are located, by giving them access to a wider highly-educated labour pool, with the potential to increase productivity and competitiveness. This transition will also benefit individuals and communities across the country by promoting a better work/life balance and quality of life, reducing commute times and transport costs.

Remote working hubs can also support balanced regional development by attracting multi-national corporations to locate in rural and regional centres, particularly as “landing space” locations in Ireland.

The enterprise development agencies, IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland and Údarás na Gaeltachta, will promote awareness and use of the remote working hubs and enterprise centres available across the country to support remote working and encourage local enterprise start-ups.

SMEs and Social Enterprises

While large companies provide employment for many people throughout the regions, Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs) make up over 98% of our enterprise base. They are a critical part of rural economies, providing employment and adding to the vibrancy of rural towns. To support the future development of these businesses the Government will consider the recommendations set out in the National SME and Entrepreneurship Growth Plan²¹, and will take these forward as appropriate, to prioritise employment opportunities through higher productivity growth, increased activity in foreign markets, and more start-up and scale-up activity.

As provided in the Programme for Government, the Government is committed to expanding the role of the Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) and to considering direct grant support to businesses with more than 10 employees which find it difficult to obtain State supports otherwise.

Social enterprises are also an important part of local economies in rural areas, often filling gaps in markets that are not attractive to commercially-focused companies due to low population densities or economies of scale. In 2019, the Department of Rural and Community Development published Ireland's first *National Social Enterprise Policy* which recognises that social enterprises are a feature of the broader entrepreneurship ecosystem.

Outdoor activity tourism is a key growth sector worldwide. The development and promotion of this sector provides opportunities for growth in rural areas



21 National SME and Entrepreneurship Growth Plan (Government of Ireland) - <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/e19ff-report-of-the-sme-taskforce-national-sme-and-entrepreneurship-growth-plan/>

The Social Enterprise Policy will deliver a suite of new measures to create an environment where social enterprises can grow, increase their social, economic and environmental impact, and contribute to jobs and local economies.

Growing Our Tourism Offering

Tourism has been a hugely important economic sector for Ireland and supports many thousands of jobs in rural communities throughout the country. The sector generated over €9 billion for the economy in 2019, with overseas visitors accounting for over €6.9 billion of this total.

The importance of tourism to local and regional economies cannot be understated. The Tourism Recovery Taskforce, which was established in 2020, noted that tourism is the only employer of note outside of agriculture in many rural areas. The sector also employs a higher proportion of young people than many other sectors.

COVID-19 has triggered an unprecedented crisis in the Tourism sector. The Tourism Recovery Taskforce estimated that, of the 260,000 jobs in the sector prior to COVID, 180,000 were either lost or vulnerable.

However, tourism will be integral to our national economic recovery and in supporting job creation, particularly in rural areas. The Tourism Recovery Taskforce has developed a Recovery Plan containing over 30 recommendations for the Government's consideration across a number of areas designed to help the sector to survive and recover from the crisis out to 2023²².

While inward tourism will be encouraged as soon as circumstances permit, in the short-term, domestic marketing will be critical to sustaining tourism businesses and jobs. Successful initiatives such as the Wild Atlantic Way, Ireland's Ancient East, and Ireland's Hidden Heartlands, along with our UNESCO Geoparks and Geoheritage sites and National Parks, provide a blueprint for further development of tourism offerings in rural areas.

The potential for creating new tourism trails and initiatives, including on a cross-Border basis, will be explored in accordance with a commitment in the Programme for Government.

Údarás na Gaeltachta will continue to build on the branding of the Gaeltacht areas and develop a Tourism Strategy for the Gaeltacht regions.

There is a growing consciousness amongst tourists of the need for a more sustainable approach to tourism and this thinking will be central to policy measures adopted by Ireland in the medium term. Sustainable tourism recognises that tourism growth must be environmentally, commercially and socially sustainable, and include community and visitor awareness and involvement. The Government will publish an interim Action Plan for Sustainable Tourism in 2021 which will identify actions which can be taken in the short-term to promote sustainable tourism.

Outdoor Activity Tourism

Outdoor activity tourism is a key growth sector worldwide and Ireland is well placed to capitalise on this trend. The development and promotion of this sector provides opportunities for employment growth in rural areas in particular, through local businesses and entrepreneurs using the tourism assets in their area in a sustainable way to support recreational activities such as walking, cycling, canoeing and angling²³.

There has been significant Exchequer investment in recent years in supporting the development of outdoor recreation infrastructure, including through funding for walking trails, greenways, blueways and angling infrastructure. The Programme for Government commits to ongoing investment and promotion of these amenities for the benefit of local communities and tourists alike. These will be important attractions for domestic and overseas visitors in the post-COVID recovery. The Government has also committed to expanding the Walks Scheme, from 39 trails in 2018, to at least 80 supported trails. The potential for the development of further trails, including on a North-South basis, will also be explored.

Comhairle na Tuaithe advises the Minister for Rural and Community Development on the development of the outdoor recreation sector and has been mandated to develop a new National Outdoor Recreation Strategy. This Strategy, which will be delivered in 2021, will provide a framework for the development of the sector across Government, and will, amongst other issues, look at opportunities to develop rural enterprises based on outdoor recreation activity.

22 Tourism Recovery Plan 2020 - 2023 (Tourism Recovery Taskforce) - <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/be0cb-tourism-recovery-plan-2020-2023/>

23 Recreational angling generates €500 million for the Irish economy and supports over 11,000 jobs.



Growing creative industries will not only provide direct employment in the future economy, but also help to develop skills and attract talent

There is increasing interest in the night skies as a tourism activity. Ireland has two internationally recognised Dark Skies areas - Kerry International Dark Sky Reserve and Mayo International Dark Sky Park. Dark Sky places offer rural communities sustainable tourism opportunities during out-of-season periods.

A Dark Skies Strategy, which will be developed over the course of this policy, will place a particular focus on the opportunities for rural communities, including employment creation.

Culture, Heritage and History

Our culture is what identifies us as a people. It is closely aligned to our tourism offering and attracts overseas visitors to experience our unique cultural offering, as well as contributing to the wellbeing of local communities and supporting jobs in many rural areas.

*Culture 2025*²⁴ sets out an overarching vision for Ireland's cultural heritage. It recognises the value of our culture and creativity, creative practice and participation, and cultural heritage, including the Irish language.

The implementation of *Culture 2025* will help to support job creation in rural areas in the culture and creativity sectors over the lifetime of this policy.

Ireland's heritage affords a huge comparative advantage in terms of our tourism offering. Heritage lies at the heart of rural Ireland and is one of the keys to sustaining rural areas and regenerating them. Ireland's rural areas benefit from a relatively unspoilt environment containing some of the most spectacular landscapes and collections of flora and fauna in the world.

The implementation of a new national Heritage Plan, *Heritage Ireland 2030*, will recognise the role our heritage plays in our communities, economy and society and will set out strategic priorities for the heritage sector over the next decade.

Creative Industries

The Creative Industries support jobs in areas such as Culture and Heritage, Performing Arts, TV, video and films, software and computer games development, Visual Arts, design, crafts and architecture.

In Ireland, the sector has potential for strong growth, and for the generation of high quality employment in rural areas. Apart from providing local employment, the sector has potential to attract overseas talent and investment. Ireland's landscape has featured in many major film productions and significant investment has been made in production facilities in recent years.

²⁴ *Culture 2025* (Government of Ireland) -<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/62616d-culture-2025/>

Digitalisation presents significant opportunities for building resilience in the Creative Industries through innovation, including in respect of new forms of cultural experience, enhanced dissemination, and the creation of new business models and markets. Creative Ireland will prepare a Roadmap for the Creative Industries, which will concentrate primary efforts on design-based, digital creative and content-creation sectors.

Green Economy

The Green Economy presents significant potential for employment opportunities for rural areas as Ireland transitions to a low carbon, climate neutral future.

The sector is one of the most dynamic and rapidly growing markets in the world and encompasses a range of activities which have the common objective of providing goods and services in a sustainable way which reduces the impact on the environment.

For Ireland, it covers activities as diverse as renewable energy, energy efficiency, sustainable food production, the Bioeconomy, Circular Economy, “Green” financial services, sustainable tourism, and energy-efficient products and services. Research and Development also has a key role to play in developing the Green Economy²⁵.

Ireland has the opportunity to grow a sustainable renewable energy industry across on-shore and offshore wind, solar and biomass categories, and, in particular, to become an exporter of wind-generated energy. There are also opportunities for micro-generation for enhanced community and business engagement in realising renewable opportunities.

Renewable Energy

As an island nation, utilising natural resources like wind energy offers considerable opportunities across all regions of Ireland. Development of this sector is critical for Ireland to meet its renewable energy targets of delivering 70% of Ireland’s electricity by 2030 from renewable sources.

These objectives have the potential to result in considerable investment for the Irish economy and job creation across all regions, in areas such as planning, development, construction and long-term jobs in operations and maintenance.

Bioeconomy and Circular Economy

The Bioeconomy offers a range of potential opportunities for sustainable development and job creation in the agri-food, industrial and technological sectors in rural areas. These opportunities span the marine, agriculture, food, forestry, and bio-based processing sectors. There are also opportunities to develop products and services such as bio-based materials and chemicals, bioenergy and biofuels, and in the bio-based waste sector.

From an international perspective, Ireland enjoys some important comparative advantages in relation to the Bioeconomy, due to our significant agricultural footprint and one of the largest seabed territories in Europe with a reservoir of biomass. Ireland also has an established bio-pharmaceutical sector, with potential for increased alignment of the Biopharma sector and Bioeconomy sector.

The development of the Bioeconomy is supported nationally by the *BiOrbic* Bioeconomy SFI Research Centre in UCD and the Irish Bioeconomy Foundation based in Lisheen, Co. Tipperary.

Implementation of the National Policy Statement on the Bioeconomy²⁶ will assist in capitalising on new opportunities which the sector represents for rural regions. It will also be supported and promoted by the National Bioeconomy Forum which involves a broad range of stakeholders, including industry, community groups, NGOs and relevant State bodies.

The Circular Economy is also opening up new opportunities for enterprises across the economy and many social enterprises are involved in this emerging sector, including by providing business-to-business waste management services.

25 See: Delivering Our Green Potential (Government of Ireland) - <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/Publications/Publication-files/Delivering-Our-Green-Potential.pdf>

26 National Policy Statement on the Bioeconomy (Government of Ireland) - <https://assets.gov.ie/2244/241018115730-41d795e366bf4000a6bc0b69a136bda4.pdf>

Improved management of waste will have an impact on job creation, directly and indirectly. The recycling/reuse sector offers opportunities for sustainable jobs if increased reprocessing rates can be achieved. The implementation of the Government's *Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy*²⁷ will support the development of the sector and capitalise on opportunities available for rural areas.

The transition to a Circular Economy will also make an essential contribution to our national goal of developing a sustainable, climate neutral, resource efficient circular and competitive economy.

Investing in Education and Skills

The presence of a well-educated, skilled and adaptable workforce is one of Ireland's key strengths and will underpin the post-COVID recovery and opportunities which will arise in the future in emerging sectors.

The nature of work is changing at a more rapid pace than ever before. The World Economic Forum estimates that between 2018 and 2022, 42% of the core skills required for existing jobs will have changed.

Moreover, research by the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service has shown that two in every five jobs in Ireland have a significant risk of automation by the late 2030s²⁸. When examined sectorally, employment in agriculture, transport, construction and retail has been identified as facing the highest potential disruption due to automation over the next two decades.

A shift in the skills requirements of workers will also be driven by the transition to a carbon-neutral economy. Embracing the transition will open up new enterprise opportunities and support significant job creation in new and emerging sectors.

In particular, the development of Ireland's wind energy sector, forestry, Bioeconomy, water and carbon sequestration management have the potential to provide significant numbers of sustainable jobs, especially in rural Ireland.

On-going skills development will therefore be critical for both employers and workers in a rapidly changing economy and workplace.

In addition to specific technical skills and knowledge, soft skills and transversal skills (e.g. communication skills, organisational skills, self-motivation) are increasingly important for work in all sectors. Advanced cognitive skills such as problem-solving are particularly important to adapt to and respond to the changes that may occur due to technological advancement or external shocks.

Lifelong learning will be an important factor in ensuring workers are equipped to deal with the future changes in the work environment and new technologies.

We must also ensure that those who have most difficulty accessing the labour market have opportunities to obtain the skills or education they require to enable them to participate in the workforce. The capacity for delivery of intensive activation and training for people that are unemployed and outside the labour market will be boosted through the new Pathways to Work Strategy 2021-2025, supporting people to upskill, reskill and find employment.

Technological Universities

The development of Technological Universities has the potential to deliver greater opportunity to students in the regions they serve, and to act as regional knowledge hubs. Technological Universities act as an anchor for regional economic development, research and innovation. They will help to attract further direct investment, research and innovation and will have a major impact on regional job creation and retention through stronger links to industry.

€90 million is being provided over the period 2019-2022 under the Technological Universities Transformation Fund. This Fund will help the delivery of more Technological Universities and assist them to support national and regional economic and social development objectives.

There is potential for three further Technological Universities to be designated by 2023, to join TU Dublin and Munster TU which were established in January 2019 and January 2021 respectively.

27 *Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy* (Government of Ireland) - <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/4221c-waste-action-plan-for-a-circular-economy/>

28 *Automation and Occupations: A Comparative Analysis of the Impact of Automation on Occupations in Ireland* (IGEES) - <https://igees.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Automation-and-Occupations-Technical-Paper.pdf>

Further Education and Training

Within tertiary education, a large range of services and supports are available to communities and businesses across the country. These include a network of nine Regional Skills Fora to help foster stronger links between employers and the education and training sector. In addition, Education and Training Boards, the Springboard+ programme, and many of the networks operated by Skillnet Ireland provide critical services across all regions to address skills provision and enable upskilling and reskilling opportunities.

Apprenticeships have a strong regional footprint and will support the diversification of rural economies.

The Government will publish a new Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025 to ensure that we have a modern and responsive apprenticeship programme which meets the needs of a changing economy. The Plan aims to grow new apprenticeship registrations to 10,000 per annum by 2025.

The continued expansion of the apprenticeship system into new sectors of the economy such as agriculture and horticulture, together with the opportunities provided by on-line and blended learning, will bring real opportunities for learners and employers throughout the country, including in rural communities.

Actions to Achieve Our Ambition

To support employment and careers in rural areas, the Government will deliver the following policy measures:

Policy Measure	
21	Develop and implement a set of nine new Regional Enterprise Plans to support enterprise development and jobs growth in the regions.
22	Through the IDA: - Target 400 IDA investments up to 2024 for regional locations. - Deliver 19 Advanced Technology Buildings in regional locations in line with the National Planning Framework.
23	Deliver ambitious job creation and enterprise development targets for the indigenous sector in the strategies of Enterprise Ireland, Údarás na Gaeltachta and the Local Enterprise Offices to embed jobs growth more deeply within the regions.
24	Assist rural economies to diversify into new sectors and markets by taking advantage of high speed broadband and new technologies.
25	Promote awareness and the use of remote working hubs and enterprise centres across the country to support remote working and encourage local enterprise start-ups.
26	Maximise our resources and strengths in the Green Economy to support employment opportunities for rural communities in areas such as renewable energy, sustainable tourism, energy retrofitting, the Bioeconomy and the Circular Economy.
27	Roll out the development of the Technological University model to help support regional growth through the education and training sector and to act as an anchor for regional economic development, research and investment.
28	Develop an overarching Clustering Policy and Framework to advance strong and effective clustering and links between SMEs, multinational corporations and the third-level sector.
29	Examine, and take forward as appropriate, the recommendations of the SME Growth Plan to map out an ambitious long-term strategic blueprint for all SMEs, including rurally based businesses.
30	Deliver a suite of new measures to support the development of Social Enterprises in rural areas to increase their social, economic and environmental impact and contribute to job creation locally.
31	Expand the use of socially responsible public procurement contracts, where feasible, which will incentivise the engagement of social enterprises and Circular Economy organisations.
32	Develop the Wild Atlantic Way, Ireland's Hidden Heartlands, and Ireland's Ancient East to increase visitor numbers, support local economies in towns and villages, and bring further sustainable benefits to rural communities.

33	Strengthen the identity and branding of the Gaeltacht regions and develop a Tourism Strategy for the Gaeltacht areas.
34	Publish an interim Action Plan for Sustainable Tourism which will identify actions which can be taken in the short-term to promote sustainable tourism.
35	Publish and implement a new National Outdoor Recreation Strategy, through Comhairle na Tuaithe, to support access to, and responsible use of, outdoor recreational and leisure facilities for people of all ages, and increase employment opportunities in rural areas.
36	Invest in greenways, blueways, walking trails and other outdoor recreation infrastructure to support the growth in outdoor recreational tourism.
37	Develop a pilot bicycle up-cycling initiative to support employment creation, to harness the potential of investment in greenways and to support the development of the social enterprise business model.
38	Expand the Walks Scheme to achieve a target of at least 80 trails, doubling the number from 2018.
39	Explore the potential for the development of further tourist trails, including new flagship cross-border trails and initiatives.
40	Develop a Dark Skies Strategy for Ireland, with a focus on the opportunities it can create for rural communities and employment creation.
41	Implement a new National Heritage Plan, <i>Heritage Ireland 2030</i> , to identify priority actions in the heritage area.
42	Identify opportunities for the Creative Industries in Ireland and maximise their potential to support employment in rural areas through the development of a roadmap to support the sector.
43	Publish a new Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025 to ensure that we have a modern and responsive apprenticeship programme with a strong regional footprint which meets the needs of a changing economy.
44	Through a new Pathways to Work Strategy 2021-2025, support people to upskill, reskill and find employment through increased capacity and intensive activation and training.
45	Through the National Disability Inclusion Strategy, develop initiatives to improve employment opportunities for people with disabilities living in rural areas, including through remote working options.

5

Chapter 5 Revitalising Rural Towns and Villages

Our Ambition

Our ambition is to support the regeneration, repopulation and development of rural towns and villages to contribute to local and national economic recovery, and to enable people to live and work in a high quality environment

We will do this by investing in projects which support economic activity and increased footfall in our towns and villages, improve the public realm, encourage town centre living, and provide the necessary services infrastructure to support town and village regeneration and sustainable growth.

Context

Our towns and villages are at the heart of social and economic activity in rural Ireland. They are places where people not only work, but also live, socialise, raise their families and engage in community activities. Our towns and villages vary in terms of their size, character and the nature of their commercial activities. But regardless of their size, they are the lifeblood of local economies and support businesses and employment with an impact that extends into their surrounding areas, settlements and communities. For visitors, they are the gateways to our heritage, culture and natural environment.

Vibrant towns are important catalysts for balanced regional development, which is key to Ireland's overall wellbeing. All parts of Ireland must thrive if we are to prosper as a country.

Since 2016, significant government investment has been made through initiatives such as the Town and Village Renewal Scheme, the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund, the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund, and the CLÁR programme to support the regeneration of rural towns and villages. This investment acknowledges their importance to commercial and community activity in rural areas, but also recognises the challenges they face.

These challenges include the effect of vacant properties on the vitality and attractiveness of towns, the impact of online shopping on town-centre retail, and the closure of services such as banks and post offices where providers have found it is no longer viable to maintain these services in certain areas. The impact of COVID-19 has created further challenges for commercial activity.

Notwithstanding these challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance and value of local towns and villages and their businesses to the community. As a result of travel restrictions and home working, many people have rediscovered the value and convenience of shopping locally. Investment in the revitalisation of our rural towns and villages as part of the post-COVID economic recovery is therefore a priority for the Government. This investment will target measures to support the viability of local businesses and local jobs, increase economic activity and footfall, and encourage more people to return confidently to town centres to shop and socialise.

The Government will also bring a more holistic and structured approach to the sustainable long-term revitalisation of our rural towns and villages, including by encouraging increased town centre living. Ireland's population will increase by one million people by 2040 and our rural towns and villages will have a part to play in the regional distribution of this growth.

To make our rural towns and villages better places in which to meet, live and work, the Government is committed to the development of a Town Centre First approach which seeks to align policies and to target available resources to deliver the best outcomes for town centres. This approach will be supported by a range of strategic investment programmes that meet the needs of differentiated rural areas, including the €1 billion Rural Regeneration and Development Fund and an expanded Town and Village Renewal Scheme to bring vacant and derelict buildings back into use and promote residential occupancy.

Town Centre First Principle

A Town Centre First approach encourages Government Departments, Local Authorities, businesses and communities to put town centres at the heart of decision-making where appropriate. Locating services such as schools or medical services, for example, in town centres rather than on the outskirts can help to revitalise the town by increasing footfall and creating a sense of place.

The implementation of a strategic approach to town centre regeneration through utilising existing buildings and unused lands for new development, addressing vibrancy and future function while promoting residential occupancy, are all central elements to securing a sustainable future for rural towns and villages.

An Inter-Departmental Group established to progress the commitment to a Town Centre First approach will bring forward proposals to the Government for consideration in 2021. The Inter-Departmental Group is supported by an Advisory Group which includes key stakeholders and experts who offer insights and views on issues affecting town centres.

The Government has also established a Taskforce to consider innovative approaches to supporting and developing a night time culture and economy when circumstances permit in the post-COVID recovery. The Taskforce will make recommendations to the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media for the development of a Policy on the Night Time Economy.

Investment in enterprise space, co-working hubs and remote working facilities in rural towns will also help revitalise town centres and boost retail and commercial activity through increased footfall.

Locating State Employment in Rural Towns

Meeting the *National Planning Framework* objective of distributing our growing population across the regions will require the provision of more jobs and more public services in our regional towns and cities to support population growth.

The Programme for Government makes a commitment to prioritise the siting of new State agencies, Departments and enterprises in towns and cities outside Dublin, where possible.

The Department of Rural and Community Development will also work with the Office of Public Works to identify potential State owned properties in rural towns and villages which can be used for community purposes.

Supporting Town Centre Living

The provision of additional residential accommodation in rural towns and villages will be required to support Ireland's projected population increase of one million people by 2040. The *National Planning Framework* projects that up to half of this population growth will take place outside the main cities and their metropolitan areas. More people and families living in and using our towns and villages on a daily basis will help to fully revitalise them.

The Programme for Government commits to implementing a strategic approach to town centre regeneration and living, through a mix of new housing developments and by utilising existing buildings and unused lands for development. The scale, design and layout of housing in rural towns should be proportionate and tailored to ensure that development responds to the character, scale and density of a particular town. It is also important that a mixed supply of private and social housing is provided.

The Programme for Government commits to providing seed capital to Local Authorities to provide serviced sites to attract people to build their own homes and live in small towns and villages. Town centre living can also be supported by repurposing suitable vacant properties and encouraging people to live in them.

