
YOUR FUTURE: SECURE IN RURAL IRELAND



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1. Introduction	2
2. Background to Choice of Priorities	3
3. Leadership and Capacity Building	4
4. Placemaking	6
5. Securing Economic Prosperity	9
6. Integrating and Enriching Community	15

1. Introduction

Rapid changes are reshaping how we live. In this change lies the potential to reverse the negative impacts of centralisation. Rural development is now at a tipping point. We can either harness these opportunities to bring new prosperity, or we can delay, and Rural Ireland will miss out. To take advantage of this state of play, more joined-up thinking and new policy tools are required.

Our central case is that in every town and village across Ireland there is talent to be developed, ability to be realised, and opportunity to be exploited. Now is the time to carve out a bold ambition for Rural Ireland. We can create the future we want.

The key is to empower that talent to design different solutions, to exploit the opportunities now opening up, to unleash innovative approaches, and to renew the spirit of voluntary contribution that exists within our communities.

Our core ambition is to harness Rural Ireland's immense assets and the new opportunities of modern sectors to deliver balanced population growth, to provide services at the most appropriate level of access, and to build more self-sustaining communities at all levels.

From our work, four key themes emerged where sustained action is needed:

- **Integrated Local Leadership informed by communities in designing solutions.**
- **Building a sense of place where the needs of everyone in the community are met, across all stages of life.**
- **A vibrant and varied economic life that allows existing and emerging opportunities to be developed in a sustainable way.**
- **Integrated and enriched communities that harness local capacity – young and old, new and long-established – to deliver creative and responsive solutions to social needs.**

These form the structure of this policy paper.

Reflecting these priorities, the following paper develops proposals for:

- "County Together", a broad-based leadership team driving responses to citizen priorities.
- A step up in ambition for Town and Village renewal.
- An Accommodation Strategy for all stages of life.
- Models of community involvement in Renewable Energy.
- Well-funded opportunities for farm diversification.
- Momentum for the Social and Community Economy to respond to local needs.

2. Background to Choice of Priorities

The analysis conducted in drawing up this report underpins our belief that we are at a tipping point which presents significant opportunities for rural Ireland.

A better pattern of population growth is needed

Ireland's population is growing faster than had been anticipated. By 2040, there will be close to a million more people in the country, and the demographics of our population will be vastly different. This creates challenges and opportunities. As the draft National Planning Framework illustrates, excessive concentration of growth in Dublin and the commuter counties is good for neither the East nor for the rest of the country.

From 2016-2022, roughly half of our population growth was concentrated in Dublin and the surrounding commuter counties. To continue growing in this lopsided manner is unsustainable. The draft NPF urges more balanced growth, particularly at the regional level. Half of the population and housing growth to 2040 is targeted to occur outside the five cities. In the Southern region, the target is population growth of 330,000, with 170,000 (52%) occurring outside of the cities of Cork, Limerick, and Waterford. In the North and Western region, the population is targeted to grow by 150,000, with 114,000 (76%) of this occurring outside of Galway city. This represents a major shift from existing patterns.

This is not just a matter of balanced population growth. We also believe that the needs and wants of the population can be better fulfilled through more dispersed growth right across Ireland. People will have more opportunity to live in the community where they grew up. They can live in communities with closer cohesion, they will spend less time commuting, they will have better access to services responsive to their needs, and they can devote more time to their families and their communities.

The economic potential is there

There have been real successes in regional policy in recent years. With the development of Regional Enterprise Strategies, the focus of the enterprise agencies was shifted to deliver dispersed growth, and this has been successful. The seminal establishment by Fine Gael of the Department of Rural Affairs has empowered rural communities to greatly improve local facilities. The delivery of the National Broadband Plan, pioneered by Fine Gael, has already realised double the benefits that were originally predicted, particularly as it enabled remote working which helped minimise the adverse economic impact of Covid. Both educational attainment and employment growth in many regional towns have actually outstripped that which has occurred in our cities.

However, these successes have not prevented acute problems in many towns and villages. For example, the traditional High Street has struggled as consumption patterns change, and fewer people choose to live in our town centres.

A strong message from our work has been that regeneration requires a sustained focus on creating new attractions at the heart of towns and villages, but also crucially ensuring that people have appropriate access to services that allow reasonable needs to be accessed and met. Without these services and the connectivity that joins them up, a strategy of dispersal will not succeed.

Achieving this necessitates a step change in policy. There are clear pathways to achieving this, if we make the right policy choices now.

