

**Department of Rural and Community Development**  
**Response to the Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural**  
**Development and the Islands Report on the Progress of the Sustainable**  
**Development Goals, December 2023**

The Committee's report makes the following recommendations in relation to the Department of Rural and Community Development. The Department's response to each recommendation is set out below.

**Recommendations under Goal 4 – Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.**

As noted in the report the Department of Community and Rural Development is not a Lead Department for Goal 4. The Department is a stakeholder department in respect of two of the sub-targets under Goal 4, Target 4.2 and Target 4.6.

**Recommendation 1**

**The Committee recommends that reporting on the progress in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals on the Islands should be conducted as a separate exercise, with consideration to the broader range of goals and targets that might be applicable in this setting.**

**DRCD Response to Recommendation**

The Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (DECC) has overall responsibility for overseeing the implementation of the SDGs across Government, including the reporting frameworks. Accordingly, the recommendation to require separate reports for our Islands would be a matter for DECC to consider.

The 10 year National Islands Policy, *Ár nOileán Bheo - Our Living Islands*, was published in June 2023. The measures in the policy include real and tangible actions in areas such as housing, digital connectivity, remote working and health services. The policy is built around achieving five high level Strategic Objectives that have been identified by islanders themselves as of key importance for the sustainable future of their communities. Each of the Strategic Objectives are linked directly to the SDGs.

It is important to note that while the Department of Rural and Community Development coordinated the policy and action plan, it is a whole of Government policy and each named Department is responsible for delivery of specific actions. A Monitoring Committee has been established, chaired by the Department and comprising representatives of island communities along with relevant local authorities and other Government Departments. The policy is backed up by rolling three year action plans with time-bound commitments so that Departments across Government can be held to account in terms of implementation.

## Recommendation 2

**The Committee recommends that particular focus be given to the area of Lifelong Learning in order to increase participation rates.**

### **DRCD Response to Recommendation**

The new **Public Library Strategy** '*The Library is the Place*' commits that public libraries will support lifelong learning in all its forms. The strategy states that the mission of public libraries is to enrich the lives of people and communities in Ireland by providing universal access to information and resources to promote reading and enjoyment, lifelong learning, life skills, education and cultural engagement.

Public libraries will support individuals at all stages in their lives to develop and maintain the skills they require to navigate the changing world successfully. A key strategic action of the new strategy is the development of a national 'Skills for Life' umbrella programme of resources and activities which will be available through all library authorities by the end of 2024, and will include basic digital skills, financial literacy, business and employment skills, sustainable lifestyles and environmental awareness.

The **Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme** (SICAP) 2018 – 2023 provides funding to tackle poverty and social exclusion at a local level through local engagement and partnerships between disadvantaged individuals, community organisations and public sector agencies. SICAP is a national programme, managed locally by 33 Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs), with support from local authorities. SICAP actions are delivered by 46 Local Development Companies (LDCs) across 51 geographical Lot areas. SICAP supports a range of groups in society which are disadvantaged and marginalised and unable or unlikely to access mainstream supports.

The programme is aimed at those in society who need more help and who are on the margins of daily life. The programme provides supports to pre-defined target groups selected based on socio-economic context, societal need and government priorities, working with these community groups to build their capacity to address local needs as well as with individuals to provide personal development, lifelong learning and labour market supports.

The next iteration of the programme is due to commence in January 2024 and will include a greater focus on delivering supports to residents of our Islands, who are named as a specific Target Group for SICAP 2024-2028.

### Recommendation 3

**The Committee recommends continued focus on the roll out of rural broadband to bridge the digital divide, with particular attention paid to the issue of fibre connectivity to the mainland as it pertains to the islands.**

#### DRCD Response to Recommendation

The **National Broadband Plan** (NBP) falls under the remit of the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (DECC). National Broadband Ireland (NBI) has made steady progress in terms of rollout of rural broadband and are active across the country. As of 5th January 2024, construction is underway across all 26 counties, demonstrating that the project is reaching scale. Over 217,000 premises can order or pre-order a high-speed broadband connection across those 26 counties, with over 205,000 premises passed and available for immediate connection. The number of connections is increasing on a daily basis and is in line with projections, with some areas exceeding expectations.