In 2019, the Department of Rural and Community Development supported a Town Centre Living pilot initiative in six rural towns²⁹ to explore how to encourage increased residential occupancy in rural towns and villages.

An independent report on the pilot initiative³⁰ highlighted the complexity of the issues that influence town centre living. These include the cost of refurbishing vacant buildings, the lack of a return on investment in terms of final property value, difficulty in identifying property owners, and the need for provision of amenities and services in town centres.

As part of its work, the Inter-Departmental Group established to progress the Town Centre First approach will examine the suggested actions in the report on the pilot, including the scope to introduce new supports and incentives for the refurbishment of vacant properties to increase town centre living. The Group will bring proposals to Government for consideration in 2021.

The Town and Village Renewal Scheme and the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund will also continue to provide funding to Local Authorities or other State-funded bodies to lead strategic projects that can have a transformative effect on towns and support increased town centre living.

Role of Local Authorities

Local Authorities play a leading role in the regeneration and revitalisation of our rural towns and villages. Working directly with communities and local businesses, they are central to creating the conditions to improve the attractiveness of town and village centres, stimulate business and support residential development.

29 The six pilot towns are: Boyle, Co Roscommon; Callan, Co Kilkenny; Ballinrobe, Co Mayo; Banagher, Co Offaly; Castleblayney, Co Monaghan; Cappoquin, Co Waterford.

30 The Town Centre Living Initiative - <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/86215-the-town-centre-living-initiative/>

They do this through a range of measures including improvements in the public realm, the provision of civic amenities, the acquisition of strategic sites for development, including through the judicious use of Compulsory Purchase Orders, and the provision of a variety of services.

The Government will work with Local Authorities to revitalise town centres through funding programmes and by reviewing other options to bring vacant properties back into use for commercial or residential purposes.

Providing an Enabling Infrastructure

Enabling the population of rural towns and villages to grow, as well as supporting new businesses and services, will require appropriate investment in infrastructure to support this growth. Deficits in water and wastewater infrastructure present a particular challenge to the development of many rural towns and villages. This issue needs to be addressed if rural towns and villages are to be able to support increased town living.

The Programme for Government includes a commitment to 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 that would otherwise not be provided for in Irish Water's capital investment plan.

The Programme for Government also commits to supporting the provision of water services in rural areas that are not served by Irish Water, and continuing to invest in a multi-annual capital funding programme to improve the quality of drinking water in group water schemes, while protecting water quality.

Other initiatives covered in this policy, such as the rollout of broadband and improved rural transport services, will also provide improved supports for the development of our rural towns and villages.

Developing Smart Towns and Villages

Smart Towns and Villages is a concept based on people in rural areas building on, and enhancing, their existing strengths and assets to find practical solutions to deal with both the challenges and opportunities facing their communities. It is complementary to the Town Centre First principle.

While technology can be an element of Smart Towns and Villages, the concept involves a town or village taking stock of all local assets - digital and non-digital - and using them to capitalise on emerging opportunities. The approach involves linking in with the surrounding countryside, neighbouring towns and villages and larger urban areas.

The Smart Towns and Villages concept can be used to enable rural communities to explore how local services, such as health, education, social services, renewable energy, transport and retail, can be enhanced and sustained through community-led actions and projects. The approach can also be used to develop responses to issues such as the transition to a climate neutral society, retaining and attracting people to live and work in the local area and creating disability-friendly communities and environments.

The LEADER Programme will be a key policy vehicle to support the development of Smart Towns and Villages in Ireland, particularly through its community-led approach to rural development. The social enterprise model also has the potential to play a strong role in supporting Smart Towns and Villages.

Actions to Achieve Our Ambition

To support the revitalisation of our rural towns and villages, the Government will:

Policy Measure	
46	Deliver a range of strategic investment programmes over the lifetime of this policy that meet the needs of differentiated rural areas, including through the €1 billion Rural Regeneration and Development Fund, and an enhanced Town and Village Renewal Scheme.
47	Prioritise rural development programmes to focus on supporting rural towns and villages to recover from the impact of COVID-19 in the short-to-medium term.
48	Provide funding to support the upgrade and enhancement of shopfronts and street facades in towns and villages.
49	Fund Local Authorities to adapt and improve outdoor public spaces for cultural events and activities all-year round, and support the recovery of the creative, cultural, entertainment and events sector.
50	Deliver major regeneration projects in towns with a population of over 10,000 which play an important role as key hubs in rural areas, through the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund.
51	Develop and deliver a collaborative Town Centre First approach to put the development and regeneration of rural town centres at the heart of decision-making.
52	As part of the Town Centre First approach, provide and resource dedicated Local Authority staff to support town centre renewal.
53	Enhance the powers of Local Authorities to offer commercial rates-based incentives for businesses, targeting the re-use of vacant commercial units.
54	Examine the feasibility of introducing 'meanwhile use' legislation so that empty buildings and shopfronts on main streets can be brought back into compatible use on a short-term, temporary basis as pop up shops, street markets, exhibitions spaces and other purposes in accordance with Town Centre First policies.
55	As part of the Town Centre First approach, provide seed capital to Local Authorities to provide serviced sites at cost in towns and villages, to allow individuals and families to build homes in rural centres.
56	Engage the Approved Housing Bodies with responsibility for housing for older people to develop accommodation in town centres more suited for those with reduced mobility.
57	Expand the Town and Village Renewal Scheme as an enabler to bring vacant and derelict buildings and sites back into use as multi-purpose spaces and for residential occupancy.
58	Encourage greater use of the Buy and Renew Scheme and the Repair and Lease Scheme to combat vacancy and dereliction.

59	As part of Budget 2022, examine the scope to introduce new supports and incentives for the refurbishment of vacant properties to increase town centre living based on the report of the pilot Town Centre Living initiative.
60	Review and extend the regulations which exempt certain vacant commercial premises, such as “over the shop” type spaces, from requiring planning permission for change of use for residential purposes in accordance with housing activation and Town Centre First policies.
61	Prioritise the siting of new State agencies, Departments and enterprises in towns and cities outside of Dublin, to support the Government’s regional development objectives.
62	Identify potential State owned properties in rural towns and villages which can be used for community purposes.
63	Examine the establishment of a Community Ownership Fund to help community groups and social enterprises buy or take over local community assets at risk of being lost, to run as community-owned businesses.
64	Invest in infrastructure, including water and wastewater infrastructure, to support the development of rural towns and villages.
65	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 that would otherwise not be provided for in Irish Water’s capital investment plan.
66	Review the situation in relation to water services for towns and villages that are not currently on the Irish Water network.
67	Bring forward proposals for the development of a Policy on the Night Time Economy which will support the revitalisation of our rural towns, as well as our larger urban centres and cities, in the post-COVID recovery.
68	Support the development of Smart Towns and Villages which use innovative solutions to improve resilience, build on local strengths and maximise opportunities to create desirable places for people to live and work.

6

Chapter 6 Enhancing Participation, Leadership and Resilience in Rural Communities

Our Ambition

Our ambition is to create more sustainable and cohesive rural communities by empowering people, developing community leaders, and creating the conditions for all people to participate in, shape, and experience, a shared national recovery.

To achieve this objective, we will invest in our communities to enhance their social, cultural, economic and environmental wellbeing and quality of life.

Context

Communities are the lifeblood of rural Ireland and they have played a key role in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Community Call, launched in April 2020, was an unprecedented mobilisation of national government, local government and the community and voluntary sector to support vulnerable people in our communities during the COVID-19 crisis. The Community Call ushered in a new way of working, a shared purpose, and significant levels of collaboration between local and national government, community and local development organisations, and the voluntary sector.

This community spirit, which is synonymous with rural Ireland, will be more important than ever as Ireland tackles the social and economic challenges ahead.

Challenges identified as being of concern to communities in the development of this policy included: not feeling sufficiently supported, an increasing burden on volunteers, as well as worries about the future in terms of generational renewal in rural areas. Financing, governance and compliance, and the cost of insurance, have also become significant operational challenges for community-based organisations.

Sustainable solutions to these challenges will require the collective efforts of national and local government, communities, and civil society. The Government will provide support for community capacity-building, leadership and resilience initiatives and will place a continued focus on enabling community organisations to deal with the challenges they face more effectively.

The Government is also fully committed to supporting communities in shaping, and being part of, a sustainable, inclusive and balanced post-COVID recovery. This support will maximise the impact and contribution which communities can make to our national wellbeing.

Empowering Rural Communities

The Government's interaction with, and support for, rural communities will be guided by *Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities*, a five-year strategy to support the community and voluntary sector in Ireland³¹ which was developed in partnership with community stakeholders and published in 2019.

A central objective of the strategy is to bring communities together, empower them to identify their own needs and priorities, and involve them in designing responses to those needs and priorities.

Rural Ideas Consultation Fora

In developing this policy, the Department of Rural and Community Development consulted extensively with people across rural Ireland to understand the issues that matter most to them.

However, consultation needs to be an ongoing process, because people's circumstances and needs evolve and change over time. The Government is committed to ensuring that it is responsive to those changing needs and will initiate a regular series of Rural Ideas Fora to enable people to contribute on an ongoing basis to issues which impact on them and their communities, and to encourage their ongoing contribution to national rural policy innovation.

Participative Structures for Young People

Consultations carried out in the development of this policy also pointed to the particular importance of young people for the future sustainability and growth of rural communities in the longer term. Their opportunity to make a meaningful contribution to their local community could be a decisive factor in determining whether or not they continue to live in a rural area. Through this policy, the delivery of mentoring and training for community leaders, with a focus on 18-25 year olds, will assist in building future community leadership capacity.³²

Building on existing structures for the engagement of young people such as Comhairle na nÓg and Hub na nÓg, and the Children and Young People's Service Committees, the Government will establish

31 *Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities* (Government of Ireland) - <https://assets.gov.ie/26890/ff380490589a4f9ab9cd9bb3f53b5493.pdf>

32 This builds on the approach outlined under the Government's National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making - <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/9128db-national-strategy-on-children-and-young-peoples-participation-in-dec/>

an annual Rural Youth Assembly to obtain the views of young people in rural Ireland on issues impacting on them and their communities on an ongoing basis. These views will help to ensure *Our Rural Future* is a living instrument, adapting to changing circumstances and needs.

A new Tidy Towns Special Award will also be introduced for the involvement of young people (aged 16-25 years) in Tidy Towns projects.

More generally there is also a need to understand more deeply the experiences and outcomes for children and young people in rural Ireland. This will be done through research, building on the Growing up In Ireland database and other relevant datasets.

Social Cohesion and Inclusion

The population of rural Ireland is increasingly diverse. Its population encompasses diversity of age, family type, nationality, ethnicity, religious belief, ability, gender identity and sexual orientation. It is important to capitalise on this diversity and to ensure that our society is cohesive, engaged, and that the wellbeing of everyone is catered for in an inclusive and complementary way.

*The Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020 – 2025*³³ sets out goals to measure progress across many aspects of social inclusion, including housing, healthcare, childcare and social integration, with the overall objective of achieving a better quality of life for all. A key target is to reduce consistent poverty to 2% or less by 2025, through various appropriate interventions.

With a budget in the order of €39 million per annum, the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP)³⁴, funded through the Department of Rural and Community Development, is one of the Government's most significant programmes aimed at reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion and equality. The programme supports and develops the capacity of local community groups to identify and address social exclusion and equality issues.

It also supports disadvantaged individuals to improve the quality of their lives through the provision of lifelong learning and labour market supports.

The 2018-2022 SICAP programme will continue to be delivered over the initial years of this policy, with a successor programme to commence in 2023.

Other social cohesion programmes and initiatives tailored for specific cohorts include, for example, the *National Disability Inclusion Strategy*³⁵ which, inter alia, will improve accessibility for people with disabilities living in rural areas.

The *National Positive Ageing Strategy*³⁶ promotes active citizenship and the health, wellbeing and quality of life of people as they age. Inter-generational programmes have proven effective in combating negative stereotypes of ageing and promoting age-friendly communities.

The Department of Health is working to provide targeted interventions that address health inequalities in areas of deprivation in partnership with all Government Departments through the Healthy Communities Programme. The Healthy Ireland National Communications Campaign, which has been ongoing since 2018, also plays an important role in enabling all communities to strengthen their resilience by improving their physical and mental wellbeing.

The Government is committed to working with local communities to help welcome and integrate newcomers into rural towns and villages. SICAP has enabled newcomers to enhance their communities by applying their skills and contributing new ideas to community development. Other initiatives such as the Communities Integration Fund³⁷ and Community Sponsorship Ireland³⁸, funded through the Department of Justice, also support community-based integration.

As well as being important from the perspective of wellbeing, sport can be a powerful tool for building networking and understanding between people and tackling social exclusion.

33 Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025: Ambition, Goals, Commitments (Government of Ireland) - <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/46557/bf7011904ede4562b925f98b15c4f1b5.pdf#page=1>

34 Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) - <https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/6609f4-social-inclusion-and-community-activation-programme-sicap/>

35 *National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017 – 2021* - (Government of Ireland) - <https://assets.gov.ie/18901/26182a87ecf84ddd8d60c215c0ce2520.pdf>

36 The *National Positive Ageing Strategy* (Government of Ireland) - <https://assets.gov.ie/11714/d859109de8984a50b9f2ae2c1f325456.pdf>

37 Communities Integration Fund - <http://www.integration.ie/en/iseq/pages/wp18000024>

38 Community Sponsorship Ireland - http://www.integration.ie/en/iseq/pages/community_sponsorship_ireland

At the heart of the ambition of the *National Sports Policy 2018-2027*³⁹ is the desire for more people to regularly and meaningfully take part in sport. The policy recognises the importance of Local Sports Plans co-produced with community stakeholders in each Local Authority area.

As part of the *Creative Ireland programme*⁴⁰ Local Authority Culture and Creative Strategies will empower communities to come together through heritage, arts and cultural activities and provide an avenue to address issues such as isolation, marginalisation or mental health concerns.

Social innovation also has a role to play in supporting inclusion and cohesion by developing new solutions to unmet social needs. Social innovation can cover a range of social and societal challenges and is often focused on supporting the needs of vulnerable groups in society. The Government funds a number of social innovation programmes and is committed to the further development of social innovation as a means of addressing pressing social challenges.

Community Infrastructure

Places and spaces are important for social interactions between all members of the community. Community centres, libraries, and sports clubs are just some examples of multi-purpose community spaces located throughout rural Ireland which serve as hubs for local communities to meet up and engage in shared activities. The value of spaces such as these will be even more important in the context of our response to COVID-19, as they can enable people to meet safely while observing public health protocols.

Libraries provide an inclusive space for personal development, lifelong learning, health and wellbeing information, and social interaction, including for new communities. The *Our Public Libraries strategy*⁴¹ also envisages targeted outreach initiatives for individuals and groups in marginalised and disadvantaged communities.

Community Participation

One of the most important ways in which social cohesion and community empowerment is built is by encouraging participation at all levels. Better decisions are made if the people affected are involved in the process and feel a sense of ownership over outcomes affecting their lives.

Local structures play an important role in developing understanding and positive relationships between different cohorts in local communities.

Public Participation Networks (PPNs) and the Local Community Development Committees are innovative statutory structures that have been put in place in recent years to ensure meaningful community participation in decision making at a local level. PPNs also act as information hubs, keeping the community informed of relevant local issues, news, events, resources and supports. The PPNs have great potential to be further utilised and developed, and their role will be enhanced over the lifetime of this policy.

Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) are independent Local Authority committees with a policy remit for planning and oversight of local development and community development programmes. Their statutory functions are designed to bring a more joined-up approach to local development and community development interventions. The Government has committed to building on this role and strengthening the strategic and operational capacity of the LCDCs in the longer-term.

Numerous Government strategies recognise the importance of participation in decision-making structures at local level so that the interests of all people including migrants, women and girls, Traveller and Roma communities, people with disabilities, LGBTI+ people, and others can be properly considered in the communities in which they live.

These strategies commit Local Authorities and local decision-making structures to adopt inclusive approaches to their work in line with Ireland's broader commitments to human rights and non-discrimination. The Local Authorities also deliver significant funding and supports to local communities, enabling vital services to be planned and delivered for rural populations.

39 National Sports Policy 2018 - 2027 (Government of Ireland) - <https://assets.gov.ie/15979/04e0f52cee5f47ee9c01003cf559e98d.pdf>

40 Creative Ireland - <https://www.creativeireland.gov.ie/>

41 Our Public Libraries 2022 (Government of Ireland) - <https://assets.gov.ie/4278/111218115931-79413828933647aaa21ce9157ee170ba.pdf>

Supporting Volunteering

An estimated 29,000 community-based organisations work in communities throughout the country and many play a vitally important role in rural areas. More than a million people actively volunteer annually in these organisations in Ireland, contributing an estimated economic value of more than €2 billion per annum to society. Volunteering benefits large sectors of society in the areas of arts, heritage, education, health, sport and supporting the socially marginalised. Recognising the importance of ensuring a supportive environment for volunteers for sustainable community development, a new *National Volunteering Strategy 2021-2025*⁴² was published in 2020.

As part of the National Volunteering Strategy, and building on the significant volunteer response that was a key part of the Community Call, the Government has committed to establishing a Volunteering Reserve in each Local Authority area. This trained, diverse and flexible volunteer reserve will be an invaluable resource for communities in responding to future local, regional and national emergencies as well as assisting in the delivery of community events.

LEADER Programme

The LEADER programme will play a key role over the lifetime of this policy in enhancing the participation of local communities in shaping their future and building leadership and resilience. LEADER is a multi-annual programme for rural development co-funded by the EU through the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

The programme is based on a community-led approach to rural development and plays an important role in supporting communities and enterprises in progressing job creation, social inclusion and environmental projects at local level.

The EU framework for the next CAP will commence in 2023 and a new LEADER programme for the period 2023-2027 will be developed in tandem with the new CAP.

In the interim, a €70 million Transitional LEADER Programme will run for the period 2021 and 2022. This programme will place a particular emphasis on building capacity within communities which have not received LEADER funding to date, and on supporting rural communities to recover from the impact of COVID-19.

The programme will also support job creation, social inclusion, and projects which address the climate agenda, digital transformation, and encourage rural communities to build on their existing strengths and assets.

A number of improvements have been made to the Transitional LEADER Programme 2021-2022 in line with Programme for Government commitments, including an increase in the rate of aid available to enterprise projects.

Across the wider range of funding programmes which are available to communities, additional supports will be provided to assist community and voluntary groups to develop projects and access funds, including by streamlining grant application processes.

The Government will also develop a single portal to make it easier for rural and community organisations to find information on the range of programmes and schemes available across Government to support rural and community development.

⁴² National Volunteering Strategy 2021 - 2025 (Government of Ireland) - <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/3cba6-national-volunteering-strategy/>

Actions to Achieve Our Ambition

To support communities in rural areas, the Government will:

Policy Measure	
69	Refine and build on a range of programmes to support communities, voluntary organisations, social enterprises and charities to build their resilience and enhance their impact in the aftermath of COVID-19.
70	Implement the National Volunteering Strategy 2021-2025, which will support both volunteers and community-based organisations in rural areas and nationwide.
71	Establish a permanent Volunteer Reserve in local areas which can be called on by community and voluntary organisations and Local Authorities as required.
72	Hold a regular series of Rural Ideas Fora to engage with rural dwellers to enable them to input on an ongoing basis to issues which impact on them and their communities, and to encourage their ongoing contribution to national rural policy innovation.
73	Establish an annual Rural Youth Assembly to allow young people living in rural Ireland to make an on-going contribution to identifying and influencing policy issues that impact on them and their future.
74	Build capacity for community development through provision of mentoring/training for community development leaders, with a particular focus on young people between the ages of 18 and 25.
75	Provide additional supports to assist community and voluntary groups to develop projects and access available funds – including by streamlining of grant applications.
76	Develop a single information portal to provide a funding roadmap on the range of programmes and schemes available across Government for rural and community development.
77	Implement a €70 million Transitional LEADER Programme for community-led rural development for the period 2021-2022, and develop and deliver a new LEADER programme to commence in 2023, in line with the next EU funding framework.
78	Deliver the Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme (SICAP) to the end of 2022, and develop a new SICAP programme to commence in 2023, following a review and consultation with stakeholders.
79	Increase the number of places on the Rural Social Scheme, TÚS and Community Employment to support rural communities.
80	Support the development of social innovation as a means of addressing pressing social challenges.
81	Provide investment for multi-purpose spaces in the community (e.g. community centres, libraries, and sports clubs) for a variety of activities, including leisure, community, cultural and services provision.
82	Further enhance the Public Participation Network and Local Community Development Committee structures to ensure that local communities are fully involved in, and contribute to, decisions affecting their local areas.
83	Work in consultation with local community and voluntary groups and with local decision-making structures to help welcome and integrate newcomers to rural towns and villages and to support cohesion more broadly.
84	Implement Culture and Creative Strategies in each Local Authority area, including “Culture Days”, to showcase local cultural heritage.
85	Empower local communities and enhance community health and wellbeing by supporting heritage, arts, cultural activities and other activities to tackle social issues such as cohesion, rural isolation and mental health.
86	Introduce a Tidy Towns Special Award for the involvement of young people (aged 16-25 years) in Tidy Towns projects.
87	Commission research on the experiences and outcomes of children and young people in rural Ireland, building on the Growing Up In Ireland and other relevant datasets.
88	Undertake research to inform the particular needs of women, girls, LGBTI+, Travellers, Roma, migrants and those of migrant origin living in rural areas.

7



Chapter 7 Enhancing Public Services in Rural Ireland

Our Ambition

Our ambition is to ensure that people living in rural areas have access to good quality public services that enable them to continue to live sustainably in rural communities and help them to maintain a good quality of life.

We will achieve this by investing in improvements in public transport services, health care within communities, housing provision, early learning and childcare facilities, and community safety.

Context

Access to good quality public and other services is essential to encourage people to continue to live in rural areas, towns and villages, and to support the sustainability of rural communities.

Key services which people rely on include housing, healthcare, education, childcare, public transport, digital connectivity, and water and wastewater infrastructure. Delivering these services requires a whole-of-Government approach.

A 2019 report by the CSO on *Measuring Distances to Everyday Services in Ireland*⁴³ highlighted that the average distance to most everyday services was at least three times longer for rural dwellers than for urban dwellers. In some rural areas, substantially higher distances were recorded of around seven times further to services such as pharmacies, GPs and supermarkets.

While it is not feasible to provide a full range of high-end services in every rural town, the Programme for Government underscores the Government's commitment to improving access to services in rural areas. These include improvements to rural transport services, community health care, water and wastewater services, and the rollout of high speed broadband.

