



Irish Rural Link
Nasc Tuaithe na hÉireann

Pre-Budget Submission

2025

Contact

Seamus Boland or Louise Lennon

Irish Rural Link is core funded by the scheme to Support National Organisations (SSNO) funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development through Pobal



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Contents

Overview.....	3
Summary of Asks in Budget 2025	4
Section 1: Long-term investment in Public Services for balanced Rural and Regional Development.....	7
Section 2: Address Poverty and Income Inadequacy.....	11
Section 3: Supports for Just Transition and Climate Change	16
Section 4: Supports for Community Groups and Voluntary Sector	19
Section 5: Agriculture	21
Conclusion	24
Irish Rural Link the Organisation	25

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.

While the rate of inflation has slowed, many households are still feeling the impact of the cost of living crisis and high prices of essential goods and services. Many of these households, especially low-income households, were already struggling with household bills prior to the cost of living crisis. The ESRI report *Energy Poverty and Deprivation in Ireland* highlighted that the level of inflation being experienced at present is “*higher for lower-income, older and rural households as a result of their patterns of expenditure*”. Through its membership, IRL are very aware of the hardship being experienced by rural households. With very little public transport available to people in rural areas, the impact on people on lower income who are dependent on their car to get to work, bring children to school and activities, attend appointments, etc. and having to make choices on what journeys they take. The continued high prices of food and fuel are also impacting the delivery of essential community services, such as Meals on Wheels, where providers are struggling with rising costs with little increase in funding. Meals on Wheels members have had to increase the price of their meals in the last two years to cover the increasing cost of providing that meal. Volunteers who use their own private car are no longer able to afford to continue to volunteer to deliver meals.

The energy crisis has highlighted the dependency Ireland has on fossil fuels and the need for a transition for cleaner, greener alternatives. Again, those on low and fixed income are the ones that are most impacted by this transition. However, we must begin supporting those who are furthest behind first.

While the one-off measures delivered in the past two Budgets were welcome and did cushion some households from being pushed further into poverty, they were just that; one off, short-term and insufficient for many on low incomes. Investment in long term measures to end consistent poverty and improve and extend public services is now needed and must be a priority for Budget 2025. Lifting people out of poverty requires adequate income but also access to public services such as; public and rural transport, broadband, childcare, healthcare, education and housing so as to reduce cost of living for households living in rural areas, especially people on low and fixed income. Measures need to be targeted to ensure those people and households furthest behind are supported the first.