Under the National Broadband Plan, every premises on every island within the Intervention Area will be provided with access to high speed broadband connectivity as part of the overall NBP deployment. The majority of islands will be connected by the end of 2025, with the remainder connected by the end of the rollout.

DRCD plays a key role in supporting the establishment of **Broadband Connection Points** (BCP) across rural Ireland. BCPs are public locations which have been selected to receive interim high-speed connectivity as part of the National Broadband Plan and ahead of fibre to the premises availability in their areas. The locations of the BCPs have been selected by local authorities and include public areas such as community halls, libraries, sports facilities, enterprise hubs, tourist locations and other public spaces, such as community centres. BCPs are located in rural and isolated areas including 10 off-shore islands.

The BCP initiative will bring connectivity to approximately 300 publicly available sites across the country. 283 sites are located within the intervention area of the NBP with 16 additional sites adjacent to, and serving, the wider intervention area which were identified specifically for remote working. 294 BCPs have been connected and are now in operation with the remaining sites to be connected shortly.

The new **National Islands Policy** reflects the strong commitment which has been given to achieving full broadband connection on our inhabited off-shore islands. DECC have overall responsibility for delivery and implementation of this action with DRCD having oversight on this commitment.

#### Recommendation 4

**The Committee recommends the specific actions are undertaken to address skills deficits that persist among certain groups, older people and those with lower educational attainment in particular, to prevent the widening of the digital divide and ensure equitable access to the benefits of digital participation.**

#### DRCD Response to Recommendation

The **Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme** (SICAP) supports a range of groups in society which are disadvantaged and marginalised and unable or unlikely to access mainstream supports. The programme is aimed at those who need more help in society and who are on the margins of daily life. The programme provides supports to pre-defined target groups, selected based on socio-economic context, societal need and government priorities, working with these individuals to provide personal development, lifelong learning and labour market supports.

A key aspect of the personal development and labour market supports delivered by SICAP is enhancing skills deficits in marginalised groups, providing training courses as well as promoting digital literacy amongst marginalised target groups.

The new **Public Library Strategy** '*The Library is the Place*' commits that public libraries will support lifelong learning in all its forms and will be a crucial partner in enhancing digital inclusion. The strategy states that the mission of public libraries is to enrich the lives of people and communities in Ireland by providing universal access to information and resources to promote reading and enjoyment, lifelong learning, life skills, education and cultural engagement.

Public libraries will support individuals at all stages in their lives to develop and maintain the skills they require to navigate the changing world successfully. A key strategic action of the new strategy is the development of a national 'Skills for Life' umbrella programme of resources and activities which will be available through all library authorities by the end of 2024, and will include basic digital skills, media literacy, and business and employment skills.

The 2023 – 2027 **LEADER programme** can provide funding in areas outside of the city boundaries of Cork, Dublin, Galway, Limerick and Waterford for training across a range of digital areas.

#### Recommendation 5

**The Committee recommends that the expanded possibilities presented by digital connection and satellite education be explored with a view to providing a broader range of subject choice at secondary level for students attending smaller rural or island schools.**

#### **DRCD Response to Recommendation**

Under the Schools 100Mbps Project which was completed in 2012, 780+ post primary schools in the State have access to a minimum of 100Mbps high speed broadband. Availability of subject choices for secondary level students, including by digital connectivity, falls under the remit of the Department of Education.

A strong commitment has been given in the new Islands policy *Ár nOileán Bheo - **Our Living Islands*** to pilot eLearning on our inhabited off-shore islands. The Department of Education has overall responsibility for delivery and implementation of this action with DRCD having oversight on this commitment.

Primary schools are provided with an interim high-speed broadband connection under the Strategic Connection Points (SCPs) programme of the **National Broadband Plan (NBP)**, in advance of the roll out of fibre to the premises. Currently 672 primary schools have been installed and the high-speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Education for school SCP's.

For third-level education initiatives the '**Learning in the Hubs**' initiative was launched in June 2023. This is a collaboration between **Connected Hubs**, an initiative of the Department and managed by the Western Development Commission, and Technological University of the Shannon (TUS). It brings third-level education to communities all over Ireland throughout the Connected Hubs network, allowing adult learners to learn in a group setting locally alongside their peers. The adult learner can access state-of-the-art facilities within Connected Hubs and contribute to local, regional and national economic development.

### Recommendations under Goal 8 – Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.

As noted in the report the Department of Community and Rural Development is not a Lead Department for Goal 8. The Department is a stakeholder department in respect of two of the sub-targets under Goal 8, Target 8.3 and Target 8.4.

#### Recommendation 6

**The Committee recommends that delivery and the vindication of the Sustainable Development Goals are given a central position in the second National Social Enterprise policy.**

#### DRCD Response to Recommendation

In 2019 the Government published the first *National Social Enterprise Policy* for Ireland 2019-2022, which was the first policy aimed specifically at developing and realising the potential of social enterprise. Since then there has been significant public investment to grow and strengthen social enterprise and real progress in advancing the potential, impact and awareness of the sector.

Work has been progressing on a second policy and, as with the first policy, my Department is adopting a partnership approach to its development. Ongoing communications, engagement, and consultations with stakeholders (internal and external) are a key principle throughout its development. This has included six regional ‘town hall’ type consultation events, receipt of written submissions from stakeholders, and bilateral meetings between my Department and a broad variety of stakeholders, including social enterprises, representative organisations, public bodies, and Government Departments.

Following the public consultation stage, it is planned to publish the policy, subject to Government approval, at the end of Q1 2024.

The important role that social enterprises and social enterprise policy plays in implementing the SDGs will be recognised in the new policy. This will be demonstrated, for example, by one of the five main objectives of the policy focusing on climate action contribution by social enterprises.

## Recommendation 7

**The Committee recommends continued investment in remote working facilities in rural areas and on the islands to promote productive activities and job creation in those areas.**

### DRCD Response to Recommendation

**Our Rural Future** recognises the opportunity for rural rejuvenation that remote working presents and commits to establishing a comprehensive and integrated national network of 400 remote working hubs by 2025. In furtherance of this commitment, DRCD and the Western Development Commission have established the **Connected Hubs** network, adding capacity to Ireland's existing remote working infrastructure and supporting the establishment of new hubs.

Over €150 million has been invested by DRCD in the development of remote working facilities through programmes such as the **Town and Village Renewal Scheme, the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund, and the Connected Hubs Call**. Successful projects are developed in collaboration with local authorities and communities with many projects seeing vacant and derelict buildings in rural towns and villages converted into remote working hubs.

**ConnectedHubs.ie**, a shared online booking and payments platform for member hubs and their users, was launched in May 2021. The network includes a diverse range of hubs, services and facilities, thus facilitating companies of different sizes. There are currently approximately 340 remote working facilities across the country (including some on offshore islands) on-boarded to the platform.

The **Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF)** provides funding for the development and construction of capital projects in towns and villages and rural areas across Ireland. To date, 215 projects have been approved for RRDF funding of €412 million. The total costs of these projects, including matched-funding, are estimated at €565 million.

Calls for applications to the Fund are sought under two categories – Category 1 and Category 2.

- Category 1 relates to large scale ambitious capital projects with all necessary planning and other consents in place, and which are ready to proceed.
- Category 2 provides smaller grant funding to enable the development of project proposals suitable for future calls for Category 1 applications.

The RRDF supports projects which support regeneration, development and sustainability in rural areas, including those focused on remote working. To date, the RRDF has provided funding of €136 million for 71 projects with a remote working element.

The fifth call for Category 1 projects is currently open for applications and closes on the 8th of February 2024. This call is also open to projects with a remote working element which satisfy the objectives of the Fund.

My Department is an Accountable Department for the **PEACEPLUS Programme** with responsibility for eight specific investment areas. The overall objective of the PEACEPLUS Programme will be to build Peace and Prosperity and ensure that this Programme will leave a lasting and tangible legacy across Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland (Cavan, Donegal, Leitrim, Louth, Monaghan and Sligo). The Programme was developed with the Sustainable Development Goals in mind.

PEACEPLUS Investment Area 2.4, 'Smart Towns and Villages', is expected to be launched by the Special EU Programmes Body shortly, with an allocation of €30 million that will provide for greater access to, and awareness of, telecommunications and will also incorporate measures for the transformation of vacant spaces and facilities within town centres for communal recreational and social use. Full details are available on the SEUPB website. Actions to be supported include:

- Mobile digital hubs: The design and development of advanced mobile digital hubs, to ensure the widest possible opportunities for digital access for rural citizens and enterprises in particular;
- Digital services by transforming existing assets: The development of projects which will help transform existing assets within towns/village centres for citizen recreational, social and enterprise usage;
- Mentoring programmes: The design and delivery of digital mentoring programmes to be delivered through the proposed mobile digital hubs in rural communities and businesses;
- Digital clusters: The development of digital clusters that can then develop opportunities to increase remote working and by so doing reduce the need for rural citizens to leave their communities and commute long distances to work; and
- Social enterprise/innovation-led projects: The development of social enterprise/innovation-led projects designed to apply advanced ICT to create new models of social service and economic development.



## Recommendation 8

**The Committee recommends that the government continue to support the creation of jobs in the Green Economy and further explores the potential for job creation in the Blue Economy.**

### **DRCD Response to Recommendation**

My Department in conjunction with the Department of Transport, introduced the **E-bikes Pilot initiative** to develop a scheme for the provision of high quality up-cycled bicycles and e-bikes for those on low incomes and/or most marginalised and disadvantaged, via the **Community Services Programme (CSP)**. Funding of €3 million is being provided by the Department of Transport for the E-Bike Pilot initiative over a three-year period, up to December 2024. There are currently five organisations or consortiums supported under this pilot. My Department, Pobal and the Department of Transport undertook an interim evaluation on this pilot scheme during 2023 to inform any future iteration of this programme, subject to the availability of funding.

The Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme's (**SICAP**) aim, objectives and horizontal themes span all 17 SDGs to some degree, with SICAP actions and outcomes supporting a broad range of SDG indicators. The next iteration of SICAP will introduce Climate Justice as a Core Theme - focusing on facilitating a just and equitable transition to a greener economy and society.

The 2023 – 2027 **LEADER programme** can provide funding in areas outside of the city boundaries of Cork, Dublin, Galway, Limerick and Waterford to support the creation of jobs in the Green Economy.

The **Community Services Programme (CSP)** supports over 420 community-based organisations to provide employment opportunities and local services through a social enterprise model. CSP provides an annual co-funding contribution towards each full-time equivalent (FTE) position being supported and, where warranted, towards the cost of employing a manager. CSP continues to contribute to organisations that have the potential to mobilise, engage and support communities nationwide to reduce carbon emissions through the provision of various services and facilities including recycling, upcycling, food waste, the warmer homes scheme, organic farming and biodiversity initiatives, to name but a few.

In March 2023, a new Call for Applications was announced under the CSP to support social enterprises and community/voluntary organisations that had a particular focus on addressing a local priority and evidenced need, are delivering tangible and practical benefits for those most disadvantaged in their community and/or are moving towards a sustainable social enterprise business model through trading. Fourteen new organisations have recently entered the programme, two of which have a particular focus on recycling/upcycling products and thereby reducing products to landfill.

#### Recommendation 9

**The Committee recommends that research be undertaken to identify how the effective separation of waste streams can be improved in order to support the development of the Circular Economy.**

#### **DRCD Response to Recommendation**

The **2023 – 2027 LEADER** programme can provide funding in areas outside of the city boundaries of Cork, Dublin, Galway, Limerick and Waterford to support the development of the Circular Economy.

***Our Rural Future***, the Rural Development Policy 2021-2025, recognises the potential of the Circular Economy to contribute to jobs growth and enterprise development in rural Ireland. The transition to a Circular Economy will also make an essential contribution to our national goal of developing a sustainable, climate neutral, resource efficient circular and competitive economy. Delivery of the measures in this whole-of-Government policy will maximise our resources and strengths in the Green Economy, the Bioeconomy, and the Circular Economy.

The Circular Economy is opening up new opportunities for enterprises across the economy and many social enterprises are involved in this sector. Social enterprises are often the only enterprises handling certain goods or materials, while providing quality training and job opportunities. The continued implementation of the ***National Social Enterprise Policy*** provides increased opportunities for them to greatly contribute to this area.

## Recommendations under Goal 12 – Ensure Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns

As noted in the report the Department of Community and Rural Development is not a Lead Department for Goal 12. The Department is a stakeholder department in respect of one of the sub-targets under Goal 12, Target 12.8.

### Recommendation 10

**The Committee recommends that adequate training and support be provided to those community structures, Tidy Towns, PPNs and Town Teams among them, who play a role in communicating the SDGs to our communities in order for them to discharge that role more effectively.**

### DRCD Response to Recommendation

The ***Town Centre First Policy***, launched in February 2022, provides a co-ordinated, whole-of-government policy framework to proactively address the decline in the health of towns across Ireland and support measures to regenerate and revitalise them. The policy has a focus on ensuring that we plan for sustainable cities and communities in line with Goal 11 of the SDGs.

The policy provides a vehicle for local communities to become involved at the planning level with a view to making towns more sustainable and inclusive places to live, work and visit through the establishment of **Town Teams**. Town Teams are vital for this process to be successful. Teams consist of key stakeholders in the community ranging from local residents, the voluntary and community sector and diverse economic backgrounds. They have a unique position in the community to become ‘local experts’ on their area and to take a lead on the development of interventions that can make positive long-term changes for their town.

**Town Regeneration Officers (TRO)** have also been appointed in twenty-six local authorities across rural Ireland and act as a key link between the local authority and the Town Team. TROs assist with the establishment and ongoing work of Town Teams, providing technical, communications, administrative and project management support to assist in accessing available funding. This link also ensures that local level knowledge is combined with the correct level of technical support and assistance to successfully drive the implementation of ***Town Centre First***. My Department is currently reviewing capacity building and training initiatives to support the establishment and further development of Town Teams as part of the policy.

The SDG Goals were first included on the SuperValu **TidyTowns** Entry Form in 2021. The goals that apply to each category are listed under the heading of the category. TidyTowns Groups are encouraged to reference any of the goals that their projects or initiatives aim to deliver. Information on the types of project that align to each goal were included in the TidyTowns Newsletter in 2022, the Tidy Towns Unit also hosted a webinar on the topic in 2022.

My Department is responsible for oversight of the **Empowering Communities Programme** (ECP) which aims to enhance community access to key services, and empower local communities to craft their own response to area-based poverty, social exclusion and the resulting consequences, with the support of the relevant Local Community Development Committee (LCDC).

Feedback to date from beneficiaries of the Programme is largely positive, with engagement workers linking communities into services, working to rejuvenate use of existing facilities in the locality and identifying and working to enhance leadership capabilities amongst community members, enabling them to develop responses to the unique challenges faced in their areas, including in terms of sustainable development initiatives.

**Recommendations under Goal 16 – Promote peace and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels.**

#### **Recommendation 11**

**The Committee recommends that the provisions in the Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities five-year strategy as they relate to the communication and implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals be implemented in full.**

#### **DRCD Response to Recommendation**

We are working towards full implementation of all the commitments contained in the strategy. It should be noted that our priorities and work-plans are set by the Cross-Sectoral Group on Local and Community Development (CSG), which includes a Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (DECC) representative. We are committed to meeting with the DECC SDG unit next year to see what progress has been made with regard to communication and implementation of SDGs under that objective to date and to ensure further progress.

Local Economic and Community Plans set out the objectives and actions that will be needed to promote the economic, local and community development of the relevant area, both by the local authority directly and in partnership with other relevant economic and community development stakeholders, such as Local Community Development Companies (LCDCs).

In 2021, my Department, in conjunction with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and an LECP Advisory Group, published the **LECP Guidelines**. These Guidelines flag, discuss and foreground the Sustainable Development Goals, not least SDG 17.

DRCD also hosted a series of **training webinars** in 2022 to ensure that each LCDC has the necessary knowledge and skills to develop and implement their LECPs. One LECP support webinar focussed on SDG and Climate Action.

DRCD supports a separate related measure for the Islands under the **CLÁR** programme. Recognising the critical role that community and voluntary organisations play in the provision of vital services to vulnerable members of the community, and particularly on our off-shore Islands, CLÁR 2023 has a specific measure to respond to the needs of these Island communities. Like many of our other CLÁR areas, the Islands have seen significant levels of depopulation over the last number of years and also face specific challenges such as rural isolation, population decline, reduced service accessibility and social disadvantage. The measure will cover the cost of:

- the purchase of hybrid/electric vehicles (and fit out, where necessary);

- PV solar panels to be erected on community facilities which are generating electricity for a connected electric vehicle charging point. This must be in tandem with the purchase of a hybrid/electric vehicle.