The provision of fast, reliable digital connectivity through the National Broadband Plan will be transformative and will enable people living in rural areas to access on-line services, including in relation to educational resources, training and health care. It will help them to overcome the challenge of physical distance from main service centres.

Housing

The *National Planning Framework* (NPF) envisages an increase of 1 million in Ireland's population by 2040. 50% of this increase is predicted to take place outside of our main cities. If this is achieved, it will help to support balanced regional development.

The objectives set out in this policy to increase employment opportunities in the regions, to diversify rural economies, and to build an infrastructure to support remote working will also support balanced regional development and underpin the sustainability of rural areas.

Catering for this population growth in rural areas will require the development of housing in our towns, villages and peri-urban areas.

The NPF includes policies on strengthening Ireland's rural fabric and supporting the communities who live there, as well as planning for the future growth and development of rural areas through:

- protecting areas that are under strong urban influence from unsustainable over-development, and
- encouraging population to be sustained in more structurally weak areas that have experienced low growth or decline in recent decades, while sustaining vibrant rural communities.

The NPF also recognises the role that our towns and villages play in the future of sustaining rural areas and has placed a major new policy emphasis on renewing and developing existing settlements, rather than continual expansion and sprawl of cities and towns at the expense of town centres and smaller villages.

Increasing the residential population of towns and villages is central to restoring their vibrancy and in enabling these settlements to fulfil their role and function as economic and social hubs for their surrounding rural areas.

The NPF target is for at least 40% of all new housing to be delivered within the existing built-up areas of cities, towns and villages on infill and/or brownfield sites. The rest of our homes will continue to be delivered at the edge of settlements and in rural areas.

The Rural Housing Guidelines will be updated for planning authorities to address rural housing in a broader rural development and settlement context.

Education

Rural schools make up the majority of our primary school sector: nearly 2,000 out of just over 3,200 of the State's primary schools are in rural areas. The majority of these rural schools are classed as small, employing four teachers or less. They are all valued in their communities in that they provide a vital link to local heritage and history, help sustain rural populations and often act as a link for sports and social activity.

43 Measuring Distance to Everyday Services in Ireland, 2019 (CSO) - <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-mdsi/measuringdistancetoeverdayservicesinireland/>

In this context, schools play a wider role in their communities and many schools make their facilities available outside of school hours for a variety of different uses and users⁴⁴.

Given the importance of small schools to their communities, the Government is committed to avoiding the closure of small schools, particularly if it is against the wishes of parents, and will facilitate amalgamations where possible. In cases where a school building becomes available due to replacement, amalgamation or closure, opportunities may exist to repurpose the school for community benefit.

Childcare

The provision of childcare facilities in rural areas is often challenging, sometimes due to poor availability in low density population areas. Some areas have explored the potential for developing community-based childcare options under a social enterprise business model whereby profits are reinvested into continuously improving the service.

An Affordable Childcare Scheme was initiated in 2019 to offer a single, easy-to-access system of financial subsidies towards childcare for families in Ireland, enhancing affordability and accessibility, and providing a platform for investment in quality childcare to benefit current and future generations.

There is still a need for the State to gain a better understanding of the needs of parents associated with the early learning care and school-age childcare in rural communities. Research in this area will be conducted to allow the Government to develop recommendations for future action.

Health

Good health is an important factor in achieving physical, mental and social wellbeing. A healthy community and workforce benefits society as a whole, through greater participation in the labour force and community life.

The main delivery point for community health and personal social services is through the network of 32 Health Service Executive (HSE) Local Health Offices and local health centres throughout Ireland.

Over the lifetime of this policy, the HSE will establish 96 new Community Healthcare Networks. These Networks will support people to live more independently in their community by coordinating and integrating services.

Additionally, the six new Regional Health Areas will be responsible for the planning and delivery of integrated health and social care services throughout Ireland. These new Regional Health Areas will devolve authority from the HSE to the local areas, giving communities a greater role in the delivery of health care.

Since 2017, the Healthy Ireland Fund has been supporting the development of a network of Healthy Cities and Counties in partnership with Local Authorities to support local implementation of national health policies and to improve health and wellbeing in the community. The Healthy Ireland programme will continue to be implemented throughout the lifetime of this policy to support the improved health and wellbeing of rural communities. New initiatives will be explored with a focus on prevention and keeping people healthy for longer.

Primary Care

Good access to high-quality primary care services is essential to rural Ireland to provide health and social care services to the local community and reduce the reliance on acute hospital services. The Public Health Nursing Service is integral to this, with citizens benefiting across the lifespan of care in terms of prevention, early intervention and long-term health and well-being. The development of primary care services, inclusive of GPs, health and social care professionals and Public Health Nursing, is part of the design to improve accessibility, both generally and specifically, to specialist services in local communities to meet the needs of the population in rural Ireland.

The role of GPs in delivering healthcare is significant for rural populations, along with access to emergency medical treatment. GPs are typically deeply embedded in the communities they serve. In the context of the Sláintecare vision for the delivery of the right care, in the right place, at the right time, GP services will continue to play a central role in rural healthcare.

⁴⁴ The Department of Education has produced guidance on the use of school buildings outside of school hours for community and recreational use. These are available on the Department's website - <https://www.education.ie/en/>

As experience has shown during the response to COVID-19, improved digital connectivity may provide some of the solutions required to deliver on this vision in a rural context.

eHealth

Digitally enabled models of care are transforming how people can access and engage with health and social care services. This includes access to specialist care delivered by the acute hospitals to citizens in their own homes or local health/primary care centre via virtual clinics⁴⁵.

Good access to digitally enabled maternity care and child health services is essential to supporting the family unit and providing the best start for children. It is therefore important for the growth, development and sustainability of rural Ireland.

To reduce waiting times and improve access and choice, maternity services are evolving and changing how they deliver care, including by offering digitally-enabled services. This includes services such as telehealth antenatal care, virtual breast-feeding programmes, and specialist maternity virtual clinics such as diabetes and pregnancy.

Likewise, child health services are providing a wider reach, enabling greater access to services such as virtual clinics that will assist in re-orientating care to better meet the needs of rural Ireland by providing greater access and increased choice.

Digitally-enabled models such as virtual clinics will be essential to rural Ireland in the future in terms of providing care closer to home and promoting greater citizen engagement with their own healthcare.

The benefits of this approach are clear - it reduces the need for a hospital visit, it improves access to a healthcare service provided in the local community, it reduces both the risk of infection and the time and expense associated with travel to an acute hospital or specialist centre.

Safety and Security

Some rural populations have a heightened perception of the threat of crime in their areas. The Report of the Garda Síochána Inspectorate, *Policing with Local Communities*⁴⁶, noted the importance of engaging communities in the delivery of local policing services.

The Government is committed to ensuring strong, visible community policing is at the forefront of our police force. An Garda Síochána are investing considerable efforts to develop community policing in order to reassure people that rural places are safe, including through the rollout of the new Garda divisional model. The Government will also introduce a new Policing and Community Safety Bill to redefine the functions of An Garda Síochána to include community safety.

To be effective, community safety must involve not only the police, but also other agencies responsible for people at risk, including Local Authorities, health, child and other social services. Based on the recommendations in the 2018 report, *The Future of Policing in Ireland*⁴⁷, on embedding the concept of “community safety” in legislation, the Department of Justice will develop a policy which will bring together service providers and the community to tackle community safety issues through a whole-of-Government approach. The voice of the community will be central to identifying and prioritising these issues.

To inform the policy, the Department of Justice will establish three pilot Local Community Safety Partnerships in Local Authority areas in the country, with at least one pilot focussed on rural communities.

The Department of Justice will also continue to support the Rural Safety Forum, which was established following stakeholder consultation, to provide a platform for a collaborative partnership approach to support the delivery of a rural community policing service. There will be a strong focus on the work of the Forum, and that of the Anti-Social Behaviour Forum, on enhancing community safety in rural areas by tackling anti-social behaviour and crime.

45 A virtual clinic is a consultation by phone or video call instead of a face-to-face meeting.

46 *Policing with Local Communities* (Garda Síochána Inspectorate) - http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Garda_Siochana_Inspectorate_Report_Policing_with_Local_Communities

47 *The Future of Policing in Ireland* (Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland) - http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Commission_on%20the_Future_of-Policing_in_Ireland



Image courtesy of: National Transport Authority

An Garda Síochána and the Department of Justice will review and enhance the effectiveness and availability of community-based alert and property-marking schemes in partnership with rural stakeholders. A revised legislative framework for local CCTV schemes will also provide greater clarity for Local Authorities and local communities on how such schemes can be established while enhancing community safety and data protection safeguards.

Service providers, including the emergency services, can have difficulty in locating properties in rural areas or townlands, particularly where an address is shared by more than one property (more than 35% of addresses fall into this non-unique category). Eircode, the State's unique property identifier, provides a solution to the challenges of locating addresses in Ireland. In 2020, for the first time, more than half of people using online services were choosing an Eircode over their traditional address, and the adoption of Eircodes is set to grow further.

Post Office Network

The Government remains fully committed to a sustainable post office network as a key component of the economic and social infrastructure in both rural and urban areas.

The Programme for Government recognises that a modernised post office network will provide a better range of financial services and e-commerce services for citizens and enterprise, as part of a sustainable nationwide post office network.

With an evolving mandate, An Post can emerge as a central hub for a wide variety of valuable community focused services. Departments will work with An Post to identify the scope to channel additional services through the post office network.

In this context, an Inter-Departmental Group will be established to examine the feasibility of directing more Government business to the network.

Separately, the development of a pilot scheme to support the use of rural pubs as community spaces and hubs for local services will be explored.

Improving Rural Transport Services

Connectivity, whether through transport links or digital connectivity, is hugely important for people who live and work in rural areas. Improvement and further integration of rural public transport services will enable people to continue to live in rural areas and to access work, education and social activities.

In this context, the Government has committed to protect and expand regional bus connectivity and connectivity between towns and villages in rural Ireland.

A Sustainable Rural Mobility Plan will be developed and implemented which will introduce a public transport service standard under which all settlements over a certain size in terms of population, combined with employment or education places, will have a service connecting them to the national public transport system. This service standard is underpinned by research carried out by the National Transport Authority (NTA).

Local Link

Local Link, which is funded by the NTA, aims to provide a quality nationwide community-based public transport system in rural Ireland which responds to local needs. It operates through a network of 15 Local Link offices throughout the country on behalf of the NTA. Its priorities include the reduction of social exclusion and the integration of rural transport services with other public transport services.

There has been a substantial increase in funding for Local Link services in recent years in keeping with increased demand⁴⁸. This has enabled the introduction of new regular commuter services and improvements to demand-responsive services, as well as the mainstreaming of evening/night time services in certain rural areas.

The Local Link service has been widely welcomed by rural populations. Recognising the importance of the service to rural communities, the Government is committed to further developing the Local Link service, to supporting integrated rural public transport services, and to piloting new transport initiatives to enhance the quality of life for people of all ages living in rural areas, including people with disabilities.

This includes initiatives to cultivate the provision of small public service vehicle services (i.e. taxi and hackney services) in designated rural areas, and to encourage the provision of a community transport service in each Local Link office area.

Connecting Ireland

The NTA's Connecting Ireland Rural Mobility Plan will improve and increase the amount of public transport services, including Local Link services, available across rural Ireland. It will enable those living in rural areas to access a wider range of activities and services.

Bus and Rail Services

Bus Éireann operates over 100 town, commuter, and rural services across the country, generally linking a series of settlements of various sizes in a particular region.

The NTA is continually working with Bus Éireann to provide improvements on its Public Service Obligation services, including improvements to many non-urban services.

Rail services also play an important role in providing connectivity in many rural areas. Ireland's rail network primarily serves inter-urban connections, but the potential catchment areas for railway stations in rural areas can extend far beyond the immediate hinterlands, thus presenting a viable and attractive option for rural dwellers and tourists alike to travel safely, efficiently and comfortably throughout Ireland. Ensuring a fit-for-purpose network, particularly in terms of quality and reliability, is therefore an important socio-economic enabler for rural areas.

€1 billion has been committed over the period 2020 to 2024 to ensure the optimal maintenance, renewal and improvement of our rail infrastructure. Separately, *Project Ireland 2040* has also committed funding toward development of a new National Train Control Centre which will modernise how train services are managed and monitored on the network and provide a basis for continued service growth in the years ahead.

In 2021 the Department of Transport, in consultation with the Department for Infrastructure (Northern Ireland), will launch a strategic rail review of the network on the island of Ireland. The review will consider all issues in relation to inter-urban and inter-regional rail connectivity, including the potential for high-/higher speed(s), rail freight and improved connectivity to the North West.

Regional, local and non-public roads

Regional and local roads serve an important economic role and also have valuable social and community functions in terms of connecting people. There are approximately 96,000 kms of regional and local roads in Ireland. This network of regional and local roads provides mobility within and between local areas. It also provides connectivity to the national road network and the ports and airports which are our links to the wider global economy.

48 Increasing from €12.2 million in 2016 to €23 million in 2020.

As committed to in the Programme for Government, essential road maintenance and upkeep budgets will be protected to ensure continued public safety and regional and rural connectivity⁴⁹.

The Government will also ensure that the Local Improvement Scheme, which provides funding for repair works on non-public roads that provide access to farms and public amenities, is funded into the future.

Cycling Infrastructure in Rural Areas

The Programme for Government places an emphasis on improving our transport infrastructure to ensure that people can travel more safely by bicycle or by walking in our towns and cities. The Government has committed to investing €1.8 billion in walking and cycling over its period in office. This will facilitate a step-change in the number of people journeying by bicycle or foot on a daily basis.

The Programme for Government also envisages that every Local Authority, with assistance from the National Transport Authority, will adopt a high-quality cycling policy, carry out an assessment of their roads network and develop cycle network plans which will be implemented with the help of a suitably qualified Active Travel Officer with clear powers and roles.

While cycling networks are mostly associated with urban travel, there is huge potential for cycling within and between rural towns and villages, and particularly in the hinterland of rural towns. The Government has committed a €50 million fund in 2021 for Local Authority investment in high-quality walking and cycling infrastructure, specifically targeted at towns and villages across the country.

Supporting Regional Airports

Ireland's National Aviation Policy recognises the importance of regional airports, particularly for tourism, business, inward investment and jobs, and in providing international connectivity to and from the regions. Our regional airports will play an important role in supporting our post COVID-19 and Brexit recovery.

In recognition of this, the Government's support for Ireland's regional airports is provided through the *Regional Airports Programme 2021-2025*⁵⁰ so that these airports can comply with international regulatory requirements in the areas of safety and security. The Programme will also encourage airports to take account of sustainability objectives and to build resilience against the likely impacts of climate change.

Irish Language Services

Our Irish language heritage is a central part of who we are and must be cherished and promoted. Irish language speaking communities should have the same opportunity to realise their potential as other communities in rural Ireland, through the medium of Irish.

The *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030* represents Government policy in relation to the Irish language and Gaeltacht regions. The delivery of the Strategy will be accelerated by implementing, on a cross-Departmental basis, the 5-Year Action Plan for the Irish Language, *Plean Gníomhaíochta 2018-2022*.

A key measure in the Action Plan is the ongoing implementation of the language planning process. Under the process, the development and implementation of language plans at community level for all of the 26 Gaeltacht Language Planning Areas, as well as up to 16 Gaeltacht Service Towns and Irish Language Networks, will continue to be supported. Gaeltacht Service Towns are defined as towns which are situated adjacent to or in Gaeltacht Language Planning Areas and which have a significant role in providing public services, recreational, social and commercial facilities for those areas.

The Official Languages Act will be strengthened to further ensure that the language Act continues to be an effective support for all those who wish to receive quality services in Irish from the State.

49 For example, €555m is being allocated for the maintenance and renewal of the regional and local roads network in 2021.

50 <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/4c47cc-irelands-regional-airports-programme-2015-2019/#:~:text=Exchequer%20support%20is%20provided%20to,Covid19%20Regional%20State%20Airports%20Programme.&text=The%20National%20Development%20Plan%20has,the%20period%202018%20to%202027>

Actions to Achieve Our Ambition

To enhance public services for rural communities, the Government will:

Policy Measure	
89	Increase the residential occupancy of rural towns and villages while enabling the Irish countryside to continue to be a lived-in landscape by adopting a balanced approach to planning, in line with relevant national planning policy and guidelines, while avoiding unsustainable ribbon and over-spill development from urban areas.
90	Update the Rural Housing Guidelines for planning authorities, to address rural housing in a broader rural development and settlement context.
91	Provide improved rural public transport services and pilot new transport initiatives for people of all ages and abilities living in rural areas, through: - Developing and implementing a Sustainable Rural Mobility Plan to ensure all settlements over a certain size in terms of population have a service connecting them to the national public transport system. - Delivering expanded Local Link services and further integrating Local Link services with other existing public transport services through the roll out of the NTA Connecting Ireland Plan. - Developing a subsidised Local Area Hackney Scheme in designated areas of rural Ireland which are too small or remote to support a full-time taxi or hackney service. - Developing and trialling a grant-aided Community Transport Service Scheme through Local Link to support otherwise unsustainable community services. - Running a pilot, after COVID-19 has abated, to examine the potential for ride-hailing services to improve rural connectivity.
92	Build on the work already undertaken to ensure that public transport services in rural and regional areas are accessible to persons with disabilities.
93	Work with An Post to identify the scope to channel additional services through the post office network.
94	Explore the potential to develop a pilot scheme to support the use of rural pubs as community spaces and hubs for local services.
95	Undertake research on early learning and care, and school-age childcare needs of parents who work atypical hours or live in rural communities, and develop recommendations for future action.
96	Establish 96 new Community Healthcare Networks throughout the country to re-shape how community healthcare services will be delivered and support people to live more independently in their community.
97	Through the Healthy Ireland programme, support improved health and wellbeing of rural communities in collaboration with Local Authorities and local stakeholders and partners.
98	Introduce a new Policing and Community Safety Bill to redefine the functions of An Garda Síochána to include community safety.
99	Roll out a Local Community Safety Partnership Pilot in a rural location.
100	Review and enhance the effectiveness and availability of community-based alert and property-marking schemes in partnership with rural stakeholders.

101	Provide greater clarity for Local Authorities and local communities, through a revised legislative framework, on how local CCTV schemes can be established while enhancing community safety and data protection safeguards.
102	Invest in high-quality walking and cycling infrastructure specifically targeted at towns and villages across the country.
103	Ensure that the Local Improvement Scheme is funded into the future.
104	Adopt a whole-of-Government approach to the protection and promotion of the Irish language, in implementing the 20-year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030 and Action Plan, and enacting the Official Language Amendment Bill.
105	Approve and implement an Irish language plan for each of the 26 Gaeltacht districts to strengthen Irish language usage by individuals, community, and businesses in these areas.
106	Develop Gaeltacht Service Towns situated in or adjacent to Gaeltacht Language Planning Areas which will play a significant role in providing public services, recreational, social and commercial facilities for those areas.

8

Chapter 8

Transitioning to a Climate Neutral Society

Our Ambition

Our ambition is to support a Just Transition for rural communities to a sustainable, resilient and climate neutral economy and society.

Our aim is to work with rural communities and businesses to help them overcome challenges related to climate change and to maximise opportunities for them to contribute to meeting national climate targets, including in areas such as retrofitting, renewable energy generation, carbon mitigation and smart farming practices.

We will do this by engaging with rural communities to include them in emerging opportunities and by providing investment to support a Just Transition to a climate neutral economy.



Context

Climate change, and our response to it, is the most significant issue of our generation and for future generations. The declaration in May 2019 by Dáil Éireann of a climate and biodiversity emergency serves to underline the necessity and urgency required to address it.

Climate change is already having impacts on Ireland's environment, society, economy and natural resources. Addressing climate change and responding to its impacts is everyone's responsibility – the State, businesses, communities and individuals.

Action needs to be taken urgently to respond to the climate crisis and create a future which is sustainable from an economic, societal and environmental perspective.

While climate change affects all communities, it can disproportionately affect rural communities in terms of both scale and intensity.

Responding to the climate challenge will be more difficult for those who do not have low carbon alternatives available to them. In Ireland's Western region, for example, 82% of homes use oil, coal or peat for heating, compared to 44% of homes in the rest of the State, and they have little access to natural gas⁵¹.

Some of the other concerns rural communities have in relation to climate mitigation include the phasing out of diesel vehicles, the potential cost of carbon taxes on transport and home heating, the proximity of wind turbines to residences, the impact on the landscape of wind or solar infrastructure, and implications of emission reduction targets for the Agriculture sector.

Communities dependent on employment in sectors such as transport and the supply of fossil fuels and generation of electricity from peat and coal, will be particularly vulnerable in the absence of alternative job opportunities.

The transition to a low-carbon economy and society must be fair and just and recognise the concerns and capacities of different communities to adapt. Rural communities need to be supported to help them to overcome challenges, as well as maximising available opportunities to adapt and diversify in the transition to a climate neutral society.

While Ireland faces unprecedented economic change over the next decade in the transition to a low carbon economy, rural areas can have a strong involvement in this transition by building on their natural assets to contribute to renewable energy generation, carbon sequestration through afforestation and rewetting of bogs, sustainable land use, smart farming, and the creation of job opportunities in emerging sectors and green technologies.

51 CSO Census of Population, Profile 1: Housing in Ireland Table E1053 - <https://www.cso.ie/en/csolatestnews/presspages/2017/census2016profile1-housinginireland/>

Ireland's Commitment to Climate Action

The Government has set out a national ambition to more than halve our carbon emissions over the course of the decade. This commitment amounts to an average 7% per annum reduction in overall greenhouse gas emissions from 2021 to 2030, and to achieving net zero emissions by 2050.

A key aspect of delivering on this commitment will be through the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill. The Bill will enshrine in law Ireland's commitment to achieving a carbon neutral economy by 2050 and provide for a series of 5-year carbon budgets.

Achieving our emissions targets will be challenging and will require fundamental changes by everybody. However, achieving these targets will improve the health and welfare of all our people.

The Government is committed to ensuring that no sector of society or community is left behind in the movement to a climate neutral future and will work to achieve a Just Transition to a sustainable future for all communities.

Transitioning to a Climate Neutral Future

The Programme for Government recognises the need for a co-ordinated whole-of-Government response, making climate action a core pillar of all Departmental strategies and committing to a wide range of measures to assist the transition to a low-carbon sustainable economy.

The *Climate Action Plan* will be a key enabler of this cross-Departmental approach. A new Climate Action Plan will be published in 2021 and will be updated on an annual basis.

