



*Irish Rural Link*  
*Nasc Tuaithe na hÉireann*

# **Recommendations to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands to Report on Energy Poverty**

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**Rialtas na hÉireann**  
Government of Ireland

## **Recommendations**

The following are recommendations Irish Rural Link (IRL) would like to see included in the final report by the Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection, Community & Rural Development and the Islands as part of their report on *Energy Poverty*.

### **Community Outreach Programme**

IRL proposed a Community Energy Outreach Programme to the Minister and his Department of Environment, Climate and Communications. This programme would be similar to previous community outreach programmes IRL delivered namely; Digital Switchover, Eircode and most recently the Covid-19 Community Outreach. The aim of the Programme is 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 will also incorporate the Government's National Retrofit Plan. Irish Rural Link working in conjunction with local Authorities and SEAI across Ireland would facilitate households to source the relevant information for them and also enable efficient and timely reporting of issues on retrofitting and energy and fuel poverty.

Community Champions, who have worked on our previous programmes would use their experience and vast networks will work to reach the almost 70,000 households who rely on turf as their main fuel source and do not have the financial resources or capacity to retrofit their homes.

### **Awareness raising roadshows**

Continuing to raise awareness of upgrading the energy efficiency of a home is essential to increase the uptake. This includes; making people aware of what grants/schemes are available, the eligibility criteria for the different grants and schemes, what other financial supports or loans are available, what is the different grants/schemes available and which one best suits the house type, people's income and their energy needs. Contractors also need to be honest about the upfront costs, how long it will take to draw down the grant/scheme and the length of time the project will take. IRL believe there is a need for regular roadshows across the country with all stakeholders involved available to speak with people to address their questions and their concerns.

### **Physical One Stop Shop Clinics**

While the One Stop Shop scheme has helped streamline the retrofitting process, it is still out of reach for many low-income and rural households. IRL believe having a physical one stop shop would be more inclusive and allow those who do not have the digital or literacy skills to access information online or find it difficult to understand the process to drop into a physical clinic to talk to someone in person who would explain details to them. These clinics could be held in the local Post Office, community centre, local sporting club, credit union etc.

### **Access to Finance**

IRL see a greater role for Credit Unions in the rollout of the retrofit programme. As mentioned, credit unions are often the only financial institute that low-income households and older people can access loans from. If the Government are committed to a just transition and that no one will be left behind, low-income and rural households must be prioritised to be able to access the low interest loans due to come on stream in the next few months. A more targeted approach to support these households now needs to be taken. Reducing the upfront costs for households will be essential to increase uptake among those households most in need of improve the energy efficiency of their homes. Credit Unions must be the key lender in the new Government backed, low interest loans.

### **Solar & Wind Energy Scheme**

Increasing the uptake by farmers of proposed solar energy schemes to install solar panels on farm buildings. More engagement with farmers is needed to ensure greater uptake. Access to finance will also be important so they

These schemes must be extended to rural businesses with sufficient roof space, community buildings and schools to help them reduce energy costs for schools and community groups.

### **Address Anomalies in Fuel Allowance**

The increase in the eligibility of Fuel Allowance to the over 70 age cohort has helped many more households become eligible for the Fully Funded Energy Upgrade scheme. However, IRL 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.

### **Monitoring of Fuel Poverty and Health**

Specific monitoring of fuel poverty linking health, social welfare payments and fuel/energy poverty be established. This would investigate further causes and extent of health issues and mortalities, such as hyperthermia, as a result of energy poverty. Recommendations should be set out from results of this monitoring.

### **Increase training of Contractors and Tradespeople**

The lack of tradespeople and contractors is slowing the number of retrofits that can be done and delaying jobs that have been approved. Creating training opportunities for tradespeople who may need to upskill is now needed and looking how migrants can be retrained or have relevant qualifications recognised quicker could help address the skills shortage needed to

reach our targets. With only 36 contractors available for the warmer home/fully funded grant schemes, encouraging more contractors to get involved and also encouraging local tradespeople to sign up must now happen.

## **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.'***