Summary of Asks in Budget 2025

Issue	Asks
Regional & Rural Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Budget 2025 must be rural proofed and contain a commitment to regional equity and the prevention of urban bias, which compromises not just the social and environmental pillars of sustainability, but also the capacity of regional economies to utilise their potential and adapt to current and future challenges. • Robust investment in public services in rural areas to help alleviate the increasing cost of living for many low-income households in rural areas. We also call for the establishment of a body to examine the parameters of service delivery in rural areas. • Increase in both current and capital expenditure for rural development to ensure actions and measures outlined in <i>Our Rural Future</i> are adequately resourced. • Continued roll out of the National Broadband Plan. Communicate effectively with the general public on updates on the status of the Plan as well as any delays. • Increase in the Budget for the Rural Transport Programme and delivery of public transport in rural areas is needed. Also, greater transparency is needed on how RTP and PSO budgets are divided and a breakdown of each made available. • Establishment of a comprehensive demand-led transport service in rural areas, using electric vehicles. • Engaging with communities early in terms of immigration to prevent the spread of misinformation and where concerns can be raised. We believe this would be beneficial to both the community and newcomers to the area where they can identify what services are needed to support the increase in population. • The shift away from privately owned and operated accommodation centres. Staff must be qualified in this area to best support those coming from conflict. • Adequate funding for the full implementation of Sláintecare. • Multi-Annual Funding for Community Education is needed so providers are able to budget the delivery of courses in advance to ensure the best outcome for students. • A comprehensive programme to assist older people and others in rural areas to access digital services.
Address Poverty and Income Inadequacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An increase in core social welfare payments of a minimum of €20 per week. This is to restore the 2020 purchasing power and to begin to provide an adequate income for people in receipt of welfare payments. • Begin to invest in Social Protection and put measures in place to address consistent poverty, deprivation and ‘at-risk’ of poverty rates. Benchmark rates against MESL rather than CPI for Budgetary benchmarking. • A 50% increase in the fuel allowance to help with the cost of fuel for low-income households who are unable to change to greener alternatives. Further widening of the eligibility for fuel allowance to other low-income households.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review the fuel allowance income thresholds for over 70's so no person be made worse off if they are no longer eligible for fuel allowance. • Excise Duty was restored on petrol and diesel prices at end of May and is due again in August, we call for no further increase in excise duty in Budget 2025. • An allowance be given to those who hold a travel card but are unable to use it or get full use of it so it can go some way towards the cost of private transport. • CE and Tus schemes must ensure the best use is made of participant's skills, time and effort while on these schemes and that meaningful employment is available when the scheme ends, which affords them an affordable living is gained. • Increase in top-up rates of employment activation schemes so participants are not made worse off from taking up a place on a scheme.
Supports for Just Transition and Climate Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ring-fencing of carbon tax to support households at risk of being further pushed into fuel and energy poverty and targeting retrofitting grants for low income households not eligible for warmer home grants. • Develop direct supports for low-income households in rural areas, a comprehensive suite of financial tools must now be developed. This would take the form of sliding scale of grants and low cost guaranteed loans designed on ability to pay. • Deploy Local Community Energy Advisors throughout every local authority as well as community organised support programmes to engage and inform hard to reach energy users who would most benefit from energy efficiency upgrades. • Explore further the proposed Community Energy Outreach Programme by IRL to ensure that vulnerable groups and households receive necessary assistance through the distribution of clear, concise, and accurate information and advice in relation to retrofitting, alternative fuel sources and fuel poverty. • Ensure that employees impacted by the green transition are reskilled to take up employment in other sectors once their job ends. • Earlier engagement with communities on renewable energy projects but also allowing communities to be part of the decision making of the correct source of renewable energy that works best for their needs. • Reinstate the grant of €5,000 or higher for Electric Vehicles and retain grant value of home chargers for a further 5 years. • Make available a 50% grant to households who need to upgrade electrics in their home to support home charging. • IRL Recommendations on Retrofitting of rural housing available here.
Supports for Community & Voluntary Sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in funding to the Community & Voluntary sector to offset the increase in costs of running the services they are currently experiencing. Also an allowance for volunteers to help cover the cost of using own car which is vital for many services such as community car schemes, meals on wheels etc. to continue.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Core and Multi-annual funding of C&V organisations who deliver essential services in the community, such as Meals on Wheels and other health and social care services, community education, transport and childcare to safeguard the continuity and sustainability of these services. • Investment in community services is needed so that they can create paid employment in the local area. This not only supports CE and Tus participants to gain employment using the skills they have developed but also ensures the future sustainability of these valuable services. • Review of insurance for the Community & Voluntary sector is needed so funding can go to the delivery of the service and not on high insurance costs. Also supports to wholly voluntary groups who receive no government funding but face high insurance costs when running events.
Agriculture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agri-environmental schemes must be designed in a way to make it worth farmers to take them up. Listening to farmers on the ground and working them will be key to helping farmers make the changes that are needed. • Target small holders and engage with them to take up agri-environmental schemes. While some of their land can be deemed poor in agricultural standards, it can be optimal for environment and biodiversity protection. • Support schemes for farmers and communities to encourage the development and deployment of on farm Anaerobic Digestion for production of bio methane. Funding for community projects in this area must be easily accessible and not be laborious and bureaucratic. • Early engagement with farmers on changes needed in the sector to reach climate targets and work with them at every stage of the process. • Continuation of Grants and supports for installation of solar panels, rainwater harvesters on roofs of farm buildings and ability to sell excess energy back to the national grid. Engagement programme to get more farmers involved in the installation of these. • Provision of carbon credits for the restoration of peatland and wetland that cannot be used efficiently for farming. • Increase in Farm Assist payment in line with other core social welfare rates and make means testing process easier.

