



*Irish Rural Link*  
*Nasc Tuaithe na hÉireann*

# **Irish Rural Link Submission to Eastern and Midlands Draft Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy**

**January 2019**

**Contact Seamus Boland/Louise Lennon**



**Department of Rural and  
Community Development**

*An Roinn Forbartha  
Tuaithe agus Pobail*

## **Overview**

Irish Rural Link (IRL) is the national network of rural community groups, representing over 600 community groups and over 25,000 individuals committed to socially, environmentally and economically sustainable rural communities.

The Regional Assembly Spatial and Economic Strategy is an opportunity for the Assembly to drive growth in each of the regions within the assembly. The development of this strategy is coming at a time when the country is starting to experience improvements in job creation and overseas investment. However, there are many risks, Brexit being the main one, that undoubtedly will have an adverse effect on businesses, especially micro and SME's in rural areas.

There also continues to be disparity in the level of growth, level of job creation and level of investment by foreign multinationals across the regions of the assembly. The Midlands region continues to lag behind in terms of growth and employment. With a bigger proportion of smaller towns and villages in the Midlands region than in Dublin and Mid-East region, the impact of the recession can still be felt among people living in these towns and villages. With the closure of many businesses, banks, post offices, garda stations and lack of public services such as public transport and high speed broadband, many of these smaller towns and villages have suffered greatly.

A collaborate approach by all stakeholders is necessary for the measures set out in the Strategy to be realised and balanced and inclusive growth is essential. Quality jobs must be created across the Assembly region so people can work and live in close proximity and the jobs created must afford, at the very minimum, a basic standard of living for people. It is an opportunity also to bring those furthest from the labour market back into employment and sustainable employment so that people do not have to face long periods out of work.

### **1. Growth and Settlement Strategy**

The Eastern and Midlands Regional Assembly area has the youngest population in the country. However, most of this is made up in the Eastern and Dublin regions, where young people have migrated to be closer to work, job opportunities and services. In the Midland region, especially in rural areas of the region, there is a higher rate of people over age of 65. While the population increased in towns outside of Dublin in the last Census (2016); Dundalk remaining largest town with a population increase of 6.2%, Athlone grew by 5.9% and Mullingar by 4.1%, these towns have become commuter towns, with the majority of people who do commute, travelling to Dublin city or surrounding areas. Indeed, Portlaoise had the fastest population growth between 2011 and 2016 at 9.5%<sup>1</sup>. But county Laois had the highest share of workers in any county with a commute time of

---

<sup>1</sup> CSO Census 2016 'Population Distribution' <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp2tc/cp2pdm/pd/>

90 minutes or more at 6.7% of the population who commute. This was followed by Longford at 6% and Westmeath at 5.8%<sup>2</sup>.

The EMRA is one of the more diverse among the three Assemblies in terms of growth and job creation and the figures above highlight the need for people to travel for work. While we welcome that there are three towns identified as regional drivers in the Draft Strategy namely; Athlone, Dundalk and Drogheda, we are still concerned that the Midlands will become a suburb of Dublin with no real growth or job creation happening in these towns.

Under the Settlement Strategy in the draft RSES it states there will be a 'Hierarchy for the Region'. IRL are concerned that this language prioritises Dublin city and region over other towns according to size, meaning rural towns and villages are of the least importance. There must be a balanced approach to growth. With Athlone identified as the regional driver for the Midlands, it is important that 'key towns' and smaller towns and villages in the region are included in development plans and that they equally reap the benefits of growth in the region. We would be concerned about the distance between Athlone and towns in Co. Laois, e.g. Portlaoise and the connectivity between these two towns and how Athlone can drive Portlaoise as a key town. Local Authorities need to work together to ensure there is balanced growth between the four counties of the region, which was one of the failings of the Athlone-Mullingar-Tullamore Gateway in the National Spatial Strategy.

Spill-over of growth in Athlone and other 'key towns' to smaller towns and villages and indeed rural villages must be a priority in this plan and Local Authorities Development Plans. The same must be true for Drogheda and Dundalk as regional drivers. There must be opportunities for people living in rural areas to have sustainable employment close to where they live and also an opportunity for people to return to rural areas and make a living.

Making smaller towns and villages and attractive place to live must be an important part of this RSES and incentives to make this happen need to be put in place. It is also important for the revitalisation of rural towns and villages. While IRL do not see the need for one off housing unless working on the land, people who do live in one-off housing must not be penalised by the lack of services. Living in the centre of town or village may need a shift in peoples' mind set, highlighting the advantages will be important.

Local Authorities are making it more difficult to get planning permission to build one off houses, having to prove an economic need. However, with it more difficult for people to save a deposit to buy a home and get a mortgage and with a lack of rented accommodation available as well as high rents, self-build can often be the only option for people. Housing shortages must be addressed and bringing back empty units in towns and villages needs to become a real strategy for Government.

---

<sup>2</sup> CSO Census 2016 'Commuting in Ireland' <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp6ci/p6cii/p6td/>

## **2. Economic Strategy**

### **Employment**

Irish Rural Link welcome that the overall unemployment rate in the state continues to fall, with most recent figures in the Labour Force Survey for Q3 2018<sup>3</sup> showing unemployment rate now stands at 6%. However, there are still disparities in the rate of unemployment across NUTS3 regions, especially within the Eastern and Midlands region. Unemployment rates in the Midlands continue to remain above the state average at 7.1%, while the Mid-East and Dublin regions have unemployment rates of 5.8% and 5.3% respectively. Results from Census 2016 showed that small towns had higher unemployment rates than larger towns. Of the larger towns across the country, Longford had the highest unemployment rate between 2011 and 2016 at 30%. A lot of work needs to be done within the Assembly region to ensure that there is more balance in job creation and that small and medium towns will see more job opportunities made available to them. Job creation must be inclusive for all with every person in society having the opportunity to take up employment. Long-term unemployment must also be addressed. Thirty-four percent of those who are unemployed are so for over a year or more. Getting people back to work and the provision of the necessary training or upskilling is now necessary. Training provided must match the skill needs for an area to ensure that they can gain employment close to where they live.

