



# **Irish Rural Link Submission Next Draft to National Planning Framework - Ireland 2040 Our Plan**

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## **Introduction**

Irish Rural Link welcomes the first draft of the National Planning Framework – Ireland 2040 – Our Plan. This plan must ensure that the same level of opportunity is available to every person regardless of where they live in the country.

It is evident that there is a disproportioned level of growth between different regions of the country with many; especially rural areas are still feeling the impact of the recession and austerity budget. Pobal's Deprivation Index for 2016 shows smaller towns have higher deprivation rates than many of the larger urban areas. On a regional basis, the Border, Midlands and South East regions were less affluent than the Dublin and Mid East regions. This is reflected in the most recent unemployment figures, where the Midlands and South East have unemployment rates of 8.3% and 8.1%. It is also reflected in the type of jobs available and still created in these regions; traditional sectors such as agriculture, Hotel and accommodation and food – which are generally low paid jobs. Income inadequacies for households earning minimum wage are higher for those living in rural areas than in urban areas.

Social exclusion is exacerbated in rural areas due to lack of public services, such as broadband, transport and closure and limited opening hours of banks and post offices. This can be even more difficult for disadvantaged and marginalised groups living in rural areas.

The National Planning Framework – Ireland 2040 must ensure proper investment is available to ensure sustainable growth and inclusion for all communities.

## **Comments and Recommendations**

The following are Irish Rural Link's comments on the first draft of the plan and recommendations that must be given serious consideration for inclusion

### **Regional Development**

Irish Rural Link welcome that the objectives of the NPF will be applied on a regional basis through statutory Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies (RSES's) so that more regional parity can be achieved. However, we are concerned about how the regions are divided. i.e the regional assembly basis; Eastern & Midland Region, Northern & Western Region and the Southern Region with larger towns identified as drivers of growth within each of these regions to filter out to their catchment area. We fear that growth and development will be

measured by each regional assembly as a whole, while sub regions within these may not be developing evenly.

Taking the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly at present as an example, the unemployment rate for the Midland region is 8.3%, this compares to an unemployment rate of 6.3% in Dublin and 5.8% in the Mid-East<sup>1</sup>. Also, Foreign Direct Investment has been unevenly distributed across the Eastern and Midlands region in the past number of years. Just 4,000 jobs were created by IDA clients in the Midlands region in 2016, compared to almost 100,000 in Dublin region<sup>2</sup>. The same can be said for the Northern and Western region, with counties in the North-West experiencing less growth than western counties.

Irish Rural Link recommend regions is aligned to NUTs used by CSO, so that larger towns with these regions can have more of an opportunity to expand and grow and that this will filter out to rural areas in their catchment.

Although there is a commitment in the draft to bring people and jobs closer, if regions are divided as outlined in the draft there is a risk of urban sprawl from the main five cities, but especially Dublin, which is happening at the moment, and people continuing to commute long distance to access employment.

IRL continue to call for a Collective Approach to Regional Development whereby, Local Authorities within each region come together to form Regional Development Groups. Local Authorities must work together to overcome macro barriers that prevent business either starting up or locating to a particular region. They need to set same rates for each town within each region, have same level of broadband speeds, and access to proper infrastructure so they can grow as a region and not be in competition of one another as was the case with the National Spatial Strategy.

### **Quality Employment and Supports for SME's and Entrepreneurship**

As mentioned above employment in rural areas are more often in traditional sectors and low paid. Regions outside of Dublin and Mid-East must be equipped with the necessary infrastructure to ensure they can attract high paid jobs.

SME 's and micro enterprise are the back bone of rural areas and must be supported. They have an important role to play in the how the country grows and develops into the future.

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<sup>1</sup> CSO Quarterly National Household Survey QNHS Q2 2017  
<http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/qnhs/quarterlynationalhouseholdsurveyquarter22017/>

<sup>2</sup> IDA Annual Report 2016 [https://www.idaireland.com/IDAireland/media/docs/About-IDA/IDA\\_Annual\\_Report\\_2016.pdf](https://www.idaireland.com/IDAireland/media/docs/About-IDA/IDA_Annual_Report_2016.pdf)

Although lending by pillar banks has improved slightly to SME's there are still many that are unable to access finance, either to start-up a company or expand existing business.

Local Public Banking is an alternative banking system that must be considered.

### **Local Public Banking**

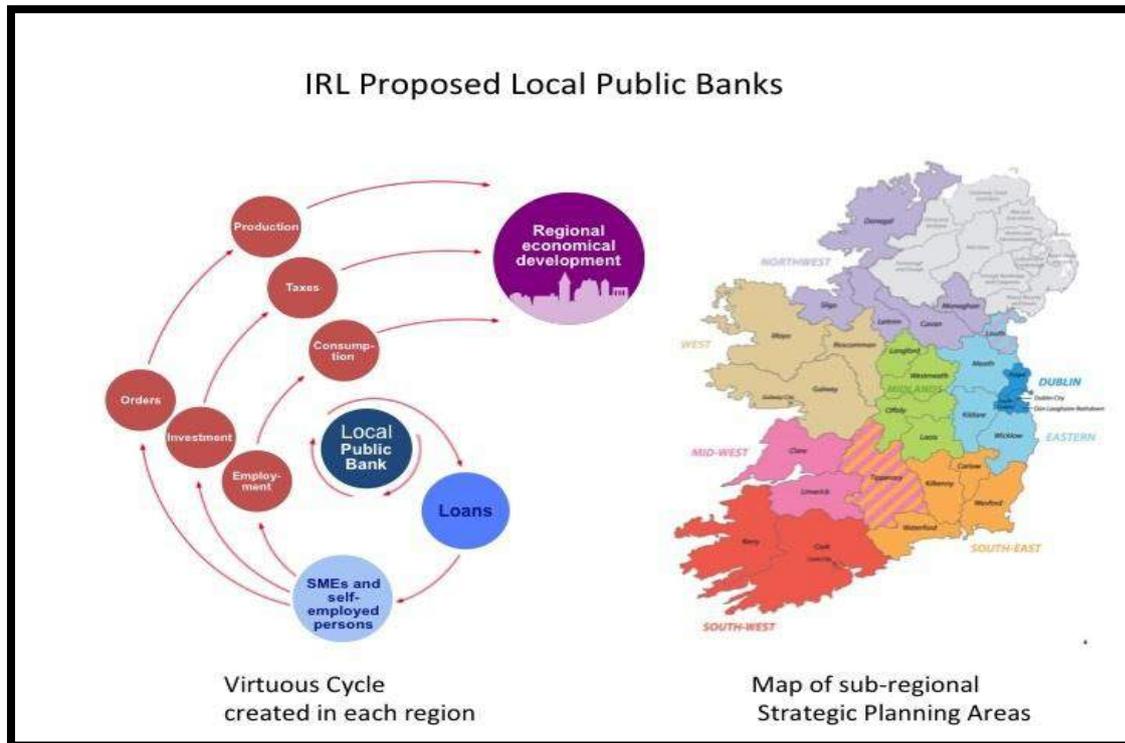
As mentioned above, small & medium enterprises and microenterprises remain a key employer in rural areas. SME's are still finding it difficult to access credit from the banking system and are therefore unable to reach their full potential. They are also more vulnerable to external financial shocks.

Irish Rural Link have proposed that the Irish Government thoroughly investigate the German Sparkassen model for the development of local public banks that operate within well defined regions and we welcome this was included in '*Programme for a Partnership Government*' and since then Minister Ring's announcement, as one of the actions outlined in '*Realising Our Rural Potential: Action Plan for Rural Development*', for consultation on this.

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

- The IRL proposal suggests a nationwide network of 8 to 10 Local Public Banks which are managed independently but with an identical business model working under identical management principles. Initially 2 or 4 pilot banks are envisaged with a rollout of the entire network developed over the next 5 years.
- In addition a centralised service unit will provide internal services, including risk management and internal audit and will house a self-supervision unit for the new public banking system.
- The new Local Public Banks will follow a specific business model that is different from traditional commercial banking. The new public banks will have to be economically viable but they will not pursue profit maximisation. At the same time they will be enabled to fulfil a public mandate because they will not be under pressure to make dividend payments.

- Earnings will partly be retained to strengthen their capital base and partly distributed to social projects, also surpluses will be partly distributed to social funds to benefit the local community.



## **Rural Areas**

The Smart Growth Rural Initiative as one of the outcomes of the National Investment Plan to support the National Planning Framework must be adequately funded to ensure that communities in rural areas can achieve the targeted growth rates set out in the plan.

Again, the necessary supports and infrastructure, i.e. high speed and affordable broadband and access to public transport are key factors in ensuring that rural areas are a place where people can migrate to instead of having to migrate out of and to build strong and sustainable communities. That young people can remain to live and work in, and older people can be cared for in their community as they age. Creation of jobs and supports for start-ups as mentioned above is also key.

Access to childcare can be a barrier for many people, especially women to access employment, education, training, etc. Childcare must be available in rural areas so more women can access employment or return to the workforce.