Section 1: Long-term investment in Public Services for balanced Rural and Regional Development

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

Our Rural Future: Rural Development 2021 -2025 sets out a framework to improving rural and regional development, supporting remote working and sustainable rural communities. Ensuring that essential services and infrastructure, such as public transport, high-speed broadband, shops, roads, employment opportunities and access to community services, healthcare, training and education are in place is paramount to development in rural areas and the success of the new rural development policy. It needs to be backed up with investment and the political will so rural areas can grow and people want to live in rural areas while at the same time have employment that affords them a decent standard of living. We welcome some of the developments such as the creation of more digital hubs to facilitate remote and hybrid working for people living in rural areas. However, rural towns and villages continue to see the closure of shops, bank branches and post offices with no increase in public transport services to access these services elsewhere.

Census 2022¹ on Ireland's population continued to see a higher concentration of people living in the east of the country. While all counties showed an increase in population in the 5 years to 2022, population grew faster in the eastern part of the country. This region also had the youngest population, with more rural counties of Mayo, Kerry, Roscommon and Leitrim having the oldest population. The Dublin and Greater Dublin Area continue to attract the majority of high-quality jobs, with almost half of MNC's locating in the region. The high cost of living and lack of housing is continuing to put more pressure on people trying to live and work in the east of the country. The long commuting times people do to get to work shows that placing all development in the Greater Dublin Area is no longer sustainable. While the number of people working from home increased in the 5 years since the last census, and many people moved to rural areas during Covid-19, it cannot be viewed as regional balance and should not replace companies having a physical presence in other regions of the country.

Transport

The lack of a robust and reliable public transport system continues to be a challenge and obstacle for people living in rural areas in accessing employment, health services, hospital appointments, education and training and day to day business and continues to be one of the

¹CSO 2023 Census of Population 2022

<https://www.cso.ie/en/statistics/population/censusofpopulation2022/censusofpopulation2022-summaryresults/>

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

The changes made to the school transport system that will come into place for secondary schools this September and for primary school students in September 2025 is very welcome and something IRL have advocated on for many years. We see the positive impact the free school book scheme has had on household incomes and believe the same will be true for families in rural areas now being able to avail of school transport.

Broadband

The need for high-speed fibre broadband to every home has been well highlighted. Expedited the roll out of the National Broadband Plan is needed to ensure that it is delivered within the timeframe. Better communications with the public is needed on updates and if any delays are anticipated.

Migration

IRL have continued to call for better engagement with communities on the opening of reception centres and temporary accommodation centres for refugees and those seeking International Protection. While we understand that peoples' identities need to be protected, the lack of community engagement thus far has increased concern and fear among local residents, increased the spread of misinformation and in some cases damage to reception centres. In rural areas, where there is already a lack of services, lack of communication can incite fear and concern among local people, which then can lead to the spread of misinformation and protests. Engaging early with communities and having open discussions where concerns can be raised can ensure they receive the correct information. It would also allow for the community to work together and identify gaps in services that are needed to better support migrants integrate into the community. Through proper engagement everyone can benefit.

Community Health and Social Care

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

IRL sees a key role for community and voluntary health and social care services to the delivery of this commitment and these organisations continue to be at the forefront of caring for older and vulnerable people in the community. Demand for services such as Meals on Wheels,

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

Community Education

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

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

Lifelong Learning and Digital Divide

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

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

funding must continue for these courses and better collaborate with other training and development skills.

Budget 2025 Calls:

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

- Budget 2025 must be **rural proofed** and contain a commitment to regional equity and the prevention of urban bias, which compromises not just the social and environmental pillars of sustainability, but also the capacity of regional economies to utilise their potential and adapt to current and future challenges.
- Robust **investment in public services** in rural areas to help alleviate the increasing cost of living for many low-income households in rural areas. We also call for the establishment of a body to examine the parameters of service delivery in rural areas.
- Increase in both current and capital expenditure for rural development to ensure actions and measures outlined in *Our Rural Future* are adequately resourced.
- **Continued roll out of the National Broadband Plan.** Communicate effectively with the general public on updates on the status of the Plan as well as any delays.
- Increase in the **Budget for the Rural Transport Programme** and delivery of public transport in rural areas is needed. Also, greater transparency is needed on how RTP and PSO budgets are divided and a breakdown of each made available.
- Establishment of a comprehensive **demand-led transport service** in rural areas, using electric vehicles.
- **Engaging with communities early in terms of immigration** to prevent the spread of misinformation and where concerns can be raised. We believe this would be beneficial to both the community and newcomers to the area where they can identify what services are needed to support the increase in population.
- The **shift away from privately owned and operated accommodation centres.** Staff must be qualified in this area to best support those coming from conflict.
- Adequate funding for the **full implementation of Sláintecare.** Commitment to implement actions set out must now be prioritised to ensure we move a step closer to a more equitable healthcare system.
- **Multi-Annual Funding for Community Education** is needed so providers are able to budget the delivery of courses in advance to ensure the best outcome for students. This needs to be an independent budget line where independent community providers can engage directly with Solas (and not distributed via ETBs).
- A comprehensive programme to **assist older people and others in rural areas to access digital services.** With continued bank branch closures, those who have no digital skills will be impacted the most and are at risk of being unable to access services online.