### **Quality of Jobs**

The quality of jobs available in rural areas tends to be lower than in urban area, with a higher number of people employed in lower paid sectors. Many jobs in retail/wholesale, hotel and catering, tourism are zero contracts. In rural areas, these are the jobs many people work in as there is very little alternative unless they commute long distances to work, which is not always an option for people. The place-based approach outlined in the draft RSES, to promote key opportunity sectors within regions identifies sectors of tourism, retail, agriculture. However, jobs in these sectors are very often minimum wage jobs, precarious hours and seasonal. The Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL)<sup>4</sup> for 2018 shows that income inadequacies are felt by households who were working on minimum wage with these inadequacies larger for households in rural areas for most of the household types looked at. This is mainly due to extra costs incurred by living in a rural area such as transport and energy costs. For people involved in agriculture, the average wage is well below the average industrial wage. While it varies from year to year, €31,374 in 2017. However, this figure was increased by increase in Dairy farm incomes. The value placed on jobs in these sectors – tourism, retail, agriculture must be increased if these sectors are seen as key

---

<sup>3</sup> CSO Labour Force Survey Q3 2018

<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/lfs/labourforcesurveyquarter32018/>

<sup>4</sup> Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (2018) 'Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2018'  
[https://www.budgeting.ie/download/pdf/mesl\\_2018\\_update\\_report.pdf](https://www.budgeting.ie/download/pdf/mesl_2018_update_report.pdf)

opportunity sectors and a move towards payment of the living wage of €11.90 must be encouraged. People cannot be made worse off by taking up employment. It must ensure them an adequate standard of living. Jobs in these sectors must also become more sustainable and that people can make career from them.

Another sector that must be included in the RSES is the Health and Social Care sector, including childcare. The RSES must be aligned to SlainteCare. With more focus on regional based delivery of healthcare and care in the community so people can remain in their own home as they age, demand for homecare services will increase. Currently such jobs are low paid and precarious work hours, so more value needs to be placed on these jobs. The same is true for childcare, which is a necessity for women wishing to go back to work. Twenty-four percent of those part-time employed are underemployed, with females making up a large portion of this group. This is mainly due to lack of affordable childcare.

### **Foreign Direct Investment**

Investment from foreign companies is a way of attracting high quality jobs to a region. The midlands region continues to lag behind, not only in the EMRA but in the whole of the country. Of the 210,443 jobs created by IDA companies in 2017, only 4,327 were created in the Midlands Region compared to 101,355 in Dublin and Mid East<sup>5</sup>. The Midland region also had the smallest rate of annual growth in IDA job creation at 1.2%. A better balance is needed between the regions of the Assembly in attracting Foreign Direct Investment. There is ample opportunity for the Midlands region to attract more FDI than is currently happening. With an Institute of Technology based in the Midlands region, there must be better collaboration between this, the IDA and Local Authorities to see what are the barriers preventing more foreign investment. With the onset on Brexit, there is an increased opportunity for more foreign investment in Ireland and this must be dispersed evenly across the country.

### **Micro and Small & Medium Enterprises**

IRL believe that Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises are the backbone to rural economies and are key to creating jobs in rural areas. While there continues to be a push for foreign multinationals to locate to Ireland, the reality is that they are attracted to the cities and larger towns. More focus must be placed on micro and SME's and how they are and can contribute to rural development and be supported more to create employment in these areas.

Micro enterprises accounted for 92.2% of all enterprises in 2015 (CSO, 2017) and this figure is reflected across the 28 EU countries. Research for an EU Funded Project MICRO IRL were lead partner, found that under 23 million SME's generated €3.9 trillion in

---

<sup>5</sup> IDA (2018) Annual Report 2017 [https://www.idaireland.com/IDAireland/media/docs/About-IDA/IDA\\_Annual\\_Report\\_2017.pdf](https://www.idaireland.com/IDAireland/media/docs/About-IDA/IDA_Annual_Report_2017.pdf)

value added and employed 90 million people across the EU in 2015. This accounted for 67% of EU28 employment<sup>6</sup>.

Micro Enterprises and SME's are always vulnerable to external shocks and continue to face many challenges in growing their businesses; including access to credit and especially in rural areas; high speed broadband.

The necessary infrastructure, such as broadband must be available to help these companies grow and make it easier for people to start-up companies. Enterprise Ireland, Local Enterprise Offices must work with third level institutes in the regions and other adult education providers, ETB's etc to ensure the skills and supports are in place to help SME's and Micro Enterprises. There are also opportunities for more collaboration between multinational companies and micro and SME's and spill-overs must be created.

### **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.

IRL have been at the forefront in campaigning for a Local Public Banking Model being introduced in Ireland as an alternative banking model for people than the pillar banks. We welcome that the Government published a report in July 2018 on Public Banking and investigation the German Sparkassen model and that a stakeholder forum will be established shortly on this.

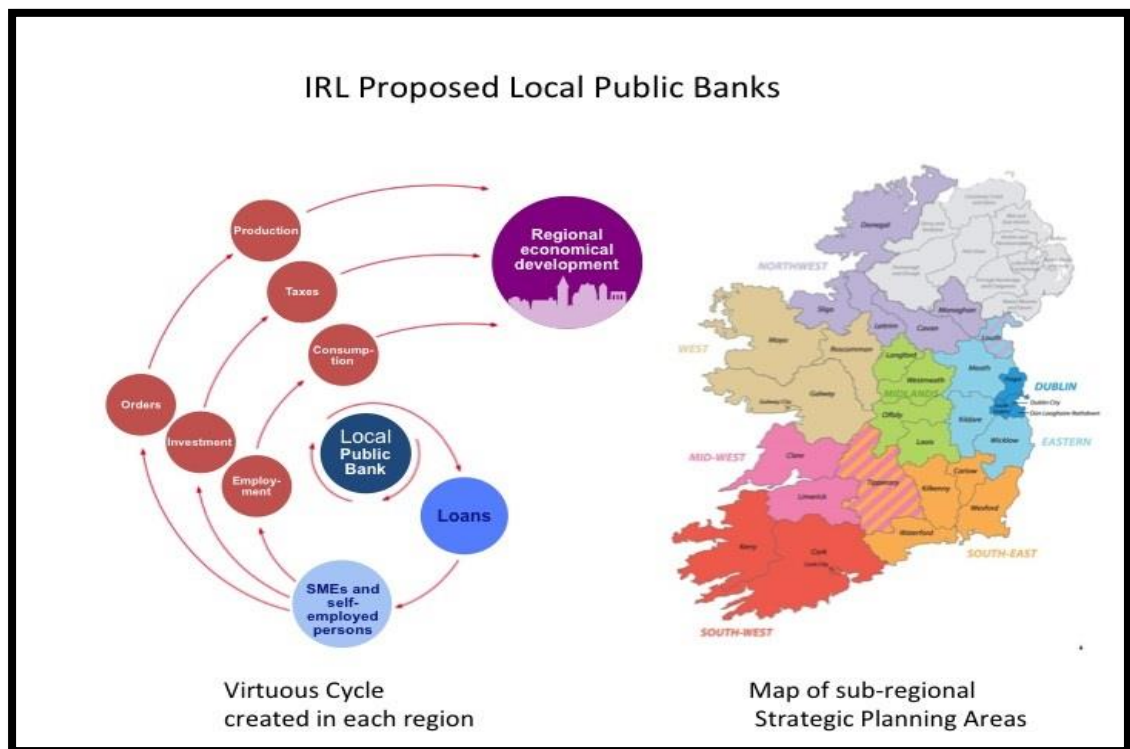
This model of banking covers the 26 counties nationally and works on a regional basis following key principles of the "Framework for the Development of Regional Enterprise Strategies." The model is not based on a theory but on an existing regional working banking model bringing prosperity by creating 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.