Our survey delivers clear messages

While more than twice as many respondents believe that Rural Ireland is going in the right direction than in the wrong direction, an almost equal number believe it is standing still. Most look to national actions to drive progress and there is comparatively little faith in the ability of local government, in its current form, to deliver solutions.

The stand-out deficit identified is housing. Nothing else comes close. There is a strong appetite for opportunities, which respondents recognise in Renewable Energy, in stronger Clustering policies, in the potential for High Street Renewal, in Remote Working, and in Remote Health delivery.

However, there is a palpable sense that local leadership is insufficiently joined up, and that the local planning capacity to deliver upon these opportunities is not there. While coherent planning is believed to be crucial, there is frustration that, in practice, the planning process places hurdles in the way of worthwhile solutions. There is also a strong perception that adapting to more sustainable patterns of activity represents a major challenge.

It is clear from the survey that Ireland will need a comprehensive suite of policies to mobilise opportunities and help people to make needed changes.

3. Leadership and Capacity Building

There is a strong sense that no one is coordinating and driving the full potential of rural development. The initiatives that have been taken by government have been impactful, but they are not enough. A lot of the good work being done occurs in silos, and opportunities for more integrated progress are being missed. County Development Plans are important documents created in an open way but, as often as not, the objectives contained within these plans cannot be delivered by the Council.

A new focus can be achieved by creating “***Mayo* Together**”, a leadership team embracing the county leadership across our public agencies (Councils, Gardai, HSE, Transport, Education and Training, etc.), along with the county leadership in our communities (Sport, Business, Farming, Youth, Active Age, etc.) The mandate would be:

- To co-design with the community **a series of key strategic projects** (e.g., Community Safety, Care in the Community, Frameworks for Town and Village

Renewal, Internal Connectivity, etc.) with the objective of making Rural Ireland a great place to live and oversee their collaborative execution.

- To ensure that when these strategic priorities are identified, a **team of the right people** from different organisations is assembled and empowered to enlist both the needed actions and the accompanying resources for effective delivery.
- To not only coordinate the input of public agencies, but also to **commission the design of novel and responsive solutions** to local needs, empowering creative communities, private enterprises, and social enterprises to contribute.
- To **troubleshoot** problems which arise from time to time which need an integrated response.
- To **mainstream proven models** that have worked elsewhere and seed their establishment locally.

The initiative aims to broaden the perspective of organisations that currently operate in silos. The leadership team would present an annual work plan and report twice a year to the elected members of the County Council and the county's nationally elected representatives, which would give those elected the opportunity to monitor progress, to shape policy of agencies serving the county in diverse ways, and to effectively present the needs of the county at national level.

This model draws on the innovative approach being taken by the Minister for Justice in creating Community Safety Partnerships, which ensure that the Gardai are not acting alone when seeking to address community safety, but instead operate with other agencies that have a clear obligation to contribute. Most of the big challenges in Rural Ireland cannot be addressed successfully without such a cross-agency approach.

To promote the effective operation of the team there must be support from government. This would include access to a Fund with both capital and current money that would help fund innovative action, and access to technical support from national bodies and academic institutions, where needed, to build capacity for effective cross-agency action.

The aim is to develop tailored responses to local needs co-designed with the community, and to learn from examples of success.

In proposing this initiative, we are conscious that a deeper look at the reform of local government is needed. Its role has been eroded by the creation of national agencies in areas where local government traditionally led the way, such as land development for Water and Housing. At the same time, new roles and functions that impact communities directly have not been devolved. County Together teams would be an important first step in making local government more relevant to communities.

4. Placemaking

Infrastructural Prioritisation

To fulfil the ambition for more balanced and integrated population growth, there must be greater focus on releasing rural potential by those planning our national infrastructures. This must ensure that accommodation can be built in a more timely way, and that services appropriate to the community's needs are available. Central to achieving this are:

- A new **Demographic Planning Unit** in the Taoiseach's office (previously recommended by the Policy Lab) to provide a stronger focus across government on the capacity to respond to the need for balanced and integrated population growth, to the needs of childhood, and to the opportunities and challenges of longer lives.
- A new **Infrastructure Department** whose mandate includes innovative design thinking in meeting these challenges, and specifically for the regeneration of towns and villages.