Section 2: Address Poverty and Income Inadequacy

Prior to the cost of living crisis, it was well documented that income inadequacy continued to be deeper in rural areas, especially for those in receipt of social welfare payments and those in low-paid or minimum wage employment when compared to urban counterparts.

While inflation is moderating, prices are still rising. Consumer Price Index (CPI) continued to increase in the 12 months to April 2024 by 2.6%. (CSO, 2024). However, Between March 2020 and March 2024, CPI has increased by 18.1%² and the cost of a basic basket of goods to meet people's minimum needs has increased by 16.8% since 2020.

Although electricity and gas prices have come down, gas is still 100% more expensive and electricity 70% more expensive than 2021³. The price for home heating oil increased by 8.1% in the year to April 2024. Prices continued to increase in staple foods and for Petrol and Diesel, increasing by 10.6% and 12.5% respectively. These price increases impact on low-income and rural households most⁴. With forecast inflation for the remainder of the year and into 2025 predicted at 4.8% preliminary findings from Annual MESL report expects a cumulative rate of inflation of 21.6% in MESL costs by the end of 2025.⁵

The *Roadmap to Social Inclusion 2020-2025* commits to reducing the level of consistent poverty to 2% and this has been reiterated in the Midterm review.

The CSO SILC⁶ figures for 2023 showed that 3.6% of the population was living in consistent poverty, while this was a decrease from 2022, if supports were not in place, this rate would be 4.4%. Over 10% of the population were 'at-risk of poverty' in 2023. Again this would be much higher at 13.6% if one-off payments were not in place. Those unable to work due to illness and those long-term unemployed are households most 'at-risk of poverty' at 27.3% and 25% respectively⁷.

Over 6% of households had great difficulty in making ends meet in 2023, compared to 5.5% in 2022. 92% of households experiencing enforced deprivation had at least some difficulty in making ends meet, with 28.6% having great difficulty. Even for households not experiencing enforced deprivation, 38.6% had at least some difficulty in making ends meet. 10.8% of households went without heat at some stage during 2023, with 7.2% of households unable to keep their home adequately warm. Twenty-seven percent of lone parent households went without heat during the year, for unemployed households this figure was 25.7%. These

² CSO CPI Calculator: <https://visual.cso.ie/?body=entity/cpicalculator>

³ CRU (2024) Irish and EU Household Electricity and Gas Price Information Note <https://www.cru.ie/publications/28018/>

⁴ CSO (2024) Consumer Price Index April 2024 <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpi/consumerpriceindexapril2024/>

⁵ Forecast inflation based on Central Bank Quarterly Bulletin and MESL calculations

⁶ Survey on Income and Living Conditions

⁷ CSO (2024) SILC Report 2023 <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2023/poverty/>

households had the highest rate of unable to keep their homes adequately warm at 21.1% and 18.5% respectively⁸.

The Government’s cost of living supports has helped people in the short term and cushioned them from the worst effects. However, the temporary nature of these supports means there will be significant income shocks for people if the social protection system isn’t insulated against the high cost of living on a permanent basis. This is the last Budget of the current government and is an opportunity to leave a permanent legacy of a stronger social welfare system.

Rural Poverty

The Vincentian MESL Research Centre annual Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) looks at the change in the cost of the minimum basket of goods and services needed to enable people to live with dignity. Such goods and services include; food, clothing, heating, healthcare, transport, education, etc. IRL are aware that having a minimum standard of living in rural areas is more than just income, it is also about access to services, such as transport, childcare, healthcare.