---

<sup>6</sup> MICRO (2017) "Rural Micro and Craft Entrepreneurs: Sustaining Rural Europe A MICRO Project Composite Report" <http://www.microsmetraining.eu/index.php>

- 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.



### **Further Education and Training**

Accessing third level courses can be more difficult for students from rural areas and especially students from lower socio-economic backgrounds mainly due to cost. As most students in rural areas have to move away from home to access third level courses, the cost of third level impacts on the family's incomes more. For people in rural areas who are considering a third level course and are maybe returning to college as a mature student there are often barriers such as access to affordable transport. A study by Cullinan et al (2013) found that for every 10 kilometres of travel distance, the likelihood that individuals would participate in higher education decreased by 2.7%. Therefore, a prospective student living 50 kilometres from a higher education institution is 13.5% less likely to participate in education at this level.

Barriers such as transport and childcare are very real for people, especially women in rural areas who are hoping to return to education and take up a course or training. For women who may have being out of the workforce for a while or never had the opportunity to take up a training course or third level education, community education

providers place a lot of emphasis on those essential 1:1 and peer supports, literacy, creating the supportive environment etc. It can be daunting to move from that environment into the higher education arena so recognition of the need for those supports for many learners is essential.

Community Education must be included in training and upskilling of people, especially women so they can increase their prospects of gaining employment or go on to further education. It must be incorporated into the RSES as a vital component in job creation. However, the following is needed for community education to be better supported -

- Develop concrete supports for community and adult education providers who are already providing formal and non-formal education to targeted disadvantaged groups and who have already identified the barriers to participation in lifelong learning (childcare, transport etc.)
- Support existing providers of education and training to lone parents to continue to deliver targeted supports to this group, taking into account the known barriers of childcare, transport and rural isolation to increase participation rates and support progression into further education and employment.
- Utilise SICAP funding (Goal 2) and access supports under LEADER (Theme 2: Social Inclusion) to support existing providers to develop programmes to enable access to 3rd level education on an outreach basis, taking into account the already identified barriers with specific reference to the low participation and attainment rates of females in third level education (29%- CSO, 2011) *Longford stats*.
- Significant differences between third level institutions in terms of a) fees charged and b) attitude towards lifelong learning and willingness to engage.

Longford Women's Link (LWL) are a provider of community education as well as other services for women in County Longford. More information on this is contained in Text Box 2.1.

### **IRL Projects**

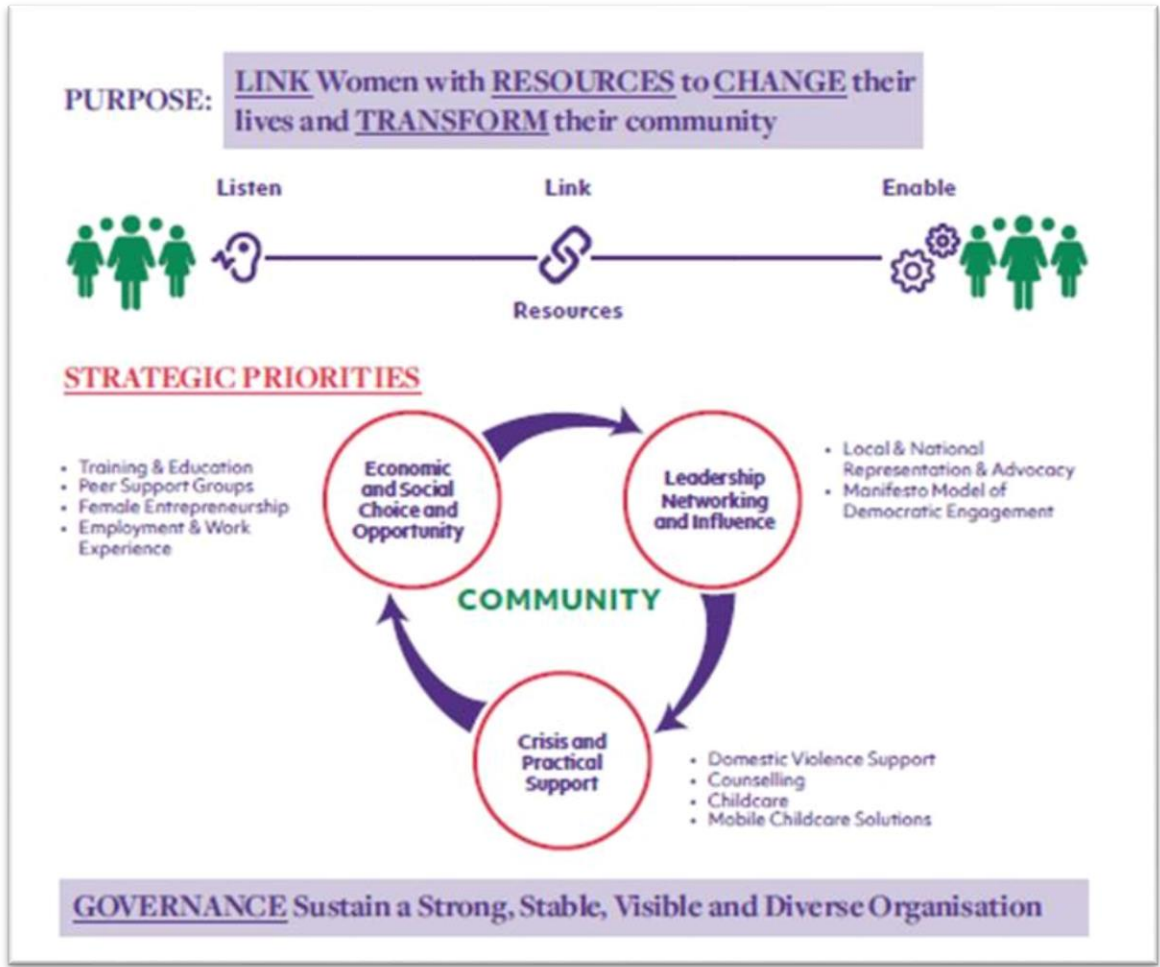
Irish Rural Link are currently involved in a number of National, Cross Border and EU projects that are contributing to better social inclusion and job creation in rural areas. More details on the projects and programmes we currently deliver are available in Appendix I.