Under the *National Adaptation Framework*⁵², Sectoral Adaptation Plans have been developed, many of which are of particular importance to rural economies. The Adaptation Plans identify actions required to minimise the impacts of climate change in the areas of seafood, agriculture, forestry, biodiversity, built and archaeological heritage, transport infrastructure, electricity and gas networks, communications networks, flood risk management, water quality, water services infrastructure and health.

Making the transition towards a low-carbon and resource-efficient economy will require research, demonstration and scaling up of technological developments across all industry sectors. It will drive more resource-efficient production management, distribution systems and value chains, as well as more efficient use of residues and by-products. It will also support new business models that maintain and enhance our natural capital.

As part of *Project Ireland 2040*, the Government is deploying €21.8 billion in public investment towards its national objective of transitioning by 2050 to a competitive, low-carbon, climate-resilient and environmentally sustainable economy.

The Government will ring-fence new revenues from the increase in carbon tax to fund the transformation of transport, electricity, buildings and food production systems, as well as protecting those most vulnerable to the impact of the transition.

There is also scope for Ireland to maximise the funding available through the EU Budget and Next Generation Recovery Package to support the transition to a climate neutral society.

To achieve the scale of uptake in the use of electric vehicles required to meet emissions targets in the transport sector, the Government is committed to publishing an Electric Vehicles Infrastructure Strategy to ensure that charging infrastructure stays ahead of demand and to provide planning guidance to Local Authorities.

There is an opportunity to enhance the network of electric vehicle charging infrastructure through the installation of public charging points at remote working hubs, community centres and enterprise centres in rural locations when these facilities are being developed over the lifetime of this policy.

Engagement with Communities

Engaging with communities will be key to ensuring a just and successful transition to a climate neutral future.

Empowering individuals and communities to take local action will require support, including the provision of training and initiatives to enable local and community-based low-carbon development.

⁵² Ireland's first statutory National Adaptation Framework, published in January 2018, provides a framework to ensure Local Authorities, regions, and key sectors can assess the key risks and vulnerabilities of climate change, implement actions to build resilience to climate change, and ensure climate adaptation considerations are mainstreamed into all local, regional, and national policy.

Existing community structures have the potential to mobilise, engage and support rural communities to reduce carbon emissions. The community-led LEADER rural development programme, for instance, will place a focus on supporting climate action projects over the period of this policy.

A review of Public Participation Networks and Local Economic and Community Plans will also be undertaken to ensure that they are fit for purpose for climate action.

In addition, new models of engagement will be developed with individuals, sectors, and regions on a structured dialogue basis so that the whole of society can contribute to the climate action process.

Local Authorities are strongly positioned to drive effective climate action at local and community level. In recognition of this, the local government sector has committed to a Charter in each of the 31 Local Authority areas to progress climate action in their communities.

Realising a Just Transition

Just Transition is a framework that encompasses a range of interventions needed to secure livelihoods when economies are shifting to sustainable production. Delivering a Just Transition is based on recognising the significant level of change required, that any burdens must be fair, and that no member of our society gets left behind.

While the transition to a low-carbon future requires collective action, it is important to recognise that certain groups may need more support to adapt due to social, economic, infrastructural or environmental factors. This may be particularly the case for rural communities which are not close to large urban settlements.

In order to develop effective solutions to address the needs of these different groups, research has been carried out on Just Transition in Ireland, and the Midlands region more specifically. This includes considering the impact of the transition on specific sectors, regions, communities and cohorts of the population, including rural communities.

As businesses take steps towards de-carbonisation and reducing their environmental impact, there is also a need to ensure that livelihoods are protected and new employment opportunities are seized as the transition to a low-carbon economy occurs. Workers need supports to become resilient to shifting industry practices through appropriate up-skilling, re-skilling, and education.

The Government has given a commitment that revenue resulting from increases in the carbon tax will be ring-fenced to protect those most exposed to higher fuel and energy costs, to support a Just Transition for displaced workers, and to invest in new climate action.

A Just Transition Commissioner was appointed in November 2019 to help ensure a co-ordinated and effective approach to Just Transition in the Midlands for communities and workers affected by the transition to a low-carbon economy and society. A key role of the Commissioner is to recommend actions to achieve a Just Transition for them.

The Commissioner's initial focus was on communities affected by the ending of peat harvesting for power generation in the Midlands. Lessons learned from the Midlands could, potentially, be applied to other parts of the country.

A number of plans to frame the work of Ireland's approach to a Just Transition will be published by the Government. These include an Implementation Plan emanating from the Commissioner's first report to Government, the 2021 Climate Action Plan and a Territorial Just Transition Plan. These will identify and prepare for challenges that will arise in a number of sectors and regions, recognising that there will be a variety of different transitions and that there will be no simple one-size-fits-all approach.

Funding a Just Transition

Just Transition Fund

The Government is investing in measures to support a Just Transition including through a Just Transition Fund for the Midlands. The Fund supports innovative projects that contribute to economic, social and environmental sustainability and which have employment and enterprise potential. The Fund has been initially targeted at the Midlands in the context of Bord na Móna's exit from peat and the direct impact this has on the Midlands Region. The impact of this Fund on the region and outcomes from supported projects will provide valuable learning for other regions across the country which may be impacted by a transition away from carbon intensive activities.

EU Just Transition Fund

To ensure that the EU achieves its goal of becoming climate neutral by 2050 in a fair manner, the European Commission published a European Green Deal investment plan setting out a Just Transition Mechanism to help those regions and sectors most dependent on fossil fuels and greenhouse gas intensive industries undergo the necessary transition. The Just Transition Mechanism comprises three pillars – the Just Transition Fund, a dedicated just transition scheme under InvestEU, and a public sector loan facility.

Ireland has secured an allocation of €77 million from the EU Just Transition Fund for investments over the period 2021 to 2027. The funding will be used to alleviate the socio-economic impacts of the low carbon transition, for example by supporting the re-skilling of workers, helping SMEs to create new economic opportunities, and the diversification of economic activity.

In accordance with the relevant EU legislation, Ireland must now prepare a Territorial Just Transition Plan, for approval by the European Commission, to secure its EU allocation. This Plan will set out Ireland's proposed investment priorities as well as targeted sectors and regions.

Climate Action Fund

The Climate Action Fund was established on a statutory basis by the Government with effect from 1 August 2020. A key objective of the Fund is to provide support for projects and initiatives that contribute to the achievement of Ireland's climate and energy targets, and for projects and initiatives in regions of the State, and within sectors of the economy, impacted by the transition to a low carbon economy.

In the region of €500 million is expected to accrue to the Climate Action Fund up to 2027. This will ensure that substantial funding is available to progress a series of funding calls over this period.

European Green Deal

The European Commission, through the European Green Deal, has outlined a range of measures to enable communities and businesses to benefit from sustainable green transition. Measures range from reducing greenhouse gas emissions, to investing in cutting-edge research and innovation, and preserving the natural environment.

The European Green Deal is about making the EU economy sustainable and improving the wellbeing of people. This will be done by turning climate and environmental challenges into opportunities, and making the transition just and inclusive for all. The new Common Agricultural Policy will be a key implementation mechanism for the Green Deal.

The European Green Deal Investment Plan will mobilise EU funding and create an enabling framework to facilitate and stimulate the public and private investments needed for the transition to a climate-neutral, green, competitive and inclusive economy.

Opportunities for Rural Businesses and Communities

Notwithstanding the challenges posed by climate change, climate adaptation and mitigation can drive innovation and create opportunities for businesses and communities in rural areas. The move to a climate neutral economy will present new opportunities for innovative businesses on the cutting edge of the transition.



The Green Economy, including the retrofitting and renewable energy sector, the Circular Economy, clean mobility, green and blue infrastructure, sustainable agriculture and the Bioeconomy, will create high quality employment opportunities that will be a source of significant employment growth over the coming decades. The development of Ireland's wind energy sector, geothermal sector, forestry, water and waste management and carbon sequestration, in particular, have the potential to provide very significant numbers of sustainable jobs and livelihoods in rural Ireland.

Ireland's renewable energy assets and strong research and development base also place us to the fore in the potential to be a leader in the development, piloting and deployment of renewables.

The Government has also committed to retrofitting 500,000 homes and installing 400,000 heat pumps up to 2030. These initiatives present significant opportunities for employment growth in rural communities, and will be supported by investment in upskilling and retraining of the workforce where necessary.

The Sustainable Energy Communities programme involves local communities directly in how energy is used for the benefit of their community as a whole. Projects aim, as far as possible, to be energy efficient, to use renewable energy where feasible, to develop decentralised energy supplies and to reduce energy costs.

There are over 500 communities involved in the Sustainable Energy Communities Network across Ireland, including on the offshore islands, and the Government is committed to increasing the numbers in the Network to 1,500 by 2030 as set out in the Climate Action Plan.

Renewable Energy Production

Rural areas have a strong role to play in securing a sustainable renewable energy supply. Innovative renewable solutions have been delivered in rural areas over the last number of years, particularly from solar, wind and biomass energy sources, and have the potential to support new enterprises and more jobs in rural areas in the future.

Offshore renewable wind energy offers considerable opportunities, particularly for coastal areas. Development of this sector is critical for Ireland to meet its renewable energy targets and has the potential to drive investment and job creation in coastal communities.

To achieve its ambition in relation to offshore wind energy the Government will, inter alia, finalise the Marine Planning and Development Management Bill (MPDM), and follow-on regulations and guidelines to provide investment and planning certainty to allow offshore wind to begin developing at scale.

In tandem with the MPDM Bill, a new streamlined and robust marine consenting regime is being developed. This new consenting regime will provide certainty to stakeholders and encourage continued investment in the offshore renewable energy sector.

A long-term offshore grid connection and management framework will also be developed and there will be three stand-alone offshore auctions under the Renewable Electricity Support Scheme up to the end of 2025. These initiatives aim to deliver on Ireland's ambitious target of 5,000MW of installed offshore wind capacity by 2030.

Many households and small businesses are increasingly installing micro-generation technology (e.g. solar panels, small turbines) to generate their own electricity. Installation of a micro-generator can assist in addressing the issues of climate change and reliance on fossil fuels. The Programme for Government commits to the development of microgeneration and enabling people to sell excess electricity they have produced back to the grid.

Other initiatives such as a Community Benefit fund and a community category within the Renewable Electricity Support Scheme, supported by an enabling framework, will enable communities to play a strong role in reaching renewable electricity targets.

The Government will issue revised Wind Energy Development Guidelines to ensure greater community engagement with proposed onshore wind energy development, while enabling Ireland to meet its binding renewable energy obligations.

Land Use

The land present in rural areas is fundamental to absorbing carbon from the atmosphere. Forests and wetlands act as natural carbon sinks. Trees and other vegetation absorb large amounts of global carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, equivalent to almost one-third of carbon dioxide emissions from fossil fuels and industry.

Shifts to sustainable land use will be facilitated by the better management of soils, afforestation, re-wetting, maintenance and rehabilitation of peatlands, soil carbon sequestration, as well as bioenergy with carbon capture and storage.

Peatlands

Irish peatlands are a significant carbon store, containing up to 75% of all the national soil organic carbon. Functioning peatlands capture carbon from the atmosphere and store it in the form of peat and vegetation. When peatlands are drained or damaged, the peat oxidises and the carbon is released back to the atmosphere. A restored bog can actively sequester carbon and thus continue to be a significant carbon store.

Peatlands rehabilitation and restoration can play an important role in sustaining jobs in areas previously dependent on an extractive economy, thereby supporting local communities and local economies, and underpinning a Just Transition.

As well as reducing carbon emissions, restoration and rehabilitation of peatlands also provides multiple additional ecosystem benefits such as water and air quality improvements, flood mitigation, enhanced biodiversity, and opportunities for tourism development, all of which contribute to the social and economic wellbeing of local communities.

Efforts to restore and rehabilitate peatlands in Ireland are being undertaken by the National Parks and Wildlife Service of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, by State agencies such as Bord Na Móna and Coillte, Environmental NGOs, and through community and volunteer efforts.

State funding of €108 million will be provided to Bord na Móna for their Enhanced Decommissioning, Rehabilitation and Restoration Scheme which will repurpose 80,000 acres of bog. The scheme aims to reduce carbon emissions and enhance biodiversity. Bord na Móna will contribute a further €18 million to the project.

It is anticipated that this project will create up to 350 jobs, including for former peat harvesters.

Coastal areas

Climate change also presents challenges to Ireland's coastal communities. Approximately 40,000 people in Ireland live within 100 metres of the sea, many in rural areas.

Coastal erosion has been increasingly evident in some parts of the country. In order to address this challenge, a proactive long-term approach is needed on management of coastal erosion to protect rural coastal communities. Measures committed to in the Programme for Government on the development of a national policy on coastal erosion and flooding and continuation of a multi-annual investment programme in flood relief will help to protect impacted communities.

Actions to Achieve Our Ambition

To support the transition to a climate neutral society, the Government will deliver the following policy measures:

Policy Measure	
107	Enact and implement the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill and set five-year carbon budgets to contribute to meeting Ireland's target of net zero emissions by 2050.
108	Publish a new Climate Action Plan in 2021 and update on an annual basis.
109	Develop new models of engagement with individuals, sectors, and regions on a structured dialogue basis so that the whole of society can contribute to the climate action process.
110	Enable community energy to play a role in reaching the target of generating at least 70% of electricity through renewables by 2030, through supports such as a Community Benefit fund and a community category within the Renewable Electricity Support Scheme.
111	Prioritise the development of microgeneration of renewable electricity, allowing people sell excess power back to the grid, through the establishment of a Microgeneration Support Scheme.
112	Expand the Sustainable Energy Communities Network from 500 to 1,500 by 2030, to support local communities to be directly involved in energy projects.
113	Launch further calls for projects to be supported from the Climate Action Fund.
114	Continue to develop Ireland's approach to a Just Transition away from fossil fuels, including by: a) preparing a Territorial Just Transition Plan for Ireland for the EU Just Transition Fund, b) commissioning additional research on Just Transition to consider future priorities and spatial and sectoral impacts, and c) supporting projects under the National Just Transition Fund.
115	Retrofit 500,000 homes and install 400,000 heat pumps across the country up to 2030, contributing to employment opportunities in rural areas.
116	Bring investment and job opportunities to coastal communities by developing the offshore renewable energy sector, including through: a) the finalisation of the Marine Planning and Development Management Bill, b) the development of a new consenting regime for offshore energy, c) the development of an offshore transmission grid, and d) offshore Renewable Electricity Support Scheme auctions.
117	Rehabilitate peatlands to contribute to reduced carbon emissions, carbon sequestration and enhanced biodiversity, including through: a) Climate Action Fund investment of €108 million to repurpose 80,000 acres of bog in the Midlands as part of a major peatlands restoration plan, and b) The national raised bog designated sites restoration programme to restore in the region of 25,000 hectares of raised bog.
118	Develop a national policy on coastal erosion and flooding and maintain a multi-annual investment programme in flood relief measures to protect impacted communities.
119	Carry out a comprehensive review of Public Participation Networks and Local Economic and Community Plans, to ensure that they are fit for purpose for climate action.
120	Consider the needs of rural areas in the development of an Electric Vehicle Infrastructure Strategy which will seek to ensure that charging infrastructure stays ahead of demand.

9

Chapter 9

Supporting the Sustainability of Agriculture, the Marine & Forestry

Our Ambition

Our ambition is to actively support the Agriculture sector to be a vibrant, effective and sustainable driver of Ireland's economy by maintaining its position as a world-class producer of quality and safe food whilst improving livelihoods and cherishing our shared natural environment including through innovation, enhancement and diversification.

We will achieve this by working with farmers and rural communities to build on the unique strengths and experience of the sector, and targeting supports to enhance farm lives and livelihoods.

We will also support the Marine and Forestry sectors which provide economic and environmental benefits for rural areas.

Context

Agriculture is both a primary economic driver and a critical component of the social fabric which sustains rural communities. For rural communities, agriculture is as much about identity and a way of life as it is about economic and environmental sustainability. The emotional significance of a community's interaction with the landscape is a major part of what shapes rural communities' pride of place. It is therefore important to situate Ireland's aspirations about the future of agriculture as part of a broader formulation of sustainable rural development which acknowledges the needs and wellbeing of people in rural areas in a holistic way.

The Agriculture sector does, however, face a unique set of challenges in terms of its ongoing sustainability in all its forms - economic, environmental and social. Brexit has brought about a change in the trading relationship with the UK and poses particular challenges for fisheries and beef production. Mitigating the negative impacts of market challenges such as Brexit will require a continuous focus on building agility, sustainability and productivity into the sector throughout the life of this policy. With appropriate support, the Agriculture sector will overcome these challenges and ensure its long-term sustainability and the wellbeing of people who depend on it.

The importance of addressing climate change and reducing greenhouse gas emissions is widely acknowledged in the Programme for Government. Society has a shared responsibility to realise this ambition and the Agriculture sector is committed to playing its part, while also taking advantage of the many sustainable opportunities that this transition can present. The implementation of *Ag-Climate*, *Roadmap towards Climate Neutrality*, the national climate and air roadmap for the Agriculture Sector⁵³, along with the *Agriculture, Forest and Seafood Climate Change Sectoral Adaptation Plan*, will be key in this regard.

Importance of the Agri-food Sector

The agri-food sector is Ireland's oldest and largest exporting indigenous industry, deeply embedded in the landscape, history and personality of the country. It encompasses everything from primary agriculture and fisheries, to food and beverage production and the processing industry. The industry provides quality, safe and nutritious food to consumers in over 180 countries around the world, with exports of almost €14.5 billion in 2019. It is also deeply connected with a wide range of other sectors, including hospitality, nutraceuticals and logistics, which underscores the functional interdependence of rural and urban areas. A vibrant and sustainable agri-food sector is therefore central to Ireland's economic wellbeing, as well as to supporting rural communities.

*Food Wise 2025*⁵⁴, a ten year strategy for the agri-food sector published in 2015, underlines the sector's unique position within the Irish economy and illustrates the potential that exists for the sector to develop further.

A new Agri-Food Strategy to 2030, to be published in 2021, will build on *Food Wise 2025* and will further reinforce the sector. The Strategy will outline the vision and key objectives required to ensure the economic, environmental and social sustainability of the agri-food sector in the decade ahead, with a focus on environmental protection, reversing biodiversity decline and developing additional market opportunities.

While Irish agriculture will maintain a strong export focus, the Government also wishes to see a greater emphasis on producing a more diverse range of food to meet our domestic needs and connecting small food producers to the consumer. This will be done through expanding the number of farmers' markets, farm shops and food emporiums and supporting the formation of community-owned markets in all towns, to showcase produce from local farmers, growers and food producers.

The Programme for Government commits to protecting and enhancing the incomes and livelihoods of family farms as the agri-food sector embraces the mission of delivering on climate change and biodiversity objectives, while building on its achievements as a world-class producer of quality food.

53 *Ag Climate - A Roadmap towards Climate Neutrality* (Government of Ireland) - <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/07fbc-ag-climate-a-roadmap-towards-climate-neutrality/>

54 *Food Wise 2025* (Government of Ireland) - <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a6b0d-food-wise-2025/#>

The Government will pilot a results-based agri-environment scheme to reward farmers for adapting to more sustainable methods of farming. The pilot will be run with a view to developing a new agri-environment scheme with a focus on environmental and biodiversity benefits that will align financial supports with climate objectives.

Sustainability of Farming Enterprises

Despite the importance of agri-food to the Irish economy, the farming sector which underpins it faces considerable legacy and succession issues and emerging challenges.

Farm incomes are a concern for many people in rural areas, with family farm income varying considerably. According to the results of Teagasc's *National Farm Survey*⁵⁵, in 2019 about one third of farms (34%) were classified as being economically viable. A similar proportion are considered sustainable due to the presence of an off-farm income (33%), while the remaining third are considered to be economically vulnerable (33%)⁵⁶. However, it should be noted that many farms are part-time and income varies considerably by farm system.

Only 18% of farms in the Northern and Western region are considered to be viable compared to 43% of farms in the Southern region. The equivalent figure in the Eastern and Midland region is 37%.

The volatility and low level of farm incomes in some sectors and regions represents a significant challenge for rural communities, which has consequences cutting across all socio-economic indicators including quality of life. In general, farm incomes continue to be highly reliant on direct payments. In 2019, the average family farm income was €23,575. Off-farm employment and the incidence of part-time farming is a significant feature of farming in Ireland with over half (52.5%) of all households having an off-farm income employment source in 2019.

Measures such as Farm Assist and the Rural Social Scheme are important supports for low-income farmers.

The Programme for Government commits to conducting a review of the means test for Farm Assist, with a view to better rewarding farmers who avail of the scheme for their enterprise.

The Programme for Government also commits to enacting legislation implementing the revised Nursing Home Support Scheme (Fair Deal Scheme) arrangements for farmers, which will contribute to ensuring the continued viability of family-owned and operated farms and businesses.

Diversification in Agriculture

The viability of farming enterprises presents a significant policy challenge in terms of maintaining the fabric of rural Ireland and the continuing contribution of agriculture to the economy.

The economic and environmental challenges facing the agri-food sector can be offset through diversification of activity at farm level and in the wider rural economy. The relative strength of the sector as an integral part in Ireland's economy creates a unique opportunity to generate significant returns from modernisation, restructuring, market development, as well as seizing the opportunities associated with climate mitigation/adaptation, sustainable land management and sustainable energy.

There is an inextricable link between diversification of farming enterprises and approaches to land-use. Sustainable land uses such as forestry, bioeconomy, and renewable energy-related development offers potential to deliver higher returns than many other farm enterprises. There is also much potential in the agri-tourism and gastro-tourism sectors.

Ireland's food and beverage offering has a significant role to play in the Tourism industry's recovery from the impact of COVID-19, given our reputation for good quality food, the growing number of Irish distilleries and the growing interest in food-trails and food festivals. Food and drink consumption accounts for 35% of all international tourism revenues⁵⁷ and gastro-tourism creates jobs and draws tourists all year round.

55 National Farm Survey 2019 Results (Teagasc) - <https://www.teagasc.ie/media/website/publications/2020/Teagasc-National-Farm-Survey-2019.pdf>

56 A farm business is considered economically viable if Family Farm Income is sufficient to remunerate family labour at the minimum wage and provide a 5% return on non-land assets employed on the farm. Farm households are sustainable if the farm business is non-viable but the household has an off-farm employment income. Farm households are economically vulnerable if they are operating non-viable farm businesses and there is no off-farm income.

57 See www.failteireland.ie/food-tourism

The agri-food sector itself has tremendous capacity to diversify, but change requires the appropriate provision of guidance and supports, as well as individual and community action. The Agri-Food Strategy to 2030 will provide an important framework in which innovation and diversification will be facilitated in the coming years. The Teagasc Options Programme will also support diversification for farm families to generate additional income.