The MESL 2024 shows a lower number of households in deep income inadequacy but higher number of households in income inadequacy. In order to purchase the same goods in March 2024 as in 2020, the core social welfare rate would need to be €237 (currently €232). Adjusting for forecast inflation gives a requirement for a *minimum* of €15 increase in rates to €247 by the end of 2025⁹. This does not account for what an adult requires to ensure an adequate income nor does it account for the extra costs of disability or caring. The extra cost of running a car for rural households and energy costs have meant that rural households have always had a greater income inadequacy when compared to their urban peers. The table below shows the cost comparisons from 2020 and 2024 for an older person living alone in a rural area.

	2020	2024	% change
Home heating oil (per week)	14.10	25.35	↑80%
Telephone and broadband	40.60	47.00	↑17%
Sunday newspaper	3.54	4.00	↑13%
Petrol for the car (per week)	24.70	30.00	↑22%
Tea bags, milk and sugar	6.50	8.04	↑24%
Warm winter coat	49.00	45.00	↓8%
Exercise class in local hall	5.20	8.00	↑54%

Source: Vincentian MESL Research Centre

⁸ CSO(2024) SILC Report Enforced Deprivation 2023 <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silced/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilcenenforceddeprivation2023/deprivationitems/>

⁹ Vincentian MESL Research Centre, 2024. *MESL 2024: Annual Update*. <https://www.budgeting.ie/publications/mesl-2024/>

The tables below show the income inadequacies for household types in receipt of a social welfare payment and 2 adults employed full-time in minimum wage jobs and living in social housing based on 2024 MESL figures¹⁰. It highlights the deeper income inadequacies for rural households compared to their urban peers.

Income Inadequacies by Household Type in Receipt of SW Payment

Household Type	Rural	Urban
2 Parents with 1 infant	-€131.14	-€34.15
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 pre-school, 1 primary)	-€114.44	-€14.07
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 primary, 1 secondary)	-€195.96	-€96.04
2 Parents with 3 Children (1 infant, 1 pre-school, 1 primary)	-€139.38	-€38.11
2 Parents with 4 Children (2 primary, 2 Secondary)	-€297.50	-€182.10
One Parent with 1 child (Primary school)	-€135.87	-€28.29
One Parent with 2 Children (1 pre-school, 1 primary)	-€119.83	-€9.16
One Parent with 2 Children (1 primary, 1 secondary (Jobseeker transition))	-€200.83	-€90.82
Pensioner Living Alone (non-contributory)	-€74.41	-€4.67
Pensioner Living Alone (Contributory)	-€63.48	+€5.36

Source: Vincentian MESL Research Centre MESL 2024

The 2024 MESL showed income inadequacies among some household types who are working on minimum wage with these inadequacies deeper for households in rural areas.

¹⁰ Vincentian MESL Research Centre (2024) MESL 2024 https://www.budgeting.ie/download/pdf/mesl_2024_-_appendix_tables.pdf.

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

Household Type	Rural	Urban
2 Parents with 1 infant	+€83.82	+€223.28
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 pre-school,1 primary)	-€4.88	+€126.47
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 primary, 1 secondary)	-€50.91	+€122.01
2 Parents with 3 Children (1 infant, 1 pre-school, 1primary)	-€98.99	-€4.62
2 Parents with 4 Children (2 primary, 2 Secondary)	-€271.44	-€96.85

Source: Vincentian MESL Research Centre MESL 2024

Restoring the purchasing power for low income households must be a priority for the Government in Budget 2025 and begin investing in Social welfare so people can begin to live with dignity. Employment Activation programmes such as CE and Tús Schemes must equip participants with the necessary skills to take up paid employment and that they are matched with the scheme that best works for them. Participants must not be made financially worse-off if they take up a place. The cost of fuel in rural areas can make a participant worse off getting to the place of work.

Fuel Allowance

IRL welcome the extension of the Fuel Allowance to single people and couples over the age of 70. However, we are aware of the difficulty some over 70's still faces in accessing fuel allowance. Due to the income thresholds in place, a couple may qualify for fuel allowance as their joint income is below the income threshold for a couple but if a spouse or partner passes away, the person left may become ineligible for the allowance if their income is above the single income threshold. The energy costs for the single person remains the same but are now more at risk of energy poverty as they have a reduced income and have lost the financial support. IRL would recommend that these income thresholds are reviewed and that no person should be made worse off if they are no longer eligible for fuel allowance.

Budget 2025 Calls to address income inadequacy:

The following are IRL asks to improve income adequacy:

- An increase in core social welfare payments of a **minimum of €20 per week**. This is to restore the 2020 purchasing power and to begin to provide an adequate income for people in receipt of welfare payments.
- Begin to **invest in Social Protection** and put measures in place to address consistent poverty, deprivation and 'at-risk' of poverty rates. **Benchmark rates against MESL** rather than CPI for Budgetary benchmarking.

- A **50% increase in the fuel allowance** to help with the cost of fuel for low-income households who are unable to change to greener alternatives. Further widening of the eligibility for fuel allowance to other low-income households.
- **Review the fuel allowance income thresholds** for over 70's so no person be made worse off if they are no longer eligible for fuel allowance.
- Excise Duty was restored on petrol and diesel prices at end of May and is due again in August, we call for **no further increase in excise duty** in Budget 2025.
- An allowance be given to those who hold a travel card but are unable to use it or get full use of it so it can go some way towards the cost of private transport.
- CE and Tus schemes must ensure the best use is made of participant's skills, time and effort while on these schemes and that meaningful employment is available when the scheme ends, which affords them an affordable living is gained. Increase in top-up for participants on schemes to ensure people are not made worse-off if take up a place on a scheme.

Section 3: Supports for Just Transition and Climate Change

The energy crisis highlighted the greater need to move away from fossil fuels as energy sources to heat our homes and power our electricity. Census 2022 results on housing showed that over 21,000 households had no central heating in their homes. Almost 68,000 households (67,891) still use peat including turf as their main source of heating. Although the number has been steadily decreasing in recent years, down from over 90,000 in 2016. The use of peat including turf as a source of heating is higher among households where the head of the household is aged over 65 years of age at 28,351. This figure reduces as the age of the head of the household reduces. Over 6,941 households over the age of 65 has no central heatingⁱ. As outlined in the previous section, the number of people unable to adequately heat their home or had to go without heat at some stage over the last 12 months has increased significantly.

IRL welcome the SEAI grants to help make energy improvements to people's homes. We also welcome that the extension of the fuel allowance to people over 70 years makes these households eligible for the 100% Warmer Home grant. However, IRL believe the eligibility of the grant is still very narrow and excludes many households on low income and some social welfare payments. Many who are in receipt of the eligible payments do not own the home they are living in so therefore automatically do not qualify. They are dependent on the owner of the property to make the changes, whether this is a local authority, AHB or a private landlord. To carry out works with the other grants available is still beyond the financial capacity of many households in rural areas and especially those on low income or in receipt of state pension.

While we welcome the introduction of low-interest loans for retrofitting homes, we feel more could have been done in ensuring low income households access these with sliding interest rate and ability to pay. Credit Unions must be a key provider of these loans.

In 2022, IRL proposed a Community Energy Outreach Programme to the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications to ensure that vulnerable groups and households receive necessary assistance through the distribution of clear, concise, and accurate information and advice in relation to retrofitting, alternative fuel sources and fuel poverty. The programme would also incorporate the Government's National Retrofit Plan. We believe now is the time to begin lifting people out of fuel and energy poverty and ensure no more households are put at risk of energy poverty in the future. More details on IRL recommendations for retrofitting of rural houses are available in our submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection, Rural and Community Development and the Islands [here](#).

The implementation of the Just Transition fund and other measures to alleviate the impact of the transition to a greener society are welcome but are not enough and are not happening quick enough for many people and communities most impacted by this.

Budget 2025 must now set out measures on a just transition that are targeted to ensure those who are the furthest behind are supported the first.

Community Energy Projects

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

Electric Vehicles

Sales of electric vehicles have slowed and remains low in rural areas, mainly due to the cost of the cars but also the lack of public charging infrastructure in the country. Also, for older housing stock, the electrics does not support the installation of chargers or additional work is needed to upgrade the electrics. This is another disincentive for people to change to an EV. The reduction of grants for electric vehicles and phasing out of grants for home chargers, there will be less incentive for rural households to switch to electric cars. These grants should remain in place to allow more households avail of the grants and we also call for a 50% grant to help households upgrade their electrics to support home charging.

