

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM CHOIMIRCE SHÓISÍALACH, FORBAIRT POBAIL AGUS TUAITHE AGUS NA HOILEÁIN

JOINT COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL PROTECTION, COMMUNITY AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE ISLANDS

Dé Máirt, 20 Aibreán 2021

Tuesday, 20 April 2021

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 3.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 3.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Joe Carey,	Paddy Burke,
Joan Collins,	Róisín Garvey,
Paul Donnelly,	Eugene Murphy,
Claire Kerrane,	Mark Wall.
Marc Ó Cathasaigh,	
Éamon Ó Cuív.	

Teachta / Deputy Denis Naughten sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Rural Development Strategy: Engagement with Minister for Rural and Community Development

Chairman: I remind members of the joint committee that in order for this meeting to be duly constituted, they are required to join the meeting remotely from within the defined precincts of Leinster House. Apologies have been received from Senator Paul Gavan. I ask members and witnesses to turn off their mobile phones as they interfere with the recording equipment. As members are participating remotely from their offices, I ask them to click on the raised hand icon, at any point, if they wish to contribute during the proceedings of the meeting and to remain on mute until such a time as I call them to speak.

The main item on our agenda is a discussion on the strategy for rural development, Our Rural Future, a new five year policy plan. It is an ambitious and transformative plan for development at a time when our rural communities face many challenges, including the upkeep of local services such as banking services and amenities, but there is also a considerable number of opportunities which, up to recently, were never even contemplated, such as attracting foreign direct investment and jobs into our rural villages as a result of remote working.

Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic and the advent of working from home brought many of these opportunities to the fore. The reality is good career opportunities are required if we are to retain our young people in our rural communities and the utilisation of the broadband networks, currently being built out, coupled with the new technology being developed will be at the heart of driving this rural revolution. This supportive approach to rural innovation is evident from the types of project being funded through the rural regeneration development fund.

Throughout this Dáil term, we explored the possibilities of remote working hubs and many of the themes and work this committee has developed merit the ambition of the strategy for rural development and the recently announced LEADER interim funding programme. With the funding in place and significant work under way in terms of connecting rural communities with the roll-out of rural broadband solutions, the committee is committed to scrutinising the delivery of the strategy for rural development, Our Rural Future, and it is our intention to monitor its progress and implementation of the coming months and years.

I would like to welcome the Minister for Community and Rural Development, Deputy Humphreys, and her officials; Mr. Andrew Forde, head of rural strategy and social enterprise, Department of Community and Rural Development, and Mr. Niall Egan, assistant secretary, service development, Department of Social Protection.

Members of the committees and the Houses have absolute privilege in respect of the statements made before either House of the Oireachtas or before the committee. By virtue of section 17(2)(I) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses, and in this case officials, present on the precincts of Leinster House are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the evidence they are required to give to the committee.

If, in the course of committee proceedings, a witness is directed by the committee to cease giving evidence in relation to a particular matter and he or she continues to do so, he or she is entitled, thereafter, only to qualify for privilege in respect of his or her evidence. The witnesses

are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and they are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against a Member of either House of the Oireachtas, a person outside the House, or, an official, by name or in such a way to make him or her identifiable.

I call on the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, to make her opening statement.

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I thank the Chair, Deputy Naughten, and the committee members for the invitation to meet with them today and provide an update on the topic of rural development. The timing of our meeting could hardly be better, as I recently launched Our Rural Future, the new five year policy for rural Ireland, developed by my Department in collaboration with colleagues across Government and State agencies, as well as with stakeholders in the rural development sector. It was also developed following extensive consultation with those living and working in rural Ireland, including on our offshore islands.

I would like to express my gratitude to this committee for its inputs into the process of developing this ambitious new plan. It was heartening in recent weeks to see that level of ambition was picked up internationally by the likes of *The New York Times*, *The Financial Times* and the World Economic Forum, all highlighting Ireland's plans for rural development as a leader in Europe.

All here today, like me, are passionate about rural Ireland and are aware of the challenges facing rural communities, whether it is retaining our young people, creating new employment opportunities or maintaining local services and amenities.

As we emerge from the shadows cast by Covid-19, an unparalleled opportunity now exists to re-imagine and re-value what rural Ireland means to our society and to maximise a recovery for all parts of our country and for all of our people. It was through this prism we developed Our Rural Future and the implementation of the measures within this policy has the potential to bring about transformative change for rural Ireland.

Our Rural Future represents the Government's blueprint for the sustainable development of rural Ireland over the next five years. It provides the framework to achieve the vision of transforming the quality of life and opportunity for people living in rural areas. It provides for more than 150 commitments across the whole-of-government. Those measures will be monitored by a Cabinet committee, chaired by the Taoiseach, and complemented by new commitments as part of the development of an annual work programme each year.

Among its high-level outcomes, the policy aims to facilitate more people living in rural Ireland and more people working in rural Ireland, with good career prospects, including by capitalising on new digital opportunities. It also seeks to ensure rural Ireland benefits from a just transition to a more sustainable economy and society and that rural towns are revitalised to become vibrant hubs for commercial and social activity, with access to public services.

We have already seen the impact of the shift to remote, or, connected working brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. It provided us with a once-in-a-generation opportunity to re-imagine what working in rural Ireland means and, in conjunction with the roll-out of the national broadband plan, has the potential to have a truly transformative impact. By giving people the choice to work from their own local communities, we can revitalise our town centres and

reverse population decline by not just retaining people but actually attracting people back. We can also reduce commuting times, lower transport emissions and, more importantly, improve the quality of life of our people. To realise this ambition would mean a step change in terms of national development, allowing us to rebalance the economy, take the pressure off the east coast, reduce regional disparities and unlock the true potential of our regions.

We will support the increased demand for remote working by developing and connecting approximately 400 working facilities into a unified national hub network, with a centralised online booking system. In simple terms, this will mean people will be able to log on to an app, find a hot desk at the hub closest to them and book it for a day, a week, a month or whatever suits their needs. We are going to invest significantly in remote working infrastructure. This will include investment in the development of new hubs but, equally important, investing in our many existing hubs around the country and bringing them up to a high-quality, modern standard to support workers' needs. Through the development of the national hub network, I believe we will significantly increase the attractiveness of rural areas for mobile talent. It will be important also for the Government to lead by example, and the policy has a commitment that will see 20% of public servants working remotely by the end of this year. The Tánaiste will also bring forward legislation later this year to give workers the right to request remote working.

Our Rural Future is backed up by unprecedented levels of investment for rural development. Since the launch of the policy just three weeks ago, I have announced a new €70 million transitional LEADER programme. The bottom-up, locally led approach that has always been central to LEADER will be key to the delivery of this policy. As I have said previously, the Government alone does not have all the answers when it comes to rural development. Every town, village, parish and island is different and the people best placed to effect change in their communities are the people who live there and know them best. Yesterday, I announced €75 million for 24 projects under the €1 billion rural regeneration development fund. When we include matching funding, these projects have a total value of about €87 million.

With the announcement yesterday, we really see that Our Rural Future been put firmly into action. Many of the projects involve vacant premises in our rural town centres being redeveloped and given a new purpose. Some really exciting projects were announced yesterday that will see flagship town centre buildings, such as former cinemas, courthouses, hotels, convents, and market houses being transformed into remote working hubs, libraries, cultural, enterprise and community spaces. There is also a strong public realm aspect to many of the projects, which will see the development of pedestrian zones, green areas and outdoor public spaces, which will increase the vibrancy of these towns and villages and breathe new life into them. Projects such as these are absolutely key to Our Rural Future and, as I have said, the focus is very much on combating dereliction and regenerating iconic town centre buildings with a new 21st century purpose.

Yesterday was the start of things to come. I hope to issue a new call for category 2 applications under the rural regeneration fund in the coming weeks, and I will bring forward a new town and village renewal scheme. The CLÁR programme is open for applications and we have included a new innovation measure under the programme this year. This innovation measure is really targeted at supporting good ideas that do not have a funding home or cannot find funding elsewhere. I encourage committee members to promote this in their counties because I really want to see exciting and innovative ideas coming forward.

The pandemic has given many people a new and renewed appreciation for our great outdoors. I am very fortunate where I live in Monaghan, as I get up every day and look out at roll-

ing green fields and little drumlins. Others are not so lucky. When the restrictions hit, people in our cities did not have this, and not having these green spaces was really hard for many people, for their physical health and, more importantly, for their mental health. It is something those of us who live in the countryside probably take for granted. There are mountains, forests, rivers and lakes all on our doorsteps. From a personal perspective as we emerge from Covid, I know I will certainly have a renewed appreciation for just how lucky I am to live in rural Ireland. While there are and will always be challenges, I would not live anywhere else.

I will shortly launch the 2021 outdoor recreation scheme. This scheme will focus on developing amenities such as our forests, lakes and rivers and increasing access to them. Coming back to Our Rural Future, one of the objectives of the policy is to develop a new national outdoor recreation strategy. We have a wonderful tourism offering in rural Ireland when it comes to activities such as cycling, hiking, kayaking, fishing and much more. Through investing in our natural amenities, we can develop significant spin-off benefits for local economies. This will be a key focus of the outdoor recreation scheme this year.

Outside of the Department, there is, of course, huge investment taking place right throughout Government, the most notable of which is the €2.7 billion investment in the delivery of high-speed broadband to rural areas under the national broadband plan. As part of Our Rural Future, we want to accelerate the roll-out of the national broadband plan. The Minister, Deputy Ryan, and National Broadband Ireland are examining whether we can deliver the plan in five years as opposed to seven years. In the meantime, continued investment in our hubs and our broadband connection points will be absolutely crucial.

As the future of our rural communities, we want young people growing up in rural areas to have an active role in shaping the future of rural Ireland. There is a strong emphasis in the policy on supporting young people, including through the establishment of a rural youth assembly, developing their leadership skills in their communities, expanding the range of apprenticeships and establishing more technological universities in the regions.

As I have mentioned, Our Rural Future contains more than 150 policy measures for delivery across Government, and my Department will be publishing reports every six months reflecting the progress being made on delivering these measures. The policy also contains a commitment to publish annual work programmes, which, as I have said, could see additional measures added each year. The Department is finalising its 2021 work programme, which will outline the actions for delivery this year, and I expect to publish it in the coming weeks. Actions for delivery this year will include the introduction of legislation to provide employees with the right to request remote work, the updating of the rural housing guidelines, the provision of funding to support the revitalisation of towns and villages, the adaptation of town centres for outdoor socialising, the publication of Ireland's first ever national outdoor recreation strategy, an increase in the number of places on the rural social scheme, Tús and community employment schemes to support rural communities, implementation of the new €70 million transitional LEADER programme for community-led rural development for the period 2021 to 2022, and the development of nine new regional enterprise plans to support jobs in the regions. This is just a brief overview and the full 2021 work programme will be published shortly.

Partnership and participation have been watchwords of Our Rural Future since my Department began developing the policy. We have committed to maintaining an ongoing dialogue with rural Ireland to ensure our policy is responsive to the needs and opportunities emerging. We will run a series of rural ideas fora, the outcomes of which will feed directly back into the subsequent year's work programme. This feedback loop will enable Our Rural Future to be a

living document that is active and not static, anticipates trends rather than reacts to them, and is owned by the people of rural Ireland and does not dictate to them. This goes back to the key ethos of ground up and not top down. I passionately believe consultation and working with local communities is the best recipe for success.

Our Rural Future recognises both that rural Ireland is integral to our national economic, social, cultural and environmental well-being and development, and the fundamental role it can play in Ireland's economic recovery and future growth. The measures that will be delivered over the next five years will benefit individuals, families, communities and businesses. It will enhance the well-being and quality of life of people living in rural areas. The pandemic has given us a unique, once in a generation opportunity to attract people back to rural Ireland. Our Rural Future is about seizing that opportunity. I know I will have this committee's support and input in doing that and I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss in more detail the policy here today and I look forward to hearing members' views.

Chairman: Picking up on the Minister's last point regarding feedback, it would be useful, on a six-monthly basis, to come back before the committee and update it on the progress being made with the implementation of the plan in order that we can continue to have that level of constructive engagement. When the Minister is responding to some of the questions later, will she give us an indication of the percentage of public servants who are permanently working remotely at present? I know there are probably quite a number in the Minister's own Department. Will she give us an idea of where we are at present compared with where we expect to be by the end of the year?

Deputy Joe Carey: I thank the Minister for her presentation. I congratulate her and her officials for compiling an ambitious rural policy backed by all the party leaders in government. It is a clear policy of Government to revitalise rural Ireland. It builds on progress that has been made in the last years, especially with the establishment of a key fund such as the rural regeneration and development fund. We have done really well in recent years in County Clare. There is a significant project in Ennistymon, where a digital hub is being created. It has been a great success. We have seen significant progress in the redevelopment of Seaworld, Lahinch and the Vandeleur Walled Garden, Kilrush. Work is also in progress on the Loop Head lighthouse and the creation of a landmark facility in Holy Island in east Clare too. There is great progress.

On the rural regeneration development fund allocation made yesterday, 24 different projects nationally were awarded money. Unfortunately, Clare did not receive money in that round. I am especially disappointed that a project in Kilmihil did not receive money. This was for the third phase of its people's park project. That community organisation has been in existence for the past seven and a half years. It has made substantial ground. Its project was to develop a community hub and remote working hub in Kilmihil. It was valued at €1.6 million and it had €300,000 secured from the philanthropic trust, the Tomar Trust. Unfortunately, it did not receive money in this round. I spoke to the Minister about this in a personal capacity and I spoke with her officials. I hope that she could further engage and ensure that this project gets back on track. I look for her support with that.

On the development of plans for communities, I understand that there is a provision in Our Rural Future to give communities a chance to bid for money to develop community plans. Will the Minister outline the position in that regard? Will a particular scheme be launched where communities, through the local authorities, will be able to draw down money? I welcome the transitional money that has been provided to the LEADER companies. That is vital. I thank the Minister for reacting positively to my representations and those of this committee in that regard.

The Minister might come back to me about the issue in Kilmihil.

Chairman: I thank the Deputy. I acknowledge the role of the Minister with regard to the interim LEADER funding.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank Deputy Carey for raising these issues. Clare has been successful in its rural regeneration and development funding in past calls. A total of €9.8 million has been allocated to County Clare since the fund was opened. There were a number of projects this time. The one the Deputy specifically referred to is Kilmihil. I would say that anybody who has been unsuccessful should engage with the Department and get feedback. The main reason that some applications were not successful this time was that, first, one must have planning permission. That was a criterion that had to be complied with. Some applications did not fit in with the criteria of the fund. For example, some applications were for greenways. We know that the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, has a big pot of money for greenways but in this round of funding, I was trying to target dereliction and centre-of-town properties that had gone out of use.

Some projects just did not stand up to scrutiny. They did not represent good value for money or perhaps there were issues with sustainability. I would say to Deputy Carey to get the applicants to the project to engage with my officials. We will give everybody feedback and go through it with them. The good news is that I will have another round of this funding, which I will launch later in the year. I have seen this on many occasions. If one does not succeed the first time, always try again. Go back, look at the projects, see where the weaknesses might be, discuss it with the officials, and be prepared to go again. We want to see and we want to support good projects. If we need to improve them, it is important that we do that. I saw one project which was turned down twice. They were very down in the mouth the second time but the third time, they got it. They said to me afterwards that when they went through the process, they looked at the areas that needed strengthening and ended up with a much better project at the end of the day. That was under the regional enterprise development fund, REDF. I would say that across the board to anybody where there are disappointed people coming forward, asking why their project did not get it. That is what they need to do.

Before I go any further, the Chairman asked me about public servants. I can say that in my own Department of Rural and Community Development, 94% or 95% of the staff are working remotely. It is working out very well. There are 6,500 staff in the Department of Social Protection, where we provide a very much customer-focused service. We have been able to do many services online and about 50% of staff work remotely. We have a target of 20% of the public service, equating to 70,000 public servants, or 8,500 civil servants.

The Chairman mentioned community funding. We have to tease out the details of that project, which is important. There may be a particularly important service or building which will be lost in the community. We will work with communities where they can see a clear pathway and make a good case about why they should take it and run it. We will support them in that. We will do that with the assistance of the local authorities. That is the idea behind that community fund. We will all identify different projects or services that may be lost to our areas. If the community gets a little help, we will support it. Indeed, we can look at the social enterprise model, which, of course, is great in terms of those type of facilities. I think I have answered all of Deputy Carey's questions.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I thank the Minister for her presentation. Credit goes to everybody who has been involved in putting this document together. It is fair to say we all want to

see it succeed. If everything in it becomes a reality, those of us who live in rural areas, and, as the Minister said, would not live anywhere else, will be quite happy with that.

A number of the 150 commitments are dependent on many things coming together, the most important of which is the roll-out of broadband, and because there is considerable reliance on remote working hubs and broadband hubs in our communities, which is important and which I welcome, there is a need for the broadband roll-out to be accelerated. Could the Minister tell us about the role she or her Department is playing in the work that is being done to see if that plan be accelerated? It is a seven-year plan. The rural action plan is a five-year plan. If much of it is to be implemented, we need to see broadband being rolled out far quicker than it is now. Covid has shone a light on how important broadband is in all of our homes.

There is reference to enhancing public services. Of course, many towns across the State are losing bank branches, and not for the first time. We need a conversation in relation to public services for the rural communities, and particularly for towns in rural areas, because we want people to come back. We want people to live and work here but if public services are still being stripped, that will work against us. We need to look very carefully at the likes of banks.

In follow up to that, there has been reference - we have heard this on so many occasions - to the possibility of rolling out additional services to the post offices, which we all would very much support. What is happening with that? We have heard much talk about additional services going in. I would appreciate an update from the Minister on where we are at with that or where we are going.

I was surprised that there were not timelines in relation to the 150 commitments. The Minister might be able to speak about whether there will be timelines in relation to the commitments, aside even from the work plans that she will be bringing forward each year.

I welcome the provision of supports to local authorities to bring vacant properties back into use. We would all welcome that. We all know of towns in our constituencies where buildings are derelict in the centre of town but does the Minister know what kind of supports she is looking at in relation to what would be given to local authorities? Also, where there have been issues in the past when it comes to ownership, have we ways around that?

The adaption of town centres is also important. I note it is listed as being for social and cultural events. We need to see careful consultation, particularly with local businesses, when it comes to any move. In different towns I have seen ideas around pedestrianisation, etc. We need to be careful to ensure there is consultation with local businesses and that we are not taking out car parking spaces to put in trees and benches. They might look nice but we need to be careful in relation to all of that.

I welcome the increased places for community employment, CE, the rural social scheme and Tús. For some time community employment has been telling us it is struggling to fill places. I raised this with the Minister previously. There is an issue in relation to the over 55s only having three years on the scheme. In some cases, they are leaving a scheme and there is no one to replace them. Given the importance of the work they do and of such services, in particular those provided by CE, as has been shown by the Covid pandemic, we need to make sure if someone cannot be replaced, there is some flexibility in leaving people in those schemes.

That leads me nicely to the local employment service, LES, and the tender that is coming down the line. It is so important that we have community-based employment services for

people who live in rural areas and that we support people back to work, but that we also support carers and people who are outside of the jobseekers category on the live register. It is important they have access to community-based not-for-profit services. If the Minister can give us an update on the tender that is coming down the tracks for the local employment service, I would appreciate that. It is a service that badly needs to be protected.

On the reference to rural Ireland benefiting from a just transition, which is important and welcome, I met with members of the Lanesboro-Ballyleague collaboration group last week in relation to the Lough Ree power station. The creation of jobs there to replace those lost is obviously urgent and that is a short-term goal. They feel like nothing is happening on the ground. We need a real focus on such towns right across the State in the move from brown to green to make sure that they are not left behind. A number of grants are available and the Minister has gone through a number of them. It would be helpful if we could have some kind of one-stop shop on the Department's website where, if I represent a sporting organisation or a community group, I can log on and see what is available to me. There are many criteria and rules. That is fine but I suggest we make it easier for groups when they are trying to apply for something specific for their area. I will leave it at that.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Deputy for the questions. There are 150 commitments in this programme but it is a five-year plan. In a couple of weeks, I will outline the commitments for this year. Obviously, as the Chairman said, I am happy to go through those with the committee at a later stage. We will not be able to do it all in one year. We will develop a work programme. However, I did not want to set it in stone because we may need to change some of these things and there will be emerging issues that we will want to include in the plan. For example, if we had set the programme in 2019, we would certainly have had to change a considerable amount of it given what has happened and the positivity around remote working, etc.

The roll-out of the broadband is a priority for the Government. The good news is we have boots on the ground and we hope to have 60,000 premises passed by the end of this year. In addition, we have found that the private providers are starting to roll out broadband as well. In fact, in my own home, I was able to pick up one of the private operators. I had been working off 2 Mbps but now have 30 Mbps. The change it makes is unbelievable. The Minister, Deputy Ryan, has met with National Broadband Ireland and we are looking at how we can reduce the term of this plan from seven years to five years. At the current roll-out rate, more than 90% of houses will be covered by the end of the plan but it is a question of how we bring the remaining more remote properties into the five-year space and we are working hard to do that. An interesting figure somebody told me is that the amount of cable it would take to connect every house and county in this country would go round the globe almost four times. That gives the committee an indication of the mammoth task and the physical project required to bring all those connections to the various houses.

Enhancing public services is very much part of it. We need to look at the digitisation and how we do things differently. I can see there being hubs. We can use places, such as community halls or maybe buildings that are repurposed, for such activities as e-learning and e-health, and we can roll out our public services, maybe through some of these centres we are developing.

Deputy Kerrane mentioned the banks, in particular. I certainly agree with her. Bank closures in rural areas is a blow to us. There is no doubt about that. The problem is that the vast majority of people are banking online. We are all using our phones to make payments and whatever. It is a positive development that the post offices are now able to provide some of

those services. They will transfer from Bank of Ireland to the post office and that will help the post office network. My background is in the credit union sector and I very much want to see our credit unions being supported to develop and roll out more services. A group of credit unions has come together and has been able to work with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment in rolling out the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland, SBCI, loans. That is important. We need to see more of that and we need to support our credit unions to do that because many of them have good, iconic buildings in the centres of towns. They are very modern and new buildings so they are there to stay.

Going back to Bank of Ireland, there are opportunities whereby the State could look to acquire buildings, possibly through our local authorities, and convert them into remote working hubs or multipurpose spaces for community facilities. I have spoken directly to Bank of Ireland and to the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe. That is important and we should try to progress that.

We have set up a committee to look at the post offices and the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, is chairing that committee. It is about bringing in the stakeholders. I met the Irish Postmasters Union recently and it has ideas around converting post offices into spaces with remote working or high-speed broadband connections, where the postmasters could provide that bit of help. For example, if a farmer did not have high-speed broadband he or she could come in and the postmaster could help him or her to fill out forms or do some work there. That is an idea that I discussed with them. I said that if they have good ideas they should come back to me and I am happy to work with them.

Regarding local authorities, we have a number of schemes, including the town and village renewal scheme, and then there is the town centre first interdepartmental group, chaired by the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke. I want to see ways of revitalising the towns and getting people back to living in them but we are going to have to incentivise them. That is the reality here.

The Deputy asked about a one-stop shop. That is a good idea and we are certainly looking into having a one-stop shop because there is a plethora of different things that people can apply for. I said one day that one would need Google Maps to find them all. It is about having that one space or platform. If we can set up a platform to find all the networking hubs across the country we can certainly put a one-stop shop database in place for people to access and apply for those services.

We have increased the number of places on Tús and CE schemes. That was announced as part of the July stimulus package but as members know, Covid and the restrictions that were in place meant we were not able to roll that out like we thought we would. It is there and the commitment is there to increase the places on all those schemes by approximately 50%.

As regards the local employment services, I absolutely recognise the fantastic work that is carried out by our local employment service providers across the country. I can speak first-hand about those in my own county of Monaghan and I am sure Deputy Kerrane could do the same for her county of Roscommon. There is a fantastic local employment service in Monaghan, led by Francis McCarron. He does fantastic work with his team in helping people with career guidance, CV and interview preparation and upskilling and training supports. I use the service regularly for constituents who want that support. I take this opportunity to assure the committee and put on the record that I recognise the great work carried out by many of our local employment providers. However, the reality is that, as Minister, I have to follow the legal advice I am given.

To do otherwise would be a dereliction of my duties. The clear legal advice I have been given is that the Department is in breach of EU procurement rules and that we need to have a competitive procurement process for these contracts. In addition, the Comptroller and Auditor General found in his 2019 report that the Department was not in adherence to public procurement policy. I do not want anybody to be in any doubt. This is very serious. When the legal advice and the Comptroller and Auditor General are saying that, it is not something that can be ignored.

Regarding what we are doing at the minute, we will be launching a phase 1 procurement process to expand the local employment services into four regions where there are currently no services at all. Given the scale of the challenge facing us all in getting people back to work post Covid, which we need to do, we want to roll these services out where there is nothing at the minute. There are no losers in this phase. It would provide a new service in areas where there is currently no local employment service. As we emerge from Covid we are going to need those additional services to help people get back to work. I cannot go into detail at this stage regarding the request for tender but I can say that it has been designed to focus mainly on the quality of the service offering, as well as the experience and track record of the tenderers in delivering a range of supports and services for those furthest from the labour market. My message today is to work with us here. What I want to do at the end of the day is make sure the people who want a job and want to get employment get all the support they can get. We can help them realise their potential and help them get that job. I just wanted to give an update on that. I thank Deputy Kerrane for raising all those issues with me.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I thank the Minister.

Chairman: I have given a bit of flexibility to the first two speakers but we need to keep to the time limits from now on in order to ensure every member gets the opportunity to speak. I call Deputy Ó Cathasaigh.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: Bearing in mind the Chairman's warning about timekeeping I will keep my praise to a minimum, in order to fit more questions in. It is not because I do not find the document worthy of praise. I do and I compliment the Minister, her Department and everybody who worked on it. There is much in it that is new and much that was already announced but it is good to see it all together in one place so we have a coherent and joined-up strategy. I commend that work.

As I said, this questioning is not about being negative at all. It is about drawing out more of what I find good in the document. The town centres first approach has been referenced widely in this document and elsewhere within Government policy but it is necessary to clarify our thinking on it. Are we speaking strictly about the Scottish model of town centres first? We need a strong definition of what it is we are talking about. The interdepartmental working group is going to report back later this year. If the Minister has a hand in that at all, I urge that that report come back to us sooner rather than later, particularly in the context of framing the next budget. If we are making town centres first a central part of our thinking about our rural future, we need to clarify what exactly we mean by that, in order that we can fund it and make it happen going forward.

I commend the bottom-up approach and I note the inclusion of the public participation networks, PPNs, the local community development committee, LCDC, structures, the rural ideas forum and the rural youth assembly. These are all good initiatives. Cappoquin in my own constituency is a good example. The Cappoquin Regeneration Company was set up under the town and village renewal scheme. It had good input from the collaborative town centre health check

programme, which is run out of the Heritage Council. It would be interesting to fund that model to allow more towns because it provides exactly the forum about which the Minister is talking. Local communities know their communities best and that collaborative town centre health check model is a good one that I would like to see funded as we move forward in this regard.

On tackling dereliction and vacancy in our town centres, yesterday's announcement about those landmark buildings was exciting and welcome. However, we need a little more detail on how we go about this. As we know the problem of dereliction and vacancy has proven to be somewhat intractable. I would like more detail on how we are going about that. We must incentivise people, especially younger people, to move back into our towns. We have a help-to-buy scheme. I would love to see a help-to-renovate scheme that helps young couples in particular close the gap between the market value and the cost of doing up that house on the main street. There are all the heritage concerns that come into it and make it expensive. As these properties can be money pits, we need to help people to make that decision.

On transport issues, we probably need to set out more specific objectives in terms of thresholds in population. This has been tried in the UK, where any town with a population above 1,000 people, or whatever, gets a public transport service and they can hang their hat on that.

I very much welcome that the sustainable development goals are linked to each of the strategic objectives. All Government policy should include that, going forward. I ask that the Minister's Department dig down deeper into the 169 sub-targets in the sustainable development goals because that is where the rubber really meets the road when it comes to vindicating those goals. It would be really helpful and would really bring the policy to life and might even inform the implementation of the policies.

I would like to flag a huge opportunity for our Gaeltacht areas stemming from this commitment to decentralisation. We know that with the Bille na dTeangacha Oifigiúla (Leasú) that is coming through the roghchoiste na Gaeilge at the minute, we are going to commit to a 20% recruitment target for those who are fluent in Irish. Decentralising some of our services to our Gaeltacht communities has huge potential to help us answer our rural strategies but also our language strategies. I therefore ask the Minister to consider that.

Finally, there is a small loophole in the rural regeneration and development fund, RRDF, in that there must be an existing town centre. To get constituency-based for a moment, our local Gaeltacht area, An Rinn, has applied for the RRDF but cannot get it because it does not have an existing town centre. There are other communities like that so it might be something to look at. An Rinn is a very dispersed community so it does not have what would be defined as a town centre. That is a small loophole and I ask the Minister to take it under advisement. I thank the Chairman for his discretion.

Chairman: I ask the Minister to be as brief as possible with her replies because there are other members anxious to come in.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The Town Centre First initiative is something we feed into, and the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, chairs that committee. People talk about the Scottish model but we have the best model here in this country and it is Westport. What they did in Westport all those years ago - Senator Burke will be able to tell us about it - is they got a plan and they stuck to it. It was transformative for the town. The Scottish model is something similar. The most important thing we can have for any town is a plan, and that is what I want to do. I want this investment in a co-ordinated, joined-up way that brings the best benefit to the ar-

eas. I know that the town centre health check is something the Heritage Council has carried out but we have funded a tremendous number of plans under the town and village renewal scheme where we have given money to local authorities. I am sure everybody is aware of them in their own counties. We said go out there, consult with the local people, find out what they want and what their priorities are and we will put them together and work through this in a sustainable way. There are loads of different funding streams that people can tap into to make their vision a reality. The most important thing is getting these communities together and getting people to think and maybe to think outside the box. If a place has a good plan it will develop in a way that is sustainable.

I totally agree with the Deputy on the help-to-buy scheme for young people. There are incentives of up to €30,000 for people to buy or build a new house but if first-time buyers are moving back into the centre of town, I want to look at the possibility of giving them that same incentive because it would involve a vacant building that has gone out of use being repurposed. It would be great to see young people moving back into the town centres because that is what breathes in new life and is what will bring footfall into the towns. The services will then organically grow as a result of that so I agree with the Deputy there.

On transport issues, we have a commitment in the policy to increase the roll-out and the provision under the Local Link services and that is under the aegis of the Department of Transport of the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan. The Local Link services have been doing really wonderful work in rural areas. We are also looking at a local hackney service as well, so there are a number of different options there whereby we can improve transport for rural areas.

The Deputy mentioned the sustainable development goals and we are very committed to those.

On the Gaeltacht areas, Údarás na Gaeltachta does a good deal of work in that area.

On decentralisation, this is not about buildings but about giving people choices. There are loads of buildings up and down the length of this country, be they old, empty Garda stations or iconic buildings sitting there with nothing happening to them. Thus, there are opportunities there. We have the properties but it is about giving people the choices. I have no doubt but that there is a demand. I have been speaking to many people who have decided they do not want the commute and want more time with their family. It is more environmentally sustainable and people want to stay in their own locality. It is a healthy place to be in when a person leaves home, goes to work, has his or her day's work but he or she does that within his or her own community, rather than sitting on a bus to Dublin. A person from County Monaghan will be on the bus for two hours in the morning and the evening travelling to and from Dublin. That is four hours of the day that person could be spending at home so for some we need this blended approach.

I definitely take the Deputy's point there and note what he said about those particular projects in County Waterford with regard to the RRDF and we can come back to him again about that, offline. I thank the Chair. I tried to be as short as I could.

Chairman: I thank the Minister. The actual subsidy by the State for new homes is €30,714, based on the latest check I have made into it. I call Deputy Joan Collins.

Deputy Joan Collins: I am not really going to make any points on the report itself because rural Deputies representing their communities can do that and I am an urban Deputy. I wish

to make a point regarding the LES and job clubs. Together with other Deputies, I have been contacted by many such services, whose providers are concerned about the tendering out the LES in counties Sligo, Leitrim, Laois and Offaly. The staff welcome the expansion of services but are concerned by the type of tender the Minister is has chosen. The type of tender she is working on is the cost-bid model whereby the price is for the job as opposed to having to having budget set by the State, which is the cost-met model. The Minister says her hands are tied by European procurement law but we must challenge that. I have a letter to hand from the European Commission Directorate General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs, which clarified this particular issue of procurement. One question asked of the Commission was “Firstly, are EU Member States obliged to use public procurement to fund the provision of social services?”. The reply from the Commission was:

In EU Law, public procurement qualifies as one of the possible avenues for public authorities to provide a service to the public administration or the citizens. The Directives do not oblige Member States to contract out any service, including social services. Public authorities are entirely free to choose whether to outsource the provision of services or whether to provide them themselves or by means other than public procurement. However, whenever a public authority decides to spend public money to acquire a service, therefore using a public contract or concession or any other legal arrangement qualifying as such, then it must comply with EU public procurement rules.

That contradicts what the Minister has said in respect of her legal advice. We are not going to be able to deal with it and tease it out here but I ask the Chairman that we have a specific meeting on this and maybe invite someone in from the procurement section of the European Commission to clarify the situation for us. This is not just because it is going to impact on those rural areas which are going to need the type of services the LES and job clubs provide at the moment. In future, it is probably going to affect all communities, including those in my own area of Ballyfermot.

As a result, I would challenge the Minister on that. We, as a committee, should take that situation forward and discuss it further.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter . The Department has explained the issue of procurement, in fairness. The employment services here have been outsourced since the mid-1990s. We have spoken to a number of the local employment service contractors and have explained the matter to them. We have been procuring employment services since the 1990s. The strong legal advice we have from the Chief State Solicitor’s office is that we have to go out under procurement rules, otherwise we will be in breach of those rules and would be on slippery ground as a result. In addition, the Comptroller and Auditor General has come in and looked at this and reported on a number of occasions that the Government must go out based on public procurement rules. I reassure the Deputy that a high level of ratings under the cost-bid model will go to, first, quality, second, a proven track record - in fairness to the LES, they have the proven track record - and, third, the delivery of services at local level. The services are being delivered at local level.

There are a number of different approaches to getting people back to work. There are 421,000 people on the PUP as we speak. Approximately 120,000 of those have been on the payment for over a year. Then there are 180,000-odd on the live register. We will face a tsunami of people who will need help to get back into employment, and that is what I want to do. I want to make sure we have the services in place to help those people get back into employment because my number one priority in all this is getting people back to jobs: helping them to

do job applications and to get advice, interview skills and such things. That is the priority. We will have 400 Intreo staff and we are expanding the capacity of all the contracted providers. As already stated, our commitment is to expand all elements of the public employment services. At the centre of all this, I assure the Deputy, are the users. They are the people we want to help, and we want to make sure they get the support they need to get back into work.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I thank the Minister for announcing this evening, at last, that Inis Oirr has been given the approval that was sought. This is a good day. It is a great day for the island. However, planning permission for the development in question was given in 2008. I am delighted the Minister has eventually managed to get the thing on her desk and sanction it and I look forward to the pier going into construction because we are very lucky nobody has been killed off the pier yet. Two people have been killed off a pier in Inishmaan over the years, and something similar happening on Inisheer was not a risk that could be discounted. I hope the Minister will now proceed with the other piers on the islands.

Since I am talking about islands, the Department will soon - the Minister might tell me when - go out for the contract for the air service to the Aran Islands. There is already an airstrip on Inishbofin. For an estimated cost of €600,000 a year - a marginal cost - a service could be run from the existing Aerphort Chonamara, where the service to the Aran Islands is based, out as far as Inishbofin. I cannot understand the Department's reluctance to provide an equivalent service to Inishbofin that would have a disproportionate benefit because it is further out into the sea and further away from the cities and so on. I look forward to hearing from the Minister on this issue today or perhaps later because when we are talking about rural, you do not get much more rural than the Aran Islands and Inishbofin.

I read the plan. Most of it is a rehash of Deputy Ring's plan and commitments already made. The rural regeneration fund and the rural broadband scheme are there. I have always been a great supporter of the latter. It will bring fibre to virtually every house in the country, and those that will not get fibre will get a 100 Mbps service, which is very good. That is the biggest game changer in rural areas. However, when I look at the plan and the plans for rural Ireland, the first thing I have to say is that, as one of the people not living in a village or town, I am beginning to feel very lonely on this island. We seem to be disowned completely as not having a valid lifestyle in our communities and parish communities if we do not live in towns or villages. I am particularly concerned about the interface between this plan, which calls for an increase in the number of people living in rural areas, and the national planning framework, the whole objective of which is to stop the growth in rural areas or to place severe limits on it. The Minister might outline the discussions she has had with the people in local government as to how these two contradictory policies will mesh because there is a very clear drive to take people out of rural parishes and to push them into towns and villages.

There is a lot of talk about developing houses in towns and villages on streets. There are a number of problems there and we should put them straight up. It is very expensive to do because of all the building regulations and is very constraining in many cases because some of these houses were built a long time ago and are on very tight sites. We have to look at why people are not jumping at various incentives that have been put their way. Another issue that has to be looked at is that some of these villages are street villages - sráidbhailte, as is said in Irish, which is a much more apt description of a villagery or a street - and a village is a street. The main street in a village is on a main road, and the problem with that is that the front doors in many cases open up onto very busy thoroughfares, and many people with children do not want to live in a property whereby if they head out the front door, they are immediately onto a

very dangerous road. We need to be practical and sensible about this and look at how that issue can be dealt with.

Were there discussions with the NTA, Bus Éireann and Iarnród Éireann? I see what is said about Local Link, but the main connecting bus services we need in rural Ireland are services to the major cities and towns because people sometimes work in those places. A very poor service is provided under the public service obligation, PSO. It is provided at a fraction *per capita* of population. The subsidy is much less - a third or a quarter per head of population - than that which is provided to, for example, Bus Átha Cliath *per capita* of population. I know it is counter-intuitive, but they are the facts when you examine them. What discussions have taken place to equalise the spend *per capita* and to ensure good services and real services in rural areas?

Chairman: Thank you, Deputy Ó Cuív.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: May I ask just one final question? There was talk about the closure of Bank of Ireland branches. Bank of Ireland is a commercial operation, so I will not try to change the minds of those who run it. The solution is under our noses. It is not necessarily the post office; it is the credit union. It is a matter of giving full banking capability to credit unions in respect of mortgage business and also providing ordinary, day-to-day banking services in order that people in rural areas would not need to bank in the high street banks any more - the AIBs and Bank of Irelands that are deserting them - but could bank in a community-owned credit union and get all the services there. The Central Bank needs to review and revise the way views credit unions because when one considers the banking collapse, the credit unions did not collapse. The main associated banks collapsed and, therefore, the community model is actually much more sustainable.

Chairman: The Minister might briefly respond.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: First, the *The New York Times*, which is a prestigious paper, described Irish rural policy as being the most ambitious in Europe. Somebody, therefore, thinks our plan is a good one.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Yes, but there are many people in rural Ireland.

Chairman: Allow the Minister to continue without interruption.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: It will help people in rural Ireland. This is a one-off chance to capture and capitalise on remote working. It is the decentralisation of people, not buildings. I am really excited about it. Much work is going into it and it contains many exciting actions that will make a difference.

The Deputy is not the only person living in the middle of nowhere. I live in the middle of nowhere too and I fully understand the importance of one-off rural housing. In fact, my daughter is building a house as we speak. I am delighted she is doing so. She will move in and revitalise Aghabog with another new family. If we did not have that opportunity, a rural community would start to go into decline. That is not happening there, however, which is why we are reviewing the rural housing guidelines. That is important because there is a balance.

The Deputy and I are not advocating scattergun ribbon development. That is not what we are about. We are about our parishes and mine happens to be Aghabog. I want to see young people who belong to the community building and living there and farming and going to the local co-operative. I went down to the local co-op recently and it was a hive of activity. It does

one's heart good to see it. I am on the same page as the Deputy.

I absolutely agree with him on town and village renewal. We will have to incentivise people to move into the centres of towns. The question is how we do that. Let us face facts; it will cost more to do up some of these town centre houses than they will be worth when they are finished. We will have to look at that gap and see how we can bridge it. We will have those discussions on town centre first policy.

The Deputy mentioned the equalisation of the spend in terms of public transport *per capita*. The Minister, Deputy Ryan, is absolutely committed to investing in our public transport. Then, of course, as the Deputy will be aware, we have the public service obligation, PSO, which is rolled out to providers to offer those services in areas where it is not profitable to do so.

Another issue straight off is credit unions. We are on the same page on this too because I believe we need to support our credit union movement. There is no better example of a fantastic social enterprise than the credit union movement. I want to see them supported in terms of what we can do in order that they can offer financial services to the communities in which they operate.

I know Inis Oírr is close to the Deputy's heart. He has raised this issue on many occasions over many years. The good news is that the business case has been approved. I met with the Deputy a month or so ago about this. The business case for Inis Oírr has been approved and they are allowed to go out for tender. The next step is that this be included in Project Ireland 2040, which, of course, is under review. I would like the Deputy to help me when I make my pitch to make sure it is included and that we get the money to get the pier sorted.

Regarding the island policy, we have much engagement and consultation with them. It is not easy living on an island. It is not easy living in a remote part of rural Ireland but it is a heck of a lot harder to live on an island. I was delighted that the RRDF announcement yesterday mentioned Burtonport in County Donegal, from where the boat that brings people out to Aranmore island departs. I have been on that boat. They will have a remote working space and they are going to improve the facility where people get tickets and make bookings. That was an RRDF announcement yesterday. I promised the Deputy that I would go and visit one of the islands. As soon as I break free, I will be over to see one of the islands because it is not easy for them. It is difficult and we need to support them in every way we can.

Chairman: I thank the Minister. The next speaker is Deputy Paul Donnelly.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I refer to the LES issue. The rural Deputies have addresses the rural element of this document. I am deeply concerned. I have spoken to a number of agencies that are involved with the LES. The Minister is aware of and spoke earlier about the wrap-around services provided by the old partnerships, as I and most people would know them as, which are involved with the LES. They provide a service that deals with the emotional aspects of the work, that is, the health and well-being of the individual and not just the employment.

I am really worried that this drive towards the privatisation of this service is not in the interests of the citizens who will use it. It will be driven by profit and by the desire for a company to make money. That is deeply worrying.

The comments the Minister has made worry me even more. I cannot for the life of me understand why we would move from a model that departmental officials recently told the Committee of Public Accounts was working well. Indecon Economic Consultants and the ESRI

both said what is happening at the moment in terms of the LES is working well.

Even recently, when we talk about moving from a net-cost to a cost bid model, many organisations, such as Empower in my constituency of Dublin West, won a contract for the social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP. Why can we do SICAP using the net-cost model? Why is the Minister then claiming that we are being forced to go to a cost bid model for the LES? It does not make sense. I back Deputy Joan Collins with regard to getting a dedicated meeting on this. Let us get experts in to really determine how and why this is being driven in this manner.

Chairman: I thank the Deputy. The Minister might also clarify something. The Deputy mentioned the issue of SICAP. Again, the CE programme and Tús are treated differently. They do not have to go out for tender and they are activation measures. Can the Minister clarify why the obligation is there to go out to tender with regard to this particular programme?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Chairman and Deputy Donnelly. First, I reiterate, and I did not make this up, the legal advice is that the requirement is that we must go out to tender and it must be a competitive procurement process. What I am doing initially is expanding the service. These regions that do not currently have a service will get one. We want to expand the service there and we have engaged with them. It is important to say that given the focus we will have on quality, I am confident that local providers should have no difficulty in putting forward a good bid. I want to be very clear on that.

There is a multifaceted approach to our employment services with the three different strands of Intreo, JobPath and the LES. That is important to say. This is absolutely not a drive to reduce costs. I want to be clear on that. The focus is on expanding the quality of the provision in the best interests of clients to achieve better outcomes. Some provide a really good service, but I will be very straight here and say there are some who do not. We know that and let us call a spade a spade. We want to work with them and improve the service users get.

As I said, the legal advice is that we have to go out to tender under public procurement. We are designing a process that awards, primarily, more marks for quality and a proven track record. Cost will be a very small, limited component of this request for tender. It is important to make that very clear. However, we are in the situation where we have been advised very clearly that we have to do this through the public procurement process.

Senator Róisín Garvey: The Minister is probably the woman who will lead us to the rural revolution. I look forward to working with her on it. It is great to have ambition and vision. It is always a good starting point. I would like to hear a bit more clarity, maybe not today, on upstairs living and renovation. I invite the Minister to come to Ennistymon in north Clare where she will see several examples of old buildings to which young people have moved and done up themselves. They have turned them into crêperies, hostels, places to live and IT recruitment centres. We have great examples in what is a heritage town. In saying all that, they have struggled and have been punished severely, financially, for their efforts. It took a lot of sweat, blood and tears and much more time than they thought it would, through loans, working hard, meitheals and everybody helping.

We have good examples in Ennistymon but it has to be made simpler if we want more people to do it. This dual use is impossible at the moment. Two friends of mine bought two old, beautiful buildings, completely renovated them and turned them into a hostel, café and place to live, which is phenomenal. However, they spent €58,000 on certificates alone. We will have to

look at that. We cannot have everything required in modern buildings in old buildings if we are serious about town centre first living. There is an issue about having two separate entrances. Many of those buildings will have a front and back door. They will not have two front doors where there has to be one entrance for the shop and another for the living space. That will have to be seriously looked at if we are serious about town centre first living.

We have good examples in Ennistymon. I would welcome the Minister to the town and I will show her around. It is where we have the best example of a digihub, which is in another old building that was done up. My godfather was the owner of that building. We got the ball rolling, which was great. He passed away but it was a great legacy for him.

I flag the issue of rural bus stops with the Minister. They are all about three years old and completely illegible. It is really frustrating, especially for older people or people with disabilities who may not be on smartphones to find out when a bus is due. I have seen bus stops that are completely ruined and mouldy. I have tried to contact Bus Éireann several times in the last few years about it. I ask the Minister to flag it with Bus Éireann, so at least people could find out about existing services. The bus stops deserve a bit more respect. It is an insult to public transport if they are all mouldy and illegible. It does not say much about how we see public transport.

I thank the Minister for all the support on LocalLink. It is fantastic and it has to be linked in with the existing Bus Éireann transport services. They also service one-off housing dwellers, which is really good. There might be some space for looking at the revival of the An Post bus service since it has to drive around collecting the post anyway. If there were seats in the back, as previously, a few extra quid could be made in picking up people when the post bus picks up and delivers parcels. The money could go to help sustain the local post office. That worked really well. I am one of those who lives in the middle of nowhere, 5 km from the local village. That post bus was amazing as one could cycle down to the main road and hop on the bus there.

I raise an issue I brought up previously, which is that public buses cannot stop at the end of a road. They go along a main road but if one gets to the end of a secondary road and flags the bus, it cannot stop unless it is at an official bus stop. That is something that is missing. It means rural dwellers have to get a lift to their closest town or village which could be 10 km or 15 km away. We have good examples of this working in other rural villages, and rural places in Germany and France, where the bus can be flagged. A cheap lay-by is provided so the bus can pull in. It can be done. I suppose that is a transport issue. I will have to contact the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, about that.

Some of the community development officers are doing great work. However, their job description does not include the ability to hold town hall meetings. The Minister knows as well as I do that there are often many little groups fighting for the same pool of money, even in the same village or town. Community development officers often do not have the skills to hold a public meeting, bring everyone into one room, let them have it out, find the commonality and help them, altogether, apply for funding. There are often little groups in the same town or village applying for the same funding pot, which is ridiculous. Community development officers should have mandatory skills, so they can hold town hall meetings, facilitate those disagreements, find the commonality and help communities to work together on applications.

It is great the Minister mentioned Westport. It was ironic that Deputy Kerrane mentioned not turning car park spaces into areas with trees and seating because that is exactly what was done in Westport. There must be a balance too. It cannot be all cars or no cars. I have seen

amazing places in Europe which have been completely transformed when they are designed for people and not just for cars. I welcome the design for Westport and that the Minister recognises it.

The urban planner in Westport presented a slide show of 20 photographs showing what happens when one car parking space is taken out and replaced with a tree and a seat. He showed pictures of old women sitting down talking, buskers, a woman breastfeeding, cyclists and so on. It is about a balance. It cannot all be about cars. It has to be people led. If places are made beautiful, then people will be brought back. I thank the Minister for all her great work. I hope we all support her on this great vision of hers.

Deputy Ó Cuív took the Chair.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: Go raibh maith agat Senator Garvey. I must say she looked exceedingly well on television last night when she discussed railways with former Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, in Clare. The remote working hub in Ennistymon is a great example. We highlight it as one of the real success projects in Clare. We held it up as an example so other communities and towns could see that what is being done there is really exemplary.

The Senator talked a good deal about the bus service. I am happy to raise those issues with the Minister, Deputy Ryan. The Senator will have to talk to the local authorities about cleaning the bus stops and signs. I often think that if I had time and a brush I would go out and wash a few of them, to be honest.

I take the Senator's point that community development officers need that skill set. There is a big focus, through the LEADER programme, on empowering communities and trying to get them to come together to develop plans. People in a particular village told me a good story that should give hope and encouragement to others. The people in the village came together as a community to build a hall. They were looking for PEACE funding at the time. They were told that they had to build capacity within the community and that they had to consult and do this and that. They were a bit sick of it because they knew they wanted a hall. However, they could not get a hall until they went through this process. They will tell one today that it was the best process they ever went through because they had to consult with each other, sit down and identify their priorities. We need that facilitation across communities, both urban and rural, so they can feel empowered, can be given the confidence to put together ambitious plans and be helped to realise them. It is important the people working with communities have the right skill set.

I did not answer the questions raised by the Chair, Deputy Naughten, and Deputy Donnelly on the issue of CE and Tús services. There are no other private operators in the market, so they get a grant towards the costs. By virtue of the service they provide, no procurement is necessary. That is just for clarification.

Senator Mark Wall: I thank the Minister. I support Deputy Ó Cuív with regard to local parishes. I live in Castlemitchell in rural Ireland and I am very worried about the one-off housing the Minister has mentioned, and how the Minister's plan stacks up against the national planning framework and the regional planning guidelines. I would love to see the Minister's plan happening. The Minister mentioned the farming community. In the past week, I have had two cases of people genuinely working in farming communities who have not been allowed to build one-off housing in the community. This is a major issue for us in rural Ireland. I welcome the fact that through the plan the Minister wants to see more people living in rural areas but this is a major stumbling block for us. Deputy Ó Cuív has also outlined it. Perhaps the Minister will

come back on this.

Rural Link and transport links are a game changer in rural Ireland. I am aware of a number of new schemes that are with the NTA for approval. I am not sure what the Minister can do to try to get them through the NTA and the Minister for Transport and back to rural Ireland. One of the schemes I am aware of has been with the NTA for almost a year and has not been approved. It is for an area with which I am very familiar and it would make a change to those living there.

The Minister mentioned people living in rural Ireland who want to go into villages but there are serious problems in south Kildare with water and wastewater facilities and infrastructure. How will we tackle this to ensure we can build the houses mentioned by the Minister? It will be an important part of any redevelopment of rural Ireland. It is something we need to look at. There are serious problems.

I welcome the €70 million the Minister has announced for the transitional LEADER programme. I have spoken about the great work that LEADER does. How will the €70 million be distributed through the LEADER companies? Does the Minister have a plan for how each LEADER company will receive a percentage of the funding? I hope it will be based on the work they do and the projects they have in the pipeline rather than previous allocations because I do not believe they were fair. County Kildare received one of the lowest amounts in the previous allocation, which was totally unfair considering the work Kildare LEADER does and the projects it has in the pipeline. I would like to know how the allocation of the very welcome €70 million will be done this time.

How much is left in the pot for the rural regeneration fund? We have five very good projects in Kildare and we would like to get a few more. How much remains of the funding for towns with populations of more than 10,000 people?

The Minister mentioned Westport and one of the factors there was town planning and public realm plans. Will he allocate town planners to local authorities? This is the way forward. Each local authority should have a number of town planners who can work on plans for the villages and towns. This is how Westport has led and it is how we should go.

I want to be associated with the calls for a special meeting on the local employment offices. I know what the Minister has said but I am aware of the great work they do. We need to look at this again.

I support Deputy Kerrane's call for a one-stop shop for grants. It is great to see all of these grants but we need to have a central location for them. We are dealing with people who are volunteering in their communities. They look to us as public representatives. A one-stop shop would be very valuable.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I take the Senator's point on water and wastewater provision in towns. I have met Irish Water and highlighted to it that there are towns and villages which cannot develop. They are full up and they need to expand. It is something we have also raised with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. I have met Irish Water officials on this matter because it has been brought to my attention on a number of occasions.

We are also going to help local authorities to develop brownfield sites so that we have sites available for young people who want to live in towns and villages. This is something we want to do. Having said this, if the Senator looks at the plan, he will see very clearly that I have in-

cluded the word “parish”. We have towns, villages and parishes. We have not forgotten about the parishes because they are very important.

The Senator spoke about planning. I agree with him that we have to do this in a way that is balanced and sustainable. As I said to Deputy Ó Cuív, I am not for scattergun development. It is not right. However, we must have a sense of balance with local people coming back to live in their local communities, contributing to their local schools, local shops and local co-ops and we have to support that. I am happy to raise this matter with the various Departments and Ministers. I absolutely agree that we need to get the balance right and I am fully supportive of what Senator Wall and Deputy Ó Cuív have said.

The €70 million for the LEADER programme has been allocated and each company has received its allocation. The Senator mentioned the rural regeneration and development fund. While €243 million has been allocated, the good news is that there is a total of €1 billion so we have plenty more money. A total of €757 million is waiting to go out over the coming years on good projects. As I said, if people did not succeed the first time, they should consult the Department and look at the project to see where the weaknesses are and where improvements can be made. Sometimes people think if they do not get money from a particular fund, their project is no good and they have to give up. There are other streams of funding so a combination can be used. For example, if a project has an outdoor recreation element, it could obtain funding from that fund. A request for a greenway was made to the rural fund but it is more suitable to the Department of Transport. It is about getting the mix right. All I can say is that we will help.

The one-stop shop mentioned by Deputy Kerrane is being developed. It is a good idea and we will make it happen. It will take a wee while but we will do it.

With regard to town planners, I have seen that in the region of €50,000 funding has been being given to local authorities to put plans together for towns. There is no reason some of this money could not go towards paying somebody to help people prepare the plans. I believe I have answered all of Senator Wall’s questions and I thank him.

Senator Paddy Burke: I welcome the Minister. The plan is finally coming in and it is great that money is being distributed to rural Ireland. I am a big advocate of the one-stop shop. It is very important that people know where to go to get information and how to go about presenting plans. The Minister said she allocated €70 million in recent days and the figure was increased to more than €80 million by matching funds. Will local authorities bring forward all of the plans or will communities do so separately to local authorities? If the latter is the case, I am sure there will be a problem with getting matching funds.

The Minister mentioned Westport, which was a planned town from its inception. It is one of the few planned towns in Ireland. As previous speakers have said, a planner for a town is very important, as is having a plan for a town.

Where do we access information on grants for small retail businesses in rural towns and villages to establish online services to complement their footfall trade? How will it be distributed? Is it coming through this Department or another Department?

I support what has been said with regard to grants for people to buy premises in small towns and renovate them as living accommodation. Such people should have the same grants available to them as first-time buyers of houses. If I recall correctly, the Chairman said that support amounted to approximately €30,000. People who intend to do up a house in an area with a 30

mph speed limit, or wherever else, should be able to avail of such support as well. There are many broken-down houses and a great deal of unused living accommodation in small towns and villages across the country.

I also agree with Deputy Ó Cuív regarding the credit unions. Nobody knows this better than the Minister. The credit unions should have extra facilities to be able to give out loans for the purchase of houses.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Senator. We are working on the portal for the one-stop-shop and we are going to work harder on it because we must get it up and running. It is an important and good resource for people when they want to know where to go. There are so many different sources of funding that people will want to see clearly how it is possible to maximise the benefits of the supports available.

There are two types of rural funding. I will announce category 2 funding in the weeks ahead. It is available to help people put their plans together and decide what a project is about. Generous grants are available in that regard to help communities put together their proposals. Category 1 funding is for big projects, once the groundwork has been done. Some projects progress through category 2 funding first, which allows them to be ready to put in an application for the more substantial category 1 funding. That is the idea behind the structure and it is a good one.

I am sorry but I did not quite catch what Senator Burke said about where people should go to look for money. I could not hear him properly.

Senator Paddy Burke: It concerned grants for retail businesses in rural towns and villages to establish themselves online and complement their physical footfall.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The Senator is correct. Rural businesses need to do that, especially now with their doors closed. To apply, they need to go to their local enterprise office, LEO, where they can get a trading online voucher. Around this time last year, when I was the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation, my then Department strongly promoted that scheme. People from many businesses have told me that if they had not gone online, their doors would have closed. The new digital economy is the new way of doing business and the new way we live, so I encourage businesses to get online.

Yesterday evening, I visited a distribution depot in Cavan, which is newly built because the old DPD depot was not big enough. The company had to move to bigger premises because of the huge volume of business going online and being delivered by courier. It is important that businesses get online and the best and first port of call for doing that is the local enterprise office.

The Senator is also correct about the help-to-buy scheme. As Deputy Naughten said, the amount available is approximately €30,700. It is the tax incentive available to people building or buying a new house. We must bridge the gap and support people to move into derelict buildings in town centres and convert them into modern living spaces. I am working with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and we will, through the town centre first task force, examine what is the best way forward in that regard. We must consider any proposals that come in. I will feed into the town centre first committee that this issue came up at the committee.

Chairman: Senator Murphy has five minutes.

Senator Eugene Murphy: I will not take five minutes as I know this is a long session for the Minister and everyone else and I am sure she has other things to get working on.

I acknowledge the Minister's support and guidance on many issues, not only since I came into the Seanad but from when I joined the Oireachtas in 2016. I hold her in high esteem. We sort of knew each other from times past. We did many programmes on radio on the credit unions in Cavan and Monaghan. The Minister played an outstanding role in that area and is doing incredible work on credit unions with the Government. She is supplying the goods; there is no doubt about that. We have probably the best chance now for rural Ireland. Even though we have battles to fight, I believe we will do pretty well. This plan must deliver and we all have a role to play in that regard. We have had many plans over the years but they have not been delivered.

There is a major crisis in my area now. I was not in the meeting earlier because I had to attend a meeting at home but perhaps Deputy Kerrane mentioned this issue. We will have no bank in north-east Roscommon after September. There will be no banking service right around the Longford, Leitrim and Westmeath border and into Roscommon. I do not care what people say about modern ways of doing things. The feedback from the small business and farming communities and the young and not so young is that they would like a third banking service. Even if such a service was available in a town or village for only two days a week, people would like to have it. That would be great. We must go ahead here in respect of the credit unions. They have the network, many of the staff and the buildings.

This would probably give rise to issues with the Central Bank, which the Government will have to fight. We are always talking about doing or that things will happen. If we lose every bank in the regions, as is happening in north-east Roscommon, it will defeat the purpose. This issue is being spoken about by the public. It is a challenge for the Government and everyone else. I wanted to make that point in passing. I know it is not the Minister's area and the Ministers for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputies Donohoe and Michael McGrath, respectively, are probably dealing with it. However, it is also important from a rural perspective.

I mean no disrespect to Senator Burke but I remember when I came in here in 2016 that staff and people from other places asked where I came from. I am not sure if Deputy Kerrane has experienced this. When I said I was from Roscommon, people would respond that they passed through the county on their way to Westport. Deputy Kerrane, the Chair and I want to ensure that people stop in Roscommon from now on and that not everyone goes to Westport. We have a fantastic county in many respects and we are now getting support for projects.

I will not mention any locations in the county today but villages and towns may have plans that are just not up to what is required. It is important that we offer those areas that may need to improve their applications a second chance because we do not want to leave any town or village behind.

Many of the issues I wanted to raise have been mentioned and there is no point in going over them again. On a final point, three community development associations in my constituency of Roscommon-Galway have no money. Oodles of money is available if they want to do something with streetscapes, plant trees in a local park or engage in similar environmental endeavours. The problem they are experiencing is that their sources of revenue have dried up. It is not possible for them to do their usual fundraising activities, such as lotto draws, and on-line activities are not really practical for many of them. I am referring to raising small amounts

of money to keep the telephone and electricity bills paid. The landlords - a group we give out about at times - of two of the three associations have not taken any rent for the last ten months. It was very generous of them to do that. Is there any way the Minister can look at this issue? I am only talking about a couple of thousand euro. I say that because I think we will get out of the current situation. We need to ensure the electricity supply and phone lines of these associations are not cut off for a few months. They are in trouble now. It is a little crack that groups are falling through and the amounts of money involved are small. I appreciate this is a difficult area because giving out money to pay bills is not a simple arrangement to organise. Given the unprecedented times in which we are living, perhaps it is possible to look at doing that.

Many community development organisations are playing a major role in towns and villages across the country. I reiterate that I am talking about small amounts of money. A couple of thousand euro would get these organisations through the next few months and keep them afloat. If they fall by the wayside now, I am afraid we will lose an awful lot of goodwill.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Senator for his kind words. He is right about community development associations. They need a few bob to keep going. They have no way of getting money at present. We have helped them through the Covid fund. These are only small amounts, and it makes a big difference. We will work on that because the Senator is correct. It is not a great deal in the larger scale of things, but it means a lot to those community groups. It gives them that small bit of encouragement to keep going. They really have had a tough time.

The Senator spoke about people going to Roscommon and said they knew where it was because it is on the way to Westport. I will tell another story. People used to say the very same about Monaghan. They knew where Monaghan was because one goes through it on the way to Donegal. We will have to find a way of knocking them off at the pass and keeping them. It is sometimes difficult for inland counties because they do not have the beaches that Mayo and Donegal have. However, they have some wonderful natural amenities. I will launch the outdoor recreation fund in a few weeks. We can develop our parks. The Senator should not despair about the applications that came from Roscommon. There is money available. We do not want to leave the county behind. We want to work with it and help it realise its ambitions.

We have many natural amenities such as lakes, bogs and mountains. There is much there that we can build on and these counties can become a tourist destination in their own right. A park in Monaghan, Rossmore Forest Park, availed of funding over the years to improve the facilities. Believe it or not, it had become a destination before the Covid-19 pandemic. It is the second most visited park in the country. All I can say to the Senator is that we can do it. We will work with him on those particular projects. He brought them to my attention previously and I am happy to work with him on them to ensure they get the support they deserve. We will have to examine the specific ones in question. The Senator should tell them to contact officials in my Department.

On the credit unions, he reminded me of when I was in the credit union in Cootehill. My motto was that the credit union is the first-choice provider of financial services in the community. There is no reason they cannot continue to be that. We have to help them in any way we can. In fairness, we cannot forget the post offices as well. They are going to take over providing some of the services that we will lose when the banks move out. There is a double whammy at present because Ulster Bank is leaving and Bank of Ireland is closing branches. Certain people want to have face-to-face interaction, and both the post offices and the credit unions have an important role to play. It is important that we work with and support them. There is talk about

a third bank. The credit union movement has the network and a great deal of expertise. There has been much investment in governance and the like over the past ten years. Credit unions are very professional organisations and we should work with them. The example of Canada is the best ever. It has a very strong credit union movement. There is a hub and spoke approach, where there is a centralised unit and the credit union offices provide all the services. In Canada, it is the main provider of financial services to the farming community. I do not see why we should not look at examples such as that, learn from them and apply them in this country.

I thank the Senator for his questions.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Ó Cuív): I thank the Minister for her comprehensive replies. I also thank her officials for the background work they have done in preparing documentation for the meeting. We will adjourn until 10 a.m. next Wednesday when the committee will meet in private session on the Microsoft Teams platform.

The joint committee adjourned at 5.25 p.m. until 10 a.m. on Wednesday, 28 April 2021.