

Budget Submission

2015/16

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Irish Rural Link Pre-Budget Submission 2015/16

Summary

Issue	Recommendations
Rural Strategies	The establishment of a cabinet committee to oversee rural regeneration as outlined in the CEDRA report.
Rural Income Protection	Maintain current levels of social welfare payments to those at the lowest level of income in rural Ireland. Expand Rural Social Scheme and Community Services Scheme. Incorporate training for participants of RSS and CSS. Maintain current levels of farm assist.
Education/cost	<p>Many IRL members are extremely concerned at the rising costs of second and third level education. These are families who do not qualify for either grants or other assistance. In many cases the family is completely hamstrung by mortgage and health bills.</p> <p>In rural areas the problem is compounded by transport, with particular problems being experienced by third level students.</p> <p>In their case the average cost of a student from a rural area going to third level education is €11,500.</p> <p>IRL are asking for the following;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A full review of grant and other supports to students attending second and third level education, with particular emphasis on the cost for rural based students. Such a review, similar to the proposed review of medical cards, would take into account factors which cause unique financial hardship, such as health issues, family indebtedness and distance. • A comprehensive analysis of the affordability of school, particularly for families who are on low wage employment. <p>Rural primary schools are under increased risk of closure through the policy of amalgamation with larger schools.</p> <p>IRL are calling for a cost benefit analysis approach which will fully examine the costs of amalgamation to not only the exchequer but to the families of the student who would be forced to travel further to school. The cost benefit approach should not just provide an economic analysis but also a social analysis such as the standard of education received in the current situation and how it would be altered in any new situation. Such a review needs to be completed taking full cognisance of parent's view-points.</p>

Rural Energy Poverty	<p>Develop an Energy Poverty Strategy & adopt proposals of the Energy Poverty Coalition.</p> <p>Ring-fence revenue from carbon tax to off-set fuel poverty and provide support for alternative fuels and heating systems. It should be noted that Ireland's carbon tax rates is one of the highest in Europe and is particularly punitive against businesses located in rural and regional areas.</p> <p>Introduce a comprehensive support package which will enable rural households to adapt their homes so that they will be warmer and will be compliant with all climate change policies.</p> <p>Develop plans that will cater for exceptional cold weather patterns.</p> <p>Address commuting patterns through regional and sub-regional employment stimuli and promote eco-driving.</p>
Community led renewable Energy Projects	<p>There is a need to offer financial support to community led projects for the initial structural costs.</p>
Rural Enterprise & Employment	<p>As stated in the CEDRA report:</p> <p>Support entrepreneurialism and diversify employment in rural areas.</p> <p>Develop an employment based training programme, which links employers with the unemployed and which at the end of each individual training programme; the employer is expected to employ the person provided they get reasonable supports.</p>
Investment policy	<p>Continue investment in broadband infrastructure.</p>
Rural Development Programme	<p>Develop microfinance for small or rural enterprises.</p> <p>The design of environmental programmes, which will protect the environment and will also create Jobs.</p>
Rain-water harvest	<p>The aim of this proposal is to put in place rainwater collection systems on every farm, using the existing farm shed as the main collector.</p> <p>Financial support to farmers would be designed under the new EU programme for rural development.</p> <p>Companies involved would do so to a minimum standard and could also avail of training programmes linked to people unemployed.</p>
Regional Development	<p>Issue a new white paper on rural development and undertake to prioritise investment in rural community development.</p> <p>Implement the CEDRA Report.</p> <p>Activate and continue Gateway Innovation Fund.</p> <p>Engage with communities to tackle ghost estates.</p>

Small Towns/Villages	<p>The launch of a targeted stimulus programme aimed at regenerating rural towns and villages.</p> <p>The mechanism for delivery of such a targeted stimulus programme should be similar to the RAPID programme and could be piloted in key areas most affected by the recession.</p>
Rural Transport & Isolation	<p>Maintain and extend current supports to Rural Transport Programme. Re-organise the method of finance allocation under the free transport programme. As it is currently constructed, it fails to be of benefit to the vast majority of people on social welfare in rural areas who are entitled to it.</p>
Phone Allowance	<p>IRL is calling on a reverse of the 2013 budget decision to remove the phone allowance for pensioners.</p>
Services	<p>Establish a study on the feasibility of essential services to rural areas. Using a cost benefit approach, the criteria used should include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The use of indicators that measure the benefit in social terms to people. - The long term consequences of not providing the service - The long term costs associated with cutting back. <p>Such a study would ensure that decisions made in the short term are based on strong principles of financial and social sustainability.</p>
Septic Tank Grants	<p>Expand the grant system for improving the standard of septic tanks in Ireland. The level of the grants needs to be raised especially for low income families and to be staged as some families can just be over the limit for the full grant losing 30 per cent of the grant available.</p> <p>Education surrounding the correct maintenance of septic tanks is required to improve the standard while also reducing the inspection failure rate.</p>

1.1 Overview

Irish Rural Link (IRL) is the national network of rural community groups, representing over 600 groups and thousands of individuals committed to socially, environmentally and economically sustainable rural communities. IRL have fully accepted the gravity of the crisis facing the Government but believe rural communities have borne a disproportionate weight of recent budgetary decisions including carbon taxes, community sector cutbacks and reduced regional investment.

