

Rural Social Scheme (RSS)

- RSS is an income support initiative that provides part-time employment opportunities in the community and voluntary organisations for farmers or fishers who are in receipt of certain social welfare payments and who are underemployed in their primary occupation. The scheme is funded through the Department of Social Protection. Total expenditure in 2021 was €51.5 million and the total budget in 2022 is €52 million.
- The scheme has sanction for 3,350 participants. At the end of April 2022 there were 2,892 participants and 134 supervisors employed on RSS.
- RSS was initiated in 2004 under the aegis of the then Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and responsibility for the scheme transferred to the Department of Social Protection with effect from 1st September 2010. The work undertaken is primarily to support local service provision via community, voluntary and not-for-profit organisations, if this does not displace existing service provision or employment. RSS is not seen as an activation work scheme. The type of work carried out by RSS participants includes, but is not limited to:
 - Maintaining and enhancing various walking routes (that is, way marked ways, agreed walks) and bog roads
 - Energy conservation work for older people and those at risk of poverty
 - Village and countryside enhancement projects
 - Social care and care of older people
 - Community care for pre-school and after-school groups
 - Environmental maintenance work - maintenance and care-taking of community and sporting facilities
 - Projects relating to not-for-profit cultural and heritage centres
 - Community administration or clerical work
 - Any other appropriate community based project identified during the course of the scheme.
 - The most widely adopted category of work used by community and voluntary groups is maintenance and caretaking of community and sporting facilities.
- RSS is delivered through 36 Local Development Companies and Údarás Na Gaeltachta, collectively known as implementing bodies (IBs). Participants must continue to be actively farming/fishing and must retain entitlement to an underlying qualifying social welfare payment in order to retain eligibility for participation on RSS.

- Eligibility for participation in RSS derives from Farm Assist, with the Farm Assist means assessment applying to the scheme. A person can qualify for Farm Assist if they are aged 18 to 66 and engaged in farming and meet the other statutory scheme conditions. However, the Farm Assist scheme is demand-led and recipient numbers are declining. There are currently just over 4,800 farmers availing of the payment - down from just over 5,300 in 2021 and almost 5,790 in 2020. The reduction in Farm Assist recipients has a knock-on effect on the number of participants on RSS.
- The Government made a commitment in the Programme for Government and in the Rural Development Policy 2021-2025 to review the means assessment disregards for the Farm Assist. As part of this review process it was recommended to provide for an extensive expansion to the list of Agri-Environmental schemes which will qualify towards the disregard of €2,540. A list of the disregards is included as Appendix 1.
- These measures have now been enacted in the Social Welfare Act 2022 and will be implemented from June 2022. These changes have an added benefit of increasing the number of people who could potentially apply for the RSS scheme, through being in receipt of Farm Assist.
- Participation is by voluntary self-selection. Currently there are more than sufficient places on RSS to meet demand for places.
- During 2017 and 2018 the number of places funded on RSS was increased by 750, bringing the total number of places available to 3,350.
- A six-year time limit was also introduced for new RSS participants with effect from February 2017. The limit was introduced to ensure that places would be available for newer cohorts of eligible persons and aligned the RSS with other employment support programmes, including CE. The six-year limit only applies to new entrants to RSS from February 2017.
- Prior to the introduction of the six-year time limit, an RSS participant could remain on the scheme for a significant part of their working life. This had the effect of limiting turnover of places on RSS and thereby reducing the opportunities for potential new entrants.
- The first group of participants that will leave RSS on the basis of the 6-year rule will not arise until February 2023.
- A number of changes were introduced to RSS last December. These changes included a rule change so that all participants who reach 60 years of age can also remain on the scheme until they reach state pension age. This rule change means that the 6-year limit no longer applies to RSS participants over the age of 60.

- This change will immediately benefit 390 RSS participants who may spend additional time on the scheme after 2023 and will continue to provide services to local communities.
- The Department continually monitors all of its income and employment support programmes and intends to complete an operational review of RSS later in 2022.
- RSS participants are subject to normal income tax and PRSI deductions, including paying a class A PRSI contribution which can help establish entitlement to the full range of short-term benefits (jobseeker's benefit, illness benefit, and maternity benefit) and long-term benefits including state pension contributory.
- In 2019, the Government established an Interdepartmental Group (IDG) to explore various aspects of the community schemes. Among the recommendations was an operational review of RSS.

The Department will undertake that review of the scheme in the second half of 2022. As well as reviewing the operation of the scheme it will, among other issues impacting on the operation and participation of the scheme.

Appendix 1. Farm Assist disregards introduced in Budget 2022.

The following are the schemes that will now be included in the disregard on Farm Assist with effect from June 2022:

- Beef exceptional aid measure
- The beef data and genomics programme
- The beef environmental efficiency plan
- All beef sector efficiency plan schemes
- Results based environment agri pilot programme (REAP) scheme payments
- Sheep welfare scheme
- Afforestation scheme
- Ash die back scheme
- Agroforestry scheme
- Forestry for fibre
- Native woodland conservation scheme
- Woodland improvement scheme
- Woodland environmental fund
- Neighbourwood scheme
- Forest genetic resources reproductive material scheme

The maximum disregard is €2450 with the remaining balance assessed at 50%.