Budget 2025 Calls for Just Transition and Climate Change:

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

- **Reinstate the grant of €5,000 or higher for Electric Vehicles** and retain grant value of home chargers for a further 5 years.
- Make available a **50% grant to households** who need to upgrade electrics in their home to support home charging.

Section 4: Supports for Community Groups and Voluntary Sector

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

The Government rely heavily on the C&V sector to deliver the many services in health and social care, education, childcare and transport, to name but a few, at community level. Many have been doing this on a shoestring for years with funding, cut following the financial crash, never restored. We know HSE section 39 organisations are experiencing difficulty recruiting and retaining staff due to low salaries, with workers unable to afford to work in the sector any longer. This is putting the delivery and sustainability of these services at risk.

IRL have a network of Meals on Wheels providers from across the country. These providers continue to feel the impact high prices due to increasing costs of keeping vans on the road and increasing food costs, all essential in the making of a nutritious meal for their clients. We welcome that the budget for Meals on Wheels increased in Budget 2024, however, further increase in funding will be needed in 2025 and we continue to call for multi-annual funding so they can plan their budgets for the year ahead and avoid passing costs onto older people receiving the service.

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

Employment Schemes and Programmes

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

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

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

them in the local area. Also the service loses staff that have gained valuable skills on the job and built a rapport with service users.

Budget 2025 calls for the Community and Voluntary Sector:

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

Section 5: Agriculture

Agriculture still remains one of the biggest sectors in rural areas. Although the numbers employed in agriculture is falling, farming was one of the largest industry groups where males are employed together with IT sector in Census 2022, with 59,000 working in the sector¹¹.

However, the sector is changing and supports are now needed for it to grow and diversify to incorporate changes around Climate Action and Environment, with as little as possible impact on people's livelihoods.

The Bio and circular economy are emerging sectors which the farming community and farmers will play a key role. They also have a key role in protecting local biodiversity. With the right supports and incentives, smaller farmers and land that is not viable could be used for these purposes. Value must be put on the non-productive areas of the farm. IRL believe small holders are in a good position to benefit from this transition. Many small holders are farming on poor land with little or no return. This could be a way of optimising land of poor quality while providing some extra income for the small holder.

This is also true for peatlands and poor land close to peatlands and wetlands. There is ample peatland in this country to store carbon emissions, and landowners should be given carbon credits that they can offset against costs they may face due to changes in regulations as a result of climate change. However, farmers and landowners must be engaged with and part of the planning process on changes in the agriculture sector. IRL know that farmers respond well to environmental changes needed in agriculture when they are engaged with at every stage of the process.

Farm Income

The 2022 Teagasc National Farm Survey reported the average family farm income was €44,936. The West had the lowest level of farm income at €14,905 compared to an average farm income of €80,524 in the South-East¹².

Twenty-five percent of farms in 2022 were classed as been economically vulnerable; meaning they have no alternative or off-farm income. The North and West regions had the highest percentage of vulnerable farms at 33% compared to 18% in the South and 25% in the East and Midlands. Just 21% of farms in North and West regions were viable compared to 56% in the south of the country¹³.

Farm Assist remains an important payment for many farming households across the country, helping in some part to reduce poverty and also to participate in the Rural Social Scheme. The current rate of €232 must be increased in line with other core social welfare payments to restore real purchasing power of their income. The means testing process is still off-putting

¹¹ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpp7/censusofpopulation2022profile7-employmentoccupationsandcommuting/atwork/>

¹² Dillon, E. et al (2023) 'Teagasc National Farm Survey 2022' <https://www.teagasc.ie/media/website/publications/2023/NFSfinalreport2022.pdf>

¹³ Ibid

for many farmers to apply for the payment even though they may be eligible. This means they lose out in being eligible to participate on RSS.

Non-contributory state pension can make farm families more at risk of poverty. Women, especially are at risk, as they are financially dependent on the farm holder, even though they have worked on the farm. They are assessed on their spouse's income from the farm and elsewhere. This puts this cohort in a financially vulnerable position. We know some work has been done on this and call for further work to be done to protect farm families into the future.

Agri-environment Schemes

IRL are involved in the delivery of projects and programmes that support and engage farmers in schemes that protect the environment and local biodiversity. Below are two EIP projects IRL are lead and partner on, where farmers have made changes and work alongside ecologists to protect the environment and local biodiversity.