We welcome the Government's success in maintaining the steady improvement of Ireland's finances and in particular their work in restructuring the huge national debt.

We also urge the government to recognise the huge sacrifices being made by people, because of the austerity now in place for 6 years and strongly recommend that this budget begins the process of stimulating the economy so that employment can begin to increase and families can lessen the hardship.

We believe that under the IMF/EU/ECB bail out this Government has choices. We note that the IMF representatives have clearly stated that the Government must not unduly disadvantage people who are vulnerable or communities that are struggling to maintain structures necessary to be sustainable. It is also note worthy that the IMF have made it clear that austerity as it is implemented affecting the most vulnerable is not a sustainable policy in terms of restoring the national economy.

Essentially, people in rural areas are subsidising urban dwellers by paying for public services such as buses that they cannot access. They cannot access a widespread rural transport service or take advantage of free travel entitlements. Much the same can be said about amenities such as libraries, public swimming pools etc. The potential for school amalgamations with no consideration of the community impacts or the cost of transport and the possibility for garda station closures in the absence of proper community policing are other worrying possibilities for rural communities.

In the last year families in rural areas are experiencing a raft of financial hardships in terms of:

- Care based services, rising fuel costs and cuts to school transport, Garda stations and post offices.
- The down turn has also affected families' access to reasonable financial services. This is highlighted by the gradual disappearance of bank branches and the increased tightening of regulations governing credit unions.
- This latter experience is forcing many families who are in extreme poverty to depend on money lenders, whose charges are punitive.

- Increased hardship on families who have children in third level education

Overall Rural Strategies.

The lack of any functioning overall strategy to inform Government policy on rural development is completely disadvantaging rural communities. The demise of the white paper on rural development coupled with the ending of the National Spatial Strategy has meant that there is no overarching strategy that can inform all departments on rural policy. National policies are then rolled out without any analysis of the unintended consequences for rural areas.

Examples include;

Government action	Outcomes
The closure of over 30 Garda stations in rural Ireland	Without an accompanying policy to assure communities that policing will be improved; rural families now believe they have an inferior police service.
School Closures	The closing of rural schools has the immediate consequence of increasing the costs of families in getting their children to school. Equally such closures are never analysed in terms of actual savings to the state.
Closure of outreach health related services	People living in isolated areas rely on accessing outreach health related services. Older people already limited in terms of transport have come to depend on these. Their closure increases their risk to ill health and increases their sense of isolation.
Carbon Tax	Because people living in rural areas can not choose alternative modes of transport, they are forced to pay this as an extra tax.
Broadband	The failure to roll out broadband, what is comparable with national standards disadvantages the rural towns, villages and communities in terms of employment creation and the encouragement of investment.

While this table is a limited representation of such examples it symbolises the huge gap between policy and action as it applies in rural Ireland.

Rural Poverty

The study carried out by the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice in association with Irish Rural Link has published a detailed study on the minimum essential budgets for six house types in rural areas.¹ The key findings illustrate the stark reality that the cost of a minimum essential standard of living for those household types in rural areas is higher than that for their urban counterparts. Table 1 illustrates the weekly budgets for six rural household types required to attain a minimum essential standard of living.

The high cost of living across rural regions means that a minimum essential standard of living is not possible for the following three of the six household types:

- Female Pensioner living alone (Age 70+)
- Two Parents and Two Children (Age 10 & 15), based on one adult working full time
- Single Male, Living Alone (Age 40 – 55)

The shortfall in income is attributable to the inadequacy of social welfare rates and the national minimum wage vis-à-vis the cost of living of a rural household. In circumstances where a person has been self-employed and is not now entitled to any social welfare payments, the shortfall would be considerably greater. In addition, these figures do not take account of recent increases in fuel costs due to carbon levies or cuts in the 2010 budget.

¹ “Minimum Essential Budgets for Six Household Types in Rural Areas” Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (2010) available from www.budgeting.ie

Table* 1: MESL Weekly Budgets† for Six Rural Household Types, Q4 2009 Prices

	Pensioner Couple (Aged 66 – 69)	Female Pensioner (Living Alone) (Aged 70+)	One Parent, Two Children (Aged 3 & 10)	Two Parents, Two Children (Aged 3 & 10)	Two Parents, Two Children (Aged 10 & 15)	Single Adult Male (Aged 40 – 55)
Food‡	€ 113.76	€ 82.74	€ 107.09	€ 127.71	€ 157.72	€ 83.82
Clothing	€ 27.58	€ 17.52	€ 22.84	€ 30.04	€ 39.33	€ 14.17
Personal Care	€ 15.01	€ 10.91	€ 13.99	€ 22.58	€ 27.37	€ 10.92
Health Related Costs	€ 15.41	€ 7.69	€ 5.90	€ 7.30	€ 7.63	€ 1.62
Household Goods	€ 26.47	€ 23.80	€ 23.15	€ 26.36	€ 28.27	€ 22.33
Household Services	€ 8.23	€ 7.70	€ 10.62	€ 10.96	€ 10.96	€ 8.27
Communications	€ 13.21	€ 13.32	€ 5.87	€ 11.44	€ 27.82	€ 10.70
Social Inclusion & Participation	€ 55.91	€ 43.76	€ 43.33	€ 66.14	€ 88.49	€ 60.77
Educational Costs	€ -	€ -	€ 7.02	€ 7.02	€ 22.38	€ 2.50
Transport	€ 51.77	€ 51.78	€ 64.48	€ 113.18	€ 113.18	€ 62.81
Household Fuel	€ 43.01	€ 41.57	€ 41.02	€ 41.22	€ 42.34	€ 33.32
Personal Costs	€ 6.49	€ 8.50	€ 6.00	€ 6.00	€ 6.00	€ 9.29
Childcare Costs	€ -	€ -	€ 208.10	€ -	€ -	€ -
Insurance Costs §	€ 43.72	€ 27.54	€ 33.86	€ 52.87	€ 52.87	€ 23.71
Savings & Contingency Costs	€ 31.00	€ 10.33	€ 14.03	€ 28.74	€ 28.74	€ 15.50
Total Weekly Costs	€ 451.57	€ 347.16	€ 607.30	€ 551.56	€ 653.10	€ 359.73

* The figures in these tables represent the average (mean) costs across three geographic areas.

† Weekly budget excluding housing costs, based on one adult working full-time (where household has an adult of working age), and no entitlement to secondary benefits.

‡ Food demonstrated the largest variance across the three areas, e.g. for the Two Parent, Two Children (Aged 10 & 15) household type food costs vary from €146.11 in Area A to €174.37 in Area C, giving a range of €28.26 in this instance.

§ Comprised of health insurance, home contents insurance, and car insurance.

Source: “Minimum Essential Budgets for Six Household Types in Rural Areas” Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice 2010 available from www.budgeting.ie

Rural/Urban Budget Shortfall

Table 2 outlines the difference in a minimum essential budget between rural and urban households. Rural households essentially require €3,635.32 - €5,647.72 per annum more than their urban counterparts in order to maintain a basic standard of living.

Table 2: Summary of Rural – Urban Expenditure Difference, Q4 2009 Prices

	Pensioner Couple (Aged 66 – 69)	Female Pensioner (Living Alone) (Aged 70+)	One Parent, Two Children (Aged 3 & 10)	Two Parents, Two Children (Aged 3 & 10)	Two Parents, Two Children (Aged 10 & 15)	Single Adult Male* (Aged 40 – 55)
Weekly Budget [†] , Excluding Rent & Childcare						
Rural	€ 451.57	€ 347.16	€ 399.20	€ 551.56	€ 653.10	€ 359.73
Urban	€ 345.58	€ 257.88	€ 329.29	€ 442.95	€ 552.56	-
Difference	€ 105.99	€ 89.28	€ 69.91	€ 108.61	€ 100.54	-
Breakdown of Rural – Urban Difference						
Food	30.30%	18.03%	27.51%	22.15%	24.72%	-
Transport (Car, Fuel, Insurance, etc.)	53.62%	65.08%	62.34%	69.20%	74.76%	-
Remainder	16.09%	16.89%	10.16%	8.65%	0.53%	-

* Rural single male not comparable with urban single male due to different age and housing profiles.

[†] Based on one adult working full-time (where household has an adult of working age), and no entitlement to secondary benefits.

Source: “Minimum Essential Budgets for Six Household Types in Rural Areas” Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice 2010 available from www.budgeting.ie

Rural Income Protection

These study findings clearly show that rural households are far more vulnerable to cuts in social welfare payments or other similar broad brush measures. Essentially, rural households will be the first to be pushed below the poverty line, or further below the poverty line as the case may be.

Consequently, the protection of marginalised and disadvantaged rural citizens and communities should be a key priority in the upcoming budget. Table 3 shows that in rural areas, even before measures introduced in the 2010 budget and rent or mortgage costs are taken into account, pensioners, persons in receipt of social welfare allowances and even persons in full time employment are often already below the poverty line.

Table 3: Comparing MESL Budget Expenditure (including housing) to Weekly Cash Income

Two Parents, Two Children (10 & 15)	Weekly Cash Income*	Weekly Expenditure†	Shortfall	Poverty Line‡
In Receipt of Jobseekers Benefit (1 car)	€ 478.23	€ 612.22	€ 133.99	€ 532.27
One Adult Working Full-time (2 cars)	€ 570.08	€ 658.01	€ 87.93	€ 532.27
One Adult Working Full-time, One Adult Working Part-time (2 cars)	€ 636.69	€ 690.67	€ 53.98	€ 532.27
Female Pensioner, Living Alone (Aged 70+)				
Contributory Pension	€ 269.02	€ 347.78	€ 78.76	€ 229.47
Non Contributory Pension	€ 257.72	€ 347.78	€ 89.56	€ 229.47
Single Male, Living Alone (Aged 40 – 55)				
In Receipt of Jobseekers Benefit	€ 204.30	€ 358.93	€ 154.63	€ 229.47
Working Full-time	€ 324.38	€ 397.02	€ 72.64	€ 229.47

* When calculating the net cash income for each scenario, income from all social welfare entitlements is taken into account where applicable, e.g. Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance, Family Income Supplement etc.

