

**Oireachtas Joint Committee on Arts, Heritage, Regional,
Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs**

**Address by Heather Humphreys TD,
Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht
Affairs**

1st March 2017

What it takes to maintain a viable rural community.

Check Against Delivery.

I want to thank the Committee for the opportunity to meet today to discuss what it takes to maintain a viable rural community. I know the Committee has already met with many rural stakeholders on this matter.

Changing the narrative around rural Ireland

As the members of the Committee will be well aware, I have lived and worked in rural Ireland all my life and I really believe passionately in the potential of rural communities. I see the resilience, the resourcefulness and tenacity of my own rural community and I know that this is replicated right across Ireland.

It is my belief that the Action Plan for Rural Development, which I launched last month will help to contribute to my goal of improving the quality of life for those who live and work in rural Ireland. In my view rural Ireland does not need to be 'saved' or 'rescued'. Rural Ireland can and does make a huge contribution to our economy through innovative industries, thriving community activism, new approaches to attracting tourism, and also through its commitment to creativity and culture.

I fully acknowledge the challenges which face rural communities, and we are not trying to whitewash those challenges. However, the new Action Plan provides the necessary supports and structures to enable Government - at both central and local level - as well as businesses and rural communities, to work together to achieve sustainable rural development.

While previous Governments have recognised the importance of rural development and have invested in initiatives to support rural communities, these initiatives have tended to operate in a piecemeal manner.

There was no co-ordination.

Notwithstanding the focus on agriculture and the food sector generally, rural Ireland and rural development has tended to be peripheral, rather than central to Government economic and social policies.

This approach has to change, and that is why the co-ordinating mechanism created by this Action Plan is so important.

A coordinated approach

The CEDRA report which was published in 2014, called, as a priority, for the establishment of a central structure at Government level to coordinate rural development across all Departments.

The lack of such a structure was seen as a significant impediment to progressing rural development in Ireland.

This deficit has now been addressed through my own role in coordinating rural policy across Government and the creation of the Regional and Rural Affairs Division in my Department.

However responsibility for rural development is not, and cannot, be the preserve of just one Department.

It is the responsibility of all of us around the Cabinet table.

The Action Plan for Rural takes a whole-of-Government approach to the economic and social development of rural Ireland and acts as an overarching structure for the co-ordination and implementation of initiatives right across Government Departments and other public bodies.

The key thing in this plan is the process of bringing together many Government Departments and agencies, recognising the importance of what they are doing individually to contribute to rural development, and multiplying their impact through a collaborative approach.

No previous Government has put in place such a co-ordinated and comprehensive plan of action to support rural development.

Supporting Sustainable Communities

One of the five Pillars of the Action Plan focuses on *Supporting Sustainable Communities*. The objectives of the actions under this Pillar are to:

- revitalise our rural towns and villages and support people to live in them;
- enhance local services such as healthcare, schools, and policing;
- empower local communities by including the views of rural dwellers and communities in decision-making processes; and
- build better communities through investment and support for community development, social inclusion and rural security.

Our towns and villages are at the heart of rural communities and should be places where people can live, work, access services and raise their families in a high quality environment.

It is important therefore, that we implement measures to help breath life back into our rural towns and villages and enable them to become vibrant places where people socialise, live and work.

While great interest has been shown by the media in the Town and Village Renewal Scheme, this is just one of a range of measures we are taking under the Action Plan to support our rural communities.

My Department will also provide funding to support towns, villages and parishes through the CLÁR programme which has a budget of €5 million this year, and through the Built Heritage Investment Scheme and the Structures at Risk Fund, which have a combined budget of €2.8 million for 2017.

The Heritage Council will be administering a Heritage and Community Grants programme, along with a historic towns programme to develop and expand the on-going work of the Department's Historic Towns Initiative and the Irish Walled Towns Network.

Other schemes, such as the SEAI's Better Energy Communities scheme, will also support town and village renewal.

Of course, one of the characteristics of Ireland is the wide diversity of communities across our rural landscape.

While many of our communities are based around towns and villages, others are more dispersed, including our island communities.

It is important that we also support these communities.

There are different requirements and different needs in every community, but connectivity with others and access to economic opportunities are fundamental issues for them all.

Jobs

In this regard, my Department will work closely with other key economic Departments and agencies to support economic development in the regions.

Strong regions provide the basis for improving economic opportunities and the jobs potential of people living in rural areas.

The Government's objective is to support the creation of 200,000 extra jobs in the economy by 2020, with 135,000 of these jobs outside of Dublin.