The following are some examples of the new approach needed:

- Use the rich sources of data now available to have a **data-led analysis of infrastructural gaps mapped**, which would guide both national investment priorities and county development planning.
- Commission **local audits** of need for childcare, for rightsizing accommodation, for primary care centres, for a continuum of care settings, so these local priorities - sometimes poorly understood - can be more fully reflected in national capital plans in an accountable way.
- Ensure that the priorities of **Irish Water** include releasing the potential of towns and villages within their investment.
- Focus the **€8 billion National Retrofitting Programme** on the greatest need for energy upgrades, which currently lie in rural communities, but which often lack the resources to undertake the work. The National Retrofitting Programme should set specific targets to tackle these needs and adapt the present programmes to include local skill development, group schemes, and more flexible access for those marginally over the income threshold for the free scheme.
- Specific **Mobility Strategies** must be evolved for rural areas, building on Local Link (up 90% in recent years), NTA pilots for Uber-like services, and sharing platforms. It should include measures to increase confidence in switching to EVs for private journeys that are unavoidable in rural settings. These measures should include an attractive rural package for combined EV and solar panels, lower motor tax, lower public charging fees, higher density of public chargers, and preferential toll concessions.

Further innovation in Housing Policies

The current review of **Housing for All** must set out a detailed pathway for the delivery of 30,000 new homes per year which must be widely dispersed outside of the five cities. This should, in particular, set ambitious targets for counties not in the commuter belts. It cannot be a “one size fits all” approach.

The emerging County Housing Strategies and planning requirements must focus on making it viable to deliver **a home for all stages of life**. The key to attracting people to live in rural areas is good access to services appropriate to the size of settlement, as has been set out in the draft National Planning Framework, and which can respond to distinctive local needs:

- Strategic housing needs identified in County Development Plans must trigger delivery of **serviced sites**.
- Locally serviced sites must be designated for **rightsizing**. A new focus must be placed on offering **continuums of settings** for a variety of needs over the lifecycle, with appropriate national incentives for delivery.
- Simpler **standard models**, which do not compromise on sound planning principles, should be introduced so that planning permission is simpler to understand and to obtain. particularly for brownfield developments, over the shop, or conversions. If a proposed development adopts a permitted standard model, it should receive permission rapidly.
- A turnkey specification for converting **one home into two** in appropriate locations within built up areas should be created.
- Give Approved Housing Bodies a mandate that includes **Affordable Purchase**.

Integrate Community projects to build greater ambition

Fine Gael has meaningfully changed the State’s approach to community development after decades of neglect. Over the past 8 years, €2.1 billion has been invested into 45,000 projects across 11 distinct rural development schemes and 7 distinct community development schemes.

Through the Policy Lab process, we have seen countless examples of the capacity of communities to mobilise when offered modest levels of support. They have helped build the fabric of village communities in particular, and have created a “demonstration effect” which others seek to follow. The pattern of innovation and initiative unleashed by the many rural funding calls prove this paper’s central case: that there is great potential untapped and that we must, therefore, be more ambitious for Rural Ireland.

However, there is a desire, revealed in our survey and in the policy kitchens, for more integrated thinking about how we can make our towns and villages great places in which to live. Anyone who wants to stay in their community should be able to do so.

The **Town Centre First** initiative has gone through its pilot phase of one town in each county and is moving to a second phase, while a National Centre has also been established. To

date the investment committed to 52 locations is under €150,000 each, because the model does not involve direct funding of projects, which instead draw on the many other lines of funding.

Now is the time to be more ambitious for this **potentially transformative “audit and plan” approach for driving regeneration** in towns and villages. To attract more communities to take this approach:

- A **simpler template for the Local Plan** must be developed, which does not have such a capacity demand from stakeholders that its fast expansion is impaired.
- A **higher rate of grant** for community projects, for refurbishment of vacant or derelict properties, for sustainable energy, for repurposing iconic buildings, for community projects, for mobility initiatives, for co-location of services, etc., should be made available within the model.
- Local authorities should be actively involved and offer **rates concessions**, where appropriate, by designating specific areas as revitalisation zones.
- Local authorities must prioritise actions to **streamline the permitting process** for those towns and villages that adopt this integrated approach.
- The terms of **vacancy grants should permit builders to refurbish and sell** renovated homes to first-time buyers in such integrated settings. This would create a meaningful market for the refurbishment of homes in rural towns, which Valerie Mulvin has estimated could provide up to 90,000 units, constructed more sustainably than new builds, across the entire country. Given the NPF population projections, we need every one of these units.
- A specific **Innovation Fund** should be incorporated in the scheme which seeks to promote new forms of activity in the High Street, recognising the profound structural changes in consumer patterns that have occurred since Covid. It would promote experiences, events and festivals that would become alternative attractions to traditional outlets.