† Less healthcare costs where applicable.

‡ Predicted 2009 60% median income poverty line, CORI Poverty Policy Briefing (2009).

Source: “Minimum Essential Budgets for Six Household Types in Rural Areas” Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice 2010 available from www.budgeting.ie

- **Rural Social Scheme & Community Services Programme**

Irish Rural Link has welcomed the Government’s commitment to the continuance of the Rural Social Scheme and Community Services Scheme. Together with the TUS scheme they provide a valuable service to people who are affected by unemployment or low income as is the case for farmers. Equally the contribution of these schemes to local communities.

IRL see these programmes as essential to the development of community infrastructure as well as providing unemployed people with the necessary skills to remain motivated to seek out employment or establish their own business. We strongly recommend that these schemes are restructured so that participants can make a real difference and ensure the best use is made of their skills, time and effort.

- **Farm Assist**

In recent times increasing numbers of farmers have relied on non-farm income, typically employed in the sectors most severely affected by the economic downturn such as construction and traditional manufacturing

sectors.² Accordingly, it is essential that the Farm Assist scheme remains intact.

Rural Energy Poverty

Retrofitting

Rural households are at greater risk of fuel poverty due to the nature of the rural housing stock, the types of fuels available, limited opportunities to switch to cheaper fuels such as gas.

Government must honour its promise to compensate poorer people suffering the increase in fuel costs as a result of the carbon tax, and take action on the rising level of fuel poverty in the State. A detailed breakdown of how all revenue raised through Carbon Tax is being used to tackle energy poverty as part of an Energy Poverty Strategy is required to ensure feasible alternatives to fossil fuel consumption are available for all households subjected to a carbon tax. Retrofitting of homes is widely acknowledged by all as a simple measure that can greatly reduce our energy usage. The problem for government remains, financing retrofitting which, like community led energy projects requires huge initial investment but the long term benefits outweigh that initial investment. Citizens understand that government have limited resources but retrofitting can have a big impact of reducing Ireland's energy usage, addressing fuel poverty and savings on heating costs. The issue of energy poverty has arisen as an area of concern for many people and organisations especially older people. Government should lead by example and retrofit government buildings as well as local authority buildings. Such initiatives have the potential to raise awareness around the benefits of retrofitting.

- **Energy Poverty Strategy**

An increase in fuel allowance or carbon tax exemption is essential for those on low incomes, and households where home heating costs have risen. Irish Rural Link is a member of the NGO Energy Poverty

² Teagasc (2008) "An examination of the contribution of off-farm income to the viability and sustainability of farm households and the productivity of farm businesses"
<http://www.agresearch.teagasc.ie/rerc/downloads/Final%20Report.pdf>

Coalition and supports its proposals, including the urgent redesign of payments and the ring fencing of carbon tax revenue.

Community Energy Projects

As a nation Ireland is rich of untapped renewable energy sources that cannot only help the environment but can also drive the national economy as well as provide cheaper energy to homes and businesses. One method of achieving the 20% renewable energy target set out by the European Union is by community owned energy projects. In particular the opportunities offered by Ireland's wind energy is unrivalled by many other countries. For centuries the west of Ireland has been considered a marginalised region but wind energy is one of the few sectors in which the west of Ireland in particular has a major competitive advantage over almost every other region in Europe.

In the recent times there has been huge contestation to the construction of large energy projects such as windfarms and pylons. Some aspects that caused objection from the public were unfamiliarity with planning regulations and mistrust of the large energy companies. A method of addressing these issues is to incentivise community led renewable energy projects. These projects would give the communities control eliminating mistrust between communities and the energy companies.

Irish Rural Link is calling on the government to offer financial support to communities for initial costs of construction as over the lifetime of energy sources the investment will be returned in some through selling the energy back into the grid, construction jobs, maintenance jobs, environmental benefits, reduced energy costs etc.

Phone Allowance

Last year's budget decision to abolish the phone allowance for elderly people is seen to have had a devastating effect on the quality of life for rural residents. For many elderly rural residents the phone acts as their only connection with the outside world. The abolishment of the phone allowance has left people in increased isolation leading to mental health issues such as depression. This decision has also lead to increased anxiety over security

among older people. Phone lines are connected to house alarms and with the elimination of the phone allowance they are no longer able to afford to have a security system in place. This is an issue of increased importance given the 50 per cent rise in robberies and assaults on older people in rural areas over the past decade.