**Text Box: 2.1 – Longford Women’s Link – Provision of Community Education and Services for Women in Co. Longford**

Longford Women’s Link (LWL) is a dynamic social enterprise linking women together to make their community safe and equal. LWL identifies and addresses key inequalities that prevent women in Longford achieving full social/ economic potential.

LWL operates using a model of Integrated Service Delivery which ensures that LWL’s headline interventions precipitate specific chains of events that contribute to social impact. Women, their families and therefore the entire community benefit from: A dedicated Women’s Community Education Facility (QQI Centre), Domestic Violence and Counselling Services, onsite and mobile childcare facility (recognising the barriers for women posed by lack of childcare), Female Entrepreneurship programme and women in decision-making all of which support economic independence for women and families. Services provided to approximately 800 women and 120 children in Longford/Midlands in 2017 enabled women to access opportunities yielding real benefits for their families and the wider community. LWL has 110 staff and has a long tradition of delivering unique programmes to support women and their families in the Midlands. LWL have been in existence for over 24 years and has significant experience in the delivery of programmes grounded in equality and social justice. We are the lead sponsor for all Community Employment Childcare Programmes in Longford and operate several services for women and their families in the community.



### **3. Environment and Climate Change**

Ireland will have to meet its Climate Action targets as part of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. However, these targets must be poverty proofed and no person can be pushed into or further below the poverty line.

#### **Fuel Poverty**

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 or take advantage of bundle deals offered by gas and electricity suppliers. The SILC<sup>7</sup> report 2016<sup>8</sup> showed almost a quarter (24.7%) of individuals at risk of poverty went without heat at some stage during 2016 while 15% were unable to keep their home adequately warm. For those living in consistent poverty, these figures were much higher with just under half of individuals (48.1%) going without heat at some stage during the year and 29.1% unable to keep their home adequately warm.

#### **Retrofitting of homes and buildings**

Retrofitting of homes is widely acknowledged by all as a simple measure that can greatly reduce our energy usage and in the long term reduce the cost of energy. It remains in the Government's interest to provide capital funding to invest in retrofitting of homes and businesses to reach climate change targets with the long term benefits far outweighing initial investment. IRL were successful in working with SEAI in hosting information evenings on the deep retrofit programme and on its Better Energy and Warmer Home grants.

While most of these grants are available to home owners, the uptake by landlords, Local Authorities and Approved Housing Bodies needs to be increased. There also need to be incentives such as being able to get credit from the energy grid where there are solar panels.

#### **Conservation of Peatlands/Wetlands**

Wetlands and peatlands are a key contributor to mitigating climate change. Wetlands and peatlands can hold two to three times more carbon than forestry and wise use of wetlands/peatlands can contribute to a range of important Ecosystem Services (ESS) such as; nutrient retention, regional water and climate regulation as well as the protection of biodiversity. Wetlands and peatlands are a tangible way to help Ireland deliver the commitments that it has made on Climate Action, such as Paris Agreement and Sustainable Development Goals 2030. With extraction of peat being stopped, there will be many bogs, especially in the Midlands region that will be left idle and conserving these can contribute to mitigating climate change, but community led approach is needed for this. The Community Wetlands Forum (CWF) was established under the umbrella of Irish Rural Link in September 2013. See Text box 3.1 for information on CWF.

---

<sup>7</sup> SILC – Survey on Income and Living Conditions

<sup>8</sup> CSO (2018) – Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2016

[https://pdf.cso.ie/www/pdf/20180316124231\\_Survey\\_on\\_Income\\_and\\_Living\\_Conditions\\_2016\\_full.pdf](https://pdf.cso.ie/www/pdf/20180316124231_Survey_on_Income_and_Living_Conditions_2016_full.pdf)

### **Carbon Sinks**

Peatlands and Wetlands as well as forestry absorb carbon. Allowing farmers and landowners to offset their carbon emissions against planting of forestry and/or no longer cutting turf on bogland and rewetting this land. The introduction of carbon sinks for both of these activities could encourage farmers, especially small farm holders, whose land is not viable to explore these options, while also giving them extra income. For community groups such as CWF members who are conserving peatlands, Moor Futures are a way that community groups can raise funds to help maintain the work they are doing.

#### ***Moor Futures***

MoorFutures are a way to raise funds for the rewetting and restoration of peatlands and wetlands. Essentially, they are a type of carbon credit used as an instrument for financing peatland protection, ecosystem services and biodiversity, through private investment. MoorFutures offer corporations an opportunity to offset their carbon emissions while investing in the biological diversity and the multiple benefits of peatlands and wetlands. MoorFutures create trust because projects are carried out in the local community and the buyer can visit the site easily; supplier and buyer are in direct personal contact. They started in Brandesburg state in Germany in 2012 with other states following suit. With the amount of peatland and wetland across Ireland, there is an opportunity now to explore such a scheme to help Ireland achieve its climate targets.

Use of Peatlands for Peatways as outlined in the draft RSES, similar to greenways and blueways are another way that peatlands can be used. However, these must not be exploited to the point it begins to damage the natural habitats of the bogs or carbon storage. Corlea Bog (Longford), Clara Bog (Offaly) and Girley Bog (Meath) are all members of the CWF and work to ensure their amenities can be enjoyed by both local communities as well as visitors and that it is done in a sustainable way.

### **Agriculture**

While there is a lot of media coverage on the impact agriculture has on the environment and climate change, measures that impact on peoples' livelihoods and indeed the production of food need to be minimised. An approach of Climate change adaption for farmers needs to be undertaken and some of the following measures can be used. Through our work as the Lead Partner in the National Rural Network, raising awareness of the schemes and initiatives available to farmers to adapt to climate change is one of the key aims of the network. Measures that are available and some that need to be introduced include:

#### **1. EIP Initiative**

EIP - European Innovation Partnerships are a new and fresh approach to research and innovation for better and more sustainable agriculture productivity. EIPs allows for

the pooling of expertise and resources by bringing together public and private sectors at EU, national and regional levels, combining supply and demand side measures.

## **2. Rainwater Harvesting**

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.

## **3. Support for On Farm Bio methane**

With increasing pressure on the agriculture sector to reduce their carbon emissions, every avenue must be explored to help farmers do this without compromising their output and their livelihood. Anaerobic Digestion is one way in which Irish agriculture can continue to grow its output while at the same time reduce its carbon emission through the production of bio methane.

Establishing biodigester cooperatives would allow farmers from the same area come together and establish these cooperatives, reducing the cost for them at an individual level while also reducing their carbon emissions.

## **4. Farm Based Energy Cooperatives**

A lead on from the Biodigester Cooperatives would be the establishments of farm based energy cooperatives. These would create energy through the use of biodigestors – converting farm waste, slurry etc. into energy which can then be used on the farms and the wider community.

Conversations now need to happen on how excess energy supply from such cooperatives can be sold back to the grid with moneys invested back into the community so everyone can benefit.

### **Text Box: 3.1 Community Wetlands Forum**

The Community Wetlands Forum (CWF) was established under the umbrella of Irish Rural Link in September 2013. The initiative came from community groups involved in wetland conservation who were developing the idea of wetlands as assets for their communities, as well as work undertaken by Irish Rural Link on behalf of communities affected by the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC). Since its establishment, the Community Wetlands Forum has continued to grow its membership, with 14 community groups now part of the forum and new groups interested in joining all using the model of community engagement to develop similar projects in their areas. The forum is also attended by representatives from Government Agencies and third level institutions. The Forum also has a rep on the LIFE Raised Bog Restoration Steering Group, NRN Biodiversity Sub-Committee and Irish RAMSAR.

The main aim of the CWF is to provide a representative platform for community-led wetland conservation groups based on the principles of community development namely empowerment; participation; inclusion; self-determination; and partnership. In support of the main objective, CWF also has the following objectives.

1. To promote wetlands, including peatlands, as important places of biodiversity and conservation, which support community integration, well-being and other services.
2. To facilitate the sharing of knowledge, ideas, experience and organisational methods between members.
3. To grow the network by encouraging new community groups who are in the process of developing community wetlands or who wish to establish such initiatives to join CWF.
4. To facilitate regular Community Wetlands Forum meetings where all stakeholders in wetland conservation can participate as equal partners.
5. To share the latest research and best practice in wetland conservation and management, and facilitate access to national and international expertise, similar networks, and funding opportunities.
6. To maximise linkages with other relevant plans, programmes, and strategies.

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. It also gives communities a sense of ownership over their local wetland/Peatland.

In May 2017, the Community Wetlands forum launched its Strategic Plan 2017-2020. The aim of the Strategic Plan is to guide the Community Wetlands Forum in its support of community wetland groups, improving outcomes in a mutually beneficial approach that is collaborative and inclusive. CWF now have a part-time Development Officer to implement its strategic Plan.

## **4. Connectivity**

The importance of the provision of robust and reliable public transport is key to connecting people to employment, education and training, health services, while at the same time reducing isolation and mitigating climate change.

People living in rural areas still do not have the same level of public transport as is available in the cities. As a result, accessing employment, health services, hospital appointments, education and training and socialising can be more difficult for people. Census 2016 showed 91% of households in rural areas owned at least one car; highlighting the over reliance on cars for people living outside Dublin. Vulnerable groups of people; older people and people with disabilities as well as those who are unable to afford a car living in rural areas are most affected by this. They rely on the goodwill of family members and neighbours to meet appointments and to go to the nearest town to do their day-to-day business.

The EMRA RSES must set out measures to meet the transport needs of every person. Connecting all the components of public transport currently available is needed but also building on the services and introducing new services to reduce the reliance on cars would be beneficial to all and to the environment.

### **Local Link Services**

The Rural Transport Programme (RTP) now known as “Local Link” is delivered by 17 Local Link Companies across the country reaching people in remote areas. Some are now providing connecting services to Bus Eireann, where stops have closed and to Irish Rail. In the EMRA region, there are five Local Link companies; Longford-Westmeath, Laois-Offaly; Kildare and South Dublin, Louth-Meath-Fingal and Ring-a-Link serving Wicklow, delivering services to people in rural areas. The pilot scheme for evening services has now been extended until March 2019. IRL would like to see this pilot becoming a permanent service among Local Links. See Text Box 4.1 for more information on services they provide

However, the services Local Link companies provide are still not accessible to everyone and the uber style service proposed over the past few days should be explored further as it could be a solution to a raft of challenges facing people and businesses in rural areas.

### **Statutory Framework for Local Transport Planning**

Local Link is still not recognised or known by many Government Departments and Local Authorities have not engaged as much as they should with their Local Link Companies. It can be a key solution to many of the difficulties that have occurred in public transport system over the past few years and be part of the overall transport system for the country. A statutory framework for local transport planning must be created and adapted by each Local Authority. Local Authorities must work with their Local Link company to identify routes and the most appropriate transport model for the communities they serve. Better integration of Local Link with other transport services

is essential for better connectivity across the country and that every person, regardless of where they live, has access to a reliable and robust public transport service.

### **Support Social Enterprises**

There are seven Fleet Owning Companies across the country that provide Local Link services in their locality. Louth Meath & Fingal Local Link/Flexibus is a fleet owner company and a social enterprise. These groups give a full range of services including; PSO service, rural transport services, community Car, Accessible Community Car and Self Drive. These services are value for money and the employment this type of services creates is supportive of the local community and gives employment and upskilling to people on the live register. The services they provide are flexible and have proved that service demand can be met in an economical way. More supports for fleet owner companies are needed. Text Box 4.2 outlines the work of Flexibus/LMF Local Link.

### **Text Box 4.1 About Local Link**

The Rural Transport Programme (RTP) has been re-branded under the name “Local Link” and is delivered by 17 Transport Co-ordinated Unit’s (TCU’s) across the country reaching people in some of the remotest parts of the country. The TCU’s in EMRA region include Laois/Offaly Local Link; Longford/Westmeath Local Link; Louth, Meath and Fingal Local Link, Kildare and South Dublin Local Link and Ring-a-Link in Wicklow. In 2012 responsibility of the programme was transferred to the National Transport Authority (NTA) and Local Link offices now operate 1,000 public bus services in local and rural Ireland. In 2016<sup>9</sup> Local Link delivered over 250,000 rural transport service trips nationally. Over €1.7m passengers accessed Local Link Bus rural transport services in 2016.

The service models provided by Local Link include;

- Scheduled Fixed Transport – These are high frequency services with a regular route, stopping places and timetables.
- Scheduled Flexible Transport – these operate to timetabled departures but can deviate from route to pick up/set down passengers closer to their destination.
- Demand Responsive – This is a door to door service responding to requests for services and operates by making specific trips to pick up and drop off passengers at their own door.

Local Link plays a vital role in delivering services in local areas, particularly in some of the most remote rural areas, providing a lifeline for many in terms of social inclusion and connectivity and are a key contributor to rural economic and social wellbeing. However, there appears to be little recognition or awareness at Government, Department and Local Authority level to the services Local Link provides and the service it could provide if there was more joint-up thinking between Government

---

<sup>9</sup>2016 are the most recent figures available

Departments, Statutory Agencies, Local Authorities and Community and Voluntary Organisations.

### **Text Box 4.2 Flexibus as a Social Enterprise**

In developing our services and in responding to local demands, our core thinking is based on Social Enterprise Model - **'Social enterprises' are businesses that trade for the common good rather than gain of a few. They address social needs, strengthen communities, improve people's life chances, enhance culture or protect the environment.'**

In 2017, Flexibus carried 170,000 passengers.

The company has enjoyed the full confidence of its stakeholders and trust of local communities and has enjoyed year on year growth in passenger numbers.

Since its formation, Flexibus has adopted a Social Enterprise model of business because we incorporate good business sense with service delivery to the community in a cost-effective way.

We have different parts of business:

- 1 Contract with National Transport Authority.
- 2 Contracts with the HSE, Bus Eireann and some smaller contracts.
- 3 A range of services to the community with a mix of funding sources.
- 4 Training services.

#### **1 National Transport Authority.**

The NTA is our largest funder under the Local Link programme. The services range from shopper services once a week, to commuter services many times a day. A full list of services is available in Appendix 7. These services pick up door to door in rural areas and are fully accessible. New or expanded services are agreed with the local area and the NTA to ensure that adequate funding is available.

#### **2 Contracts with the HSE, Bus Eireann and other contracts.**

Flexibus Local Link LFM have contracts with the HSE for non-emergency transport services and other transport contractors. The availability of vehicles and well-trained staff ensure that Flexibus deliver a quality service to passengers. Any financial surplus from these contracts is used to support the cost of other community services.

#### **3 Community Services.**

Hospital service. Flexibus Local Link LMF deliver Hospital services for all Dublin and Louth hospitals. The service started when our passengers identified a need to attend hospital and health appointments as they were unable to get an affordable accessible service. We carry about 2,000 people each year to hospital appointments. We link in with other hospital services to ensure that people can get to their appointments.

Active Retirement Services. We provide service to local active retirement groups. Rural isolation and loneliness are very prevalent among people who live alone or in remote areas. The provision of transport to rural groups to bring people together is an important social service and improves the lives of people and allow them to remain in their homes for longer. This is consistent with national policies of rural development.

Meals on Wheels: This service relies on volunteers to bring the meals to people. However, volunteers are not always available and therefore some community support is needed.

Disability services: Many wheelchair users attend day services a few times a week but for other social activities they rely on accessible transport. A visit to the cinema, or the library or



any local community activity demands wheelchair transport. This service must be available and, affordable and accessible for our local wheelchair users.

Community Car: This is a volunteer car scheme to hospital and health appointments. This service supports people who have a personalised transport need. The volunteers are from Louth and Meath and deliver a very important service to able and disabled persons within their communities.

Community Self Drive: This scheme provides one of our buses to community groups who need to access transport for their community activity. It covers both sports and activities except football, hurling and rugby. The community group nominate a driver to carry out a training course in Flexibus and thereafter they can take a bus, free of charge at the weekends. The bus is returned to Flexibus with the diesel replenished and clean and tidy.

**Training.** Flexibus has been training drivers, Personal Assistants and staff for many years. In 2017 we published a comprehensive booklet for DAPA training (Driver and Passenger Assistant) and a Driver handbook and Health and Safety Management system handbook for staff. In conjunction with Cork Local Link and Clare Local Link, we developed a piece of training – DAPA (driver and Passenger Assistant) Currently there is one stream completed, with two other modules to be printed. This training is done in conjunction with First Aid, Manual Handling, Children First and Driver CPC. We train our staff, HSE staff and staff from other agencies. Driver CPC is a legislative requirement and all bus and truck drivers must complete one module each year. We train drivers for our Self Drive and prepare drivers for their test and Driver CPC's. Financial surplus from training is used to support our other activities.

### **Community Leadership**

Employment. Flexibus employ people only from the Live Register and this links in with our training system for drivers. All new drivers begin their training in their first day and the training continues to a 'buddy' system where the new driver will work with another experienced driver to see how the company works, what systems we use. This builds the confidence of the drivers so that when they start driving they are secure in their job. We have a range of vehicles from 8 seats to 18 seats. Drivers who start with Flexibus as a car driver (8 seats) can progress to gain their D1 licence and then attain their D licence.

The health, safety and well-being of our staff is very important to the Management and Board of Directors.

Purchase of Accessible Vehicles. Flexibus is quite unique in having a fleet of vehicles ranging from 8 seats to 18 seats all of which are accessible. The financial surplus from our contracts are used towards the purchase of accessible vehicles which are dearer than general minibuses. We are fully compliant with our obligations towards our funders as regards their terms and conditions for receiving funds.

### **Broadband and Mobile Phone Coverage**

The rollout of the National Broadband Plan needs to happen without any further delays. The Broadband Officers in Local Authorities must continue to work with getting the fibre broadband to every home and business in the country and ensure that the technology is future proofed. It is essential for businesses, for attracting investment but also for helping people, especially older people stay in touch with family and friends. With many services, including farm payments and farm returns moving online, broadband is now a necessity.

## **5. Quality of Life**

The RSES is a real opportunity to improve the quality of life for people living in the region. This will involve a wide range of measures including those outlined from in previous section such as; reducing time people spend travelling to and from work by creating quality jobs, provision of public services – transport, high speed broadband and having local amenities and greenways, blueways and brownways for people to enjoy and have healthier lifestyles.