Regeneration of Clonakilty

In the 1960s, Clonakilty went through a period of decline, with high levels of dereliction and vacancy after the closure of the West Cork railway. However, the town employed a town architect whose role was to produce Town Development Plans and engage closely with the community. Through this process, citizens were encouraged to learn about the planning process and play more of a role in their town’s development. The Clonakilty Development Plan has focused on consolidating the town through restoration, repurposing, and pedestrian-friendly public spaces that encourage social congregation. Clonakilty is widely considered the benchmark for town regeneration in Ireland.

One-Off Housing

While housing will continue to focus on developing supply within the curtilage of existing towns and villages, it must be recognised that two-thirds of families in Rural Ireland live in one-off housing. Indeed, one-off housing was noted as an important pull factor for those moving to Rural Ireland. Any serious policy for thriving rural communities must ensure that people with a reasonable local connection can build one-off homes to sustain those communities.

To underpin the sustainability of this approach, planning restrictions on one-off housing should be loosened in line with the Draft National Planning Framework, but set a requirement that the **design must embrace sustainability**: low embedded carbon in building; clear guidelines on sustainable use of water and wastewater; the eventual use of zero emission and renewable energy-powered vehicles; and systems for waste minimisation and for optimum material recovery.

5. Securing Economic Prosperity

Historically, remoteness from the centre has been an obstacle to rural economic progress and resulted in strong forces for centralisation. However, many of the new drivers of change are altering the patterns which led to globalisation and centralisation.

The new drivers of economic progress lie in the continuing spread of the digital revolution, in the transformative power of artificial intelligence, and in the urgent need to curb the damage being done by climate change and biodiversity loss. They create new opportunities for rural economies to create competitive advantage specifically from:

- the opportunity for remote working and remote service delivery to remove the handicap of location.
- the shift from centralised fossil fuel power generation to dispersed renewable generation.
- the drive for circular patterns of design and consumption designed to remove environmental damage, which promote local sourcing, local repair and recovery as we rethink how our needs for nutrition, shelter, clothing, travel and leisure are met.
- the new emphasis on accessible and sustainable supply chains, not prone to disruption by pandemic or geopolitics.
- the shift from the mass market to more personalised products and experiences.

While some of these changes are undoubtedly placing pressure on existing business models in Rural Ireland, each presents significant opportunities which must be developed strategically to maximise their impact on rural prosperity. Strong foundations have been laid for delivering on this. Specifically, the roll out of the National Broadband Plan creates a unique competitive advantage, the active strategies to develop our renewable energy, and

the creation of Regional Enterprise and Regional Skill structures lay foundations for strong ambition.

Driving a Digital Revolution in Ireland

Fine Gael's **National Broadband Plan** is both ahead of schedule and is delivering benefits far in excess of expectations in the areas served. The 400 Connected Hubs offer a network that can help capitalise on the potential.

The National Broadband Plan has now achieved 85% of the targeted coverage, either completed or under construction. This opens up a major opportunity to overcome obstacles created by remoteness, and to attract new activity to rural locations. Already we are seeing the benefits of remote working, remote commerce and remote connectivity, whose value was seen during Covid. However, much more can be achieved.

To get maximum benefit, a **Broadband Innovation Unit** should be developed within the Department of Communications to ensure that Ireland capitalises on the lead created by this universal high-speed broadband. Its mandate should be to:

- Identify obstacles that might hamper the adoption of remote working.
- Pioneer the use of remote health screening, smart personal technologies, and remote health delivery to deliver better health outcomes without attendance at hospital.
- Pioneer the capacity to deliver more services remotely from the public, private and social enterprise sectors.

Renewable Energy

The scale of opportunity in Ireland for renewable energy, including wind, solar, biomass, biogas/biomethane, biofuels, geothermal, hydrogen and other technologies is significant. Different scales of generation should be promoted and encouraged. By 2030, 22GW of renewables will be developed, and the offshore wind opportunity will more than double that in the years beyond. The development of over 200 Biomethane Production Facilities will offer an opportunity for profitable farm diversification in the production of feedstock. It is vital that the estimated 20,000 direct jobs and multiple spin off opportunities from renewables make a strong positive impact on Rural Ireland.

The plan-based approach to this development opens up the opportunity for local sourcing partnerships, and the attraction of new energy intensive sectors like Data Centres to locate in the regions where renewable power is generated. Energy Parks, as recently pioneered by Bord na Mona in the Midlands, demonstrate this opportunity. Spin-offs like hydrogen production are realistic prospects. However, it is essential that a roadmap for grids, for ports and other supporting facilities is quickly articulated.

Powering Prosperity, the plan for the development of these opportunities by the Department of Enterprise, must set the wide dispersal of these economic opportunities to the regions as an objective. This opportunity should be a very tangible element supported by the **Just Transition Commission**.