Carbon Tax

A lack of a public transport option in rural areas necessitates car ownership in order to access employment, basic services and amenities. Carbon tax could cost rural households ten times more than some urban households. Analysis in 2010 from the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) shows that the annual carbon tax likely to be paid by someone living in inner-city Dublin will be €25 but people living in the countryside could face bills of up to €275.³

- **Fuel Costs**

Increased fuel costs will increase the cost of living in rural areas, compounding the effects of a carbon tax with relatively little return to the exchequer and should not be introduced.

- **Eco-driving**

In the short term, until there are alternatives, car transport will continue to dominate. Irish Rural Link believes that eco-driving training should be included as part of driver training and testing. Upon completing training, drivers tend to reduce their fuel consumption by 25% (Convery, 2008). Advancements in alternatives to fossil fuels for transport will also require commitment.

- **Commuting Patterns**

Regional and Sub-regional employment stimuli represent one of the key ways in which commuting patterns, fuel consumption and carbon

³ “STRIVE- Science and Sustainability- Research based knowledge for Environmental Protection” EPA and ESRI 2010

emissions can be addressed in a manner that supports local communities.

Rural Enterprise & Employment

The current level of unemployment in rural counties is above that in the urban areas. The rise in unemployment occurring across all sectors will be most difficult to resolve in rural areas which are over-reliant on primary industries such as agriculture, construction and low-level manufacturing. According to the 2006 Census, one in five of the working population of rural areas is working in agriculture, a decline from one in three in 2002. At present there are high levels of unemployment among a highly skilled and young workforce and an increasing trend towards emigration.

The following supports are required to foster entrepreneurship and create sustainable employment opportunities among those living in rural areas.

- **Credit Availability**

Cash flow and credit availability for viable businesses must be addressed. In order for rural communities to become economically sustainable, the lack of available credit at reasonable rates is currently a barrier to new and existing enterprises in all sectors. An alternative credit/banking system based on the principles of microfinance incorporating microcredit is required for business start-ups and community based enterprises in particular. A rural loan guarantee scheme for rural start-ups and businesses with less than ten employees should also be implemented.

- **Broadband**

Investment in high-quality fibre broadband must continue. The past 12 months has seen significant investment from the commercial sector in regards to fibre broadband infrastructure. The introduction of Siro (Joint venture between ESB and Vodafone) into the market is seen as vital as it adds increased competition in the market. The recent announcement

from Eircom which outlines their plan to remove 300,000 premises from the State-subsidised National Broadband Plan is regarded as a hugely positive step towards delivering high speed fibre optic broadband to every premise in the country. This announcement means that there are now 460,000 premises under the National Broadband Plan. These premises will be serviced under the National Broadband Plan. A deadline should be created for completion of the National Broadband Plan for these unserved rural premises along with an appropriate budget for the infrastructure required. Any infrastructural development proposed under the National Broadband Plan must be fit for purpose and future proof in order to meet future demands.

- **Diversified Employment**

A job stimulus package targeted towards diversifying rural employment, and also to maximise the potential of the increasingly high level of education of the rural population. Clearly opportunities for jobs beyond farming and for the families of farmers must be created. A graduate workplace initiative which allows graduates to access opportunities in their local area outside of hubs and gateways should be put in place.

- **Entrepreneurship**

County Enterprise Boards must receive an increased allocation if they are to successfully foster enterprise locally. Any new enterprise support structure must have sub-regional job creation targets.

- **Small to Medium Enterprises**

A strategy to support small retailers and businesses must be urgently developed to address infrastructure and commercial rates. SME's are vital to our economy and their needs are often overlooked.

- **Inclusive Entrepreneurship**

Enterprise support in the budget must be built on the principles of Inclusive Entrepreneurship. Mainstream business support fails to reach many types of entrepreneurs, including women, rural entrepreneurs, the disabled and those from ethnic minorities.

Youth Guarantee

The aim of the EU-wide Guarantee is to provide young people under the age of 25 with a good quality offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship within a short time of becoming unemployed. Nationally youth employment is a major problem but in rural areas youth unemployment is at crisis point. In some areas of Donegal and Wexford youth unemployment can be as high as 79 per cent.

In principle, Irish Rural Link supports the youth guarantee and any initiatives that aim to reduce the high level of youth unemployment but has concerns over the implementation in rural areas where youth unemployment is significantly higher. An aspect of the youth guarantee that needs to be considered is that a large proportion of the youth population in rural areas do not have access to transport to travel to the urban centres for employment or training. With such a large population of youth unemployment occurring in rural regions there is a case for the training centres to be more accessible to young people in rural areas. An area where the accessibility could be improved is by providing greater funding to the Rural Transport Scheme which could deliver the participants to a training centre.

Irish Rural Link is calling on the government to monitor and evaluate the delivery of schemes such as JobBridge as some employers could be seen to exploit the scheme.

Rainwater harvesting

As part of our submission to the EU rural development programme, we have proposed a rain-water collection system should be installed in every farm.