Attracting people to live in smaller towns and villages must continue to be a key objective and mix of housing must be available in rural areas to allow people as they age to downsize if they choice to must be considered. The development of a programme for new homes in small towns and villages outlined in the first draft of the Plan, where Local Authorities, Irish Water and other public service agencies acquire land to allow for site preparation for self build to take place is welcome and can ensure better and more robust public services be available to people in rural areas.

## **Transport**

Investment in a proper rural transport system is essential as part of this plan and for it to be linked and connected to the overall public transport system in the country. There are 17 Local Link companies across the country that deliver public transport in various ways, such as scheduled routes, unscheduled routes, demand responsive transport and community car in rural areas and connect people from rural communities to local towns and villages so people can access employment, third level education, training and to do weekly shopping or meet up with people. It also connects people into Bus Eireann and other inter-city bus and rail services. In the current draft there is no mention of it and it must be recognised as part of the plan and as part of the objectives for Transport and Rural Areas within the plan.

Ensuring that all transport services are accessible for all is essential and that a suite of transport measures in rural areas are in place to ensure that people with a disability and older people can access transport, public transport must be wheelchair accessible.

## **Health**

Irish Rural Link welcome that there will be a bigger focus on primary care centres to deliver healthcare. With the number of people over the age of 65 projected to increase to approximately 1.4 million by 2046 (CSO, 2016) and the number of people over the age of 85 expected to double by 2031, there will be a greater need for care in the community. With an ageing population comes an increase in the number of people with chronic disease. The current dependency on acute hospital care to treat patients with chronic disease is not sustainable and greater investment is now needed to meet this growing demand.

Also, majority of people as they age would like to do so in their own home or in their community. This is the preferred option for Government also as it is less costly on the state finances. Services to support people to remain in their own home must also be invested in and development. Services such as Meals on Wheels play a vital role in communities; helping people as they age remain in their own home, reduce hospital stays and allows a

person to remain independent. This service has an important role to play in the future of caring for people in their community.

### **Climate Action**

Transition to sustainable energy is one of the objectives outlined in the National Planning Framework. Irish Rural Link are supportive of this, however it must be poverty proofed. By their nature housing in rural areas, especially older housing stock is more expensive to heat. They also rely more on fossil fuels and oil to heat their homes as there are little or no alternatives. People living in private rented accommodation are often in the same situation and are unable to make any changes to the house they are renting.

Grants for retrofitting of housing must be made more accessible to people on fixed or low incomes and more awareness of such grants is needed.

The importance of Peatlands and Wetlands to help mitigate Climate change must be recognised in the plan and objectives in the National Biodiversity Plan be aligned with objectives of this plan. Peatlands store twice as much carbon as forestry, assist in water purification by filtering contaminants, can regulate flooding by acting as a natural reservoir, absorbing, storing and slowly releasing water in a catchment area and help in the conservation of many species.

Under the umbrella of Irish Rural Link, the Community Wetlands Forum was established. This forum came about from communities that were affected by the Habitat Directives and wanted to preserve the bogs in their communities and use them as a local amenity. It was through engagement with communities and community empowerment that eight of the members of the forum developed their wetlands, including peatlands, as important places of biodiversity and conservation, well-being and other services. Membership of the forum has increased and also includes stakeholders from Government agencies and third level institutions.

### **Conclusion**

The importance of regional balanced growth cannot be emphasised enough to ensure that quality jobs can be created in regions and people can live closer to their jobs. The first draft of this plan lacks visualisation for Midlands and North West region and there is a fear that if these are subsumed into the wider regional assembly that they will once again be overlooked and forgotten about and continue to lag behind the Dublin and Eastern region.

Communities are at the heart and soul of rural areas, as well as urban areas and development of sustainable communities are vital to connecting people within their own communities and to their regions and the rest of the country. The need for a robust public transport system and affordable high speed broadband are key elements needed to facilitate this connectivity and establishment of these must be key objectives of this plan.

The NPF – Ireland 2040 has the potential to work if actions are implemented. Given the timeframe of the plan it needs the will and commitment of all political parties, Government Departments, Local Authorities, Government Agencies and Community groups.

## **Irish Rural Link the Organisation**

Irish Rural Link (IRL), formed in 1991, is a national network of organisations and individuals campaigning for sustainable rural development in Ireland and Europe. IRL, a non-profit organisation, has grown significantly since its inception and now directly represents over 600 community groups with a combined membership of 25,000.

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

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

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

Irish Rural Link's aims are:

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

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