Breeding Waders

IRL are currently involved in the delivery of two EIP projects. Lead partner in the [Breeding Waders EIP](#), the aim is to secure existing Breeding Wader¹⁴ populations and support population recovery through landscape management and policy development. The project will engage farmers in the protection of these bird species that are near extinctions. This project was launched on 22nd May and work has commenced on protecting the nests of these birds for the remainder of this breeding season. Work will then commence with farmers on work needed to protect the nests on their land for future breeding season.

FarmPEAT

[FarmPEAT](#) is an EIP (European Innovation Partnership) project working with farmers in the Midlands to raise the water table and reduce carbon emissions from drained agricultural peat soils. Farmers receive results-based payments and can also volunteer to complete supporting actions to improve their results-based payments in future years. These actions are part or fully funded by FarmPEAT. For example, drain blocking is a fully funded action where farmers can install dams to raise the water level in the drain, slow the flow of water, and reduce carbon emissions while allowing the field to continue being farmed.

Engaging with and listening to farmers on the ground gives us an insight into their needs and what they would like to see in terms of agri-environmental schemes. What lessons can be learnt from these projects and where improvements can be made. During a workshop with our project farmers and steering group, FarmPEAT found that future agri-environmental schemes can boost the uptake of drain-blocking actions with:

¹⁴ Breeding Wader species includes; Curlew, Lapwing, Redshank, Snipe, Oystercatcher, Dunlin, Golden Plover, Ringed Plover, Common Sandpiper, Red-Necked Phalarope

- payment stability/continuity/certainty
- tailored, site-specific schemes
- options that don't negatively impact net income
- a mixture of annual flat rate, results-based, and supporting action payments
- flexible deadlines to complete actions that take into account the impact of climate change on seasonality
- easily accessible hydrological expertise to avoid unwanted impacts on neighbouring land
- coherence between different schemes

Budget 2025 Calls for the agriculture sector:

- Agri-environmental schemes must be designed in a way to make it worth farmers to take them up. Listening to farmers on the ground and working them will be key to helping farmers make the changes that are needed.
- Target small holders and engage with them to take up agri-environmental schemes. While some of their land can be deemed poor in agricultural standards, it can be optimal for environment and biodiversity protection.
- Support schemes for farmers and communities to encourage the development and deployment of on farm Anaerobic Digestion for production of bio methane. Funding for community projects in this area must be easily accessible and not be laborious and bureaucratic.
- Early engagement with farmers on changes needed in the sector to reach climate targets and work with them at every stage of the process.
- Continuation of Grants and supports for installation of solar panels, rainwater harvesters on roofs of farm buildings and ability to sell excess energy back to the national grid. Engagement programme to get more farmers involved in the installation of these.
- Increase in Farm Assist payment and make means testing process easier.
- Provision of carbon credits for the restoration of peatland and wetland that cannot be used efficiently for farming.

Conclusion

Budget 2025 must now start to seriously address poverty and income inadequacy among low income households and those in receipt of social welfare payments. While one-off payments were welcome in last year's budget, they are not sustainable and don't go far enough to address the underlying causes of poverty.

Addressing poverty is more than just about financial support, it is about having access to public services; such as public transport, childcare, healthcare and broadband. The reduction in cost of public transport, while welcome, has very little or no benefit for many low-income rural households who have no access to regular public transport services. Investment in services is as important as increasing income adequacy to lift rural households out of poverty and prevent pushing more households into poverty.

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

Budget 2025 must put in place financial support for low income households and those dependent on social welfare payments that not just supports them to stand still but affords them an adequate standard of living. It must also now start to look at long term measures to lift people out of poverty and not push more people into it. This will involve not only financial supports but real investment in public services, especially in rural areas where, if a proper public transport system was in place, would reduce dependency on the private car and reduce the cost of living for many low-income rural households.

Irish Rural Link the Organisation

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

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

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

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

Irish Rural Link's aims are:

- To articulate and facilitate the voices of rural communities in local, regional, national and European policy arenas, especially those experiencing poverty, social exclusion and the challenge of change in the 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.'

ⁱ CSO (2023) Census of Population 2022 Profile 2 – Housing in Ireland
<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpp2/censusofpopulation2022profile2-housinginireland/occupiedwellings/>