Water is an increasing cost to farmers and obligations under the Water Framework Directive reinforce the need for farms to make the most efficient use of water possible. Farming's intensive use of water has implications for the water reserves of the wider community. Farms have large areas of roofed sheds and concrete yards and there is significant scope to harvest, collect and recycle the water from these, enabling it to be used in farm activities or - if suitably treated - as high quality drinking water. In light of this Irish Rural Link propose a supports scheme.

The objectives of such a scheme are:

- To conserve water.
- To make farms more self sufficient in terms of water usage.
- To create employment in rural areas.

Cost per farm unit ⁴

Fittings	€2,028
Precast Reinforced Concrete Tank	€1,500
Installation Costs	€ 800
Total	€4,328
Grant 12.5%	516
Total cost to farm At an average saving in water charges of 1,000 per year the farmer could expect to pay the capital cost in just over three years	€3,814

Based on an estimate that there are 135,000 farms in Ireland and that such a proposal would be targeted at 100,000 farms; the overall cost to the EU rural development programme would be 50 million.

Septic Tank Grants

Early this year, inspection of septic tanks began around the country by the local authorities for many rural residents this sparked fear. Many septic tanks have been left in decline since their construction due to a lack of education on maintenance. Many people are living in fear of inspections due to the cost of bringing their tank up to standard. From the initial round of inspections up to 75% of septic tanks failed in some counties. The majority of these were down to minor problems such as sludging or lack of maintenance. The tanks with

⁴ This study and report were undertaken under the auspices of the National Rural Water Monitoring Committee by a project team from the School of Civil and Structural Engineering at Dublin Institute of Technology.

larger structural damage will cost a great deal more to fix for which there is a maximum grant of 4000 euro available. Irish Rural Link is calling for an increase in the level of the grant available aimed at low income families and elderly people. The staging of the grants is also an issue that needs to be addressed. There is currently an 80% grant to a maximum of 4,000 euro for incomes under 50,000 while there is 50% available to a maximum of 2,500 euro for incomes between 50,001 and 75,000. IRL is calling for the grants available to be increasingly staged as families earning just over 50,000 euro could lose up to 30% of the grant available for being relevantly over the limit.

Renewed Commitment to Regional Development

There is an urgent need for a joined up approach to rural planning policy, involving a new white paper on rural development and a commitment to giving effect to the identified objectives National Spatial Strategy for rural areas. Following the perceived assault on rural communities⁵ by the Government and in light of the ‘refresh’ of the National Spatial Strategy and the infrastructure priorities published in October,⁶ Irish Rural Link believe it is now appropriate for the Government to restate its commitment to regional development in the Budget. This will require a renewed white paper on rural development together with an undertaking to prioritise investment in rural community development.

- **Community Development**

A policy to address the issue of ghost estates should also be articulated to address uncertainty about their future uses. Communities must have a role in this.

- **Public Service Efficiency**

The OECD has published a considered study of the Irish public sector *Towards an Integrated Public Service* and made detailed recommendations. These include the need for a strategic vision and

⁵ See “No Commitment to Rural Jobs in National Spatial Strategy” Irish Rural Link Press Release 13th October 2010 available from www.irishrurallink.ie

⁶ National Spatial Strategy Update and Outlook, DoEHLG 2010.

increased performance review and accountability. These recommendations should be acted on immediately to ensure the public sector's efficiency, effectiveness and relevance. Budget 2014 must take initiatives to support this process.

- **Local Government**

The cost saving recommendations around cross cutting and shared services contained in the Local Government efficiency review must be implemented instead of further cuts to the Local Government Fund. Cuts to the Local Government Fund lead to Local Authorities cutting services and refusing to reduce rates and charges which drastically increase the cost of doing business.

Rural Transport

The many benefits of the Rural Transport Programme include the important role it plays in combating rural isolation, particularly for older people. It also represents value for money, carrying approximately 1.5 million passengers annually, and functioning on less than 1.2% of the total annual investment in public transport. The role of community groups and non profit organisations in delivering this programme has been instrumental in affordability, capacity building and community involvement.

Irish Rural Link makes the following recommendations:

- Maintain and expand current supports to Rural Transport Programme
- Improve integration of rural transport services, including the Rural Transport Programme, Bus Éireann rural stage carriage services, health related and school transport services.
- IRL supports the development of the National Positive Ageing Strategy to deal with issues around incomes, isolation and poor access to services for older rural dwellers.
- Re-organise the method of finance allocation under the free transport programme. As it is currently constructed, it fails to be of benefit to the

vast majority of people on social welfare in rural areas who are entitled to it.

The Community and Voluntary Sector

By international standards a significant number of services are delivered by the sector in Ireland. The recession and unemployment means many of their services are under severe pressure. Nevertheless, these networks are a valuable resource at local, regional and national level and have a vital role to play in protecting marginalised members of society improving the rural citizen's quality of life.

Small Towns Village

The decline of rural towns and villages is demonstrated by the high closure rate of small businesses, often moving out to the outskirts of the area. While it is clear that the recession has contributed to this, it is also an outcome of high rental charges and local authority rates. Equally the cost of doing business in towns is added to by the imposition of parking charges or restrictions on parking in any circumstance.