### **Healthcare**

Improved quality of life needs to be across the lifecycle. This would involve access to healthcare close to where people live and people can remain in their own home as they age. While the Eastern and Midland Regions have one of the youngest population in the country, it is without doubt that measures need to be put in place for older people living in the regions, especially in rural areas and to meet the future demand of health care that comes with an ageing population. With the development of SlainteCare and the Action Plan to be launched in the coming weeks, the focus of healthcare must focus on delivery of health care at community level and primary care. This must be included in the RSES. Community services play a vital role in helping keeping older people in their homes and allowing for early discharge from hospital. Services such as meals on wheels, befriending services, home help all now must be properly funded and become a greater part of home care packages. As outlined in previous sections, this sector will be a growing sector in the coming years and more value must be placed on jobs in this sector.

#### **Meals on Wheels**

Meals on Wheels service is a critical component of the continuum of care services and one service available that enables older people to remain living in the community or to return to their own homes after hospitalisation. For those using the service it is seen as more than just a meal. It links people into other services, such as the Public Health Nurse, befriending services and other healthcare services and it can reduce rural isolation. For many, especially men living alone, the person delivering a meal may be the only person they might see in the day or week. However, there are many challenges that are hindering Meals on Wheels delivery the vital service it provides and need to be addressed to ensure older people can remain in their own homes and live independently.

### **Social Inclusion**

As mention, growth and development in this RSES must be balanced and inclusive of everyone in society. People in rural areas continue to be more at risk of poverty and social exclusion. This can be further exacerbated for marginalised and vulnerable groups of people; older people, young people, people with disabilities, migrant and ethnic minority. The lack of services such as public transport and broadband are two of the main causes of this.

The Vincentian Partnership MESL continues to show households living in rural areas, the MESL is higher than for households in urban areas. These higher costs are primarily related to higher transport and home energy costs. For example, meeting the transport needs of rural pensioner households requires a car – this can add an additional €59 per week (due to fuel, maintenance, insurance, etc) to the MESL budget for a lone pensioner in a rural area compared to no direct transport costs for a lone pensioner in an urban area. (VPSJ, 2018).

#### **Income Inadequacies by Household Type in Receipt of Social Welfare Payment**

<b>Household Type</b>	<b>Rural</b>	<b>Urban</b>
2 Parents with 1 infant	-€75.83	-€25.78
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 pre-school,1 primary)	-€55.35	-€1.28
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 primary, 1 secondary)	-€126.50	-€74.30
2 Parents with 3 Children (1 infant, 1 pre-school, 1primary)	-€70.90	-€21.61
2 Parents with 4 Children (2 primary, 2 Secondary)	-€205.91	-€145.71
One Parent with 1 child (Primary school)	-€101.57	-€25.03
One Parent with 2 Children (1 pre-school, 1 primary)	-€81.94	-€7.17
One Parent with 2 Children (1 primary, 1 secondary)	-€153.08	-€80.19
Single Adult living in Private Rented Accommodation	-€84.83	-€47.38
Pensioner Living Alone (non-contributory)	-€55.71	+€8.59
Pensioner Living Alone (Contributory)	-€45.24	+€18.20

And as mentioned, households in rural areas in receipt of minimum wage still have higher income inadequacies than their urban counterparts.

IRL would like to see MESL used as a benchmark for social welfare payments and minimum wage scales. While this is one means of improving standard of living for low income households, it must be accompanied with provision of adequate services to

## **6. Implementation and Monitoring**

IRL welcome that an implementation group will be established to monitor and review the RSES for the assembly. IRL would like to have the opportunity to be part of this group in its capacity as a voice for rural sustainable communities, ensure that there is balanced growth across the region and that vulnerable and marginalised people living in rural areas are included and reap the benefits of the envisaged growth.

### **Conclusion**

As a driver for the new Project Ireland 2040, the Eastern and Midlands Regional Assembly must ensure that there is balanced growth and development across the three regions. This needs to be outlined in its Spatial and Economic Strategy and ensure that it is inclusive of everyone. The Midlands region is still lagging behind the Dublin and Mid East region in terms of employment and investment in quality jobs and there needs to be more collaboration between all stakeholders, Local Authorities, Employment agencies and Third Level Institutes to attract FDI to all regions and for the provision of quality jobs.

This must now be a strategy to ensure that those people who have been left behind since the recession and even before the recession have opportunities to access education, training and quality employment.

## **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.'***

## **Appendix I – Programmes and Projects Delivered by IRL**

### **National**

#### **National Rural Network**

Irish Rural Link leads a consortium made up of The Wheel, NUI Galway and Farrelly & Co to deliver the National Rural Network. The overall aim of the National Rural Network is to build and sustain a membership-based network that maximises the beneficial outcomes of the rural development programme.

The NRN achieves its aim through the following objectives:

- Raising awareness of key issues of rural concern identified by the RDP and identifying best practice models within a national and international context that can be disseminated to relevant stakeholders. Creating a collaborative process between relevant stakeholders to enhance the delivery and quality of the RDP;
- Establishing a supportive themed working group system which will act on key themes emerging from the Rural development Programme;
- Facilitating communication of the RDP-outputs to targeted stakeholders and groups;
- Gathering best practice in all relevant areas and communicating and disseminating to all key stakeholders and groups;
- Supporting the Managing Authority in its networking, dissemination and communication objectives.

Its ambition is to maximise the impact of the RDP 2014-2020 by bringing it into the lives of as many people and communities as possible, and by communicating its key opportunities and outputs to all relevant stakeholders.

#### **Getting Citizens Online and IT Skills for Farmers**

The main objective of Getting Citizens Online is to get more people online. It is aimed at people who have never used the computer before, with the objective of being able to use computer programs such as MS Word, being able to navigate the World Wide Web, searching for information and sending emails. Training is provided by fully qualified Computer Tutors and we supply a laptop for each person attending the course. The programme is funded by the Department of Communications Action & Environment. It is a free course delivered over 5 sessions. Each class is 2 hours in duration and delivered mornings & evening to suit trainees.

The Digital Skills Training scheme is aimed at the following target groups:

- Age profile 45+
- Farming communities
- Small business owners (less than 10 people)

- Unemployed persons
- Persons with disabilities
- Disadvantaged groups

Since June 2017 we have delivered IT Skills Training for Farmers programme. The overall aim of the programme is to get more farmers online. The programme will cover topics such as –

Farmer Registration Calf & Herd Register, Computer Literacy, Internet Search, Setting up Email & Online Banking. Training is provided by fully qualified Computer Tutors that are fully equipped with Train the Trainer training on Agfood.ie by the Department of Agriculture, Food & Marine. The IT Skills for Farmers training takes place over a 5-week period with one 2 hour classes per week. Classes are run nationally and mainly in the evenings tailored to the availability of Farmers.