Community Participation in Renewables

In order for rural communities to directly benefit from the concentrated generation of fossil fuels being replaced by dispersed renewable generation, national targets for community-owned renewable projects, community shareholding in developer-led projects, and community participation in District Heating initiatives should be set.

- SEAI should support the establishment of these **group schemes** with advice and seed money as it has with Sustainable Energy Communities.
- Arrangements for **equitable access to the grid** and a reasonable price for supply to the grid should be constructed.
- Access should be granted to the **low interest loan fund** recently established for energy upgrades.
- Individual participants should be allowed access to the annual €400 **tax credit**.

It is vital that rural communities become partners in the drive for sustainability. This will not only provide our communities with energy independence and security but will elevate confidence in renewables at a larger scale.

Dynamic Multi-function Farming for Viability and Resilience

The core of Irish Agriculture lies in its grass-based production of dairy and beef. Irish farmers have good credentials on measures of sustainability compared to other, more intensive producers in those sectors. These sectors will continue to be key for Ireland and for strategic food production. However, securing their future requires a sustained focus on adopting sustainable production methods. Many farmers believe they lack the information and an adequate policy framework to deliver these changes. In many cases, Irish farms are already struggling for viability. Farmers cannot easily fund big changes in their enterprises and need more guidance and support on this path.

Almost all our beef and dairy products are exported. This means Ireland, more than any other country, must further develop our credentials as sustainable producers, and get ahead of consumer expectations. This is vital to protect our good reputation and high margins in these sectors. In turn, it will protect viable family farms into the future.

Farming and land use also has a unique advantage in this changing world.

- It can remove carbon from the atmosphere in more sustainable and cost-effective ways than other sectors.

- The particular features of methane as a short-lived greenhouse gas means that a policy of carefully managing down emissions can deliver immediate gains in reducing global warming that are not fully reflected in the present measures of emissions.
- It can develop renewable sources of energy that displace dirty sources. It can be the fulcrum for a dynamic new circular bio-economy and can play a vital role in promoting greater biodiversity.

Irish farms of the future should be sources of sustainable food, fuel and fibre.

These streams could represent a rich new source of potential income for farmers. Other sectors for whom carbon abatement is far more expensive could willingly finance these cheaper alternatives. However, the new opportunities lack a route to market that gives equivalent confidence as the more traditional beef and dairy enterprises. It is not surprising that many farmers see them at best as making only marginal contributions to their incomes. It is essential that public policy works out the detail of the supporting infrastructures and market systems if this opportunity is to be realised.

The rewards of opening up the way to this evolving vision of farming is that it can provide future generations with real reasons to plan a future on the land. Our engagements have shown us that this is essential to the cultivation of sustainable communities in Rural Ireland.

New pathways are required if we are to realise this prosperous future.

Place Quality Food and Environmental Gains in Harness Together

Too often the production of quality food and the delivery of environmental improvement are presented as being pitted against one another in a zero-sum game. However, nothing could be further from the truth. There is no resilient long-term future for the family farm or the food processor that does not embrace a pathway to sustainability. We have identified several steps to move in this direction:

- A cross-government Task Force should be established with the mandate to set out an integrated pathway to a prosperous future for the family farm. The integration of the diverse opportunities into a convincing picture of the future is vital.
- Increase support for the development and adoption of modern farming techniques and technologies to reduce the impacts on water, air, and biodiversity.
- Focus on the need to provide sustainable farm incomes that can maintain and enhance rural and vibrant communities.
- Major processors should be required to measure their emissions footprint. Processors and farmers should be facilitated in co-creating strategies for mitigation of emissions, and the value of improvements should be adequately rewarded in price premia.

- Accelerate the process where farmers “Know Their Emission Number” and measure “key performance indicators” (such as the adoption of measures on the Teagasc pathway), so that their contribution to improvement can be verified and recognised.
- Generational renewal and succession initiatives are needed to encourage the new generation into farming.

Incentivise better emission and river catchment management

Collaboration is required at the local level so that water quality, biodiversity and carbon emissions can be tackled in an integrated way. Farm nitrogen use has a role, but so does waste water treatment.

- Local authorities can play a strategic role in uniting farmers and the wider community in a collective endeavour to deliver this.
- A **Land Use and Emission Abatement Fund** should be created to support initiatives in rewetting, rewilding, carbon farming, forestry, and bioenergy so that in time this can become a reliable source of income.
- A **diverse range of land use options** should be promoted and supported through policy, support, and regulation to promote biodiversity, sustainable food production and emissions reductions. The disappointing record in planting of forestry despite the incentives contained in the present billion-euro strategy must be addressed in the upcoming mid-term review. It is essential to both create and communicate a reliable route to market. We need both a source of native timber and the sequestration benefits it can bring.
- Diversification must be underpinned by **certain guarantees of income stability**, particularly to supply the network of Biomethane Production Facilities and encourage the development of diversity within existing enterprises and alternative enterprises.
- **Microgeneration and small-scale** renewable energy generation must be expanded, especially where it can meet local needs.
- Ireland should move to early adoption of the EU Carbon Farming Framework.

Improve the State’s interface with Small and Micro Rural Businesses

A strong theme from the small business community is that Enterprise policy has not yet fully evolved to support the small businesses which grow up around local needs and opportunities. They often need expertise that is not always available in the local LEO. Innovation is needed in sectors which are not primarily exporting, if the rural economy and the high street is to thrive. New activities thrown up by the Circular Economy, such as repair, refurbishment and recovery require tailored support if they are to get established as sustainable enterprises either commercial or social. While supports like selling online or undertaking an energy efficiency agenda are welcome, they don’t fully meet the needs. There is a big opportunity to develop the LEO structures and fill these gaps:

- The critical role of Rural Entrepreneurship and Female Entrepreneurship and Social Entrepreneurship in both existing and new activities should be recognised.
- Access to the suite of universal support (i.e., incl. non-traded services) should be supported, harnessing the 180 supports on the new Enterprise Support Portal.
- Access to Specialist Services via the LEO network should be evolved to assist enterprises with building capacity for scaling and with achieving the potential to export.
- Collaborative models within sectors should be developed to identify enterprises who can act as beacons in innovation as well as in adapting to the green and digital agendas.
- The issue of generational renewal and succession in small and micro businesses should be addressed.

Develop a Structured Clustering Policy

Recent work done on behalf of the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment has demonstrated the opportunity for Ireland to widen and deepen the concept of clustering. Creating collaborative structures can deepen the skill pool, develop innovative solutions to common problems, create the foundations for successful start-ups, and establish links into academic and research bodies that help stay ahead of the coming waves of innovation that face every sector. There are a number of stand-out opportunities for stronger local clusters. These include Food; Tourism; Retrofitting; and Sustainable and Renewable Energy, to name just the most obvious.

The **Regional Enterprise Plans** and the **Regional Skills Fora**, established by Fine Gael, have been very successful in developing economic activity in the regions and have created a structure in which the key agencies, public and private, have developed the capacity for delivering on strategic goals. These networks for supporting entrepreneurship, for applied innovation, and for clustering must now be applied to realising the full potential of the changing business environment.

The **National Clustering Office** envisaged should identify opportunities and work with the existing regional enterprise boards and regional skills fora to evolve the clustering network and the array of supports to the clusters. Each cluster will have its own particular characteristics, but common elements will include:

- **Supporting Start-ups** through low-cost incubation spaces, mentoring and access to capital.
- **Promoting Dispersed Applied Innovation**, by giving a clear mission to universities and National Research Bodies to create accessible hubs of expertise and innovation in sectors of local opportunity.

- **Developing needed facilities for development and innovation** and building out the existing models of successful Enterprise Hubs.
- **Ensuring easy local education and training access** to Skillnets and other Lifelong Learning.
- **Developing a Circular Strategy** for the cluster to help enterprises to quickly transform their operations to meet the environmental credentials that consumers now expect.

Some of the specific opportunities which our work identified for clustering initiatives included

- **Promoting integration in Food, Tourism and Heritage offerings** where significant opportunities exist for eco-tourism, for concepts of local Food and Heritage Trails, and for market opportunities for Local Produce in Civic Spaces in local towns.
- **Promoting second sites in rural/regional locations.** This would involve a joint EI/IDA Task Force identifying sectors of opportunity (e.g., Finance, IT).
- Supporting continued **remote working models and collaborative spaces** so that an enriched working environment is available.

National Centre for Furniture Design and Technology in Letterfrack, Connemara, Co. Galway

The Centre at Letterfrack began as a community development project led by Connemara West. It expanded through a partnership with GMIT (now ATU) and has become the National Centre for Furniture Design and Technology. The project has provided major social and economic dividends for the village and wider region. It is the area's biggest employer, has generated significant revenue from student accommodation, and the town's population profile has been transformed by the presence of so many students. The Centre also has strong links to industry, providing a bright future to those who opt to pursue a trade.

Waterford Greenway

This 46-kilometre cycle route along an old railway line between Waterford City and Dungarvan has had a strong positive impact on the towns along its route and demonstrates the positive spillovers that using Rural Ireland's assets can bring.

6. Integrating and Enriching Community

Rural areas already report three times the neighbourhood cohesion of their urban cousins. Community is at the heart of rural life. However, this cohesion must be enhanced with new underpinnings. While better planning and economic opportunity are necessary for strong community, they are not sufficient in themselves.

Covid has disrupted participation. Evidence from around the world demonstrates that the pandemic has had long-term, “hidden” impacts on our population, like increased feelings of loneliness and isolation. Government policy must seek to repair the loss of these bonds.

Different communities face diverse challenges and needs, but the key to progress is the building of **social capital**, that intangible feature of trust and mutual support that leads communities to thrive, building strong networks in spite of diverse interests, needs, and capabilities. Luckily, we do not make policy in a vacuum. There are proven processes to cultivate this.

Building trust within communities, as well as between communities and the State, requires well-developed processes that go beyond consultation. In Ireland, we need the process of interaction between the State and organisations to be one of genuine openness, where there is greater **co-design** of solutions.

Meaningful co-design of solutions will ensure that resulting initiatives and outputs will not only be more accessible to the local groups that they serve, but that they will be tailored to their needs (features which were consistently reported to be absent). The Age Friendly Ireland network of councils offer a good template.

Integrated consultation around key challenges must be facilitated, with the goal of co-designing optimal responses (village renewal, community care, etc.)

- Locally led vehicles for community consultation should be developed (e.g., community fora).
- Participation must be cultivated among the young and others who might be slower to get involved.
- Ensure the participation of the many successful local networks such as Tidy Towns, School Boards, Partnership Companies, Leader Groups, etc., who have proven flexibility in their approach and can act as mentors for others in getting new initiatives going.

Public Participation Networks (PPNs)

PPNs are the networks which facilitate engagement between local authorities and community groups across the country. Their purpose is to ensure that local authorities are responsive to the needs of communities. 31 PPN representatives from community groups and organisations are elected, across the country, to various local authority structures where they represent the interests of the PPN and its membership to the Council. This framework for engagement between communities and local authorities must be strengthened and built upon to facilitate co-design of solutions that meet local needs.

Social Enterprise and Flexible Responses

A central challenge in rural communities is the capacity to pay for needed services that fall short of commercial viability. This implies a much higher reliance on the emergence of community providers or Social Enterprise.

- Social Enterprise should have full access to enterprise supports and not be excluded because of their charitable status.
- The flexible mandates of Partnership Companies should be harnessed for piloting new approaches.
- A greater willingness to create funds that foster innovation at local level — schools, primary care, etc., — within a framework of accountability is needed for those on the ground who can make a difference.

Developing the Connected Hubs into magnets of activity

The network of 400 Connected Hubs has been identified in our work as very positive to date, but with huge additional potential. A **new mandate for the Connected Hubs** should be given to fully develop the opportunities that they offer:

- To create a virtual platform for local products and businesses to exhibit their offer and develop new sales channels.
- To create a volunteer-run shared mobility platform accessible by people who are isolated or with restrictive mobility.
- To become a hub for information and in particular for local clubs and activities to be accessed by the wider community to promote connectivity.
- To foster Social Enterprise as a way of meeting local needs.

Ludgate

Ludgate is a social enterprise that operates a remote co-working space in Skibbereen. Not only has it facilitated remote working in the area, but it has also become a hub of community activity in West Cork and has facilitated the return of skilled workers and family to the area.

Open all state-owned assets to community use within such plans

State-owned assets, paid for by the taxpayer, should not merely lie unused outside of regular business hours. During the course of our work, community groups and leaders consistently advocated for a better use of these assets. Some steps include:

- Opening up state-owned assets to use by community groups and clubs. For example, schools, public bodies, and government departments should be expected to allow youth clubs, etc., to use their space after hours. Community leaders that

participated in our work reported that the often-cited barrier of insurance issues is exaggerated.

- Introducing a requirement that any new community centres built using state funding, or community assets improved using state funding, should be designed for multi-purpose use.
- Multi-use design should be prioritised in local plans and county-level strategies, with preferential conditions given to projects which embed multi-use in their design.

Community Safety Plans

Our research identified great potential in the model of Community Safety Partnerships, which has recently been enacted by the Dail, building on a series of successful pilots. The concepts of co-design with the local community, clear obligations on public bodies other than the Gardai to contribute actions and resources to the plan, and collaborative leadership were identified as particularly valuable. However, key to success is having good leadership and identifying people within other organisations who have the authority and the commitment to engage creatively in meeting the various challenges faced by our communities.