Towns that are mainly supported by small business types are therefore more vulnerable to any increased charges.

The closure of services, such as Garda stations, Post offices and banking services, particularly in the smaller towns has reduced their sustainability and increased overall poverty.

It is therefore regrettable that the RAPID programme, an initiative designed to assist the most vulnerable towns has been withdrawn. It is IRL's view that such an initiative is imperative as a first step to restore small towns as a platform of creating a vibrant rural hinterland.

Policy Rural Proofing

Our wealthiest regions receive massive investment, both public and private. Rural areas are not looking for hand outs, just a similar level of investment. Lagging regions need to have a similar quality of infrastructure for their residents and businesses as is available in more successful regions. It is a waste of talent and opportunity not to realise all regions' potential.

As the primary national economic policy tool, the annual budget should contain a commitment to regional equity and the prevention of urban bias, which compromises not just the social and environmental pillars of sustainability, but also the capacity of regional economies to utilise their potential and adapt to current and future challenges.

Rural Policing

In the past decade rural Ireland has seen a stark rise in its crime rate especially the number of assaults and robberies on elderly people. An aspect of this is the closure of a large number of rural Garda stations with 100 Garda stations closed in 2013 alone. IRL acknowledges that the number of attacks and burglaries is not solely because of the closure of Garda stations and shortage of personnel but expresses it is a factor, welcoming the recruitment of new members to the Garda force in 2014 and 2015. IRL continues to campaign for a modern rural policing system that protects rural communities especially the most isolated of its residents. There needs to be a sense of security and reassurance given to rural communities by the Department of Justice and An Garda Síochána to eliminate any fear factor. Irish Rural Link is calling on the government to increase the resources of An Garda Síochána by multiplying the number of patrol cars in rural areas especially. The enhanced number of patrol cars in an area can have a significant impact on preventing crime as well as providing people with a sense of security.

Education Costs

Students from rural areas are facing increased costs in the future due to rising college fees, accommodation, travel, utilities etc. Evidence of the increasing costs in attending third level education can be seen in the Irish League of Credit Unions' survey 2013 which states that the number of students who have had to access student loans has risen from 11% in 2011 to 25% in 2013. This means that 1 in 4 students have a student loan which leads to a large population of young people heading into the workplace with a high level of debt if they obtain employment directly after finishing third level education.

Thanks to new rules from the Central Bank regulators, many ordinary families are suffering as they are finding it difficult to access loans from their local Credit Union.

Because of this students are being forced to drop out of college because their parents are unable to get a credit union loan.

Irish Rural Link is calling on the government to re-examine the grant scheme and college fees which are set to rise to €3,000 per year in the next academic year. College fees and the rising cost of living are causing some young people to rethink attending third level education because they simply cannot afford it.

College Accommodation

College accommodation has become a major issue for students especially rural students for whom commuting is not a viable option. The price is no longer the sole issue but the availability of accommodation has now become problematic. There is currently a shortage of housing in Dublin, raising the price of accommodation, in turn pushing some accommodation out of the student's budget. This is an issue that is becoming prominent in the other major towns and cities across Ireland. The number of people attending third level education has significantly risen in the past two decades and is expected to continue to rise, escalating the problem of accommodation further.

Irish Rural Link is calling on the government to introduce allowances for rural students who are paying thousands of euros every year for accommodation as well as their increasing student contribution. A policy that could address the problem is the introduction of a tax relief for registered tax compliant landlords who are willing to rent their accommodation to students.

A reason behind the shortage of college accommodation is that there is a limited supply of campus accommodation around the universities and institutions. IRL believe that a method of reducing the accommodation problem is by providing the universities and institutions with funding to increase campus accommodation. The campus accommodation would

provide students with safe and affordable accommodation as well as a constant stream of income for the college. Another appealing aspect of an initiative like this is that it would provide employment both long and short term. The short term jobs would be created by the construction while the long term jobs can be created through maintenance and security. The long term benefits of such an initiative would greatly outweigh the initial costs experienced by the exchequer and the institution itself.

Community Wetlands Forum

The forum was established under the umbrella of Irish Rural Link in September 2013. The forum came together as a result of the work already undertaken by Irish Rural link on behalf of community groups affected by the Peatlands directive and in the development of wetlands as an enhanced asset in the community.

The difficulties associated with implementing the Peatlands directive, particularly regarding the adverse experience of turf cutters, have shown that there is a disconnection between communities and the objectives of conservation as they would apply to wetlands. Because of this, many wetland areas are left in perilous states, with essential management needed for their protection. Equally where wetland community groups have taken action, the results, both for the wetlands and the communities are spectacular. There is as you will know a small number of communities who have established development plans in their areas. From our work on this we are coming across many who would wish to start the process, but feel they will need support, given the controversial publicity around the implementation of the Peatlands directive.

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

In establishing a network of wetland groups it is proposed that the aim is to: Facilitate the sharing of knowledge, ideas and organisational methods. It will also introduce groups to the latest research, national and international experts, similar networks and funding possibilities.