### **Local Public Banking**

Irish Rural Link have worked with the Sparkasse Public Bank Foundation in Germany for over two years to research and explore a public banking model in Ireland. We believe that such a banking model is necessary to meet the ongoing support and needs for Micro and SME's; which are not met by Pillar banks. Such a model would also be a key component in more balanced growth and regional development.

One of the actions outlined in a joint report by Department of Finance and Department of Rural and Community Development, was the establishment of a stakeholder forum which IRL will be a member. This group is set to be established at end of January 2019.

### **Community Engagement on SEAI's Grants - Deep Retrofit Pilot Programme, Better Energy Homes and Warmer Homes Grants**

IRL were contracted by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) to deliver community and stakeholder engagement events on three of the grant schemes they are currently providing to home owners to make their homes more energy efficient, helping to make homes warmer while also reducing energy bills.

Two engagement events were held in May 2018 in Athlone and Galway on the Deep Retrofit Pilot Programme. Over 300 people were engaged with at both of these events with more people enquiring by email and phone about the pilot programme.

In November and December 2018, four events across Offaly and Galway were held to engage people with two other SEAI grants available to home owners – Better Energy Homes and Warmer Homes grants. Four more of these events will take place in February 2019.

IRL engaged an audience in all 6 events who had not previously engaged with SEAI raising awareness of a range of SEAI offerings and provided information, guidance and assistance

to assist clients in their decision making process. The insights report which we provided will assist in shaping future programmes and strategic plans.

### **Cross Border Project – The Next Chapter**

*The Next Chapter* is a new project targeting women to develop their ideas, build communities and support the transition out of conflict. *The Next Chapter* aims to improve the representation of women in public and political life and contribute to a more gender-sensitive society in Northern Ireland and the border regions of the Republic of Ireland.

This project is funded through the EU PEACE IV Programme, managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB). IRL are in partnership with Politics Plus and Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) in the delivery of this project and will contribute to SEUPB's overarching programme output of regional level projects that result in meaningful, purposeful and sustained contact between persons from different communities.

This is a two year programme running until end of December 2019 and is actively doing the following:

- Developing 10 Chapters across the region with up to 400 women helping mobilise social change in their areas through a range of initiatives including community projects
- Delivering a Capacity Development training programme for 200 participants
- Coordinating 10 cross-border peace and reconciliation networking events
- Hosting two Ambassadors' Forum events and a Stormont Symposium to showcase the programme and facilitate learning and development on a cross-community and cross-border basis
- Creating a Young Female Leaders Advisory Panel
- Empowering 150 women to contribute to legislative reform and policy consultation exercises.

Stakeholder engagement was carried out continually between February and June across all of Louth, Monaghan, Cavan and Leitrim and the border regions of Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, Newry, Mourn and Down District Council and Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council. Relevant stakeholders at a county, community and local level were engaged with. Meetings were arranged with key stakeholders and a dialogue was established with all stakeholders to build relationships. Stakeholders helped to promote the project, information sessions and meetings in their area and were essential in recruiting participants.

IRL held a stakeholders meeting in Kilkenny (Oct) and Cavan (Sept) attended by former Tanaiste Mary Coughlan, local councillors and women from the community. Discussions included an insight to life in politics and how members can become more engaged with their local communities.



## **EU Projects**

### **DELSA - Digital Empowerment for Low Skilled Adults**

IRL are the Lead Partner with 5 European countries and 2 Irish organisations (8 Partners in total) developing training tools for Citizens in rural areas, especially marginalised communities, who wish to upskill for the digital era.

DELSA will address the specific needs of low-skilled adults identified by the EU Commission in “New Skills Agenda” 2016: more than 70 million Europeans lack digital skills, becoming more exposed to unemployment, poverty and social exclusion.

DELSA addresses the needs of target groups (low-skilled adults) by developing and deploying OER targeted at low-skilled adults to sustain their digital competences and lead to their socio-economic empowerment (and employment).

DELSA becomes the concrete platform for collaboration among the various actors involved in digital skills for adult education: AE providers, private sector, facilitators, NGOs. Such a comprehensive Partnership empowers DELSA to respond to the pressing challenge of providing concrete educational solutions for low-skilled adults.

Kick Off Meeting took place in Brussels on the 6<sup>th</sup> December 2018.

### **SustainIT – Sustainable Tourism Innovative Training**

IRL are Partner with 7 other EU organisations on SUSTAIN IT; a project co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union, Key Action 2, Strategic Partnership for Vocational Education and Training. Its goal is to reinforce capacities of European workers and professionals in the sustainable tourism sector to enhance their employability while reigniting the sectors’ growth and competitiveness.

SUSTAIN IT will develop innovative, concrete and actionable training to be delivered via traditional means (face-2-face) and the dedicated Open Educational Resource (OER).

IRL will undertake desk research and produce a short report on Government and Government agency policies and strategies on sustainable tourism as well as identifying best practice cases to help inform the online resources. It will also undertake test and validation of the OER before final sign off of the resource.

Kick Off Meeting took Place in Brussels on 5<sup>th</sup> December 2018.

### **Rubizmo – Replicable Business Models for Modern Rural Economies**

RUBIZMO is an EU Funded Horizon 2020 Project. It is a consortium of 16 European organisations from high-level R&D organisations, end-user networks and clusters, experts in exploitation and uptake, and communication and replication professionals across 11 EU Countries. RUBIZMO aims to identify 50 successful business cases and 20 new business models in rural areas in the participating countries. It will explore conditions for replication to develop four practical, user-oriented tools:

A virtual library of business cases, to inspire and inform potential entrepreneurs about business opportunities;

- Guidelines on creating favourable conditions for the deployment of innovative business models, to help public authorities and rural networks create adequate framework conditions for rural innovation;
- A toolkit for clustering and network development in rural areas;
- A transformation support tool, to help individual entrepreneurs understand which business models are best adapted to their situation, and how to go about implementing change.

Kick Off Meeting for this project took place in Brussels in May and a progress meeting took place in October 2018.

**A National Stakeholder Panel was established and first** meeting took place in January 2018 with representatives from, NUIM, LWL, Teagasc, ICMSA, WDC, Ballyhoura Development, CARLOW IT and Dunhill Eco Park, Waterford and Northern and Western Assembly. There will be 1-3 meetings of this Forum in a year.

More information on this project is available on <https://rubizmo.eu/> and follow Rubizmo on Twitter @rubizmo