Care Needs

A strong and consistent theme has been the need to support the evolution of local community solutions to needs in their community. Whether it is in caring for the child or caring in later life, people place a huge value on the flexibility and responsiveness of a community service. However, the frameworks used by overseeing bodies are often narrowly oriented towards delivery by a public service model or through a private sector tender. A **superior model has evolved in Partnership Companies**, which have a greater degree of autonomy to respond flexibly.

There are some wonderful exemplars of excellence in community delivery, and there is an urgent need for planners in bodies like the HSE or the Childcare Development Agency (currently in development) to devise better models for mainstreaming these successes.

A strong objective of public policy must be to focus on enabling people to **remain in their own communities**, living independently if at all possible, or with supported living available locally when independent living becomes unviable. As our population rapidly ages, the acute treatment and nursing home models of old age care will place more strain on our health services.

The Digital Revolution must be harnessed to help deliver the change we need. At **peak Covid**, GPs held 4.35 million remote consultations in 2020 and consultants held 0.26 million. This has fallen to 1 million and fifty-eight thousand respectively, less than 25% of the peak. The success of this enforced experiment surely contains the seeds of a new approach with benefits for providers and patients alike.

We believe that this is one of many areas where the County Leadership Teams can cultivate a more community-led approach to care.

- There are excellent examples of community-based services providing a continuum of care, which could be replicated in the right conditions.
- The opportunity for remote consultation, diagnosis, assessment, and monitoring must be developed in local Community Health Areas.
- The **local Pharmacist** is an invaluable resource in the community and the present move to give them limited prescribing rights should be rapidly expanded.
- Health Insurers should be **mandated to support efforts to keep their clients healthy**, which will bring new funding to cost-effective local health screening and community care of chronic conditions.
- **Local Family Care Partnerships** should be created, where family carers can register and where they would have the opportunity to pair, share and access community services in a more flexible way.

Kilmaley, Co. Clare

Kilmaley Day Care/Health Centre & Housing Complex offers a suite of social and health care services to help older people live independently within their community, with assistance when needed. The complex offers purpose-built housing on-site - next to community facilities like the church, shop, creche, and post office - and helps meet the needs of clients in a holistic way.

St Brendan's Community Care Village Project, Mulranny, Co. Mayo

St Brendan's provides a continuum of care in the home, beginning with people living in their own home with supports through to sheltered housing and, when needed, high-support care, all within the community. It provides housing and care appropriate to people's needs at all stages, including respite, convalescent and palliative care, and timely use of intravenous antibiotics locally for life-threatening diseases. This keeps people out of hospital and within their community. St Brendan's is the biggest local employer for the last 26 years with an annual wage bill of €1.4 million and has helped rejuvenate Mulranny.

Circular Economy

One of the great challenges of our age is to move away from the "take, make, discard" pattern of consumption, to one which seeks to design out all forms of environmental damage from how we meet our needs for nutrition, shelter, travel, and leisure. It emphasises careful use of materials, keeping them in productive use for as long as possible and recovering them for reuse whenever possible. In short, this "Circular" approach shifts emphasis from

waste disposal to the careful management of non-renewable resources. New opportunities created by this transformation must be seized.

- Create a **Rediscovery Centre** in every county attached to a major Bring Centre, which would become a centre for repair, refurbishment, and recovery.
- Develop **sharing platforms in every county**, which economise the need to own items that remain idle almost all the time.
- Create a virtual marketplace for reuse of items and repair.
- Develop **rural mobility hubs** using app technology to make better use of the stock of vehicles to meet community needs, especially for those with free travel but few public transport options.

Growing and building the volunteer base in community and voluntary organisations

Volunteering is not only a vehicle for developing practical skills, social skills, and lifelong friendships. It is an essential element for unlocking many of the opportunities that the Policy Lab has identified lies with the capacity to engage volunteers. A significant challenge is to build this capacity in other areas of activity that enrich communities. Ideas have been put forward for unlocking this.

- **Young people** must be invited to put forward their views and participate.
- The County Leadership teams should organise an **Annual Freshers Week** where all local organisations can attract new volunteers, particularly targeting young volunteers or the recently retired.
- Leadership **succession strategies** must be developed through mentoring and appropriately designed courses.
- A **triage service** for accessing the many different grant schemes should be developed, where the Connected Hubs would be a well-placed potential provider.
- Community and volunteer organisations must be resourced and have access to any **dedicated training**, particularly as it relates to capacity building and navigating the grant process.

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