It will also provide skills in the use of community development principles as a means of bringing all parts of the community with them.

Clearly the group currently in its infancy will need support, particularly some funding. As of now there is a group of 11 local networks with interest in more joining. These include Abbeyleigh, Corlea, Cabragh, Laois Offaly wild life trust, Cloughjordan, Kenagh, Boora, Clara, Kerry, Westmeath and Kildare.

While Irish Rural Link is currently providing some administrative support, it will not be able to supply expert related assistance in the form of research and technical wetlands expertise. Examples of such support include;

- The identification of potential wetland sites in communities and communities who wish to evaluate their own areas.
- The co-ordination of targeted event, seminars on community involvement.
- The provision of direct assistance to groups who wish to explore new projects.

As a beginning we would like to hire the services of a graduate or someone whose qualifications or experience could be put to use with this group. As a means of funding this Irish Rural Link would propose that government consider means in which the EPA, perhaps in partnership with the relevant department would make available funding in the region of €10,000 to begin the process.

Please see the Wetlands Community Forum's budget submission for more details.

Western Meals on Wheels Network- delivering community services.

The Western Meals on Wheels Network was established under the umbrella of Irish Rural Link in the spring of 2015 and consists of Meals on Wheels organisation from Clare, Donegal, Galway, Kerry, Mayo and Roscommon which plans to develop the network nationally over the next year.

Meals-on-wheels service is a critical component of the continuum of care services that enables older people to remain living in the community or to return to their own homes after hospitalisation. It has, therefore, previously recommended on a number of occasions that the service is designated as a core service underpinned by legislation and funding. Currently there is no legal entitlement to receive or obligation on the State to provide meals-on-wheels to older people. As a result, there is no clear direction regarding who should be responsible for the support and development of the sector.

With the existence of the meals on wheels there is:

- lower mortality
- shorter hospital stays
- fostered independent living
- reduced need for nursing home care following discharge
- increased likelihood of discharge from nursing home and reduced need for non-elective hospital readmission
- reduced incidence of falls
- daily contact
- expression of community inclusion
- Decline in loneliness
- Decrease isolation

Aim:

To provide a local, community led professional facility to assist people who require services to maintain optimum health and independence.

Objectives:

- to advocate for a national standardised meals on wheels service which provide a system all organisations can adhere to.
- to ensure members have adequate resources to deliver a professionally produced nutritious meal to their clients.
- To advise and advocate the government and other agencies which influence the delivery of Meals on Wheels and ancillary services.
- to meet the future demands of network members by assisting in the development of their services .
- To develop the organisation in a manner which is inclusive and participatory to all meals on wheels organisations.
- To develop a voluntary professional Meals on Wheels service to a standard and to create a template that will be recognised and given a quality national rating.

Clearly the network currently in its infancy will need support, particularly some funding. While Irish Rural Link is currently providing some administrative support, it will not be able to supply expert related assistance in the form of research and technical meals on wheels expertise. Examples of such support include;

- The identification of potential meals on wheels organisations around the country.
- The co-ordination of targeted seminar which would help inform organisations about new regulations and guidelines.
- The provision of direct assistance to groups who wish to explore new projects as there are many communities who could establish meals on wheels services with the appropriate assistance.
- Promotion of product and service through marketing to potential clients, their families, carers, PHN, Hospital discharge service, home help, doctors and others.

As a beginning Irish Rural Link would like to hire the services of a graduate or someone whose qualifications or experience could be put to use with this group. As a means of funding this Irish Rural Link would propose that

government consider means in which the Health Service Executive, perhaps in partnership with the relevant department would make available funding in the region of €10,000 to begin the process.

Please see the Western Meals on Wheels Network's budget submission for more details.

Irish Rural Link the Organisation

Irish Rural Link (IRL), formed in 1991, is a national network of organisations and individuals campaigning for sustainable rural development in Ireland and Europe. IRL, a non-profit organisation, has grown significantly since its inception and now directly represents over 300 community groups with a combined membership of 25,000.

The network provides a structure through which rural groups and individuals, representing disadvantaged rural communities, can articulate their common needs and priorities, share their experiences and present their case to policy-makers at local, national and European Level.

Irish Rural Link is the only group represented at the national social partnership talks solely representing rural communities' interests.

'Our vision is of vibrant, inclusive and sustainable rural communities that contribute to an equitable and just society'

Irish Rural Link's aims are:

- To articulate and facilitate the voices of rural communities in local, regional, national and European policy arenas, especially those experiencing poverty, social exclusion and the challenge of change in the 21st century.
- To promote local and community development in rural communities in order to strengthen and build the capacity of rural community groups to act as primary movers through practical assistance and advice.
- To research, critique and disseminate policies relating to rural communities including issues such as sustainability, social exclusion, equality and poverty
- To facilitate cross-border networking between rural communities

'Our mission is to influence and inform local, regional, national and European development policies and programmes in favour of rural communities especially those who are marginalised as a result of poverty and social exclusion in rural areas.'