Farm diversification can not only boost incomes and income certainty, it can also lead to more sustainable rural environments which will support the realisation of Ireland's commitments in relation to climate, air, soil, water and biodiversity.

Environmental Sustainability

Irish society, and the agriculture and food sectors in particular, are faced with many environmental challenges, from climate change to water and air quality and supporting biodiversity. Agricultural emissions stand at 34% of the national total which is a reflection of both the comparative lack of heavy industry in Ireland and the scale of agricultural output, particularly dairy and beef production.

The Agriculture sector recognises these challenges and is stepping up action to help Ireland reach its target to become a climate neutral economy by 2050, including through the GLAS scheme which supports farmers to tackle climate change, preserve biodiversity, protect habitats and promote environmentally-friendly farming. €1.5 billion will be allocated to a REPS-2 programme to 2030 to encourage and incentivise farmers to farm in a greener and more sustainable way.

Although Irish agriculture has a low carbon footprint per unit of production, reducing total emissions and contributing to the *Climate Action Plan* will be to the fore in the Agri-Food Strategy to 2030. These efforts need to be progressed to ensure our transition to a low-carbon, climate-resilient economy and society, while also taking advantage of new opportunities.

In this context, *Ag-Climate*, the roadmap towards climate neutrality, will ensure that the future of agriculture and land-use (including forestry) is built on environmental sustainability and climate resilience. The roadmap sets an ambitious vision for a climate neutral Agriculture sector by 2050.

It includes 29 actions with specific and challenging targets aimed at reducing the environmental footprint and further building on the strong credentials of Irish agriculture from primary producer through to processor.

The commitments seek to reduce emissions, enhance sustainable land management and contribute to sustainable energy. Examples of proposed actions include the adoption of low emission slurry spreading equipment, changes in fertiliser type, targeting of peat-based soils for specific management, managing livestock levels, Bioeconomy development, and support for energy efficiency measures in the Agriculture sector.

It is also important to ensure the adequate conservation of habitats where many of our plants and animals live, through locally led climate and environment schemes and agri-environment measures.

Ensuring Long Term, Equitable Involvement in Agriculture

Teagasc is the primary education and training provider for the overall land-based sector, and is a significant education provider to the food sector. As the national agriculture and food development authority, Teagasc, along with other public and private providers, provides specialised and customised training to the agri-service sector as required.

Approximately 7,000 learners participate yearly in full-time, part-time and distance programmes in agriculture, horticulture, equine and forestry.

Teagasc education programmes play a key role in equipping next generation farmers with the knowledge and capabilities necessary for a changing farming landscape. Knowledge Transfer Programmes delivered by public and private advisory services will continue to build human capital across the farming community and upskill farmers through the dissemination of research findings, peer to peer knowledge exchange, farm advice and the provision of lifelong learning programmes. These programmes will support farmers in meeting the challenges and opportunities arising in the agri-food sector.

The success of the CAP funded European Innovation Partnerships (EIP-Agri)⁵⁸, which deliver novel solutions to challenges facing the Irish agri-food sector and the rural economy, demonstrates the very real benefit of bottom-up locally-led innovative solutions.

58 EIP-AGRI - <https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/en>



The farming sector cannot reach its full potential without the active engagement of women and proactive efforts to facilitate their participation

Kylemore Farmhouse Cheese image courtesy of: Hany Martouk

There is potential for extension of this model to address other issues of concern to rural areas. Similarly, the European Commission's Living Labs⁵⁹ initiative encourages exploring place-based innovations, adopting socio-ecological approaches and circularity in primary production, food and biobased systems.

Succession Planning

Eurostat data on the age profile of farm holders in the EU 28 countries⁶⁰ shows that in 2016, approximately one-third of all EU farm managers were over 65. However, the age profile of farm holders varies widely between EU countries.

According to the CSO's Farm Structure Survey⁶¹, in 2016 more than half of farm holders in Ireland were aged 55 or over and 30% of all farm holders were over 65 years of age. This indicates an aging farm holder population, with a disproportionately low level of young farmers under 35 years of age (5.4%).

A 2015 EU-wide study identified access to land, access to credit and national inheritance laws as challenges for young people attempting to take up farming⁶².

59 As recommended in the 2018 report A Sustainable Bioeconomy for Europe (European Commission) - https://ec.europa.eu/research/bioeconomy/pdf/ec_bioeconomy_strategy_2018.pdf

60 Agriculture statistics - family farming in the EU (Eurostat) - https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Agriculture_statistics_-_family_farming_in_the_EU

61 Farm Structure Survey 2016 (CSO) - <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-fss/farmstructuresurvey2016/>

62 Needs of Young Farmers: Report I of the Pilot project, Exchange Programmes for Young Farmers (European Commission) - <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/fa9c8e5e-eff8-11e5-8529-01aa75ed71a1>

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has a number of measures to support young farmers and generational renewal, funded both at national and EU level. These include financial support, taxation measures and access to finance initiatives.

Ensuring continuous knowledge transfer and training, as well as promoting agricultural careers, is a critical feature of generational renewal in agriculture.

Linked to succession is the situation of gender equality in the Agriculture sector. Traditionally there has been a cultural bias towards male successors. This has had a significantly negative effect on the participation of women in agriculture at all levels and has reinforced a perception that farming is a male sector. However, the sector cannot reach its full potential without the active engagement of women and proactive efforts to facilitate their participation.

The CSO Labour Force Survey shows that only approximately 14% of workers in the agriculture, forestry and fishing sector are female. This lags behind the EU average where 28% of farm managers are female. The Government is committed to addressing gender inequality across this sector in Ireland.

The Programme for Government commits to investing further in the next generation of farmers under the new CAP, encouraging generational change and land mobility to young, educated, and trained farmers.

Health and Wellbeing of Farmers

Farmers experience a disproportionate burden of health problems compared to other occupational groups. These include heightened rates of cardiovascular disease, cancers, mental health and suicide. Farmers also face a high risk of workplace injury, disability and premature death.

These health challenges can result in reduced activity which in turn can negatively impact on profitability, competitiveness and sustainability of farming. Gender imbalance and rural isolation make farmers a hard-to-reach group to engage with on health matters and health promotion interventions.

There is a growing level of awareness amongst farmers, farming organisations, Government agencies and Departments of the importance of farmers' health and wellbeing.

This has led to a range of programmes and initiatives focusing on these issues, such as the 'On Feirm Ground' programme under which Agricultural Advisors will be trained to engage with and support farmers on health and wellbeing issues.

Other programmes include Macra na Feirme's 'Make the Moove' rural mental health initiative, and the European Innovation Partnerships (EIP) initiative on farm health, safety and wellbeing led by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. Mental Health Ireland and the Department of Health through the Healthy Ireland programme, are also active in this area.

While the development of these programmes and initiatives is welcome and valuable, there are opportunities to significantly increase their awareness and reach across the farming community.

CAP Reform

The Programme for Government acknowledges the importance of Ireland's agri-food sector in terms of dispersed economic development throughout the country and the significant role the sector is playing in rural areas. In this context, the continued investment in our Agriculture/agri-food sector, through a well-funded and strategically aligned Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) will empower rural communities and provide public benefits such as maintenance of our landscape, improvements in biodiversity and water quality, along with the transition to carbon neutrality in the agriculture and land-use sector.

The CAP protects farm family incomes, supports rural economies, ensures the production of high-quality safe food for consumers and protects rural landscapes and the environment. Recent reforms of the CAP have been aimed at making European Agriculture more responsive to the signals of the market and there has been an increasing focus on the provision of the public good.

The European Commission's proposals for the CAP post-2020 set out what the new CAP is intended to achieve for farmers, communities and the environment/climate. These include supporting viable farm incomes, increasing competitiveness, contributing to climate change mitigation, fostering sustainable development, protecting biodiversity, and promoting employment growth in rural areas.

There is also a cross-cutting objective of modernising the sector by fostering and sharing of knowledge, innovation and digitalisation in agriculture and rural areas through the development of the Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS).

The EU framework for the next CAP will commence in 2023. However, transitional arrangements under the rules of the 2014-2020 framework will apply for the period 2021 and 2022. The schemes and measures to be included in the new CAP will be finalised during the transitional period in the context of the available EU budget and final regulations.

A new LEADER programme for the period 2023-2027 will be developed in tandem with the new CAP. A Transitional LEADER Programme will run for the period 2021 and 2022. LEADER takes a 'bottom-up' approach to rural development, supporting communities and enterprises to develop and deliver employment, social inclusion and environmental projects at local level. An important element of LEADER is its support for small and micro artisan food producers.

Marine Sector

Ensuring the viability of the fishing industry is crucial to supporting the economic sustainability of the coastal and island communities who depend on it.

As an island nation, fishing has always been economically and socially important to Ireland. The water around Ireland's 7,500 km of coastline has provided exceptionally good seafood for thousands of years and it is important to protect this resource for future generations.

Ireland's goals for sustainable fisheries are supported through the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP). The CFP provides the framework for the long-term conservation and sustainability of fish stocks around our shores. The Programme for Government sets down an ambitious programme of actions that promote a sustainable seafood industry including technical measures that promote sustainability, and tackling the issue of waste in our seas.

in 2018, Ireland's ocean economy had a turnover of €6.2 billion. Ireland's ocean economy provided employment for 34,132 people in 2018



The value of Irish seafood exports in 2019 was estimated to be in the region of €578 million. Fisheries and aquaculture have been important sources of food and value for a long time, but outside these sectors the use of renewable aquatic biological resources to make products is now emerging, and activities to speed up the developments and achieve the potential of the blue bioeconomy⁶³ are also underway.

In 2012, *Harnessing Our Ocean Wealth*⁶⁴, an Integrated Marine Plan for Ireland, set out a vision, high-level goals and key enabling actions to put in place the appropriate policy, governance and business climate to enable Ireland's marine potential. It set ambitious targets for growing Ireland's marine economy – to increase the turnover from our ocean economy to exceed €6.4 billion by 2020, and to double the value of our ocean wealth to 2.4% of GDP by 2030 (from a baseline of 1.2% in 2007).

The *Ocean Economy Report*⁶⁵ shows that in 2018, Ireland's ocean economy had a turnover of €6.2 billion and provided employment for 34,132 people. The total Gross Value Added of the sector in 2018 was €4.19 billion, representing 2% of GDP.

As committed to in the Programme for Government, a successor to *Harnessing Our Ocean Wealth* will set out a new ambitious vision for the marine economy post-2020. In addition, a new National Marine Planning Framework will encourage cross-industry development.

Forestry

Forestry in Ireland provides multiple benefits such as providing habitats for biodiversity, water protection, recreational spaces, and carbon sequestration. In addition, the timber that is produced from our forests sustains and supports a vibrant forestry industry and provides over 12,000 jobs in rural areas.

Ireland is one of the least forested countries in the EU, with forest cover at just 11% or 770,020 hectares⁶⁶ compared to the EU average of 34%. Our overall national objective is to increase forest cover to 18%.

The national forest estate is an important and expanding sink for carbon. Forestry promotion, protection and use as a renewable resource are key elements of Ireland's response to climate change. Based on the National Forest Inventory (NFI) data, Ireland's forests removed an average of 3.8 Mt of carbon dioxide equivalents per year from the atmosphere over the period 2007 to 2016.

Forestry is also a key land use at the centre of Ireland's transition to a low-carbon and sustainable future. In 2018, 40% of the roundwood used in the Republic of Ireland was used for energy generation, mainly within the forest products sector.

Planting trees can play an important role in increasing and diversifying farm income. By incorporating forestry into the farming mix, agricultural production can continue alongside timber production while delivering both economic and environmental benefits.

The National Forestry Programme provides grants and premiums to private landowners who plant trees, and other supports which promote sustainable forestry management. The programme also funds the planting of native woodlands on publicly owned lands and recreational forestry such as Neighbourwoods⁶⁷ which benefit local communities.

There is an important biodiversity resource within Irish forests as well as numerous ecosystem services including the protection and enhancement of water quality, wider habitat linkage, landscape enhancement and opportunities for outdoor recreation.

63 Blue Bioeconomy Forum: Roadmap for the Blue Bioeconomy (European Commission) - <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/7e963ebb-46fc-11ea-b81b-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-115609569>

64 *Harnessing Our Ocean Wealth* (Government of Ireland) - <https://www.ouroceanwealth.ie/about-plan>

65 Ireland's Ocean Economy, June 2019 (NUI Galway) - https://www.nuigalway.ie/media/researchsites/semru/files/Online_Irelands-Ocean-Economy-Report_for-web_final.pdf

66 Ireland's National Forest Inventory (Government of Ireland) - <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/823b8-irelands-national-forest-inventory/>

67 NeighbourWood Scheme - <https://www.teagasc.ie/crops/forestry/grants/management-grants/neighbourwood-scheme/>



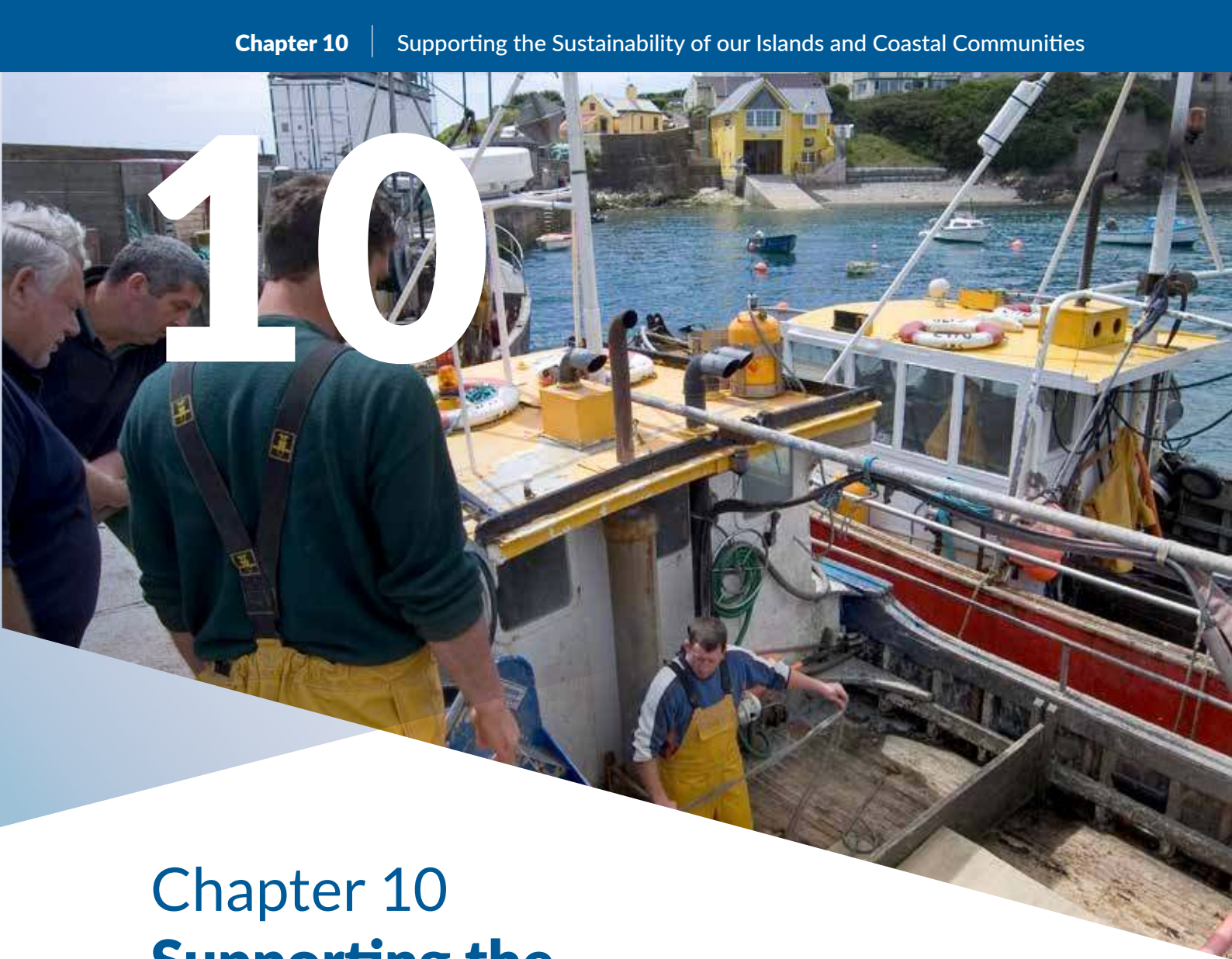
There is also further potential for increased economic benefits of forestry for farmers through a closer alignment between agri-environment schemes and forestry which involves the promotion of farm forestry as an option which can work alongside the existing farm enterprise, including agroforestry/silvopasture.

Forestry and forest products are therefore a resource which can contribute to overall sustainable development in the rural economy. There is potential to further develop forest-based value chains, and to align with the chemical, energy, textile and construction industries which could use woody biomass as inputs.

Actions to Achieve Our Ambition

To support the sustainability of the agriculture, marine, and forestry sectors in rural areas, the Government will:

Policy Measure	
121	Develop and Implement a new Agri-Food Strategy to 2030, building on the success of the previous strategies.
122	Encourage and support Local Authorities to expand the number of farmers' markets, farm shops and food emporiums, and support the formation of community-owned markets in all towns, showcasing local food produce from local farmers, growers, and food producers.
123	Support farm diversification, including through the provision of the Options programme managed by Teagasc.
124	Support research and development in areas such as agri-food, biobased systems, smart agriculture and precision agriculture to promote and encourage innovation.
125	Explore the potential application of Living Labs in an Irish context, establishing innovation networks to identify and pilot tailored place-based initiatives for primary production, food and biobased systems.
126	Implement <i>Ag Climatise - A Roadmap towards Climate Neutrality</i> for the agri-food sector.
127	Pilot a results-based agri-environment scheme to reward farmers for adapting to more sustainable methods of farming with a view to the development of a new agri-environment scheme capable of delivering broad environmental and biodiversity benefits that will align financial supports with climate objectives.
128	Publish a successor forestry programme to deliver an ambitious afforestation plan, to achieve an afforestation target of 8,000 ha/year, with a particular focus on an increased farmer participation and habitat creation.
129	Provide ongoing support for the development of the knowledge and skills base of the agriculture and forestry sectors by the Teagasc Advisory and Education Services.
130	Develop the Common Agricultural Policy Strategic Plan for the period 2023-2027, which will address existing and emerging challenges including climate action, environmental protection, generational renewal, viable farm incomes, and sustain vibrant rural areas.
131	Support generational renewal, including young farmers and women in agriculture, through measures including the CAP, taxation measures and access to finance initiatives.
132	Increase awareness and outreach across the farming community of programmes and initiatives to support the safety, health and wellbeing of farmers.
133	Conduct a review of the means test for Farm Assist to ensure farmers receive the appropriate level of support through this scheme.
134	Enact legislation implementing revised Nursing Home Support Scheme (Fair Deal Scheme) provisions in respect of family-owned and operated farms and businesses.



10

Chapter 10 Supporting the Sustainability of our Islands and Coastal Communities

Our Ambition

Our ambition is to ensure our offshore islands continue to support sustainable and vibrant communities and that visitors have an opportunity to experience and appreciate the unique culture, heritage and environmental richness the islands have to offer.

We will achieve this by publishing and implementing a new 10-year policy and accompanying Action Plans for Island Development which will identify and address the main challenges and opportunities for our island communities.

We will also seek to ensure that coastal communities continue to benefit from the unique characteristics and attributes of Ireland's coastline and its natural resources in a sustainable manner. We will achieve this through developing and implementing a National Marine Planning Framework and investing in coastal communities to support economic growth.

Context

Both island and remote coastal communities find themselves faced with similar challenges around infrastructure, climate change, services and income generation, as well as generational renewal.

The inhabited offshore islands are an integral part of the fabric of rural Ireland and contribute to our economy, culture and heritage. The challenges that affect our island communities, whilst similar to those in the rest of rural Ireland, include an extra dimension due to the islands' separation from the mainland.

Issues such as the provision of housing, the delivery of education and healthcare, and employment opportunities are magnified on the offshore islands. There is also an added challenge brought about by an ageing population and challenges of retaining young people on the islands.

The economic impact of COVID-19 severely affected our island communities. Many of the sectors which islanders rely on for employment, such as tourism and hospitality, were badly hit and will take time to recover.

The importance of access to essential services, which is particularly challenging for peripheral coastal and island communities, was also highlighted during the crisis.

Ongoing dialogue between Local Authorities, relevant policy Departments and communities will be important to ensure that measures are put in place to address challenges affecting island and coastal communities and to maximise available opportunities.

Island Demographics

The majority of our inhabited islands lie off the western seaboard of counties Donegal, Mayo, Galway, Kerry and Cork. They are highly dependent on tourism, agriculture and fishing, but they are equally adept at self-reliance and have a very strong sense of community and identity.

According to the Central Statistics Office, there are around 80 inhabited islands off the coast of Ireland. Of these, approximately 30 islands have a permanent resident population, have no land causeway connection with the mainland, and are not in private ownership. In 2011, a total of 2,846 people resided on these islands; the population had fallen to 2,627 by 2016, a reduction of 7%.

Just 5% of the population of these islands was less than 4 years old in 2016, compared to an average of 8% nationally. Over 20% of the islands' population are aged 65 years and older; this is considerably higher than the national average of 12% for that age cohort⁶⁸. This age profile represents a challenge to the ongoing viability of the islands as places to live.

Employment figures for people who live on the islands is less than the national average but varies considerably from island to island. A higher number of retired people live on the islands (19%) compared to the national proportion of retirees (13%).

The proportion of the island population who have either no formal education or primary education only, at 32%, is considerably higher than the national average of 15%. The percentage of the island population holding Third Level qualifications (18%) is lower than the national average of 25%. These statistics undoubtedly reflect migration to the mainland for education or employment purposes.

Connectivity and Access to Services

Physical access is the most fundamental issue of concern to those living on the islands and is the lifeline for island populations. Access impacts on every aspect of island life, including health and welfare services, education, employment, social and family life, and business.

Affordable, frequent, safe transport services, by both sea and air, and safe piers and airstrips, are vital to island communities. They provide links to the mainland without which islanders could not survive. Cargo services are also essential, bringing supplies to the islands as well as transporting commercial products from the islands to markets on the mainland and beyond.

The Government will invest in vital infrastructure on the islands over the lifetime of this policy, to ensure safe access for islanders, service providers, and visitors alike.