The announcement yesterday that the unemployment rate has now fallen to 6.6%, down from a peak of 15.2% is very welcome in this regard.

The regional Action Plans for Jobs, which are co-ordinated by the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, will play a key role in improving the operating environment for businesses so that enterprises can start-up, grow and create employment.

My Department is working closely with the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation to ensure that our respective Action Plans are complementary and mutually re-enforcing.

Through the Action Plan for Rural Development, we are also placing a focus on maximising the potential of our tourism sector and developing activity tourism, which particularly benefits areas in the countryside.

This is a growing sub-sector internationally, and we have not yet fully tapped into the growing customer base or our natural assets in this area.

Similarly, we have potential to optimise our built heritage, which is often rooted in rural Ireland, to attract more visitors and provide increased employment opportunities for local communities.

85% of overseas visitors to Ireland in 2015 visited at least one region outside of Dublin.

We are working with a number of agencies across the Government system to build on this and realise the potential of rural tourism.

Culture and Creativity

When we talk about vibrant rural communities, I am always struck by the important role which the arts and culture play in bringing people together at local level and contributing to people's quality of life.

It is important that cultural participation is actively supported in rural communities as a way to combat rural isolation, enhance and contribute to the vibrancy of rural Ireland, and generate economic activity, for example through cultural tourism.

Culture 2025 aims to increase the participation of individuals and communities from across Ireland, including rural communities, and will provide a platform for bringing together the numerous local, regional and national cultural entities with a view to sharing best practice, and developing synergies.

A couple of weeks ago, I announced the allocation of €9 million in capital funding for arts and culture centres across the country.

This was the most significant investment in regional arts and cultural centres in a decade and goes to the very heart of what I am trying to achieve through the Creative Ireland programme.

Our language is, of course, an essential part of our culture and connects people in a way that defines our identity.

Our Gaeltacht regions often provide the first real experience of rural Ireland to our young people who are reared in the cities, as they attend summer courses in the Gaeltacht.

However, the Gaeltacht regions are also home to many successful enterprises and Údarás na Gaeltachta is targeting the increase of 1,500 jobs in the Gaeltacht regions over the three-year lifespan of the Action Plan.

Improving connectivity

Connectivity between, and within, communities is also addressed in the Action Plan, with a particular focus on improving mobile phone and broadband access, improving rural transport links and protecting people's property through flood defence measures.

The rollout of the National Broadband Plan constitutes one of the single biggest investments in rural Ireland for generations and will allow communities and businesses in rural areas to compete effectively and realise their full potential.

It is important to recognise that a lot has already been done by commercial service providers to roll out broadband to an increased number of rural areas.

As the Committee will be aware, the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment is currently involved in a tendering process which will see intervention in areas not likely to be covered as a commercial proposition.

While the roll out of broadband in the intervention area will commence once the contracts have been awarded, the Government is already taking action to accelerate and facilitate both broadband roll out and improvements to mobile phone reception in rural areas by implementing the recommendations of the report of the Taskforce on Mobile Phone and Broadband Access.

Improved transport links to and from rural areas will be addressed through actions relating to the Rural Transport Programme, the regional airports, and transport solutions designed to meet particular needs, such as those of island communities.

Investment in flood relief measures will be doubled to €100 per annum by 2021, with over 100 new measures planned for rural communities.

Concluding comments

In concluding, A Cathaorlaigh, I would like to put on record my thanks to this Committee and to individual Oireachtas members, for the suggestions I received when I was developing the Action Plan. It is clear from the submissions received that we are all passionate about supporting rural Ireland and that we all have the interest of rural Ireland at heart.

Some of the ideas put forward by the members of the Committee which are reflected in the Plan include:

- the development of an effective ‘rural-proofing’ model;
- the examination of rates issues for small businesses in rural Ireland;
- a range of measures to improve flood defences, as mentioned previously; and
- capacity building measures for local communities.

Cathaoirleach and committee members, this Government has now put in place a comprehensive plan for rural development which provides the policy and operational environment in which rural communities and businesses can thrive, succeed and realise their potential.

I fully intend that the vast programme of work across Departments and agencies will be effectively and efficiently delivered and that we will achieve significant gains and improvements across all the sectors encompassed by the Plan.

In short, the implementation of this Action Plan will help ensure that rural communities not only remain viable, but flourish and prosper over the years to come.

I hope that this Committee will join me on the journey of changing the perception of rural Ireland, of presenting rural Ireland as modern, dynamic, creative and an essential part of Ireland's economic and social fabric.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh.