

**Opening Statement by Mr. William Parnell,
Assistant Secretary General, Dept. of Rural and Community Development,
to the
Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development, and the Islands**

Wednesday, 9th December 2020

Introduction

Good morning, and thank you for the invitation to address the Committee on the topic of COVID-19 Pandemic supports to the Islands and Rural Ireland.

As the Committee is aware, responsibility for the Islands function transferred from the former Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht to the Department of Rural and Community Development in September. The offshore islands and their communities are, of course, a fundamental part of the fabric of rural Ireland. Many of the challenges that affect the islands are similar to those in other parts of rural Ireland, but they are even more pronounced due to the islands' separation from the mainland.

We hope that the islands will benefit from the closer alignment with the Department's suite of programmes and initiatives to support community development, rural economic development and digital innovation.

Impact of COVID-19 on Rural areas

There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally changed our society and our economy in the space of just 9 months. The impact of COVID-19 was extreme and immediate. It has affected the way we work, study, socialise, and go about our daily business.

Rural economies are vulnerable to economic downturns at the best of times due to their less diversified economic base and a greater reliance on small and micro-enterprises compared to large urban centres.

A report on the regional impact of COVID-19 published in May by the three Regional Assemblies concluded that coastal and rural counties are more likely to be exposed to the economic disruption caused by COVID-19 due their high reliance on enterprises that require human interaction or which cannot be operated remotely.

We know, too, that sectors such as Tourism, Hospitality, Arts and Culture, on which many rural towns, villages and communities depend, have been amongst those most impacted by COVID-19.

The social impact of COVID-19 has also been highlighted by many commentators. The dispersed settlement pattern of rural Ireland, along with an older demographic profile than urban areas, also creates a particular social vulnerability for many people living in rural areas.

However, the COVID crisis has also demonstrated the extraordinary efforts of local communities, organisations and volunteers in mobilising to help those most in need, or at risk of social isolation. Many of the positive aspects of rural living have been highlighted, including the quality of life, a sense of community, and close access to countryside trails, forests and coastlines. These have been important factors in supporting the physical and mental wellbeing of many people at this time.

The Western Development Commission reported recently that 7% of respondents to a survey on Remote Working had relocated to the West of Ireland since the start of the pandemic, while a further 23% were considering doing so.

COVID-19 Supports for Rural areas

As the Committee is aware, many different supports have been introduced across Departments to help businesses, individuals and communities to cope with the impact of COVID-19. In general, these supports are available to those who run businesses, or who live in rural areas. I would like, however, to focus today on the supports the Department of Rural and Community Development has made available to support businesses, social enterprises, communities and voluntary organisations to respond to the impact of COVID-19.

Community Call

The Department was centrally involved from the outset of the pandemic in the Government's Community Call initiative, which mobilised national government, local government and the Community and Voluntary sector to support vulnerable people in our communities.

In March, as part of the Government's COVID-19 Action Plan, the Department provided support for volunteering, funding to ALONE for their crisis telephone support line, and an email helpdesk facility to assist smaller community groups with their queries.

In April, an initial €2.5 million *COVID-19 Emergency Fund* was introduced to provide immediate and urgently-needed funding to community and voluntary groups participating in the Community Call. This helped with practical supports such as food for meals on wheels services, care packs for people cocooning, PPE, and delivery van costs. Just last Monday, Minister Humphreys and Minister O'Brien announced a further €1.7 million under this Fund to enable community and voluntary groups to support the delivery of the Government's "Keep Well" campaign.

The Department also provided funding for the *COVID-19 Community Outreach scheme*, to help ensure that any gaps in service to the vulnerable in each Local Authority area were identified and met. This scheme was operated by The Wheel and Irish Rural Link.

Stability Package

Community and Voluntary Organisations, Charities and Social Enterprises have played a huge role in responding to the COVID-19 crisis at local level. However, many were impacted by the loss of revenue from traded income or fund-raising as a result of restrictions put in place to counter the spread of the virus.

In May, the Government launched a €40 million support package for these organisations. The package is administered by the Department and funded through the Dormant Accounts Fund. It includes:

- A €35 million *COVID-19 Stability Fund* which provides financial support to organisations and groups delivering front-line services to those most in need, but which are in danger of closure. To date, close to 600 organisations, including a number of island-based organisations, have been allocated almost €31 million under this fund. An additional €10 million was allocated to this fund in October and will be distributed shortly.
- The Stability Package also included a €5 million Government commitment to a Philanthropy Fund, *Innovate Together*, which focuses on supporting Community and Voluntary Organisations, Charities and Social Enterprises to make innovative adaptations to their operations to address the challenges presented by the pandemic. To date, 52 organisations have been allocated funding to a value of approximately €3.2 million under the *Innovate Together* Fund.

Town and Village Renewal Scheme

The Department has adapted its rural development programmes this year to help rural areas and rural businesses to adapt to the impact of COVID-19.

This year's Town and Village Renewal Scheme included an Accelerated Measure which was designed to support rural towns and villages to put in place measures quickly to enable people to shop and socialise safely within the public health guidelines. A total of 363 projects have been approved by the Minister under the Accelerated Measure, to a value of €10.4 million.

The standard Town and Village Renewal Scheme measure is placing an emphasis on supporting towns to adapt to the impact of COVID-19 in the medium term. A budget of €15 million is available for this Measure and it is expected that the successful applicants will be announced in the coming weeks.

CLÁR Programme

The CLÁR programme was also re-focused this year to help communities and organisations in CLÁR areas to adapt to COVID-19.

This year's programme included supports for community recreational areas, such as picnic spaces and seating areas, where people can socialise outdoors in safe, accessible community spaces. It also provided support for the adaptation of vehicles and the purchase of kitchen or delivery equipment for community organisations providing meals on wheels and other community services.

A total of €4.5 million has been approved under the CLÁR programme to date for 160 projects, with some additional funding to be announced by the Minister in the coming weeks.

The grant rate for these programmes was increased from 80% to 90% this year, in recognition of the pressures on the finances of Local Authorities and community groups due to the disruption caused by COVID-19.

Other programmes such as the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund and the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme will also play an important role in helping rural areas to recover in the medium-term from COVID-19. The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund has been repositioned this year to ensure that the investment provided can act a key driver for economic recovery in the post COVID-19 environment.

The Department has also shown flexibility within other schemes such as LEADER, the Community Services Programme, Tidy Towns and SICAP, recognising the difficulties faced by delivering organisations.

Specific Initiatives for the Islands

Specific accommodation has been provided to facilitate island communities during the pandemic. Approximately 30 of the offshore islands are inhabited, with populations varying from less than 10 people, to more than 800 people. A large proportion of those living on the islands are in an older age group, with the majority of the islands having a high dependency ratio.

Both passenger transport and cargo services to the islands are lifeline services. Our overarching objective has been to keep these services open throughout the pandemic, but to do so in a way which ensures the health and safety of the islanders, service providers and visitors.

In March, following requests from island representatives, and in recognition of the unique challenges of island living, travel to the islands was closed to outside visitors. This decision was taken in consultation with the island communities and was welcomed by them. While visitors were not permitted to travel to the islands, the islanders themselves could continue to travel to the mainland to avail of services.

The Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht arranged to prepay subsidies to operators in March to support their operations and to continue lifeline services to the islands during the lockdown. The Department also worked with community representatives and ferry operators to facilitate temporary reduced sailing timetables in an attempt to reduce the risk of exposure for the island communities and the ferry operators.

In keeping with the general easing of restrictions, travel by visitors to and from the islands was permitted from July.

Since then, as the Committee will be aware, the Government's Living with COVID-19 Plan sets out various restrictions in relation to travel at different Levels of the Plan's framework. The Department will work with the service operators to ensure that appropriate levels of services to the islands continue to be provided at every stage of that framework.

I will be happy to take any questions the Committee may have in relation to supports provided by the Department to help rural communities to cope with the impact of COVID-19.

Thank You