As is the case with many other rural areas, digital connectivity has been a challenge for islanders. Access to computers (58%) and broadband/internet (55%) on the islands is considerably less than on the mainland where 73% of the population have access to a household computer and 72% have access to broadband/internet.

68 CSO Census 2011, comparable demographic data not readily available through 2016 Census.

Improved broadband and mobile phone access presents an opportunity to change the dynamic for the islands. The National Broadband Plan aims to deliver access to high speed broadband to every premises in Ireland, regardless of location, including the offshore islands.

A number of islands will benefit from Broadband Connections Points which are amongst the first premises to be connected under the National Broadband Plan to enable communities in remote locations to access free public high speed broadband. A number of islands will pilot innovative approaches to services such as eHealth by using the connectivity and facilities at the BCPs.

Údarás na Gaeltachta is also rolling out a network of innovation and digital hubs with high speed broadband connectivity. Hubs on 13 islands form part of this growing digital ecosystem and will support employment opportunities on these offshore islands. There is also potential for the development of community-based enterprise hubs on other islands not under the remit of Údarás na Gaeltachta.

Housing and Services

The availability of affordable, quality homes for permanent residents on the islands is essential to ensure the long-term viability and sustainability of island communities. The opportunity to build or refurbish a house on an island, particularly for young people who have grown up there, can make a significant difference to the long-term sustainability of an island community.

This issue will be considered further in the context of the 10-year policy for the development of the Islands.

The policy will also address access to services based on the islands, including health services, water supply, childcare, and education provision.

Employment

Many islanders rely on part-time and/or seasonal jobs in order to sustain their livelihood. Tourism, heritage, fishing and farming are sectors which provide important employment opportunities for islanders.

Island identity is inevitably bound with the sea, with seafaring and income from fishing forming an important part of the economies and heritage of the islands. With over 14,000 direct and indirect jobs across fisheries, aquaculture, processing and ancillary sectors, the seafood industry plays a vital role in the sustainable economic viability of many coastal and island communities where there are limited alternative economic activities. In light of the employment numbers involved in the fisheries sector, the impact of Brexit on the sector will bring about significant challenges for islands and coastal communities.

Unlike those on the mainland, island farmers have few opportunities to take up alternative forms of employment. Farming also costs more on the islands due to overall outlay, including costs for freight to and from the island for livestock and equipment.

In order to sustain permanent populations on the islands, more opportunities are required for island-based micro enterprises, the self-employed and potential entrepreneurs to create and maintain sustainable and attractive jobs. Improved digital connectivity will help in this regard and will support a broader range of employment opportunities for people living on the islands, as well as enabling people to work remotely, no matter where their employer is headquartered.



The islands also have the potential to act as test-beds for new technologies in areas such as renewable energy and e-Health, and this is a strength that has the potential to be more fully exploited.

Tourism

Tourism is an important aspect of island economies.

The offshore islands and their communities embody an extraordinary repository of language, culture and heritage which constitute a unique element in the fabric of Irish society. Our islands draw visitors from around the world seeking the opportunity to experience our unique Irish language, culture and heritage. Towns and cities on the mainland also benefit from the islands as visitor destinations, through increased tourist footfall in the region as a whole.

However, high tourist numbers can also change the nature of the island and put a strain on local resources (e.g. water, medical care, rescue services and longer-term housing), diminishing the benefits to residents and the island community as a whole. Striking a balance between conservation efforts and island development is essential to the sustainable growth of the tourism sector on the islands.

A move towards enhanced tourism offerings which encourage visitors to spend at least one night on an island could result in a better distribution of revenue across island services and place less of a strain on the island's resources.

Policy for Islands Development

The Government is committed to the development and sustainability of our island communities through the publication and implementation of a new 10-year Policy for Islands Development to 2030.

This will be the first focused policy initiative for the islands for more than 20 years. It will focus on strengthening island communities and economies and addressing challenges arising from their separation from the mainland. The policy will focus on developing new opportunities for islanders and building sustainable futures for island communities.

The policy will be informed by an extensive consultation process with island communities and other stakeholders, and will address issues such as housing, health, energy, utilities, waste management, climate change, education, digital connectivity, employment, infrastructure and transport.

Implementation of the 10-year policy will be underpinned by a series of three-year Action Plans which will include specific actions for delivery across a number of Government Departments, Local Authorities and State agencies. This approach will ensure progressive and visible delivery of the long-term policy objectives, while also providing the scope to respond to new challenges and opportunities over the lifetime of the policy.

The marine economy is a key enabler of effective regional development, especially in remote coastal communities



Coastal Communities

1.9 million people live within 5km of Ireland's coastlines. The relationship between island and coastal communities is particularly interconnected in terms of family, trade and traditions. Island and coastal communities are typically primary trading partners in areas such as aquaculture, fishing and marine tourism, and also have a mutual reliance and interdependence in areas such as transport and public services.

In terms of employment, many communities along our coast depend on industries such as tourism, fishing and aquaculture. The marine economy is a key enabler of effective regional development, especially in remote coastal communities. Established ocean and coastal sectors include seafood related enterprise such as commercial fishing and aquaculture, marine tourism, energy production, maritime transport, boat-building and ship leasing.

Our coastal areas are key drivers for Ireland's tourism sector, as highlighted by the successful branding of initiatives such as the Wild Atlantic Way in recent years. Ireland's scenic coastline, rocky escarpments and beaches attract a large number of overseas visitors every year. In 2018, 76% of overseas tourists visited a coastal area and 61% participated in a marine-related leisure activity.

Ongoing engagement with coastal communities on policy proposals and opportunities will be explored through new Coastal Partnership Groups which will bring together local coastal communities to address issues of concern, share best practice and resources, and facilitate communication between stakeholders.

Developing the Marine Sector

Significant potential and benefits for coastal communities also exists in the areas of marine research and innovation, and the development of marine technologies.

The European Maritime and Fisheries Fund Operational Programme for Ireland has provided €12 million in funding through seven Fisheries Local Area Groups (FLAGs) over the period 2017-2021 to foster the socio-economic development and diversification of coastal communities and offshore islands traditionally dependent on fishing.

The FLAG scheme will continue to support investments by micro seafood enterprises, projects in the areas of marine tourism and leisure, and in the wider marine sector.

Offshore renewable energy projects will also offer employment opportunities around the coast of Ireland. Further development of offshore energy projects will support future diversification in employment and ensure that coastal areas benefit from opportunities in this sector, including through supply chain opportunities.

The Programme for Government commits to the production of a long term plan outlining how Ireland will take advantage of the significant potential of offshore energy on the Atlantic Coast and achieve 5GW capacity in offshore wind by 2030 off Ireland's Eastern and Southern coasts. This plan will position Ireland to become a major contributor to a pan-European renewable energy generation and transmission system.

Several commitments to further develop the marine sector have been outlined in the Programme for Government, including the development of a successor to *Harnessing Our Ocean Wealth* which will set out a new vision for the development of the Marine economy.

The Government will also publish Ireland's first ever Marine Spatial Planning policy, setting out a clear vision for the future development of our marine planning system.

The Government will bring forward Ireland's first National Marine Planning Framework which will introduce a planning system for managing the development of Ireland's maritime area in the same way that the National Planning Framework fulfils this function on land.

These two documents will form the basis for *Project Ireland Marine 2040*, which will outline a long-term overarching strategy to manage Ireland's seas.

A marine planning oversight delivery board will be established for *Project Ireland Marine 2040* to provide leadership and oversight to the implementation of the National Marine Planning Framework, and implement the long-term overarching strategy to manage Ireland's seas for the benefit of all its people.

Actions to Achieve Our Ambition

To support the sustainability of our islands and coastal communities, the Government will deliver the following policy measures:

Policy Measure	
135	Publish a new 10-year cross-Departmental Policy for Island Development and associated Action Plans to ensure delivery of the policy, covering areas such as housing, health, energy, utilities, waste management, climate change, education, digital connectivity, employment, infrastructure and transport.
136	Progress vital infrastructure development for our island communities.
137	Establish a forum for ongoing dialogue between Local Authorities, relevant policy Departments and island communities.
138	Establish gTeic enterprise hubs on the islands under the remit of Údarás na Gaeltachta to support employment opportunities.
139	Explore the potential for community-based enterprise hubs on islands not under the remit of Údarás na Gaeltachta.
140	Maximise the potential to utilise the islands as test-beds for innovative technologies (e.g. eHealth, micro-generation of renewable energy).
141	Develop a new integrated marine sustainable development plan, as a successor to <i>Harnessing Our Ocean Wealth</i> , focusing on all aspects of the marine sector.
142	Publish Ireland's first ever Marine Spatial Planning policy, setting out a clear vision for the future development of our marine planning system.
143	Following completion of the Marine Spatial Planning policy, bring forward Ireland's first National Marine Planning Framework which will introduce a planning system for managing the development of Ireland's maritime area in the same way that the <i>National Planning Framework</i> fulfils this function on land.
144	Establish a marine planning oversight delivery board for <i>Project Ireland Marine 2040</i> to provide leadership and oversight to the implementation of the National Marine Planning Framework, and implement the long-term overarching strategy to manage Ireland's seas for the benefit of all its people.
145	Explore the potential for Coastal Partnership Groups to bring together local coastal communities to address issues of concern, share best practice and resources, and facilitate communication between stakeholders.
146	Continue to invest in coastal communities through the Fisheries Local Area Group (FLAG) scheme, providing support for investments by micro seafood enterprises and projects in the area of marine tourism and leisure and the wider marine sector.

11

Image courtesy of:
Dr. Chaosheng Zhang,
National University of Ireland,
Galway

Chapter 11 Implementation of the Policy

Context

In line with the OECD Principles on Rural Policy⁶⁹, *Our Rural Future* is based on the premise that an integrated and holistic place-based approach can contribute to the economic, social and environmental sustainability of rural areas and to the wellbeing of its people.

The policy aims to deliver wellbeing for all, and to support an aligned policy approach to rural development. It seeks to promote enhanced community participation, to prepare rural areas for technological, demographic and environmental change, and to address the diversity of challenges and opportunities facing rural areas, informed by analysis, data and consultation.

In line with international experience and best practice, the policy also advocates the adoption of an integrated, place-based approach to rural development.

Integrated Approach to Rural Development

The integrated approach to rural development offers an opportunity to make a real difference to rural areas by focusing on the long-term developmental needs of an area, rather than on disparate individual projects.

The approach advocates a holistic, place-based approach, which encourages and supports rural communities to develop cohesive and integrated plans to meet the long-term needs of their own particular area.

69 OECD Principles on Rural Policy (OECD) - <https://www.oecd.org/rural/rural-development-conference/documents/Rural-principles.pdf>



This approach recognises that every area is different, and each has its own strengths as well as developmental needs⁷⁰.

Over the lifetime of this policy, the Government will invest significantly in rural areas to deliver stronger, more resilient, sustainable and progressive rural communities and economies which will support our national development.

To maximise the impact of this investment, we will encourage and help rural areas to develop and implement cohesive place-based Master Plans to address the long-term developmental needs of their particular area. These non-statutory plans will need to be aligned with relevant Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies, County Development Plans, Local Economic and Community Plans, and national, regional and local policy objectives. They should also be flexible enough to build on local functional relationships that straddle administrative boundaries (e.g. based on the concept of Regional Economic Development Zones)⁷¹.

Where investment priorities are aligned and informed by a strong, cohesive, locally generated vision in this way, the Master Plan can act as a basis to attract support from multiple funding streams.

The integrated approach to rural development builds on the model of the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund which encourages a collaborative approach to delivering ambitious projects of scale that support rural development.

The approach will be progressively implemented over the lifetime of this policy. It will ensure effective use of public monies and address an objective of the *National Planning Framework* to achieve more aligned funding for rural development.

Rural Proofing

As part of this policy, we will develop an effective rural proofing model which will provide a basis for Departments to consider the impact of their policy proposals on rural economies and communities and to adapt their proposals, where necessary, to avoid any unintended impacts on rural areas.

Rural proofing aims to ensure that Government policies show an understanding of, and take into account, the specific characteristics and challenges of rural areas. It seeks to anticipate the potential impacts of Government policy interventions and to ensure fair and equitable policy outcomes for rural areas. For rural proofing to work effectively, all Government Departments will need to make the impact on rural communities of proposed policy initiatives a routine policy consideration.

⁷⁰ For example, see Úibh Rathach Tasforce Action Plan: <https://udas.ie/assets/uploads/2019/10/Tuairisc-agus-PGniomh-Tascfhorsa-Cuid-1.pdf>.

⁷¹ Rural Economic Development Zones (REDZ) - <https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/03c53c-rural-economic-development-zone-redz/>

Implementation And Oversight

Our Rural Future reflects a whole-of-Government approach to supporting the economic, social and cultural development of rural Ireland and to the protection of its environment.

The commitments to be delivered in the policy will be implemented progressively over its lifetime. Each deliverable will be led by a nominated Government Department, State agency or other body, as set out in Appendix 1.

Implementation of the policy will be co-ordinated on behalf of the Government by the Department of Rural and Community Development.

Progress on its implementation will be overseen by the Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Investment which is chaired by the Taoiseach. The Cabinet Committee is supported by a Senior Officials Group of civil servants from key Government Departments.

Progress updates will be published every six months. The end-year progress report will include a work programme for the following year, enabling new actions to be added over the lifetime of the policy. A mid-term review will also be built into the implementation review process.

Each Policy Measure is directly linked with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, to align with Ireland's SDG commitments and to facilitate complementarity in reporting.

Continuous Engagement with Rural Stakeholders

The Government is committed to a continuous dialogue with people in rural Ireland throughout the life of this policy. In this context, structures have been built in to the policy to support ongoing dialogue with rural stakeholders (e.g. through the Rural Ideas Fora and Rural Youth Assembly) to enable new actions to be added through an annual work programme to respond to emerging needs and issues.

Higher Education Institutions and international organisation such as the OECD and the EU also have an important role to play in informing the continuous development of policies to support rural areas through support programmes, sharing of best practice, research and analysis.

In this context, the Department of Rural and Community Development will partner with the Higher Education Institutions and other research funders and research organisations to support new research into rural development priorities.

The Department will also support the establishment of a Higher Education Institutions network on rural development to ensure ongoing engagement with key experts over the lifetime of this policy. In parallel, it will deepen its engagement with organisations at international level, including the OECD and the European Commission.

Funding Delivery of the Policy

Funding of the commitments contained in this policy will be met from the Votes/budgets of the relevant Government Departments, agencies and other bodies responsible for the delivery of the policy measures.

Funding for Departmental commitments will be subject to the annual Estimates process and will be reflected in the published allocations in the Revised Estimates Volume each year.

All expenditure incurred will be subject to the terms of the Public Spending Code⁷², and the Capital Works Management Framework where appropriate.

North-South Cooperation

The achievements of the peace process, founded on the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, represent one of the brightest chapters in the shared history of the island. The interlinked histories of Ireland and the UK have entered a new phase with the UK's withdrawal from the EU, but we are committed to ensuring our relationship remains close and continues to develop. We will build on the progress achieved since 1998, in partnership with the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Executive, to harness the full potential of the Good Friday Agreement.

North/South cooperation is a central part of the Good Friday Agreement. Through the North-South Ministerial Council, the Government and the Northern Ireland Executive work together across six areas of cooperation, including Agriculture and Rural Development, to agree common policies and approaches for the mutual benefit of both parts of the island.

72 The Public Spending Code, published in 2013, is the set of roles, procedures and guidance to ensure Value for Money in public expenditure across the Irish Public Service and the Code applies to all organisations that spend public money - <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/public-spending-code/en/>

The Government will work to enhance, develop and deepen all aspects of North-South cooperation and the all-island economy and will build on the strong working relationships with the Northern Ireland Executive and the North-South Implementation Bodies⁷³ in relation to issues that impact on rural areas and communities.

As committed to in the framework of the North-South Ministerial Council, the Department of Rural and Community Development will deepen bilateral collaboration and the sharing of information and ideas in relation to rural policy with its counterpart Department in Northern Ireland and will identify areas for further co-operation.

The Government will also work with the Northern Ireland Executive and EU and UK partners on the development and delivery of the new EU PEACE PLUS programme, to be implemented from 2021. The programme will provide significant support for a peaceful, sustainable and prosperous island in the years ahead.

Through the Shared Island Fund, the Government is making €500 million in new capital funding available to 2025, ring-fenced for Shared Island projects. This will support the delivery of key Shared Island commitments in the Programme for Government and foster new investment and development opportunities on a North/South basis. The investment will benefit many rural communities North and South.

The Government also remains committed to supporting the work of the North-West Strategic Growth Partnership which is jointly led by Donegal County Council and Derry City and Strabane District Council to deliver on strategic priorities aimed supporting sustainable development for the North West region. The Partnership is supported by the International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD), a North-South-US partnership programme which promotes integrated regional and rural development and fosters cross-border and inter-regional co-operation.

Environmental Commitment

Sustainable rural development is predicated on the responsible interaction between people and planet. In adopting this policy, the Government reaffirms its full commitment to sustainable rural development.

The Government is committed to ensuring the effective implementation of its statutory and other responsibilities towards the environment and biodiversity, as well as towards achieving a climate neutral future. Our ongoing partnership and dialogue with rural communities across a wide range of policy areas is a key part of realising this commitment to our shared environment.

Given the high-level framework for rural development which *Our Rural Future* presents, the Policy Measures outlined should not be considered as a detailed plan for delivery in themselves, although in several cases, implementation plans at appropriate levels are in place or will be developed in accordance with established planning and regulatory frameworks to facilitate delivery.

Any Measures giving rise to, or potentially giving rise to, environmental impacts will therefore be subject to screening and further consideration under Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and/or Appropriate Assessment (AA), and Flood Risk Assessment as appropriate⁷⁴.

73 The six all-Ireland implementation bodies are Waterways Ireland, Food Safety Promotion Board, Special European Union Programmes Body, The North/South Language Body, InterTradeIreland and Foyle, Carlingford & Irish Lights Commission.

74 The SEA/AA Pre-screening statements regarding *Our Rural Future* are available on the Department of Rural and Community Development's pages of the Gov.ie website - <https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation/departments-of-rural-and-community-development/>

Actions to Achieve Our Ambition

To support implementation of a joined-up approach to further the economic and social advancement of rural areas, the Government will deliver the following measures:

Policy Measure	
147	Support rural communities to develop long-term cohesive Master Plans for their areas, to support an integrated place-based approach to rural development (aligned with the RSEs, County Development Plans, Local Development Plans and relevant national, regional and local policy objectives).
148	Develop an effective rural proofing model to ensure the needs of rural communities are considered in the development of Government policies.
149	Support new research into rural development priorities, including in collaboration with Higher Education Institutions and other research funders and research organisations.
150	Establish a Higher Education Institutions Network on rural development to ensure ongoing engagement with rural development experts over the lifetime of this policy.
151	Enhance the sharing of information and best practice on rural development policy on a North-South basis and identify areas for further cooperation.
152	Deepen engagement at international level on policy relating to rural development matters through increased participation, including at OECD and EU level.

Appendices

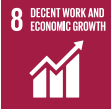
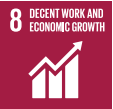
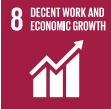
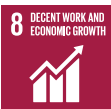
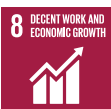
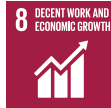
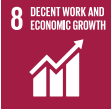


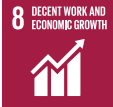
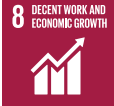
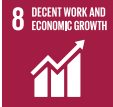
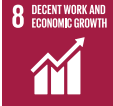
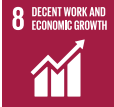
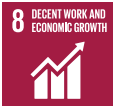
Appendix 1

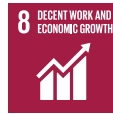
Full List of Policy Measures

The full list of policy measures to be delivered is outlined in the table below. Measures for delivery will be led by named Departments and bodies as set out below, with other stakeholders involved also referenced.

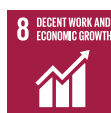
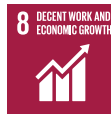
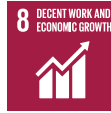
Optimising Digital Connectivity

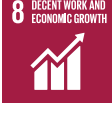
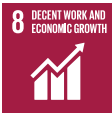
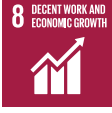
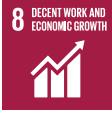
	Policy Measure	Lead Delivery Body	Other Stakeholders	Links with Sustainable Development Goal #:
1	Invest up to €2.7 billion in the rollout of the National Broadband Plan and explore how the initiative can be accelerated to deliver connectivity as soon as possible in rural areas.	National Broadband Ireland under contract to D/Environment, Climate & Communications	Retail Service providers	  
2	Implement the <i>National Remote Work Strategy</i> to facilitate employees in working from home, or from co-working spaces, which will support the retention of skilled people in rural areas.	D/Enterprise, Trade & Employment	Interdepartmental Group on Remote working; Relevant Departments and Agencies	  
3	Introduce legislation in 2021 to provide employees with the right to request remote work.	D/Enterprise, Trade & Employment	Relevant Departments and Agencies	
4	Map and publish a comprehensive picture of remote working facilities across the country, and the various facilities available in each, to ensure that future hubs are developed in a strategic way that meets demand and maximises utilisation in key locations.	D/Rural and Community Development, Western Development Commission	Relevant Departments and Agencies	
5	Establish a comprehensive and integrated national network of 400 Remote Working Hubs throughout the country, with shared back-office services and a central booking platform for users.	D/Rural & Community Development, Western Development Commission	Enterprise Ireland, Údarás na Gaeltachta, Local Authorities and other hub providers	
6	Invest significantly in remote working facilities to support the retention of skilled people in rural communities and attract mobile talent to rural areas.	D/Rural & Community Development	D/Environment, Climate & Communications, Relevant Departments and Agencies	 
7	Provide financial support to Local Authorities to bring vacant properties in town centres back into use as Remote Working Hubs.	D/Rural & Community Development		
8	Develop national data on the incidence and frequency of remote work, to provide an evidence base for future policy.	Central Statistics Office	D/Rural and Community Development, National Hub Network Group, Relevant Departments and Agencies	

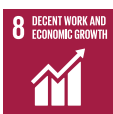
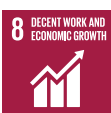
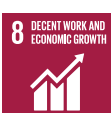
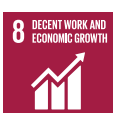
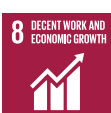
	Policy Measure	Lead Delivery Body	Other Stakeholders	Links with Sustainable Development Goal #:
9	Establish a centralised cross-departmental knowledge base on the costs and benefits associated with the increased adoption of remote working to understand impacts on areas such as employment, transport, carbon emissions, broadband, and equality.	D/Enterprise, Trade and Employment	D/Rural and Community Development, D/Transport, D/Environment, Climate & Communications, D/Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth	
10	Mandate public sector employers, colleges, and other public bodies to move to 20% home and remote working in 2021, with further annual increases over the lifetime of this policy.	D/Public Expenditure & Reform		  
11	Pilot co-working or hot-desking for civil servants in a small number of towns initially, to support the objective of a move to 20% home or remote working.	D/Public Expenditure & Reform	Relevant Departments and State agencies	
12	Through IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland and Údarás na Gaeltachta promote and enable the uptake of remote working across their client base to support regional job creation.	D/Enterprise, Trade and Employment, D/Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media	IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland, Údarás na Gaeltachta	
13	Through the Tax Strategy Group, review the current tax arrangements for remote working in respect of (i) employees and (ii) employers, and assess the merits of further enhancements for consideration in the context of Budget 2022.	D/Finance		  
14	Provide grants to retail businesses in rural towns and villages to establish an online presence to complement traditional footfall trade.	D/Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Local Enterprise Offices		 
15	Develop Local Digital Strategies in each Local Authority area, to maximise the potential of improved rural digital connectivity for businesses and communities.	D/Rural & Community Development, D/Environment, Climate & Communications	Local Authorities	 
16	Expand the provision of free-to-use wireless internet connectivity in rural areas through the rollout of Broadband Connection Points and other initiatives such as the WiFi4EU public wifi networks and the Digital Innovation Programme.	D/Rural & Community Development	Local Authorities, National Broadband Ireland	
17	Under the Schools Broadband Programme, review on an ongoing basis the availability of broadband services and upgrade schools broadband connectivity, including within the State intervention area where possible.	D/Education	National Broadband Ireland, D/Environment, Climate & Communications	 

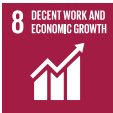
	Policy Measure	Lead Delivery Body	Other Stakeholders	Links with Sustainable Development Goal #:
18	Increase the capacity for remote and blended learning to enable young people, in particular, in rural areas to access further and higher education courses through online learning while living in their local communities.	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science	Third Level Institutions	
19	Develop and implement a new 10-year Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy strategy so that everybody, regardless of age, can capitalise on the connectivity and opportunities presented by the rollout of high speed broadband.	SOLAS, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science		
20	Upgrade and reskill workers in sectors undergoing transformational technological change to adapt to new roles and new ways of working.	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science	SOLAS, Skillnet	 

Supporting Employment and Careers in Rural Areas

21	Develop and implement a set of nine new Regional Enterprise Plans to support enterprise development and jobs growth in the regions.	D/Enterprise, Trade & Employment	Enterprise Development Agencies, Other Relevant Departments and Agencies, Enterprise Sector	
22	Through the IDA: - Target 400 IDA investments up to 2024 for regional locations. - Deliver 19 Advanced Technology Buildings in regional locations in line with the National Planning Framework.	IDA Ireland	D/Enterprise, Trade & Employment	
23	Deliver ambitious job creation and enterprise development targets for the indigenous sector in the strategies of Enterprise Ireland, Údarás na Gaeltachta and the Local Enterprise Offices to embed jobs growth more deeply within the regions.	Enterprise Ireland, Údarás na Gaeltachta, Local Enterprise Offices	D/Enterprise, Trade & Employment, D/ Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media	 
24	Assist rural economies to diversify into new sectors and markets by taking advantage of high speed broadband and new technologies.	D/Enterprise, Trade & Employment	Enterprise Ireland, LEOs	 
25	Promote awareness and the use of remote working hubs and enterprise centres across the country to support remote working and encourage local enterprise start-ups.	D/Rural and Community Development, D/ Enterprise, Trade & Employment	Relevant Departments and Agencies	

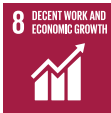
	Policy Measure	Lead Delivery Body	Other Stakeholders	Links with Sustainable Development Goal #:
26	Maximise our resources and strengths in the Green Economy to support employment opportunities for rural communities in areas such as renewable energy, sustainable tourism, energy retrofitting, the Bioeconomy and the Circular Economy.	D/ Environment, Climate and Communications, D/Agriculture, Food & the Marine	Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, National Bioeconomy Implementation Group	   
27	Roll out the development of the Technological University model to help support regional growth through the education and training sector and to act as an anchor for regional economic development, research and investment.	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science	Institutes of Technology	
28	Develop an overarching Clustering Policy and Framework to advance strong and effective clustering and links between SMEs, multinational corporations and the third-level sector.	D/Enterprise, Trade & Employment	Relevant Departments and Agencies	 
29	Examine, and take forward as appropriate, the recommendations of the SME Growth Plan to map out an ambitious long-term strategic blueprint for all SMEs, including rurally based businesses.	D/Enterprise, Trade & Employment	Relevant Departments and Agencies	 
30	Deliver a suite of new measures to support the development of Social Enterprises in rural areas to increase their social, economic and environmental impact and contribute to job creation locally.	D/Rural & Community Development	Social Enterprise Stakeholders	  
31	Expand the use of socially responsible public procurement contracts, where feasible, which will incentivise the engagement of social enterprises and Circular Economy organisations.	All Departments		 
32	Further develop the Wild Atlantic Way, Ireland's Hidden Heartlands, and Ireland's Ancient East as regional tourism offerings and further diversify tourism opportunities by strengthening Ireland's image as an outdoor activity holiday destination to the domestic and international markets.	Fáilte Ireland	D/Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Local Authorities, Other Relevant Stakeholders	  
33	Strengthen the identity and branding of the Gaeltacht regions and develop a Tourism Strategy for the Gaeltacht areas.	D/Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media	Údarás na Gaeltachta	
34	Publish an interim Action Plan for Sustainable Tourism which will identify actions which can be taken in the short-term to promote sustainable tourism.	D/Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media		 

	Policy Measure	Lead Delivery Body	Other Stakeholders	Links with Sustainable Development Goal #:
35	Publish and implement a new National Outdoor Recreation Strategy, through Comhairle na Tuaithe, to support access to, and responsible use of, outdoor recreational and leisure facilities for people of all ages, and increase employment opportunities in rural areas.	D/Rural & Community Development	Comhairle na Tuaithe	  
36	Invest in greenways, blueways, walking trails and other outdoor recreation infrastructure to support the growth in outdoor recreational tourism.	D/Rural & Community Development, D/ Transport	Fáilte Ireland, Local Authorities, Local Development Companies, Sport Ireland	  
37	Develop a pilot bicycle up-cycling initiative to support employment creation, to harness the potential of investment in greenways and to support the development of the social enterprise business model.	D/Rural and Community Development		 
38	Expand the Walks Scheme to achieve a target of at least 80 trails, doubling the number from 2018.	D/Rural & Community Development	Local Development Companies, Local Authorities, Sport Ireland	  
39	Explore the potential for the development of further tourist trails, including cross-border trails and initiatives.	D/Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, D/ Transport	Fáilte Ireland	  
40	Develop a Dark Skies Strategy for Ireland, with a focus on the opportunities it can create for rural communities and employment creation.	D/Rural & Community Development	National Parks and Wildlife Service, Fáilte Ireland, Local Authorities, and other relevant stakeholders	 
41	Implement a new National Heritage Plan, <i>Heritage Ireland 2030</i> , to identify priority actions in the heritage area.	D/Housing, Local Government and Heritage		
42	Identify opportunities for the Creative Industries in Ireland and maximise their potential to support employment in rural areas through the development of a roadmap to support the sector.	D/Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media	D/Enterprise, Trade & Employment and relevant State agencies	 
43	Publish a new Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025 to ensure that we have a modern and responsive apprenticeship programme with a strong regional footprint which meets the needs of a changing economy.	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science	SOLAS	  
44	Through a new Pathways to Work Strategy 2021-2025, support people to upskill, reskill and find employment through increased capacity and intensive activation and training.	Department of Social Protection		 

	Policy Measure	Lead Delivery Body	Other Stakeholders	Links with Sustainable Development Goal #:
45	Through the National Disability Inclusion Strategy, develop initiatives to improve employment opportunities for people with disabilities living in rural areas, including through remote working options.	D/Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth	Relevant Departments and Agencies/ Comprehensive Employment Strategy Implementation Group	  

Revitalising Rural Towns and Villages

46	Deliver a range of strategic investment programmes over the lifetime of this policy that meet the needs of differentiated rural areas, including through the €1 billion Rural Regeneration and Development Fund, and an enhanced Town and Village Renewal Scheme.	D/Rural & Community Development	Relevant Departments, State agencies, Local Authorities	
47	Prioritise rural development programmes to focus on supporting rural towns and villages to recover from the impact of COVID-19 in the short-to-medium term.	D/Rural & Community Development	D/Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, D/Housing, Local Government & Heritage, Local Authorities	 
48	Provide funding to support the upgrade and enhancement of shopfronts and street facades in towns and villages.	D/Housing, Local Government & Heritage, D/Rural & Community Development		
49	Fund Local Authorities to adapt and improve outdoor public spaces for cultural events and activities all-year round, and support the recovery of the creative, cultural, entertainment and events sector.	D/Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media		
50	Deliver major regeneration projects in towns with a population of over 10,000 which play an important role as key hubs in rural areas, through the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund.	D/Housing, Local Government & Heritage		
51	Develop and deliver a collaborative Town Centre First approach to put town centres at the heart of decision-making where appropriate.	D/Housing, Local Government & Heritage, D/Rural & Community Development	Relevant Departments, Local Authorities	
52	As part of the Town Centre First approach, provide and resource dedicated Local Authority staff to support town centre renewal.	D/Rural & Community Development		
53	Enhance the powers of Local Authorities to offer commercial rates-based incentives for businesses, targeting the re-use of vacant commercial units.	D/Housing, Local Government & Heritage		

	Policy Measure	Lead Delivery Body	Other Stakeholders	Links with Sustainable Development Goal #:
54	Examine the feasibility of introducing 'meanwhile use' legislation so that empty buildings and shopfronts on main streets can be brought back into compatible use on a short-term, temporary basis as pop up shops, street markets, exhibitions spaces and other purposes in accordance with Town Centre First policies.	D/Housing, Local Government & Heritage		
55	As part of the Town Centre First approach, provide seed capital to Local Authorities to provide serviced sites at cost in towns and villages, to allow individuals and families to build homes in rural centres.	D/Housing, Local Government & Heritage, Local Authorities		
56	Engage the Approved Housing Bodies with responsibility for housing for older people to develop accommodation in town centres more suited for those with reduced mobility.	D/Housing, Local Government & Heritage	Relevant Approved Housing Bodies	
57	Expand the Town and Village Renewal Scheme as an enabler to bring vacant and derelict buildings and sites back into use as multi-purpose spaces and for residential occupancy.	D/Rural & Community Development	Local Authorities, D/Housing, Local Government & Heritage	
58	Encourage greater use of the Buy and Renew Scheme and the Repair and Lease Scheme to combat vacancy and dereliction.	D/Housing, Local Government & Heritage		
59	As part of Budget 2022, examine the scope to introduce new supports and incentives for the refurbishment of vacant properties to increase town centre living based on the report of the pilot Town Centre Living initiative.	D/Rural & Community Development, D/Housing, Local Government & Heritage	Town Centre First Inter-Departmental Group	
60	Review and extend the regulations which exempt certain vacant commercial premises, such as "over the shop" type spaces, from requiring planning permission for change of use for residential purposes in accordance with housing activation and Town Centre First policies.	D/Housing, Local Government & Heritage		
61	Prioritise the siting of new State agencies, Departments and enterprises in towns and cities outside of Dublin, to support the Government's regional development objectives.	D/Public Expenditure & Reform	Relevant Departments and State agencies	
62	Identify potential State owned properties in rural towns and villages which can be used for community purposes.	OPW	D/Rural & Community Development	

	Policy Measure	Lead Delivery Body	Other Stakeholders	Links with Sustainable Development Goal #:
63	Examine the establishment of a Community Ownership Fund to help community groups and social enterprises to buy or take over local community assets at risk of being lost, to be run as community-owned businesses.	D/Rural & Community Development	D/Public Expenditure & Reform, D/Finance	
64	Invest in infrastructure, including water and wastewater infrastructure, to support the development of rural towns and villages.	D/Housing, Local Government & Heritage	Irish Water, Local Authorities, Other utility providers, Other relevant Departments	 
65	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 that would otherwise not be provided for in Irish Water's capital investment plan.	D/Housing, Local Government & Heritage	Irish Water	
66	Review the situation in relation to water services for towns and villages that are not currently on the Irish Water network.	D/Housing, Local Government & Heritage		
67	Bring forward proposals for the development of a Policy on the Night Time Economy which will support the revitalisation of our rural towns, as well as our larger urban centres and cities, in the post-COVID recovery.	D/Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media	Local Authorities, Communities	
68	Support the development of Smart Towns and Villages which use innovative solutions to improve resilience, build on local strengths and maximise opportunities to create desirable places for people to live and work.	D/Rural & Community Development	Local Authorities, Local Development Companies, Communities	 

Enhancing Participation, Leadership and Resilience in Rural Communities

69	Refine and build on a range of programmes to support communities, voluntary organisations, social enterprises and charities to build their resilience and enhance their impact in the aftermath of COVID-19	D/Rural and Community Development	Relevant Departments	  
70	Implement the National Volunteering Strategy 2021-2025, which will support both volunteers and community-based organisations in rural areas and nationwide.	D/Rural and Community Development	Volunteer Ireland	 
71	Establish a permanent Volunteer Reserve in local areas which can be called on by community and voluntary organisations and Local Authorities as required.	D/Rural and Community Development	Community and Voluntary Stakeholders, Local Authorities, Relevant Departments	

	Policy Measure	Lead Delivery Body	Other Stakeholders	Links with Sustainable Development Goal #:
72	Hold a regular series of Rural Ideas Fora to engage with rural dwellers to enable them to input on an ongoing basis to issues which impact on them and their communities, and to encourage their ongoing contribution to national rural policy innovation.	D/Rural & Community Development	Local Authorities, Public Participation Networks	  
73	Establish an annual Rural Youth Assembly to allow young people living in rural Ireland to make an on-going contribution to identifying and influencing policy issues that impact on them and their future.	D/Rural & Community Development	Comhairle na nÓg, D/Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Local Authorities	  
74	Build capacity for community development through provision of mentoring/training for community development leaders, with a particular focus on young people between the ages of 18 and 25.	D/Rural and Community Development	Community and Voluntary Stakeholders	
75	Provide additional supports to assist community and voluntary groups to develop projects and access available funds – including by streamlining of grant applications.	D/Rural and Community Development	Local Authorities, Local Development Companies	  
76	Develop a single information portal to provide a funding roadmap on the range of programmes and schemes available across Government for rural and community development.	D/Rural and Community Development		
77	Implement a €70 million Transitional LEADER Programme for community-led rural development for the period 2021-2022, and develop and deliver a new LEADER programme to commence in 2023, in line with the next EU funding framework.	D/Rural and Community Development	LEADER Local Action Groups, Local Development Companies	
78	Deliver the Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme (SICAP) to the end of 2022, and develop a new SICAP programme to commence in 2023, following a review and consultation with stakeholders.	D/Rural and Community Development	Local Community Development Committees, Local Authorities, Local Development Companies	 
79	Increase the number of places on the Rural Social Scheme, TÚS and Community Employment to support rural communities.	D/Social Protection	Local Authorities, Local Development Companies, Community and Voluntary Stakeholders	
80	Support the development of social innovation as a means of addressing pressing social challenges.	D/Rural and Community Development		

	Policy Measure	Lead Delivery Body	Other Stakeholders	Links with Sustainable Development Goal #:
81	Provide investment for multi-purpose spaces in the community (e.g. community centres, libraries, and sports clubs) for a variety of activities, including leisure, community, cultural and services provision.	D/Rural and Community Development	Local Authorities, Community Groups	  
82	Further enhance the Public Participation Network and Local Community Development Committee structures to ensure that local communities are fully involved in, and contribute to, decisions affecting their local areas.	D/Rural & Community Development	Local Authorities, Local Community Development Committees, Public Participation Networks	 
83	Work in consultation with local community and voluntary groups and with local decision-making structures to help welcome and integrate newcomers to rural towns and villages and to support cohesion more broadly.	D/Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth	D/Rural & Community Development, Local Authorities	
84	Implement Culture and Creative Strategies in each Local Authority area, including "Culture Days", to showcase local cultural heritage.	D/Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media	Local Authorities, D/Housing, Local Government and Heritage	 
85	Empower local communities and enhance community health and wellbeing by supporting heritage, arts, cultural activities and other activities to tackle social issues such as cohesion, rural isolation and mental health.	D/Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media	D/Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Local Authorities	 
86	Introduce a Tidy Towns Special Award for the involvement of young people (aged 16-25 years) in Tidy Towns projects.	D/Rural and Community Development	Tidy Towns Committees	
87	Commission research on the experiences and outcomes of children and young people in rural Ireland, building on the <i>Growing Up In Ireland</i> and other relevant datasets.	D/Rural & Community Development	D/Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth	 
88	Undertake research to inform the particular needs of women, girls, LGBTI+, Travellers, Roma, migrants and those of migrant origin living in rural areas.	D/Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth		 

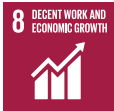
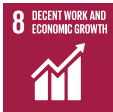
	Policy Measure	Lead Delivery Body	Other Stakeholders	Links with Sustainable Development Goal #:
Enhancing Public Services in Rural Areas				
89	Increase the residential occupancy of rural towns and villages while enabling the Irish countryside to continue to be a lived-in landscape by adopting a balanced approach to planning, in line with relevant national planning policy and guidelines, while avoiding unsustainable ribbon and over-spill development from urban areas.	D/Housing, Local Government & Heritage	Local Authorities	  
90	Update the Rural Housing Guidelines for planning authorities, to address rural housing in a broader rural development and settlement context.	D/Housing, Local Government & Heritage		
91	Provide improved rural public transport services and pilot new transport initiatives for people of all ages and abilities living in rural areas, through: - Developing and implementing a Sustainable Rural Mobility Plan to ensure all settlements over a certain size in terms of population have a service connecting them to the national public transport system. - Delivering expanded Local Link services and further integrating Local Link services with other existing public transport services through the roll out of the NTA Connecting Ireland Plan. - Developing a subsidised Local Area Hackney Scheme in designated areas of rural Ireland which are too small or remote to support a full-time taxi or hackney service. - Developing and trialling a grant-aided Community Transport Service Scheme through Local Link to support otherwise unsustainable community services. - Running a pilot, after COVID-19 has abated, to examine the potential for ride-hailing services to improve rural connectivity.	D/Transport, National Transport Authority		 
92	Build on the work already undertaken to ensure that public transport services in rural and regional areas are accessible to persons with disabilities.	D/Transport, National Transport Authority	Public transport operators, Local Authorities	  
93	Work with An Post to identify the scope to channel additional services through the post office network.	D/Environment, Climate & Communications	Relevant Departments	

	Policy Measure	Lead Delivery Body	Other Stakeholders	Links with Sustainable Development Goal #:
94	Explore the potential to develop a pilot scheme to support the use of rural pubs as community spaces and hubs for local services.	D/Rural and Community Development		
95	Undertake research on early learning and care, and school-age childcare needs of parents who work atypical hours or live in rural communities, and develop recommendations for future action.	D/Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth		  
96	Establish 96 new Community Healthcare Networks throughout the country to re-shape how community healthcare services will be delivered and support people to live more independently in their community.	D/Health		
97	Through the Healthy Ireland programme, support improved health and wellbeing of rural communities in collaboration with Local Authorities and local stakeholders and partners.	D/Health	Local Authorities	
98	Introduce a new Policing and Community Safety Bill to redefine the functions of An Garda Síochána to include community safety.	D/Justice		
99	Roll out a Local Community Safety Partnership Pilot in a rural location.	D/Justice	Relevant Departments, State agencies, and Local Authorities	
100	Review and enhance the effectiveness and availability of community-based alert and property-marking schemes in partnership with rural stakeholders.	D/Justice		
101	Provide greater clarity for Local Authorities and local communities, through a revised legislative framework, on how local CCTV schemes can be established while enhancing community safety and data protection safeguards.	D/Justice		
102	Invest in high-quality walking and cycling infrastructure specifically targeted at towns and villages across the country.	D/Transport	Local Authorities	 
103	Ensure that the Local Improvement Scheme is funded into the future.	D/Rural and Community Development		 

	Policy Measure	Lead Delivery Body	Other Stakeholders	Links with Sustainable Development Goal #:
104	Adopt a whole-of-Government approach to the protection and promotion of the Irish language, in implementing the 20-year <i>Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030</i> and Action Plan, and enacting the Official Language Amendment Bill.	D/Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media		
105	Approve and implement an Irish language plan for each of the 26 Gaeltacht districts to strengthen Irish language usage by individuals, community, and businesses in these areas.	D/Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media		
106	Develop Gaeltacht Service Towns situated in or adjacent to Gaeltacht Language Planning Areas which will play a significant role in providing public services, recreational, social and commercial facilities for those areas.	D/Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media	Local Authorities	

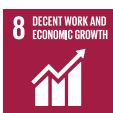
Transitioning to a Climate Neutral Society

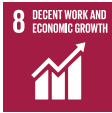
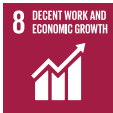
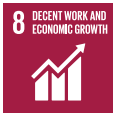
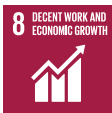
107	Enact and implement the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill and set five-year carbon budgets to contribute to meeting Ireland's target of net zero emissions by 2050.	D/Environment, Climate & Communications		  
108	Publish a new Climate Action Plan in 2021 and update on an annual basis.	D/Environment, Climate and Communications		
109	Develop new models of engagement with individuals, sectors, and regions on a structured dialogue basis so that the whole of society can contribute to the climate action process.	D/Environment, Climate and Communications	Relevant Departments and Agencies	  
110	Enable community energy to play a role in reaching the target of generating at least 70% of electricity through renewables by 2030, through supports such as a Community Benefit fund and a community category within the Renewable Electricity Support Scheme.	D/Environment, Climate and Communications	Commission for Regulation of Utilities, SEAI	  
111	Prioritise the development of microgeneration of renewable electricity, allowing people sell excess power back to the grid, through the establishment of a Microgeneration Support Scheme.	D/Environment, Climate and Communications	SEAI, D/Enterprise, Trade & Employment, D/Agriculture & the Marine	  
112	Expand the Sustainable Energy Communities Network from 500 to 1,500 by 2030, to support local communities to be directly involved in energy projects.	D/Environment, Climate and Communications	SEAI	 

	Policy Measure	Lead Delivery Body	Other Stakeholders	Links with Sustainable Development Goal #:
113	Launch further calls for projects to be supported from the Climate Action Fund.	D/Environment, Climate and Communications		
114	Continue to develop Ireland's approach to a Just Transition away from fossil fuels, including by: a) preparing a Territorial Just Transition Plan for Ireland for the EU Just Transition Fund. b) commissioning additional research on Just Transition to consider future priorities and spatial and sectoral impacts, and c) supporting projects under the National Just Transition Fund.	D/Environment, Climate and Communications	Relevant Departments and Agencies, Local Authorities	  
115	Retrofit 500,000 homes and install 400,000 heat pumps across the country up to 2030, contributing to employment opportunities in rural areas.	D/Environment, Climate and Communications	SEAI	 
116	Bring investment and job opportunities to coastal communities by developing the offshore renewable energy sector, including through: a) the finalisation of the Marine Planning and Development Management Bill, b) the development of a new consenting regime for offshore energy, c) the development of an offshore transmission grid, and d) offshore Renewable Electricity Support Scheme auctions.	D/Housing, Local Government & Heritage, D/Environment, Climate and Communications		  
117	Rehabilitate peatlands to contribute to reduced carbon emissions, carbon sequestration and enhanced biodiversity, including through: a) Climate Action Fund investment of €108 million to repurpose 80,000 acres of bog in the Midlands as part of a major peatlands restoration plan, and b) The national raised bog designated sites restoration programme to restore in the region of 25,000 hectares of raised bog.	D/Environment, Climate and Communications, D/Housing, Local Government & Heritage		

	Policy Measure	Lead Delivery Body	Other Stakeholders	Links with Sustainable Development Goal #:
118	Develop a national policy on coastal erosion and flooding and maintain a multi-annual investment programme in flood relief measures to protect impacted communities.	OPW, D/Housing, Local Government & Heritage	Local Authorities, D/Environment, Climate and Communications	 
119	Carry out a comprehensive review of Public Participation Networks and Local Economic and Community Plans, to ensure that they are fit for purpose for climate action.	D/Rural & Community Development	Local Authorities, LCDCs, PPNs, SEAI, D/Environment, Climate and Communications	  
120	Consider the needs of rural areas in the development of an Electric Vehicle Infrastructure Strategy which will seek to ensure that charging infrastructure stays ahead of demand.	D/Transport		 

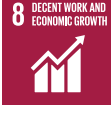
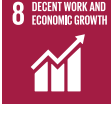
Supporting the Sustainability of Agriculture, the Marine & Forestry

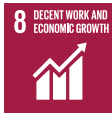
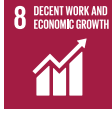
121	Develop and Implement a new Agri-Food Strategy to 2030, building on the success of the previous strategies.	D/Agriculture, Food & the Marine	Agri-food Sector	       
122	Encourage and support Local Authorities to expand the number of farmers' markets, farm shops and food emporiums, and support the formation of community-owned markets in all towns, showcasing local food produce from local farmers, growers, and food producers.	D/Agriculture, Food & the Marine	Local Authorities	    
123	Support farm diversification, including through the provision of the Options programme managed by Teagasc.	D/Agriculture, Food & the Marine	Teagasc, private advisory services	  
124	Support research and development in areas such as agri-food, biobased systems, smart agriculture and precision agriculture to promote and encourage innovation.	D/Agriculture, Food & the Marine, D/Enterprise, Trade & Employment	Teagasc, Higher Education Institutions, Enterprise Ireland, Science Foundation Ireland, Environmental Protection Agency, SEAI, Irish Research Council	 

	Policy Measure	Lead Delivery Body	Other Stakeholders	Links with Sustainable Development Goal #:
125	Explore the potential application of Living Labs in an Irish context, establishing innovation networks to identify and pilot tailored place-based initiatives for primary production, food and biobased systems.	D/Agriculture, Food & the Marine		  
126	Implement <i>Ag Climatise - A Roadmap towards Climate Neutrality</i> for the agri-food sector.	D/Agriculture, Food & the Marine		  
127	Pilot a results-based agri-environment scheme to reward farmers for adapting to more sustainable methods of farming with a view to the development of a new agri-environment scheme capable of delivering broad environmental and biodiversity benefits that will align financial supports with climate objectives.	D/Agriculture, Food & the Marine		 
128	Publish a successor forestry programme to deliver an ambitious afforestation plan, to achieve an afforestation target of 8,000 ha/year, with a particular focus on an increased farmer participation and habitat creation.	D/Agriculture, Food & the Marine		  
129	Provide ongoing support for the development of the knowledge and skills base of the agriculture and forestry sectors by the Teagasc Advisory and Education Services.	D/Agriculture, Food & the Marine	Teagasc	   
130	Develop the Common Agricultural Policy Strategic Plan for the period 2023-2027, which will address existing and emerging challenges including climate action, environmental protection, generational renewal, viable farm incomes, and sustain vibrant rural areas.	D/Agriculture, Food & the Marine	Relevant Departments and Agencies	     
131	Support generational renewal, including young farmers and women in agriculture, through measures including the CAP, taxation measures and access to finance initiatives.	D/Agriculture, Food & the Marine	D/Finance	    

	Policy Measure	Lead Delivery Body	Other Stakeholders	Links with Sustainable Development Goal #:
132	Increase awareness and outreach across the farming community of programmes and initiatives to support the safety, health and wellbeing of farmers.	D/Agriculture, Food & the Marine	Health and Safety Authority, Teagasc	  
133	Conduct a review of the means test for Farm Assist to ensure farmers receive the appropriate level of support through this scheme.	D/Social Protection		
134	Enact legislation implementing revised Nursing Home Support Scheme (Fair Deal Scheme) provisions in respect of assets which are family-owned and operated farms and businesses.	D/Health		

Supporting the Sustainability of our Islands and Coastal Communities

135	Publish and implement a new cross-Departmental Policy for Island Development and associated Action Plans to ensure delivery of the policy, including in areas such as housing, health, energy, utilities, waste management, climate change, education, digital connectivity, employment, infrastructure and transport.	D/Rural & Community Development	Relevant Departments and Agencies, Local Authorities	   
136	Progress vital infrastructure development for our island communities.	D/Rural & Community Development	Relevant Departments and Agencies, Local Authorities	 
137	Establish a forum for ongoing dialogue between Local Authorities, relevant policy Departments and island communities.	D/Rural & Community Development	Local Authorities, Island Communities	 
138	Establish gTeic enterprise hubs on the islands under the remit of Údarás na Gaeltachta to support employment opportunities.	Údarás na Gaeltachta	Island Communities	 
139	Explore the potential for community-based enterprise hubs on islands not under the remit of Údarás na Gaeltachta.	D/Rural & Community Development	Local Authorities	 
140	Maximise the potential to utilise the islands as test-beds for innovative technologies (e.g. eHealth, micro-generation of renewable energy).	D/Rural & Community Development	Relevant Departments and agencies	 

	Policy Measure	Lead Delivery Body	Other Stakeholders	Links with Sustainable Development Goal #:
141	Develop a new integrated marine sustainable development plan, as a successor to <i>Harnessing Our Ocean Wealth</i> , focusing on all aspects of the marine sector.	D/Agriculture, Food & the Marine	Relevant Departments and Agencies	 
142	Publish Ireland's first ever Marine Spatial Planning policy, setting out a clear vision for the future development of our marine planning system.	D/Housing, Local Government & Heritage	Relevant Government Departments and State Agencies; Environmental Pillar; Relevant Industry; International Partners	
143	Following completion of the Marine Spatial Planning policy, bring forward Ireland's first National Marine Planning Framework which will introduce a planning system for managing the development of Ireland's maritime area in the same way that the <i>National Planning Framework</i> fulfils this function on land.	D/Housing, Local Government & Heritage	Relevant Government Departments and State Agencies	
144	Establish a marine planning oversight delivery board, <i>Project Ireland Marine 2040</i> , to provide leadership and oversight to the implementation of the National Marine Planning Framework, and implement the long-term overarching strategy to manage Ireland's seas for the benefit of all its people.	D/Housing, Local Government & Heritage	D/Taoiseach, D/Public Expenditure and Reform, Relevant Government Departments and State Agencies	
145	Explore the potential for Coastal Partnership Groups to bring together the local coastal communities to address issues of concern, share best practice and resources, and facilitate communication between stakeholders.	D/Housing, Local Government & Heritage	Relevant Government Departments and State Agencies, Coastal Communities	   
146	Continue to invest in coastal communities through the Fisheries Local Area Group (FLAG) scheme, providing support for investments by micro seafood enterprises and projects in the area of marine tourism and leisure and the wider marine sector.	D/Agriculture, Food & the Marine	Fisheries Local Action Groups (FLAGs)	  

Implementation of the Policy

	Policy Measure	Lead Delivery Body	Other Stakeholders	Links with Sustainable Development Goal #:
147	Support rural communities to develop long-term cohesive Master Plans for their areas, to support an integrated place-based approach to rural development (aligned with the RSEs, County Development Plans, Local Development Plans and relevant national, regional and local policy objectives).	D/Rural & Community Development	Local Authorities, Local Development Companies	
148	Develop an effective rural proofing model to ensure the needs of rural communities are considered in the development of Government policies.	D/Rural & Community Development	All Departments	 
149	Support new research into rural development priorities, including in collaboration with Higher Education Institutions and other research funders and research organisations.	D/Rural & Community Development	Higher Education Institutions, other research bodies	  
150	Establish a Higher Education Institutions Network on rural development to ensure ongoing engagement with rural development experts over the lifetime of this policy.	D/Rural & Community Development	Higher Education Institutions	
151	Enhance the sharing of information and best practice on rural development policy on a North-South basis and identify areas for further cooperation.	D/Rural & Community Development, D/Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (NI)		
152	Deepen engagement at international level on policy relating to rural development matters through increased participation, including at OECD and EU level.	D/Rural & Community Development	D/Foreign Affairs	

Appendix 2

Consultation Process and Key Messages

The process of developing *Our Rural Future* involved a series of consultations with key stakeholders (including Government Departments, agencies, and rural stakeholder groups) to inform the development of the policy. This engagement was extremely important in order to gather inputs and insights on key issues impacting on rural Ireland, and to obtain agreement on the implementation of actions to be included in the policy.

An outline of some of the consultations which were held is set out below.

Rural Conversations Series

The Department undertook an initial strand of stakeholder engagement through a series of three rural development seminars co-hosted with the Royal Irish Academy. These seminars focused on the themes of delivering economic development in rural communities (November 2018), enhancing social cohesion in rural communities (February 2019), and building vibrant and sustainable communities in rural Ireland (April 2019). The Rural Conversations series provided an opportunity to elicit rural stakeholder views on issues impacting on rural economies and communities. An average of circa 60 people attended each of these events. A report on each event was published by the RIA, and a composite report⁷⁵ bringing together key messages from all three events was published in September 2019.

Regional Stakeholder Workshops

The Department of Rural and Community Development held a series of eight stakeholder workshop events during May and June 2019. These took place in Cavan, Donegal, Carlow, Tipperary, Galway (Aran Islands), Mayo, Clare, and Kerry.

The events were well attended by a wide range of stakeholders including Local Authorities, community Gardaí, community and voluntary groups, education and training bodies, sectoral and representative groups and business interests.

Discussions at the events focused on the identification of the challenges and opportunities for rural Ireland and the actions required to address these challenges and realise the opportunities.

Youth Workshops

In addition to the eight regional stakeholder events, two events were held to obtain the views of young people living in rural Ireland. A discussion was held with a small group of second level students in Carlow. A further youth consultation event, held in a structured workshop format (aligned with the format of the regional events) was held, in conjunction with Foróige. This event was attended by almost 50 young people, between the ages of 14 and 18, who live in rural Ireland, and are members of the Foróige network countrywide.

Action Plan for Rural Development Monitoring Committee

The Monitoring Committee which oversaw progress on the implementation of the measures contained in the Action Plan also had an important contribution to make in informing the next stage of rural policy development.

Whole-of-Government Approach

A number of bilateral meetings took place with key Government Departments and agencies to ensure that synergies with key Government policies are reflected in *Our Rural Future*.

⁷⁵ Rural Conversations Composite Report (Royal Irish Academy and Government of Ireland) - https://www.ria.ie/sites/default/files/rural-conversations-report_0.pdf

Oireachtas Committee

As part of the consultation process, the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Rural and Community Development was invited to make a submission on the priorities and key actions which the members believed could be taken to strengthen rural economies and rural communities in the years ahead.

Public Consultation

The Department held two public consultation events during September and October 2019, in Mallow and Laois. These workshops sought the views of people living and working in rural Ireland on the challenges and opportunities facing them and their communities, and actions required to help rural Ireland realise its full potential.

Feedback from the public was also invited through an online survey on the challenges and opportunities facing people living and working in rural Ireland.

The survey was open for input from 4 September to 11 October 2019. By the closing date, 1,733 responses had been received.

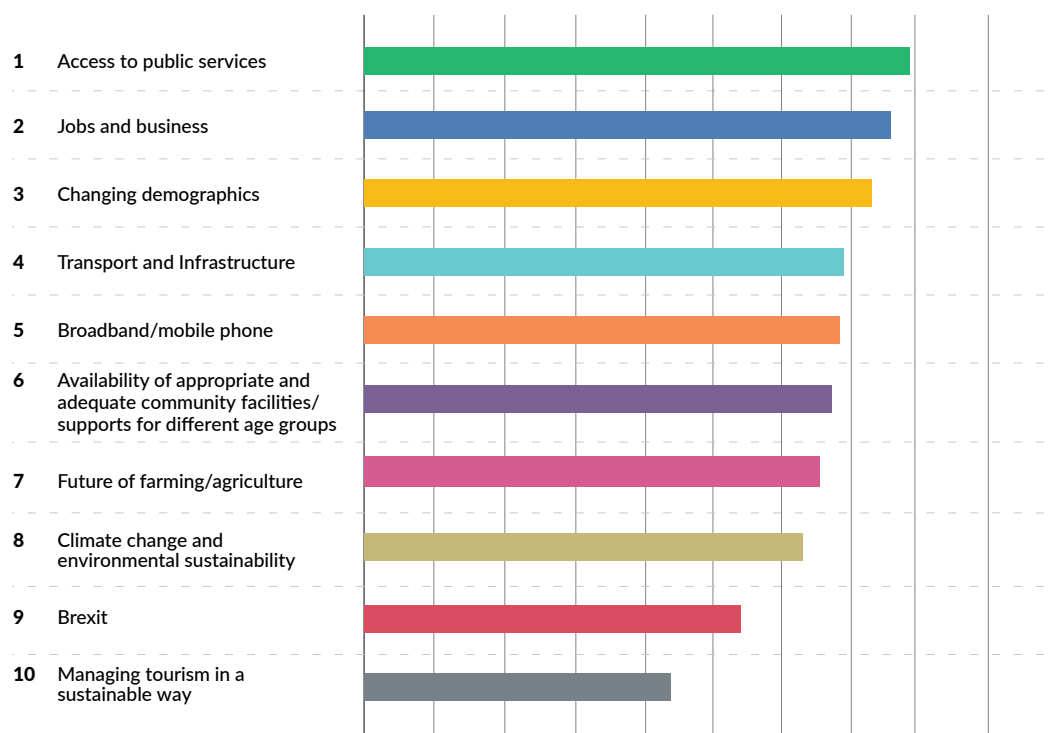
Respondents ranked the top challenges facing rural Ireland as follows:

1. Access to public services
2. Jobs and business
3. Changing demographics
4. Transport and Infrastructure
5. Broadband/mobile phone connectivity
6. Availability of appropriate and adequate community facilities/supports for different age groups
7. Future of farming/agri-food sector
8. Climate change and environmental sustainability
9. Brexit
10. Managing tourism in a sustainable way

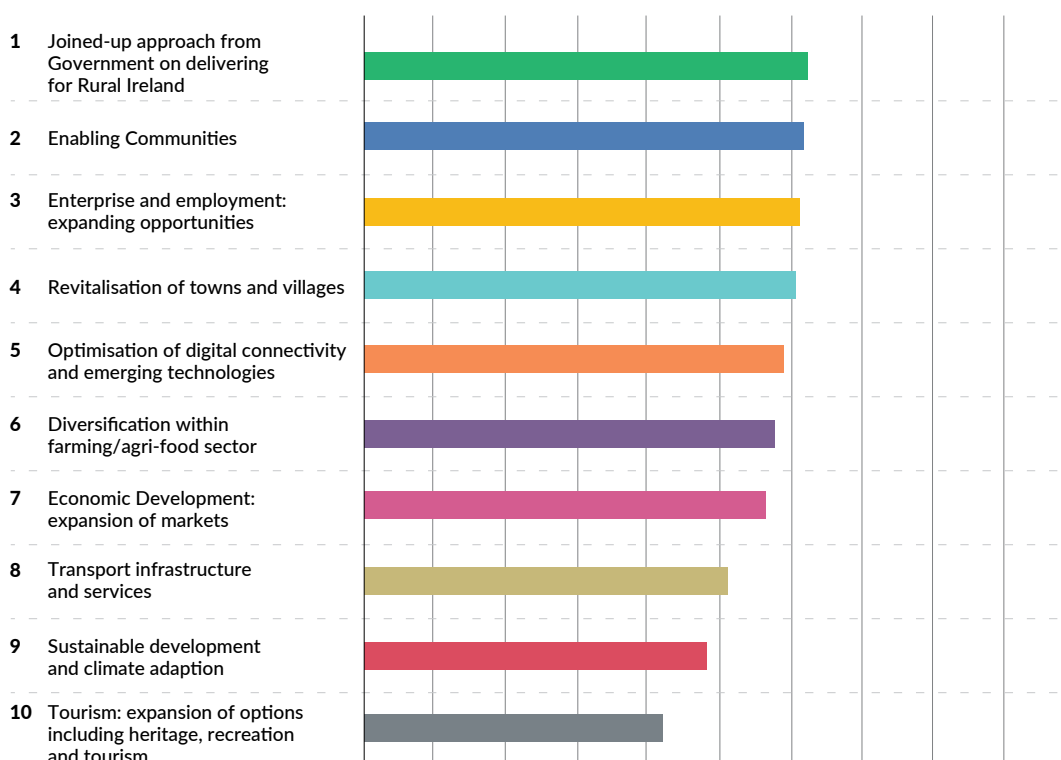
The opportunities which rural areas could maximize the potential of over the coming years were ranked by survey respondents as:

1. Joined up approach from Government
2. Enabling communities: (e.g. supporting local leadership, groups and volunteers; enhancing community amenities)
3. Enterprise and Employment: expanding opportunities (e.g. Social Enterprise, apprenticeships, supporting entrepreneurs)
4. Revitalisation of towns and villages
5. Optimisation of digital connectivity and emerging technologies (e.g. remote working, research, development and innovation, and future jobs)
6. Diversification within farming/agri-food sector
7. Economic Development: expansion of markets (local, national and international) and sectors (both non-traditional and emerging)
8. Transport infrastructure and services
9. Sustainable development and climate adaptation (e.g. renewable energy)
10. Tourism: expansion of options including heritage, recreation and activity tourism

In your opinion, what are the main challenges facing rural Ireland in the next 5 years ranked by priority from 1-10 (with 1 being the most significant challenge and 10 being the least significant)?



In your opinion, what are the main opportunities available to rural Ireland in the next 5 years, ranked by priority from 1-10 (with 1 being the most significant challenge and 10 being the least significant)?



Consultation process – Key messages

Some of the key messages which emerged from these consultations include:

- The **centrality of communities** in ensuring economic and social progress in rural Ireland.
- Importance of the work of the **community and voluntary sector**, and the need to support it to address sustainability and governance and compliance concerns.
- **Community leader and volunteer support infrastructure**, including mentor links with other community leaders and youth; targeted schemes for rural youth, retired people, distinct communities and new communities.
- **Potential to increase use of multi-purpose community spaces**: Renovating and reusing vacant buildings and clustering of services to enable the community to use these spaces for a variety of purposes including leisure/ community/services provision/enterprise hubs. Spaces where different generations, and new and established communities can interact for social events, community projects, etc.
- Increasing focus on **sustainable development and climate adaptation**.
- The necessity of **high speed broadband** for work, study and social interactions.
- Recognition of **opportunities to optimise use of digital connectivity and emerging technologies** (e.g. digital services, remote working, co-working/multi-purpose spaces) in light of the rollout of the National Broadband Plan.
- **Changing demographics** and the implications arising from an ageing population and the challenge of **retaining young people in rural communities**.
- Value of an **inter-generational mix** in communities.
- The need for **good quality jobs and career opportunities** in order to retain young people in rural areas, and to attract graduates back to rural Ireland.
- The requirement for **more coherent implementation of policies**, programmes and funding streams being delivered by the Department of Rural and Community Development and other Government Departments and agencies.
- The need for further integration of rural, regional and national **public transport services** which are affordable and reliable to provide a comprehensive and reliable service to rural dwellers of all ages.
- Opportunities to develop the **Social Enterprise model** in rural Ireland to address social, societal and environmental challenges.
- **Mental health and addiction services**: Strong message that there is a lack of support services for young people with mental health issues. Alcohol and drug use becoming increasingly prevalent amongst this age group, and the current support structure which largely falls on schools to provide, is not effective.
- **Gap in the diversity of facilities** available outside of sports clubs, with no alternatives available for young people not interested in GAA, etc. Facilities for young people tend to be generic in terms of age (covering 5-18 years of age), and sufficient consideration is not given to different categories of age-appropriate facilities, i.e. tailored amenities for the younger age group, for teenagers, and the older age group.
- **Promoting cultural landmarks and heritage sites**, and utilising these assets to increase tourism.
- **Diversifying tourism offering** through more activity tourism, investment in Greenways, arts/ creative tourism, traditional music and dance, and Irish-American market for heritage tourism.
- Incentivise educators and researchers to engage with rural-focused dissertations or group projects, or to commercialise their **research**.
- Strategies to **enable people to both live and work in rural areas**: childcare, local services, skill matching between residents and local industries.
- Importance of **communication and access to local information** on events, opportunities, funding: local radio/papers, apps, websites.
- Need for a **national rural communication** policy to help articulate rural value and contribution to Irish society.

Consultations on implications of COVID-19

Subsequent to the extensive consultations carried out in 2019 relating to the development of a new rural policy, additional consultation was undertaken in light of the impact COVID-19. The Department engaged in a series of conversations with a number of stakeholder focus groups to identify the short-term and longer-term impacts of COVID-19 on rural areas and any consequential actions which need to be taken to assist the economic and social recovery of these areas. These engagements and insights informed further development of the rural policy in a post-COVID context.



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